

## The Lady in Pink: Dress and the Enigma of Gendered Space In Marcel Proust's Fiction

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Ce muet langage des robes...  
—Marcel Proust

The language of clothing has played an important signifying role in the novel since the eighteenth century. In the earliest realist texts—works by Defoe, Richardson and Marivaux—telling details of dress are central to issues of characterization, description and historical reference. While dress continues to have its referential function in nineteenth-century novels, it also acquires an important symbolic role in the works of Balzac, Eliot, Flaubert, Tolstoy, and James. For these writers, clothing is not only a manner of reinscribing rank and class but, in the case of women in particular, it becomes emblematic of gendered space, an instrument used by society to fabricate women as well as a tool that women can use for self-fabrication. By the end of the nineteenth century, fashionable dress was socially acknowledged “as an entity to be glorified, described, exhibited, and dealt with philosophically; like sex, if not more so, it became a prolific machine for the production of texts and images” (Lipovetsky 69).

No novelist has paid more attention to the public and the private, the social and the personal spheres, which dress delineates than Marcel Proust. His great novel, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1987-1989) *In Search of Lost Time* (1992), about four thousand pages in length and divided into seven volumes, was published between 1913 and 1927, and covers a period of some fifty-five years starting in

the late nineteenth century and ending sometime after World War I. This long and complex work, written in the first person by a narrator who is also its hero, can be read on many levels. In a language rich in metaphor, the novel explores individual consciousness, social organization and the daily experience of the world. The search for lost time plays out against a chronicle of social change, often satirically observed. The narrator's life, a worldly and a spiritual quest, provides material for the exploration of emotional states—love, jealousy, desire and loss—as well as a profound inquiry into the nature of artistic creation. Marcel Proust was the archivist of the *Belle Epoque* and also its poet.

As an observer of the social scene, Proust describes fashions in dress and comments on the role costume plays in a society that places great value on ritual and stylized observance of convention. For the artist, clothing has a complex signifying role as a rich indicator of many aspects of personal as well as cultural life.

Both in its referential and in its symbolic functions, clothing acts as one of the many links Proust establishes between people, places, and epochs. The reverberation of an era, as well as an index of wealth, rank, and social class, dress is also an important textual motif which shapes the perception of the other and, as a result, is a significant element in the creation of character. In fact, a number of the principal personages in the novel are first glimpsed by the narrator almost incidentally and distinguished only by a striking aspect of their clothing. The face of Albertine, for example, is seductive and mysterious beneath her ambiguous black polo cap as she bicycles on the dunes at Balbec; the Duchesse de Guermantes, at an obscure country wedding, is blue eyed and red faced, enveloped in “a billowy scarf of mauve silk, glossy and new and bright” (1:245; 1:172);<sup>1</sup> and Odette de Crécy, the future Mme Swann, is a nameless and charming “Lady in Pink” when seen for the first time by the young narrator. Each of these characters thus introduces herself through her clothing, and in each instance this early glimpse reveals a secret which hints, through fabric and color, at a truth that will only be realized and elaborated much later.<sup>2</sup>

Dresses designed by Mariano Fortuny and worn by Albertine are closely tied to the narrator's life as an artist and lover. In the later volumes, these dresses become a complex and crucial struc-

turing motif which Proust himself described, in a letter to Maria de Madrazo, as “sensual, poetic and by turns painful” (*Corresp.* 15:57). While the narrator’s love for Albertine crystallized around a relatively small number of dresses by the great Venetian couturier and designer, his admiration for the two elegant older women is evidenced through a much more extended elaboration of feminine fashion.

The dresses of Oriane de Guermantes attract the narrator’s attention from his childhood to the time of the last formal reception which closes *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The duchess is an elegant woman who undergoes a number of metamorphoses in her social role and in her relationships with the narrator. His vision of her, however, always stays closely tied to her ancient, aristocratic name. Bird metaphors are linked to the mysterious race from which she is descended and also manifest themselves most strikingly in the description of her clothing. The color red, another distinguishing feature of her costume, is tied not only to her family but to her skin, and to the very sound of her name. Therefore, while the dresses and the physical appearance of the duchess vary, subject to the vagaries of fashion, the narrator is always aware of the woman beneath the fabric and ornaments. He admires her elegance, but also sees her clothing as a sign of the servitude of women both to fashion and to the men on whose financial support their stylishness depends. The memory of a beautiful red dress serves as a key to his understanding of the social and personal disintegration of the duchess.

