

Proustian Aesthetics of Ambiguity: Elstir's "Miss Sacripant"

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There is a Chinese saying that a picture is worth a thousand words.¹ Yet with Proust a thousand words proffer a multitude of images, of brilliant sunshines and twilights, of landscapes and figures submerged in muted colors and shadows from which changeable shapes emerge in variegated hues. In the Proustian world reality is an elusive composition, a mirage of transparencies piled up on each other, tabloids of perceptions, images flashing on multilayered screens; it is a sea of shapes and colors, blending and then disjoining, in prismatic effect, a fluid unity perpetually redefining itself in time. But where does the artist's eye come to terms with the shadows of reality that crowd his world, one wonders, how can he capture the fleeting images and hold them fast? The procedure is long, gradual and halting; the cumulative knowledge it affords alters with the years, intransmissible, a unique achievement in the space of a life.

The role of art and the image of the artist have often been central in literature, from the works of Balzac to Zola, the Goncourt brothers and Proust. The constant need for a new language and mode in artistic expression has resulted in a perennial reinterpretation and in a fluid concept of what the artist represents, of his world and his vision; but the temptation to identify him with his work is both justified and misleading, for his art resides in a mystical unity with truth and the intuitive ability to give it shape. Balzac, who often shocked the fastidiousness of "bon goût" through his coarse appearance, his flashy attire and Gargantuan appetites, has left us, within the complexities of his literary creation, visions of the most ethereal and poignant delicacy. The contradiction is here only an apparent one, for Balzac's art held up to a great extent a mirror to his life, catching in its reflection both the outer demeanor and the fire from within, his passionate inconsistencies and the feverish tenacity of his visions. Perhaps that is what art indeed represents, the translation, into a language that is new, of a personal reality. That there may exist an "objective" reality is of scant relevance here, for in the universe of art every line is a creation, in which perceivable shapes are wedded to the emotional discernment of truth.

One of the central figures in Proust's kaleidoscopic world is Elstir, the remarkable painter who serenely fills canvases with splashes of color from his magical palette. He is, as all figures of painters in a literary work must be, a double creation, a character within a character or, more precisely, the author of art within art. The simultaneity of the two images presents a constant play in which Elstir's nonliterary work comes out of literature, and in which the evocation of a sensuous reality lives through the imagination. The paintings of Elstir, born out of words, reflect the tension that exists between the real and the unreal, and the mysterious link of the artist's life with his creation: "Je comprends que l'image de ce que nous avons été dans une période première ne soit plus reconnaissable et soit en tout cas déplaisante. Elle ne doit pas être reniée pourtant, car elle est un témoignage que nous avons vraiment vécu, que c'est selon les lois de la vie et de l'esprit que nous avons, des éléments communs de la vie, de la vie des ateliers, des coteries artistiques

s'il s'agit d'un peintre, extrait quelque chose qui les dépasse."² Thus Elstir defines the process of maturing in man and the artist, his slow gathering of experiences and his laborious piling of them, each being a new discovery and the foundation for the next one to follow. The artist's experiences lie then at the very root of his art; they form the composite layers of the wavering transparencies which are his own way of perceiving reality.

Much has been said already about Elstir's probable identity. There is an often accepted theory that all names of artists in *La Recherche* follow a pattern that reveals who the original model was; it is in the first three letters of the name, it would seem, that the secret is contained. Hence, BERgotte would represent BERgeret, VINteuil stands for VINcent d'Indy and (H)ELstir for HELleu. The fact, however, that the character of Bergotte also suggests Paul Bourget as a possible model, Vinteuil that of St. Saens and that Elstir is often reminiscent of Whistler, only points to the unicity of the artistic reality and its departure from life patterns. It may be assumed that whoever Elstir's model was, he held possibly no more resemblance with the wistful author of *Miss Sacripant* than the latter has with her own model, Odette de Crécy.

