
*Never Say I: Sexuality in the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust* proposes that the problematization of the first person, which has been a central feature of twentieth-century French literature and critical theory, is particularly acute in writing that raises the intimate and controversial subject of same-sex sexuality. Taking the work of three major figures of early twentieth-century French literature, Michael Lucey’s book explores the convergence of formal innovation in first-person narration and social innovation in the depiction of same-sex relations. It is the first of two volumes that Lucey plans to devote to this topic. The second will consider a later group of writers whose first-person writing about sexuality occurs in the ambit of Colette, Gide, and Proust: authors including Yourcenar, Duras, Hervé Guibert, and Rachid O. The book’s title is taken from a 1921 journal entry in which Gide relates that Proust once remarked to him that: “You can tell anything, as long as you never say I (qtd. in Lucey 4).” Though the precise meaning of this admonition is hard to pin down, it suggestively evokes the intersection between reflection on the use of the first person and the description of same-sex sex, with its overdetermined potential for sociopolitical controversy, personal confession, and commercial exploitation, that forms the core of Lucey’s study. This injunction suggestively evokes the intersection of the description of homosexuality—with its overdetermined potential for social controversy, personal confession, and commercial exploitation—and reflection on the use of the first person, which is at the heart of Lucey’s study.
Never say I reads what Lucey describes as "The social character and function of utterances about same-sex sexuality" (27), in the context of a reflection on the fundamentally intersubjective character of the first-person voice. Far from describing the solitary labor of individual writers, the book explores the social and intellectual ties that connected these literary contemporaries. The reader learns a great deal about social relationships and reciprocal readings between Gide and Proust, Gide, and Colette, as well as about these writers' interactions with other significant interlocutors, notably Paul Bourget, Jean Lorrain, Roger Martin du Gard, and Rachilde. But Lucey carefully avoids representing these relationships as literary "contexts," if this term is understood to imply a stable, relatively homogenous environment that exercises a determining impact on literary production. The model of interplay between texts and social exchanges deployed in Never Say I is dynamic and multidirectional, and Lucey portrays social groups as fluid and internally differentiated. He notes, for example, that open-minded attitudes to sex and gender roles do not necessarily correspond to progressive political attitudes, taking, as an example, the fact that members of Colette's circle who liked to experiment with sexual personae were in many cases also fierce partisans of French national identity who regarded colonial regimes as a natural instantiation of the hierarchical order of race (116, 130).

Lucey's focus on the construction of the "I" in relation to social milieu corresponds to his argument that attitudes toward same-sex relations, and the ways in which these relations are represented, are highly specific in cultural and historical terms. Refining, but also moving away from Foucault's account of the paradigm shift in the late nineteenth century that laid the terrain for the perception of homosexuality as a social and personal identity, Lucey argues that ways of thinking and speaking about sex take shape in the interval between macro- and micro-sociological orders, that is, between personal understandings formed in the orbit of small social groups and "the larger, official, macrological understanding of that same question of classification" (20). If the representational history of same-sex sexuality is framed in this way, it becomes easier to understand why, for example, behavior that seemed old hat to a small subset of avant-garde writers in 1907 seemed fashionably risqué to a different set of actors in the mid 1930s (130). Never Say I shows that attitudes toward sexuality do not evolve in a linear fashion toward ever greater acceptance and greater representational transparency, and this is in part because at any given historical moment there is a plurality of publics, groups that approach and comment on social questions in contrasting ways and with differing levels of authority and influence.
Lucey mobilizes a range of theorists and interpretative models that are not standard points of reference in critical writing on literary representations of same-sex relations, and it is a refreshing departure. While he writes briefly about Foucault and Judith Butler, he draws more extensively on Pierre Bourdieu's work on literature as a social and economic field in *The Rules of Art*. *Never Say I* also foregrounds work by thinkers—including Pierce, Deleuze and Guattari, Michael Silverstein, and Erving Goffman—who emphasize the interactive dimensions of enunciation. Lucey's discussion of the "I" as a "figure" or "impersonation" framed by social relations, for example, is much indebted to Silverstein's discussion of linguistic indexicality that is "functionally independent of reference," but that connects speech with the social universe that frames it (21).

Scholarship on sexuality and the first person, as Lucey notes, has generally revolved around questions of genre. It deals with the relationship between the status of the "I" and the presentation/reception of the writing that it anchors as memoir, autobiography, autofiction, or first-person novel. In *Never say I*, by contrast, genre is de-emphasized, and Lucey instead considers how, across a spectrum of literary and non-literary forms, the first-person voice is constituted by what it says on a given subject, as well as by how and to whom it says it. This is a key theoretical move that allows Lucey to place the use of the first-person voice in an important new light. At times, however, the de-emphasis of genre is taken too far. Though there are differences as well as interconnections to be made regarding the use of the first person in different forms of writing, at many points in the book these textual differences are erased in the service of a wider emphasis on the intersubjectivity of the first-person voice.

A key aspect of Lucey's project is the inclusion of Colette alongside Gide and Proust as a writer who exemplified formal innovation in her writing about and public performances of same-sex relations. Whereas many previous readers have situated Colette within a parallel literary history of French women's writing, Lucey regards her as an integral figure in a literary tradition and social environment that also included the more thoroughly canonical figures of Gide and Proust. *Never Say I* offers detailed, closely argued readings of a substantial corpus of novels, letters, review essays, and journalistic pieces, and represents an important contribution not only to our knowledge of the three authors in question, but also to the historiography of sexuality. To the extent that the book has flaws, they lie less in Lucey's scholarship and arguments than in his presentation of the material. The points made in *Never say I* do not come across as strongly as they might because the writing is somewhat disorganized. The architecture of the book, notably the basis for the organization of
the argument into different chapters, is not always clear. In several chapters, particularly chapter 2 that considers conversations among Gide, Proust, and Bourget, the flow of the argument is hard to follow because Lucey shifts rapidly between different texts, historical moments, and theoretical points. The most compelling chapters are those that invite readers into the social/textual universe that is being discussed by means of sustained readings and steadily constructed arguments. This is notably the case in chapter 6, where Lucey reads Charlus's assignation with Jupien in *Sodom and Gomorrah II* in conjunction with consideration of early states of the manuscript, and in dialogue with Gérard Genette's well-known reading of Proust's narrative technique in *Narrative Discourse*. Chapter 3—a wide-ranging discussion of Colette's participation in the scandalous mime *Dream of Egypt* as well as of the social exchanges surrounding her collection of short texts, *The Tendrils of the Vine* (Lucey explains that in the French slang of the time *vrille* [tendril] referred to an "active" partner in a Lesbian couple)—is also strong. Yet even here the material seems to call for a division into two chapters, one focusing predominantly on Colette's enactment of self and sexuality during her career as a theatrical performer, the other on the linguistic play of *Tendrils*. Lucey's reading of the texts that comprise *Tendrils* in the end takes up only a few pages at the end of a lengthy chapter and seems out of proportion with the presentation of letters and journalistic material that precedes it.

*Never Say I* is, finally, not an "entry-level" work. It lacks the framing gestures that would make it accessible to readers who are not already familiar with much of the material in question. For readers who are well acquainted with the works of Proust, Gide, and Colette, however, it offers a compelling body of interpretations in which the most interesting aspects of literary history and biography are combined with theoretical reflections on writing in the first person.

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Leland de la Durantaye’s thesis is that *Lolita* is a moral book because its real subject matter is not the abuse of young girl but the