

Proust's Dutch treat

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Proust's Dutch treat

Some of Marcel Proust's earliest manuscripts are the rough drafts he made of essays on the painters Chardin, Rembrandt, Watteau, Moreau and Monet, which were published posthumously with the extended reflection on literary criticism, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*¹. Proust conceived these various pieces on painters as a coherent whole, and wrote to his friend Pierre Mainguet, asking if *La Revue hebdomadaire* would be interested in publishing them: « Je viens d'écrire une petite étude de philosophie de l'art si le terme n'est pas trop prétentieux où j'essaye de montrer comment les grands peintres nous initient à la connaissance et à l'amour du monde extérieur, comment ils sont ceux 'par qui nos yeux sont déclos' et ouverts en effet sur le monde.² »

¹ They are classed by the *Cabinet des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque nationale* as *Proust 45* (N.A.Fr. 16636 f°62 - 92), and were first published by Gallimard in 1954, presented by Bernard de Fallois, in *Nouveaux Mélanges*. They have been re-printed in the volume of Proust's works entitled *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, edited by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris : Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1971), pp. 372-382 and 659-677. (This volume is referred to henceforth in this article as CSB).

² See Marcel Proust, *Correspondance*, edited by Philip Kolb (Paris Plon, 1970), volume I p. 446, letter dated the end of November 1895. (This edition of Proust's correspondence in 21 volumes, published between 1970 and 1993, is henceforth referred to as *Corres*, followed by the number of the volume in Roman numerals).

In this sketchy theory of aesthetics, Proust suggests that artists act as opticians who open our eyes to their way of seeing the world. Throughout his work, Proust develops the notion that the artist's vision of the world is expressed by his or her characteristic colour, tonality or style, reaching a resounding conclusion in *Le Temps retrouvé*, where he puts forward Dutch painting as a model:

*Grâce à l'art, au lieu de voir un seul monde, le nôtre, nous le voyons se multiplier, et autant qu'il y a d'artistes originaux, autant nous avons de mondes à notre disposition, plus différents les uns des autres que ceux qui roulent dans l'infini et, bien des siècles après qu'est éteint le foyer dont il émanait, qu'il s'appelât Rembrandt ou Ver Meer, nous envoient encore leur rayon spécial.*³

Proust uses the terms « rayon spécial » and elsewhere « phrase-type » to mean the distinctive originality of the painter, composer or writer. The references he makes to Dutch and Flemish art in the manuscript versions which pre-date the conception of his novel, in his personal letters, and in the definitive version of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, confirm the fundamental place it takes in his work, and suggest an aesthetic relationship between the Northern school of painting and Proust's writing.

Proust was a frequent and fervent visitor to the Louvre, where, as the following extract from a letter to his friend Reynaldo Hahn indicates, he happened upon *The Banker and his Wife* painted by Quentin Metsys in 1514 : « J'ai été avant-hier au Louvre (Aimez-vous Quentin Matsys [...] l'homme qui a devant lui des pièces d'or, une petite glace bombée qui représente ce qui [se présente] dans la rue, des perles etc et à côté de lui sa femme). »⁴ (See figure 1).

³ See Marcel Proust : *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris : Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, in 4 volumes, brought out under the direction of Jean-Yves Tadié, 1987 - 1989), volume IV, p. 474. This edition of Proust's novel is henceforth referred to as RTP, followed by the number of the volume in Roman numerals, and the page number.

⁴ *Corres II* p. 119, letter written the 3rd or the 4th of September 1896.

Proust's formulation merits attention, as rather than using the first person to say what he saw, he addresses another viewer in the second person, implicitly inviting him to view this picture through his eyes. Proust superimposes a critical dimension on the painting, varnishing it as it were with his own aesthetic taste.

Proust's retouching of the painting belongs to the series of artistic reproductions of this work. In fact, Metsys probably copied a painting Jan Van Eyck did some one hundred years earlier, which would explain why the costumes in *The Banker and his Wife* are old-fashioned. In his monumental seven hundred page opus on early Flemish painting, Erwin Panofsky devotes only half a paragraph to this work by Metsys, qualifying it as self-consciously archaic and identifying it as a « reconstruction » of the Van Eyck original, which has now disappeared⁵. Metsys's painting was frequently imitated, notably by Marinus van Reymerswaele, who made several pastiches of it, interpreting the scene as a double portrait of avarice, and erasing all spirituality from the original by replacing the woman's prayerbook with an account book. Metsys's painting was also reproduced in 1630, by Willem van Haecht in his *Apelles Painting Campaspe*. In this *mise en abyme*, *The Banker and his Wife* can be seen in the front right hand corner of the painting, which depicts an art studio with the artist at work. In his miniaturised copy of the Metsys painting, Van Haecht metamorphoses the Madonna and Child of the prayer book into Adam and Eve. It is plausible that Proust saw this painting on painting in the Hague, as it belonged to Willem V, before joining the collection of the Mauritshuis.

Proust defines the subject of *The Banker and his Wife* as « [un] homme qui a devant lui des pièces d'or ». Metsys's work belongs to the tradition of genre painting, and depicts a contemporary shopfront scene in the trading port and 16th century financial center of Antwerp. The exact function of the banker is unclear – he might be a moneylender, as the promissory notes on the shelves behind him would suggest, or a money changer, as the coins he is examining are from various foreign

⁵ See Erwin Panofsky *Early Netherlandish Painting*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953), Volume 1, p. 354.

origins; he might also be a pawnbroker, as the jewels and the pouch of pearls seem to indicate. Whatever, he is successful, and the couple is reasonably wealthy, as their fur collars and cuffs and the wife's decorative gold wristband denote.

Proust brings out the symmetrical composition of *The Banker and his Wife* (« l'homme [...] et à côté de lui sa femme »). Metsys painted it on two wooden boards of equal width and the join can be seen, as it runs through the spine of the open book on the top shelf and passes to the left of the mirror. The painting is constructed as a symmetrical reflection, as if a mirror were placed along the central divide: the left part, cast in darker hues, seems to reflect the brighter right side. This composition suggests the two symbolically opposed realms of money and spirituality. The husband's banking objects are cast in the shadow of Mammon, whereas the wife's spiritual book seems to be bathed in celestial light.

