4 In *Sur Proust: remarques sur 'A la recherche du temps perdu'* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1960/70); see Chapter 2, 'Proust contre les snobs'.
5 *La Princesse de Clèves* (Paris: Dent, n.d.), p.221.
6 Published posthumously in 1890 and (in a more complete version) 1913.
7 See especially M. Waller, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993); also, e.g., D. Kelly, *Fictional Genders: Role and Representation in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).
8 See, e.g., D. Silverman, 'The "New Woman", feminism, and the decorative arts in fin-de-siècle France', in L. Hunt (ed.), *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp.144–63; J. Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p.256; J.-P. Peter, 'Les médecins et les femmes', in J.-P. Aron (ed.), *Misérable et glorieuse: la femme du XIXe siècle* (n.p.: Fayard, 1980), pp.81–100.
9 See, e.g., J. Canavaggia, *Proust et la politique* (Paris: Nizet, 1986); M. Sprinker, *History and Ideology in Proust: 'A la recherche du temps perdu' and the Third French Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
10 *Marcel Proust: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2 vols.,1959, 1965); frequently reissued.
11 J.E. Rivers, *Proust and the Art of Love: The Aesthetics of Sexuality in the Life, Times and Art of Marcel Proust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). See also G. Stambolian and E. Marks (eds.), *Homosexualities and French Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), to which Rivers had contributed a chapter.
12 Kinsey's 1940s and 1950s studies of sexuality found, for example, that at least 50 per cent of American men claim post-pubertal experience of homosexual feeling and/or behaviour. Rivers gives clear summaries of Kinsey's research.
13 Rivers gives a translation of 'Avant la nuit' (pp. 267–71), first published in 1893 but not included by Proust in *Les Plaisirs et les jours*. It is republished in P. Clarac and Y. Sandre (eds.), Marcel Proust, *Jean Santeuil, précédé de Les Plaisirs et les jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). See here M. Riffaterre's essay on the jellyfish ('*méd*use') and the '*med*' tag in *A la recherche*: 'Compelling reader responses', in A. Bennet (ed.), *Reading Reading* (University of Tampere, 1993), pp.85–106.
14 See A. Winton [Finch], *Proust's Additions: The Making of 'A la recherche du temps perdu'* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 2 vols., I, 294; II, 155.
15 More than 1700 times in *A la recherche*, according to E. Brunet: *Le Vocabulaire de Proust* (Geneva: Slatkine-Champion, 1983), 3 vols.
16 *Réflexions ou sentences et maximes morales, suivi de Réflexions diverses* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1965), nos. 81, 427, 583. (Mȳ translation, here and following.)
17 *La Cousine Bette* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1963), p.170.

12

RICHARD BALES

Proust and the fine arts

Few authors foreground the arts quite so comprehensively as Proust; certainly, none made them so central to their own literary production. Proust's whole life was saturated with love of the arts, and so too was to be his great novel: probably no other work of literature celebrates the arts as totally as his, or is so convincing in this pursuit. If one could point to, say, Joyce or Thomas Mann as examples of writers who display a keen awareness of the literary possibilities of incorporating the arts into the fabric of their own work, even their efforts seem small when compared to Proust's.

We are fortunate in possessing a clear picture of Proust's artistic tastes in his youth, and as he grew up. Two general questionnaires which he filled in have survived (*CSB*, pp.335–7), and the entries for the arts make fascinating reading: if, at the age of about fourteen, there is a predictable juvenility about some of his choices (George Sand, the historian Augustin Thierry, Musset, Meissonnier, Mozart, Gounod), there are already signs of the maturity which was to be expressed, fully-fledged, in the questionnaire completed at the age of 21. Here, the list acquires more substance: Anatole France, Pierre Loti, Baudelaire, Vigny, Beethoven, Wagner, Schumann, Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt. And, as if to underscore the import of his choices, at the top of the questionnaire Proust has written 'Marcel Proust par lui-même' ['Marcel Proust on himself']. To find confirmation of this development, and of his artistic preoccupations in general, one need only glance at the correspondence of these early years: there is scarcely a letter without some reference to the arts, and many of them attest to the fact that he was a voracious reader both of French and of European literature generally (and some American), always up to date with the latest writing. Add to this the fact that Proust had had the meticulous training in the Classics which was *de rigueur* in the educational programme of the time, and the overall picture of his cultural awareness is impressive indeed.

