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Sophie Bertho, *La Peinture Selon Proust. Les détournements du visuel*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021. 170 pp. €26.00. (pb). ISBN 978-2-406-10757-6; €65.00. (hb). ISBN 978-2-406-10758-3.

Review by Shuangyi Li, University of Bristol.

This is a richly documented and convincingly argued account on the role and function of painting in the development of Proust's *literary* aesthetic. Much previous and existing scholarship in this area manifests a fundamental intention to see, understand, and interpret paintings referenced in Proust's œuvre from a supposedly Proustian perspective, that is, according to a certain Proustian theory of art. For many, Proust's quasi-encyclopaedic references to Western painters and their works may even provide a strong and authoritative framework to discover and investigate art and art history, to educate ourselves through art. However, such approaches to Proust and painting are exactly what Sophie Bertho sets out to argue *against*. Instead of reading art through literature—a dominant practice closely associated with the concept of *ekphrasis* up until Proust's time—Bertho, in three chapters or steps, demonstrates how paintings actually serve to advance narrative development and enhance characterization in Proust's novel, contributing significantly to the construction of Proust's modernist literary aesthetic. In this light, the word "détournement" in the subtitle of the book not only marks Proust's intellectual and artistic learning and evolution, but also signals positively his literary appropriation and self-fashioning in relation to and via visual art. This line of enquiry is certainly consistent with Proust's ultimate vocation as a writer, not a painter, and what the protagonist-narrator endeavours to accomplish in the last volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu* is not the completion of a painting but the composition of *the* book, although discussions on art permeate the novel.

Perhaps somewhat contradicting the central thesis of Proust's unfinished book of essays *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (published posthumously in 1954), which posits that a writer's biography should not hold the key to the exegesis and analysis of their works, Bertho's first and most extensive step—around fifty-five pages—is to revisit Proust's intellectual trajectory from his early days as writer of a collection of short stories titled *Les Plaisirs et les jours* (1896), when he was virtually unknown (despite the explicit support of some notable figures of the Parisian salons including the painter Madeleine Lemaire and the writer and later Nobel Prize laureate Anatole France). Three key sources of influence are discussed in detail, namely Robert de Montesquiou, the Goncourt brothers, and John Ruskin, which should sound rather familiar to Proust scholars. Nevertheless, Bertho expertly synthesizes and navigates the vast scholarship—the MHRA-style footnotes in this chapter number 219!—and accurately pinpoints how each of the three figures' ideas on literature and art are digested, followed, ultimately rejected or overcome by Proust, as his novelistic conception evolves, in search of a different aesthetic vision.

In biographical terms, Proust's experience with the three figures and their works is identified and characterized as going through four stages: encounter, reading, adoration, and disenchantment (p. 19). In terms of Proust's exact creative relationships with them, the three figures anticipate and proleptically highlight several key areas in Proust's subsequent aesthetic (re)configuration. From Montesquiou, Proust learns that the embellishment and transformation of banal realities can be achieved through the use of precious language and through changed ways of seeing, and such a process encourages Proust to dwell on the relational nature between physical objects as well as that between a physical object and an artistic and fictional object, which exercises a direct impact on Proust's reflection on literary style.

The issue of style is developed even further through Proust's reading of the Goncourt brothers' writings, or what they themselves designate as "écriture artiste," which devotes almost excessive attention to textual detail (p. 39). What is more, the young Proust greatly admires the Goncourt brothers' art criticism on painters such as Rembrandt, Moreau, Turner, and Chardin, whose works are to be repeatedly referenced in *La Recherche*. However, whereas the Goncourt brothers' aesthetic theory centres around taste and the realist object, Proust places the subject of perception at the heart of the novel, which results in the metaphorical conception of a series of "optical instruments" in *La Recherche*, such as the magic lantern, the kaleidoscope, the microscope, and the telescope. By focusing on the perceiving subject rather than the represented object, Proust suggests that a real artist is someone who knows how to "animer, rendre mystérieuses ou joyeuses des scènes de la vie de tous les jours" ("animate scenes of everyday life and endow them with mystery or joy") (p. 43, my translation). To further evidence Proust's entanglement with and departure from the Goncourt brothers' style and aesthetic, Bertho carries out a careful examination of the Goncourt pastiche that features towards the end of *La Recherche* as well as in Proust's *Pastiches et Mélanges* (1919).

