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 Excerpt  
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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction*

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Most readers – and even many non-readers – know Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* as a vast social tapestry unfolding against the scintillating background of Belle Époque France; a reminiscence of the illusions of youth and the complex ties of family; and a deep investigation of the psychology of desire and loss, remembrance and forgetting. Those who have read all the way through the final volume, *Le Temps retrouvé*, know that Proust’s novel is also a prolonged meditation on the significance of art in life, and the path to becoming an artist.

Proust’s novel traces the aesthetic apprenticeship of its narrator-protagonist, a figure similar to, but also crucially different from Proust himself. From an impressionable boy who reads avidly, dreams of traveling to far-off places, and wants to become a writer but who is unsure he has the talent or willpower, the protagonist transforms himself into an increasingly lucid and mature observer of society and of his own heart; at the very end of the novel he resolves to write. Along the way, he encounters the work of a number of artistic models, many of them historically real and some of them fictional – the actress La Berma, the writer Bergotte, the painter Elstir, the composer Vinteuil. Overcoming an initial failure to understand their work or appreciate it for artistically valid reasons, he eventually learns vital aesthetic lessons from each of these creators, through a series of revelations that could be distilled to this aphorism from *Le Temps retrouvé*: “you can make anew what you love only by renouncing it” (6: 525, trans. mod.; iv, 620).

Summarized in this way, Proust’s relationship to the arts seems evident: it is a question of models, of lessons, and of a kind of synthesis, perhaps even transcendence. *À la recherche du temps perdu* would then constitute a summation, an imaginary museum that houses a series of great works, especially from those arts considered the highest in the nineteenth-century canon, painting and music; a paper cathedral, where artworks serve as

stations leading to the protagonist's artistic apotheosis, his sacrifice and resurrection through writing.<sup>1</sup> This shrewd maneuver positions literature as the highest art in the emergent twentieth century, and Proust as its greatest practitioner. Much valuable scholarship has built on this seductive narrative.

The chapters collected in *Proust and the Arts* aim to extend and challenge this received conception in two related ways, and unfold the complexity behind the apparently simple conjunction of its title.<sup>2</sup> First, they go beyond the classic question of the models used by Proust for his fictional artists, and break new ground in exploring how he learned from and integrated in highly personal ways the work of such creators as Wagner or Carpaccio. Second, they reveal the breadth of Proust's engagement with varied media from different eras, outside questions of canon and hierarchy: from "primitive" arts to sound recordings, from medieval sculpture to *Art Nouveau* glassmaking, from portrait photography to the private art of doodling.

In his introduction to the catalogue of a major exhibition on Proust and the arts in 1999, Jean-Pierre Angremy noted the "ceaseless expansion"<sup>3</sup> of the Proustian realm: the great rise of Proust's critical fortune since his death, but also the continual enrichment of our appreciation of his work, with new questions that emerge from each rereading and every new study.<sup>4</sup> This principle of expansion is inscribed in Proust's novel, and in fact structures it. At the very end of *Le Temps retrouvé*, the narrator – right after musing about how the literary endeavor he is about to begin might mirror "what is so often done by painters" – describes this work-to-come as an attempt "to transcribe a universe which had to be totally redrawn" (6: 527–528; iv, 622–623).<sup>5</sup> Proust designed his cosmically expansive novel, not as something vast and embalmed (as we might sometimes think of cathedrals or museums), but as the space of a living, ever-renewed process (as cathedrals and museums ideally are). His novel's structure is not closed but open, not didactic but pedagogical: the narrator does not end up writing *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and the reader is not given readymade answers. Instead both are perpetually set in motion, toward new endeavors and in search of ever-new insights.<sup>6</sup>

The inverse of this expansive quality, for Proust, is idolatry. Another word for artistic complacency, idolatry is what stops the process of *recherche*. Idolaters love art for the wrong reasons, viewing it as an embellishment to their world rather than an invitation to question how they see that world. Proust borrowed the notion from John Ruskin, but eventually came to see Ruskin himself as an idolater. This evolution informs the dynamics of apprenticeship and the development of relationships to art that reverberate

### Introduction

3

through the novel. When does admiration for an artist or love of an artwork turn into repetition rather than creation? Swann the connoisseur idolizes art and turns it into a process of association to enhance love and life. The hero needs to learn to evade the habits to which Swann succumbs; he must overcome his artistic loves (the novels of Bergotte, for instance) in order to become a true creator. Yet observing Swann's errors is not enough for the hero to avoid them, and he must go through his own trials. Proust was exquisitely sensitive to the blind spots of his characters, constantly adjusting their perceptions of art and social life. Through his depictions of idolatry, readers are warned not to get too comfortable with what they think they know, lest they become caught in the web of habit and routine, unable to pursue the kinds of deeper truth Proust is seeking. The same, we would argue, applies to scholarship.

