

Early Twentieth-century Fashion Designer Life Writing

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**Abstract:** In her article "Early Twentieth-century Fashion Designer Life Writing," Ilya Parkins examines memoirs of major modernist fashion designers in the, finding that the genre is characterized by a strong geographic cleavage between France and America, overlain by perceptions of epistemic difference. She compares Elsa Schiaparelli's and Paul Poiret's work, finding that despite their differences, the opposition between France as a locale of abstract knowledge and America as a site of empiricism allows them to claim, as French designers, a certain privilege in a profession characterized by an unresolvable tension between art and commerce. The encroachment of American industrial models in their industry, however, threatens their episteme and ultimately their senses of self. Designer memoirs are poignant archives of melancholy, a condition deriving from nostalgia at the perceived loss of an aesthetic orientation and way of life, and intelligible as a response to fashion's uneasy encounter between aesthetics and industry.

## Ilya PARKINS

### Early Twentieth-century Fashion Designer Life Writing

As Caroline Evans notes in a discussion of French designer Jean Patou's American mannequins, in fashion, "the look of standardization and an industrial aesthetic was commonly perceived to be an American one" (250). Evans traces "tensions in early-twentieth-century modernity: between creativity and business, between France and America, and between elite consumption and mass production" (261). She builds on the work of Nancy Troy, who shows in her 2003 book, *Couture Culture*, how early twentieth-century designers promoted concepts of authenticity in an anxious battle to suppress the inbuilt logic of copying and standardization that defined fashion, and that mining the perceived opposition between France and the United States was an important strategy in that battle. Here, I work from the important insights of Troy and Evans, to foreground the strained relationship between France and America in the discourses of fashion houses. But I begin from the autobiographical articulations of designers themselves, because they open up new dimensions — an epistemological one, and an intimate, psychic one — that allow us to think about how the designer her or himself is implicated in the maintenance of a discourse of national differences — and further, what the designer might tell us about the role of fashion in modernity.

The autobiographical work of fashion designers has enjoyed little sustained critical attention in its own right. Probably because of its obviously commercial underpinnings it has not been taken seriously as documentation of designers' subjectivity. To look for designers' subjectivity, however, misses the point about designer memoirs and autobiographies: that, particularly in the modern era, the era of fashion's massification, of its increasingly visible cultural presence, these texts are crucial indices of designers' attempts to craft a public persona — and to secure a lasting cultural legacy. No matter whether they are ghostwritten or penned by the designers themselves, no matter how carefully strategized and potentially "inauthentic" their expressions of sentiment might be, they stand as documents of the peculiar condition of fashion designer celebrity — and in this way, I argue, they speak to larger questions about the place taken by fashion and the designer in the cultural landscape of early twentieth-century modernity. Indeed, when we read the designer autobiography as a document of celebrity self-fashioning, its relevance to the question of the modern — to both cultural modernism and industrial modernity — becomes clear. Most early twentieth-century designers were engaged on some level with the logic of the new; the critical and commercial success of fashion was associated with a drive toward novelty that aligned it both with the drive of cultural *avant-gardistes* toward innovation in idea and artistic form, and with the increasing technological sophistication of industrial production, which itself signified a very different kind of newness. As a line of fashion theorists stretching from Walter Benjamin through Ulrich Lehmann and Caroline Evans has shown, fashion's attachment to novelty is consistently compromised from within, or haunted, by the past, which reappears constantly in its cycles and is often referenced explicitly in couture. Fashion, in this account, has been shown to be a constellation of past and present, to use the terms of Walter Benjamin (see also Evans *Fashion at the Edge*; Lehmann; Vinken). Of course, this was not explicitly acknowledged in the early twentieth century. In this period, designers' careers were built upon these two poles — aesthetic and industrial — of modernity; success depended on their ability to convincingly establish themselves as modern subjects, who held the sartorial keys to admitting others into the promise of the modern. If they were successful enough to publish memoirs and other autobiographical writings, then these careers were also, of necessity, exercises in the production and management of a public persona. The career of a popular early twentieth-century fashion designer, then, was defined by at least two things: a cultivation of novelty, and a convincing and coherent spectacle of that novelty to consumers.

