

WRITING GAY

Exactly forty years ago I won a Hopwood Award for a play I'd written that was called *The Blueboy in Black*. The prize money I spent buying cases of a terrible sweet fizzy Italian wine named Asti Spumante, which I considered wildly elegant. Though the award money was quickly dissipated, my name and the name of my play were announced in *The New York Times*, which led to an agent contacting me. Through her a production was arranged and two years later my play, starring the black actors Cicely Tyson and Billy Dee Williams, opened off-Broadway. The play, partly because at the time I was out-of-touch with the newest trends, was a bit *démodé*, a recycling of the Theatre of the Absurd and Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, and I was criticized for being dated. Worse, in 1964 we were at the height of the Civil Rights Movement when the race problem was supposed to have been solved, but I was showing angry blacks on stage who were taking revenge on their white employers. The critic for the *Times*, Bosley Crowther, said, "Negroes in America have enough problems without Mr. White." The most positive review, by Alan Pryce-Jones in *Theatre Arts*, called it one of the two best plays of the year. But when I met Mr. Pryce-Jones twenty years later (and this is the Proustian part) and thanked him for his kindness, he had no recollection of my play.

The play was not only about race but also about homosexuality. When my ultra-conservative Republican father came to the opening night with a business associate, he asked me privately, "What's it about—the *usual?*," which was his way of referring to a gay theme. I had to confess that it was a little bit

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about the usual. Of course for him discussion of race was almost as offensive, so it must have made for a rather uncomfortable evening.

When I was a junior I had won a Minor Hopwood for a collection of short stories, and there again “the *usual*” had been a recurring theme at a time when almost no gay literature existed—and even the very term was unknown. To be sure, James Baldwin had recently published a despairing homosexual-themed novel, his beautiful book *Giovanni's Room*, and Gore Vidal and Paul Bowles and Tennessee Williams were all experimenting with short gay fiction, much of it extremely deft and sophisticated, but none of them became celebrated or successful for their gay fiction. They all had to go on to quite different work in order to achieve their immense fame.

I suppose I never had much of a choice. For some reason I had a burning need to explore my own gay identity in fiction. I'd written my first gay novel when I was just fifteen and a boarding student at Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills outside Detroit. Since I didn't play sports I had the long afternoons in which to do my homework and then the official two-hour enforced study hall in the evenings to work on my novel, which I called *The Tower Window*. It was all about a boy much like myself who turns to an adult man, a handsome Mexican, because he's been rejected by a girl his own age. I had a highly developed fantasy that I would sell this novel and make a fortune which would allow me to escape my dependence on my parents—but even though my mother's secretary typed it up for me I never got around to sending it off. Perhaps I didn't know where to send it.

No matter what I wrote, even at the very beginning, it was bound to have homosexual subject matter. I studied fiction here at Michigan in a workshop conducted by Allan Seager. The one time I had a conference with him he thoroughly frightened me by saying, “The nouns in a paragraph should be arranged like the heads in a painting by Uccello.” “Utrillo?” I asked. “Aw, get out of here,” he said, fed up and waving me out.

In those years, long before gay liberation, no one could write a proud, self-respecting, self-affirming gay text, since no gay man, no matter how clever, had found a way to like himself—not even Proust, the sovereign intellect of fiction, had

managed that one. But a homosexual writer could be impertinent, elusive, camp—and that was a tone I adopted in a novel I submitted to the Hopwood Committee in my senior year, a book called *The Amorous History of Our Youth*, which was quite an arch performance, starting with its title, an allusion to two books—Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* and a scandalous character attack of the seventeenth century called *The Amorous History of the Gauls* by Bussy-Rabutin, Mme de Sévigné's cousin. Louis XIV exiled him for his book. I remember that the Hopwood judge, a woman novelist, was quite rightly so irritated by the flipness of this novel—an account of a sexual love between two brothers, one rich and one poor, separated at birth—that she couldn't contain her rage and gave it a severe drubbing (I rather fear I wasn't meant to see this evaluation and pulled strings in order to read it). Of course she was right—the novel must have been appallingly grating. But I suspect that in that period, when no homosexual could defend his identity as anything other than an illness, a sin, or a crime, our inexpressible anger came out in bizarre forms—as a hostile and inappropriate superciliousness, for instance.