In addition to the banker's gold coins, Proust noted the « perles etc » in the painting, suggesting that these various reflecting surfaces are a characteristic feature of Metsys's work. The painting is almost a study in catoptrics, as light also plays off the different glass objects, the embossed pewter dish, and the velvet of the wife's dress. Proust singles out the most intriguing element of the painting, the « petite glace bombée qui représente ce qui [se présente] la rue ». The convex mirror in the centre foreground is placed at an angle, so that it reflects the window on the left, which is the main source of light. The view of the street is presented through the double mediation of the mirror and the window, and includes in the distance a spire looming above the trees. Metsys highlighted the two-way vision a window offers, as his reflected window has a strip of stained glass along its top, indicating that light is streaming in, while the transparent glass panes look outwards to the street scene. A man in a red cap, seated in front of the window, is also reflected in the mirror. He could be the banker's client, awaiting the verdict, as the banker assesses the value of his coins and jewels.

On the most mundane level, a mirror was used in sixteenth century bankers' shops as a talisman against burglary. However, the German cardinal and philosopher Nicolas de Cues, with whose ideas Metsys would have been familiar, sees the mirror as an image of the eye

of God⁶. The religious message of the painting is expressed by the presence of numerous objects used in worship, such as the ornate book of hours, the six translucent glass prayer beads hanging from a hook, and the richly decorated and gilded mounted crystal vase. According to 16th century iconography, a closed box, such as the one on the left-hand side of the lower shelf, contains divinity and the transparent glass carafe above it symbolizes the Virgin⁷.

Thus, the painting is more than just a realist, workaday scene, it « is more of a sermon than a satire⁸ ». It conveys a moral message, or warning, as suggested by the gesture of the old man admonishing the younger man who can be seen on the street through the half-open door behind the couple. De Cues also proposes the image of the moneychanger as God's representative on earth. He could discern and assess real worth, but he was limited in that he only had the power of knowledge, not the divine power of creation⁹. This painting clearly establishes an analogy between the banker, who is weighing coins, and God weighing souls at the Last Judgment. The edifying intention of the work was specified by an inscription added to the frame in the mid 17th century, a Latin quotation from *Leviticus*, which translates into English: « Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity¹⁰ », and invites a reading of it as an illustration of this Biblical passage.

However, as the construction of meaning in this painting is constantly undermined by its deconstruction, its interpretation is challenging, complex and contradictory. On closer examination, the objects depicted in *The Banker and his Wife* are far from unambiguously pious. A burning candle is a « symbol of the all-seeing

⁶ Cf. Nicolas de Cues: *Le Tableau ou la vision de Dieu*, 1453. Translated by Agnès Minazzoli, (Paris : Les Éditions du Cerf, 1986), p. 47.

⁷ cf. Panofsky *op. cit.* vol. 1, p. 144.

⁸ Larry Silver: *The Paintings of Quinten Massys* (Oxford : Phaidon, 1984), p. 137.

⁹ See *Le Jeu de la boule*, in *Œuvres choisies de Nicolas de Cues*, presented by Maurice de Gandillac, (Paris : Aubier, 1942), pp. 537 - 538.

¹⁰ *Leviticus* XIX, 35: « Stature justa et aequa sint pondere ».

Christ¹¹ », but the one in this painting, on the righthand lower shelf, has ominously gone out. Similarly, the exotic fruit on the upper back shelf refers to Eve and original sin, but is also associated with the purity of the Virgin¹². The wife's attention has strayed from the book of hours – her tightly closed lips prove that she is not chanting the prayers. Her crossed-over hands and the position of the pages indicate that she is going through this holy book heretically, that is to say both backwards and forwards. In fact, her bony hands are in the same position as those of her husband, pointing to her avarice and role as a partner in trade, suggesting perhaps that this richly decorated book of hours has been offered as a gage, which it is the wife's job to evaluate.

The mirror is the most ambiguous element of *The Banker and his Wife*, as we have seen that it is the 16th century equivalent of the electronic surveillance eye, as well as the eye of God. It is the symbol of vanity but also of truth, and of prudence, allowing Man to see and thus correct his or her faults. Its central, foreground position likens it to the *memento mori* in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, and the gaunt, spectre-like figure reflected in Metsys's mirror could represent death. As he is clad in red, he could also denote the heretical and the Satanic. The convex mirror recalls the one hanging on the back wall in Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*, which reflects the presence of the artist as well as witnesses testifying the scene.

All of the painting's ambiguities subvert or even invert an initial reading of it, posing the basic question of the discrepancy between genuine value and purported worth, between the represented and its representation. Even the title of the painting – *The Banker and his Wife* – is put to question, because the value of their wedding rings seems cheapened by the numerous pawned rings on the graduated ringholder near the husband's right hand. The painting stages exchange, as the banker's activity is to weigh the coins, to ascertain whether they are equal to their numeric sign. The theme of the unquantifiable variables of loss and gain is repeated throughout the painting, from the nested brass weights which the husband uses as standards, to the records of

¹¹ Panofsky *op. cit.* vol. 1, p. 202.

¹² Panofsky *op. cit.* vol. 1, p. 144.

financial transactions on the shelves behind him. The painting contains a reflection on pictorial representation, as the artist's inscription *Quinten schildert* can be read on a folded piece of parchment. It puts into play various optical perceptions : the objects on the wooden shelves behind the couple are executed in perfect *trompe-l'œil* and are given such depth that we feel we could lift them off. Metsys has made me victim of another optical illusion, because I see the man as examining a coin held between his fingers, not holding a balance, which blends in with his dark clothes and is only materialized in the round shadows on the green baize tablecloth. The mirror creates several optical illusions, as the image in it is necessarily inverted, and its convex surface adds a further distortion. This spherical mirror tricks us into thinking that the small figure near the window is far away, whereas if we were to reconstruct the space of this scene, we would discover that we are closer to him than to the couple. The mirror creates a *mise en abyme*, bringing the outside inside, with a double framework delineating the streetscape outside the reflected window and the reading man in front of it.