While clothing plays an important role in the relationship of the narrator to each of these female characters, the links between clothing and a woman’s body are most explicitly explored in the case of Madame Swann, whose femininity is defined specifically in terms of surfaces and objects and whose very personality seems to assume its reality from costume. Dress not only encloses and enhances her lovely appearance; it gives substance to her person and order to her life. Through the agency of dress this ordinary, even vulgar, woman rises above her condition and enters a world of passion and poetry. Odette Swann plays many roles in the *Belle Epoque* society depicted in the novel. Wife and mistress to several fashionable men and hostess of a distinguished literary salon, she also has had an earlier career as an actress, an artist’s model, and a *grande cocotte*. Her social

position is unstable and, like so many of Proust's characters, her sexual identity is shrouded in ambivalence. With the frequent changes of name and social position, only her role as a fashionable woman gives Odette a degree of personal identity and continuity. From the time she was a well-known courtesan until the end of her life as a respectable and wealthy lady, Odette is always seen as one of the best dressed women in Paris. She changes her proper name, her social designation, and her position, more times than any other character in the novel as Miss Sacripant, Mme de Crécy, Mme Swann, Mme de Forcheville. For Swann in love she resembles Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro in Botticelli's Sistine fresco, while for the young Marcel she is consistently wrapped in the mystery and glamour of her clothing. Before he comes to know her as the elegant Madame Swann she is briefly seen, early in his life, as a lady in white and, most memorably, as a lady in pink. Odette enveloped in the aura of her dress is a significant presence throughout the *Recherche*.

In a letter written to Lucien Daudet while he was completing *Du côté de chez Swann*, Proust discusses the complex structure of leitmotifs that will give order to *A la recherche du temps perdu* and cites, as an example of such a motif, the actuality that "the Lady in Pink was Odette" (Daudet 76). A brief scene drawn from Marcel's childhood visit to his bachelor uncle Adolphe marks the first of many transverse lines that tie Odette into the fabric of the novel. It is also the first of a series of visions of Odette, framed within a costume and a room, isolated and captive under the male gaze.

The guileless look of a child marks this first image of Odette. She is eating a tangerine and its orange color seems to blend with her pink dress. Her open friendly face reminds the boy of many pretty young women he has seen before at the home of his parents:

I could find no trace in her of the theatrical appearance which I admired in photographs of actresses, nothing of the diabolical expression which would have been in keeping with the life that she must lead. I had difficulty in believing that she was a courtesan. (1:105)<sup>3</sup>

The elegant carriage, whose horse and coachman both wear a red carnation, and, most particularly, the pink dress and the pearl necklace worn by the lady provide some guarantees to the young man's imagination that this was indeed a *cocotte chic*. Three times in fewer

than three pages he refers to the elegant costume; four times the young woman is called the "Lady in Pink." Under the gaze of the admiring boy the periphrasis functions as a designation and, like her dress, as an enigmatic covering. Even though he does not know her identity, the "Lady in Pink" becomes linked in his mind with forbidden pleasures: love, the theater and the world of artists.<sup>4</sup> For the reader, this first glimpse of the future Mme Swann introduces the color motif of pinks and reds which swirls around her and all beloved women in Proust's world. These positive colors, as Jean-Pierre Richard calls them, along with their variants of mauve, violet and scarlet, are tied to sensuality, erotic charm and the promise of pleasure (Richard 78).<sup>5</sup>

Without knowing any details about Odette's early life, and certainly without knowing that she was the "Lady in Pink," the young narrator, who was a frequent guest at her house, projects on Mme Swann many of the attributes he admired in Uncle Adolphe's mistress. The magic, the seduction, and the elegance of a secret world are intimately tied to the clothing she wears. Odette Swann, the mother of his childhood friend Gilberte, is closely observed and her social persona elaborated as a function of the costumes she wears. An entire way of life and an intricate schedule of daily activities are suggested by linking a vestimentary code to a social program: receptions, teas, luncheons at home; walks or carriage rides in the Bois, surrounded by admirers; intimate moments when she plays the piano, reads in her salon, perhaps even writes. Other hidden activities are also implicitly tied to her costume: possibly, a secret erotic life, certainly, visits from hairdressers, dressmakers, jewelers, photographers. Consultations with gardeners, decorators and florists also contribute to the creation of the vestimentary space around Mme Swann.

### The Recreation of an Era

A large section of the chapter entitled "Autour de Madame Swann," which quite literally revolves around her and her salon, is devoted to Odette's dresses. Innumerable details relative to fashions and styles of the *Belle Epoque* are embedded in these pages where a dazzled young narrator lovingly describes his impressions of Mme Swann.<sup>6</sup>

Such specific references make of the novel a repertory of fashion and a nostalgic archive of bygone times and lost social strata. *A la recherche du temps perdu* can be read as a chronicle of *fin de siècle* dress styles when, for the first time, ladies walked on foot; when they enjoyed sports such as bicycling, golf, and yachting; and when Anglomania was in the air. More comfortable clothes were designed by the great couturier Redfern, who introduced the English tailored suit around 1890. The rigor of a code which ordained clothing strictly according to the time of day and the social activity is apparent: sport clothes for golf or for yachting; tailored suits to be worn on errands or informal visits; more formal afternoon dresses, clothes for informal or ceremonial evenings; indoor gowns, dresses for private or formal dinners; ball gowns. Fashion favored certain types of garments: tea gowns, parasols, small hats, furs. The description of certain gowns marks the chronology of changes in fashion during this period. The black velvet dress trimmed with white satin and cattleya orchids worn by Odette on the night she began her affair with Swann alludes to a fashion popular in 1881. The steady growth of the bustle from 1883 to 1885 contorted the form of the female body and Odette, like all fashionable ladies, had the "appearance of being composed of several disparate pieces" (2:265; 1:607). By 1887, the bustle has disappeared, and the waistline was made more slender. Mme Swann's dresses offer a résumé of the changes and innovations in fashion which progressively liberated the feminine silhouette and, eventually, placed great emphasis on charming hats. These included, in the wardrobe of Mme Swann, small toques decorated with a feather or a flower, a soft *chapeau à la Rembrandt*; and hats with long streamers hanging down the back, which had been made popular some years earlier by the Empress Eugénie, and which were now known by the amusing and provocative designation "Suivez-moi, jeune homme!" "Follow me, young man!"<sup>7</sup>