Being relatively sedentary, Proust had no problem in broadening his literary horizons; what is often easily forgotten, however, is that he made

considerable efforts to acquire first-hand knowledge of the other arts, in the shape of visits to exhibitions, to the theatre and to concerts. His adult life is for our purposes rather nicely framed by visits to art galleries which were to result in significant literary responses: a trip to the Louvre in 1895 was to lead to an article on Chardin and Rembrandt, while journeys to the low countries in 1898 and 1902 were to develop his love of Flemish and Dutch painting, and where he was to see Vermeer's *View of Delft*, which he considered the most beautiful painting in the world (*Corr.* XX, 226). It was a painting he was to see again in Paris in May 1921, on the occasion (although he could not have known it at the time) of his very last visit to an art-gallery; and of course he was to feature the *View of Delft* in a famous passage of his novel.

As far as music is concerned, we have seen how considerably Proust's tastes developed in his youth. He seems to have needed little guidance on this score, and if his long-standing friendship with the composer Reynaldo Hahn probably provided easy access to musical circles, it surely had no appreciable effect on already well-established preferences. Proust was resolutely a modernist, and above all a convinced Wagnerian, with all the cultural baggage that that brings with it. References to Wagner abound in the correspondence and in *A la recherche du temps perdu*: he was clearly a key aesthetic figure for Proust, combining as he does breadth of vision, telling specificity of detail and sublimity of expression. At one stage, Proust had even intended to incorporate a performance of *Parsifal* into the clinching final episode of his novel (see IV, 799, 812, 946; not in the English translations): the decision to abandon this idea is a good example of Proust's tendency to reject, wherever possible, external 'support' for the internal logic of his own fiction.

Other musical enthusiasms could be listed, including Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which Proust heard on the curious invention called the 'théâtrophone' and whose atmosphere of mystery he found particularly haunting (the correspondence of 1910–11 is especially eloquent here). Then there were the Ballets russes, the great cultural hit of the years preceding the First World War, with their dazzling sets and costumes, colourful modern scores and exotically oriental flavour. Was Proust present at the notorious première of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*? We do not know for sure; but he was certainly a regular and enthusiastic attender at these ballets. He even put on concerts of his own, extravagantly paying for a string quartet to come to his apartment at night and play modern French chamber music and the late Beethoven quartets – he was way ahead of the times in his appreciation of these profound works.[1]

All of this musical and artistic activity (and there was much, much more) builds up a picture of a Proust whose tastes were distinctly highbrow; they

were, but this does not mean he was an artistic snob. On the contrary, he saw great value in the humbler aspects of the arts. As a young man, he appreciated the music-hall artist Mayol; and within the pages of *A la recherche* he was to find unexpected musical beauties in street-criers' calls.[2] In a characteristically witty early essay in *Les Plaisirs et les jours* entitled 'Éloge de la mauvaise musique' (see *JS*, pp.121–2) ['In praise of bad music'],[3] the opening sentence stands as a sort of manifesto: 'Détestez la mauvaise musique, ne la méprisez pas' ['Detest bad music but do not despise it' (p. 138)]. Such music plays an enormous role in people's lives, a role which is somehow heightened by the music's lack of pretensions. There is an admirable simplicity to it: 'Un cahier de mauvaises romances, usé pour avoir trop servi, doit nous toucher comme un cimetière ou comme un village' (*JS*, p.122) ['A collection of bad Romances worn with constant use should touch us as a cemetery touches us, or a village' (p. 139)]. And remember these words were penned during Proust's supposedly snobbish, young dandy period.

In this same collection of *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, in 'Mondanité et mélomanie de Bouvard et Pécuchet' (*JS*, pp.57–65) ['The Social Ambitions and Musical Tastes of Bouvard and Pécuchet' (pp. 100–112)], Flaubert's fictional buffoons with claims to seriousness take on new life and establish what they see as impeccable criteria of taste. Needless to say, what they really provide is an object-lesson in amateurishness, inflated pretensions and general artistic philistinism. There will be plenty more of this in *A la recherche*! What it is important to note from a reading of this essay is Proust's innate attitude of scepticism towards the notion of hierarchy: so when Bouvard rejects Wagner's early *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser* as not being 'advanced' enough, but perversely promotes the even earlier *Rienzi*, he is giving in to a modishness, the mere expression of which proclaims its ridiculous and impermanent nature. In writing as he does, Proust can clearly make fun of such attitudes; but as far as he himself was concerned what mattered was not fashion, but sheer excellence. In many ways, his whole life can be seen as a quest for this ideal.