And though I was a fairly bright student I had almost no skill as a writer. I wrote in a trance, almost unconsciously, because I was writing to stay sane, to conduct my own auto-analysis, to drain off my daily dose of anguish, remorse, and hostility. That was the era of the bitchy queen, since there were no available modes of open anger, of self-legitimizing affirmation. I wrote as drag queens bitched at each other on the street corner—to claim attention, to shock, even to horrify the straight people passing by. Later, after gay liberation, we were able as people and as writers to redefine ourselves as members of a minority group who could mount campaigns for our rights and against societal stereotyping, but back then, forty years ago, such a program would have caused us to puff on our cigarettes and to say, "Get you, Mary."

This terrible unconsciousness and obsessiveness continued to mark my writing after graduation. I'd found a job in the very bastion of American conservatism, the halls of *Time* and *Life*. I worked in New York for Time-Life Books, writing essays about everything from the giant molecule to the Japanese garden, but every night I grimly returned to my office

after a solitary supper and wrote many, many bad plays that my agent refused even to send out—and a long novel, which rather confusingly bore a title, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, I used years later for an entirely different book. This book was confessional, despairing, and all about a hopeless one-sided love affair with a handsome, brilliant guy my age who became temporarily insane, so guilty was he about being a homosexual at all. This book, which I finished in 1966, three years before the advent of gay liberation, was sent out to some twenty publishing houses, all of which rejected it. Two of the editors who read it were clandestinely gay and were afraid to accept it lest they be labeled as gay themselves and fired—or so they told me years later.

After this defeat I thought I should write a *good* book—it sounds ludicrous, but it only then occurred to me that I could and should write a book that was obviously impressive. For if I'd never bothered to write well myself, I was a connoisseur of good writing done by others. I loved Firbank and Proust and Colette and Jean Genet and at this time especially, Nabokov. I could suddenly imagine what it would be like to bring to the page the same pleasure I took in reading the fiction of these geniuses. Not that I hoped to emulate their art; I just wanted to exercise in my own writing the taste that made me respond to theirs.

The Usual was still part of my new novel, *Forgetting Elena*, except now it was as obscure as the rest of the book. The narrator is an amnesiac who doesn't want to admit he's lost his memory and who struggles to second-guess from other people's reactions what sort of person he must be. He has no idea what sex and love are and the heterosexual love act, which must be one of the most peculiar in literature, he construes as something like a dangerous and ultimately painful religious rite. The whole thing takes place in an island kingdom, which may or may not be real—or perhaps just a distorted vision of Fire Island, an ambiguity which in some ways recalls the real or unreal kingdom in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. *Forgetting Elena*, my first book to be published, was not perceived as a gay-themed book at all; three years after it had come out to no acclaim whatsoever, Nabokov singled it out as one of his favorite American novels. By then, of course, most of the first edition had been pulped.

I don't want to recapitulate my writing career, such as it has been; I'd rather focus on two or three aspects of gay writing that have interested me in recent years. Most importantly, I'd like to talk about the writing of biographies of gay men and how that has affected some of my own fiction.

In 1982 I published what has possibly become my best-known book, *A Boy's Own Story*. At the time the craze for memoirs had not yet taken off. Of course generals who'd won the battle of Iwo Jima might write their memoirs, but the interest in their historical accomplishment was firmly established in advance. Back then few nobodies wrote their memoirs and I was quite happy to call my piece of autofiction a novel. First of all, calling something a novel, at least back then, protected a writer from pesky personal questions of the sort, "Why did you betray your high school teacher when he was so nice to you?"

Second, by calling my book a novel I could take all sorts of liberties with the truth without being held accountable for the discrepancies. I could change around the chronology to make it more dramatic, I could reduce the cast of characters, so messy and redundant in real life. And, in my particular case, I could nudge my own weird case toward the norm, at least the gay norm, and hope to pick up a bit more reader identification along the way. Whereas in real life I had been bizarrely brazen (or perhaps driven) sexually, and just as unpleasantly precocious intellectually, in the fictional derivation from my life I could make my stand-in shy and not outstanding in any way. In short, I could make him much more likable.

In the summer of 1983 I moved to Paris, where I stayed for the next sixteen years except for a few short intervals. When I finally moved back to the States four years ago I was surprised by many things: the institutionalization of identity politics, which had still been struggling to impose itself when I'd left; the concurrent ascendance of a rather Stalinist brand of political correctness; and finally the parallel growth of Oprah-style programs and the memoir industry. I suppose all three phenomena—identity politics, political correctness, and the memoir (usually linked to a disability or an oppressed minority or a childhood trauma) could all be labeled aspects of the culture of complaint, though I see them more as parts of a very American tradition of bearing witness and of comman-

deering that testimony into a political program: the personal as political, which may be America's most salient contribution to the armamentarium of progressive politics.