Significantly, Marcel who accidentally discovers the little watercolor does not recognize in the puzzling portrait of the woman either Swann's wife or Gilberte's mother. Elstir's manner of expression, without willfully disguising commonly perceivable realities, has covered them up with so many layers of poetic shades and intuitive variations that they become metamorphosed, transmuted into an ideal coincidence of feelings, imagination, and sensations: "[l'aquarelle] me causa cette sorte particulière d'enchantement que dispensent des oeuvres, non seulement d'une exécution délicieuse, mais aussi d'un sujet si singulier et si séduisant que c'est à lui que nous attribuons une partie de leur charme, comme si, ce charme, le peintre n'avait eu qu'à le découvrir, qu'à l'observer, matériellement réalisé déjà dans la nature et à le reproduire" (p. 847).

What Elstir has painted in fact, is not Odette de Crécy but "Miss Sacripant," an actress, in disguise, straddling an equivocal sexuality in unambiguous clarity of features.⁴ She is not beautiful, yet striking, young and depraved at once, a woman in man's attire, with a dreamy touch of sadness in a superficial countenance. More than a portrait, it is a chronicle, the record of a life embracing a gamut of stances and psychological variations, of pretences, of lies and half truths, of emotions shown and concealed sentiments. Hence the fascination it exercises on the viewer, the magnetizing effect of a confrontation with a truth greater than the one offered by outside realities; this painting is the symbol of a nature so complex and varied that it required an equally intricate experience of life in the painter to render it into a recognizable verity, alive with all the ambiguities and the web of circumstances with which real life itself is endowed. "Miss Sacripant" is a woman wearing the appearance of a mask, which is itself a truth cloaked in masquerade.

The man behind the painter in Proust's work remains unexplained, and almost peripheral. The steps that led from M. Biche to the renowned Elstir present, on the one hand, the double image which all realities hold in the Proustian world, and on the other, and more strikingly, two removed stages in the development of an artist. In the latter view the two images, rather than being alternate and interchangeable, are simultaneous; the first, M. Biche, forms either an inner frame within a larger canvas or the lower layer beneath

the cumulative transparencies of subsequent images. In either case—and the choice here must rest with one's individual optics—it is a foundation for the artistic structure that will finally emerge.

The passage that interests us here concerns the adolescent Marcel's visit to the painter's studio in Balbec. While Elstir continues working on a canvas in progress, Marcel browses around, looking at the paintings in the room: "Le plus grand nombre de ceux qui m'entouraient n'étaient pas ce que j'aurais le plus aimé voir de lui, les peintures appartenant à ses première et deuxième manières, comme disait une revue d'Art anglaise qui traînait sur la table du salon du Grand-Hôtel, la manière mythologique et celle où il avait subi l'influence du Japon . . ." (p. 835). Elstir's stylistic development can thus be traced from an early interest in mythological figures, recalling Gustave Moreau, to a later stage of Japanese influences, before settling down to the present. The earliest period, more ponderous and intellectual, depicting gods and goddesses, was followed by a lighter touch when the fashion for oriental moods stressed understatement and suggestiveness rather than fully outlined figures. The earlier stage of Elstir's art was in keeping with the dictates of l'École des Beaux-Arts and its more traditional teachings prevalent among the disciples of Ingres and Moreau; then followed what eventually became impressionist painting, with nuances of colors and variations of moods, glittering lights contrasted with shaded views, fluidity of movement and shapes. To the latter manner belongs the Port of Carquethuit, a painting only recently completed in which the liquidity of the sea and the variegated masses of houses and roofs, boats and people, are in constant flux, "amphibious" and interchangeable. But before reaching this latter stage with which Elstir's art will finally be identified, there was a middle phase, one that, already in harmony with the transparency of lines and the fluctuating hues of the later vein, was still characterized by a clarity of outlines and the depth of a psychological statement more in keeping with the earlier one. That period is represented by the canvas entitled "Miss Sacripant."