The man by the window is one of three figures in red associated with reading: the scarlet Madonna in the illuminated manuscript is holding a closed black book, and she could be seen as a miniaturised reflection of the banker's wife, who is turning the pages of her book. The numerous books in this painting invite an interpretation of it as an allegory of reading. The book is given a significant place, on the top shelf behind the couple, at the peak of the triangle their figures form. The very composition of this painting, with the central dividing line resulting from the join of the two wooden planks, suggests an open book. The two characters, whose heads are tilted towards each other, would fold over each other if the book were closed. The strong horizontal lines of the back shelves, the wooden bench the couple are seated on, and the table's edge all suggest lines of writing. The painting could be seen as *The Book*, open to this illustration of the passage from *Leviticus*. It might also be a projection of the reading man's imagination, the image the text gives rise to in his mind, his subjective interpretation of what he reads. Proust may well have been drawn to Metsys's depiction of the activity of reading, as it emphasizes the role of the

reader in literary commerce. In his terms, the book is a kind of mirror which reflects the reader : « chaque lecteur est quand il lit le propre lecteur de soi-même. L'ouvrage de l'écrivain n'est qu'une espèce d'instrument optique qu'il offre au lecteur afin de lui permettre de discerner ce que sans ce livre il n'eût peut-être pas vu en soi-même.¹³ » The reader re-writes the text, projecting his or her own images onto it. Similarly, for Proust a painting is a kind of magic mirror¹⁴ which allows the viewers to see their own reflections and even images of the past. According to Proust, art is a kind of Dutch treat, as painter and viewer, writer and reader alike actively contribute to artistic creation.

The convex mirror Proust focused on in Metsys's work paints in the space where the spectator stands. Although it is slightly askew, it elicits spectator participation, inviting him or her to peer into it. Whereas Metsys frequently painted grotesque figures whose faces seem to be reflected in a distorting mirror, in *The Banker and his Wife*, the characters are portrayed without a hint of caricature, but the convex mirror in the foreground will tease the spectator.

The mirror adds a dimension to the painting, creating a boundary between represented space and the space in which the painter and the spectator stand. The edge of table in the shadow in the foreground, marked by a leather strip held in place by brass tacks, creates a viewing area in front of it, and serves as a framing device within the picture. Metsys has included the viewer in his work, as a spectral reflection : this virtual figure is the counterpart in painting to Gerald Prince's « narratee » in literature, and could thus be dubbed the « spectatee »¹⁵. In Metsys's work, the spectatee is positioned on the line of the vanishing point, which is outside the window, beyond its central divide and the aligned church spire. The lines in this reflecting source of light draw the painting out, towards the viewer. As the shape of the mirror suggests, the spectatee is the central eye of the picture.

¹³ RTP IV 489 - 490.

¹⁴ CSB 675.

¹⁵ cf. Gerald Prince : 'Introduction to the Study of the Narratee', in Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 7 - 25.

Quentin Metsys does not figure in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, nor in Proust's manuscript essays on painting, where Rembrandt is granted pride of place. Proust devoted eight large folios to this painter he qualified as one of his favorites¹⁶, beginning with a preliminary definition of Rembrandt's « phrase-type », pointing out the recurrent features of his work : « les vieilles coupeuses d'ongles, peigneuses de cheveux fins, la femme triste et modeste sous ses fourrures et sous ses perles, la maison où le feu s'allume dans l'ombre des pièces obscures, ce ne sont pas des choses que Rembrandt a peintes, ce sont les goûts de Rembrandt¹⁷ ».

The last element enumerated here – « la maison où le feu s'allume dans l'ombre des pièces obscures » – is a leitmotif in Rembrandt's work, which is composed in the shady tones of this characteristic light. It is his own special colour, his « rayon » as Proust calls it, which he projects onto the outside world, bathing it in his particular light. Rembrandt's works reveal a source of illumination in the depth of dusky shadows, a lighting effect which Proust recognized in his own experience. In his novel, he describes the effect the rays of the setting sun produce in the Grand Hôtel de Balbec as a Rembrandt painting: « un crépuscule, où Rembrandt découpe tantôt l'appui d'une fenêtre ou la manivelle d'un puits. [...] à chaque étage une lueur d'or reflétée sur le tapis annonçait le coucher du soleil et la fenêtre des cabinets.¹⁸ » Proust sees the outside world through Rembrandt's tinted glasses, his shades, and his characteristic hues are projected onto the outside world : the panes of glass in the bookcases reflecting and framing the visual effect. In his manuscript essay, Proust associates the quality of light in Rembrandt's works with the artist's inner world: « Ce sont les goûts de Rembrandt, et cette lumière où sont ses portraits et ses tableaux, c'est en quelque sorte le jour même de sa pensée, l'espèce

¹⁶ In a questionnaire he responded to at about the age of twenty. See CSB 337.

¹⁷ All of the following quotes from Proust's manuscript essay on Rembrandt can be found in *Proust* 45 (N.A.Fr. 16636 f° 74 r° et v°, 75, 76, 77, 78), and transcribed in CSB 659 - 664.

¹⁸ RTP II 158.

de jour particulier dans lequel nous voyons les choses, au moment où nous pensons d'une façon originale. »

According to Proust, the originality of Rembrandt's work is that he paints a kind of twilight zone, in which subjectivity is projected onto objects in the outside world. As the very subject of his painting *The Philosopher in Meditation* suggests, Rembrandt's distinguishing « phrase-type » is the representation of thought: « le but de l'organisation de l'artiste étant de donner intégralement telle ou telle pensée ».

The painting Proust calls *Les Deux Philosophes* (The Louvre, 1632) actually depicts only one philosopher and probably a servant stoking the fire, who are separated by a central, deformed spiral staircase. The scene is framed by a dark rounded border of a wall, which creates a circular composition of reflections in a golden eye. The painting is a distortion of objective reality, and a penetration into the subjective eye/I: it looks like the artist's eye staring at us.