The designer memoir was a pillar in the establishment of a coherently modern identity, a foundation of this "branding" effort. Even when published at the end of the design career, autobiographical writing did the work of establishing what critic Aaron Jaffe calls a "modernist imprimatur." In *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, Jaffe explains this concept: "By the word 'imprimatur,' I mean ... that the modernist literary object bears the stamp of its producer prominently. At once as a distinctive mark and a sanctioning impression, the imprimatur, as I define it, turns the author into a formal artifact, fusing it to the text as a reified signature of value" (20). I argue that fashion designer autobiog-

ographies functioned as Jaffe suggests the modernist imprimatur did: they enabled the accrual of value to the designers — even in retrospect — on the basis of perceptions of their individuality, which in turn derived from a sense of their modern iconoclasm. Although Jaffe has developed the concept to speak to the particularities of literary modernism, it is worth noting that it has a special relevance for the fashion designer, who literally cultivated a distinct signature to signify the un-reproducibility of her or his sartorial artistry. It may well be that designer autobiographical work is invested in the creation of a coherent signature. But try as they might to base their couturier branding efforts on a consistent picture of a personality, the works reveal the ideological pressures brought to bear in their creation. Marked by tensions and contradictions — notably between an undercurrent of conservatism that would appear to fly in the face of the revolutionary sensibility the designers were concerned to articulate — the autobiographical works make apparent the labour of their production. Hence they also reveal something of the labour invested in the creation of designer identities. And, as I will suggest here, that labour — whether or not it is a "genuine" reflection of the psychic states of designers — reveals something about the general cultural positioning of the *couturier* in modernity.

One of the layers of tension that becomes apparent in an examination of the formation of a modernist imprimatur in the autobiographical writing of Paul Poiret (active from the 1900s-1920s) and Elsa Schiaparelli (active from the late 1920s-1950s), is a persistent — and constantly threatened — opposition between what I would call two different modernities, distinguished by their geographic coordinates. The works seem to bear agitated witness to — but, crucially, they also help to produce — a conflict between two different manners of being modern, two *styles de vie* and aesthetic orientations which were respectively yoked to France, where the designers resided, and America. For example, in her 1954 memoir, *Shocking Life*, Schiaparelli describes her understanding of the acts of cultural translation necessary when she — long based in Paris, although Italian by birth — began a U.S. lecture tour during the Second World War: "America had always been more than hospitable and friendly to me. She had made it possible for me to obtain a unique place in the world. France gave me the inspiration, America the sympathetic approval and the result. Here I was trying to tell America ... that it was impossible to replace France in the realm of our particular creative work. There are impalpable reasons that have made France what she is ... I pointed out that America, which had made terrific steps forward, employs methods built upon a vast and limitless scale of thought and production, whilst ours are those of a beautiful atelier of research and fantasy" (112-13). Schiaparelli takes pains here to clarify her goodwill and even in expressing her sympathy for the country she relies on a conceptual opposition between France and the U.S. It is one that aligns France with an aesthetic modernism that has deep, even transhistorical roots, and the United States with an ethos of industrial modernization. This is an altogether predictable formulation, relying as it does on the dichotomization of aesthetics and the market which have been problematized over the last fifteen years (see Jensen; Dettmar and Watt; Burns; Turner; Jaffe). Twenty years earlier, recounting his own fashion career in the first of three autobiographical works, *En habillant l'époque* (1930) — published in English as *King of Fashion* or *My First Fifty Years* — the fervently anti-US-American Paul Poiret described US-Americans thus: "An American has to see an article manufactured, completed, solid in front of him, so that he can copy it servilely. Their absolute lack of imagination prevents them from conceiving the unforeseen and the hypothetical. Like Saint Thomas, they only believe what they have seen. This must restrict them in science and in art, for it restricts their field of activity to the data of experience" (*King of Fashion* 275-76). Here Poiret is dismissing US-Americans as empiricists, enslaved by sense data. What is remarkable about this passage is the invocation of epistemological categories to describe the opposition between France and the U.S. In approaching the question in this way, Poiret invites us to reconsider the dichotomous positioning of the two nations as a war between competing modern ways of knowing. This approach is fruitful, too, in analyzing Schiaparelli: recall her formulation of US-Americans employing "a vast and limitless scale of thought and production," whereas the French are invested in "research and fantasy," and their aesthetic dominance has occurred for "impalpable reasons." The invocation of scale situates US-American methods of production spatially, whereas the alignment of French production with fantasy suggests an intriguingly unsituated and in that sense ethereal, ultimately unknowable, process. The delineation of a particularly French kind of unknowability in opposition to US-American empiricism thus becomes shorthand for the dichotomy of transcendent artistry and vulgar industry.