Certainly, a very great deal of Proust's writing activity in the years leading up to 1900 is devoted to consideration of artistic topics of one sort or another. Generally brief articles or reviews, these texts deal with contemporary poets, dramatists and novelists (often friends), with art exhibitions, with musical events, or with questions of a general aesthetic nature (see *CSB*, pp.338–423). The two sets of poems included in *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, entitled 'Portraits de peintres' and 'Portraits de musiciens' (not in the translation) are well worth dwelling on. Clearly deriving from the model of Baudelaire's 'Les Phares' ['The Beacons'], they are examples of art about art, evoking not specific pictures or pieces of music, but providing a general

meditation on the chosen painter's or composer's special world, in an attempt to recreate what it feels like to be in close contact with those worlds. Although Proust was surprisingly ungifted as a poet, these verses, for all their gaucheness, are truly redolent of their subject-matter, and point forward to later articulation of artistic material with a view to promoting its transcendent features.

This preoccupation is highlighted even more in an article Proust wrote in 1895, but which was not published until long after his death: in 'Chardin et Rembrandt' (*CSB*, pp.372–82),[4] he tackles the manner in which great artists open the eyes of their beholders to deeper implications than just contemplation of subject-matter. The pleasure one experiences in a still-life by Chardin is thus 'dégagé de l'instant, approfondi, éternisé' (p.374) ['released from the moment, made timeless and profound' (p.123)], language and sentiments which anticipate Proust's later years. Beauty resides not in objects themselves; if it did, it would not be 'si profonde et si mystérieuse' (p.380) ['as profound nor as mysterious' (pp.129–30)]. As for creative acts, they do not proceed from obedience to rules, but from 'une puissance incompréhensible et obscure, et qu'on ne fortifie pas en l'éclairant' (p.382/131) ['an obscure and incomprehensible power, which we do not make stronger by elucidating it' (p.131)]. An altogether remarkable foretaste of the mature writer.

But in these early years Proust was essentially a miniaturist, and such acute insights as we get, perhaps especially in this area of the arts, are tantalising in their brevity. Even *Jean Santeuil*, a would-be novel of potential breadth, suffers from fragmentariness, and is notably short on artistic scrutiny. But with the fillip provided by the discovery of Ruskin's ideas, Proust finds a new expansiveness, a quality particularly useful in laying forth and analysing questions of an aesthetic nature. Certainly the introductions and annotations to his translations of *Sesame and Lilies* and *The Bible of Amiens* speak with an authority which combines a wide range of artistic reference with an assured overall coherence in aesthetic matters. This was clearly the way Proust was going to develop as a writer.

The Ruskin prefaces were essentially *essays*, a *genre* which enjoyed a high profile in the 1900s (Maeterlinck, for example, was an outstanding proponent, much read), and Proust's *Pastiches* of this period fall into the same category. This is important, because the next substantial text he was to write was nothing less than the so-called *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, in other words the harbinger of *A la recherche*. The whole programme of the *Contre Sainte-Beuve* is an aesthetic one: attacking Sainte-Beuve's concentration on the personality of the writer, and replacing it with analysis which respects the autonomy of the work of art. We are not yet in the realms of fiction, so what

we have are studies of real, exemplary, writers: full-blooded, penetrating analyses of Nerval, Baudelaire and Balzac which foreground the 'interior vision' of the writer, the 'profound laws' which inform his work, his 'spiritual world', and the way in which they 'donnent pour nous une sorte de valeur littéraire à mille choses de la vie qui jusque-là nous paraissaient trop contingentes' ['give a sort of literary value to countless things in life which had hitherto seemed to us too contingent'] (*CSB*, pp.234/25, 237/28, 252/44, 276/68). Proust never ceases to build on his criticism of Sainte-Beuve's blinkered view of literature, and to privilege expression not just of literature's visionary aspect, but also of how that vision is communicated to the reader, and – most importantly – shared by him or her.

Once one moves into the pages of *A la recherche*, the range of artistic reference becomes vast: aside from the cultivated voice of the Narrator himself – and he is never short on artistic comparisons and allusions – any number of characters express themselves on artistic matters, often not very happily. But the Narrator's immediate family provides a sound enthusiast in the shape of his grandmother (so close to him as a person in all ways): when it comes to choosing a present for the boy, and she selects books by Musset, Rousseau, and George Sand's sexually daring *Indiana*, other members of the family, outraged, force her to substitute something less emotionally advanced. Her reason for falling back on Sand's rustic novels rests on a question of quality: 'Ma fille, disait-elle à maman, je ne pourrais me décider à donner à cet enfant quelque chose de mal écrit' (I, 39) ['"My dear," she had said to Mamma, "I could not bring myself to give the child anything that was not well written"' (I, 45/53)]. So too when she buys him pictures of famous monuments or sites to hang on his wall, she exercises her impeccable taste by ensuring that these pictures are reproductions of paintings depicting those places by, say, Corot, Hubert Robert, or Turner: this enables her to introduce 'plusieurs "épaisseurs" d'art' (I, 40) ['Several "thicknesses" of art' (I, 46/54)]. Her guiding principle clearly is that one cannot have too much of a good thing – a general enthusiasm for the arts which is keenly shared by her grandson.

