CERTAIN of Proust's allusions to play titles or to theatrical events, such as the Paris performances of the Russian ballet, serve to establish the effect of the passage of time and the chronology of particular events in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. For this purpose, play titles operate in the same fashion as do song titles or phrases from popular songs in many contemporary novels. These allusions, in Marcel's text or in the dialogue, are only occasionally chronologically precise, unless we are to assume that Proust retained, and expected his readers to possess, an exact knowledge of the dates when plays were revived at the Comédie Française or elsewhere. But enough of the references are sufficiently exact to underline the passage of time. The period of Marcel's childhood is made to seem remote by the fact that the first set of plays mentioned, early in the "Combray" chapter, is made up of plays which had first been produced before Proust's own birth. The playbills for the *Testament de César Girodot* (Belto and Villetard, 1859), *Œdipe-Roi, Diamants de la couronne*
(a comic opera by Scribe and Auber, 1841), and Le Domino noir (another comic opera by the same authors, 1837), all strike the young Marcel as strange and mysterious, partly because he must choose between revivals of the latter two for his first visit to the theater (I, 73-74).

A revival is also mentioned when the young Gilberte announces that she is going to the theater (I, 408). She is to see Michel Strogoff (Verne and Dennery, 1880); as will appear, the reference cannot possibly be to the original production. But Sacha Guitry tells us, "It was revived year after year, every Christmas." ¹ The choice of revivals in these references not only makes the childhood seem remote, but, as will be seen, this vagueness about which particular production may be meant also seems both deliberate and functional, as Marcel indulges (or Proust has him indulge) in a kind of chronological sleight of hand.

Perhaps the simplest way to pursue Proust's chronological markers is to take them seriatim as they appear in the progress of the whole novel, omitting for the present such allusions in the "Amour de Swann" section, which, as a flash back, presents its own special problems. After Du côté de chez Swann, the first such allusion (which has been radically altered in the English translation) presents a slight anachronism. Bloch, during the action at Balbec, uses the catch-phrase, "Après tout, c'est pas mon père!" (I, 770), which, Jacques Nathan points out, is a celebrated line from Georges Feydeau's comedy La Dame de chez Maxim's, produced in 1899.² Bloch, according to the chronology of the novel, is using this remark the year before it became celebrated, as the action in this section seems to be of 1898. The section begins with the sentence, "J'étais arrivé à une presque complète indifférence à
l’égard de Gilberte, quand deux ans plus tard je partis avec ma grand’mère pour Balbec” (I, 642). The material of two years earlier has included a reference to the Tsar Nicholas’ visit to the Invalides (I, 543), which was in 1896.

Curiously enough, on the same page as the “deux ans plus tard” reference appears the phrase, “notre vie étant si peu chronologique, interférant tant d’anachronismes dans la suite des jours.” Whether or not Proust intended that this be applied directly, it may be taken as a warning, conscious or not, that chronological references are not to be taken entirely literally. The chronological effects intended are psychological ones, and Bloch’s catch-phrase recalls a general period rather than a specific date, just as “Twenty-three skiddoo” suggests yester-year to the contemporary reader without specifying an exact date. Bloch’s catch-phrase establishes the action in the late nineties, contrasted with the playbills of Marcel’s childhood, a much more remote time.

The action of Le Côté de Guermantes is also shown to be of the nineties, in part by the conversation about Maeterlinck’s Les Sept Princesses, from which Saint-Loup’s mistress has recited in the Guermantes drawing room (II, 223-30, 249-50). This play, an early work—Maeterlinck began his career as a writer in 1889—was published in Brussels in 1891, followed by Pelléas et Mélisande in 1893. The conversation indicates that to the fashionable speakers the play is an obscure work by an obscure author, although Marcel finds “une sorte d’âpre satisfaction à constater sa complète incompréhension de Maeterlinck” (II, 229). Again, without precision in dates, Proust has established the period: when Maeterlinck was a comparative unknown, as a contemporary might indicate a period when Maxwell Anderson and Noel Coward were just
getting started. Maeterlinck could hardly have been an obscure figure, even to Oriane, after *Pelléas et Mélisande* became an opera, which was in 1902.

