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The Girl in the Novels of Marcel Proust.

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THE GIRL IN THE NOVEL
OF MARCEL PROUST

by

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

1. C. S. Du Côté de Chez Swann.
2. J. F. A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs.
3. C. G. Le Côté de Guermantes.
4. S. G. Sodome et Gomorrhe.
5. P. La Prisonnière.
6. A. D. Albertine Disparue.
7. T.R. Le Temps Retrouvé.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The young girl, in the innocence of her youth, is a luminous thread in the complex tapestry of A la Recherche du Temps Perdu. Although she fulfills the important task of illuminating her intricate background, she occupies but slightly more than one-fifth of the completed work, as the author's technique of total recall forces her to give way to the vain woman of the world, the courtesan, the invert, and society in its entirety. It is fitting that she should play her most important rôle in the first two volumes of A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, for it is there that the narrator recalls the memories of his childhood and youth. She never completely disappears from the book, however, for milkmaids and vendors, young girls of high birth and working girls, peasants and waitresses, the named and the nameless, float in varied succession on and off the pages of Proust in his re-creation of an entire society.

The author's purpose in writing A la Recherche du Temps Perdu was to create a work of art which should defy the destructive influences of time. His aim was to solidify within the pages of his book the efforts of a human soul to understand the essence of phenomena, which seem to be ever changing and shifting. The girl in the work of Marcel Proust exemplifies better than any of his other characters both the desirability of understanding the outside world

and the fluidity of all things. She is particularly well adapted to the task she is expected to perform, for, because of her physical attractiveness, her youth, and her mobility, the author can best express through her the beauty and elusiveness of the external world.

The girl is, then, a source of inspiration to Proust, first, because of her charm. She seems to him to be a desirable emanation of the beauty that exists in the world outside the imagination of the individual. The author of A la Recherche du Temps Perdu was passionately devoted to beauty in all its forms. His hero, Marcel, in this respect, takes on the characteristic of his creator. From his earliest childhood, the narrator delights in the pictures of Giotto, which have been given to him by a friend of the family, Charles Swann. The cathedral at Balbec appears to his childish dreams as the incarnation of beauty in stone. The compositions of Wagner seem to him to express the infinite in the field of music. Just as painting, architecture, and music are suggestive of ideal beauty in other media, so the young girl appears to him to be its human bodiment. She delights her creator in her visible form. The firm, young flesh, the rounded arms, the free, bold movements, the rosy coloring never cease to enchant him. He remembers for years the golden face of a milkmaid whom he has seen from a train window at dawn on his first trip to Balbec or a young harpist who appears to him to be a goddess gathering stars. The girl moves through

the mind of Proust like a living stream, which he channels with consummate skill into the pages of his book to add her sparkling freshness to his narrative.

The girl, in addition, is well adapted to illustrate the fluidity which Proust feels exists in the universe, for in her appearance, speech, and personality she is an unformed creature. Her facial lineaments have not yet settled into fixed expressions of optimism or of bitterness.¹ She has not yet assumed a characteristic manner of speaking; she is in the process of forming her mode of expressing herself, which will be partly her own creation and partly an adaptation of the speech of her parents and of her locality.

Les traits de notre visage ne sont guère que des gestes devenus, par l'habitude, définitifs. . . . De même nos intonations contiennent notre philosophie de la vie, ce que la personne se dit à tout moment sur les choses. Sans doute ses traits n'étaient pas qu'à ces jeunes filles. Ils étaient à leurs parents. L'individu baigne dans quelque chose de plus général que lui. A ce compte, les parents ne fournissent pas que ce geste habituel que sont les traits du visage et de la voix, mais aussi certaines manières de parler, certaines phrases consacrées, qui presque aussi inconscientes qu'une intonation, presque aussi profondes, indiquent, comme elle, un point de vue sur la vie. Il est vrai que pour les jeunes filles, il y a certaines de ces expressions que leurs parents ne leur donnent pas avant un certain âge, généralement pas avant qu'elles soient des femmes. On les garde en réserve. . . . Aucune ne saurait diviser la jeune fille de son pays natal. Elle, c'est lui encore.²

¹Marcel, Proust, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, Tome II, A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs, iii, p. 193; hereafter referred to as J. F.

²J. F., iii, p. 198-199.

Her essential nature, too, is still largely unformed. Although throughout the book Proust's characters are presented as constantly changing, the young girl is even more elusive than the others. As her habits have not yet solidified into personality traits, she defies the comprehension of the narrator at every turn. He longs to understand her and to have her understand him, but he is unable to attain his desire at the time when success matters to him most, for the love affairs of adolescence are fragile, temporary attachments, which, because of the youth and mutability of the characters involved, are easily destroyed.

In addition to the immaturity of the young girl, she is useful to the author in expressing the fluidity of the universe because of her mobility. As she is young, she can be presented as moving quickly, smoothly, and gracefully through his pages, constantly eluding the grasp of her pursuer. She has the many interests of the adolescent in the life about her to remove her from the presence of the narrator when he needs her most.

In summary, the girl in her beauty and in her constant changeableness in every way symbolizes to the author the attractive aspects of the outside world which the narrator, the hero, Marcel, does his best to understand. For the hero, as for the author, she at every turn eludes him, like a wraith which curls away from the hand which is seeking to grasp it. The tragedy of A la Recherche du Temps Perdu is the hopelessness of reconciling the inner world

with exterior reality, for the narrator can attain satisfaction only when he withdraws from active life to live in a world of his own creation.

CHAPTER II

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PROUST'S GIRLS

In the study of Proust's girls it must be stated at the outset that the reader learns most about them from the lips of the hero, the narrator, Marcel. The author holds up to us the mirror of the hero's mind, for us to look upon the images of the beings he has created. Since the glass can reflect only what is held before it, we see only what the narrator sees, with, however, the important exception that we also see the mirror, for we have studied it from the first page of the book. Through the printed page we have come as close as is humanly possible to having lived his life. We know how he builds up his expectations; we know how cruelly he is disappointed. We have seen him changing gradually before our eyes and thereby modifying the environment about him. In turn, we have studied the impressions he produces upon others and their reactions to him. We see the changes in the facial expressions in the people about him; we hear their contradictory statements. There is a constant ebb and flow in the emotions of the narrator and in those of the girls he loves, which assume the rhythm of music. They are forever modifying each other, so that nothing about any of them seems stable either to the reader or to each other.

From these various manifestations which the author

presents to us, we, the readers, must perform the same task that we do in real life. We must form our impressions of the changing personalities of the girls as they appear to the mind of the narrator. We identify ourselves with the hero. Yet we, with our own past lives, are enabled to remain sufficiently outside his identity to subject him to the same penetrating scrutiny with which he examines the people about him. Thus Proust, while he is omniscient so far as his characters are concerned and permits us to share partially that omniscience, at the same time descends to earth and in the person of his narrator becomes a mere mortal. We, too, share this humanity and are as puzzled by the inconsistencies of the other characters as is the narrator himself.

Much of Marcel Proust is in the hero of the book. A realization of that fact will help to explain why the hero experiences difficulty in interpreting phenomena about him. This difficulty was felt by the author himself, for just as his hero, Marcel, is an introvert, so was Proust, himself. Just as the author of A la Recherche du Temps Perdu remained secluded for years in his cork-lined room to write his monumental work, so his main character at the end of the novel proposes to devote his life to the same task. Proust, like his hero, was subject to exhausting attacks of asthma, which led to his coddling both by himself and by his family. In both men there is the inordinate attachment to a mother, which may serve to explain the reasons why the narrator finds all

other women unsatisfactory. Both have the same feeling of self-importance and morbid sensitivity. To each of them a normal personality would seem a monster of ruthlessness.

Just as Proust's picture of his hero, Marcel, is drawn from life, so many of his girls are composites of people he had known. Just as Marcel is hurt by what seems to him to be the harshness and the hardness of those about him, so the author, Proust, was easily offended by what he imagined to be insults. The agonized note with which he tells the story of the narrator's love for Gilberte and for Albertine has the unmistakable tone of authenticity.

Throughout A la Recherche du Temps Perdu an inscrutable angel leads the hero, Marcel, to love girls who are strikingly similar to each other, while being his exact opposites.

