

Proudhon In the Closet

The homophobia and misogyny of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

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Pierre-Joseph Proudhon is best known as the anarchist who exclaimed *Property is theft!*, and the first anarchist to fall foul of Marx and Engels' tendency to viscously turn on those who who refuse to submit to their authority.

He is less well known as a misogynist, and even less so as a venomous homophobe. Here Daniel Guerin analyses Proudhon's misogyny and homophobia and the raging contradictions brought about by his hatred and the paradoxical consequences this has on Proudhon's anarchism. Guerin's research reveals a complex and conflicting emotional relationship with men and masculinity, and consequently women and the feminine, in Proudhon's life.

Jesse Cohn's easy-to-read translation is the first into English since the essay was written in 1969.

Daniel Guerin (1904–1988) was a leading figure of the French New Left, and authored dozens of books on Capitalism, Fascism, Socialism, Marxism and Anarchism. He was an early advocate of gay rights in the New Left, which saw him ostracised from much French leftist publishing houses. His best known works in English are perhaps *Anarchism* and *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*.

I would like to consider one of the least known aspects of the work of the great social reformer: his keen and unusual curiosity with regard to homosexuality.¹ A curiosity all the more surprising since he passed, quite rightly, for a man of rigid mores – a man, moreover, who had authored the posthumous *Pornocratie*, who was wont to thunder against the deviations of the flesh.

Proudhon claimed to observe that the homosexuality of his time was hardly practiced by the working classes. Its practitioners, according to him, were rather “refined types, artists, men of letters, magistrates, priests.” Why? because workers were “not sufficiently advanced in the worship of the ideal.” For him, *unisexual love* was “an error of judgment produced by an illusion of the ideal,” the pursuit of “the beautiful and the good.” What struck him concerning ancient mores was that “great poets came to celebrate this monstrous ardor – the privilege, according to

¹ All the citations of Proudhon that follow, unless otherwise specified, are taken from *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Eglise*, 1858, Rivière edition, vol. IV.

them, of gods and heroes". He added that it was this "poetic" of homosexuality that really had to be explained. And excusing himself in advance for the audacity of his incursion into such a field, he dared to write:

"I have consulted written testimonies; I have queried those ancients who were able to express it in poetry and philosophy everywhere, and who, speaking to a society accustomed to Socratic manners, were hardly obstructed from doing so [...] what I will say [...] will have [...] the advantage of singularly reducing the crimes of those who comprised its first singers and panegyrists [...] We have pleaded in favor of a few persons, the greatest to have illuminated our race, in favor of Greek poetry and philosophy, the eternal honor of the human spirit, the innocence of unisexual love."

Proudhon opens his study by deliberately rejecting the explanation of Saint Paul "who believes to have explained everything when he attributes the phenomenon with which we are concerned to the worship of false gods." For him, "Saint Paul's explanation does not explain anything." It was too convenient for Christianity to charge polytheism and the society based on it with behaviors that it wanted to purge from the earth. "But [...] Christianity did not succeed in its enterprise" and the passions denounced by the apostle "remained in the Church of Christ."

Returning to the origins of Greek love, Proudhon suggests, with reason, that homosexuality had existed in Greece well before Socrates. It is in Ionia that this love initially "was sung and divinized." Earlier, the Syrians, the Babylonians, and other Eastern religions had made homosexuality one of their mysteries. At the origin of humanity, an "erotic pantheism" reigned, one which Charles Fourier, to whom Proudhon owed so much, called *omnigamy* and which Proudhon evokes in these terms:

"This supreme love, which cleared up the chaos and which animates all the beings, does not need, to enjoy, of the human form. For him, the reigns, the kinds, the species, the sexes, all is confused [...] It is Cénis, changed girl into a boy; Hermaphrodite, at the same time male and female; Protée, with its thousand metamorphoses [...] Théocrite goes further: in a lament on the death of Adonis, it claims that the wild boar which killed it out of a blow of hook was guilty only of awkwardness. The poor animal wanted to give a kiss to this beautiful young man: in the transport of its passion it tore it!"

When humanity, exit of chaos, entered civilization, this erotic pantheism was moulted in "erotic idealism":

"Above all, the old ones thought, the man cannot live without love; without love the life is an anticipation of death. Antiquity is full with this idea; it sang and recommended the love; it disputed as far as the eye can see its nature like it disputed of the Bien sovereign, and more once it was able to him to confuse them. With the same power that its artists idealized the human form, its philosophers and its poets idealized the Love [...] It was [...] among them, with which would discover and carry out the perfect love [...] But this ideality of the love, where to find it? How to enjoy it, and up to what point?"