Shifts in taste and the passage of time are illustrated by changes in Mme Swann's dresses and the style of interior design in her salon. At the turn of the century, when the taste for fashions inspired by the Far East "retreats" and the Eighteenth Century again becomes fashionable, Mme Swann no longer receives her guest in Japanese kimonos but wears flowing Watteau-style gowns while the Chinese dragons on the cushions of her salon are replaced with Louis XV garlands. It is

in these specific instances that costume functions as one of the signs which takes into account the real diachrony of the novel.

The aura of sensual color that surrounds Odette Swann and the style of her flowing peignoirs and dressing gowns evoke a fashion on the boundaries of the intimate and the personal. They allude to her former life as a courtesan but also, by calling attention to the popularity of tea gowns and indoor dresses among fashionable ladies, tell of a shift in dress codes from the private to the public at the turn of the century. Style in clothing and decor is an external sign—striking and irreversible—of the passage of time. For the narrator in search of lost time, changes in fashion become emblematic of temporal transformations and nostalgia for lost youth is metaphorically expressed as ironic commentary on the modernization of women's dress. He bemoans that in the early twentieth century, "in place of the beautiful dresses in which Mme Swann walked like a queen," women wore immense hats "covered with all manner of fruits and flowers and birds" while their gowns were made of "Liberty chiffons sprinkled with flowers like wallpaper" (1:603; 1:417).

### The Vestimentary Genius of Mme Swann

Quite paradoxical to their role as indicators of the fashions of a specific historical period, the dresses of Mme Swann also seemed to possess a very individual style. On many levels, dress is a form of self-expression for Odette; it makes the body visible; it reveals feelings and implies physiological needs. It gives spatial unity to her person while it also creates enigmas that envelop her.

Through her creative efforts and somewhat like an artist, Odette discovered, or invented, a "sort of vestimentary personality . . . which gave to the most dissimilar of her costumes a distinct family likeness" (2:267; 1:609). Once liberated from the bustles, whalebones and curving ruches which had fragmented her body into seemingly disparate elements, Odette, taking advantage of a softer and more pliant fashion, unified her body and transformed herself completely into her own creature (2:265 *et seq.*; 1:607 *et seq.*). In his Notebooks Proust gives an extraordinarily concise summary of the vestimentary genius of Mme Swann by emphasizing the active role she played in shaping fabric to conform to her will.

And the body of Madame Swann whipping the silk like a siren churns the waves, gave the fabric a human expression, found its own type just like her face and seemed now an organized and divine form which had lifted itself out of chaos.<sup>8</sup>

Dress quite literally becomes one with the body of the wearer and signals an exultant act of self-determination as it mirrors the integrated female subject. An erotic identification of dress with the female body is created which points to an aspect of dress often signaled by psychoanalysts. Clothing “gives assurance of the existence of the body. Proclaims it. Draws it for the other to see” (Lemoine-Luccioni 102 and 147).

Just as Odette’s body found its own triumphal line, so dresses activated her personality, and gave her energy and direction: “sudden determination in the blue velvet, an easy-going good humour in the white taffeta . . . a sort of supreme discretion full of dignity in . . . the black crepe de Chine” (2:268; 1:609). It is one function of fashionable dress to give concrete expression to emotions, and it has been suggested that this “psychologizing of appearance is accompanied by the narcissistic pleasure of transforming oneself” (Lipovetzky 79). In the case of Mme Swann, the narcissism linked to dress often borders on self-indulgent auto-eroticism.

Odette received her intimates . . . in the bright and billowing silks of Watteau-style peignoirs whose flowering foam she seemed to caress over her bosom and in which she basked, lolled, disported herself with such an air of well being, of cool freshness, taking such deep breaths, that she seemed to look on these garments not as something decorative, a mere setting for herself, but as necessary, in the same way as her “tub” and her daily “footing,” to satisfy the requirements of her physiology and the refinements of her hygiene. (2:262)<sup>9</sup>

While the text alludes to socio-historical detail—the “Watteau” fashions, Anglomania, the new-found female interest in sport—a sensual and very personal pleasure derived from clothing underlies this evocation of Mme Swann as she seems to bathe in the luxury and well-being provided by her gown.

Mme Swann’s unique and self-absorbed elegance transcends time and alludes to the present as well as to other times and other

places. Jean-Pierre Richard suggests that one of the reasons that Odette does not seem to age is that she has already assimilated time through the “synthesizing” activity of her dress. Her dresses can be read as a palimpsest simultaneously presenting layers of time, earlier fashions and bygone days (Richard 199-201). By projecting her outside of time and lifting her out of the transitory, the dresses and jewels of Mme Swann lend a special charm to her person. “One felt that she did not dress simply for the comfort or the adornment of her body; she was surrounded by her garments as by the delicate and spiritualized machinery of a whole civilization” (2:267).<sup>10</sup> This “poetic” function of dress is often central to the descriptions of Odette Swann’s costumed appearance.