Ruskin's influence on Proust's conception of art is the most significant of all three, and this is not least because Proust famously translated into French, with the help of his mother and Marie Nordlinger, two of Ruskin's books, *The Bible of Amiens* and *Sesame and Lilies*. Proust is particularly drawn to the religion and salvation of art—the idea that art is rooted in the sacred, and that great works of art offer us an insight into the divine. Then, with a quick turn of the argument, supported by meticulous textual evidence, Bertho demonstrates how Proust knowingly and creatively adapts and appropriates Ruskin's artistic examples, such as his painting "Zipporah" and his comments on Giotto's works in Padua, *in order to* enhance the characterization and advance the narration. For instance, the characterization of Odette is largely based on a verbal representation of Ruskin's "Zipporah"; the protagonist's elaboration on Giotto's allegory of *Infidelitas* (according to Ruskin) anticipates his anxiety over Albertine's unfaithfulness.[1] But Proust's novelistic engagement with such visual artwork is utterly detached from the context of Ruskin's reproduction, which effectively turns Ruskin's "religion of art" into what Bertho formulates as "idolâtrie créatrice" (p. 58). What ultimately turns Proust against Ruskin is the perception and making of Venice. Ruskin demonstrates an erudite approach to the art and architecture of Venice, as seen in the latter's work *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853), which dwells on the object's external materiality. By contrast, Proust stresses the experience of sensation and the importance of individual perception and reflection, which Edward Bizub formulates as a "Venise intérieure." [2] Bertho in this first chapter broaches the topic of Proust and painting from the perspective of Proust's biography, largely following the logic of influence studies, but her much more important critical purpose is to highlight the formation and transformation of Proust's visual and literary aesthetic vision from life to work.

The second and third chapters treat painting in Proust proper, the discussion of which moves from more conceptual terms revolving around the overall Proustian aesthetic to more practical terms around a series of precise functions of painting in Proust's *La Recherche*. Bertho makes quite an original claim by considering painting to be an essential form of Proustian "optical instruments," which has the potential power to reveal the essence of life, or what Proust likes to call "la vraie vie" ("real life"). For Proust, great artwork embodies a metaphorical perception of things that is made possible through a sensation or an impression, and it is through such a metaphorical perception that we may arrive at a certain "essence générale, commune à plusieurs choses" ("essential generality, common to several things"), situated outside Time. In the short space of a few pages, Bertho helpfully maps out and negotiates the fundamental analogy among painting, metaphor, and involuntary memory in Proust, particularly in relation to his notion of "real life."

Where this book gets most argumentative is in the section on Proust's resolute departure from, or overcoming of, the concept and practice of *ekphrasis*, which is today generally understood as the verbal representation of visual images. It must be pointed out that while theories of *ekphrasis* have been significantly developed by contemporary scholars working especially in Intermediality Studies, Bertho's argument here is based on Proust's ultimate rejection of *ekphrasis* as it is practised during or up until Proust's time, which often aims to describe "objectively" a painting, offer the "correct" or "authoritative" interpretation of it, or to "make the painting speak," as it were. Inversely, Proust makes paintings serve his novelistic writing, which Bertho considers to be a defining characteristic of Proust's modernist literary aesthetic. To substantiate this claim, Bertho first carries out a comparative, or more accurately, contrastive study between Goethe and Proust, and then explores the novelistic transposition of Monet to Elstir, from *Jean Santeuil* to *La Recherche*.^[3]

Once Bertho has established that the Proustian aesthetic subjugates painting to literature, they move on to explore what they categorize as the four major functions of painting in *La Recherche*: psychological, rhetorical, ontological, and structural. In fact, all these functions have already been touched upon in previous chapters, but here they are presented in a more systematic way and with additional examples. For example, the psychological function refers to the use of paintings for characterization; the rhetorical function refers to use of paintings to advance an essayistic argument; the ontological function is illustrated through Giotto and Elstir who inspire the protagonist-narrator to become aware of the difference between lived life and transformed life through art. The final section on the structural function of paintings in relation to the character Albertine is the most extensive one, as Bertho analyses a series of real and fictional paintings in meticulous detail: *inter alia*, Elstir's *Miss Sacripant*, Giotto's *Infidelitas* and *The Entombment*, Titian's *St. John the Evangelist*, and Carpaccio's *The Patriarch of Grado*.

Overall, this is a relatively short but intellectually fecund monograph (with five colour images), which, as the author reveals in the foreword, consolidates and condenses twenty years of active research on the topic. The argumentation and analysis are largely empirically grounded and relatively free of theoretical jargon. Its effective engagement with up-to-date and multilingual bibliographic sources in French, German, and English, as well as its extensive and skilful use of various avant- and paratexts in Proust Studies, is most impressive. It is thoroughly recommended to students, scholars, and general readers of Proust, who are interested in discovering this canonical modernist writer's relation to painting.

NOTES

[1] Quite tellingly, Giotto's *Infidelitas* is translated in French as "l'idôlatrie."

[2] Edward Bizub, *La Vénise intérieure, Proust et la poésie de la traduction* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1991).

[3] *Jean Santeuil* is Proust's unfinished novel, published posthumously in 1952, another avant-text of *La Recherche*.

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