I followed up *A Boy's Own Story* with two other books in a trilogy—*The Beautiful Room Is Empty* (1987) and *The Farewell Symphony*, ten years later, in 1997. Already, with *The Beautiful Room is Empty*, I had discovered that whereas there is something eternal about childhood, that the strong nameless moods of that first period of life are undated, there is something highly historical about early adulthood. The sheltered if miserable childhood I had spent in Cincinnati and Texas as a boy could just as easily have been led in the nineteenth century as in the twentieth. My childhood, at least, was all yearning and brooding, running through woods and fields, and much of it was spent in isolation or with maids who resented all of us. As a result I never indicated when or where the action was taking place in *A Boy's Own Story*. Even the narrator's all-male boarding school has a distinctly nineteenth-century feel to it. The one thing that was undeniably American about the book, as I learned later from talking with European readers, was how *free* and unsupervised the boy was. But that sort of freedom was something Europeans had noticed about American children already in the nineteenth century.

By the time I got to describing my protagonist's early adulthood in *The Beautiful Room is Empty* I knew it was crucial that I show exactly when and where he came of age. Coming out in New York in the 1960s was obviously something very different from what coming out in London in 1900, say, would have been. Moreover, I decided to have my narrator-protagonist enter directly into a major historical turning point—the beginning of gay liberation. That breakthrough occurred in June 1969 at the Stonewall Uprising, the first time gays resisted arrest en masse and rose up against the cops after the raid of a popular gay bar in Greenwich Village. As it happened, I had witnessed this event at first hand and it had had a direct impact on me.

In fact, in planning the book I started with the violence that would come at the end, with Stonewall, and decided to construct a book leading up to it that would prompt even the most conservative heterosexual reader to become impatient

with the hero's self-hatred and his years spent in therapy seeking in vain to go straight. I wanted that reader to say out loud, "Oh, for crissake, get on with your life and leave us all in peace." I was pleased when the daily *New York Times* critic wrote something almost exactly like that.

In the ten years that intervened between the publication of this second book and of the third, I had devoted seven years to researching and writing my biography of Jean Genet.

I would like to tell you a little bit about that experience and then eventually lead the discussion back to how my *Genet* affected the shape of *The Farewell Symphony*.

Genet died in 1986 and a year later my editor, Bill Whitehead, asked me if I knew anyone interested in writing his biography. Without much reflection I said, "Me!" I thought the project would take no more than three years of researching and writing. But at the end of three years I'd written not one word and knew almost nothing about my subject. I lied to my new editor (Bill in the meanwhile had died of AIDS) and said it was coming along swimmingly, but in fact I was in a complete panic and considered stepping in front of an oncoming bus just to get out of my contract. I didn't dare admit I didn't even know the name of the village where Genet had been born (no one did). Although I'm considered brash, I could be defeated by the slightest refusal from a stranger, and in the world Genet had left behind everyone was very strange indeed.

Genet was completely unlike most subjects of literary biography, who are middle-class prodigies, adored by their mothers; the mothers save every scrap of their juvenilia and as the little darlings grow up they are surrounded by friends who are also writers or at least highly literate. These other people all keep journals, send letters, now even print up the e-mails they receive from distinguished friends, publish accounts of their own lives, and create fictional portraits of one another. The parents and mates of the middle-class writer save every word he utters or writes and his or her movements are widely reported in the press. Writing a biography of someone such as Sartre, for instance, is primarily a question of what to exclude in an overly documented life.

Genet, by contrast, was an orphan, raised in a village—but which one?—and had already entered the French penal sys-

tem by the time he was an adolescent. He had no literary friends until he was in his early thirties and was briefly taken up by the gay men around Jean Cocteau as well as by Cocteau himself. Even that Parisian literary interlude lasted less than ten years. Throughout most of his life Genet's friends were criminals, fellow soldiers, fellow prisoners, shady boyfriends, thieves for whom he worked as a fence, Black Panthers, Palestinian soldiers—in other words, people hard to identify and locate, people who die young, people who are suspicious of a white American interviewer, people who in any event scarcely know what a biography is. Criminals in particular are people who die young, who can't be found if they're still alive, who if they're found won't talk, who if they talk are not to be believed, and who in any event want to be paid. I knew perfectly well that Genet would have disliked me, since he detested whites, members of the middle class, Americans, writers, and avowed homosexuals—on five counts I was out. Why should his friends and survivors like me any better? Moreover, Genet detested the idea of anyone ever writing his biography, partly because a “real” life would challenge and even overthrow his own account of things in his so-called autobiographical novels such as *A Thief's Journal*.