### The Poetry of Clothing

For the youthful narrator, a mysterious, quasi-religious world is created over which Mme Swann presides like a high priestess profoundly versed in the liturgy and rite of fashion. While Proust most often describes the “aura” emanating from her person, there are passages where he looks with intensity at the most minute detail of her dress. The intricate workmanship so characteristic of the fashions of the *Belle Epoque* is carefully observed and magically transformed through analogies which associate dress to other art forms. A blouse, ordinarily hidden beneath the jacket of a suit has “a thousand details of execution which had every chance of remaining unobserved, like those parts of an orchestral score to which the composer has devoted infinite labor although they may never reach the ears of the public” (2:293).<sup>11</sup> The carefully embroidered lining of a jacket, visible only when the wearer unexpectedly removes it because of the heat, is likened to

those Gothic carvings on a cathedral, hidden on the inside of a balustrade eighty feet from the ground, as perfect as the bas-reliefs over the main porch and yet never seen by any living man until, happening to pass that way upon his travels, an artist obtains leave to climb up there. (2:293-94)<sup>12</sup>

Although there are fashion plates and period dresses that attest to these particulars made vivid by Proustian analogy, it is in the paint-

ings of Renoir, Manet, and Whistler that one most readily finds the visual equivalent of the gowns worn by Madame Swann. Odette seen by the narrator in his youth is never systematically described. Her costumed appearance is captured like a fleeting optical juncture; impressions and evanescent visions create the image of the character. Moments, singulative or iterative, are evoked and temporal layers are indicated by the superimposition of colors. We see Mme Swann in her elegantly furnished house, surrounded by beautiful objects and magnificent flowers, dressed in marvelous indoor gowns "of crepe de chine or silk, old rose, cherry-coloured, Tiepolo pink, white, mauve, green, red or yellow, plain or patterned" (2:155).<sup>13</sup> When she sits at the piano, her lovely hands emerge "from the pink, or white, or, often, vividly colored sleeves of her crepe de chine peignoir" (2:139).<sup>14</sup> On certain cool autumn days, Mme Swann wore an indoor gown "white as the first snows of winter, or . . . one of those long pleated chiffon garments, which looked like nothing so much as a shower of pink or white petals" (2:232).<sup>15</sup>

Roland Barthes, in *The Fashion System*, observes that in all instances, literary or journalistic, "the described garment is fragmentary" and that "writing" clothing involves a series of choices which, by the emphasis placed on certain vestimentary features function as an "instrument of structuration" (15-16).

The cascade of sensual colors which envelops Odette is one such structuring device. Another is the painterly concept of space conceived as "an uninterrupted continuum that connects instead of separating things" (Greenberg 173). Proust, as a young man, wrote that he imagined Monet's garden at Giverny to be very much like one of the master's paintings, a garden of tints and colors, more than a garden of flowers, "un jardin-coloriste" where shades and tones harmonize in a space dematerialized of all that does not pertain to color (*Contre Sainte-Beuve* 539-40). In the *Recherche*, the spatial structure of the imagined garden is often transposed to descriptions of Mme Swann at home.

One arresting application of chromatic material to structure visual experience in the novel is a portrayal of Odette in her drawing-room at the beginning of one winter season. The narrator recalls that the room was filled with enormous chrysanthemums in a variety of colors.

[P]ale pink like the Louis XV silk that covered her chairs, snow white like her crepe de chine dressing gown, or of a metallic red like her samovar, they superimposed upon the decoration of the room another, a supplementary scheme of decoration, as rich and as delicate in its coloring, but one that was alive and would last for a few days only. But I was touched to find that these chrysanthemums appeared not so much ephemeral as relatively durable compared with the tones, equally pink or equally coppery, which the setting sun so gorgeously displays amid the mists of a November afternoon, and which, . . . I found again inside, prolonged, transposed in the flaming palette of the flowers. Like the fires caught and fixed by a great colorist from the impermanence of the atmosphere and the sun. (2:233-34)<sup>16</sup>

Contiguous objects, which in reality are quite different one from the other, seem to reflect each other in a “metonymic fusion” (Lejeune 166). The description captures the chromatic consonances between Mme Swann’s clothing, her salon, her flowers and the autumnal sunset; harmonies of pink and white and red immobilize the ephemeral.

Like Monet, Manet, and the other Impressionist painters whom he admired, Proust associated flowers, fashion and femininity in his recreation of this era “which lavished so much money and attention on women’s clothing” (Herbert 184). Mme Swann’s clothing mediates between herself and her environment, between the garden and the drawing room, between public and private spaces. From these harmonies results a kind of marriage between artifice and nature where all contrasts fade, all oppositions disappear, and all partitions vanish in the euphoria of one continuous, uninterrupted space (cf. Genette 50-51).