In choosing the pictures just mentioned, she makes an important link to someone outside of the family: she consults Swann, a supposed expert in such areas. Now Swann is clearly an important role model for the Narrator, and any artistic input he can provide is bound to be received with seriousness. His cultivated sensibility is there for all to see, and his knowledgeability is mightily impressive: who else would have the wit and flair to compare the kitchen-girl at Combray to a painting by Giotto (I, 80; I, 94–5/110–12)? And the fact that he is writing a book on Vermeer only adds to his perceived

unimpeachability in the field of art. But we soon see (notably in the flashback of 'Un amour de Swann') that he is deeply flawed in this area. Perhaps his Giotto comparison *was* witty, but what does it really say about Giotto? Precious little. In coupling together a great artist and a humble girl, Swann is essentially only name-dropping. He famously takes the procedure a degree further in identifying his lover Odette with Botticelli's *Zipporah* in the Sistine Chapel, and putting a reproduction of the painting on his desk where others put a photograph of their wife (I, 220–1; I, 270/318). In reducing high art to a single point of reference, using it as it were anecdotally, he betrays art itself, by debasing it where it should be elevated. Similarly, when it comes to music, he channels his sensitivity in a direction unprofitable to the music itself: in arrogating a little phrase of Vinteuil's *Sonata* for his personal 'use' – he makes it into the 'national anthem' of his love for Odette (I, 215; I, 262/308) – he is extending the Botticelli misappropriation technique. This time, however, his own suspect procedures rebound on him: after falling out of love with Odette, he hears the little phrase again in a state of unpreparedness, and in being confronted with associations of lost happiness ('les refrains oubliés du bonheur' ['the forgotten strains of happiness']) finds himself the victim of a 'déchirante souffrance' (I, 339) ['[an apparition] . . . so agonisingly painful' (I, 415/490)]. This is obviously not the sort of artistic path the Narrator should choose to follow.

Nor, in spite of much distraction, does he. For him, the arts always take first place; his attitude right from the start is that they contain something which it is important for him to learn. So, in one of the many glimpses we get of the boy in Combray engaged in reading, he feels 'ma croyance en la richesse philosophique, en la beauté du livre que je lisais, et mon désir de me les approprier, quel que fût ce livre' (I, 83) ['my belief in the philosophic richness and beauty of the book I was reading, and my desire to appropriate them for myself, whatever the book might be' (I, 99/115)]. There is a clear sense of symbiosis in the act of reading, a form of communion. Although the analysis is provided by the older Narrator looking back on his youth, the reader receives a particularly fresh and close impression of the excitement felt by the boy. The fictional novelist Bergotte, for example,

> exprimait toute une philosophie nouvelle pour moi par de merveilleuses images dont on aurait dit que c'était elles qui avaient éveillé ce chant de harpes qui s'élevait alors et à l'accompagnement duquel elles donnaient quelque chose de sublime. Un de ces passages de Bergotte, le troisième ou le quatrième que j'eusse isolé du reste, me donna une joie incomparable à celle que j'avais trouvée au premier, une joie que je me sentis éprouver en une région plus profonde de moi-même, plus unie, plus vaste, d'où les obstacles et les séparations semblaient avoir été enlevés. (I, 93)

> [would express a whole system of philosophy, new to me, by the use of marvellous images that one felt must be the inspiration for the harp-song which then arose and to which they provided a sublime accompaniment. One of these passages of Bergotte, the third or fourth which I had detached from the rest, filled me with a joy to which the meagre joy I had tasted in the first passage bore no comparison, a joy that I felt I was experiencing in a deeper, vaster, more integral part of myself, from which all obstacles and partitions seemed to have been swept away.] (I, 111/130)

The account is shot through with vocabulary of an appropriately intense emotional immediacy, utilising extremes of depth and elevation which will become more and more familiar to the reader each time the Narrator waxes lyrical in his close encounters of an artistic kind.