Two, related things are notable about this spatial opposition. The first is that taken together, Poiret and Schiaparelli encourage a rereading of France and the U.S. as incompatible epistemes. Their life writing serves to delineate two different kinds of knowledge — the autobiographical act is, for these designers, implicated in the construction of themselves as particular kinds of (French) knowers, against the knower implied by the empiricism of the United States. The creation of the fashion designer's modernist signature involves the designation of the designer as a knowing subject. This designation is highly suggestive in conceiving of the role of both fashion and its designers in the early twentieth-century cultural landscape. As a form that is at once fantastic and material, ephemerally inconstant and visually spectacular, fashion itself necessarily complicates the epistemic opposition between abstract and experientially verifiable knowledges. The designers' uneasy straddling of this divide indicates the fragility of the division between aesthetic abstraction and the materiality of the market in the rapidly democratizing twentieth-century fashion industry. Bringing to bear an epistemic analysis on these texts reveals a second dimension of the fashion designer persona, one which might be said to exist as a counterweight to the generally frothy depictions of fashion designers in the mass media in this period. The texts underline a persistent melancholy in the two designers, one which underlies and might be said to wear away at the celebratory tone that each strikes. As I argue, this melancholy is directly related to the epistemological split that characterizes the relationship of the U.S. and France; it emerges from what they deem the successful encroachment of a US-American, empiricist episteme upon their own French one. The apparent demise of their own episteme punctures the progressivist, future-oriented rhetoric that characterizes each work, as melancholy shades into nostalgia, a modality that develops a melancholy character as it confronts the sheer inaccessibility of the past, its irreconcilability with the present (see Fritzsche 1592). An epistemological analysis of these texts, then, also allows us to understand melancholy not only as typifying the condition of the modern fashion designer, but also potentially sheds new light on the question of fashion's temporal structure as a perplexing crystallization of past and present.

Although Poiret and Schiaparelli are two very different designers, working in slightly different times, a comparative reading of their autobiographical works yields some important insights that allow us to begin to generalize about the condition of the fashion designer in modernity. In fact, it is precisely the divergent character of their life writing that makes a comparative examination so effective. The tone of their work differs substantially. Poiret's three autobiographical publications, *En habitant l'époque*, *Revenez-y*, and *Art et phynance*, might well be described as defensive rehabilitations of the designer's own name, coming as they did at the end of the final, troubled decade of Poiret's career and the failure of his business. Poiret's works are also conventional in their rhetoric and structure; they are chronological narratives that position the author and his aesthetic philosophy unambiguously at their centre; they might be read as rhetorical pleas for a coherent identity. Schiaparelli's single autobiographical work, *Shocking Life*, though it is also a chronological narrative, does not offer the same kind of apparently straightforward framework. Rather, it is characterized by what Caroline Evans calls "a tendency to make-believe ... it is ... playful and puzzling, full of distancing devices that serve to highlight the contingent and precarious nature of identity" (Evans "Masks, Mirrors, and Mannequins" 23). On one level, then, Schiaparelli's work offers a strong contrast to Poiret's. Thus it is all the more remarkable that, from their divergent approaches, we find emerging an analogous set of epistemological and temporal concerns. It is for this reason, I contend, that the two texts can be used together to cautiously theorize about the state of the modern designer's public persona, and can also tell us something about the psychic stakes of fashion as a cultural industry.