Si, en ce goût de divertissement Albertine avait quelque chose de la Gilberte des premiers temps c'est qu'une certaine ressemblance existe tout en évoluant, entre les femmes que nous aimons successivement, ressemblance qui tient à la fixité de notre tempérament parce que c'est lui qui les choisit, éliminant toutes celles qui ne nous seraient pas à la fois opposées et complémentaires, c'est-à-dire propres à satisfaire nos sens et à faire souffrir notre coeur.³

The narrator is made to love his opposite, because the author realized from his own personal experience, that a highly sensitive,

³J. F., iii, p. 178.

emotional artist needs to fasten his faith to someone who is stable and optimistic. If both the hero and the girls he loves are presented as moody and morose, the atmosphere, as in real life, would become unbearably sodden and dreary. Thus, by introducing diverse types as lovers in A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, the author not only follows the natural inclinations of mankind in the choice of a mate, but, also, by the interplay of opposing natures he enlivens the action of the narrative.

While the girls in the work of Marcel Proust are similar because they are, of themselves, the opposites of the narrator and inevitably attract him, they also resemble each other because the hero's attitudes evoke similar reactions from each of them. The same cause acting upon similar material produces similar results. The narrator is able to attract friends in the first place because he is physically attractive, as shown by Gilberte's statement of him as he appeared in his childhood. "... je n'avais jamais vu un aussi joli petit garçon."⁴ He does not change as remarkably as does the pharmacist in Combray, whom Gilberte finds ugly in his maturity, for she says of Marcel some years later: "... même le jour où je vous ai rencontré sous votre porte, vous étiez resté tellement le même qu'à Combray, si vous saviez comme vous aviez

⁴Marcel Proust, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, Tome VII, Albertine Disparue, ii, p 207; hereafter referred to as A. D.

peu changé."⁵ He is intelligent enough for the great writer, Bergotte, to enjoy talking to him. At one of the Swann dinner parties where both Bergotte and the narrator are present, Gilberte whispers in her friend's ear, "Je nage dans la joie, parce que vous avez fait la conquête de mon grand ami Bergotte. Il a dit à maman qu'il vous avait trouvé extrêmement intelligent."⁶ He shows his desire to be friendly and gives his friends handsome gifts. Thus, he attracts girls for there is much about him to attract them.

But throughout the book, the narrator has, on the other hand, the unhappy faculty of spoiling life, not only for himself, but, also, for all about him. His chief trouble is caused by his over-active imagination, which leads him to endow his associates with qualities which they cannot possibly possess. To make matters worse he likes to imagine these impossible divinities, who have sprung from his brain like Minerva from the head of Zeus, as dancing attendance upon him. When he encounters them in real life, however, they fail to live up to his exaggerated expectations. He is cruelly disappointed. In his despair he is driven to recriminations and false accusations. Consequently, his friends, in self-defense, assume a cryptic indifference, which to his sensitive nature seems cruel to the point of sadism. The

⁵A. D., i, p. 210.

⁶J. F., i, p. 196.

narrator is shown, then, literally creating the other characters by the extension of his own personality. Although he possesses the ability to attract girls by his charm, his intelligence, and his generosity, he proceeds to estrange them by his suspicions and his exacting demands.

It is evident, then, that the girls in the work of Marcel Proust bear a striking resemblance to each other; first, because the narrator is attracted by his opposite. He, himself, specifically says that Albertine seems to him to be the reincarnation of Gilberte.

Je pouvais presque croire que la personnalité sensuelle et volontaire de Gilberte avait émigré dans le corps d'Albertine, un peu différent, il est vrai, mais présentant, maintenant que j'y réfléchissais après coup, des analogies profondes.⁷

Secondly, they resemble each other because he, by his attitudes, determines their reactions.

Elles sont, ces femmes, un produit de notre tempérament, une image, une projection renversée, un "négatif" de notre sensibilité.⁸

To the sensitive mind of the narrator most of the people whom he meets -- and the girls, in particular, for their personalities are of the most significance to him -- appear to be extreme extroverts, in contrast with his own nature, which shrinks from

⁷A. D., 1, p. 138.

⁸J. F., iii, p. 178.

encountering reality. Gilberte Swann and Albertine Simonet have this trait in common and consequently wound him frequently, because of their enjoyment of activities which he cannot share.

Gilberte's life is a constant round of parties and teas, which, much to her admirer's discomfort, she obviously relishes. She is not the lean, emaciated, studious type of girl, who loves to mull over books and her lessons. On the contrary, the prospect of being kept at home by her governess annoys this fair-haired, little girl, who likes nothing better than to play prisoner's base in the Champs Elysées. If her lessons prevent her from coming, she says:

"C'est rasant, je ne pourrai pas venir demain; vous allez tous vous amuser sans moi," d'un air chagrin.⁹

On the other hand, Gilberte does not miss her games and her friends in the Bois, if more interesting alternatives present themselves. Upon one occasion she hurts Marcel cruelly when ^{he} specifically asks her to come early to the park the next day, so that he can talk to her before the others arrive. Her face lights up, but not because of him.

Sa figure resplendit et ce fut en sautant de joie qu'elle me répondit:

--Demain, comptez-y, mon bel ami, mais je ne viendrai pas!

⁹Marcel Proust, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, Tome I, Du Côté de Chez Swann, ii, p. 256; hereafter referred to as C. S.

J'ai un grand goûter; après-demain non plus, je vais chez une amie pour voir de ses fenêtres l'arrivée du roi Théodose, ce sera superbe, et le lendemain encore à Michel Strogoff et puis après, cela va être bientôt Noël et les vacances du jour de l'An. Peut-être on va m'emmener dans le midi. Ce que ce serait chic! quoique cela me fera manquer un arbre de Noël; en tout cas si je reste à Paris, je ne viendrai pas ici car j'irai faire des visites avec maman. Adieu, voilà papa qui m'appelle.

Je revins avec Françoise par les rues qui étaient encore pavoisées de soleil, comme au soir d'une fête qui est finie. Je ne pouvais pas traîner mes jambes.¹⁰

Gilberte is gay and popular. Even as a child she accompanies Bergotte on his excursions to cathedrals and castles.¹¹ Later the Duchesse de Guermantes finds her witty and attractive.¹² Her parents never tire of extolling her virtues.¹³ She is in demand; she is a creature of motion; she loves to be constantly "on the go." How the studious, wide-eyed Marcel must have annoyed her at times!

As for the little band, it is their very gregariousness which first attracts Marcel. He is enchanted by this charming group of girls who first appear to him against the background of the sea at Balbec, for they usually travel together and seem to derive huge enjoyment from each other's company. Although they are ruthless in their wild abandon, as in the case of Andrée's mad

¹⁰C. S., ii, p. 274.

¹¹C. S., i, p. 146.

¹²A. D., ii, p. 46.

¹³J. F., i, p. 151.

jump over the head of the old man seated by the bandstand,¹⁴ yet to Marcel they are fascinating, for, in their compact solidarity, pushing their bicycles and carrying their golf clubs, they represent to him everything that he is not. He is intrigued by them to the extent of loving them all indiscriminately at first, although his affections are gradually centered almost entirely upon Albertine, the most popular and at the same time the most fugitive of the group.

Albertine, like her friends, loves to ride madly over the countryside on her bicycle, even in the rain, when her mackintosh gleams like black armor.¹⁵ She is exceedingly fond of sports. In fact, she plays golf so well that she might have won a match at Balbec, if she had not suddenly taken the idea into her head of going to Paris.¹⁶ The narrator himself says of her that she is the type of person who is ready for anything.

Elle avait cela de charmant qu'elle était toujours prête à tout, peut-être par cette habitude qu'elle avait autrefois de vivre la moitié du temps chez les autres,¹⁷.

A person such as she is naturally much sought after.

Dès son enfance Albertine avait toujours eu en admiration

¹⁴J. F., iii, p. 176.

¹⁵A. D., ii, p. 104-105.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Marcel Proust, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, Tome VI, La Prisonnière, ii, p. 274; hereafter referred to as P.

devant elle quatre ou cinq petites camarades, parmi lesquelles se trouvait Andrée qui lui était si supérieure et le savait (et peut-être cette attraction qu'Albertine exerçait bien involontairement avait-elle été à l'origine, avait-elle servi à la fondation de la petite bande.)¹⁸

Albertine shares with the little band and with Gilberte the traits of activity, of friendliness, and of popularity common to the extrovert.

While it is the trait of extroversion which first attracts the hero to his friends, it is at the same time the cause of his greatest despair, for it also takes them away from him. The girls in the novel of Proust represent a type; they are "breezy" people who have many interests and hosts of friends. They are hard to get hold of and to pin down to any particular time or place. They must roam freely about in their catholic interests, which take them hither and yon, but too often away from their fervent slave, the precocious Marcel. His insistence inevitably becomes irksome to them who feel the necessity of breathing a freer atmosphere. Their escape from him is inevitable. He is maddened by his unsuccessful efforts to retain even the persons of these fugitive girls. In spite of all that he does to hold them near him, in spite of his flowers, his gifts of clothes, his hired cars, they inevitably elude him.