In marriage?

“Marriage,” retorts Proudhon according to a proverb, “is the tomb of love. And that was incomparably more true for the Greeks [...] than it is for us. The dignity of wife, aristocratic in her principle and its form, hardly conferred on the ancient woman but of haughty claims which made it not very pleasant.”

The author refers here, too summarily, to the (patriarchal) social conditions of which the Greek woman was the victim:

“The wife, such as, in leaving the heroic age, civilization had to make her, having for it only her pride, the triviality of her occupations, and her importunate lasciviousness, that hardly repressed the troubles of pregnancy and marital rebuffs, love departed on the morning of the wedding, and the heart remained deserted. There is not the least piece of love in the gynaeceum, Plutarch vigorously declares.”

If the marital union were thus “destitute of the ideal, therefore, of love,” from whom can love be asked? From the *hetaira*, the concubine, the courtesan? But this kind of “waged love” is reduced to a “satisfaction of the senses,” to a “secretion of the organism,” to a “sentinel,” Proudhon fulminates. “I love him, you say; yes, as I love wine, fish, and all that gives me pleasure.”

“Thus, the *hetaira* and the courtesan, not offering anything more, as regards amorous delight, offering even less than the legitimate woman, love such as the human heart wants, idealized love, becomes impossible between the two sexes [...] The ancients had pursued this analysis only too well. They understood marvelously that beauty, physical as well as moral, is immaterial, that the love that it inspires exists entirely in the soul [...] Where, then, wondered the man of antiquity, where to find the love without which I cannot live, and that I cannot grasp either with my wife, nor with my mistress, nor with my slave? Where is it, this love, this will-o’-the-wisp that only misleads men? ‘I found woman bitterer than death,’ exclaims Solomon; he means, obviously, not the person, but the sex. Nothingness everywhere, love nowhere.”

And Proudhon attentively follows “the progress of this idealistic seduction which, after having rejected marriage as something that is by its nature foreign to love,” leads to the “hallucination” of homosexuality:

“It is thus by a refinement of delicacy at the same time as by a search for the quintessence of the beautiful and the honest that the ancients came to scorn marital love, and with it any physical relationship with woman. Such is the series of ideas by which the Greeks, in speculating on love and releasing it from the indignities of the flesh, ended in excess. This might appear extravagant, but such is the case, and all of history testifies to it.”

Proudhon, with a curious leniency, now abandons theory in favor of examples:

“Anacreon, according to Aelian, being at the court of Polycrates, tyrant of Samos, conceived a sharp affection for a young man named Smerdias. He cherished him, says the historian, for his soul, not for his body. For his part, the adolescent had a respectful affection for the poet.”

And Proudhon adds:

“Smerdias, the beautiful ephebe in question here, was also loved by the tyrant Poly-crates.”

Having finally overcome the barriers of prudence and inhibition, the author launches wholeheartedly into an exaltation of Greek love:

“We must really believe that this extraordinary theory had up to a certain point become part of custom, when one sees the most virtuous and least suspect men of antiquity making profession of it. Socrates, who gave his name to perfect love before Plato had given it his, made love to Alcibiades in view of the whole city. He taught him philosophy, reproached him for his pride, tore him away from the seductions of courtesans, instructed him in continence, and, by word and example, taught the Athenians to love and respect youth. There is a beautiful lesson of him in the dialogue of Plato called the *Theatetus*. Theatetus is a graceless young man with a squashed nose and squinty little eyes, a true portrait of Socrates, presented and recommended to the philosopher by a citizen of Athens, whom his friends ironically, and to his great displeasure, accused of making love to this unpleasant boy. Socrates questions Theatetus, forcing him by his questions to reveal his intelligence, emphasizes his natural happiness, and in the end, says to him before everyone: ‘Go, Theatetus, you are beautiful; for you have the beauty of the soul, a thousand times more invaluable than that of the body.’ A statement worthy of the Gospel, which had to impress the Athenians greatly, and which Plato would have been careful not to ignore.