To understand the way that territory and epistemology are intertwined in these texts, I will begin by more closely examining how knowledge is mapped onto place. One of the most striking features of Schiaparelli's autobiography is her constant alignment with ethereality; she notes that she "continued to believe in miracles" (Schiaparelli 9) and characterizes herself as a "mystic" who "could not bend [herself] to the laws of religion." Her "belief ... was directly connected to the source of harmony and creation, but she "could not bring [herself] to go through the channels of man" (20). Here she establishes her anti-materialist bent, revealing a yearning to disavow the physical and conventional structures that constrain her. For a fashion designer — whose career was, of necessity, built on her mastery of materials — this constant invocation of the extra-material as foundational to her character is telling. One might argue that the clothing she designs actually bears out this tension between matter

and the immateriality, as her oeuvre is famously characterized by its surrealist play, its incorporation of principles of uncertainty which engage the viewer as a — profoundly uncertain — knower. Schiaparelli summarizes it bluntly near the end of the book by saying that she strongly believes in the unknown, and that at the end of her career she was in more profound contact with the beyond — indeed, this is what prompted her to retire. The beyond is the means by which she spatializes — or perhaps more accurately, de-spatializes — the unknowable she so prizes. As her career draws to a close and she publishes this consideration of her life and work, she evinces a certain desperation to transcend the parameters of space and time. Poiret's autobiographical writing repeatedly makes similar moves, invoking a kind of unlocatable non-place as the realm of the artistry within which he is so concerned to position himself, against commerce. For him, this is often figured as dream or imagination, which, he notes in *Art et Phynance*, is — although "unreal" — able because of its deterritorialized quality to engender the conventional space of reality. Here, he asks himself which is more powerful, reality or dreams, and answers: "I think that dream is more powerful, because it engenders reality" (Poiret, *Art et phynance* 21). This accords a constitutive power to the immaterial, the un-situated, that effectively privileges non-place over conventional space. The tendency to privilege this category of Nowhere is threaded through all of his writing, often taking the form of a classic concern with an eternal beauty, which in turn works to align the aesthetic principle on which his work is founded with a cultural value that is deemed to transcend time and space.

What is curious about this invocation of Nowhere as a governing principle in both of these texts is the constant compromising of this spacelessness. Nowhere is by definition unlocatable, of course, yet the designers frequently bring Nowhere down to earth, as it were, by locating it in France. At the very least, France is, by virtue of being the antithesis of the U.S., an important facilitator or enabler of the unsituated values that they so prize. In locating themselves in this non-spatial space that is obliquely and intermittently aligned with the aesthetic possibilities represented by France, Schiaparelli and Poiret are each able to distinguish themselves from the material topography of the United States, given shape in their work through descriptions of cities, lecture halls, stores and factories — in effect, through representations of materiality of the nation. What is striking in each author's major work is the mundane nature of descriptions of US-America, as opposed to descriptions of place in France, the latter of which are largely tied to the singular sites of the designers' ateliers, showrooms, and homes. The French spaces are privileged and themselves semi-transcendent because of their association with the designers as mediators of unknowability. The US-American sites, oriented in these accounts to crude and pedestrian spectacles of production or consumption, are, by contrast, fatally grounded, inexorably material. They are transparently knowable, whereas the kinds of knowing that might be facilitated by the incompletely described geography of France are uncertain, immaterial, and ultimately unstable. What might give us pause in the work of both designers is a strange, intermittent attribution of spatial transcendence to US-America, which I noted above. This sometimes seems to compromise their insistence on the epistemic difference between themselves and US-Americans. Recall that Schiaparelli describes the "vast and limitless scale of thought and production" in America, contrasting it to the French "atelier of research and fantasy." Poiret also points to this vastness, aligning it with a certain monumentality: "their conceptions are vaster and more monumental than ours" (Poiret, *King of Fashion* 270). A kind of limitlessness comes into play here, but its attachment to the object-based world of industrial production differentiates it from the ultimate material transcendence of the French. Indeed, the figuration of vastness and transcendence is derived from the size of the US-American landscape — it is tied to space — and for that reason it does not represent a transcendent beyond. The beyond prized by Poiret and Schiaparelli has no such spatial correlates.