It is not only by the fact of their merely physical

¹⁸J. F., iii, p. 233.

absence that the girls are intangible, but they are elusive in their personalities as well. The narrator is bewildered at every turn by what appears to him to be their endless inconsistencies. He does not know what to think of them either for themselves or in respect to their relationship to him.

Gilberte's variability is particularly noticeable in her attitude toward her father. When, upon one occasion, she seems to be solicitous of him to the extent that the hero is led to commend her on her kindness, she replies:

"Oui, pauvre papa, c'est ces jours-ci l'anniversaire de la mort de son père. Vous pouvez comprendre ce qu'il doit éprouver, vous comprenez cela, vous, nous sentons de même sur ces choses-là. Alors, je tâche d'être moins méchante que d'habitude."¹⁹

Although she expresses her sympathy and regard for her father, a few hours later, on the self-same day, when M. Swann thinks that it would not be seemly for his daughter to go to the theater on the anniversary of her grandfather's death, she grows pale with rage and later tells Marcel that it is foolish to deprive oneself of pleasure for fear of what other people may think. Moreover, she expresses her intention of going in defiance of her father, offering as her excuse that her governess may be disappointed, if they do not go! Within the space of a few short hours, this girl

¹⁹J. F., 1, p. 152.

presents two completely contradictory aspects of her character to her friend, Marcel. It is no wonder that he is led to speculate on the nature of her real character and on the sincerity of her professed love for her father.

At this same period in her life, Gilberte condemns Mlle Vinteuil for her disrespect for her father.

... "Jamais, je ne la connaîtraî, pour une raison, c'est qu'elle n'était pas gentille pour son père, à ce qu'on dit, elle lui faisait de la peine. Vous ne pouvez plus comprendre cela que moi, n'est-ce pas, vous qui ne pourriez sans doute pas plus survivre à votre papa que moi au mien, ce qui est du reste tout naturel. Comment oublier jamais quelqu'un qu'on aime depuis toujours."²⁰

Yet later in her life when Gilberte has been legally adopted by M. de Forcheville and has become an habituée of the Guermantes' salon, Marcel finds that "on n'osait plus devant elle prononcer le nom de Swann."²¹ She has become ashamed of her father because of his Jewish antecedents. This little girl by whom Swann had fondly hoped that his memory would be perpetuated has grown from merely ignoring her father's will to denying him entirely.²² Proust adds:

... et celle qui aurait dû rajeunir, sinon perpétuer sa mémoire, se trouva hâter et consommer l'oeuvre de la mort et de l'oubli.²³

²⁰J. F., i, p. 151-152.

²¹A. D., ii, p. 47.

²²Ibid., p. 61.

²³Ibid., p. 62.

When even this delightful little friend of his childhood shows herself faithless to her father's memory in spite of her earlier protestations of eternal constancy, the narrator begins to question the existence of anything like stability in the universe.

Throughout his youth the narrator is uncertain as to Gilberte's feelings toward him. The first time he sees her, he thinks that she dislikes him, for she seems to him to have a sly, enigmatic smile upon her face, which he interprets as implying deep disgust with him, her abject worshipper on the other side of the hedge. This impression of her mocking hostility is intensified when she quickly sketches in the air an indelicate gesture, which he has always associated in his mind with deliberate insult.²⁴ When he sees her later in the Champs Elysées, he is still more mystified by her behavior. She seems to have some affection for him, for she makes him presents of an agate marble and of a book by Bergotte which she has taken the trouble to wrap in a packet tied with pink ribbons and sealed with white wax.²⁵ Yet even in the period when she confers these favors upon him, she seems irritated by his presence.

Si elle me donnait parfois de ces marques d'amitié, elle me faisait aussi de la peine en ayant l'air de ne pas avoir de plaisir à me voir, et cela arrivait souvent les jours

²⁴C. S., i, p. 205.

²⁵C. S., ii, p. 266-267.

mêmes sur lesquels j'avais le plus compté pour réaliser mes espérances.²⁶

Although she invites him to her home to share in her parties and her teas, she eventually tires of him to the extent of openly betraying her displeasure at his arrival.²⁷ When, after long deliberation, he decides to return to Gilberte to declare himself formally to her as her suitor, it is only to see her leaving the house with a young man.²⁸ At every turn he is frustrated in his love for Gilberte. She seems fickle and unpredictable. He fails utterly to understand her at the time when she matters most to him.

If Gilberte presents a problem to him, the little band is still more mystifying. The first time he sees them, he considers them as a group of girls "dont l'attitude suffisait à révéler la nature hardie, frivole et dure."²⁹ As he gets to know them better, they seem to be more innocent and well-bred than he had at first thought.

Je tirais en ce qui concernait leur manière de vivre et la conduite à tenir avec elles, toutes les conséquences du mot innocence que j'avais lu, en causant familièrement avec elles, sur leur visage. Mais peut-être l'avais-je lu étourdiment dans le lapsus d'un déchiffrement trop rapide,³⁰

²⁶C. S., ii, p. 268.

²⁷J. F., i, p. 217.

²⁸J. F., ii, p. 34-35.

²⁹J. F., iii, p. 252.

³⁰Ibid., p. 251-252.

In the course of time, as Marcel's affections narrow down from the entire group to one or two of them only, he swings back and forth in his opinions about them individually with the regularity of a pendulum. Andrée, the girl who jumped over the old man by the bandstand, later appears to him to be "frêle, intellectuelle, et cette année-là fort souffrante."³¹ Later in the novel he has another reversal of opinion concerning her, when her story becomes closely linked with that of Albertine "à qui elle montrait une tendresse caressante et douce de grande soeur."³²

In the case of Albertine, the narrator is overwhelmed by doubts. Neither he nor the reader discovers absolutely the truth concerning the real nature of this mystifying character. Marcel can never arrive at any definite conclusions concerning her, although she generally captivates him -- with the exception, of course, of the frequent occasions when he thinks he would prefer Venice. The first time he sees her, she impresses him as being somewhat lax and unbridled in her attitudes,

... une fille aux yeux brillantes, rieurs, aux grosses joues mates, sous un "polo" noir, enfoncé sur sa tête, qui poussait une bicyclette avec un dandinement de hanches si dégingandé, un air et employant des termes d'argot si voyous et criés si fort, quand je passai auprès d'elle (parmi lesquels je distinguai cependant la phrase fâcheuse de "vivre sa vie") qu' ... je conclus ... que toutes ces filles appartenaient à la population qui

³¹J. F., iii, p. 176.

³²Ibid., p. 177.

fréquentes les vélodromes, et devaient être les très jeunes maîtresses de coureurs cyclistes.³³

Not long after this he sees her being lead home by her governess as one would thrust an animal into its cage,³⁴ which nothing in the future will succeed in taming.³⁵ But when he meets her later at a party given by Elstir, he finds her entirely different from the girl with the bicycle.

Pour commencer je trouvai Albertine l'air assez intimidée à la place d'implacable; elle me sembla plus comme il faut que mal élevée à en juger par les éphthètes de "elle a un mauvais genre, elle a un drôle de genre" qu'elle appliqua à toutes les jeunes filles dont je lui parlai;³⁶

In commenting upon this unexpected change which he finds in Albertine, he says:

Il n'empêche d'ailleurs qu'après cette première métamorphose, Albertine devait changer encore bien des fois pour moi. Les qualités et les défauts qu'un être présente disposés au premier plan de son visage, se rangent selon une formation tout autre si nous l'abordons par un côté différent -- comme dans une ville les monuments répandus en ordre dispersé sur une seule ligne, d'un autre point de vue s'échelonnent en profondeur et échangent leurs grandeurs relatives.³⁷

In the next weeks at Balbec, he comes to respect her so much that

³³Ibid., p. 41.

³⁴Ibid., p. 89-90.

³⁵A. D., ii, p. 88-90.

³⁶J. F., iii, p. 150.

³⁷Ibid., p. 150.

he implies later that the belief in her integrity which he holds at this time will be the cause of much trouble for him later.

"Car pour souffrir vraiment par une femme, il faut avoir cru complètement en elle."³⁸ It is on his second trip to Balbec that he begins to doubt seriously her essential morality, for upon one occasion when he and Dr. Cottard see her and Andrée dancing together in the Casino, he is profoundly disturbed by the old doctor's remarks.