It is not irrelevant, and surely not accidental, that the description of "Le Port de Carquethuit" in the work precedes that of "Miss Sacripant." The "metaphor" of sea, land and sky appearing in changeable focus and varying perspectives in that later canvas, is not present in the one of the young woman in disguise; but what is suggested here would have little impact unless the theme of "metaphor" in painting had already been discussed in detail. Yet, if that theme had been introduced with the analysis of Miss Sacripant, much of the subtlety and the ambiguity present in the characterization of the young woman would have been marred.

The metaphor in the portrait is not one of visual perspective alone. Where the fluidity of colors and lines in the Port of Carquethuit conjured up a poetic reality composed of illusions and produced a displacement of traditional optics, "Miss Sacripant" displays a corresponding transposition of a psychological nature; here the painter and his model are steeped in notions and understandings not discernible to the naked eye. Captured through contrasts of elements and juxtapositions of tones, the full understanding of the model and the hidden quality of her personality are frozen in a lasting statement of her essence.

The painter and his art, the relation of the artist to his work and the role of the portrait—real, imaginary, academic—in his universe, are subjects central to many literatures. Balzac's Frenhofer of "Le Chef d'Oeuvre inconnu" is possessed by his own inner vision of beauty and his feverish pursuit of

the unattainable ideal. Zola's Claude Lantier of *L'Oeuvre* becomes prey to his own creative demon; in anguished solitude, he is bewitched by the macabre portrait of his dead child, and he surrenders the tormented love he once bore his wife to the image on the canvas which now takes the place of *her* neglected self. Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's Manette in their *Manette Solomon* embodies, on the contrary, the painter Coriolis's living ideal; her perfect beauty becomes, rather than an inspiration, a stifling force in the artist's creative aims. Elstir's Miss Sacripant represents the composite reality of art and life, a stage in the man's life that coincided with a phase of the artist's endeavor. She is at once a segment of Elstir's past—as the hurried concealing of the canvas upon Mme Elstir's arrival suggests—and a step in his development as a painter. She is thus a rendering, not of the model's beauty or of an abstract concept of beauty, but of Elstir's ideal in art—which is the translation, in an intangible form, of all that is most real and most truly lived in life: "C'était—cette aquarelle—le portrait d'une jeune femme pas jolie, mais d'un type curieux, que coiffait un serre-tête assez semblable à un chapeau melon bordé d'un ruban de soie cerise . . ." (p. 848). The curious aspect of the portrait becomes gradually more apparent as its equivocal expression is more closely analyzed. The comparison of the close-fitting head wear ("serre-tête") to a bowler hat is the first indication of, or at least a possible allusion to, male attire, one however mitigated, by the coquettish feminine touch of the bright red ribbon: ". . . une de ses mains gantées de mitaines tenait une cigarette allumée tandis que l'autre élevait à la hauteur du genou une sorte de grand chapeau de jardin, simple écran de paille contre le soleil" (p. 848). One hand, wearing a half-glove ("mitaine"), half hidden therefore, holds what in the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth could not but be regarded as a sign of effrontery in a woman, of masculine behavior and even depravity. Partially concealed by the glove, this hand is the most obvious trait of the painting, mentioned immediately after the bowler hat and in harmony with its dubious character; the "lighted" cigarette picks up the motif of both the cylindrical shape and the bright red ribbon, while the contrast between the feminine aspect of the ribbon and the masculine quality of the hat is repeated in the implied delicacy of the fingers visible below the glove and their contact with the strikingly male symbol of the cigarette. The restful position of the other hand further reinforces the contrasts, with the large straw hat it holds in a traditionally romantic and feminine image that conjures sights of shy smiles amidst flowers in shaded gardens. The "simple screen," wide, round, and womanly is juxtaposed with the tubular aspect of the bowler hat and the cigarette; set against the latter's insolent presence, it suggests a kind of surrender and abandon, in conventional representation of the female-male roles. Significantly, all that seems contradictory, each minute detail that underlines and denies at the same time the meaning established by the preceding one, points to well established Proustian analogies. The same metaphor that links in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, for instance, the two seemingly divergent roads of the "côté des Guermantes" and the "côté de chez Swann" lies at the heart of the Sacripant painting.⁵ All that is presented in visible contrasts of meanings amounts in fact to essential parallels where each aspect stresses its own intrinsic duality; that duality is evident in the uncertain sexuality of the figure in the portrait, oscillating between male and female characteristics, and in the mutually superseding symbols: "Le caractère ambigu de l'être dont j'avais le portrait sous les yeux tenait, sans que je le comprisse, à ce que c'était une jeune actrice d'autrefois en demi-travesti" (p. 848). The actress, whose very profession assigns her roles and impersonations, is here "half-disguised," as if she were then only "half" an actress, whose diminished role gives her a limited impersonation. Since the impersonation is clearly that of a man, the actress remains half-man half-woman, and the role playing is, by the same inference, merely partial.