Proust confers the status of « phrase-type » to the eyes in Rembrandt's paintings, which convey inner thought :

ce regard du poète qui se redit les vers avec tout leur sens, de l'Homère, ce regard qui voit toutes les misères, qui a toutes les tendresses et qui a comme envie de pleurer, du Christ des Pèlerins d'Emmaüs ; et qui [...] ont les yeux non pas droits et fiers, mais fixes, remplis d'une pensée que c'est notre pensée qui recueille et reconnaît dans leurs orbites respectueuses de ce qu'ils contiennent, et tendus à ne pas la laisser échapper [...], comme si toute grande pensée, d'Homère ou du Christ, était plus grande qu'eux-mêmes, comme si penser grandement, profondément, c'était justement penser avec un tel respect qu'on ne laisse rien échapper de la pensée.

Proust focuses on the gaze the painter directs to the spectatee: « Mais ayant achevé sa toile, c'est plus dégagé de pensée que Rembrandt au fond de sa toile nous regarde [...] ». He points out how Rembrandt engages an exchange of questions and answers with his spectatee: « au fond de chacune de ses toiles, il semble que son regard soit au moment où, encore tendu sur la réalité qu'il avait essayé de saisir, [il était] déjà

détaché de cet effort par la réalisation libératrice et nous demandant en quelque sorte 'Est-ce cela ?' ou disant 'Voilà'. »

Rembrandt's prolific production of self-portraits can be viewed as a long dialogue with the spectatee. Each one establishes eye-contact between the artist and the viewing subject. Proust would have seen the 1633 oval portrait in the Louvre, set in a frame resembling a mirror, in which Rembrandt depicted himself in cap and gold chain. He would also have known the reflective gaze in the portrait of the artist as an old man, painted at his easel, in 1660.

Proust concludes his essay with a fictitious narrative of a visit to a Rembrandt exhibit in Amsterdam. His attention is drawn not to the paintings on display, but to a tottering old man, leaning on his housekeeper for support, whom another visitor identifies as the aged Ruskin. For Proust, the view of the critic revarnishes the canvas and adds another aesthetic layer to it, even retouching it with his personal colouring. Proust's essay dwells longer on the spectator than on Rembrandt's works, and the narrator even begins to view this prestigious viewer as another Rembrandt, framing the spectatee as a painting:

Il est le même qui, jeune homme, allait voir Rembrandt, qui écrivit sur lui tant de pages ardentes. Grimé comme un Rembrandt par l'ombre du crépuscule, par la patine du temps, par l'effacement des années, le même effort pour comprendre la beauté le conduisait encore. Il semblait tout d'un coup que les toiles de Rembrandt fussent devenues quelque chose de plus digne d'être visité, depuis que Ruskin venu de si loin était entré dans la salle ; il semblait aussi que c'était pour Rembrandt comme une récompense qui aurait pu lui être douce et que, si le regard de Rembrandt, qui semble nous considérer au fond de ses toiles achevées avait pu voir Ruskin, le maître eût été à lui, comme un souverain qui reconnaît un souverain dans la foule.

Proust's description of how Ruskin was all but transported in his admiration of the pictures at this exhibition is ironic, as Ruskin was scathing in his criticism of Rembrandt, vituperating his choice of subject (notably the gruesome anatomy lesson) and his use of

chiaroscuro: « It is the aim of the best painters to paint the noblest things they can see by sunlight. It was the aim of Rembrandt to paint the foulest things he could see – by rushlight.¹⁹ »

Although Proust was wont to rework and re-cycle his manuscript material, this essay on Rembrandt was left aside in the composition of his novel, where Dutch art is more extensively represented by Vermeer, who can also claim the rank of Proust's favorite painter: « Ver Meer est mon peintre préféré depuis l'âge de vingt ans et entre autres signes de cette prédilection [...] j'ai fait écrire par Swann une biographie de Ver Meer dans *Du Côté de chez Swann*²⁰ ».

During a lesson in aesthetics the narrator of *La Recherche* gives to his « prisoner » Albertine, he defines the « phrase-type » with illustrations from the work of Thomas Hardy and Stendhal. He pursues his argument by drawing an analogy between literature and painting, using Ver Meer's themes and particular colouring as his example:

Vous m'avez dit que vous aviez vu certains tableaux de Ver Meer, vous vous rendez bien compte que ce sont les fragments d'un même monde, que c'est toujours, quelque génie avec lequel elle soit recréée, la même table, le même tapis, la même femme, la même nouvelle et unique beauté, énigme à cette époque où rien ne lui ressemble ni ne l'explique, si on ne cherche pas à l'apparenter par les sujets, mais à dégager l'impression particulière que la couleur produit.²¹

This passage of the novel can be found in embryonic form in a sketchy version of the essay on literary criticism known under the title *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. The recognition of an artist's « phrase-type » is likened to the Proustian sensitivity to analogies, which is implicitly associated with involuntary memory:

¹⁹ John Ruskin, *Works*, The Library Edition presented by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London, 1903 – 1912), volume 19, *The Cestus of Aglaia*, chapter V, p. 109.

²⁰ *Corres XX* p. 263 - 264, letter dated May 14, 1921, to Jean-Louis Vaudoyer.

²¹ RTP III, p. 879.

Dès que je lisais un auteur, je distinguais bien vite sous les paroles l'air de la chanson qui en chaque auteur est différent le garçon qui en moi s'amuse à cela, doit être le même que celui qui a aussi l'oreille fine et juste pour sentir entre deux impressions, entre deux idées, une harmonie très fine que tous ne sentent pas. [...] s'il crée en quelque sorte ces harmonies, il vit d'elles [...] et meurt ensuite [...] ou plutôt il meurt mais peut ressusciter si une autre harmonie se présente, mais simplement si entre deux tableaux d'un même peintre, il aperçoit une même sinuosité de profils, une même pièce d'étoffe, une même chaise, montrant entre les deux tableaux quelque chose de commun : la prédilection et l'essence de l'esprit du peintre. Ce qu'il y a dans un tableau d'un peintre ne peut pas le nourrir, ni dans un livre d'un auteur non plus, et dans un second tableau du peintre, un second livre de l'auteur. Mais si dans le second tableau ou le second livre, il aperçoit quelque chose qui n'est pas dans le second et dans le premier, mais en quelque sorte est entre les deux, dans une sorte de tableau idéal, qu'il voit en matière spirituelle se modeler hors du tableau, il a reçu sa nourriture et recommence à exister et à être heureux. [...] Et si entre ce tableau idéal et ce livre idéal dont chacun suffit à le rendre heureux, il trouve un lien plus haut encore, sa joie s'accroît encore. S'il découvre entre deux tableaux de Ver Meer.²²