The often present color mauve, the purple flowers violets, orchids, pansies—which are so frequently a part of her costume, are reminiscent of the lavender tones so much favored by the Impressionist painters. These flowers lend their color and their petals to provide poetic substance to an apparition which came to represent, for the young narrator, Paris in the month of May: “Madame Swann would appear, blossoming out in a costume which was never twice the same but which I remember as being typically mauve; then she would hoist and unfurl at the end of its long stalk . . . the silken banner of a wide parasol of a shade that matched the showering petals of her dress” (2:290).<sup>17</sup>

Odette, totally preoccupied with herself, with her bodily ap-

pearance and the knowledge of her own beauty, is often perceived as self enclosed, like an actress on stage, dramatically separated from the audience of her admirers. The passages which describe her walks on the Avenue du Bois or the Allée des Acacias are exemplary of this vision of woman as the Other, a sublime object surrounded by the murmur of celebrity (1:592-98; 1:409-12 & 2:290-98; 1:625-30).

The most fully developed of these tableaux of Mme Swann's walks occurs during the last pages of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* and marks the apotheosis of the narrator's memories of this glamorous woman whom he had so passionately observed during his early adolescence. Despite the specificity of time and place, the elegant Mme Swann becomes the representation of Womanhood while her costume pays tribute to the dressmaker's art. The use of cinematographic technique in the exposition of this scene is striking, and provides another example of a structuring device drawn from the visual arts.

Bordered in time and space—a day in May between 12:15 and one o'clock—surrounded by the mauve tones of her costume, encircled by her silken sunshade and reframed by the black and gray agglomeration of the admirers who walk with her, Mme Swann advances, as if before a tracking camera, under the gaze of the observing narrator who has been lying in wait for her. With a cinematic mobility of point of view, the eye of the observer moves toward her, around her, alongside her through a series of subtle reframings. We see her face beneath the parasol, a close-up of her smile, of the little ribbons floating from her bodice and the exquisite detail of the lining of a jacket or the pleating of a blouse. Revealed to subtle probing, her entire way of dressing seems the manifestation of a secret liturgy, of rites which follow a canon known only to her. Distant and apart from mere mortals, she receives the homage of the little, bowing figures (“petits personnages salueurs”) who surround her. Finally, she receives the elegant greeting of the Prince de Sagan, who doffs his hat with a great flourish “in which he displayed all the chivalrous courtesy of the great nobleman bowing in token of respect for Womanhood, even if it was embodied in a woman whom it was impossible for his mother and his sister to know” (2:297).<sup>18</sup> Other horsemen greet her “comme cinématographiés au galop sur l'ensoleillement blanc de l'avenue” ‘as though filmed at the gallop

in the blinding sunlight of the Avenue' (2:298; 1:629). The gaze recedes, as do the years, and all that is left is the beautiful image of Mme Swann, surrounded by the mauve reflection of her parasol, "comme sous le reflet d'un berceau de glycines" 'as though in the coloured shade of a wisteria bower' (2:298; 1:630).

Most of these passages describing the clothing of a charming Odette, surrounded by admirers, are compressed into relatively few pages of the *Recherche*. The end of this first chapter of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* marks a distinctive moment in the adolescence of the narrator. It is a period of young love, of innocence and unfulfilled dreams. But it is also the beginning of his apprenticeship of the signs of the world as well as his first acquaintance with the signs of erotic love. His youthful desire projects special signification on this elegant woman who had been Swann's great love and who was now the mistress of a salon frequented by artists and writers. Her garments play a mediating role. Under the gaze of the young man, Odette's persona shifts, develops, becomes complex through the medium of her clothes. A more mature narrator reflects on this:

Of course when we are young . . . our desires, our beliefs confer on a woman's clothing an individual personality, an irreducible essence. We pursue the reality. But by dint of allowing it to escape we end by noticing that, after all those vain endeavours which have led to nothing, something solid subsists, which is what we have been seeking. We begin to isolate, to identify what we love, we try to procure it for ourselves, if only by a stratagem. Then, in the absence of our vanished faith, costume fills the gap, by means of a deliberate illusion. (3:445-46)<sup>19</sup>

A melancholy reflection on lost illusions as well as an extraordinary reflection on the power of costume—that most ephemeral of worldly signs—to resurrect and give meaning to a past that has vanished!

### The Enigma of the Lady in Pink

Even as he describes his youthful obsession with the beautiful and glamorous Mme Swann, the narrator, in an occasional shift of viewpoint, meditates on Odette from the perspective of his more mature experience. He notes her pretentiousness as well as the tastes

and mannerisms which reflect her early life as a courtesan. “[I observed] on her lips an ambiguous smile in which I read only the benign condescension of Majesty, though it was pre-eminently the provocative smile of the courtesan” (1:595).<sup>20</sup> In a later perspective, the notion of Mme Swann as a former *cocotte* predominates. This turn in the narrator’s view on Odette occurs when some old photographs allow him to recognize in Mme Swann the “Lady in Pink” of his childhood. At first he has difficulty in superimposing these two images. However, when he falls in love with Albertine and is himself tortured by jealousy and incertitude, he thinks of Swann’s love for Odette and begins to project “the rooted idea of Mme Swann’s character” on the hypothetical construct he was making of Albertine. “My imagination played with the idea that Albertine might . . . have had the same immorality, the same capacity for deceit as a former prostitute” (4:235).<sup>21</sup> In his jealousy he continues to draw parallels between his love story and Swann’s with the focus of comparison always on Odette, not only a kept woman and also, possibly, a lesbian. A definitive formula of equivalencies is imposed and from a certain moment on, Mme Swann again becomes for him the “Lady in Pink.” The glamour of the “Lady in Pink” is now also tied to suffering. Enigma and mendacity are part of the aura surrounding her.