(One may recall here that earlier in the same volume (I, p. 685) Marcel had had a dream in which Mme Swann appeared transfigured into a man.) What remains of the identity of the figure in the portrait, the being beyond the mask, is ambiguous: an image that embraces part of the lie and makes it its own. The demarcation line between reality and play acting, truth and assumed role, is as fluid and interchangeable as the liquidity of the sea, the sky and the roof tops in the Port de Carquethuit. The important difference here lies in the plurality of meanings that stems from a psychological vantage point, rather than the polychromatic hues resulting from a visual perspective: "Mais son melon, sous lequel ses cheveux étaient bouffants, mais courts, son veston de velours sans revers ouvrant sur un plastron blanc me firent hésiter sur la date de la mode et le sexe du modèle, de façon que je ne savais pas exactement ce que j'avais sous les yeux, sinon le plus clair des morceaux de peinture" (p. 848). The hair under the hat is "fluffy" but "short," the feminine bouffant quality being immediately denied by the "short" male characteristic. What follows offers—or seems to offer—less confusion of identity, for the black velvet jacket and the white dicky are an unmistakable masculine attire; yet their presence, rather than eliminating doubts reinforces them. The marked male aspect of these two items of clothing, in fact, stands against a carefully built background of mixed elements and contradictory statements; not surprisingly, those very details make any clear identification impossible. The image that emerges at this point is one that finds no echo or corroboration either in "time, place or sex." Yet, singularly, it is precisely here that the painting appears "le plus clair des morceaux," with its character emerging out of its very mystery and ambiguity. The clarity evident here is not merely a sudden revelation or some magical intuition that affords insight into an unexpected world; what happens in fact is that gradually all the details that have been noticed begin to fall into a pattern, forming a code, a language, the meaning of which becomes increasingly intelligible. Each aspect of the painting can thus be reduced to a key—the hat, the ribbon, the hair, the jacket, the shirt—a kind of alphabet that spells out truths which, not immediately identifiable, appear by degrees clearer. The critic Barbara Bucknall says that painting brings as much information as a work of literature,⁶ and that is precisely the case here. All that is necessary for the observer to do is to learn the language, so as to be able to decipher the canvas; the fact that Marcel had already observed other paintings before stopping in front of "Miss Sacripant" appears, in retrospect, as an "apprentissage," a necessary first step and the mastering of a special alphabet, before he could read Elstir's complex language.

Next to the young woman in the painting, there is "un porte-bouquet plein de roses." A little later on the same page (p. 848) the flowers become "des oeillets" and, on the following page, again they appear as "des oeillets" dans le vase." Allowing for a simple oversight on the part of the author, the transposition from the rose, traditionally a symbol of woman and of love, to the carnation, a more masculine and ambiguous one, is in keeping with the double images and meanings contained in each detail of the painting. The container for the roses is simply referred to as a "porte-bouquet," or slender vase for flowers, and is somewhat unimportant at first; the flowers it holds seem to stand out by contrast, lush and inviting with their delicately pink petals. But as the flowers change identity, the importance of the vase increases: "Le verre du porte-bouquet, aimé pour lui-même, avait l'air d'enfermer l'eau où trempaient les tiges des oeillets, dans quelque chose d'aussi limpide, presque d'aussi liquide qu'elle . . ." (p. 848). The container is now cherished for its own sake, a liquid vessel holding no longer simply "roses" but "stems" of flesh colored flowers. (The symbolic quality of the flower is perhaps clearer in

the English word "carnation," from the Latin "caro," meaning "stem" and, more directly, from the Italian "carne," or "flesh." The French "oeillet," also from the Latin, "oculus," means literally "opening" or "little eye.") Without any need to pursue any obvious sexual connotation, the transposition of the flowers' identity is all the same suggestive, even if accidental. Both the flowers and the container have been in turn presented as female and male symbols, each standing for both, interchangeable and fluid in their respective roles.

