

H-France Review Vol. 8 (April 2008), No. 56

Willy, *The Third Sex*. Translated and introduction by Lawrence R. Schehr. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. xii + 138 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-252-03216-5

Review by Brett A. Berliner, Morgan State University.

Binary thinking is easy—you are either male or female, gay or straight, in the closet or out. In the Marais today, for example, gay men celebrate their identity—or don't, many just live their life unproblematically. Both options have become increasingly easy, at least legally, if not socially. Since the 1980s, legal discrimination against gays has been abolished. More recently, in 1999, the Pacte civil de solidarité (PACS) was enacted, granting the right to civil unions.<sup>[1]</sup> It is easy to believe that, prior to the contemporary movement for gay rights, virtually all gays were in the closet, oppressed and hidden from society's gaze. But history is just too complex for such a view, and Lawrence Schehr's new translation of Willy's *Le Troisième Sexe* (1927) makes this all too plain to see.

Willy, the *nom de plume* of Henri Gauthier-Villars (1859-1931), was an author and cultural critic who may best be remembered today for his marriage to Colette, whom he would lock in her room and command to write. The fruits of this labor, besides Colette fleeing the marriage for another woman, were the Claudine novels, which Willy dutifully published under his own name. Willy would go on to publish numerous other books, taking authorship of the work of others, which he apparently did with *The Third Sex*. Regardless of true authorship, this book is an entertaining, wide-ranging piquant romp through gay Paris and Germany, and it provides a lens with which to see the complex "*je-m'en-foutiste*" response (as Schehr calls it) to gays in interwar Europe.

Willy begins his tour of the gay twenties in Germany, where, he claims, "pederasty" is "more widespread [there] than in any other country in Europe" (p. 15). Clubs, ostensibly abundant, provided for great fun. At the Adonis-Bar, for example, "after two A.M., ephebes dance completely naked on the tables and show revealing tattoos" (p. 15). Willy suggests that this is notable, not unique: such conviviality was widespread throughout urban Germany in the twenties. Moreover, many cities had associations for gays. There were even journals, typically short-lived, with naked images, "sappy poetry," and personal ads, like one from a student in Freiburg, who hoped "to meet a friend between twenty and twenty-seven, hale and manly in appearance" (p. 21).

In Germany, gay associations and, in particular, the activities of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld and his Institute of Sexual Knowledge formed a true homosexual movement in the twenties. Hirschfeld was a "tireless" advocate for homosexuals, even making a successful, "scandalous" film about gays. Most significantly, he worked for the repeal of Article 175 of the German penal code, legislation that made homosexuality punishable with both a prison sentence and the possible loss of civil rights.<sup>[2]</sup> This law, which Willy claims was a "showy sword of Damocles," had a paradoxical effect: "Germany—a country with legal punishment for 'sodomites'—is also the country in which these gentlemen are most 'out'" (p. 22). Indeed, advocates like Dr. Hirschfeld and Adolf Brand publicly debated such gay issues as the difference between uranism and pederasty or even whether to advocate for anal coitus. "Germany," Willy thus quips, "is undoubtedly the only modern country that raises pederasty to the level of a philosophical institution" (p. 25).

France, too, Willy asserts, was rife with homosexual behavior, although not gay advocacy organizations. Still, there were social groups, like the Cavemen, who could turn out “fifty or sixty little gentlemen made up and dressed up like young ladies” for a “veritable saturnalia” (p. 57). More regularly and publicly, gays danced at the Salle Wagram and Magic-City, a fact that did not disturb Willy. “What can it do to ladies’ men—like me—that a place exists where ‘ignoble ephebes’ go to wiggle about?” (p. 58). Clearly little—and it makes for good copy. Sex always sells, especially transgressive sex. Indeed, going to gay clubs appeared to be a bit of a spectator sport, and Willy only too readily obliges the prurient and adventurous of the antics at Leon’s, the “Fag Exchange” at the Clair de Lune, and the “men-women” at La Petite Cabane. Some very public scenes sported popular homoerotic types, especially prostitutes, with evocative sobriquets: “various Bobettes, Résédas, Fatimas, [and] Toto-the-Sailors... can be seen pacing up and down, at the cocktail hour, on the well-known ‘Fags’ Island” in front of the Opera (p. 56).

Less piquant than Willy’s guide to gay clubs is his take on history and literature. When one of Willy’s prudish friends complains about the “turpitude” of the twenties, a “product of an era without God,” Willy riffs on gays in history (p. 70). Willy had a cursory, albeit encyclopedic knowledge of notable gays: the cross dresser Henri III, Peter the Great, and the libertines in the court of the Sun King and Louis XV all get mentioned. Contemporary literature receives greater due—and not just that of Marcel Proust and André Gide. Such works, among many, as Francis Carco’s, *Jésus-La-Caille* (1914) and Jean Rodes’s, *Adolescents* (1904) leads Willy to conclude that “we are witnessing a decline in the traditional love novel, and by that I mean one that borrows its emotional themes from the genital norm” (p. 83).

Willy succeeds in making his point that the twenties were gay in more ways than one. But what should we make of this slim work today? First, it is a veritable primer on how homosexuals were understood early in the twentieth century, and central to this question is noting the language Willy employed to describe homosexuality: sodomite, ephebe, uranist, invert, and pederast. These terms range from the biblical to the scientific in source and from the moral to the social and legal in context.<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, these terms suggest that the twenties were a time when the very definition of homosexuality was fluid and unstable. It would remain that way until gays were able to claim their own identity in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Second, need we say that the history of gay life must be contextualized? Willy’s salacious and slanderous discussion of Germany is undoubtedly related to longstanding feelings of national chauvinism. He could not, however, give himself over to unalloyed national pride. His acute sense of interwar decadence did not allow him to suggest that *La France* was especially manly. Indeed, the Great War did not, as some had hoped, rejuvenate France and the virile French male. Rather, the war, horrific, tragic, and demoralizing, destabilized bourgeois patriarchy. How that social order was to be reconstituted raised profound and often divisive concerns not just about national decline and French identity, but also about gender. The *garçonne*, the *bobette*, and the little sailor boys at the Opera could be threats to the social order, but Willy was not convinced of this. He was ambivalent towards gays, and this is suggestive of the broad and unresolved culture wars that grappled with who belonged in and defined a true France.<sup>[4]</sup> Indeed, Willy slandered homosexuals, but in the best French Republican tradition he also feared excessive repression, such as burning gay literature. “Let us hope this Puritanism,” he writes of those who want to repress gay culture, “does not reach the excesses observed in America... against books containing obscene words” (p. 12). Gays were Willy’s subject, but they were also objects or vehicles to raise larger issues of French identity and France’s liberal traditions, whether real or mythic. Finally, there is the outstanding translation and copious annotations of Lawrence Schehr. With virtuosity, Schehr has retained Willy’s wit, racy language, and hilarious puns. In this translation, Willy’s gay twenties roar once again.

## NOTES

[1] See Scott Gunther, "Building a More Stately Closet: French Gay Movements since the Early 1980s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13 (July 2004): 326-347.

[2] For a broad survey, see Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris 1919 – 1939*, vol. I and II (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006), and for a more focused work, see Carolyn J. Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[3] See Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). In chapter six, Nye provides a fine discussion of the history of terms used to designate homosexuals; it is interesting to note, however, that Nye contends that "the third sex," was not a phrase used with any frequency in France before World War I.

[4] See Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars Over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992) and Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France 1917-1927* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Brett A. Berliner  
Morgan State University  
[bberline@morgan.edu](mailto:bberline@morgan.edu)

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. No republication or distribution will be permitted without permission. ISSN 1553-9172