The early part of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* would appear to be still in the nineties, but a number of references to plays moves us into the first decade of the twentieth century, and then to the last years of the decade. Françoise’s daughter uses a catchphrase from *Charley’s Aunt*: “Ah! sans doute une princesse à la noix de coco.” The reference is underlined by a pun: “Voyant que j’attendais une visite, elle fit semblant de croire que je m’appelais Charles. Je lui répondis naïvement que non, ce qui lui permit de placer: ‘Ah! je croyais! Et je me disais Charles attend (charlatan)” (II, 728). *Charley’s Aunt* was produced in Paris in 1894, establishing the early events of Marcel’s affair with Albertine in the nineties, but only fifteen pages further on, Marcel is looking forward to the time when Mme Verdurin is “discovered” by society with the Russian ballet (II, 743). The first season of the Russian ballet in Paris was in 1909, and the time when Mme Verdurin is a kind of patron goddess of the troupe, entertaining them at supper parties, is not reached in the novel until much later, on page 237 of *La Prisonnière*, thus enclosing most of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* and more than half of *La Prisonnière* approximately between 1894 and 1909.

Some chronological effect is established in the Verdurin conversation about Porel (director of the Odéon from 1884 to 1891), Antoine (who directed it later), and the dire possibility of Tolstoy plays at the Odéon: “D’ailleurs, la satrapie de Porel étant maintenant occupée par un fonctionnaire [Antoine] qui est un tolstoïsant de rigoureuse observance, il se pourrait que nous visions *Anna Karénine* ou *Résurrection* sous l’archi-
trave odéonienne" (II, 935). As was noted earlier, the chronology of this passage is in itself somewhat muddy, since although Antoine became director of the Odéon in 1906, the speakers assert the dreadful possibility of seeing Tolstoy plays there, whereas Résurrection had already appeared at the Odéon in 1902, although Anna Karénine did not appear until 1907. However, if we think of this confused set of references as indicating a general time, instead of a historical series of particular events, we have clearly moved into the twentieth century, somewhere apparently within its first five or six years. Again the reader is given the sense of a period as it appears in memory—a psychological marker of chronology.

We are kept in the early twentieth century with Charlus' remark, "Voir Sarah Bernhardt dans l'Aiglon, qu'est-ce que c'est? du caca" (II, 1070). This performance was in 1900. A few pages further on we are given two references to 1902, in remarks about La Châtelaine, and Périer in the opera Pelléas et Mélisande (II, 1086-87). The latter reference clearly marks the progress from the time when Maeterlinck was the obscure author of Les Sept Princesses. The final theatrical chronological marker in the novel is the already mentioned involvement of Mme Verdurin with the Russian ballet.

When we turn again to the "Amour de Swann" flashback, we find the period rather clearly indicated by similar theatrical allusions, although the chronology of this section also presents some inconsistencies. More confusing, however, are the inconsistencies or actual impossibilities which result when these allusions are set beside the allusions in Marcel's narrative about his own life. Germaine Brée states what has usually appeared to be the case when she writes: "Le narrateur en est définitivement localisé dans le temps. Dans
l'ensemble, et malgré quelques interférences de dates, le roman en bloc avance lentement et chronologiquement." But in adding for her example the "Amour de Swann" flash back, she correctly dates the flash back without noting the very real difficulty of fitting it into the novel as a whole:

L'histoire de l'amour de Swann pour Odette, nous pouvons au besoin en désigner assez précisément l'époque: celle où le "Francillon" d'Alexandre Dumas est une nouveauté. . . . Nous sommes de toute évidence dans la décade de 1880. Puis Odette, qui avait été "l'incarnation de l'Exposition universelle de 1878," incarne pour le narrateur "l'Allée des Acacias de 1892." . . . L'abondance et la précision de ces points de repère constituent une véritable "marche du Temp," dont Proust veut évidemment nous donner la sensation directe.3

The "Amour de Swann" section certainly includes its contradictions of dates, but the discrepancy between this section and the novel as a whole is rather more startling.

The allusions noted by Professor Brée are, indeed, of the eighties, but they appear in the novel with several anachronisms. Francillon was a novelty in 1887, but appears in a discussion which seems to make le Maître des forges, of 1883, equally novel. Jules Grévy was president of France from 1879 to 1887, dates which are almost entirely of the eighties, but which hardly constitute a "precise" time reference; Gambetta died on December 31, 1882; the second page of "Un Amour de Swann" does indicate the general period with a reference to Wagner: "Si le pianiste voulait jouer la chevauchée de la Walkyrie ou le prélude de Tristan, Mme Verdurin protestait, non que cette musique lui déplût, mais au contraire parce qu'elle lui causait trop d'impression" (I, 189), but the fashion for Wagner can hardly be pinned to a particular year.