Odette—the “Lady in Pink”—is composed and isolated in this designation as in the many descriptions of her elegant clothes. The periphrasis, often set off within the text by quotation marks and underscored by capital letters, becomes the first and last element of a veritable portrait gallery of Odette. She is also framed diegetically in photographs and paintings which refer to different moments in her life, and which circulate and reappear in different contexts throughout the *Recherche*. All these portraits show Odette costumed and all allude to her erotic life. A sensual note is always tied by analogy or memory to Odette’s clothing. She is always seen under the gaze of a man, and her dress seems to be a metonymic expansion of her person, a reminder that a woman’s body is at once public and private.

The watercolor of “Miss Sacripant” is chronologically the earliest and the most ambiguous portrait likeness of Odette. Executed years before the narrator’s birth by the great painter Elstir, it shows a young woman with the elusive and ambiguous appearance of “a

somewhat boyish girl” or “an effeminate, vicious and pensive youth,” dressed in a costume which underscores this bisexual perspective: a bowler hat with a cerise ribbon, a velvet jacket without lapels worn over a white shirt-front. On a table next to her stands a small vase filled with red roses. She holds a lighted cigarette in one hand and a broad-brimmed garden hat in the other (2:583-85; 2:203-05). The cerise ribbon and the red flowers accentuate the provocative tension between the elements of her costume. The lighted cigarette and the broad-brimmed garden hat which she holds, one in each hand, seem to offer the tantalizing choice between illicit temptation and romance. The watercolor portrait and its photographic reproductions are discussed on several occasions and give rise to some speculation about the relationship of its subject to the painter and to other lovers. Most particularly, however, this portrait focuses attention on the structuring power of a lover’s gaze. “Elstir’s portrait of Odette . . . is a portrait not so much of a mistress as of the distortions of love” (5:502).<sup>22</sup>

Swann’s gaze also imposed its own order on the woman who was first his mistress and then his wife. While he was in love with Odette, this great connoisseur of art kept on his study table the photographic reproduction of Botticelli’s daughter of Jethro because an imagined resemblance between his mistress and the Sistine fresco reassured him of the quality of her beauty and confirmed the ardor of his love. Once married, Swann had in his room a small daguerreotype of the young Odette “in which, beneath a straw hat trimmed with pansies, one saw a thin young woman, fairly plain, with bunched out hair and drawn features” (2:601).<sup>23</sup> The tired features and frail look had a “Botticellian charm” absent from more recent photographs of his wife. Swann continued to see Odette as a Botticelli figure and even tried to convince her to dress in a manner reminiscent of some of the paintings of the great Florentine master. He did not like the series of photographs of the “definitive” Odette, triumphant, beautiful, and elegant, transformed by her own energy and the artistry of make up and clothing. These photographs which are never described in detail but which allude to a certain moment in Odette’s life can be imagined by the reader as hidden pictorial representations, frozen in time, of the elegant lady whom the narrator had admired in his youth.<sup>24</sup>

Near the end of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the narrator observes that over the years Mme Swann has supplied his “imagination with abundance of material to work on” (6:418; 4:600); there had existed for him many Odettes, “separated by the colorless ether of the years,” each one different and each one “bedecked with the dreams which [he] had had at very different periods” (6:376; 4:568). However, when Odette, now Mme de Forcheville and mistress of the duc de Guermantes, reappears at the last reception in the last volume, she seems to have lost much of the magic that the narrator’s desire had conferred on her. In spite of the spectacular elevation of her social status, this last Odette seems, in his eyes, very much to resemble the first: a young-looking woman who is the mistress of an old man; a woman who dresses to please a man; a woman who seeks her identity in her clothing. She wore only those peignoirs which pleased the duc de Guermantes, served only the dishes he liked:

[I]n a word, in spite of all that she had accomplished in building up a social position, she was tending under pressure of new circumstances to become once more, as she had first appeared to me in my earliest childhood, the lady in pink. (6:409)<sup>25</sup>

We are asked to contemplate “this Restoration Duke and this Second Empire courtesan swathed in one of the wraps he liked, [as] the lady in pink would interrupt him with a sprightly sally.” Just a few lines further down, on the same page we read that “the Duke glared at the audacious lady in pink” (6:413).<sup>26</sup> Again, and for the last time, the periphrasis “frames” Odette while her clothing, once again, points to the meaning of her person.