We are not given any extended examples of Bergotte's writing, but we get a clear idea of what readers, and not just the Narrator, like in Bergotte: his 'flux mélodique' ['melodic flow'], the 'expressions anciennes' ['old-fashioned phrases'] he uses, combined with common, simple ones, and 'une certaine brusquerie, un accent presque rauque' which he voices in sad sections (I, 94) ['a sort of roughness, a tone that was almost harsh' (I, 112/131)]. The Narrator especially appreciates those purple passages where Bergotte dwells on the beauty of his subject-matter, perhaps to the detriment of the storyline: 'il faisait dans une image exploser cette beauté jusqu'à moi' (*ibid.*) ['by some piece of imagery he would make their beauty explode into my consciousness (*ibid.*)]. The boy's enthusiasm for Bergotte is total, but predictably, and like so many of his preferences, it comes under serious attack, here in the shape of Monsieur de Norpois, a pompous diplomat colleague of the Narrator's father. On hearing that the boy is very keen on Bergotte, Norpois registers his disapproval, labelling the writer a mere 'joueur de flûte' (I, 464) ['flute-player' (II, 51/61)], and proclaiming that in the modern day 'il y a des tâches plus urgentes que d'agencer des mots d'une façon harmonieuse' (I, 465) ['there are tasks more urgent than the manipulation of words in a harmonious manner' (II, 52/61)]. Shortly before this, Norpois had given a silent reception to the Narrator's own youthful prose-poem (I, 447; II, 30/35), and now with his damning of Bergotte, the boy feels 'consterné, réduit' (I, 466) ['dismayed, diminished' (II, 54/63)], his ambitions wrecked: 'je sentis une fois de plus ma nullité intellectuelle et que je n'étais pas né pour la littérature' (I, 466) ['I felt conscious once again of my intellectual nullity and that I was not cut out for the literary life' (II, 53/63)].

It is all a question of self-confidence, an area in which the Narrator is dismally lacking: essentially, he is an idealist, and is naturally vulnerable to seemingly authoritative subversion of his ideals. In the case of Bergotte, the author is himself an agent when it comes to the process of disillusion which

sets in when the high idealism can no longer be sustained. Having at first fantasised about Bergotte's being a 'vieillard infiniment sage et presque divin' (I, 402) ['that infinitely wise, almost divine old man' (I, 493/582)], the Narrator's disappointment is palpable when, at a dinner party, he eventually meets the 'doux Chantre aux cheveux blancs' (I, 537) ['the gentle Bard with the snowy locks' (II, 139/164)] and is confronted with a youthful, short, red-nosed and goatee-bearded individual, not at all the disembodied sage he had imagined:

> J'étais mortellement triste, car ce qui venait d'être réduit en poudre, ce n'était pas seulement le langoureux vieillard dont il ne restait plus rien, c'était aussi la beauté d'une œuvre immense. (I, 537)
>
> [I was cruelly disappointed, for what had just vanished in the dust of the explosion was not only the languorous old man, of whom no vestige now remained, but also the beauty of an immense work.] (II, 139–40/165)

The Narrator is here – as so often he is – a victim of his own over-fertile imagination: by dint of building up a precise picture of yet-to-be-experienced situations he virtually ensures variance between imagination and fact, hence disappointment. An analogous example of this syndrome – it is in the same area of *A la recherche* – is his desire to go and see the actress la Berma perform: 'Hélas! cette première matinée fut une grande déception' (I, 437) ['Alas! That first matinée was to prove a bitter disappointment' (II, 17/20–1)]. In all such cases, the Narrator needs to adjust to unalterable reality. This duly happens with Bergotte, and subsequent references to the writer's art are more measured in their appreciation. Besides, with Bergotte's becoming a social acquaintance, the emphasis in the Narrator's life shifts away from concentration on what is purely literary.

This move is a fairly close reflection of the manner in which his existence, as it becomes more socially oriented, seems to be drifting further and further away from his youthful ideals of high art and a literary vocation. Have they disappeared forever? It sometimes seems so, but great moments of resurgence prove otherwise; and if these are few in number, their paucity is more than adequately compensated for by their power. In the case of Bergotte, his artistic apotheosis occurs, ironically, with his death, as he collapses at an exhibition, in intense contemplation of Vermeer's *View of Delft*. Even as he dies, he is learning important lessons from the painter: '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' (III, 692) ['"That's how I ought to have written," he said. "My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of colour, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall"' (V, 207/244)]. Bergotte physically dies, but not his art with him: in a series of metaphysical reflections the Narrator (here surely very close to Proust's own convictions) articulates the view that there exists (at least in connection with art) 'un monde entièrement différent de celui-ci, et dont nous sortons pour naître à cette terre, avant peut-être d'y retourner' (III, 693) ['a world entirely different from this one and which we leave in order to be born on this earth, before perhaps returning there' (V, 208/245–6)]. At any rate, Bergotte's literary work remains to be admired; and here, employing the purple-passage technique which the Narrator so admired in Bergotte's novels, he himself (and, of course, Proust as author) composes the ultimate in epitaphs:

> On l'enterra, mais toute la nuit funèbre, aux vitrines éclairées, ses livres, disposés trois par trois, veillaient comme des anges aux ailes éployées et semblaient pour celui qui n'était plus, le symbole de sa résurrection. (III, 693)
>
> [They buried him, but all through that night of mourning, in the lighted shop-windows, his books, arranged three by three, kept vigil like angels with outspread wings and seemed, for him who was no more, the symbol of his resurrection.] (V, 209/246)

That is impossible to follow; but on the level of the Narrator's trajectory as Protagonist, it has to be followed – he is still nowhere near his goal, and the lessons learned from Bergotte have not yet borne fruit in any significant production of his own. What about other artistic lessons? Bergotte had marked the Narrator's childhood years; now the painter Elstir takes over where he left off, in eloquent pages bunched in the Balbec section of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. The approach to Elstir is more detailed, more analytical, than was the case with Bergotte: as he grows older, the Narrator is clearly becoming more discriminating. Indeed, the occasion of his being at Balbec in the first place comes about as a result of an aesthetic project: his desire to see Balbec church, an edifice which he romantically imagines to be battered by sea-spray, and whose architectural style is, in Swann's words, 'almost Persian' (I, 378; I, 463/547). Predictably, emotion takes over, and transforms the church into an object far removed from reality. But not entirely; for we already know how appreciative the Narrator is of ecclesiastical architecture from the evocative and impassioned description of Combray church (I, 58–66; I, 68–78/80–91): importantly, its historic patina enables him to apprehend the fourth dimension of time. And churches are intimately connected to people: true, they are conceived by artists, but with a view to protracted habitation and interaction by successive generations of ordinary folk. Predictably, though, the Narrator's first encounter with Balbec church is a disappointment: in particular, its famous statuary, which should

represent its 'liveliest' aspect, seems cold and dead to his gaze, and leaves him unmoved (II, 20; II, 273–4/323).

Providentially, it is Elstir who will set him right in these matters, but not straight away. The order in which the Narrator experiences the two major aspects which Elstir incarnates – painter and then critic – represents a sort of modulation from one activity to the other, the inevitability of which is henceforth to become a major feature of his own thinking – and eventually practice. First, then, we get to know Elstir as a painter, in particularly vibrant pages where the older Narrator brilliantly foregrounds his younger self's excitement. After the unpromising ugliness of Elstir's house, what he witnesses in the studio is tantamount to 'le laboratoire d'une sorte de nouvelle création du monde' (II, 190) ['the laboratory of a sort of new creation of the world' (II, 478/565)]. That word 'creation' is to be used time and again, with an insistence and with overtones of awe which set the artist apart as someone special. Indeed, the Narrator makes the very highest claims for Elstir, advancing the view that the latter's work

> consistait en une sorte de métamorphose des choses représentées, analogue à celle qu'en poésie on nomme métaphore et que si Dieu le Père avait créé les choses en les nommant, c'est en leur ôtant leur nom, ou en leur en donnant un autre qu'Elstir les recréait. (II, 191)
>
> [lay in a sort of metamorphosis of the objects represented, analogous to what in poetry we call metaphor, and that, if God the Father had created things by naming them, it was by taking away their names or giving them other names that Elstir created them anew.] (II, 479/566)

Note the critical vocabulary mixed in with the exalted comparison: this is not just an emotional over-the-top reaction. The notion of metaphor is an especially precise and strong one, and it runs right through the conspectus of Elstir's paintings offered for the Narrator's delectation. In *Le Port de Carquethuit*, just finished, metaphor represents the guiding principle of the whole painting: here, there is no fixed frontier, no absolute demarcation, between land and sea, but, given the way they interact, each is viewed in terms of the other, with ships' masts seeming to rise out of dry land, and buildings out of the sea. The Narrator's entranced and inquisitive eye roves all around the painting, noting the great range of variations Elstir plays on the land/sea metaphor. So, here distant churches rise from the water and produce, haloed by a rainbow, an effect which is 'irréel et mystique' (II, 192) ['ethereal, mystical' (II, 480/568)]; elsewhere, women fishing for shrimps seem to be placed in a grotto protected from the waves; the boat in which sightseers sally forth behaves like a carriage on land; so that, overall, 'la terre est déjà marine et la population amphibie' ['the land was already subaqueous and the population amphibian'] and everything is suffused by the omnipresent 'force de l'élément marin' (II, 193) ['strength of the marine element' (II, 481/568)]. None of this is accidental: Elstir has been playing on the spectator's expectations and constantly challenging them by this technique of metaphorical substitution. But, being an esteemed artistic creator, Elstir is not just some dry dogmatist: on the contrary, as the Narrator puts it in a sort of motto prefatory to the *Port de Carquethuit* meditation, 'les rares moments où l'on voit la nature telle qu'elle est, poétiquement, c'était de ceux-là qu'était faite l'œuvre d'Elstir' (II, 192) ['the rare moments in which we see nature as she is, poetically, were those from which Elstir's work was created' (II, 479–80/566–7)].