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When the allusions to plays are examined seriatim, therefore, several inconsistencies appear. The first play mentioned is *Les Danicheff* (Alexandre Dumas fils and Pierre de Corvin-Krovkowski, under the pseudonym “P. Newski”), first presented in 1876; but since Swann is promising Mme Verdurin a lobby permit “pour la reprise des *Danicheff*” (I, 216), there is no anachronism. However, a useful chronological conclusion can be drawn from the fact that Swann proposes to get this permit from the prefect of police at a luncheon at the Elysée, where M. Grévy is to be the host. Also, Mme Verdurin has complained at the lack of such a permit on the day of Gambetta’s funeral, apparently recent, a fact which would place this action early in 1883. The affair between Swann and Odette, on this evidence, can hardly have begun earlier than late 1882, since the conversation seems to take place during one of Swann’s earliest visits at the Verdurins’. This cluster of references which places the beginning of the affair in 1882-83 is fairly precise, and provides the basis, as will be shown, for several discrepancies between the flash back and the main narrative.

Not long afterward, Odette is in a happy mood because she is going to see *Reine Topaze* (I, 245), necessarily a revival, since this comic opera was originally presented in 1856. On the next page, however, Swann is described as going again to see *Serge Panine* because Odette liked it. This play, by Georges Ohnet, appeared in 1881, a date not too far out of chronology. But the second allusion to this play, a few pages later, involves us in sleight of hand. Mme Cottard speaks of “cette fameuse Francillon dont tout le monde parle” (p. 256), goes on to remark that it is probably not as good as “Serge Panine, l’idole de Mme de Crécy” (p. 257), and wonders
whether Swann admires le Maître des forges. The reference to the latter might be taken as moving us forward just a year. It was a novel of 1882, adapted for the stage by its author, Georges Ohnet, in 1883. Francillon, however, did not appear until 1887. Aside from the obvious contradictions created by treating all three plays as comparatively recent, although produced over a period of six years, another complication results, as will be shown, from the fact that the love affair still continues apparently as late as 1887.

A minor inconsistency seems to result from the fact that after the quarrel between Swann and the Verdurins, Odette attends a production of 1885, after the Francillon production has already been discussed:

Alors ce salon qui avait réuni Swann et Odette devint un obstacle à leurs rendezvous. . . . “Nous ne pourrons pas nous voir demain soir, il y a un souper chez les Verdurin.” Ou bien les Verdurin devaient l’emmener à l’Opéra-Comique voir Une Nuit de Cléopâtre. . . . “Vois-tu, Une Nuit de Cléopâtre (quel titre!) n’est rien dans la circonstance. . . . Evidemment j’aurais mieux aimé te demander comme une chose sans importance de renoncer à Une Nuit de Cléopâtre . . . dans l’espoir que tu irais cependant.” (I, 289–91)

Even if Francillon was introduced early anachronistically, this discussion still has the affair continuing at mid-decade, as indeed it would have to do, if it is to take up years of Swann’s life and still have begun in 1882. In “Un Amour de Swann,” no additional plays or theatrical events serve as chronological markers. A reference to Swann’s being moved by an advertisement for Les Filles de marbre, by Théodore Barrière, does not affect the issue, since this was a play of 1853, obviously revived during the eighties (I, 360). Thus, it is at some time
after the presentations of *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* (1885) or *Francillon* (1887) that Swann cries out, "Dire que j'ai gâché des années de ma vie, que j'ai voulu mourir, que j'ai eu mon plus grand amour, pour une femme qui ne me plaisait pas, qui n'était pas mon genre!" (I, 382).

The first difficulty in fitting these events of the eighties into Marcel's own narrative arises from a direct contradiction between two statements about the flash back. It is first described as

ce que, bien des années après avoir quitté cette petite ville, j'avais appris au sujet d'un amour que Swann avait eu avant ma naissance, avec cette précision dans les détails plus facile à obtenir quelquefois pour la vie de personnes mortes il y a des siècles que pour celle de nos meilleurs amis. . . . Tous ces souvenirs . . . ne formaient plus qu'une masse . . . entre les plus anciens, et ceux plus récents, nés d'un parfum, puis ceux qui n'étaient que les souvenirs d'une autre personne de qui je les avais appris. . . . (I, 186)

This certainly sounds as if the affair—"que Swann avait eu avant ma naissance"—ended before Marcel's birth. Within the flash back, however, Marcel remarks, "C'est vers l'époque de ma naissance que commença la grande liaison de Swann" (I, 194). If we follow the earlier assertion, Marcel would have been born either after 1885 or after 1887. From this, some curious results would follow, not the least being an almost psychopathic precocity. He would have been nine or eleven at the time of the first Dreyfus trial, and well established in society before he was thirteen or fifteen. He would also have arrived at puberty at the age of seven or nine, as the wrestling sequence with Gilberte takes place in 1894, when Gilberte is "une jeune personne de quatorze à quinze ans" (I, 476).
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(Even Gilberte's age requires chronological testing, as will be seen.) If we choose to follow the later assertion, and assume Marcel's birth and the beginning of the affair as about 1882, we gain three to five years. Thus Marcel would be thirteen at the first Dreyfus trial, in society by the time he was eighteen, and the wrestling sequence would occur when he was twelve. This chronology clearly makes better sense, not only for these sample episodes, but for a number of others, and as the novel progresses, Marcel's precise adult age matters less and less.

