Dreyfus, Proust and the Crimes of the Belle Epoque

by Caroline Weber, March 13, 2013

March 13 (Bloomberg) -- This year represents a watershed in the history of France’s Belle Epoque -- the period of unprecedented economic growth and extraordinary cultural foment that nation enjoyed between the centennial of the French Revolution in 1889 (an occasion commemorated by, among other things, the inauguration of the Eiffel Tower) and the outbreak of World War I in 1914 -- for two seemingly unrelated reasons.

First, it marks the 100th anniversary of the publication of “Swann’s Way,” the first installment of “In Search of Lost Time” (1913-1927), Marcel Proust’s vast novel chronicling the lives of privileged Parisians at the fin de siecle.

Second, the French Ministry of Defense has for the first time made public the entire contents of the infamous secret dossier that the French army used against Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish artilleryman, in a bogus treason case it brought against him in December 1894, sentencing him to life imprisonment on Devil’s Island in French Guiana. (The posting is the work of Pierre Gervais, Pauline Peretz and Pierre Stutin, historians who have a new book about the file, “Le Dossier Secret de l’Affaire Dreyfus.”)

This case sparked a shattering national scandal known as the Dreyfus Affair, in which conservatives vehemently affirmed the guilt of “the Jewish traitor” even when faced with evidence, galvanizing to a whole generation of liberal politicians and intellectuals (including Proust), that the military had framed Dreyfus for crimes committed by Major Ferdinand Esterhazy, a non-Jewish officer with no connection whatsoever to the disgraced captain.

**Disturbing Links**

So what do a literary masterpiece and a long-sealed military file -- to which Dreyfus and his legal team were denied access, even after his exoneration in 1906, and which is now exhaustively digitized and posted online -- have in common?

More, it turns out, than just a shared historical context, a parallel re-emergence in the spotlight and a similarly overwhelming page count. ("In Search of Lost Time" has seven volumes, each of which contains two or more novel-length subsections; the secret dossier encompasses about 1,000 pieces of evidence, many of them forgeries, that the French military drew on to incriminate Dreyfus throughout his 12-year legal ordeal.) Both compendiums expose disturbing if powerful links, in the cultural imagination of the Belle Epoque, among Jewishness, homosexuality and covert criminality.

In the Dreyfus Affair, the tie between presumed espionage and anti-Semitic prejudice is, of course, well known, and has been ever since January 1895, when Dreyfus, having just been found guilty of leaking military information to the Germans, was publicly stripped of his captain’s insignia to the rabid screams of a crowd that demanded “Death to the Jew!”

Unbeknownst to the condemned man and his lawyers, as well as to the public, the secret dossier in his
case included a series of intimate letters between two foreign spies in Paris: Colonel Maximilian von Schwartzkoppen, the German military attache to whom Esterhazy, not Dreyfus, had sold French military secrets, and Lieutenant Colonel Alessandro Panizzardi, an Italian military attache who was sexually involved with Schwartzkoppen in the mid-1890s.

Although neither Schwartzkoppen nor Panizzardi had anything to do with Dreyfus, the two men’s correspondence -- with slangy allusions to sodomy and with feminized versions of their first names (“Maximilienne” and “Alexandrine”) -- revealed an irrefutable liaison between them, and thus lent an air of veracity to other documents which Dreyfus’s persecutors forged to lend retroactive credibility to his conviction as a spy.

**Letters Suppressed**

Some of these fake documents even referenced the foreigners’ affair directly, chief among them the faux Henry -- a forgery later named for the major who commissioned it -- in which “Alexandrine” informs her lover that if “Dreyfus is brought in for questioning,” they must both claim that they “never had any dealings with that Jew. … Clearly, no one can ever know what happened with him.”

The spies’ letters, real and fake, conveniently allowed the top officers to justify placing the whole dossier under seal, on the grounds that “dishonoring” Germany’s and Italy’s military attaches by uncovering their illicit entanglement could spell disaster for France’s diplomatic relations with both countries. (Nobody had forgotten that a single, intercepted telegram -- written by the German chancellor on a relatively nonscenalalous subject and deemed a casus belli by the French legislature -- had sparked the catastrophic Franco-Prussian War in 1870.)