“*Cornelius Nepos*, in his biography of Epaminondas, tells us that, the king of Persia having intended to buy him, *Diomedon of Cyzicus*, who was charged with the commission, started by placing in his service a very young man named Micythus, which Epaminondas loved with all of his heart. What did the Theban hero do? After having severely admonished the intermediary of the great king, he says to his young friend: ‘For your own sake, Micythus, return his money quickly, or I shall denounce you to the magistrate!’ [...] A strange occupation for pederasts, to preach to their catamites, by word and example, modesty, study, disinterestedness, chastity, all the categories of virtue, and to threaten them with punishment if they deviate from these!

“In a war waged by the men of Chalcis against their neighbors, they owed their victory to the courage of Cleomachus, one of their own, who devoted himself to their cause [...] on the sole condition of receiving beforehand, in the presence of the army, a kiss from his friend, and dying before his eyes. It is Plutarch who recounts the story. I would like to know: has chivalry ever produced anything purer and more beautiful than this tale?

“Everyone knows that the sacred battalion of Thebes, which perished entire in Chaeronea, was made of three hundred young men, one hundred and fifty couples, whose love formed the basis of their discipline as much as did their patriotism.”

Passing from Greek literature to Latin poetry, Proudhon continues in the same vein:

“Virgil, singing of Roman messianism and universal regeneration, Virgil, disciple of Plato, does not forget this pederastic purification of love. His episode of Nisus and Euryalus is inspired by Greek friendship, in which love is combined with warlike emulation.

One was their care, and their delight was one:
One common hazard in the war they shar’d,²

“he says of the young heroes: Euryalus, type of splendid youth and virtuous grace, that all the army loves as much as it admires him,

Euryalus a boy of blooming years,
With sprightly grace and equal beauty crown’d;...³
His blooming beauty, with his tender tears,
Had brib’d the judges for the promis’d prize...⁴

“and Nisus, his pure and pious lover. Read, in the fifth and ninth books of the *Aeneid*, the touching story of this love: one would speak of an episode of the sacred battalion of Thebes. And it is after having told the story of their death that the poet exclaims: O happy friends! for, if my verse can give/Immortal life, your fame shall ever live,/ Fix’d as the Capitol’s foundation lies,/And spread, where’er the Roman eagle flies!”

And Proudhon, no longer astonished, no longer restrained, exclaims:

“Why are we so extraordinarily astonished, after all, by an attachment which has its roots in nature itself? Don’t we know that there exists between the adolescent and the grown man a reciprocal inclination, which is composed of a thousand various feelings and the effects of which go well beyond simple friendship? What was this but the affection of Fénelon for the duke of Burgundy, this child of his heart and his genius, that he had created, formed, the Bible would say engendered, as he had created his Telemachus? Love, in the purest and highest sense given it by the Greeks. Fénelon informing the duke of Burgundy, it is Socrate revealing with its listeners the beauty of Theatetus, it is Epaminondas reprimanding Micythus. How he wished to die for this fruit of his loins, tender Fénelon!

“I would go further: what was this so much noted predilection of the Christ for the youngest of his apostles?⁵ For my part, I see there, as in the episode of Nisus and Euryalus, a Christian imitation of Greek love. And it is not the least proof in my eyes that the author of the 4th Gospel was not a Hebrew of Jerusalem, incapable of these delicacies, but a Hellenist of Alexandria, who knew its public, and know nothing better to praise the holiness of the Christ than to make of him a lover after the manner of Socrates. We calumniate the ancients, and we do not see that their ideas, restored to their just measure, have their source in the human heart, and that they are continued in our own religion.

² *Aeneid*, IX, 188. [Translations from *The Aeneid* by Dryden. (Trans.)]

³ *Ibid.*, V. 295.

⁴ *Ibid.*, V. 344.

⁵ John 13:23; 19:26–27; 21:20.

“The distinctions between loves and the difference in their characters were so well established among the Greeks that we see them living together without fighting or merging. Achilles has, as a partner of his bed, the hetaira, the beautiful prisoner Briseis; as a friend of his heart, Patroclus, his hetairos. Moreover, what a difference in the laments he makes for them! For Briseis, he cries, it swears to fight no more and to return to Thessaly; for Patroclus, he violates his oath, kills Hector, massacres his prisoners, and accomplishes the capture of Troy.