Tenez, regardez, ajouta-t-il en me montrant Albertine et Andrée qui valsaient lentement, serrées l'une contre l'autre, j'ai oublié mon lorgnon et je ne vois pas bien, mais elles sont certainement au comble de la jouissance. On ne sait pas assez que c'est surtout par les seins que les femmes l'éprouvent. Et voyez les leurs se touchent complètement.³⁹

From this time on, he suspects her of inversion through the remainder of their acquaintance and even after her death. He never ceases to torment her with his suspicions and his inquisitions. Albertine, both to the narrator and to the reader, is one of the most bewildering creations in all fiction. The truth about her is never ascertained completely.

So far as her feelings toward Marcel are concerned, he is never able to determine just how much she loves him or whether she

³⁸Ibid., p. 243.

³⁹Marcel Proust, A la Recherche de Temps Perdu, Tome V, Sodome et Gomorrhe, II, ii, p. 9; hereafter referred to as S. G.

loves him at all. Just as in his affair with Gilberte, Marcel plays the old daisy-plucking game of "she loves me, she loves me not." The first time he sees her, she seems to show some interest in him.

J'avais tant regardé cette cycliste aux yeux brillants qu'elle parut s'en apercevoir et dit à la plus grande un mot que je n'entendis pas mais qui fit rire celle-ci.⁴⁰

Early in their acquaintance she goes so far as to write him a little note, even though her friends are present, in which she says, "Je vous aime bien."⁴¹ But she counteracts the effect of her note shortly after writing it, when she speaks sharply to him in a game they are playing together on the beach, in which a ring is passed from hand to hand on a string. He thinks when he feels the pressure of Albertine's hand on his that she is taking advantage of the game to tell him how much she likes him. He is completely dejected when she says to him, "Mais prenez-la donc, voilà une heure que je vous la passe."⁴² He is again encouraged to think she loves him when their affair finally reaches the point at which she plans to spend the night in the hotel in order to catch a train the next day and invites him to have dinner in her room. When he attempts to make love to her, however, she rings the bell violently.⁴³ The next winter when she visits him

⁴⁰J. F., iii, p. 44.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 201.

⁴²Ibid., p. 214.

⁴³Ibid., p. 231.

in Paris, she has changed again perceptibly.

Il y avait des nouveautés plus attirantes en elle; je sentais, dans la même jolie fille qui venait de s'asseoir près de mon lit, quelque chose de différent; et dans ces lignes qui dans le regard et les traits du visage expriment la volonté habituelle, un changement de front, une demi-conversion comme si avaient été détruites ces résistances contre lesquelles je m'étais brisé à Balbec,⁴⁴

On his second trip to Balbec, he enjoys many hours in her company, although his calm is punctuated by his suspicions, first of her relationships with other men, for she seems to him to pay undue attention to his friend, Saint-Loup,⁴⁵ and, secondly, of her affairs with other women. Finally, when his doubts are dissipated to the extent that he begins to tire of her and to fabricate an excuse for ridding himself of her tiresome presence, he learns the astounding news that she is a friend of the Vinteuls. That information explodes in his mind with the force of a volcanic eruption. His worst suspicions are verified. After a night of frenzy, he decides that he must marry her⁴⁶ and take her to Paris.⁴⁷ From then on their affair is an endless maze of moments of ecstasy alternating with black suspicion. Marcel never learns the truth as to whether or not Albertine loves him. She seems

⁴⁴Marcel Proust, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, Tome III, Le Côté de Guermantes, II, p. 43; hereafter referred to as C.G.

⁴⁵S. G., II, ii, p. 94.

⁴⁶S. G., II, iii, p. 237.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 221.

to enjoy his company, yet that of others is just as acceptable to her. She, even more than Gilberte, convinces the narrator of the impossibility of establishing satisfactory relationships with any other human being.

Thus, Proust presents the girls in his novel as not only elusive in person, character, and emotions, but even in their sex. In the case of Gilberte, the trait of inversion seems to have been added to her character as an afterthought, in a subsequent revision, for Marcel finds out years later from Gilberte that the young man he had seen with her the day when he was returning to her house to declare himself formally as her lover, was not a young man at all, but an actress, Léa, in man's clothing.⁴⁸ Albertine, too, tells him an improbable tale about one occasion when Gilberte had kissed her in a carriage and asked her if she liked women.⁴⁹ As for Albertine, after the first two volumes, she is constantly suspected of the trait. Proust is jealous of Andrée, Gisèle, Rosemonde, the sister and the cousin of Bloch, a beautiful, young unknown woman, another woman whom Albertine has met at Vichy, Gilberte, Léa, a pastry vendor, an actress friend of Rachel, the women who frequent the showers at Balbec, Mlle. Vinteuil, her friend, and a host of unknown people.⁵⁰ Thus even the sex of his girls is indeterminate.

⁴⁸A. D., ii, p. 211.

⁴⁹P., ii, p. 236-237.

⁵⁰Albert Feuillerat, Comment Marcel Proust a Composé son Roman, p. 210.

They shift from feminine to masculine and back to feminine again with bewildering rapidity. By assigning his girls the trait of Lesbianism, Proust makes them still more fugitive than they had been before. Everything about them changes -- their sex, their personalities, their facial expressions. Never, in all literature, can there be found creatures who are so evasive.

In the midst of this shifting, changing flux, what can the individual believe in? Is there any truth upon which one can build one's life? Are all outside phenomena merely the creations of one's imagination? These are the questions which the narrator asks himself. Were these girls over whom he had suffered intensely ever anything but elusive shadows? Had they ever felt toward him, as he had toward them? He had suffered agonies when he had given up Gilberte, although the passage of time had made him forget his grief. His experience with Albertine, though shot through with moments of golden happiness, had been, for the most part, as bitter as gall. Was all his grief a useless expenditure of his energy? Had there ever been any basis for his affection for them? Just after he had learned from Albertine's lips the terrible news that she knows Mlle Vinteuil and her friend, Marcel doubts seriously the existence of anything outside his own mind.

Deux ou trois fois, pendant un instant, j'eus l'idée que le monde où était cette chambre et ces bibliothèques et dans lequel Albertine était si peu de chose, était peut-être un monde intellectuel, qui

était la seule réalité, et mon chagrin quelque chose comme celui que donne la lecture d'un roman et dont un fou seul pourrait faire un chagrin durable et permanent et se prolongeant dans sa vie; qu'il suffirait peut-être d'un petit mouvement de ma volonté pour atteindre ce monde réel, y rentrer en dépassant ma douleur comme un cerceau de papier qu'on crève, et ne plus me soucier davantage de ce qu'avait fait Albertine, que nous ne nous soucions des actions de l'héroïne imaginaire d'un roman après, que nous en avons fini la lecture.⁵¹

And yet he feels that the love is genuine in his own case for he says:

Cet amour était vrai, puisque je subordonnais toutes choses à les voir, à les garder pour moi seul, puisque je sanglotais si, un soir, je les avais entendues.⁵²

The question in his mind is, however, does this love exist in the mind of the beloved?

Seulement que quelque chose change violemment la place de cette âme par rapport à nous, nous montre qu'elle aime d'autres êtres et pas nous, alors aux battements de notre coeur disloqué, nous sentons que c'est, non pas à quelques pas de nous, mais en nous qu'était la créature chérie.⁵³

If his love for these girls exists only in his own mind, then other people as well, and all the outside world are only what the individual makes of them.

⁵¹S. G., II, iii, p. 230-231.

⁵²Ibid., p. 231.

⁵³Ibid., p. 232.

Many years later, Proust allows his narrator to have a long, intimate conversation with Gilberte, now Mme. Saint-Loup, in her garden at Tansonville, in which his youthful questionings are partially answered. By studying this conversation it is possible for the reader to reach a significant conclusion concerning the nature of the girl characters in A la Recherche du Temps Perdu. In the course of that conversation, Marcel, in a mood of tender, laughing reminiscence and yet with the detachment lent by distance, when his love, the obstacle to their enjoyment of each other is gone,⁵⁴ comments on how he used to adore her in the far-off days of their youth. She reproaches him for not having told her he loved her, for she had loved him. She adds that she had even thrown herself at his head two times. When he seeks for an explanation, she confesses the real state of her feeling on the occasion of the "indecent gesture," which had made him fall back hurt to the quick.

"La première fois à Tansonville, vous vous promeniez avec votre famille, je rentrais, je n'avais jamais vu un aussi joli petit garçon. J'avais l'habitude, ajouta-t-elle d'un air vague et pudique, d'aller jouer avec de petits amis, dans les ruines du donjon de Roussainville. Et vous me direz que j'étais bien mal élevée, car il y avait là-dedans des filles et des garçons de tout genre qui profitaient de l'obscurité. L'enfant de chœur de l'église de Combray, Théodore qui, il faut l'avouer, était bien gentil (Dieu qu'il était bien!)"