I would like to suggest that this contrastive motif effectively establishes both as practitioners of a kind of transcendent modernism, emergent from a free-floating, un-situated plane. It dematerializes the designers and the labour they are engaged in, as modern artist-industrialists. There is clearly something liberating in that kind of weightlessness, and it seems to become a refuge from modernity even as it is invoked in the name of modernist experiment. Fashion and its worlds seem sometimes in the modern period to speak obliquely to the yearning of various modernists for an escape valve from the pressures of modernity. In the case of Poiret and Schiaparelli, who bear the weight of the tension between art and commerce, that is an escape into liquidity that offers respite from the tension yet also helps to shore up their retroactive branding of themselves as particular kinds of subjects. The move to

detrterritorialize thus constructs them as subjects, constructs their houses as having an appropriately artistic and transcendental legacy, and offers them subjective dissolution as a balm for the overburdened, modern spirit.

In making this move away from space, Schiaparelli and Poiret are suggesting something about the content and value of knowledge, and the construction of the knower, in France. But more importantly, they are also pointing to a French knower specific to the fashion industry. The disavowal of spatiality is necessarily a disavowal of the process of production upon which their businesses rely. Their refusal to locate themselves and their form of knowledge – triangulated as it is with creativity and imagination – effects an erasure of the process of production that plainly recalls commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism – involving, in the classic Marxian formulation, the obscuring or effacement of the process of commodity production, so that the commodity takes on a magical cast – is certainly a predictably invoked construct in any discussion of fashion. But here it becomes visible in a different way. What is notable is that what are being erased here are not necessarily the conditions of production of the object – in the case of the fashion industry, the clothing – but the conditions of production of (French) knowledge and French epistemic subjects themselves; in this case, the conditions of emergence of the designer, as designer becomes commodity. Julie Rak notes that, in mass-marketed life writing, though the work's success depends on the depiction of a coherent subject, "the taking-on of narrative subjectivity in the text means that the writing subject of autobiography must become an object in order to package his or her identity for consumption" (155). In these autobiographical texts, the establishment of competing epistemes is a central ingredient in the development of a saleable public persona for the designers. For of course, one buys a commodity. If the subject of the autobiography is a commodity, it is this objectified subject that a consumer is purchasing. In their unlocated-ness, the designers as representatives of a French way of knowing offer to consumers the promise of access – through purchase – to a way of knowing and by extension a way of life. What is noteworthy about these texts is that they reveal an engagement in the retrospective branding and marketing of designers and their houses on multiple levels: especially since the fashion houses are no longer operative, what is being promoted through the construction of the designers as particular kinds of epistemic subjects is an epistemological standpoint (or non-standpoint, as it were). Modern fashion becomes visible as attempting to preserve, or perhaps germinate, a kind of knowledge whose existence appears to be threatened by the very conditions of industrial production that increasingly defined it. And, as the life writing shows us, its designers came to embody that tension. Their publications, so easily dismissible as mere mass-market drivel, seem to bear the traces of this encounter between competing epistemes, and this lend the works a melancholy quality that flies in the face of their purpose and the celebratory publicity efforts attached to them.