This last Odette, again a “Lady in Pink,” holds no new signs to be deciphered. The signs which she emits now seem empty and mendacious. There are no further meanings to discover and decode. She is to be read only on her beautiful surface; detached smiles, silken or velvety fabrics, luminous colors speak to her beauty and her elegance. Perpetually “costumed,” Odette is a construction of what her clothes and other people’s desire make of her: a stylish woman, a seductive woman, a *grande cocotte*. For Proust, worldly signs, no matter how much they vary, “are empty and end up intact or identical at the conclusion of their development” (Deleuze 104). Although the memory of her clothes is rich in metaphoric allusions for the nar-

rator, the elegance and artistry which had once made Odette one of the most fashionable women in Paris, at the end of the novel make her seem an artificial creature, a sort of mechanical doll whom time has not touched. She seems not to have aged; she is playing the same role that she has always played; she is finally defined only by the fabrics, the dresses, and the ornaments which envelop her.<sup>27</sup> Elegant and seductive, she remains masked and costumed.

Despite the narrator's disappointment in this last manifestation, Odette is not merely, "a static emblem of the desirable woman, but an intersection point in a moving network of desiring pathways" (Bowie 64). Her relationships have stood as a reminder of the link between love, suffering, and jealousy while her life epitomizes the mutability and pretense of the social order. Odette's existence bears witness to the emptiness of worldly signs and the sterile role of appearance and habit on the stage of society's theater. Yet the memory of her elegance and glamour remains a focus of the vanished past and lost illusions. Dress is a sign both worldly and intimately bound to the person of its wearer which it reveals, mysteriously distorts and conceals at the same time. The mute language of clothing speaks eloquently and ambiguously.

### Notes

1 *A la recherche du temps perdu* has been translated most recently as *In Search of Lost Time*. I refer to the novel and its component parts by their French titles. However, for the convenience of English speaking readers, I quote from the English translation by S. K. Scott-Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D.J. Enright and published by The Modern Library in 1992. This revision is based on the translation published by Random House in 1981 under the title *Remembrance of Things Past*. Occasionally, I make minor modifications in this excellent translation. Since I have worked principally with the French text, I also give a reference to the standard French "Pléiade" edition, edited by Jean-Yves Tadié and published in 4 volumes by Gallimard, 1987-1989. I indicate, in parentheses and following each quotation, volume and page number first for the Modern Library translation and then for the Pléiade edition. In all other instances when I cite works originally written in French, the translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

2 For an analysis of the function of image and appearance in the elaboration of Proustian characters see Tadié, *Proust et le roman*, 61-103. In her *Proustian Optics of Clothes*, Festa-McCormick analyzes clothing as devices used to reveal secret aspects of character while Leo Bersani, in his *Marcel Proust*, also notes the role played by clothing in the “gallery of widely diversified portraits” that Proust creates in his novel (180-81).

3 “Je ne lui trouvais rien de l’aspect théâtral que j’admirais dans les photographies d’actrices, ni de l’expression qui eût été en rapport avec la vie qu’elle devait mener. J’avais peine à croire que ce fût une cocotte” (Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* 1:76).

4 Several years later, when he first meets Bergotte, he is sadly reminded that the great novelist, like the lady in pink, is one of those “wonderful” persons whom his parents could never properly appreciate (2:201; 1:562).

5 This motif is rich in metaphoric implications which vary throughout the novel depending on shade and intensity of color. On Swann’s first visit to her apartment Odette receives him in a pink silk dressing gown; on the second visit she is dressed in a peignoir of mauve crepe de Chine. See also Stadler, “The Red Dress of Oriane de Guermantes.”

6 In his correspondence and in conversations with friends, Proust showed great concern to properly document the clothing that he describes in his novel. George Painter, in his biography, includes many anecdotes illustrating the efforts Proust made to get accurate information about detail and context of clothes worn by elegant ladies on various occasions. See also Tadié, *Marcel Proust—Biographie*.

7 Perrot’s *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie* is an excellent source of information about all aspects of dress and adornment in the 19th century. Much detailed information about French fashion during the *Belle Epoque* and after, can also be found in Boucher, *20,000 Years of Fashion*, 388-410, as well as in the “Notice” and notes of the Pléiade edition of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, 1:1322-23; 1208; 1211, etc.

8 “Et le corps de Mme Swann, fouettant la soie comme le corps d’une sirène fait l’onde, donnant au drap une expression humaine, avait trouvé lui aussi un type autant qu’avait fait son visage et semblait une forme organisée et divine qui s’était dégagée du long chaos.” Relevant sections etc.

9 “Odette recevait ses intimes . . . dans les soies claires et mousseuses de peignoirs Watteau desquelles elle faisait le geste de caresser sur ses seins l’écume

fleurie, et dans lesquelles elle se baignait, se prélassait, s'ébattait avec un tel air de bien-être, de rafraîchissement de la peau, et des respirations si profondes, qu'elle semblait les considérer non pas comme décoratives à la façon d'un cadre, mais comme nécessaires de la même manière que le 'tub' et le 'footing', pour contenter les exigences de sa physionomie et les raffinements de son hygiène" (1:605).

10 "On sentait qu'elle ne s'habillait pas seulement pour la commodité ou la parure de son corps; elle était entourée de sa toilette comme de l'appareil délicat et spiritualisé d'une civilisation" (1:609).