⁵⁴A. D., ii, p. 207-208.

et qui est devenu très laid (il est maintenant pharmacien à Méséglise), s'y amusait avec toutes les petites paysannes du voisinage. Comme on me laissait sortir seule, dès que je pouvais m'échapper, j'y courais. Je ne peux pas vous dire comme j'aurais voulu vous y voir venir; je me rappelle très bien que, n'ayant qu'une minute pour vous faire comprendre ce que je désirais, au risque d'être vue par vos parents et les miens, je vous l'ai indiqué d'une façon tellement crue que j'en ai honte maintenant. Mais vous m'avez regardée d'une façon si méchante que j'ai compris que vous ne vouliez pas.⁵⁵

The second time that she had tried to interest him was the occasion when she had looked significantly back at him twice when she had met him returning from his walk in the Bois de Boulogne.⁵⁶ She admits that she had even loved him in the days when they had played in the Champs Elysées, "mais là vous m'aimiez trop, je sentais une inquisition sur tout ce que je faisais."⁵⁷

It is only when Gilberte is a married woman that Proust allows the narrator to find out how completely wrong he had been in his interpretation of her emotions. He had made his mistakes in judgment because he had read into her actions his own past life. He had misunderstood her gesture at Tansonville when she was a child, because he had learned before he had seen her that that particular gesture could indicate only intentional insult. He was hurt in the days when they played together in the Champs

⁵⁵A. D., ii, p. 207-208.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 15.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 209.

Elysées, because he had been too insistent; he had loved her too much. In addition, he had not yet developed enough maturity and understanding to realize that her life had to be led apart from his. She couldn't devote herself to him alone; there were other demands upon her time. He was grievously hurt on the day when he had seen her leaving the house with Léa, because he had built himself up as her lover in his mind. So far as Gilberte was concerned, he had failed to attach significance to her look on the day when he had met her leaving his house upon his return from the Bois, because he had mistaken her for another person entirely, a Mlle d'Éporcheville (really d'Orgeville), a young lady of easy virtue about whom his friend, Saint-Loup, had told him.⁵⁸ If he had only been able to interpret reality correctly, he might have spared himself months of torment.

Since he had been so wrong in his conception of Gilberte's love for him throughout his adolescence, the reader is naturally tempted to ask: Is it not possible that he may have similar mistakes concerning Albertine? Isn't it possible that the endless suspicions which had tormented him and with which he had tortured her were founded only on figments of his own imagination? In fact, the narrator himself comes to the conclusion that he had all along by his own clumsiness spoiled everything.

⁵⁸ A. D., ii, p. 21.

Et tout d'un coup je me dis que la vraie Gilberte -- la vraie Albertine --, c'était peut-être celles qui s'étaient au premier instant livrées dans leur regard, l'une devant la haie d'épines roses, l'autre sur la plage. Et c'était moi qui, n'ayant pas su le comprendre, ne l'ayant repris que plus tard dans ma mémoire après un intervalle où par mes conversations tout un entre-deux de sentiment leur avait fait craindre d'être aussi franches que dans les premières minutes -- avais tout gâté par ma maladresse.⁵⁹

The chief benefit that he derives from this conversation with the older Gilberte is the conviction that there is at least a modicum of reality outside one's own mind.

Pourtant j'étais heureux de me dire que ce bonheur vers lequel se tendaient toutes mes forces alors, et que rien ne pouvait plus me rendre eût existé ailleurs que dans ma pensée, en réalité si près de moi, dans ce Roussainville dont je parlais si souvent, que j'apercevais du cabinet sentant l'iris. Et je n'avais rien su!⁶⁰

The reader, too, concludes that the characteristics of the girls in the work of Marcel Proust, such as their harshness and duplicity, were, in all probability, merely the creations of the hero's overworked imagination.

From Marcel's conversation with Gilberte, his quest of a lifetime is satisfied; there is some reality outside of the individual. There is some stability upon which people can build

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 208.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 212.

their lives. People are not entirely changeable, but there is a permanent self, which continues throughout one's life, although it is made up from a number of successive selves.⁶¹ In the midst of the apparent ebb and flow, there is a personality which is being formed in the individual in about the same manner as a river lays down deposits of sand and so builds up the shore. It is hard to determine the essential characteristics of the changing individual, even of oneself. The adolescent, in whom the process of formation is accelerated, is especially elusive, but there is gradually being developed within the youthful person a character which does belong to the individual alone, even though it is being modified from day to day, just as Gilberte's childish ignoring of her father's will about going to the theater grows into the much more serious offense of denying him entirely. In fact, she even goes to the extent of seeming to imply that she is the natural daughter of some exalted personage.⁶² When Marcel is a middle-aged man, after Albertine is dead and he has become indifferent to Gilberte, he at last realizes how much better off he would have been had he tried to know Gilberte and Albertine for themselves.

Mais l'infini de l'amour, ou son égoïsme, fait que
les êtres que nous aimons sont ceux dont la physionomie

⁶¹Ibid., p. 212.

⁶²Ibid., p. 52-53.

intellectuelle et morale est pour nous le moins objectivement définie, nous les retouchons sans cesse au gré de nos desirs et de nos craintes, nous ne les séparons pas de nous, ils ne sont qu'un lieu immense et vague où s'extériorisent nos tendresses. Nous n'avons pas de notre propre corps, où affluent perpétuellement tant de malaises et de plaisirs, une silhouette aussi nette que celle d'un arbre ou d'une maison, ou d'un passant. Et ç'avait peut-être été mon tort de ne pas chercher davantage à connaître Albertine en elle-même.⁶³

In fact, in the very first glance that he had had of them, in the moment before Gilberte's gesture and in the first looks that Albertine had cast upon him, he had judged their characters correctly, because then he had been freer than at any other time in his acquaintanceship with them of the prejudices of his own emotions. At first glance, they had both seemed to be girls who were free and bold by nature. As he had learned to know them better, he himself, by his own suspicions and vacillations, had created within them their seeming evasiveness, mendacity, and indifference.

Thus, to summarize, one must arrive at the following conclusions about the girl in Proust: The author has endeavored to duplicate in his novel the processes that occur in real life. He shows the changes wrought by time and the fluidity of all things. His girls are the best suited of all his characters to be used as

⁶³A. D., i, p. 128-129.

symbols of the flux that exists in the world, because they are adolescents. They are in the time of life when people change drastically. He can simply and naturally make them elusive and fickle, because those are characteristics natural to youth. Because of the characteristics which he wants to emphasize and because of the nature of the hero, the girls appear as extreme extroverts, whose words and deeds are unreliable. Many of their traits exist, however, only in the mind of their friend. He affects and changes them by his own attitudes. We see them as they affect him; he himself creates his "own heaven and hell."

CHAPTER III

THE ART OF PROUST IN PORTRAYING THE GIRLS

Proust has made use of every device at his command to invest his girls with fluidity and beauty. He achieves fluidity by showing his characters in the process of becoming. His means of displaying the gradual changes which take place in their natures is the presentation of one aspect of their natures at a time. He is like the operator of a movie projector, who, after having run through many feet of film, immobilizes one view to enable the spectators to study it in detail. Although he shows only one aspect of a character at a time, he complicates the individual by showing successively the changes which occur in diverse sides of a personality. For example, Albertine in Marcel's first glance of her at Balbec has much of the gamin in her. As she pushes her bicycle ahead of her on the boardwalk, she is loud, "slangy," and bold.⁶⁴ Later, at the Elstir party, she seems to have attained a degree of culture and refinement, which Marcel could not have believed possible in the case of the young girl pushing the bicycle on the boardwalk.⁶⁵ When she invites him to her hotel bedroom, her nature seems to partake of the original brazenness he thought he had detected in her at

⁶⁴J. F., iii, p. 44.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 150.

first glance.⁶⁶ She reverts, however, to the correct young lady when she abruptly rings her bell to end his advances.⁶⁷ Later when she comes to him in Paris on the day when Marcel has written to Mlle Stermaria, she has matured into a young woman who seems less correct and more hotly passionate than during her last days at Balbec the summer before.