In addition, Genet had eventually rejected and abandoned all his friends, so each time I met one of them I was dealing with a wounded person, someone who remembered Genet only as a painful episode in his or her life, yet sometimes as the most important one.

After three years of fruitless research I was so obsessed with Genet that I'd virtually forgotten I'd ever written novels of my own. Once in England when I was giving a talk about Genet someone asked me about my own fiction and I blinked, uncomprehending for a moment.

In my ignorance and arrogance I had initially hired a beautiful American boy and girl to help me with my research, though they had no special skills as scholars and had never read Genet's *oeuvre* (nor did they get around to it now). They had no idea of where to start, no more than I did. Unwittingly we had stumbled onto the most challenging and intransigent of all modern literary biographical subjects. Nevertheless, each of these two beauties provided me with one vital link in the story. The young woman I hired to pretend to take French

lessons from Paule Thévenin, someone who had refused to grant me an interview. Paule was an extremely difficult older woman who had befriended Genet in the 1960s and helped him prepare the final version of his great play *The Screens*. Although my young American spoke excellent French she engaged Paule for a year as her coach (all at my expense); at last she'd become sufficiently close to her to be able to ask for an interview with me, which was finally granted. After an initial coldness Mme Thévenin opened up and shared freely with me hundreds of specific and enlightening memories—and even showed me x-rays of Genet's kidneys! (Her husband had been Genet's doctor and had provided him with the powerful sleeping pills he'd consumed by the handful).

The young handsome American man also had a find. A friend of his sent him a clipping from *Le Morvandiau*, a newspaper published in Paris for people who'd moved to the capital from the rather primitive district known as the Morvan. In this paper was an article by a certain Joseph Bruley about "my classmate, Jean Genet." The article itself was a white-wash of Genet's highly questionable character but it did give us the name of the village (Alligny) and Bruley eventually led us to a dozen other villagers who'd grown up with Genet and considered him to have been a highly dubious character.

As the years went by I teamed up with the world's leading Genet expert, Albert Dichy, who prepared me a complete chronology of Genet's life and who established Genet's elaborate police record in every town and village in France. He also introduced me to key people in Genet's life including his three heirs (a seven-year-old Moroccan boy, a circus horse trainer and an ex-race car driver). Through Albert I met Genet's literary lawyer and several criminal lawyers who'd worked with his legal dossier as well as Leila Shahid, the Palestinian ambassador to Paris. I interviewed a woman who pointed a pistol at the lion when her husband put his head in the animal's mouth during their circus act. She was a poet and Genet lived with her for a while.

Genet was as assiduous a traveler as I myself am, so I took some pleasure in following him to Damascus and to Morocco, where I visited his grave, which looks out on the local prison, a bordello, and the sea—three of the great tropes of his fiction. I interviewed Jane Fonda, the mother of one of my former stu-

dents, Vanessa Vadim. She had met Genet at a benefit for the Panthers in the early 1970s in Hollywood. Genet had grabbed onto her because she was one of the few people present who could speak French at the party (for years she'd lived in France when she'd been married to the French film director Roger Vadim). Genet took her phone number and called her the next morning at six. He'd awakened in a strange house, he didn't know where he was, and he wanted his coffee. Miss Fonda said, "Okay I'll come right away but where are you?" Genet didn't know. At last she, who'd grown up in Hollywood and knew every house, said, "Go outside and come back and describe the pool to me." He did so and she said, "Oh, you're at Donald Sutherland's. I'll be right over."

One of the valuable keys to Genet's American period that Albert Dichy tracked down was the testimony of a Swiss woman named Marianne de Pury. Albert had seen that Genet had written her several letters, which she had sold or given to the library at Kent State. We contacted her just as she was moving back to Switzerland from Santa Fe, New Mexico, after some twenty-five years in the States. She had been a pretty upper-class Swiss girl with blond hair and a pearl necklace who'd moved to the States and almost immediately become involved with the Panthers and in particular their minister of information known as Big Man. It was she who had translated for Genet almost everywhere he went in the States—and fortunately she had a good memory.