“All the Greek poets who sang of love under its double hypostasis followed Homer’s example. I would suspect Anacreon’s Bathyllus: the poet’s indiscretion, in the portrait he drew of his friend, cast an obscene shadow on the purity of the original; but how far the sentiment that Bathyllus inspires in him exceeds all his imaginations of mistresses! How charming, moreover, that song of the messenger dove! And what a reverie in these two verses, which the translators separate as if they were two odes:

Give me, O give me, lovely fair,
Of Bacchus’ ruby stream to share,
To drink most copiously the wine
Distill’d from heaven’s inspiring vine.
Now noon’s exhausting, sultry heats,
Me, panting, drive to cool retreats;
Secluded there, my languid powers
Revive, as fly the fervid hours.
Give me fresh roses,—garlands fair,—
My forehead scorches those I wear;
Nor bear they now their lovely hues,
Their morning tints, their nectar dews.
But what, O heart! what cooling stream
Shall I, now burning, place between
Thee and vehement ragings dire,—
Thee, and the ardour of love’s fire ?
Sit, O Bathyllus, in this shade!
The tree is beautiful,—array’d
In summer’s softest foliage sweet,
In nature’s blandishments replete;
While on the pliant branch, as tresses,
Its tender leaves the air caresses,—
Serenity the soul possesses.
A cooling fountain rolling near,
In liquid accents greets the ear,—
Persuasive, it provokes our stay,
While burns without the golden ray.
Delightful to the ear and eye,—
Retreat like this who can pass by?

Now, it is not Greek love so much as its purity that intrigues Proudhon:

“What astonishes me in all this Socratic, Platonic, Anacreontic or Sapphic poetry, whatever one wishes to call it, is the extraordinary chastity of the thought as well as the language, a chastity equaled only by the heat of the passion. Explain to me if you can, on the assumption of an impious love, this inconceivable mixture of all the penetrating lines, graceful images, and unutterable harmonies that could be produced by the most exalted tenderness, the severest thought, the most divine poetry, along with the most dreadful things that the madness of the senses could have invented; for my part, such an alliance of heaven and hell in the same heart appears inadmissible, and I remain convinced that if there is any horror there, it is all our own.”

Was the “unisexual” love of old really pure? Proudhon, after having asserted this, is no longer so certain. But at least their ideal was one of purity, according to him:

“For our part, without claiming more knowledge of such matters than it is advisable for decent people to have, we maintain the opinion established by us in the text, i.e., that pederastic love did not necessarily imply, for the ancient Greeks, as it implies today for us, relations of the body; that, quite to the contrary, this love claimed to remain pure, and that thus it was practiced by Socrates, Epaminondas, and a host of others. The passages that we have quoted from Plutarch, Plato, Virgil, and the Gospel according to Saint John, are unimpeachable testimonies. We consequently maintain that it is of this pure love that Anacreon and Sappho sang; that it is a matter of distinguishing, here, if one wishes to be fair, between the ancients’ theory of passion and what their practice might have been, and that before accusing the greatest poets of abominable manners, one must begin by understanding their feelings and their ideas. In whatever manner, in secrecy, Anacreon with Bathyllus, Sappho with her beloved, that of which we do know absolutely nothing nor will never know anything, one thing remains positive, demonstrated, established [...] the ancients made of love an ideal other than ours, an ideal which it is not a question here of justifying [...]; but an ideal irreproachable in their thought, and one that had its poetry.”

Proudhon, however, educated by his personal experience, has too profound a notion of the “madness of the senses” to be deluded by naive illusions. He knows too well that it is impossible to interpose a watertight bulkhead between platonic love and the fleshly kind: this kind of love, “however spiritualistic it is in principle,” does not therefore remain any less physical:

“One of Plutarch’s interlocutors, who defends the cause of the androgynous or bisexual love, made the following objection to his adversary, who protested in the name of the partisans of perfect love against the accusations with which they were charged: You claim that your love is pure of any union of bodies, and that the union exists only between the souls; but how can there be love where it does not take possession? It is as if you speak of becoming drunk by making a libation to the gods, or of alleviating your hunger with the fragrance of burnt offerings. To this objection, there is no answer. Whatever one may think of the distinction between bodies and souls, it always remains that the former are joined only by the joining of the latter.”