At a time when homosexuality still constituted “an affront to decency” under French law, it seemed all too logical that the high command should keep its proof of the foreign soldiers’ transgressions under wraps. “That the secret dossier wasn’t made public, so be it, I regret that,” Major Louis Cuignet, one of the officers who unwittingly uncovered the fakeness of the faux Henry, testified in 1904. But, he said, “it was a question of decency, if I may say so: There are some things that should not be made public.”

In keeping the Dreyfus dossier shrouded in secrecy, the French military also fueled right-wing paranoia about a “Jewish conspiracy” -- a menacing if ill-defined plot the popular author Edouard Drumont had warned against in his viciously anti-Semitic best-seller, “La France Juive” (1886), and in which the captain had ostensibly played a role. According to Gervais, Peretz and Stutin, whose book addresses the issue in depth, who put the secret dossier online, fin-de-siecle anti-Semites and homophobes both envisioned “hidden vices” with which members of those putatively deviant and immoral “races” were secretly corrupting the nation.

In this context, the specter of unspecified “things that should not be made public” encompassed a whole panoply of phantom social menaces for which Dreyfus, as a Jew and a convicted spy, didn’t have to be gay, too (as indeed he wasn’t), to become the poster child.

**Sexual Secrets**

At the same time, his adversaries readily cast aspersions on the sexuality of his advocates, known as dreyfusistes; one general’s note in the secret dossier, for instance, asserts that the outspoken dreyfusiste Georges Picquart “is known in certain circles as Georgette … which would explain his attitude in the
Dreyfus Affair.”

It is in this phantasmagoric convergence of Jewishness, homosexuality and dreyfusisme that the secret dossier evokes the work of Proust, who was himself half-Jewish and gay and a supporter of Dreyfus. At the start of “Sodom and Gomorrah” (1921-22), Volume 4 of “In Search of Lost Time,” the young narrator accidentally spies an older nobleman, the Baron de Charlus, in flagrante with another man. The scene shocks the narrator not because of its “indecency,” but because Charlus is a well-known lady-killer, and thus has been duplicitously covering up his true nature.

Occurring just as the anti-Semitic vitriol unleashed by the Dreyfus Affair has reached its peak in the conservative, aristocratic milieu where the narrator and Charlus socialize, the discovery that the baron is an invert (the preferred Proustian term for male homosexuals) leads the narrator to an extended meditation on gay identity, which in its “criminal” clandestineness he compares to Jewish identity:

“[Their honor precarious, their liberty provisional, lasting only until the discovery of their crime; their position unstable … excluded even, save on the days of general misfortune when the majority rally round the victim as the Jews rallied round Dreyfus, from the society -- even the sympathy -- of their fellows … but also brought into company of their own kind by the ostracism to which they are subjected, the opprobrium into which they have fallen, finally having been invested, by a persecution similar to that of Israel, with the physical and moral characteristics of a race … [finding] a relief in frequenting the society of their kind … forming a freemasonry far more extensive, more effective, and less suspected than that of the lodges … all of them required to protect their own secret but sharing with others a secret which the rest of humanity does not suspect, … playing with the other race … a game that may be kept up for years until the day of the scandal when these lion-tamers are devoured; obliged until then to make a secret of their lives.”

Justifying Persecution

With this passage, Proust emphasizes that societal persecution and prejudices have transformed homosexuality and Jewishness into unspeakable transgressions, and that this criminalization has in turn forced the members of these so-called races underground, like so many spies, forcing them into a tacit conspiracy not to destroy the community at large, but to preserve, through secrecy, their own “unstable position” within it.

In this light, he observes, the scandal of the trumped-up espionage case against Dreyfus actually furnished the Jews with one unintended advantage: a chance to express openly their solidarity with an unjustly oppressed confrere. Today, the opening of the secret dossier presents a similar opportunity: opponents of homophobia, anti-Semitism and all related strains of criminalizing bigotry can take the full measure of the mechanisms at work in the Dreyfus Affair, and can reaffirm the importance of “marginal” identities being allowed to come in from the cold.

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