I read the interviews that Genet had given to Japanese papers and Arab papers and Spanish theatrical magazines and Austrian and Italian magazines—none of them previously collected. I got my hands on some rather stiff and literary love letters Genet had written in his late twenties to Lily Pringsheim, a German leftist living in Czechoslovakia in the mid-1930s, a woman who had harbored him when he was fleeing the authorities after he'd deserted from the French army. I interviewed the English journalist who'd interviewed Genet on television—a memorable occasion during which Genet, insisting that every person in the room had as much to say as he did, turned the cameras on the technicians and interrogated them. I went to a garage outside Cannes where one of Genet's lovers now worked in what he called the Garage Saint Genet. His wife spoke freely and interestingly to me, but her hus-

band gunned the motors he was repairing louder and louder to drown out our voices. I interviewed a ghastly racist millionaire who had been one of Genet's first patrons and who spoke insultingly of blacks while his black servants waited on us. I interviewed Sartre's male secretary from the years during which Sartre had known Genet and written his huge tome, his literary psychoanalysis, *Saint Genet*. In the end I spent every penny I earned and then some on my research and my travels, but my book did win the National Book Critics Circle Award—and the citation singled out my research as what most impressed the judges.

When at last, after the seven years consecrated to Genet, I came back to my own fiction I found that I had not been influenced so much by Genet (whose work I intensely admire but have never attempted to emulate) as by the experience of writing a biography. And not just any biography but a gay biography which, depending on the subject, is marginally different from a biography of a heterosexual. Of course all lives are different and nationality or profession or period are factors at least as determining as sexual orientation. But I would like to suggest that there are special problems and considerations touching on gay biography. In Genet's case he usually fell for younger heterosexual men with connections to the underworld. Genet several times in his life built houses for these lovers and reserved a room in each house for himself. He invariably befriended their wives and in disputes usually took the woman's side. Because I'm gay myself and just thirty years younger than Genet, I flatter myself that I knew how to interpret these relationships. From my experience of the world I knew that such relationships between older gay "patrons," if you will, and younger heterosexual studs were quite common in the old Mediterranean world and I knew enough not to make too much of them or too little. I knew that Genet's married lovers weren't "closeted," a word that makes sense only in a culture of avowal. I knew Genet wasn't "exploiting" these lovers, since he'd grown up as a member of the lowest and most exploited underclass in France.

Biographers, to be sure, are no better or worse than their fellow citizens and in treating the lives of lesbians and gay men biographers have been guilty of whitewashing or rewrit-

ing or even suppressing their subjects' sexual and romantic lives.

Perhaps the prejudices against homosexuals can be said to begin with ignoring many gay writers or relegating them to playing minor roles in the lives of supposedly more important heterosexuals. A figure like Oscar Wilde was always too influential to ignore—too scandalous, too quotable—although at first he was turned into a tragic fop, a witty, epigrammatic Pagliacci, and few biographers were prepared to take him as seriously as everyone took someone as incompetent at being heterosexual as Nietzsche, for instance, although the parallels are striking (a love of paradox, argumentation through apothegms, hatred of the bourgeoisie, little concern about self-contradiction, an exhortation to readers toward the transvaluation of all values). Only Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* redressed this balance; moreover, it took another gay man, Neil Bartlett in *Who Was That Man?*, to speculate about the exact nature of Wilde's sexuality. Of course the question is far from being settled and Wilde's grandson, Merlin Holland, whom I've met, is campaigning for Wilde-as-bisexual.

Just as homosexuals themselves were (and often still are) shrugged off as minor retainers at life's banquet, uninitiated to the great mysteries of childbirth, adultery, and divorce, in the same way an elusive but major gay novelist such as the Edwardian Ronald Firbank has been largely ignored by biographers, despite the fact that novelists as different from one another as Hemingway and Evelyn Waugh all claimed they'd been influenced by him, Hemingway by the practice of representing a crowd scene through unassigned bits of dialogue and Waugh by the exquisite timing of his humor. Brigid Brophy did write a massive biography of Firbank, *Prancing Novelist*, but it is so subjective, capricious, and unreliable as to be anything but a standard life. Brophy refused to conduct any original research of her own. She relied on the only other biographer, Miriam Benkowitz, an American librarian, who approached Firbank primarily as a bibliographical problem. Never was a biographer more ill-suited to her subject. Only now is an English gay man, Richard Canning, at last writing Firbank's life, reopening long-closed archives, revisiting all the places Firbank knew, including Rome and North Africa, and studying the effect of Jamaican Creole on Firbank's tropi-

cal novel, *Sorrow in Sunlight*. Canning has also uncovered the comedy of errors that surrounded his burial and reburial in Rome. Such painstaking scholarship is lavished on a writer only when the biographer is convinced of his first-rank value.