Si j'avais changé à son égard, elle-même avait changé aussi, et la jeune fille qui était venue sur mon lit le jour où j'avais écrit à Mlle de Stermaria n'était plus la même que j'avais connue à Balbec, soit simple explosion de la femme qui apparaît au moment de la puberté, soit par suite de circonstances que je n'ai jamais pu connaître.⁶⁸

Although two sides of her nature are shown struggling with each other, the author's method is to present only one side at a time. Gradually, the reader comes to the realization that one trait has well-nigh vanquished the other, although some vestiges of the secondary trait may at times be detected by the observer. Through observing one facet of their natures at a time, we see certain ones of their original tendencies gradually congealing into fixed habits. These changes seem bewildering to Marcel, however, because he has not completely understood the multiple forces which have brought about the transformation in the loved one. Later he realizes that

⁶⁶J. F., iii, p. 228.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 231.

⁶⁸A. D., i, p. 139-140.

one's estimate of outside phenomena depends entirely upon the point of view with which one looks at a thing.

Je commençais à me rendre compte que le système des causes nombreuses d'une seule action ... n'était qu'une sorte de symbole artificiel, voulu, des différents aspects que prend une action selon le point de vue où on se place. ... Que de fois il m'est arrivé, après avoir cherché à comprendre les rapports de deux êtres et les crises qu'ils amènent, d'entendre tout d'un coup un troisième m'en parler à son point de vue à lui, car il a des rapports plus grands encore avec l'un des deux, point de vue qui a peut-être été la cause de la crise. Et si les actes restent aussi incertains, comment les personnes elles-mêmes ne le seraient-elles pas?⁶⁹

At the same time as the girls whom he loves are developing, the narrator himself is changing his ego. One is forever giving way to another. The difficulty that he experiences in his relationships with the girls is in making their respective loves coincide. In the course of the constant change which everyone is undergoing, there is little wonder that ruptures occur. But then, it is comforting to realize that the same process of becoming which has brought about the destruction of a friendship will, in the course of time, likewise bring oblivion to grief. Then, it is the task of the artist to generalize his love and give it to the world in the form of a novel. Though the individual love dies, the general, idealized love remains, which must be imparted to the world in a work of art.⁷⁰

⁶⁹A. D., ii, p. 96.

⁷⁰Marcel Proust, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, Tome VIII, Le Temps Retrouvé, ii, p. 51; hereafter referred to as T. R.

It is interesting to compare Proust's conception of the development of his characters from day to day with Bergson's statement that our selves determine what we become.⁷¹ Bergson, whose philosophy was current at the time when Proust wrote A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, holds that if one person is to know another's state of mind at any given moment he must relive the life of the subject who experiences it in order to grasp it in its original complexity.⁷² Then, too, he must not only have relived his life, but he must know whither he is being conducted and so know his final act, like a novelist.⁷³ Proust has presented to us his hero, Marcel, from whose life the veil has been raised to such an extent that we are able to understand him. Like Marcel, we are puzzled by the girls in the book, because, in general, we are not permitted to learn what has motivated them. We do learn enough about them, however, such as the real emotions of Gilberte concerning Marcel, to suspect that their actions are not completely illogical and unreasonable. In most cases they seem to do the best they can under the circumstances to make him understand their intentions. Gilberte, in the short time she is free of adult supervision in the garden at Tansonville, tries to show him that she likes him. Albertine is solicitous of Marcel's welfare at all times and tries to be with him whenever he

⁷¹Henri Bergson, Time and Free Will, p. 173.

⁷²Ibid., p. 16-18.

⁷³Ibid., p. 187.

wants her, even though, at times, in his suspicion of her he hurts her to the point of bringing tears to her eyes.⁷⁴

Since Proust, the novelist, knows whither he is conducting his characters, many of the incidents which he relates early in the book foreshadow what is to occur later. The Vinteuil episode, which the child Marcel happens to glimpse when he is outside the window at Montjouvain, explains his reactions to Albertine's casual statement that she knows Mlle Vinteuil and her friend. Later in his life, Marcel feels that Albertine may possibly have been trying to confess to him her liking for women when, on one of the early days at Balbec, perhaps to sound him out on the matter, she says:

Ainsi, tenez, ces relations dont vous parliez l'autre jour à propos d'une petite qui habite Balbec et qui existeraient entre elle et une actrice, je trouve cela ignoble, tellement ignoble que je pense que ce sont des ennemis de la jeune fille qui auront inventé cela et que ce n'est pas vrai. Cela me semble improbable, impossible.⁷⁵

Proust skillfully relates events, such as the Montjouvain affair, the dance of Andrée and Albertine in the Casino, the anger of Gilberte when her father does not want her to go to the concert, to foretell what his characters are to become. Throughout the novel the author leaves clues for the reader, which point like arrows to the solution of the problems later presented by a character's behavior.

⁷⁴S. G., II, ii, p. 22.

⁷⁵J. F., iii, p. 242.

Fittingly enough, Proust's work itself exemplifies the very principle of becoming that he was striving to show in his writing. When he first began to write A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, he himself was only thirty-four. In writing of youth he had to return in his imagination to his own adolescence. Thus Du Côté de Chez Swann, A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs, and parts of the remainder of the work are based on memories which lie buried deep in his subconscious mind. He brings to the surface of consciousness the emotions he had felt in those far-off days, without attempting to criticize what he had felt.⁷⁶ He has himself expressed in Le Temps Retrouvé what he was attempting to do.

Ce travail qu'avaient fait notre amour-propre, notre passion, notre esprit d'imitation, notre intelligence abstraite, nos habitudes, c'est ce travail que l'art défera, c'est la marche en sens contraire, le retour aux profondeurs, où ce qui a existé réellement gît inconnu de nous qu'il nous fera suivre.⁷⁷

But he was not able to maintain throughout that dreamlike quality with which he paints the girls that he had known in his early adolescence. As he wrote about the "moi" who had matured, the element of intelligence, rather than that of simple emotion, entered his analysis. In his comment on other writers who were forced to leave the realm of the subconscious as they grew older, he is forced

⁷⁶Albert Feuillerat, Comment Marcel Proust a Composé son Roman, p. 112-113.

⁷⁷T. R., ii, p. 49-50.

to admit that the intelligence can disclose many truths to the writer.

Souvent des écrivains au fond de qui n'apparaissent plus ces vérités mystérieuses, n'écrivent plus à partir d'un certain âge qu'avec leur intelligence qui a pris de plus en plus de force; les livres de leur âge mûr ont à cause de cela plus de force que ceux de leur jeunesse, mais ils n'ont plus le même velours.

Je sentais pourtant que ces vérités que l'intelligence dégage directement de la réalité ne sont pas à dédaigner entièrement car elles pourraient enchasser d'une matière moins pure mais encore pénétrer d'esprit ces impressions que nous apportent hors du temps l'essence commune aux sensations du passé et du présent, mais qui plus précieuses sont aussi trop rares pour que l'oeuvre d'art puisse être composée seulement avec elles.⁷⁸

The beauty of his descriptions of his adolescent girls can thus partly be accounted for by the fact that he returned to the dream world of the subconscious to describe them. His later work, on the other hand, grows critical; his hero, suspicious; his girls become mendacious and inverted.

...Il est devenu un homme qui observe, veut pénétrer les causes des effets; il ne se contente plus de reproduire les sensations dont il a gardé le souvenir; il en dégage la signification psychologique ou sociale et ne retient que cette signification. L'analyse qui, dans la première forme, était strictement évocatrice est devenue critique. Et en ces cas, cette atmosphère rêveuse qui, toujours dans la première version (Du Côté de Chez Swann, published in 1913, and the Grasset

⁷⁸T. R., II, p. 52-53.

proofs of the remainder of the work, which was revised during the whole of the First World War⁷⁹) entourait l'oeuvre d'une certaine opacité un peu énigmatique s'est dissipée, comme une brume qui se lève au-dessus d'un paysage. Nous sommes au plein air de la conscience claire. Tout est précis, net, définitif. Aux expressions comme 'je sentais' succèdent des expressions comme 'je comprends,' 'je voyais,' etc.⁸⁰

Proust shows his girls as becoming, because the philosophy at the basis of his work is that all phenomena in the universe are changing and that one's perceptions are therefore relative. The individual's point of view depends upon the man, the mood, the moment, and the surroundings.⁸¹ In Proust's descriptions of the girls in his book, the symbols of the fluidity of reality, he uses two types of imagery which are particularly well adapted to express his philosophical theories.

First, he confuses the impressions received by the senses to illustrate his point that all perceptions are dependent upon the peculiar set of circumstances which prevail at any given moment. throughout his descriptions of the girls in A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, Proust expresses Marcel's difficulties in registering correctly in his mind the exact appearance of those whom he loves most.

The first time he sees Gilberte he falls in love with her for her imagined blue eyes which he has always associated with blond

⁷⁹Feuillerat, op. cit., p. 14-17.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 129.