It is important for the Narrator to experience Elstir as a wonderful creative artist before hearing him express himself as a critic: quite simply, his credentials are displayed in emphatic style, giving him a substantial base from which to speak with authority. The case to which he addresses himself is Balbec church, in response to the Narrator's admission of disappointment. The words of enlightenment – a great monologue full of erudition, yet far from pedantic – guide the Narrator through what should have been his interpretative strategy on contemplating the statuary. The latter all fits together, possessing meaning which can be 'read' like a poem; in Elstir's eyes, it is 'la plus belle Bible historiée que le peuple ait jamais pu lire' (II, 196) ['the finest illustrated Bible that the people have ever had' (II, 485/573)]. The starting-point for the sculptures is, literally, the text of the Bible, which is translated into stone with the greatest exactitude, yet allowing the artist in the different medium to express a new delicacy and produce 'que de profondes pensées, quelle délicieuse poésie!' (II, 196) ['what profound thoughts, what delicious poetry!' (II, 485/573)]. And it is emphatically the hand of an individual artist at work; he may have lived many centuries ago, and be tackling much-treated subject-matter, but this does not make him any less of a genius:

> Le type qui a sculpté cette façade-là, croyez bien qu'il était aussi fort, qu'il avait des idées aussi profondes que les gens de maintenant que vous admirez le plus . . . Il y a certaines paroles de l'office de l'Assomption qui ont été traduites avec une subtilité qu'un Redon n'a pas égalée. (II, 197)
>
> [The chap who carved that façade, take my word for it, was every bit as good, had just as profound ideas, as the men you admire most at the present day . . . There are certain passages from the Office of the Assumption which have been conveyed with a subtlety that not even a Redon could equal.] (II, 486/574–5)

The offhand way in which Elstir uses the word 'type' ['chap'] to describe the medieval artist is not just an expression of parity between artisans, but is also

telling in bringing the Narrator's (and our) perception of a creative artist distant in time right up to date, in an appreciation surpassing that of the highly regarded ultra-modern symbolist Odilon Redon. In this way, Elstir is able to provide the Narrator with an in-depth lesson of artistic life, one which couples, in a sort of indissoluble duet, the individuality of creative practice and the necessity of underpinning that practice with enlightened critical theory. Hence the Narrator's pronouncement that what he tasted in Elstir's studio were '[d]es joies intellectuelles' (II, 198) ['intellectual pleasures' (II, 487/576)] should be taken literally: an emotional enthusiasm, but one which is informed by reason.

This attitude is one which will liberally mark the Narrator's encounter with what is indubitably his most overwhelming aesthetic engagement: that with the music of Vinteuil. In Combray days, such an eventuality seemed highly improbable – Vinteuil was only an unremarkable music teacher there – but the accounts of Swann's hearing his violin sonata make us aware of what it is like not only to experience music of high quality, but also of how the feeling manifests itself in an individual's mind. At first, the music 'lui avait ouvert plus largement l'âme' (I, 205–6) ['had opened and expanded his soul' (I, 250/294)]; then, he becomes captivated by a recurrent little musical phrase, which he needs to hold onto because it seems to offer 'la possibilité d'une sorte de rajeunissement' (I, 207) ['the possibility of a sort of rejuvenation' (I, 252/296)]. But as we have seen, Swann goes on, not to celebrate the music as autonomous achievement, but to debase it by harnessing one of its most striking features (the little phrase) to his obsessive love for Odette. This is scarcely the sort of behaviour one would expect from someone who is supposed to be writing a book on Vermeer.