In the past sometimes all trace of homosexuality in a statesman or military officer, say, would simply be erased. Cambacaré, for instance, was Napoleon's prime minister and so openly gay that he convinced the emperor to decriminalize homosexuality. Thanks to Cambacaré, France had no laws against homosexuals until the pro-Nazi Vichy government came to power during World War II. But when I picked up a French biography of Cambacaré written in the 1950s, there was no mention of his sexuality nor of his influence on France's laws. A misplaced prudishness, in other words, had led the biographer to ignore altogether the legislation for which his subject is most likely to be remembered.

When I was working on my life of Genet the French publisher was worried that I would turn him into a "gay writer." (I had made the mistake in an interview in the French press of calling Rimbaud a homosexual poet.) The French are strenuously opposed to all minority designations of writers, past or present; it's part of the legacy of their universalism dating back to the Enlightenment and the Revolution and it is one of the main cultural differences with the values of the United States, the home of identity politics. Gallimard, the French publisher, was relieved when my Genet manuscript came in and seemed devoid of any special pleading for Genet as a gay hero.

When I wrote my Penguin life of Proust, however, I decided to discuss his homosexuality—how else could I make my book different from the hundreds that had preceded it?—but I was attacked for this approach in the *Sunday New York Times Book Review* and in the *New York Review of Books*. The *Times* critic, the English novelist and biographer Peter Ackroyd, took me to task for reducing Proust to his sexuality. Similarly, Roger Shattuck in the *New York Review* struck a blow for Proust's *universality* against my supposedly narrowing view.

I think anyone who has read my book will attest to at least the density and inclusiveness of my brief biography and to my discussion of everything from Proust's crippling asthma to his youthful social-climbing, from his liberating translations of

Ruskin into French to his various and prolonged struggles to become a writer, from his dark vision of love and friendship to his strenuous efforts to court prize committees, but I refuse to apologize for my treatment of his sexuality, especially since it presented him with complex literary problems.

Proust himself recognized that homosexuality was a key theme—and a thoroughly original one—in his book and worried that his friend Lucien Daudet had beat him to the punch in his early novel. Only when Proust had examined Daudet's book was he reassured that it was a trivial and inexplicit treatment of the theme and no threat to his own primacy in the field. Proust had promised his publisher Gallimard early on that his book might be judged "obscene" since it treated a "pedophile." Indeed many of the female characters turn out to be lesbians and nearly all of the male characters are queer—except "Marcel," the narrator and the stand-in for Proust himself. Since, as Proust told André Gide, all of his sexual experiences had been with men and none with women, he was obliged to transpose his homosexual experiences into heterosexual terms in order to flesh out those scenes, characters, and situations. This transposition, I'd claim, was in fact the most creative part of his book, the very area where he had to combine memory of real experiences with objective observations of real women he'd studied in the world and their heterosexual male lovers. In his treatment of Albertine, the great love of Marcel's life and the name that appears most frequently in the book, Proust drew on his affair with Agostinelli, his chauffeur, who met an early death during a flying lesson as a pilot, and with Henri Rochat, a handsome Swiss waiter at the Ritz who eventually moved in with Proust.

When I call these Proustian transpositions of men into women "creative," I'm remembering my own experiences when I was in Ann Arbor as a student between 1958 and 1962. I belonged to the Sigma Nu fraternity but I was also cruising guys in the Union and less reputable places. One of my best friends was arrested for doing what I was constantly doing—and he had to report to a parole officer once a week for the next seven years. Not surprisingly, he eventually became a prison psychologist.

In that period it was impossible to speak openly of one's ho-

mosexual adventures. One had to translate them into heterosexual terms, and one had to have a detailed and capacious memory to keep track of all the lies one had invented, often on the spur of the moment. One also needed to be resourceful in finding plausible female activities (sewing, dancing) that would be a counterpart to the real-life male activities of one's partners (sewing, cruising).

I feel that Proust's elaborate transpositions of male friends into female characters was an example of the same sort of obsessive and creative mendacity. The transpositions were precisely the most *artistic* part of Proust's conception of his book, and to ignore them is to miss out on a true literary value peculiarly suited to the biographer's craft.