Proust seems almost to have set a trap for his critics, between the experiences of the hero and the retrospective critical analyses of the narrator – the two being separated by the evolving story. Many of us who love Proust's work, and have written about it, have joyfully indulged in sheer admiration and near repetition of the narrator's thought. How not to do so with such a great work? As readers, we identify with a doubting hero, and aspire to the narrator's voice of analytical confidence. But if we allow ourselves to think we are on the side of the narrator, for whom answers have already unfolded, then we are in fact like Swann, too much at ease with our knowledge, mistaking our love of Proust for a settled understanding of his art. We are pressing Proust to our heart like Swann presses to his the reproduction of a Botticelli, deluding himself that it gives him mastery over the unknowable Odette (1: 318; 1, 222). The interplay between the narrator and the hero is a reminder that what we know constantly changes with time and perspective. The chapters collected in this volume take up this challenge, opening new interpretative avenues.

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This book originated in several iterations of a seminar course on Proust in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard University, culminating in a semester-long celebration of the centenary of *Du côté de chez Swann* in 2013. Starting in 2008/2009, independent scholar Susan Ricci Stebbins developed a superb museum guide that linked Proust's novel to a surprising number of works at the Harvard Art Museums.<sup>7</sup> For instance, a painting by Manet, now on the cover of this volume (Figure 1.1), evoked a passage from *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*:



Figure 1.1 Manet, *Skating*, 1877

And this, Elstir's earliest manner, was the most devastating of birth certificates for Odette because it not only established her, as did her photographs of the same period, as the younger sister of various well-known courtesans, but made her portrait contemporary with the countless portraits that Manet or Whistler had painted of all those vanished models, models who already belonged to oblivion or to history. (2: 604; II, 218)

## Introduction

5

Although Proust may not have seen this particular work, for our students and for us, the passage and the painting came alive in an unexpected dialogue. Like *Odette*, the main figure in the painting is a woman of ambiguous social status (courtesan or respectably married bourgeoisie?); the grey background plane is similarly open to interpretation (ice skating or roller skating?).<sup>8</sup> Proust saw Manet as one of “these great innovators who are the only true classics” (*CSB* 617), and a forerunner to a new generation of painters – including the fictional Elstir (3: 685; II, 790).<sup>9</sup> Taking students to the museum was a reminder that the relationship to art in Proust’s novel goes much deeper than the representation of any given work. His invitation to readers, to explore and make connections between art and lived experience, can be taken up through different means: for Proust, this meant in person or in print;<sup>10</sup> for us, it can also mean online.

The conference “Proust and the Arts,” on April 19 and 20, 2013, was the keystone of our celebration of *Du côté de chez Swann*. What promised to be a joyful occasion turned into a state lockdown of the entire region on April 19, during the pursuit of two men who had bombed the Boston Marathon a few days earlier. The curfew was lifted in time for a concert of music linked to Proust, eerily disturbed by police sirens.<sup>11</sup> The conference talks, compressed into a splendid but long event the next day, reminded everyone in attendance of how Proust’s work heightens the sense of significant moments; he himself wrote – a mere three months before his death – that life would “suddenly appear delicious” if we were threatened with disaster.<sup>12</sup>

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*Proust and the Arts* brings into conversation multiple strands of scholarship. In the past three decades, genetic criticism, with its meticulous studies of the immense corpus of Proust’s drafts and revisions, has informed much scholarly work in France and Japan.<sup>13</sup> This volume makes available in English original studies by some of the leading practitioners of this critical approach, opening fascinating views into the novelist’s creative process. Many of the book’s contributors from North American institutions approach Proust through questions about cognition, identity, and social or art history, examining how the arts shape his relationship to the craft of writing. In Proustian fashion, these diverse research perspectives, seemingly as different as the Swann and Guermantes ways, often meet in unexpected places. Gathered here, they show how Proust’s complex interactions with the arts can inspire readers today.

This collection highlights the renewed relevance of Proust’s capacious attention to the arts in light of current debates, about the possibility of

sustained attention in our increasingly digital era and around questions of reading in the future. It attests to the enduring richness of Proust's artistic achievement, and the ways his novel continues to speak to book and art-lovers of all kinds. We hope readers will take as much pleasure in this collection as we have in bringing it together.