Recognizing the melancholy quality of the designers' self-representations calls us to attend to the kind of narrative that is told in these works about the designers' changing relationship to America as an episteme that is incompatible with their own. Both texts are characterized by an initial voicing of a certain hope in relation to America, which eventually gives way to disenchantment with American industry and empiricism. In her text, Schiaparelli evokes this very early on, suggesting that her first trip to America, a decade before she began designing clothing, called her violently to her senses from an optimistic mythologizing about US-American possibilities: "America, the magic dream of the world, holds out expectations beyond what can humanly be fulfilled" (Schiaparelli 28). All of Schiaparelli's later descriptions of the U.S. are read through this initial expression of disappointment. With her descriptions of her time in exile there during the Second World War, the disappointment takes on a melancholy cast. The more time she spends in the country over the course of her career, the more forcefully she locates herself as a different kind of knower from that apparently produced and privileged by the US-Americans. The implied transformation of the image of the U.S. from a site of magic and hope functions as a particular kind of nostalgic knowledge narrative, one that laments the loss of childish naiveté but also strategically opposes Schiaparelli to that naiveté.

Poiret makes a similar, if more explicit, move, but does so by attributing nostalgically such naiveté directly to the US-Americans. He argues that the only French person equipped to understand the US-American psyche is "the elementary schoolboy" (Poiret, *King of Fashion* 279), a naive empiricist who can navigate the overwhelming onslaught of sensory data that US-America represents through its crowds, its architecture, its hectic visual culture. This figure is invested with a kind of epistemic privi-

lege that the French do not have; in a particularly noteworthy passage, Poiret writes this of the French: "the form of our education does not always make it easy for us to understand the mass of this people. On the contrary, it handicaps us, and our impedimenta of knowledge, culture, and riches encumbers us as soon as we are on the boat" to the United States (179). Here, then, US-American empiricism is equated with a lack of education.

Thus, both Poiret and Schiaparelli respond to the category of naive or ignorant knowledge. Although their locations of this naiveté are divergent, their generally nostalgic gloss on the category of naive knowledge and its association with US-American empiricism also works to establish both as worldly and yet world-weary knowers. This apparent compliment about the promise of US-American knowledge becomes a comment on the sophistication of the designer and a denigration of the American sensibility. Indeed, the figuration of unknowability and mystery as a kind of cross to be heroically borne by the French fashion designer in the face of the onslaught of US-American consumer culture is strong in these texts, and I would argue that it even functions as the central theme of both accounts. The portrayal of melancholic artistry in both texts is rooted in the sense of the designers as endangered epistemic subjects. And if we take this life writing as a study in the retroactive construction of a public persona, the building of a legacy — as the texts' publication at the end of each designer's career suggests that we must — then we must consider what it means that the designers are invested in an understanding of themselves as heroic yet sacrificial offerings in the relationship between competing modern epistemes, one of which, they know since they are writing retrospective accounts, will emerge victorious.

These autobiographies thus offer not only an account of competing epistemes, but of the dissolution of their own. In both texts, there is a slippage: US-America goes from being figured as a nation of oafish yet benign empiricists, to a threatening, even monstrous entity. In Schiaparelli's text, this is evident in her description of her exile in America during the Second World War. During that period, she says (referring to herself in the third person, as she does intermittently throughout the text, "something was wrong. A malignant force was working against Schiap, though where it came from she never knew. Just now, in this dismantled world, whatever Schiap did was either fought against or distorted by an invisible demon hand" (Schiaparelli 145). The U.S. comes to represent evil here. And it is interesting to note how in a sense unknowability is transfigured, shown this time in an US-American guise, but having taken on a demonic aspect that is very different from French unknowability. Poiret's representation of America's monstrosity is different; it shades into the embodied grotesque, for instance in its depictions of US-Americans as "a Gargantua, with one hundred and twenty million mouths, all gaping upon the same continent" (*King of Fashion* 279). Such imagery obviously demands the reader's sympathy for the embattled designer and even buttresses their self-portrayals in iconoclastic, heroic terms. The triumph of a US-American episteme that is monstrous in its scale and its mechanization presents itself as yet another opportunity to retroactively shore up the designers' particularly transcendent modernism and secure a legacy.