Just to finish my little disquisition on homosexuality and biography, I'd say that gay lives are not like straight lives. One must know them intimately from the inside in order to place the right emphasis on the facts. For instance, those heterosexual biographers and critics who have attacked Michel Foucault for infecting people even after he knew he was positive for AIDS are ignoring several crucial things. First, Foucault was a sadomasochistic bottom, a slave, unlikely to have infected anyone, since a slave does not transmit his sperm. Second, Foucault certainly didn't know he was positive, since there was no test to determine one's HIV status in Europe until 1985, after Foucault's death. Finally, since he was a friend of mine I can attest that he guessed at his diagnosis only five months before his death. He worried that he might have infected his lover, Daniel Defert (he hadn't), but he knew perfectly well that he'd never infected any of those leather guys in San Francisco. But of course my approach would not please the muckrakers. I'm afraid that all too often biography is the revenge of little people on big people.

Or take another issue, not at all technical or medical but just as telling. Those critics who attacked Brad Gooch's *City Poet*, the biography of the New York poet of the 1950s Frank O'Hara, complained that Gooch had talked too much about his sex life and not enough about the poetry. But in fact O'Hara, the founder of "Personism," wrote poems to his tricks and had led such an active sex life, one might be tempted to say, in order to generate his poems, which are often dedicated to real tricks or imaginary crushes. When Joan Accocela in *The New*

Yorker complained that *City Poet* was too “gossipy,” she missed the point. O’Hara’s grinding social schedule and hundreds of sexual encounters offend people who want his life to be like a straight man’s of the same period. If O’Hara had had one or two gay marriages and had made his domestic life more important than his friendships, then he would have seemed like a reassuring translation of straight experience into gay terms. But O’Hara’s real life was messy and episodic in the retelling, even picaresque—it doesn’t add up to a simple, shapely narrative. It’s all day after day of drinks with X, dinner with Y, and sex with Z—not what we expect in the usual literary biography. Biographies were originally meant to be *exemplary* lives, whether they were written as the Lives of the Saints or Plutarch’s Lives, whereas the lives of most gay men, especially those before gay liberation, were furtive, fragmented, submerged—half-erased tales that require special tools of the biographer if they are to be rendered in glowing colors.

When I turned to *The Farewell Symphony*, the last volume of my autobiographical trilogy, I had just come out of the experience of researching and writing the Genet biography. I was now both a biographer and a novelist, I could tell myself. People often speak of fictional techniques—suspense, shapeliness, narrative flow—influencing the form of biographies, but in my case biographical techniques influenced my new understanding of the novel. Writing Genet’s life—which led from his childhood as a peasant foster child in the Morvan into a life of petty crime, prostitution, and begging to a flight across Eastern Europe in the 1930s into French prisons under the Nazis and the threat of extermination in the death camps—from such a marginal existence to the consecration of success as a published novelist and produced playwright and the subject of a massive psychoanalytic study by Sartre, the greatest philosopher of the day, and later to contacts with the leading European sculptor, Giacometti, and two other prominent philosophers, Foucault and Derrida, finally to a posthumous masterpiece, *Prisoner of Love*, dedicated to the Black Panthers and the Palestinians—writing this amazing story, with its completely unexpected developments, convinced me that no matter how scattered and multifarious a person’s activities might be, the fact that they all have happened to one individual moving through time lends the story a surprising coher-

ence. Having written Genet's life I took on the subject of my own life in the 1970s and 80s in a novel, *The Farewell Symphony*, with a new willingness to discuss subjects I had downplayed or excluded altogether in the previous two books—subjects such as friendships, intellectual projects, artistic career, family relationships, sexual peccadilloes, and romantic one-night stands—a multitude of subjects I had soft-pedaled in my earlier volumes of autobiographical fiction.

The novel as a genre is essentially a nineteenth-century bourgeois concoction. In a Jane Austen novel a small cast of characters, all members of the gentry or nobility, revolve around each other in a village until two or four get married. The mother's bad values, the father's incapacitating eccentricity, the young women's vanity or virtue—everything is properly redressed or punished or rewarded by the last page. As in a Haydn trio the simplest themes are fully exploited and thoroughly developed. For better or worse *Emma* remains our ideal of the novel, the ur-novel.