Jacques Nathan has considered the difficulties of establishing the narrator's age:

De même, il est difficile de donner au narrateur un âge qui explique son rôle d'un bout à l'autre du roman. En effet, l'épisode "Un amour de Swann" se passe en 1887 (allusion à la première représentation de Francillon). Si nous laissons un temps raisonnable pour les événements qui précèdent le mariage de Swann et d'Odette, ce mariage, et la naissance de Gilberte, ne peuvent guère avoir lieu avant 1890. Or par ailleurs, Gilberte est présentée comme la compagne de jeux du narrateur. En accordant au narrateur l'âge de Proust lui-même, il est difficile de le faire jouer avec elle aux Champs-Elysées, car il devient son aîné de dix-neuf ans; si au contraire nous en faisons un contemporain de Gilberte, il a trente ans à peine au moment de la dernière réception Guermantes au cours de laquelle il se dépeint comme un vieillard. Nous pensons qu'il est inutile de chercher une solution à ce problème qui n'en comporte pas. Quelques-fois, nous l'avons vu, Proust brouille les dates pour rester enfant le plus longtemps possible, mais cette explication ne vaut pas quand il s'agit des autres personnages. Dans les deux cas que nous avons cités, et dans plusieurs autres aussi clairs, il n'a voulu qu'échapper au temps.  

A complete solution is, as Nathan suggests, impossible, but some light can be cast. What seems to have happened is that
for purposes of the novel, Proust has subtracted ten or eleven
years from his own age—for to assume 1871, when Proust
was born, as Marcel's birth date is quite impossible, since the
events of Swann’s love affair would then run from Marcel's
eleventh to fourteenth or sixteenth years. Having made this
subtraction in creating Marcel as narrator, Proust seems none­
theless to have used the public events of his own adolescence
as the background for the Swann flash back, running the risk
of the actual overlapping of the two times. The risk seems to
have been justified, as the discrepancy seems seldom to be
pointed out, although numerous critics are, of course, aware
that there are anachronisms.⁵

Albert Feuillerat indicates, after a careful examination of
the differing versions:

Mais le thème qui a subi la plus sérieuse dislocation est celui
du Temps. Dans la première forme, la succession des événements
ne prêtait à aucune confusion. . . . Si, dans la forme définitive,
il y a maintenant conflit entre quelques-unes de ces dates, s'il
est parfois impossible de situer les événements dans le déroulement
de l'action, si le narrateur est en même temps jeune, inexpéri­
menté et au terme d'une existence lourde d'expérience, c'est
uniquement parce que l'auteur, perdu dans le monde dont il
étendait indéfiniment les limites, atteint de troubles de la
mémoire, ne se rendait plus compte du désordre qu'il créait par
ses innombrables additions, ou en rapprochant brusquement des
événements qui appartenaient quelquefois à des périodes très
différentes de sa vie. Si Proust avait pu exécuter son œuvre
comme il l'entendait, on peut être sûr qu'il aurait persisté dans
son dessein de rendre sensible cet écoulement du temps, sans
lequel son livre n’a plus de sens.⁶

Although there is no doubt that further revisions of the text
would have resolved some of the conflicts between dates, the
fact that *Du côté de chez Swann* appeared in the most satisfactorily revised form would seem to indicate that while Proust might still have adjusted minor anachronisms within the periods (such as Bloch’s quoting from a play that had not yet appeared), he might very well have left the relative times of the flash back and the main action untouched.

It is not enough to say that the present ordering works for the rather simple reason that most readers are unlikely to notice the difference. Proust's arrangement works better, not in spite of, but because of the deliberate discrepancy. It has already been shown how Proust, by alluding to plays earlier than his own childhood, makes Marcel's early childhood, before “Un Amour de Swann,” seem extremely remote. The word *seem* is a deliberate choice here, as we are dealing, it must always be noted, with psychological time, although the allusions are necessarily in chronological time. To the reader of 1913, events of the eighties, more than a quarter of a century earlier, would have seemed sufficiently remote to fit Proust's purpose, especially as exactness is blurred by the ambiguity over whether Swann's affair was beginning, or continuing, or completed when Marcel was born. Few readers can have very precise orderings of public events during a period of from five years before to five years after their dates of birth, and it is just in this period that Proust has rested his chronological ambiguities. Whether he deliberately or consciously planned to do this; or whether he was aware of the literal contradictions but decided not to revise them away; or whether, as Feuillerat suggests, he had weaknesses of memory on which he did not trouble to check, the resulting effect is the same. The chronology seems to be intentionally confused in order to preserve a psychological ambiguity which
causes the reader to relive the past in general, not historical, terms.