Above, I note Aaron Jaffe's concept of the modernist imprimatur, from which emerges the modern literary celebrity as brand. Mobilizing the idea of the modernist imprimatur as a coherent signature or personal brand is useful for fashion studies, though certainly different from the way it functions in literary modernism. Literary modernism was a domain where the discussion of money and markets was overtly discouraged, whereas the fashion industry was powered by these things. At any rate, the notion of the imprimatur takes on an intriguing cast when the modernist in question is writing to establish, respectively, a coherent identity, to impose that signature on themselves at the *end* of their careers. What, to be blunt, is the point of establishing a coherent, brand-related identity if there is no material gain to be made from it — if, as with both of these designers, the businesses in question are shuttered? There is no question that at least part of the equation is material gain — and this holds especially true for Poiret, who faced serious financial problems in the post-career period in which he published these three autobiographies. That Schiaparelli published her work immediately after the closing of her house, however — when she was not facing significant financial difficulties — and that Poiret obsessively published not one, but three, autobiographies, suggests that something more than profit was at stake in the writing of what ultimately consolidated a modernist imprimatur. If Peer Fritzsche's framework of nostalgia as a symptom of modern loss and dispossession holds true, then it becomes possible to read these works as testimonials to the loss represented by a globalizing culture,

one characterized by multiple, seemingly incompatible, epistemes. In the face of that loss, their recounting of their careers takes on a very specific cast; these works can be read as efforts to fix and memorialize not just themselves, but an entire way of knowing. At the very end of her autobiography, Schiaparelli makes plain that, in retiring from the fashion industry, she had submitted to the logic of the new that defined fashion and its modernity; she must "make an absolute change" (207). She gives a sense of what is at stake in this submission when she writes that in retiring, "I must not only free myself from the excess baggage of possessions and jealousy, but I must also tear myself away from the bondage of love and devotion. It meant tears and relief, it meant tightening my own heart without mercy; there must be no softness and no regrets" (207). Schiaparelli suggests that the capitulation is painful enough to require emotional fortitude. Poiret's *King of Fashion* ends on a similar note. He recounts the dissolution of his house in unusually cursory terms, after describing its ascendancy in rich detail: "It was the end of everything. A few days later I was turned into a limited company. Everyone knows the rest of the story" (*King of Fashion* 330). Here his affected brevity also attests that the triumph of the American episteme — which is, in his mind, the cause of his demise — is too painful to dwell on. Both Poiret and Schiaparelli erect psychic defences of a kind, then, against feelings of loss that originate from their sense that a way of knowing has been superseded, and with its demise, their very sense of self is threatened.