Thus, Proust cites Ver Meer in this manuscript exposition of his aesthetic theory, drawing a parallel between the art of literature and the art of painting. In one of his slender notebooks, he also jotted down a reference to a specific work by Ver Meer: « les boutons dans une chaise de cuir, un point dans une étoffe (Ver Meer de Kahn)²³ ». These are abbreviated references to Vermeer's *Sleeping Servant*, which Proust had seen in the private collection of Rodolphe Kahn. The brass knobs on a leather chair, as well as the embroidered drape in the foreground, are motifs Vermeer repeated in other paintings, constituting thus his

²² This passage can be found in the *Cahier 2* (classified by the *Cabinet des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque nationale* N.A.Fr. 16642) in a section in which Proust wrote in the notebook upside down, on folios 17 v°, 17 r°, 16 v° and 18 r°. It has been transcribed and printed in CSB 304.

²³ *Carnet 1* (N.A.Fr. 16637) f° 41 v°. Transcribed by Philip Kolb, and published by Gallimard in 1976, under the title *Le Carnet de 1908*.

« phrase-type ». The critic René Huyghe even decorates the borders of his article: « Affinités électives : Vermeer et Proust²⁴ » with close-ups of the leaded window, the yellow satin cape with fur trim, the earthenware jug, the chair with lionhead finials and brass buttons, and the frequently depicted pearl, following Proust's suggestion that they compose Vermeerean leitmotifs.

Proust noted Vermeer's minute rendering of sewing or embroidery stitches, which he would also have admired in what he called the « exquisite » *Dentellière*²⁵, at his time, the only Vermeer in the Louvre. In his study of *The Lace-Maker*, Didi-Hubermann suggests that the blotches of colour and the grainy aspect of the painting result from use of the *camera obscura*, an optical instrument – and precursor of the modern camera – employed by 17th century Dutch painters. It consisted of a darkened chamber, with one tiny point to let in a pencil of light, which passed through a lens to produce an inverted image, which was righted by a second lens or mirror, before forming on a screen on the opposite wall. In the portrait of the androgynous *Girl with the Red Hat*, itself painted over the portrait of a man, the dapple lionhead finials on the chair – a recurrent detail in Vermeer's work – have the quality of images formed in the *camera obscura* (globules of paint, a marked contrast between light and shade, and circles of blurred indistinctness).²⁶

The foreground of Vermeer's *Sleeping Servant*, which looks like an anachronistic still-life by Cézanne, is a table which serves as a barrier between the viewer and what is viewed. The spectator cannot go beyond the edge of the table, although he is invited to advance far enough to brush up against the ornate, richly textured cloth.

The same elements – the table and the « tapis » the narrator points out to Albertine – can be seen in the *Girl Reading a Letter at an*

²⁴ See *L'Amour de l'art*, January 1936, pp. 7 - 15.

²⁵ See *Corres XVIII* p. 321, letter dated July 10 1919 to Walter Berry.

²⁶ See Charles Seymour, Jr. : « Dark Chamber and Light-filled Room : Vermeer and the Camera Obscura », in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. XLVI, n° 3, September 1964, pp. 323 - 331.

Open Window, where Vermeer deepens the space allotted to the spectatee, by painting in a kind of *trompe-l'oeil* curtain in the foreground (see figure 2). It has surreptitiously been drawn aside, inviting the spectator to witness this intimate scene, and, to quote Lawrence Gowing's book on Vermeer, it « subtly claims a place both in the letter reader's world and ours »²⁷.

The Art of Painting contains a similar curtain, from behind which the spectatee is stealing a glance at the painter at work. Proust recognized that by giving us only a back view of the self-effacing painter, Vermeer left his work to the subjective interpretation of the viewer or critic: « Cet artiste de dos qui ne tient pas à être vu de la postérité et ne saura pas ce qu'elle pense de lui est une admirable idée poignante.²⁸ »

The brass chandelier reflects the scene on its curved surface, including the leaded panes of the window to the left and a front view of the artist. Logically, the spherical base of the chandelier, like the convex mirror in Metsys's *The Banker and his Wife*, should also be reflecting the spectator, but Vermeer has solved that technical problem by running an ornamental band through what would otherwise be our image.

Proust hoped that as war damages, France would acquire *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, which is still in Dresden, and *The Art of Painting*, of which the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna is proud possessor²⁹. His particular interest in these paintings might well result from the way Vermeer includes the spectatee in them. He would also have noticed how they both contain patches of sun-drenched wall which, according to Proust, compose Vermeer's « phrase-type ». He would also have admired the cool, pale morning light reflecting off the white plaster in the much publicized *Milkmaid*, which he had seen in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, before seeing it again at the 1921 Paris exhibit. These characteristic expanses of blank yellow form a kind of screen onto which the spectatee can project. Significantly, in the paintings where the figure addresses the spectatee directly – for

²⁷ Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 99.

²⁸ *Corres XX* p. 263, letter dated May 14 1921 to Jean-Louis Vaudoyer.

²⁹ *Corres XVIII* p. 321, letter dated 10 July 1919 to Walter Berry.

example in the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* which Proust knew and loved³⁰ – the dark backdrop invites no such projection. Either the spectatee's presence is hidden and intrusive, and reflected onto the « pan de mur jaune », or it is established by an exchange of looks with the person painted against what seems to be the reverse side of a mirror.