Since the material of the flash back, whether we take it as before or just after Marcel's birth, is material actually within Proust's own lifetime (from his eleventh to sixteenth years), it gains a psychological strength and validity that it might very well not have had as a result of research. If Proust had made Marcel his own age, the "Amour de Swann" section would have become secondhand. As it stands, the novel presents Proust's memories, in this one section observed differently, but not different in quality. All the memories are, as Marcel writes, "une masse" (I, 186), an effect less likely to have come about had Proust combined memory with research. (A minor advantage arises from not having to account for the Franco-Prussian War in the flash back, nor to show its effect on society in the main narrative. By beginning in the eighties, Proust was able to work with a stable society uninterrupted by major historical crises. The importance of this for his theme hardly requires discussion.)

If we accept the view that Marcel was born about 1882, at the beginning of Swann's affair, we are still left with two chronological problems, the age of Gilberte and the time of the episode when Marcel met Odette at his Uncle Adolphe's. The greater number of applicable references indicates that Gilberte and Marcel are about the same age. In the early part of "Combray," when Marcel's family receives visits from Swann without his wife, Marcel's mother speaks of Gilberte as of a young child: "'Voyons, monsieur Swann,' lui dit-elle, 'parlez-moi un peu de votre fille; je suis sûre qu'elle a déjà le goût des belles œuvres comme son papa'" (I, 24). When Marcel sees her in the garden with Odette and Charlus, he
sees "une fillette d'un blond roux" (I, 140), and later, when he meets her in the Bois, she is still "une fillette à cheveux roux" (I, 394). The period when Gilberte and Marcel used to meet in the park can be fairly precisely dated by juxtaposing two rather widely separated passages. The first is the description (I, 417-21) of Marcel's watching Gilberte's mother walking in the Allée des Acacias. This was before Odette knew Marcel, and hinges on a theater metaphor: "... J'étais pour elle ... un des personnages secondaires, familiers, anonymes, aussi dénués de caractères individuels qu'un 'emploi de théâtre,' de ses promenades au bois" (p. 421). Years later, almost at the end of the novel, remembering this period, Marcel observes, "... Elle ne semblait pas dire: 'Je suis l'Exposition de 1878,' mais plutôt: 'Je suis l'Allée des Acacias de 1892!" (III, 950). The 1892 date for their childhood meetings would make Marcel about ten, and the "little girl" presumably about the same age.

Another indication of their approximate age may be drawn from the episode in which they wrestle in the park (I, 494). The physiological details here make it sufficiently clear that the narrative has reached a stage at which the epithets "little boy" and "little girl" no longer seem applicable. This episode occurs apparently in 1895, the year before the visit of the Tsar Nicholas (I, 543). Seemingly, at this time the two children would have been about twelve or thirteen years old, an age which can be accepted for the episode. Another reference, however, to Gilberte in the same year seems to make her two or three years older, as M. de Norpois says of her, "Oui, une jeune personne de quatorze à quinze ans?" (I, 476). We seem, if we hold to 1882 as Marcel's birth year, to have a Gilberte who is a year or two older than Marcel, a possibility which is
acceptable so far as their own relationships are concerned, but which immediately gives rise to some obviously peculiar implications.⁷

If Gilberte is as little as two years older than Marcel, she would have had to have been born before her parents had met. Even if she is the same age as Marcel, she would have to have been born at the time when her parents met. The only direct indication that the novel gives of when Gilberte was born is somewhat vague: "Il y a eu, il est vrai, dans les années qui précédèrent le mariage, d'assez vilaines manœuvres de chantage de la part de la femme; elle privait Swann de sa fille chaque fois qu'il lui refusait quelque chose. Le pauvre Swann, aussi naïf qu'il est pourtant raffiné, croyait chaque fois que l'enlèvement de sa fille était une coïncidence et ne voulait pas voir la réalité" (I, 466–67). The final version of the novel casts no further light on the circumstances of the marriage, and the account of Swann's affair includes no mention of the child, and, consequently, none of Odette's blackmailing. Feuillerat indicates that the original plan was more explicit, and that the existence of Gilberte was one reason for the marriage: "Odette, impatiente de sortir de sa situation irrégulière, surtout à cause de sa fille, avait tourné à la méchanceté." ⁸ This, then, is the explanation, clearly implicit but never defined in the novel as it stands, of why Swann married a woman who did not please him, who was not in his style. But in incorporating this story, or building the novel around this story, Proust never made the necessary chronological adjustments, either to clarify Marcel's age or that of Gilberte, his contemporary.