## NOTES

- 1 Jean-Yves Tadié neatly sums up this view in proposing that, “by his recombination and integration of all the arts, Proust is [the] universal heir [of the] heritage of the West.” Foreword to *Proust in Perspective: Visions and Revisions*, ed. Armine Kotin Mortimer and Katherine Kolb (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), ix.
- 2 Important scholarly predecessors and interlocutors of this volume include the essay collections *Au seuil de la modernité: Proust, Literature and the Arts*, ed. Nigel Harkness and Marion Schmid (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2011); *Proust and the Visual*, ed. Nathalie Aubert (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012); *Marcel Proust et les arts décoratifs: poétique, matérialité, histoire*, ed. Boris Roman Gibhardt and Julie Ramos (Paris: INHA/Classiques Garnier, 2013); and *Marcel Proust in Context*, ed. Adam Watt (Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 3 Jean-Pierre Angremy, “Exposer Proust,” in *Marcel Proust, L'écriture et les arts*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié with Florence Callu (Paris: Gallimard/Bibliothèque nationale de France/Réunion des musées nationaux, 1999), 9.
- 4 Working from a premise – “what did Proust know?” – that addresses classic questions of sources and biography, essays for that catalogue gesture toward this broadening in significant ways, including studies by two contributors to the present volume, Antoine Compagnon and Kazuyoshi Yoshikawa.
- 5 William C. Carter highlights the importance of this image: “Proust's *Recherche* is an open-ended novel built on the model of the universe . . . dynamic, freed from the effects of entropy, of winding down to a conclusion.” *The Proustian Quest* (New York University Press, 1992), 228–229.
- 6 Maurice Blanchot was one of the first commentators to describe *À la recherche* as a “complete-incomplete work” [“une œuvre achevée-inachevée”] whose principal characteristic is the “movement” of writing “without end.” *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford University Press, 2003), 24; *Le livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 36–37.
- 7 This guide became the basis for the digital exhibition *A Proustian Gallery: Selected Works from the Harvard Art Museums*. proust-arts.com/a-proustian-gallery.html
- 8 The English term used in the painting's original title, “Au Skating,” evokes the novelty and fashionable status of roller-skating in Paris starting in the winter of 1875/1876. See John O'Brian, “Édouard Manet: *Skating*, 1877,” in *Degas to Matisse: The Maurice Wertheim Collection* (New York: Harry



## Introduction

7

- N. Abrams/Harvard University Art Museums, 1988), 66–69. O’Brian notes that Manet “calculated the impact of the . . . signifiers in this painting with considerable care” and deliberately chose “not [to] provid[e] the necessary visual information that might permit an unambiguous reading” of the background or the figure (68–69). In *Le Côté de Guermantes*, the narrator observes how Rachel finds herself, like Odette, caught between “double” identities: as she is about to board a train with her aristocratic lover Saint-Loup, “a pair of common little tarts” recognize her and exclaim, “Come on, we’ll all go to the rink together” [“viens, on ira ensemble au skating”] (3: 213; II, 459).
- 9 Antoine Compagnon proposes that “Proust’s place in literature is analogous to Manet’s in painting: was he the last of the great classics or the first of the revolutionaries?” *Proust Between Two Centuries*, trans. Richard E. Goodwin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 20–24. See also Yasué Kato, “Proust et Manet: à propos des ‘Notes sur Manet’ de Jacques-Émile Blanche,” *Gallia: Bulletin de la Société de langue et littérature françaises de l’Université d’Osaka* 39 (1999), 1–8.
  - 10 Allowing for an enhanced reading experience akin to a hypertext, a number of publications have provided marvelous guides to paintings cited by Proust, including Eric Karpeles’s *Paintings in Proust: A Visual Companion to In Search of Lost Time* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008) and Yann Le Pichon’s *Le Musée retrouvé de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Stock, 1990); for musical works related to Proust, the collective CD-book *Marcel Proust, une vie en musiques* (Paris: Archimbaud/Even & arts/Riveneuve, 2012) provides a similarly engaging introduction.
  - 11 Sindhumathi Revuluri’s program notes for the concert are available at [proust-arts.com/program-notes.html](http://proust-arts.com/program-notes.html). We thank her for organizing this event, and the musicians, Lewis Epstein, Monica Hershberger, Hannah Lewis, and Samuel Parler, for their solacing performances.
  - 12 Response to an inquiry from the newspaper *L’Intransigeant* in August 1922 (*CSB* 645–646); cited by Corydon Ireland in “Confronting Evil, Embracing Life: Two Truncated Harvard Conferences Prove Surprisingly Relevant after a Cave-dark Week,” *Harvard Gazette*, April 23, 2013, available at [news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2013/04/confronting-evil-embracing-life](http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2013/04/confronting-evil-embracing-life).
  - 13 See for instance the illuminating essays collected in *Proust aux brouillons*, ed. Nathalie Mauriac Dyer and Kazuyoshi Yoshikawa (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011) and *Proust face à l’héritage du XIXe siècle: tradition et métamorphose*, ed. Nathalie Mauriac Dyer, Kazuyoshi Yoshikawa and Pierre-Edmond Robert (Paris: Presses Sorbonne nouvelle, 2012).

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PART I

*Art's way*

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