It was on a postcard of the *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* that Paul Morand wrote from a village in Saxony, near Dresden, claiming that he had insisted the *Jeu de Paume* exhibit include the *View of Delft* for Proust's sake³¹. To a very real extent, this Vermeer painting, painting owes its celebrity to French promotion, starting in the middle of the last century, when the art historian Etienne-Joseph-Théophile Thoré rediscovered the artist he nicknamed the Sphinx of Delft, and published his pioneering work under the pseudonym of William Bürger³². The French publicity campaign for Vermeer launched by Thoré-Bürger was pursued by the flashy, fashionable aesthete, Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, who, on the occasion of the Paris exhibition boasting three works by Vermeer, wrote a study of the artist which was published in the periodical *L'Opinion*, in April and May 1921. Reading these articles renewed Proust's interest in Vermeer, whose work he had discovered and admired during his visit to Holland in October 1902. He asked Vaudoyer to accompany him to the Paris exhibit, insisting that the presence of the critic would enhance his appreciation of the paintings. In thanking Vaudoyer for the guided tour, he shows how the art was coloured for him by the circumstances and the company in which he saw it, and, after a loose paraphrase from the articles in *l'Opinion*, he evokes the notion of the « phrase-type »:

³⁰ See *Corres XXI*, p. 615, letter dated shortly before 28 June 1907 to the Princesse de Caraman-Chimay : « cette *vue de Delft* me semble un des cinq ou six plus beaux tableaux que je connaisse dans le monde entier, ainsi qu'une femme du même Ver Meer à la Haye aussi ».

³¹ *Corres XX* p. 222 - 223, dated 1 May 1921. The painting is in the Mauritshuis, in the Hague, and dates from circa 1660.

³² See in particular : *Musée de la Hollande* 1858, pp. 272 - 273, and the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, October 1866, pp. 298 - 299.

Je garde le souvenir lumineux du seul matin que j'aie revue [sic] et où vous avez guidé si affectueusement mes pas qui chancelaient trop, vers ce Ver Meer où les pignons des maisons 'sont comme de précieux objets chinois'. Depuis j'ai pu me procurer un ouvrage belge³³ dont les nombreuses reproductions, regardées avec votre article à la main, m'ont permis de reconnaître dans des tableaux différents des accessoires identiques.³⁴

This autobiographical event, which ironically resembles the visit to the Rembrandt exhibit he had invented many years earlier, is recast as an episode in *La Prisonnière*, where the writer Bergotte, a character in part inspired by Ruskin, makes an ultimate outing to see the work of « un artiste à jamais inconnu, à peine identifié sous le nom de Ver Meer³⁵ », where Proust loosely paraphrases Vaudozier:

un critique ayant écrit que dans la Vue de Delft de Ver Meer (prêté par le musée de la Haye pour une exposition hollandaise), tableau qu'il adorait et croyait connaître très bien, un petit pan de mur jaune (qu'il ne se rappelait pas) était si bien peint qu'il était, si on le regardait seul, comme une précieuse oeuvre d'art chinoise, d'une beauté qui se suffisait à elle-même. [...] Enfin il fut devant le Ver Meer qu'il se rappelait plus éclatant, plus différent de tout ce qu'il connaissait, mais où, grâce à l'article du critique, il remarqua pour la première fois des petits personnages en bleu, que le sable était rose, et enfin la précieuse matière du tout petit pan de mur jaune³⁶.

Proust insists that a critic determined Bergotte's decision to go to the exhibit, and even guided his viewing of the painting, but he is the first

³³ Gustave Vanzype, *Jan Vermeer de Delft*. Nouvelle édition revue et augmentée. Bruxelles(Paris: Librairie nationale d'art et d'histoire, G. Van Oest et cie, 1921), in 4°. 84 pages, 37 reproductions. The first edition had appeared in 1908.

³⁴ *Corres XXI*, p. 291 - 292 letter dated 17 June 1922.

³⁵ RTP III 693.

³⁶ RTP III 692. This passage is a late addition to the novel, written in *Cahier 62*, (N.A.Fr. 16702 f° 57 and 58 r° et v°), under the title « Pour la mort de Bergotte ». That preliminary version was typed and added to the third typescript of *La Prisonnière* : N.A.Fr. 16746 f° 89, bearing the title « Mort de Bergotte ».

to point out the « petit pan de mur jaune », mentioned by neither of his French predecessors.

But this passage on the *View of Delft* is not so much an ekphrasis as it is the account of a dramatic action, Bergotte's fatal attraction to the « petit pan de mur jaune ». In focusing more attention on the viewing subject than on Vermeer's work, Proust emphasizes the vital role of the spectatee, who brings the painting alive at the cost of his own life. Proust's staging of its viewing suggests that the painting remains a two-dimensional topographical representation of the town until a spectator interacts with the work by looking at it. To mark this work with a touch of autobiography, may I corroborate that viewing this painting is an active experience, by recalling my most memorable visit to the Mauritshuis in the Hague, when I discovered that this painting has an anamorphic quality to it. As I moved in front of the painting, the cubic composition of roofs, house-walls and spires seemed to pop up into three dimensions, like a cardboard cut-out model, proving just how much Escher owes to this three hundred year old work by his compatriot. Walking from the left of the painting to its center provoked the physical sensation of softly gliding along in a boat, while the canal with a bridge over it seemed to flow deeper and deeper into the heart of the town.

By attaching less importance to the painting than to Bergotte's reaction to it, Proust has seen the originality of Ver Meer, who proposes a view of Delft without addressing his viewer or directing him where to stand. This feature of the painting is most eloquently analyzed by Norman Bryson, who explains that during the Italian Renaissance, painters learned to use perspective, presenting their work as in a theatre, and turning their figures towards the spectator in direct invocation, whereas:

The View of Delft belongs to a different spatial regime and stages nothing: it is a vision of the inadvertent, vision in inadvertency. [...] [t]he spectator is an unexpected presence, not a theatrical audience ; nothing in the scene arranges itself around his act of inspection, or asks him, in Albertian

fashion, to place his body at this particular point at which the founding perception was 'gathered'.³⁷

It has been argued that Vermeer presented a slice of life in this painting, capturing the sense of immediacy by using the *camera obscura*, which would also account for its arbitrary framing and presenting³⁸. It is therefore not surprising that this *View of Delft* has the quality of a poor holiday snapshot taken in the days before cameras had built-in automatic zooms which can edit out unsightly expanses of seemingly irrelevant cloudy sky and sandy foreground. To pursue this photographic imagery, the viewer could be said to act as the « sensitive plate », as he or she even develops the painting by looking at it. Vermeer leaves room, but neither directions nor orders, for the spectatee, issuing an invitation to make the painting his or her own by viewing, reproducing or reworking it. Like the book, Proust considered the painting as a mirror, the reader and the viewer as partners in art.