And Proudhon concludes, like a man devastated in his inmost depths by the battles of the angel and the beast:

“Any love, as ideal as its object may be, such as is for example the love of nuns for Christ or that of monks for the Virgin, even more so the love that refers to a living and palpable being, necessarily resounds in the organism and stirs sexuality. There is delight in love in the young Virgin who cherishes her turtle-dove; and what delirium, as one knows too well, is kindled in their consumed senses by the imaginations of the mystics! Having arrived at the summit of the empyrean, the celestial love, attracted by this material beauty whose contemplation pursues it, falls down towards the abyss: it is Eloa, the beautiful archangel, in love with Satan, whom it is enough for him to behold to lose himself. Such is [...] the antinomy to which love, like any passion, is subjected: just as it cannot do without the ideal, it cannot do without possession either. The first inescapably leads to the second.”

* * *

Why Proudhon have so much interest in homosexuality? It remains to me to seek the key to the enigma in his life and his person. The majority of his many commentators have shrunk from such an indiscreet investigation. At most, one of them, Jules L. Puech, restricted himself to summarily indicating that the source of his repressions would “undoubtedly” be revealed by psychoanalysis.⁶

At only seventeen years of age, Proudhon experiences, as he himself tells us, a “Platonic love” that makes him “quite stupid and quite sad.” He becomes enamored of a girl in a Christian manner, i.e. with “absolute faith.”⁷

In spite of his “green youth,” which claims more concrete satisfactions, he is made the “guardian” and “sharer” of the young lady’s virginity. At the end, “having waited too long, the young person was taken away and married to another.”

Why this singular behavior in love, which was prolonged for five years? Proudhon attributes his “mental affection” to the reading of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie*, an “allegedly innocent pastoral that must be blacklisted by every family.” And he denounces “the danger of this Platonism that a vain literature would like to set up as a virtue”. He suggests to us another explanation when he observes, in his *Carnets*: “I wish, if I ever marry, to love my wife as much as I loved my mother.”⁸ Perhaps he was paralysed, like so many others, by the all-too-famous Oedipus complex. For ten years after its puberty, he owed his perennial virginity to this unhappy love:

“He who is strongly seized by an ideal passion from his youth,” he says, “before his virility has arrived, by his very idealism, awkward and graceless with sex, scornful of gallantry, where he does not succeed, abrupt and sarcastic towards the pretty, intractable to cohabitation, which he calls, not without reason, immoral. In short,

⁶ Introduction to the volume of Proudhon’s *Oeuvres Complètes* containing *Du Principe de l’Art, La Pornocratie ou les femmes dans les temps modernes*, 1939, p. 304.

⁷ Quoted in Daniel Halévy, *La Jeunesse de Proudhon*, 1913, p. 36.

⁸ *Philosophie de la Misère*, 1867, vol. II, p. 384; *Carnets*, 1960–1961, vol. I, p. 320; vol. II, p. 340.

he balks, in spite of his appetite and his teeth, against the love that pricks him, irritates him, makes him redden like a lion [...] He feels extravagant, ridiculous [...] in aversion and love, he takes up marriage and a wife.”

For some years, Proudhon, “lamentable martyr of continence,” will be “attacked by the devil who tormented Saint Paul”:

“The devil who had for so long burned in my heart now roasted my liver, without either work, nor reading, nor walks, nor cooling agents of any kind being capable of restoring me to peace [...] A painful scission took place in me between my will and my nature. The flesh said, *I want*; the conscience, *I do not want*...”

At this point in time, Proudhon half-opens his most intimate chambers to us. This “platonism,” the “danger” of which he had only vaguely denounced,⁹ he now denounces clearly: “O, all you young men and young girls who dream of a perfect love, know it well: your Platonism is the straight way leading to Sodom.”¹⁰

* * *

Even if one excavates the youth of Proudhon in its least recesses, one finds there no female adventure apart from this pure passion. His biographer, Daniel Halévy, agrees that “to romp with the fair sex was not to his taste.”¹¹ He himself admits to us that when he still lived in the countryside and saw the farm girls masturbate the bull, “he never felt anything for these lively lasses.”¹²

On the other hand, we do find evidence of a masculine liaison. At the age of twenty-two, he met, at the printing press where he works, a young student from Besançon. Although of different social origins, the two young people become inseparable: “[As soon as] I knew you, I loved you,” Gustave Fallot will later write to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.¹³ He urges his friend to follow him to Paris. Proudhon does not resist this call. All is shared between them: room, bed, table, library, savings. Together, they “platonize.” But the terrible epidemic of cholera of 1836 struck Fallot. His friend tends to him day and night. He exhausts himself in the effort to save the one he loves. But he does not succeed in denying him to death. His pain is dreadful:

“I felt that half of my life and my spirit was cut off from me: I was alone in the world.” The memory of Fallot occupies his thought “like an obsession, a true monomania.” He goes to Père-Lachaise cemetery and remains for a whole hour in meditation on his tomb.¹⁴

All his life, Proudhon will remain faithful to male friendship. In a posthumous writing, he will observe: “Every man has secrets he entrusts to a friend, that he does not tell his wife.”¹⁵

To a comrade taken away from him by a wife, he writes bitterly: “Marriage works upon you in a strange way, messieurs who have taken wives [...] Shut up in the household more and more, you

⁹ *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l’Eglise*, édition Rivière, vol. IV, pp. 131–132.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹¹ Daniel Halévy, *La Jeunesse de Proudhon*, 1913, p. 102.

¹² *La Pornocratie ou les femmes dans les temps modernes*, posthumous work, 1875, p. 84.

¹³ Letter of Dec. 5, 1831, *Correspondance*, 1875, vol. I, p. xv.

¹⁴ Halévy, *op. cit.*, pp. 122, 133.

¹⁵ *La Pornocratie...*, p. 193.

end up forgetting that you were *compagnons*. I believed that love, paternity, increased friendship among men; I realize today that this was only an illusion.” And it adds this significant remark, for the reader who already knows the value he attached to ancient traditions of friendship: “If Orestes had married Hermione, from that day, he would have forgotten Pylades.”¹⁶

Elsewhere, Proudhon urges a lover whom he wishes well to safeguard his freedom: “Remember, young man, that the kisses you are given are bonds with which you are laden and that three days of Lent are enough to turn the woman, without your realizing it, from a gentle lover into a tyrant.”¹⁷ Proudhon would like to save his friends from the noxious female influence: “The conversation and the company of women reduce men’s minds, feminize them, dull them.”¹⁸

* * *

When his pen sometimes happens to evoke a beautiful male, Proudhon can barely contain his agitation. In a curious parabola, he describes a character of plebeian blood, of whom “the impassioned energy, the firmness of his muscles, the timbre of his voice [...] exerted an irresistible seduction” so much so that the young widow of whom he was an admirer “could not, in his presence, avoid feeling a delicious shiver.”¹⁹ On the other hand, effeminacy is repugnant to him: “The pretty boy who affects the female graces is disgusting.” The prospect gives him a horror of a society in which man would be “pretty, nice, mincing,” and in which there would “no longer [be] either males or females.”²⁰ Elsewhere Proudhon betrays his predilection for the male anatomy. Compared with man’s body, that of woman is, in his eyes, a “diminution, a sub-order”: “The muscles are unobtrusive; the virile shoulders are rounded; in place of strong, expressive lines are soft and flabby ones.”²¹

Proudhon is not tender toward the weaker sex. He can scarcely find enough degrading words to stigmatize the woman who has been possessed by love. She yaps, she returns to the state of an animal, a madwoman, a trollop, a female monkey, she suffers from inextinguishable lust, she is a well of wickedness. “Woman solicits, aggravates, provokes man; she disgusts and annoys him: more, more, more!”²²

For Proudhon, woman is an inferior, “subordinate” creature. She will be never a “strong mind.” He radically denies female genius. “A woman can no longer produce a child when her mind, her imagination and her heart are preoccupied with matters of politics, society, and literature.” Her true vocation is the household: “We other men, we find that a woman knows quite enough when she mends our shirts and makes us beefsteaks.”²³ To grant women voting rights would be “to attack family decency” and Proudhon, who took a housewife for his spouse, utters this laughable threat: “The day when the legislator grants women the right to vote will be the day of my divorce.”²⁴

¹⁶ Letter to Ackermann, Oct. 4, 1844, *Correspondance*, vol. II, pp. 158–159.

¹⁷ *La Pornocratie...*, p. 264.

¹⁸ *Carnets*, 1961, vol. II, p. 12.

¹⁹ *Contradictions Politiques*, 1864, posthumous work, Rivière edition, p. 297. One could compare this portrait to that of Hercules, an athlete “with long, strong thighs,” lightly borrowed by Proudhon from a Latin textbook (*La Guerre et la Paix*, 1861, édition Rivière, p. 15).