The passage from the rose to the carnation, from the simple container to the almost liquid and transparent vase, coincides with a change of tone and descriptive manner in the text. From merely an interesting, even a fascinating, painting, "Miss Sacripant" has become a love symbol of intrigues and passions; the language has gone through a parallel transformation and, from narrative and philosophical, it now becomes sensuous and evocative. What had previously appeared as "son veston de velours sans revers" in utter simplicity, unadorned even by a collar, and "ouvrant sur un plastron blanc," now becomes rich, ornate and sparkling: "La blancheur du plastron, d'une finesse de grésil et dont le frivole plissage avait des clochettes comme celles du muguet, s'étoilait des clairs reflets de la chambre, aigus eux-mêmes et finement nuancés comme des bouquets de fleurs qui auraient broché le linge. Et le velours du veston, brillant et nacré, avait çà et là quelque chose de hérissé, de déchiqueté et de velu qui faisait penser à l'ébouriffage des œillets dans le vase" (p. 849). Where nouns had earlier been emphasized—jacket, shirt—with the attributes of "velvet" and "white" merely added in order to explain the general appearance of Miss Sacripant, the adjectives and the quality of the material now take precedence. The "whiteness" of the shirt front, and the "velvety" feeling of the jacket are stressed, the "frivolous" little pleats with their design in harmony with the shape of the carnations—"little bells," now compared to "lilies of the valley," which catch in the embossing all the hues reflected in the room. Without even suggesting a Freudian analysis of the text, such as might be done by the brilliant critic Serge Doubrovsky,⁷ we shall nonetheless point out that the word "muguet" is derived from "musquet," or "nutmeg." The words "brilliant and pearly" stand as in contradiction to each other, indicating at once the glittering and subtle aspect of the velvet, reflecting and deflecting light, harsh, and smooth. In this context the carnations, far from retaining the earlier assertive appearance above their rigid stems, now look ruffled and disordered in the vase that holds them, presenting, in contrast with the initial description, an image of exhaustion and even prostration.

The painting of Miss Sacripant illustrates among other things the old principle that appearances are most often deceptive; yet within the oscillating movement pointing to one image and then the other, within the contrasting impressions and elusive verities, there resides an essential element of truth. That element does not rest at one point or another, but somewhere in between and it embraces at once all sides of the spectrum: "Le long des lignes du visage, le sexe avait l'air d'être sur le point d'avouer qu'il était celui d'une fille un peu garçonnière, s'évanouissait, et plus loin se retrouvait, suggérant plutôt l'idée d'un jeune efféminé . . ." (p. 849). The androgynous quality of Miss Sacripant's portrait—or the truth within the lie, or the element of lie that is to be found in all assertions—seems to affirm a reality that both transcends and surpasses the painting itself. What is suggested is a totality of impressions and realities, a notion that encompasses, with Miss Sacripant and its inspiring model, Odette de Crécy, much of human nature; also, with

the space captured in the canvas and the disposition of the figure and the flowers, it suggests the space-time factor that is central to all notions and to all measures. Beyond time and beyond space, capturing a past outside the confines of memory, the portrait reflects the present (with the garden outside Elstir's studio, the canvases in the room, the room itself, and the undefined quality of the air) and the future, through an artistic dimension that goes far beyond that of human nature.