⁸¹Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle, p. 157.

reddish hair. In reality her eyes are so black that there is no possibility of mistaking their color.

Ses yeux noirs brillèrent et comme je ne savais pas alors, ni ne l'ai appris depuis, réduire en ses éléments objectifs une impression forte, comme je n'avais pas, ainsi, qu'on dit, assez 'd'esprit d'observation' pour dégager la notion de leur couleur, pendant longtemps, chaque fois que je repensai à elle, le souvenir de leur éclat se présentait aussitôt à moi comme celui d'un vif azur, puisqu'elle était blonde.⁸²

Later in the days when he plays with her in the Bois de Boulogne, he is disturbed by the fact that on the very evening of a day when he has just played with Gilberte he is unable to remember her exact features and to recompose them into a recognizable likeness of the girl he has just left.

Par exemple si depuis la veille je portais dans ma mémoire deux yeux de feu dans des joues pleines et brillantes, la figure de Gilberte m'offrait maintenant avec insistance quelque chose que précisément je ne m'étais pas rappelé, un certain effilement aigu de nez qui, s'associant instantanément à d'autres traits, prenait l'importance de ces caractères qui en histoire naturelle définissent une espèce, et la transmuait en une fillette du genre de celles à museau pointu.⁸³

Upon one occasion he takes particular pains to study her countenance closely to etch it upon his memory forever. He notices that her

⁸²C. S., i, p. 204.

⁸³C. S., ii, p. 264-265.

flesh has the golden tint of that of M. Swann, while her features resemble those of Odette. Proust writes whimsically:

Cette peau rousse c'était celle de son père au point que la nature semblait avoir eu, quand Gilberte avait été créée à résoudre le problème, de refaire peu à peu Mm Swann, en n'ayant à sa disposition comme matière, que la peau de M. Swann.⁸⁴

Yet, despite this careful analysis of her appearance, Marcel fails completely to recognize her later when he meets her on the street.

Albertine, even more than Gilberte, takes on innumerable appearances. Marcel is never able to come to any definite conclusion about her in any respect. Feuillerat maintains that the many different Albertines in the later volumes are caused by the fact that the author was using different models for the character in his revisions.

Tous ces remaniements ne sont pas sans avoir laissé des traces profondes sur le caractère de l'héroïne. Bien que nous soyons maintenant habitués au système proustien de la multiplicité des modèles pour un même personnage, il faut convenir que, dans ce cas, l'auteur a usé du procédé jusqu'à l'excès. Ce ne sont pas deux ou trois personnes qui ont posé pour le portrait, mais une demi-douzaine, peut-être plus, on ne saurait le dire au juste. Albertine est une foule, une agglomération d'êtres qui diffèrent par le physique, par la situation sociale, par le caractère. On dirait une collection de photographies que l'auteur extrait d'un tiroir plein de souvenirs

⁸⁴J. F., i, p. 190.

d'amours défuntes et qu'il étale devant nous, s'attardant à en contempler certaines plus longuement, jetant un regard bref sur d'autres. A première vue, toutes ces Albertines se confondent, mais bientôt quelque trait distinctif les sépare et alors, opposées, se disputant le coeur de cet amant instable, elles reprennent leur individualité. Car c'est seulement quand leurs caractères deviennent inconciliables qu'on arrive à les saisir dans leur diversité.⁸⁵

When one studies Proust's technique in his earlier volumes of recording the mistaken impressions that he receives in order to illustrate his idea of relativity, one is tempted to disagree with Feuillerat's theory that Proust based the character of Albertine upon many different models. The different aspects which she presents to the narrator are more probably the efforts of the author to suggest to the reader the phases in the development of the nature of Albertine and the evasiveness which she shares with all the other girls in A la Recherche du Temps Perdu. In other words, Proust's differing portraits of Albertine would then be intentional means to an end, rather than accidental mistakes and careless writing.

In A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs, Marcel has difficulty in fixing the exact location of a beauty spot, which his confused impressions tell him is somewhere on her face. The day when he sees her riding past Elstir's home on her bicycle he thinks that it is on her chin.⁸⁶ Later when he meets her at the party

⁸⁵Feuillerat, op. cit., p. 22.

⁸⁶J. F., iii, p. 110.

Elstir gives to introduce him to Albertine, he thinks that it is on her cheek under her eye.

En somme, quand je la voyais, je remarquais qu'elle avait un grain de beauté, mais ma mémoire errante le promenait ensuite sur la figure d'Albertine et le plaçait tantôt ice tantôt là.⁸⁷

Eventually, he does succeed in placing it definitely on her upper lip.

...le grain de beauté que je m'étais rappelé tantôt sur la joue, tantôt sur le menton, s'arreta à jamais sur la lèvre supérieure au-dessous du nez.⁸⁸

Not only her elusive beauty spot, but her entire physical appearance as well is forever shifting and changing for him. The day when her governess is leading her home with her golf clubs she looks entirely different from the day when he had first seen her.

La fillette qui la (the governess) précédait, ressemblait à celle de la petite bande qui, sous un polo noir, avait dans un visage immobile et joufflu des yeux rieurs. Or, celle qui rentrait en ce moment avait aussi un polo noir, mais elle me semblait encore plus jolie que l'autre, la ligne de son nez était plus droite, à la base, l'aile en était plus large et plus charnue. Puis l'autre m'était apparue comme une fière jeune fille pâle, celle-ci comme une enfant domptée et de teint rose. Pourtant, comme elle poussait une bicyclette pareille et comme elle portait les mêmes gants de renne, je conclus que les différences tenaient peut-être à la façon dont j'étais placé et aux circonstances, car il était peu probable qu'il y eût à Balbec, une seconde

⁸⁷J. F., iii, p. 153.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 156.

jeune fille, de visage malgré tout si semblable, et qui dans son accoutrement réunit les mêmes particularités.⁸⁹

The next winter in Paris he complicates his difficulty in fixing her image in his mind by his endeavor to recall her appearance at successive stages in their acquaintance. The image of a Hydra-headed human frequently occurs in Proust, for Marcel strives many times to recall how a friend has looked at various intervals within his knowledge.

Bref, de même qu'à Balbec, Albertine m'avait souvent paru différente, maintenant, comme si, en accélérant prodigieusement la rapidité des changements de perspective et des changements de coloration que nous offre une personne dans nos diverses rencontres avec elle, j'avais voulu les faire tenir toutes en quelques secondes pour recréer expérimentalement le phénomène qui diversifie l'individualité d'un être et tirer les unes des autres comme d'un étui toutes les possibilités qu'il enforme, dans ce court trajet de mes lèvres vers sa joue, c'est dix Albertines que je vis; cette seule jeune fille étant comme une déesse à plusieurs têtes, celle que j'avais vue en dernier, si je tentais de m'approcher d'elle, faisait place à une autre.⁹⁰

Marcel's lack of correct perception is sometimes caused by a combination of circumstances in which the narrator is not permitted to see the entire picture presented by a character. One day Françoise ushers into his presence a little salesgirl whom he has seen in a nearby dairy shop and whose nose has fascinated him.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 90.

⁹⁰C. G., II, p. 53.

When the girl stands before him divested of the aura of imagination with which he had surrounded her, she is reduced to herself. Then he notices that her nose, which had attracted him particularly because of its arch, is rounder than he had believed and gives her an air of stupidity, whereas her cheeks which he had not been able to see when she was surrounded by the other girls in the shop are so pretty that he is frightened.⁹¹

By his skill in portraying the confusion in sense impressions which his narrator receives, Proust succeeds admirably in transmitting to the reader his feeling that all perceptions are relative to the circumstances under which they are received. Simultaneously, he lends to the external appearances of the girls, which, in turn, frequently reflect the state of mind within, their predominating quality of evasiveness.

To Proust, the girl is the symbol not only of fluidity, but, also, of supernal beauty. In order to suggest to the reader the extent to which he idealizes her and her inaccessibility, he uses imagery which, though based first on nature, becomes supernatural. To heighten the elements of mystery and divinity he employs imagery suggested by the Bible, the Arabian Nights, Greek mythology, and the lore of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. Biblical metaphysics, the magic of the Arabian Nights with its genii

⁹¹p., i, p. 195.

and beautiful maidens materialized from empty space, the classical divinities of antiquity, the art, alchemy, and astrology of the Middle Ages fascinate him and inspire him to clothe his girls with otherworldly characteristics.

Both his process of going from the natural to the supernatural and his use of Christian imagery are illustrated in Proust's description of the hawthorn hedge, before the first appearance of little Gilberte Swann to the dazzled eyes of her beholder.