The adjustment for Gilberte has to be made in a fashion similar to Proust's telescoping of his own life to provide the chronology for Marcel's. Gilberte must be slightly younger
than Marcel if we take it that her parents' affair began about the time of Marcel's birth; she could be his age or somewhat older if we take it that the affair was merely continuing when he was born. As the former chronology works best for Marcel, it seems preferable to attach Gilberte to it. Thus, although she could have been born in 1883, she has gained two or three years by 1895, by Norpois' account. As the two children grow older, the discrepancies one way or another matter less and less, the difference between twelve and fourteen being greater than that between twenty-two and twenty-four.

To recapitulate, although Proust has used some of his own memories of the eighties for the background of Swann's affair, Marcel seems to have been born about 1882, simultaneously with the beginning of Swann's affair; Gilberte to have been born possibly a year later; the affair to have ended by 1885 or 1887; and the marriage to have taken place soon after 1885 or 1887. The "little girl" at Combray could be any age from five to eight, when Marcel would be between six and nine; the "little girl" in the park, in 1892, would be about nine, Marcel about ten; and the wrestling episode, two or three years later, would involve a boy of twelve or thirteen and a girl of twelve—or, if she has caught up with M. de Norpois, of fourteen or fifteen. In any event, the transitions from childhood to puberty and adolescence are clear and acceptable, even if the precise years or months are not.

In each of these childhoods there remains, however, one episode almost impossible to draw into the chronologies. Gilberte's friendship with Bergotte seems to take place when she is improbably young, whether we start from 1883 or go back from 1894. Swann mentions this friendship before Marcel has seen the "little girl": "C'est le grand ami de ma fille. Ils
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vont ensemble visiter les vieilles villes, les cathédrales, les châteaux” (I, 99). Even if we accept M. de Norpois’ “fifteen” in 1894 or 1895, Gilberte would have to have been between nine and twelve when she went about with Bergotte from cathedral to castle, from one town to another. One can just barely imagine the possibility of Bergotte’s being interested in so young a girl, and the suitability of their traveling together, but it has echoes in Lolita, with Gilberte as an unlikely nymphet. The obvious unlikelihood of it is of the same sort as has often been pointed out in the episode of Albertine’s living with Marcel while his family is away, and with neither family raising serious objections. While the Albertine episode rests on an incomplete transposition of sexes, this episode rests on an incomplete transposition of chronology in working the Bergotte material into the lives of Marcel and Gilberte. It is mentioned, however, in a portion of the novel where the chronology is vague enough that the episode does not strike the reader as an obvious discrepancy. By the time it is again alluded to, it may be taken as having occurred merely in an undefined “past.”

Marcel’s first meeting with Odette, difficult or impossible to fit into the chronology of his life, is also more important retroactively than when it happens, with the episode and the recalling of it separated by more than a thousand pages. When it is first mentioned, it is as a flash back within the narration of Marcel’s childhood days at Combray: “Mais depuis nombre d’années je n’entrais plus dans le cabinet de mon oncle Adolphe, ce dernier ne venant plus à Combray à cause d’une brouille qui était survenue entre lui et ma famille, par ma faute, dans les circonstances suivantes” (I, 72). As the account continues, however, the chronology becomes blurred. Marcel
writes of a time when he used to visit his uncle, a time when his love of the theater, necessarily platonic since he was still too young to be allowed to attend, is expressed in admiration of playbills on the advertising boards; but the account moves on to his schooldays, when he wrote notes about the theater to his classmates. Then, “plus tard, quand [il fut] au collège,” he made lists of actresses in order of their talent. These actresses and various cocottes are visitors at his Uncle Adolphe’s (I, 72-75). In this introduction to the episode of his meeting Odette, there already appears a contradiction between the phrase “depuis nombre d’années je n’entrais plus dans le cabinet de mon oncle Adolphe” and the reference to much later schooldays, from which the episode apparently moves.

References within the episode make it clear, too, that Marcel is a schoolboy, although Odette is described as a young woman: “. . . En face de lui, en robe de soie rose avec un grand collier de perles au cou, était assise une jeune femme qui achevait de manger une mandarine” (p. 76). This young woman has met Marcel’s father, and wonders if Marcel could not visit her, to which Uncle Adolphe replies, “. . . Il est très tenu; il travaille beaucoup. Il a tous les prix à son cours . . .” (p. 79). Marcel reports his visit to his parents, precipitating the family quarrel with Adolphe. The transition back to the main narrative is explicit: “Quelques jours après, croisant dehors mon oncle qui passait . . . je détournai la tête. Mon oncle pensa que je suivais en cela les ordres de mes parents, il ne leur pardonna pas, et il est mort bien des années après sans qu’aucun de nous l’ait jamais revu. Aussi je n’entrais plus dans le cabinet de repos, maintenant fermé, de mon oncle Adolphe . . .” (I, 80). Although Marcel knows Odette as Gilberte’s mother in 1892, he does not discover for a
number of years her identity as the young lady in pink, whom he met as a schoolboy at about the same time.