There is no way modern gay life could be shoved into this Procrustean bed. Often the most intense and memorable moments in a gay life are without foreshadowing or consequence. A moment ago I deliberately used the expression "romantic one-night stands" for its shock value, for straight people often imagine that sex at the sauna must be cold and impersonal precisely because it is out of all social context and may never be repeated. Outsiders assume that "anonymous sex" is somehow unfeeling or mechanical or merely lust-driven; neither Emma nor Elizabeth would know what to make of it. And yet, as André Gide recalled at the end of his life in his book *Ainsi Soit-Il*, the most meaningful moment of *his* eventful life had been sex with two beautiful Arab teenagers who'd been assigned to his caravan when he crossed Tunisia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Another French thinker, Michel Foucault, once remarked that if courtship was the most romantic moment for the heterosexual couple, for a gay lover the most romantic moment was after sex and after one had put one's brand-new partner in a taxi. Straight love is all about anticipation, whereas gay love is all retrospection. In straight life love, friendship, and sex are ideally all joined in the same person, whereas in gay life these drives can be separated out.

Perhaps assimilation and the safe-sex years have caused gay life in the '90s and in our decade to resemble straight life, but in the period I wanted to cover in *The Farewell Symphony*, the time between the beginning of gay liberation and the onset of AIDS, this period that Brad Gooch has called The Golden Age of Promiscuity, gay life was radically different from anything straight or gay novelists had ever written about before, unless we go back to the *Satyricon* of Petronius or Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji* or *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Laclos. In *The Farewell Symphony* I stretched the boundary of coherence to the breaking point, but I had the courage to do so because I'd written a long biography of a man who could not be totalized, whose evolution was always surprising and certainly unpredictable and whose affairs were always messy.

If I had begun my autobiographical series with a cool distance between my adult self as narrator and myself as teenage protagonist, if I had reshaped my life in the first two volumes toward telling a good story and structuring a pleasing narrative, in the last volume, *The Farewell Symphony*, I decided to narrow the distance between narrator and protagonist, even as the story in real time was catching up with the moment in which I was writing the book. It was all a bit like the end of *A Hundred Years of Solitude* in which Aureliano, the last member of the Buendía family, as the allotted century comes to an end, is reading about himself reading before the book and the village are blown away in a great synthesis of a tempest.

Before I began the Genet biography I had imagined I'd turn my autobiographical series into a tetralogy, one volume devoted to the seventies and the heyday of promiscuity and one to the eighties and the tragedy of AIDS. But after the decade that went by following the publication of the second volume I realized that in the late nineties it would be intolerable to read one book about everyone having a great time sexually and even more painful to read another volume about everyone dying. Accordingly I decided to collapse the two books into one and to weave my way back and forth from the eighties into the seventies. The inevitable gloomy trajectory of a strict chronology I would avoid, just as a temporal fluidity

would mitigate both the tragic aftermath and the preceding hedonism.

Today I have not focussed on many of the issues that have affected my career as a gay author. I have not talked about the gay writing group, The Violet Quill, which I belonged to at the time I took my own leap forward and wrote *A Boy's Own Story*. I could have pointed out how this group was revolutionary because it did not address in its fiction an apology for gay life to a straight reader, as all previous gay writing had done, even Genet's. I could have argued that the new gay writing that emerged in the late seventies and throughout the eighties plunged the reader into the midst of gay urban experience. No longer were we writing about lonely and tortured gay men nor about gay couples living in the forest or on a deserted coast. Now for the first time we were showing the gay ghetto and gay friendships as well as gay romances. Nor were we presenting just a few anguished and ever-so-sensitive esthetes; no, we wanted to show the full range of the gay typology, as anthological as that of any society.

I could have talked about how this moment in gay writing is now coming to an end and is spawning mindless gay genre writing (murder mysteries and dog stories and teen dating tales) or something more serious, something one could call post-gay writing, in which one or two characters might be gay but in which they are inserted into a more general society. I'm thinking of post-gay writers such as Michael Cunningham or Allan Gurganus or Peter Cameron.

I could have touched on many subjects but I have tried to concentrate on just two or three things, drawing on a career I know well, my own. I've hoped to show how my own writing has evolved away from a traditional conception of the novel toward something broader, more episodic, even picaresque, and how the reach of my novel, *The Farewell Symphony*, also owes something to a new, more daring conception of gay biography. Perhaps some of the confidence I had to fight my lonely fight as a pioneering gay novelist came from the affirmation I received when I won a major Hopwood exactly forty years ago. I hope that those of you who are winning prizes today will be emboldened by the honor in pursuing that long and lonely struggle, a writer's life.