The question of the designers' sense of their own identities begins to reveal for us the import of this textual legacy of melancholy and loss. It underscores what is at stake in these autobiographies for those interested in the relationship of early twentieth-century fashion to broader structures of modernity. The texts reveal the intimate point of intersection between Poiret's and Schiaparelli's understandings of multiple regimes of knowledge, and their ambiguous positioning of themselves as modern subjects of a very particular type — artist-industrialists. Poiret's and Schiaparelli's efforts to memorialize themselves as epistemic subjects point to anxieties — about the relationship between art and commerce, between the original and the copy, the elite and the mass market — that are intrinsic to the development of the fashion industry in the early twentieth century. But I suggest it shows us something more about this anxiety, because the self-representational labour reveals its subjective, melancholic dimension. Although it is important to remember that these are mass-marketed memoirs, clearly written with the aim of securing a legacy for a fashion house as a brand, they seem to bear the traces of a melancholic dissatisfaction. I propose that this melancholy is a major condition of modernity for the French fashion designer. And, further, that it emerges from the contradiction they live between a transcendent modernism with transhistorical underpinnings, and an industrial modernity that threatens not simply to overshadow their perceived uniqueness, authenticity, and artistry, but to render them obsolete as subjects. I cannot help but be reminded of the archetypal battle between modernization and cultural modernism that has been shown in recent modernist studies criticism to be a false dichotomy, but that certainly remained ideologically compelling — it was a tension that was all too real to people like Poiret and Schiaparelli and their publics. These designers can, I think, be read as bearers of this tension between art and commerce. And it is fashion that puts them there, with its simultaneous promise of cultural distinction and ideological massification. In this sense, I think the fashion memoirs point us to the way the ideological stakes of fashion, as a general modality of the modern, might be internalized by designers. As Caroline Evans notes in another context, "Fashion, with its affinity for transformation, can act out instability and loss" (*Fashion at the Edge* 6) as foundational narratives of the modern. Fashion materializes these modalities, but it in itself does not allow us access to them as subjectively experienced. But instability and loss are what we find in the life writing of Poiret and Schiaparelli and this raises the question of the psychic stakes of the operations of different epistemological paradigms — and their relationship to fashion.

The question of the emotional content and resonance of two different, apparently nationalized epistemes matters because it foregrounds the specificity of fashion. Obviously, fashion itself bears the contradiction between art and commerce. In their writing, the designers have subjectified that tense encounter. Whether or not this is "authentic" angst is not the issue. The issue is that this is yet another way in which the representation and reality of fashion come to be bound up with a modern imaginary that is always on the precipice of devastation. Gilles Lipovetsky writes in *The Empire of Fashion* that fashion "pacifies social conflict but deepens subjective and intersubjective conflict: allows more individual freedom but generates greater malaise in living" (241). It does so by deepening the

divides between social actors, rupturing their connections to each other, exacerbating the divisions characteristic of modernity as experienced in the metropole. It is not merely wearers and consumers of fashion who experience its alienating qualities. These texts by designers show us that they, too – in their bearing of fashion's contradictions – are touched by the profound relationship between fashion and alienation. Lipovetsky and Evans have argued that fashion privileges or highlights the profundity of modern anomie. It also points us — because it such a personal and embodied modality — to the intimately experienced dimensions of this anomie. Poiret's and Schiaparelli's texts point us to this psychic dimension, and its linkage for them to the question of two competing modernities — an empirical or industrial one, and an unknowable, creative one — might enrich our understanding of fashion-related melancholia for subjects in general.

In conclusion, what is intriguing about the melancholic dimensions of these texts is the way that they contribute to the ongoing theorization of modern fashion's constellations of past and present, which I noted above. Since Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, the apparent conundrum of fashion's enfolding of past into present has been fruitful territory for theorists of fashion. By showing readers the way this temporal complexity was borne out, for modern designers, in nostalgia, the life writing makes plain the pervasiveness of this construction, and most importantly its *personal* meaning for subjects associated with fashion. In these texts, the apparently philosophical problem of temporality becomes a question of subjective knowledge, a lived experience of dissonance. Part of what is so helpful is the way they materialize and personalize the temporal reconfigurations of modernity, which so often read as abstract and impersonal. This is instructive for us in thinking about fashion, as fashion also functions as an intimate join between body and world, linking individual, embodied subjects to mass movements. As Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass put it in their book on figurations of clothing in the early modern period, "clothing is a worn world: a world of social relations put upon the wearer's body" (3). The autobiographical work of modern designers begins to colour in for us the ways that such a "worn world" is mediated and experienced by the subjects who provided the materials, in the modern period, for the wearing.

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