Before we examine the passage in which Marcel discovers her identity, it is necessary to introduce another thread of this chronological web. It is established during Marcel’s first visit to the studio of Elstir, at Balbec, when he becomes curious about a watercolor sketch lying there: “Je me trouvai ainsi mettre au jour une aquarelle qui devait être d’un temps bien plus ancien de la vie d’Elstir . . . le portrait d’une jeune femme pas jolie, mais d’un type curieux . . . C’était une jeune actrice d’autrefois en demi-travesti . . . Au bas du portrait était écrit: Miss Sacripant, octobre 1872” (I, 847-49). After Marcel has identified the subject as Mme Swann before she was married, he remarks, during his thoughts about this remarkable circumstance: “Cette manière, la première manière d’Elstir, était l’extrait de naissance le plus accablant pour Odette . . . parce qu’il faisait de son portrait le contemporain d’un des nombreux portraits que Manet ou Whistler ont peints d’après tant de modèles disparus qui appartiennent déjà à l’oubli ou à l’histoire” (I, 863).

The emphasis, then, is on the remoteness of the period when Odette played Miss Sacripant, a remoteness clearly labeled “October, 1872.” A reference late in the novel causes yet more chronological confusion, when Charlus says of Swann and his wife: “Mais, voyons, c’est par moi qu’il l’a connue. Je l’avais trouvée charmante dans son demi-travesti, un soir qu’elle jouait Miss Sacripant; . . . les mauvaises langues avaient prétendu . . . que j’avais couché avec Odette. Seulement, elle en avait profité pour venir m’embêter, et j’avais cru m’en débarrasser en la présentant à Swann” (III, 299-300). This observation throws the beginning of the affair
back exactly ten years, and would therefore have it continuing for thirteen to fifteen or more years.

Another, more complicated explanation might be that Odette in 1882 either played Miss Sacripant again, or disguised herself in the costume at some sort of masquerade. No allusion, however, is made to either possibility, nor is there any evidence that she was still an actress when she met Swann. In fact, she is identified as “la demi-mondaine” (I, 190), and, although the meeting is at the theater, nothing suggests that she was performing: “... Un jour au théâtre il fut présenté à Odette de Crécy par un de ses amis d’autrefois qui lui avait parlé d’elle comme d’une femme ravissante avec qui il pourrait peut-être arriver à quelque chose ...” (I, 195). This, except for the date, in part coincides with Charlus’ account, but omits any suggestion of acting, or of Miss Sacripant.

What seems to have happened is that Proust has forgotten the telescoping of his own life, and has moved the start of Swann’s affair back to the period of his, rather than Marcel’s birth. In any event, his realization of the identity of the lady in pink is combined with the identification of the portrait with Odette, and includes Odette among the actresses (and cocottes) with whom his uncle had had “friendships.”

Marcel’s realization that he had met Odette before he knew her as Swann’s wife and Gilberte’s mother comes some time after the adolescent love affair with Gilberte is over, and Marcel has found a regular place in the Guermantes circle. Charles Morel, the son of Uncle Adolphe’s valet, brings Marcel a collection of photographs of actresses and cocottes, friends of Adolphe who had died the year before (II, 264). Looking over these photographs and recognizing one of Miss
Proust’s Manipulation of Chronology

Sacripant, Marcel is troubled, oddly enough, by a question of chronology, concerning, not himself, but his uncle:

Comme j’avais été très étonné de trouver parmi les photographies que m’envoyait son père une du portrait de miss Sacripant (c’est-à-dire Odette) par Elstir, je dis à Charles Morel, en l’accompagnant jusqu’à la porte cochère: “... Est-ce que mon oncle connaissait beaucoup cette dame? Je ne vois pas à quelle époque de la vie de mon oncle je peux la situer; et cela m’intéresse à cause de M. Swann ... — . . . En effet, cette demi-mondaine déjeunait chez votre oncle le dernier jour que vous l’avez vu. (II, 266-67)

If Marcel cannot see to what stage in his uncle’s life he can assign Odette exactly, the reader’s problem is to see to what stage in Marcel’s life he can assign the meeting exactly.