The phrase « le petit pan de mur jaune » gives an indelibly Proustian colour to the *View of Delft*³⁹. As Philippe Boyer in his essay entitled *Le petit pan de mur jaune* writes : « ce tableau-fenêtre [...] creuse dans la *Vue de Delft* une *Vue de Proust*⁴⁰ ». In the small book *Petit pan de mur jaune*, the extract narrating Bergotte's death is preceded by an article entitled *Les écarts d'une vision* by Jean Pavans. He relates his visit to the 1986 Vermeer exhibit in Paris, making the point that for the reader of Proust, the corpse of Bergotte lies in the foreground of this painting :

³⁷ Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting : The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan, 1983), page 111.

³⁸ cf. Gowing, *op. cit.* p. 128.

³⁹ Many years before writing this passage, Proust had sent holiday tips to his friend the Princesse de Caraman-Chimay, expressing his admiration for this Vermeer painting in superlative terms. See *Corres XXI*, p. 615, letter dated shortly before 28 June 1907 to the Princesse de Caraman-Chimay: « Le tableau que j'ai le plus aimé en Hollande [...] c'est la *Vue de Delft* de Vermeer, au musée de la Haye. »

⁴⁰ Philippe Boyer, *Le petit pan de mur jaune* (Paris : Seuil, 1987), p. 22.

*En face, finalement, de l'oeuvre originale, mon émotion a été aussi forte que je l'espérais, mais quelle était encore la source véritable de cette émotion ? C'était bien entendu le souvenir de la mort de Bergotte, de ces pages à travers le filtre desquelles le chef-d'œuvre existait pour moi depuis près de vingt ans.*⁴¹

If thanks to Swann, Vermeer's name was as familiar to Odette as that of her dressmaker⁴², so it can be argued that Vermeer's general popularity is indebted to Proust : « La vérité, c'est que Proust a appris le nom de Vermeer, non pas aux connaisseurs, mais au grand public, et parce que ce grand public admirait Proust il s'est mis à admirer Vermeer.⁴³ » Proust's passage on the *View of Delft* has ensured the critical fortune of the painting, but, as Daniel Arasse writes in *L'Ambition Vermeer*, it has also blurred our vision of it : « Le prestige de *La Recherche* trouble l'approche actuelle de Vermeer.⁴⁴ » It must be thanks to one of France's greatest men of letters that the museum shop of the Mauritshuis in the Hague sells greeting cards of the detail of the sloping roof ; the author who celebrated involuntary memory would have smiled to see for sale tiny books, with the *View of Delft* on the cover, containing a pad of appropriately blank yellow pages, designed with one sticky side to be used to voluntarily jog memory. He would probably have experienced anxiety in recognizing his influence on Estève Non's experimental – and ephemeral – novel, which took the form of an exhibit of a series of photographs entitled *Le petit pan de mur jaune de Vermeer*. These photographs, which « narrate » an amnesiac's awakening in hospital, with a patch of yellow as sole memory, were

⁴¹ Jean Pavans, *Les écarts d'une vision* (Paris : Editions de la différence, (collection) « Tableaux vivants », 1986), p. 41.

⁴² RTP I 460.

⁴³ François Fosca, *De Diderot à Valéry : les écrivains et les arts visuels*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1960), p. 77.

⁴⁴ Daniel Arasse, *L'Ambition Vermeer* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1993), p. 180, note 9.

displayed along the exhibit's walls, so that the book was read by literally reading the walls⁴⁵.

Proust's « petit pan de mur jaune » has become an icon of contemporary art criticism. Georges Didi-Huberman in his essay *La part de l'œil* based his notion of the visual, blank but luminous area in a painting on Proust's phrase, calling it a « pan⁴⁶ ». Daniel Arasse illustrates his concept of *Le Détail*⁴⁷ with the same passage from the *Recherche*, as Proust considers the « petit pan de mur jaune » as « une précieuse œuvre d'art chinoise, d'une beauté qui se suffisait à elle-même », a miniature work of art contained in the larger painting; the part which, as the verb « détailler » suggests, can be cut away from the whole.

The phrase: « le petit pan de mur jaune avec un auvent » has fired much critical debate, and commentators are categorical and opposed in their definitions of its exact reference. Some insist that it can only be the yellow, pink and greenish patch of city wall on the extreme right of the canvas, taking the drawbridge to be the sunshade Proust mentions. Others, myself included, think Proust is referring to the sloping roof with a dormer window, which he mentioned as the « pignons de maison » in his letter to Vaudoyer, and which he mistakes as a wall when writing his novel. The roof is reflecting such intense sunlight that the eye is irresistibly attracted to it.

The debate over the identification of the « pan de mur jaune » is futile, and merely proves Proust's point that a work of art is open to various plausible interpretations. The « pan » reflecting the sun also reflects us : it is an area onto which we can project ourselves, as well as a source of illumination. The « pan » in painting corresponds to the blanks on the page, the area onto which viewer and reader can project

⁴⁵ Estève Non, *Le petit pan de mur jaune de Vermeer*, roman (Paris: Balland, 1974). The book describes the novel which was exhibited at the Daniel Templon gallery in Paris, during the autumn of 1973.

⁴⁶ The essay was reworked and published under the title *L'Aporie du détail* at the end of *Devant l'image*, 1990. Didi-Huberman explores the same notion of the « pan » in his book *Fra Angelico, Dissemblance et Figuration*, (Paris: Flammarion, Éditions de Minuit 1995).