Meanwhile, as the presentation of the portrait has turned, from a simple statement, into an evocative and seductive description of overwhelming sensuality, the role of Elstir seems to have receded in the background. Little by little, his work has asserted its entity outside of him and projected in all its psychological and artistic complexities the existence of a Miss Sacripant; she now lives independently from him, as all creation lives away from its maker. Yet there is, in this as in all created objects, a secret and symbiotic bond with its author. Gradually the presence of Elstir is reasserted, until it becomes inseparable from his art: "Mais surtout on sentait qu'Elstir, insoucieux de ce que pouvait présenter d'immoral ce travesti d'une jeune actrice, pour qui le talent avec lequel elle jouerait son rôle avait sans doute moins d'importance que l'attrait irritant qu'elle allait offrir aux sens blasés ou dépravés de certains spectateurs, s'était au contraire attaché à ces traits d'ambiguïté comme à un élément esthétique qui valait d'être mis en relief et qu'il avait tout fait pour souligner" (p. 849). These observations, immediately following the rich and detailed description of flowers, shapes, and materials, are a reminder, suddenly, that there was a notion and a cognition beyond the artistic talent of Miss Sacripant's author, that this is not merely a photographic rendition of reality but an interpretation in which are mirrored Elstir's personal view and his understanding of life. That view and that understanding rest upon the notion that no reality is ever simple, direct, or universal, and that all truth is multifaceted, variable, and illusory. Out of this, there emerge shapes, colors, and concepts reconcilable with the duplicity of all visions and the subtle force that integrates them into a single movement. Ambiguity thus becomes an "aesthetic element" in the composition of a portrait, a primary factor revealing, more than the nature of the model, the artist's own vision and his perceptive knowledge of life. That the very name of "Sacripant" might be a symbol of deceptive identity and elusive behavior⁸ only reinforces the notion that the essence of art lies in the ideal mirror of all reality—the visible, the hidden, the conscious, the proffered, and the disguised elements that go into the composition of life itself.

NOTES

¹Maurice Chermowitz, *Proust and Painting* (New York: International University Press, 1954), p. 126.

²Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du Temps perdu* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Tome I. p. 894. All subsequent quotations are from this same edition and only the page number will be given in parenthesis.

³George A. Cattai, *L'Amitié de Proust*. Préface de Paul Morand (Paris: Gallimard, 1936), p. 208. See also R. Allard's "Les Arts plastiques dans l'Oeuvre de Marcel Proust" ("Hommage à Proust," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, Jan. 1923) in which Elstir is made to resemble Turner and Whistler (p. 217) or Vuillard and Bonnard (p. 226).

⁴The curious use of "Miss" is in keeping, we believe, with the less clear connotations of the English title compared with the French "Mademoiselle." Laura Hayman, a well known "demi-mondaine" supposedly supplied the model for Odette de Crécy; her image has been left us in man's clothing and wearing a top hat (see in this connection Marcel Proust's centenary volume, ed. Peter Quennell; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971, illustration on p. VIII15), and she was also represented by Paul Bourget as an English woman, Gladys Harvey. Another possible model for "Miss Sacripant" is the distinguished actress of the time, Réjane, with features strongly reminiscent of Odette and photographed, as the "duc de Sagan," in a toque edged in bright ribbon.

⁵See in this connection Roger Shattuck's *Proust's Binoculars* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 122-132.

⁶Barbara Bucknall, *The Religion of Art in Proust* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 56. "Thus it appears that painting although it may be deficient of a source of purely factual information can give the same kind of psychological information, although in a different form, as a work of literature."

⁷Serge Doubrovsky's *La Place de la Madeleine, Ecriture et Fantasma chez Proust* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1974), is a Freudian interpretation that emphasizes the sexual connotations at the basis of Proust's work.

⁸See in this connection the interesting article by Peter Bondanella and J. E. Rivers, "Sacripant and Sacripante: a Note on Proust and Ariosto." *Romance Notes*, 2, No. 1 (Autumn 1969), pp. 4-7. They point to the relation between the warrior Sacripante's feverish pursuit of Angelica in Ariosto's epic, and Swann's unappeased need to know and to hold the complexity of both present and past of his mistress, in Proust's work.