La haie formait comme une suite de chapelles qui disparaissaient sous la jonchée de leurs fleurs amoncelées en reposir; au-dessous d'elles, le soleil posait à terre un quadrillage de clarté, comme s'il venait de traverser une verrière; leur parfum s'étendait aussi onctueux, aussi délimité en sa forme que si j'eusse été devant l'autel de la Vierge, et les fleurs, aussi parées, tenaient chacune d'un air distrait son étincelant bouquet d'étamines, fines et rayonnantes nervures de style flamboyant comme celles qui à l'église ajouraient la rampe du jubé ou les meneaux du vitrail et qui s'épanouissaient en blanche chair de fleur de fraisier.⁹²

Intercalé dans la haie, mais aussi différent d'elle qu'une jeune fille en robe de fête au milieu de personnes en négligé qui resteront à la maison, tout prêt pour le mois de Marie, dont il semblait faire partie déjà, tel brillait en souriant dans sa fraîche toilette rose, l'arbuste catholique et délicieux.⁹³

The scene is set for the manifestation of the little Virgin.

⁹²C. S., I, p. 200.

⁹³C. S., I, p. 203.

The first time the little band appears, Marcel sees them against the sea, a moving spot, which, as it comes nearer, materializes into five or six little girls,⁹⁴ in much the same manner as a genie forms from a cloud of vapor. That Proust must have had the Arabian Nights in mind when he describes their approach is evidenced by the fact that a few pages farther on he compares the one who has attracted him particularly to a "petite péri, plus séduisante pour moi que celle du paradis persan."⁹⁵

His favorite conceit in respect to these young girls, the motif of the frieze of girls by the sea, appears early in his descriptions of them. He likes to imagine that a piece of Greek statuary has been endowed with life and that the animated goddesses are frolicking on the sands.

Et cependant, la supposition que je pourrais un jour être l'ami de telle ou telle de ces jeunes filles ... cette supposition me paraissait enfermer en elle une contradiction aussi insoluble, que si devant quelque frise antique ou quelque fresque figurant un cortège, j'avais cru possible, moi spectateur, de prendre place, aimé d'elles, entre les divines processionnaires. ... Et même le plaisir que me donnait la petite bande noble comme si elle était composée de vierges helléniques, venait de ce qu'elle avait quelque chose de la fuite des passantes sur la route. Cette fugacité des êtres qui ne sont pas connus de nous, qui nous forcent à démarrer de la vie habituelle où les femmes que nous fréquentons finissent par dévoiler leurs tares, nous met dans cet état de poursuite où rien n'arrête plus l'imagination.⁹⁶

⁹⁴J. F., III, p. 35.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 43.

⁹⁶J. F., iii, p. 45.

Sometimes his girls walk down from amid the statuary of the porches of medieval churches. "Albertine ... était une des incarnations de la petite paysanne française dont le modèle est en pierre à Saint-André-des Champs."⁹⁷ They are time and time again compared to figures in medieval or renaissance paintings

... l'aurore de jeunesse dont s'empourprait encore le visage de ces jeunes filles et hors de laquelle je me trouvais déjà, à mon âge, illuminait tout devant elles, et, comme la fluide peinture de certains primitifs, faisait se détacher les détails les plus insignifiants de leur vie, sur un fond d'or.⁹⁸

Their appearance while they are talking may be compared to that of the angels of Bellini.

Et de cet instrument (voix) plus varié, elles jouaient avec leurs lèvres, avec cette application, cette ardeur des petits anges musiciens de Bellini, lesquelles sont aussi un apanage exclusif de la jeunesse.⁹⁹

One time in a telephone conversation only the voice of Albertine comes to Marcel. He feels then that it might take sort of alchemy to bring her in person before his eyes.

Cet effort de l'ancien sentiment, pour se combiner et ne faire qu'un élément unique avec l'autre, plus récent, et qui, lui, n'avait pour voluptueux objet que la surface colorée, la rose carnation d'une fleur de plage,

⁹⁷C. G., II, p. 55.

⁹⁸J. F., iii, p. 197.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 197.

cet effort aboutit souvent à ne faire (au sens chimique) qu'un corps nouveau, qui peut ne durer que quelques instants.¹⁰⁰

Whether the Bible, the Arabian Nights, Greek mythology, or medieval and renaissance lore are used as sources of inspiration, his images partake of the supernatural, which lends surpassing beauty and mystery to his girls. In every figure there is the suggestion of divinity, of reincarnation, of the materialization of bodies from spirit, of the animation of statuary or painting, of the elusive elements of music.

Music, as the most abstract of the arts, frequently symbolizes his emotions towards the girls. He may refer to their faces as being as confused as the music one forgets.¹⁰¹ His love for Gilberte is compared to a Vinteuil sonata, whereas that for Albertine is likened to the more complicated Vinteuil septuor.¹⁰² He describes the little band as walking with the smooth grace "si remarquable chez les bonnes valseuses."¹⁰³ They never avoid

une occasion de saut ou de glissade sans s'y livrer consciencieusement, interrompant, semant, sa marche lente -- comme Chopin la phrase la plus mélancolique -- de gracieux détours où le caprice se mêle à la virtuosité.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰S. G., II, i, p. 145.

¹⁰¹J. F., iii, p. 37.

¹⁰²A. D., i, p. 139.

¹⁰³J. F., iii, p. 37.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 39.

The author employs frequently such words as "ephemeral," "fugitive," "fluidity," "nimbus," "cloud," "aura," "aureole." He uses every means at his disposal to suggest to the reader the otherworldliness of his girls. Innumerable images scattered throughout the book refer to regions beyond the confines of the earth. He describes the little band as being a "lumineuse comète."¹⁰⁵ inhabitants of an "astre voisin,"¹⁰⁶ "un continent céleste."¹⁰⁷ The image of a constellation is used many times in reference to this delightful group of girls, whom he likes to think of as a

sorte de blanche et vague constellation où l'on n'eût distingué deux yeux plus brillants que les autres, un malicieux visage, des cheveux blonds, que pour les repérer et les confondre bien vite au sein de la nébuleuse indistincte et lactée.¹⁰⁸

Figures are selected by the author with infinite care to launch a flight of imagination which will connect the ether above with terrestrial regions, below. The girls may be compared to birds who collect before flying away,¹⁰⁹ or the smile of Albertine to an "arc-en-ciel qui unit pour moi notre monde terraque à des régions que j'avais jugées jusque-là inaccessibles."¹¹⁰ Just as the

¹⁰⁵J. F., iii, p. 39.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 110.

rainbow connects heaven with earth, so Proust's images are carefully designed to lead the reader from the natural to the supernatural.

Ainsi s'était dissipée toute la gracieuse mythologie océanique que j'avais composée les premiers jours. ... Les créatures surnaturelles qu'elles avaient été un instant pour moi mettaient encore, même à mon insu, quelque merveilleux, dans les rapports les plus banals que j'avais avec elles ou plutôt préservait ces rapports d'avoir jamais rien de banal.¹¹¹

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 253.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The girls in the novel of Proust, Gilberte, Albertine, the little band, and the hosts of others, who lend to A la Recherche du Temps Perdu their beauty and fluidity, are symbols of the attractive aspects of reality. The author feels that there is about the little band, for instance, "un flottement harmonieux, la translation continue d'une beauté fluide, collective et mobile."¹¹² Their beauty and fluidity in turn represent the supernal beauty, or soul, of the universe. He has chosen the young girl to illustrate these qualities, because she is herself a creature who is in the process of developing. In her beauty and youth she seems to have sprung fresh from the infinite.

Pour la plupart les visages mêmes de ces jeunes filles étaient confondus dans cette rougeur confuse de l'aurore d'où les véritables traits n'avaient pas encore jailli. On ne voyait qu' une couleur charmante sous laquelle ce que devait être dans quelques années le profil n'était pas discernable. Celui d'aujourd'hui n'avait rien de définitif.¹¹³

The girls are creatures whom the hero would like to understand, but they, like fireflies, elude him. If on a rare

¹¹²Ibid., p. 38.

¹¹³Ibid., p. 192-193.

occasion, he succeeds in capturing one of them and imprisons her long enough to study her in the garish light of the sun, he finds that the beautiful, luminous creature dissolves into a bit of phosphorescent dust. But bitter as has been his disappointment, the woman who has made him suffer has been of greater use to him than the company of a man of genius, for she has made him plumb the depths of his being and draw from those subterranean sources profound and vital truths; then "un écrivain peut se mettre sans crainte à un long travail."¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴T. R., ii, p. 65.

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