It is, in fact, impossible to fit this episode into the established chronology of the novel, either of “Un Amour de Swann” in the eighties, or of Marcel’s life, beginning in 1882. Inexplicable inconsistencies result from Marcel’s having seen, as “a little boy,” Gilberte as “a little girl,” when she came to Combray with her mother, whom Marcel had seen, according to an earlier passage, “some years” earlier. Additional inconsistencies result from the association of the lady in pink with Miss Sacripant as a figure of the seventies, on the basis of the 1872 date of the Miss Sacripant portrait and of the association of this portrait with those of Manet, who died in 1883. Psychologically, the effect is similar to that of making the playbills of Marcel’s childhood refer to plays older than Proust. Practically, Proust again seems to be using his own birth date, ignoring the fact that Marcel is a decade younger. The mention of Marcel’s puzzlement over his uncle’s chronology seems to partake of the same chronological sleight
of hand as is used with the playbills, switching the reader’s attention from the true puzzle to a false one. The technique of distraction here is of the same quality as the seemingly disingenuous remark on the first page of the “Noms de pays: le pays” section: “notre vie étant si peu chronologique, interférant tant d’anachronismes dans la suite des jours” (I, 642).

There is no way, of course, to know how aware Proust may have been of all the chronological contradictions, or whether the conjuror’s tricks to conceal them were entirely deliberate. Samuel Beckett assumes that Proust was consciously cavalier: “He will write as he has lived—in Time... He raises himself artificially out of Time in order to give relief to his chronology and causality to his development.” More revisions might have removed all the contradictions, but the fact remains that many of them were not removed after the numerous revisions which Proust did make, especially in Du côté de chez Swann. (In point of fact, as Feuillerat indicates, it was revision which introduced some of the contradictions.) Nonetheless, it does not seem certain that Proust would have wished to remove all chronological contradictions if this meant the sacrifice of psychological and artistic effects.

The chronological outlines might have been clearer, but at the expense of unity of tone and of psychological effectiveness. The consideration of this handling of chronology underlines the fact that Proust was engaged in writing a novel, a work of art, not a disguised memoir or a minor piece of history. Just as no one should be distracted by the fact that according to the literal chronology of Othello Desdemona simply had no opportunity for the unfaithfulness for which Othello slays her, the reader of Proust need not be distracted by literal chronological facts. As in Shakespeare, we find an operation of
"double time," in which the effect or appearance of time is more powerful than the facts of time. What is important is that chronological references should seem clear in their contexts, and that their progression should seem psychologically valid. These criteria Marcel’s narrative meets, making his childhood sufficiently remote, and the progress from period to period convincing as he looks back over various strata of time.

Three months before he died, Proust suggested that Einstein might help to resolve some of the apparent contradictions. Benjamin Crémieux had written to Proust about the question: "Dans une autre lettre, j’avais adressé au grand roman de Proust le reproche de dérouter le lecteur sur sa chronologie. ‘Vous parlez, lui disais-je à peu près, d’automobiles ou de ballets russes, alors qu’on s’imagine être en 1890.’” To this, Proust replied, on August 6, 1922: “Je crois que les anachronismes dont vous avez la bonne grâce de me féliciter ne sont pas dans mon livre. Je ne le jure pas et cela m’ennuierait trop d’ouvrir cet assomant ouvrage pour vous répondre avec certitude. Mais enfin, autant que je me souviens, entre la soirée Guermantes et le deuxième séjour à Balbec, il y a un grand intervalle de temps. Einsteinisons-le si vous voulez pour plus de commodité.” Proust has artistic justice on his side. Although certain discrepancies may simply be the result of errors of memory, a greater number of discrepancies seem less important than the valid effects which they create. While details may be confused, as in combining plays of several seasons into one reference, the general periods are clearly presented. Precise ages of characters may be ill-defined, but the progress from one stage of life to another is kept clear. Although Marcel’s memories and Swann’s may overlap with Proust’s, their vividness is unimpaired. Although the telescoping of the
chronologies of Marcel and Gilberte may result in unlikely episodes, such as Gilberte's early friendship with Bergotte—or even impossible ones, such as Marcel's apparently meeting Odette in the seventies—the relationship between Marcel and Gilberte is kept convincing and credible. Remote events seem remote, even when they are made more so than is literally possible. When events are recalled—and such an episode as the meeting with the lady in pink is important only when recalled—they fit without difficulty into what has been established as an indefinite past. If they seem inconsistent, it is as memories seem inconsistent; and if remote, as memories are remote. The standard used is the standard of the human mind, not that of the calendar, the engagement book, the journal, or the memoir. The effect is more important than the fact, psychological truth more important than literal fact. Conforming to the requirements of a work of art and the demands of fiction, Proust does not carelessly confuse chronology: he deliberately manipulates it.