11 "mille détails d'exécution qui avaient eu grande chance de rester inaperçus, comme ces parties d'orchestre auxquelles le compositeur a donné tous ses soins, bien qu'elles ne doivent jamais arriver aux oreilles du public" (1:627).

12 "ces sculptures gothiques d'une cathédrale dissimulées au revers d'une balustrade à quatre-vingts mètres de hauteur, aussi parfaites que les bas-reliefs du grand proche mais que personne n'avait jamais vues avant qu'au hasard d'un voyage, un artiste n'eût obtenu de monter" (1: 627).

13 "de crêpe de Chine ou de soie, vieux rose, cerise, rose Tiepolo, blanche, mauve, verte, rouge, jaune, unie ou à dessins" (1:531).

14 "des manches roses, ou blanches, souvent de couleurs très vives de sa robe de chambre de crêpe de Chine" (1:520).

15 "blanche comme une première neige, parfois aussi dans un de ces longs tuyautages de mousseline de soie, qui ne semblent qu'une jonchée de pétales roses ou blancs" (1:584).

16 "rose pâle comme la soie Louis XV de ses fauteuils, blanc de neige comme sa robe de chambre en crêpe de Chine, ou d'un rouge métallique comme son samovar, ils superposaient à celle du salon une décoration supplémentaire, d'un coloris aussi riche, aussi raffiné, mais vivante et qui ne durerait que quelques jours. Mais j'étais touché par ce que ces chrysanthèmes avaient moins d'éphémère que de relativement durable par rapport à ces tons, aussi roses ou aussi cuivrés, que le soleil couché exalte si somptueusement dans la brume des fins d'après-midi de novembre . . . je retrouvais prolongés, transposés dans la palette enflammée des fleurs. Comme des feux arrachés par un grand coloriste à l'instabilité de l'atmosphère et du soleil" (1:585-86).

17 "Mme Swann apparaissait, épanouissant autour d'elle une toilette toujours différente mais que je me rappelle surtout mauve; puis elle hissait et

déployait sur un long pédoncule . . . le pavillon de soie d'une large ombrelle de la même nuance que l'effeuillage des pétales de sa robe (1:625).

18 "où s'amplifiait toute la chevaleresque courtoisie du grand seigneur inclinant son respect devant la Femme, fût-elle incarnée en une femme que sa mère ou sa soeur ne pourraient pas fréquenter" (1:629).

19 "Certes quand on est jeune . . . notre désir, notre croyance confèrent au vêtement d'une femme une particularité individuelle, une irréductible essence. On poursuit la réalité. Mais à force de la laisser échapper, on finit par remarquer qu'à travers toutes ces vaines tentatives où on a trouvé le néant, quelque chose de solide subsiste, c'est ce qu'on cherchait. On commence à dégager, à connaître ce qu'on aime, on tâche à se le procurer, fût-ce au prix d'un artifice. Alors, à défaut de la croyance disparue, le costume signifie la suppléance à celle-ci par le moyen d'une illusion volontaire" (2:680-81).

20 "aux lèvres un sourire ambigu où je ne voyais que la bienveillance d'une Majesté et où il y avait surtout la provocation d'une cocotte" (1:411).

21 "mon imagination faisait le jeu de supposer qu'Albertine aurait pu . . . avoir la même immoralité, la même faculté de tromperie qu'une ancienne grue" (3:200).

22 "[le portrait] d'Odette par Elstir . . . est moins le portrait d'une amante que du déformant amour" (4:23).

23 This little straw hat reappears more than once in the novel. It is mentioned in one of the earliest descriptions of Odette, when Swann is struck by her timid, fearful air and then several times in relation to the photograph of his wife which Swann particularly liked. Ironically, an elderly Odette recalls wearing this same hat at the beginning of a wild love affair, "un amour fou," with M. de Bréauté!

24 During the second half of the nineteenth century, the art of photography allowed fashionable ladies to flaunt their costumed identity. The Countess of Castiglione had more than 400 photographs taken of herself during this period. "Several photographs. . . , make explicit references to herself as an object of vision, using picture frames and mirrors to remind us of her artifice. Her self-presentation emphasizes the extravagant surfaces that substitute for an interior being" (Higonnet, 311).

25 "en un mot elle tendait, malgré tout l'acquis de sa situation mondaine, et par la force de circonstances nouvelles, à redevenir, telle qu'elle était apparue

à mon enfance, la dame en rose" (4:593).

26 "ce duc si 'Restauration' et cette cocotte tellement 'second Empire', dans un de ses peignoirs qu'il aimait [tandis que] la dame en rose l'interrompait d'une jacasserie. [...] Ainsi le duc regardait-il un instant l'audacieuse dame en rose" (4:596).

27 As he contemplates Odette in her last role as mistress of the Due de Guermantes, the narrator comments somewhat harshly: She was commonplace in this role as she had been in all her others. Not that life had not frequently given her good parts; it had but she had not known how to play them 'Elle était médiocre dans ce rôle comme dans tous les autres. Non pas que la vie ne lui en eût souvent donné de beaux, mais elle ne savait pas les jouer' (6:414; 4:597).

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