²⁰ *La Pornocratie...*, p. 33, 59–63.

²¹ *Carnets*, 1961, II, p. 11.

²² *La Pornocratie...*, p. 30, 92, 198, 235, 265; *Contradictions Politiques*, p. 298.

²³ *La Pornocratie...*, 33, 225, 170; *De la Justice...*, vol. IV, p. 304; *Carnets*, 1961, II, p. 12.

²⁴ *La Pornocratie...*, p. 59; *Contradictions Politiques*, p. 274.

He goes so far as to prescribe men to guide woman with cudgels. She “wants to be overcome and finds it good [...] Man has strength; it exists to be used; without strength, woman mistrusts him [...] Woman does not dislike being coerced a little, even raped.”²⁵

Proudhon’s *bête noire* is the emancipated woman, sufferer of “intellectual nymphomania,” who imitates masculine manners, the “virago,” the woman of letters, of which George Sand is, in his eyes, the hateful prototype.²⁶ But this anti-feminist frenzy will earn him stinging replies. At eighteen years of age, a young novelist will publish a vigorous lampoon against Proudhon, followed soon by that of a colleague.²⁷ Infuriated by these attacks, Proudhon will write an incoherent and unfinished response, and which, fortunately for him, will be published only after his death.²⁸

* * *

Beyond woman, it is all of modern society in the process of sexual revolution that arouses Proudhon’s anger. He denounces “the amorous madness that torments our generation,” “this pornocracy which, for thirty years, has set back public decency in France,” “this spirit of lust and licentiousness” which is “the plague of democracy,” “the worship of love and pleasure [...] cancer of the French nation.” Apostrophizing his contemporaries, he hurls these words at them: “You want flesh! you will have flesh until you sicken of it.”²⁹ The fault lies with the arts and letters, which over-excite the senses.³⁰ Isn’t the reading of a romance novel followed infallibly by a visit to the brothel – where one “meets only with disgust, unpleasantness, remorse?”³¹ And Proudhon lashes out at the utopian socialists, his predecessors, who had wished to rehabilitate the flesh; at Père Enfantin, leader of the “Saint-Simonian religion,” to whom he says: “You are a church of procurers and libertines”;³² at Charles Fourier, who preached the free flowering of the passions and wished to place them at the service of his regenerated society.³³

But still more than lust, it is homosexuality that does not cease to haunt Proudhon’s disturbed mind. Communism, while tending “to the confusion of the sexes” would be, “from the perspective of love relations, fatally pederastic.”³⁴ He is just as suspicious of the “sacerdotal androgyny” of the Saint-Simonians as he is of Fourier’s “omnigamy,” against which he raises the inquisitorial suspicion of “having extended love relations far beyond the accustomed barriers” and “having sanctified even *unisexual conjunctions*.”³⁵ The furor of the senses, he believes, necessarily leads to pleasures that are “contrary to nature,” to “sodomy.”³⁶ “We have entered fully into promiscuity, so

²⁵ *La Pornocratie...*, p. 191, 194, 267.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28; *Carnets*, vol. I, p. 227, 321, 342–343, 354; vol. II, p. 202, 363.

²⁷ Juliette La Messine (the future Madame Adam, better known by her pen name of Juliette Lamber), *Idées antiproudhoniennes*, 1858; Jenny d’Héricourt, *La femme affranchie*, 1860; cf. Jules L. Puech, Introduction to *La Pornocratie...*, Rivière edition, 1939, p. 315.

²⁸ *La Pornocratie*.

²⁹ *Philosophie de la Misère*, vol. II, p. 376; cf. also *Carnets* 1960, vol. I, p. 242: “All are content provided that they are kissed (...) They make love like dogs.”

³⁰ *De la Justice...*, vol. IV, p. 71; *Philosophie de la Misère*, vol. II, p. 384; Letter of Proudhon to Joseph Garnier, Feb. 23, 1844, quoted by Sainte-Beuve, *P. -J. Proudhon*, 1872, p. 105.

³¹ *La Pornocratie...*, p. 250; *De la Justice...*, vol. IV, p. 132.

³² *La Pornocratie...*, p. 166 et 23, 31, 108, 113.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

³⁴ *De la Justice...*, vol. IV, p. 71.

³⁵ *Avertissement aux Propriétaires*, 1842, édition Rivière, 1939, p. 222.