⁴⁷ Daniel Arasse, *Le Détail*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1992).

themselves. Bergotte was struck by Vermeer's perfectly painted patch of yellow wall, which threw implacable illumination onto his own writing : « C'est ainsi que j'aurais dû écrire, disait-il. Mes derniers livres sont trop secs, il aurait fallu passer plusieurs couches de couleur, rendre ma phrase en elle-même précieuse, comme ce petit pan de mur jaune.⁴⁸ » Proust draws an explicit analogy between literature and painting here, inspired perhaps by Vermeer's numerous depictions of the different stages of reading and writing letters. In *A Lady Writing*, the writer, set against a dark background, is looking straight at us, as if she were addressing the letter to the spectatee. In the *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*, the lady is bent over the epistle while the maid is standing by waiting to deliver it. In *The Love Letter*, the maid has just delivered the sealed letter, and the lady is looking at her inquiringly. In *Mistress and Maid*, communication lines have been crossed : the mistress, whose hand is on her chin in interrogation, is interrupted in her writing, as the maid has just delivered a letter.

As a recurrent motif in these paintings of reading and writing, an open window symbolically suggests communication between the outside and inner worlds, just as the opening and closing of the window mimics the folding and unfolding of the letter. The window is the surface on which both writer and reader can project their reflections. In *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, which stages the reception of the letter, ascribing importance to the active contribution reading makes to literary creation, the window mirroring the reading girl is a graphic representation of Proust's notion that the reader is reflected in the text.

Proust's interest in these paintings of literary exchange has been followed by a fashion in contemporary publishing to illustrate works of literary criticism with Vermeer's reading scenes. Terry Eagleton's introduction to the subject : *Literary Theory*⁴⁹ has *Mistress and Maid* as its cover, whereas Juliet Dusinberre's book on Virginia Woolf's

⁴⁸ RTP III 692.

⁴⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

Renaissance essays uses *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*⁵⁰, and the publisher Macmillan takes the same painting as the cover of their 1997 catalogue: *Literature and Cultural Studies*.

Proustian aesthetics mistake painting and literature as identical twin sister arts : both are carried out in the *camera obscura*, and both require the active contribution of the viewer or reader to be brought and kept alive. Proust narrates the creative activity of viewing painting when the narrator visits Elstir's studio in Balbec, which is described in terms of a magnified *camera obscura*. The viewer and the painter pursue their complementary activities inside this huge optical instrument, complete with mirror, projection screen, refracting prismatic glass, and a concentrated, channelled source of light:

Les stores étaient clos de presque tous les côtés, l'atelier était assez frais et, sauf à un endroit où le grand jour apposait au mur sa décoration éclatante et passagère, obscur ; seule était ouverte une petite fenêtre rectangulaire encadrée de chèvrefeuilles qui, après une bande de jardin, donnait sur une avenue ; de sorte que l'atmosphère de la plus grande partie de l'atelier était sombre, transparente et compacte dans sa masse, mais humide et brillante aux cassures où la sertissait la lumière, comme un bloc de cristal de roche dont une face déjà taillée et polie, çà et là, luit comme un miroir et s'irise. Tandis qu'Elstir, sur ma prière, continuait à peindre, je circulais dans ce clair-obscur, m'arrêtant devant un tableau puis devant un autre.⁵¹

In his own writing, Proust borrows this optical instrument from Dutch painters. *A la recherche du temps perdu* is created in a *camera obscura*, into which a ray of light from the outside penetrates – under the door in the opening passage of *Combray*, through the slit at the top of the curtains at the beginning of *La Prisonnière*. The inaugural scene of Proust's novel, which casts both its light and shadow over the entire work, is set in a Rembrandtesque dark room, with a patch of luminous wall : « C'est ainsi que, pendant longtemps, quand, réveillé la nuit, je

⁵⁰ Juliet Dusinkerne, *Vigania Woolf's Renaissance Human Reader or Conno-Reader?* (London: MacMillan, 1997)

⁵¹ RTP II 191.

me ressouvenais de Combray, je n'en vis jamais que cette sorte de pan lumineux, découpé au milieu d'indistinctes ténèbres⁵² ».

Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* will only be illuminated if there is a reader to serve as reflector. In Proustian terms, the literary work is conceived in silence and in the dark, during the intimate exchange of writer and reader : « le livre est l'enfant du silence et de l'obscurité ». This conception of literature is opposed to that of Ruskin, who considers reading as a conversation with the writer, and also to that of Sainte-Beuve, who is interested in the writer as a social being. Proust's portrait of Bergotte depicts their infertile attitudes, which condemn literature to failure and mortality, and his death in front of the *View of Delft* emphasizes that a social approach to art is fatal. In dizzy agony, Bergotte weighs the relative value of his life and his writing, ultimately acknowledging that his art does not possess transcendent immortality: « Dans une céleste balance lui apparaissait, chargeant l'un des plateaux, sa propre vie, tandis que l'autre contenait le petit pan de mur si bien peint en jaune. Il sentait qu'il avait imprudemment donné la première pour le second.⁵³ » This image of the scales might well be inspired by Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* (The National Gallery, Washington, D.C., circa 1665), which Proust could have seen in a private collection in Paris, but which he would have known at least in reproduction. As in the Metsys painting, the scales are not actually used to weigh anything, they are being checked for accuracy, and thus are pregnant with symbolic value. The implicit message in *The Banker and his Wife* is represented by Vermeer, as the woman is standing in front of a painting depicting the Last Judgement, and made explicit by Bergotte's image of the « céleste balance ». For Proust, however, the same pair of scales symbolize artistic creation: « l'art est [...] le vrai Jugement dernier⁵⁴ » ; he uses them to balance the respective contributions of the creator and the receiver of the work of art. Proust has positioned Metsys's mirror in the foreground of his own masterpiece, to indicate that it will only remain immortal if it catches

⁵² RTP I 43.

⁵³ RTP III 692.

⁵⁴ RTP IV 458.

readers' reflections: it is an invitation to them to partake in this Dutch treat.

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Figure 1

Quentin Metsys : *The Banker and his Wife* (1514), Louvre,
Paris, Oil on wood, 0.70 x 0.67 m.



Figure 2

Vermeer, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657 - 1658),
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.
Oil on canvas, 0.83 x 0.64,5 m.