³⁶ *La Pornocratie...*, p. 164, 247, 261.

much has bawdiness become universal... Here, we have arrived at unisexual love.”³⁷ Any nation that dedicats itself to pleasure “is a nation devoured by sodomitic gangrene, a congregation of pederasts.”³⁸ Pederasty would be “the effect of a furious pleasure that naught can appease.”³⁹ And he asks, in a tone of strange delight: “Would there be [...], in this *frietus* of two males, a bitter pleasure that arouses the dulled senses, like the human flesh that, so it is said, makes any other feast tiresome to the cannibal?”⁴⁰

* * *

Proudhon’s last word is antisexual terrorism. Carnal passion, left to itself, appears to him irremediable: “It was to no avail that Bernard, Jerome, Origen, wished to overcome their flesh by labor, fasting, prayer, solitude.” Suppressed passion only erupts with even more fury. Instead of diminishing with its satiation, it is reborn and seeks new objects: “To enjoy, to enjoy again, to enjoy without end.”⁴¹

Proudhon thus does not hesitate to call the legislator, the gendarme, the judge to the rescue. Divorce is to be prohibited; sodomy is to be compared to rape and punished with twenty years of isolation.⁴² Better still, murder is to be declared legally excusable when performed by the first to come upon a “sodomite” discovered *in flagrante delicto*.⁴³ Proudhon seriously thinks of addressing a denunciation to the general prosecutor in order to prosecute the phalansterian school for “immorality”: “From now on,” he gloats, “one has the right to say to the Fourierists, ‘You are pederasts’ [...] If it is demonstrated that Fourierism is immoral, they must be banned [...] This will not be persecution, it will be *self-defense*.”⁴⁴

In order to extirpate lust, Proudhon preaches the most relentless eugenics: “It is necessary to exterminate all bad natures and to renew the sex by the elimination of vicious subjects, just as the English remake the races of oxen, sheep, or pigs.”⁴⁵ Socialism, as he conceives it, will employ sweeping means. The wrong of Christianity is not, according to him, in having wished to condemn all sexual relations outside of legitimate marriage, but having been unable to do so. *The Revolution alone shall accomplish it*.⁴⁶

We are warned: “*Everything prepares for severe manners.*” In the future society, “*a perpetual war*” will be waged on “*the erotic appetites*”; “*an increasingly successful war.*” Thus shall we be inculcated with “disgust for the flesh.”⁴⁷

Thus – what a paradox! – in order to extinguish “the fire in the blood”⁴⁸ that consumes him and that he hopelessly attempts to repress, Proudhon, an anarchist as regards social organization, foreshadows the most authoritarian of puritanisms.

³⁷ *De la Justice...*, vol. IV, p. 131.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁹ *De la Justice...*, vol. IV, p. 54.

⁴⁰ *De la Justice...*, vol. IV, pp. 54–55.

⁴¹ *Philosophie de la Misère*, édition 1867, vol. II, p. 376, 385.

⁴² *De la Justice...*, vol. IV, p. 52, 298.

⁴³ *Carnets*, vol. I, p. 232.

⁴⁴ *La Justice poursuivie par l’Eglise*, 1861, éd. Rivière, 1946, p. 237; *Carnets*, I, p. 168, 275, 288–289; II, p. 113, 128.

⁴⁵ *La Pornocratie...*, cit., p. 252.

⁴⁶ *De la Justice...*, IV, p. 155.

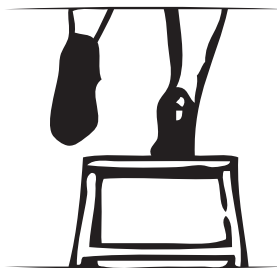
⁴⁷ *Carnets*, I, p. 135, 190.

⁴⁸ *Philosophie de la Misère*, p. 379.

Thus he proves, by a *reductio ad absurdum*, that one requires, in order to save the victims of his kind, a sexual revolution.

Daniel Guerin

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Daniel Guérin
Proudhon In the Closet
The homophobia and misogyny of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
Originally written in 1969 & translated in 2013.

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Translated by Jesse Cohn. A reinterpretation of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's well-known misogyny as a symptom of repressed homosexual desires. Daniel Guérin (1904–1988), was also author of *Homosexualité et révolution* (1953) and the widely read *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (1965/1970).

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