How will the Narrator fare when it comes to music? Given Swann's poor example, we might expect him to make some elementary mistakes; but it is not so, for the greater part of his musical experiences take place after the encounter with Elstir and the aesthetic lessons acquired on that occasion. But not totally: there is a section early on in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (that is, before the Elstir experience) where we see the Narrator engaging in fairly sophisticated meditations about the unique effect which music produces. How, for example, one's priorities develop from hearing to hearing, with the initially perceived beauties making way for others, which now seem more profound. In the case of Vinteuil's *Sonata*, this shifting means for the Narrator that 'je ne la possédai jamais tout entière' ['I never possessed it in its entirety']; in this 'elle ressemblait à la vie' (I, 521) ['it was like life itself' (II, 119/141)], an important linkage between art and life. And this coupling takes on an additional, aesthetic dimension when it comes to consideration of the reception of great works, so often ahead of their time, when they

lacked '[des] êtres capables de [les] aimer' ['persons capable of appreciating [them]']. The late Beethoven quartets are cited as examples of how 'ce qu'on appelle la postérité, c'est la postérité de l'œuvre' ['what is called posterity is the posterity of the work of art']; the artist must, in order for a work to achieve all it can, 'la lance[r], là où il y a assez de profondeur, en plein et lointain avenir' (I, 522) ['launch it, there where there is sufficient depth, boldly into the distant future' (II, 121/143)]. Words of wisdom remarkably early on in the Narrator's career.

This precocious maturity in musical matters, bolstered by the creative and critical example of Elstir, performs an invaluable preparatory function when it comes to the Narrator's own full-scale encounter with a matchless musical composition. The experience of hearing Vinteuil's posthumous *Septet* – surely the most immediate and exuberant evocation of music ever penned – finds him capable of engaging in the experience both emotionally and intellectually in an act of reception which goes beyond the individual moment and, in a supreme aesthetic gesture, points towards future creation. Not that the *Septet* makes for easy listening: at first, the Narrator feels he is in unknown territory, and parts of the music are strident, rhythmically disconcerting, even ugly. But all of this is more than offset by the massive impact of the 'chef-d'œuvre triomphal et complet qui m'était en ce moment révélé' (III, 756) ['the triumphal and consummate masterpiece now being revealed to me' (V, 284/335)]. In ever more brilliant language, Proust the writer conveys the spiritual excitement of his Narrator as the *Septet* advances, the little phrase of the *Sonata* making a reappearance, 'harnachée d'argent, toute ruisselante de sonorités brillantes' (III, 753–4) ['harnessed in silver, glittering with brilliant sonorities' (V, 281/332)]; out of nothingness, an 'espoir mystérieux' ['mysterious hope'] arises, culminating in 'un appel ineffable . . . de l'éternel matin' (III, 754) ['the ineffable call . . . of eternal morning' (V, 282–3/333)]. 'Joie; fraîcheur; originalité; bonheur; trésor insoupçonné' ['joy; freshness; originality; happiness; unsuspected treasure']: the highly-charged words applied to the music provide as it were a rhythmical support to the intensity of the emotion, emotion which arises from the craft of a musician who is 'haletant, grisé, affolé, vertigineux' ['panting, intoxicated, unbridled, vertiginous'] in the act of creation, a veritable counterpart to Michelangelo's painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (III, 759; V, 287/339). Proust does not, of course, attempt to imitate the sounds of music, rather the euphoria it produces, so that, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, we are the music while the words last.

Vinteuil the dead composer is 'réincarné' ['reincarnate'], he 'vivait à jamais dans sa musique' ['the composer lived for all time in his music'] each of his works being 'une même prière, jaillie devant différents levers de soleil

intérieurs' (III, 759) ['the same prayer, bursting forth like different inner sunrises' (V, 286–8/337–40)]. It is as if great artists – here Vinteuil stands for them all – come trailing clouds of glory from some other world; each is the citizen of a 'patrie inconnue, oubliée de lui-même, différente de celle d'où viendra, appareillant pour la terre, un autre grand artiste' (III, 761) ['an unknown country, which he himself has forgotten, and which is different from that whence another great artist, setting sail for the earth, will eventually emerge' (V, 290/342)]. In fervent virtuosity of increasingly metaphysical language, Proust and his Narrator (how can one separate them at this point?) are positively transported into the empyrean:

> Des ailes, un autre appareil respiratoire, et qui nous permissent de traverser l'immensité, ne nous serviraient à rien. Car si nous allions dans Mars et dans Vénus en gardant les mêmes sens, ils revêtiraient du même aspect que les choses de la Terre tout ce que nous pourrions voir. Le seul véritable voyage, le seul bain de Jouvence, ce ne serait pas d'aller vers de nouveaux paysages, mais d'avoir d'autres yeux, de voir l'univers avec les yeux d'un autre, de cent autres, de voir les cent univers que chacun d'eux voit, que chacun d'eux est; et cela nous le pouvons avec un Elstir, avec un Vinteuil, avec leurs pareils, nous volons vraiment d'étoiles en étoiles. (III, 762)
>
> [A pair of wings, a different respiratory system, which enabled us to travel through space, would in no way help us, for if we visited Mars or Venus while keeping the same senses, they would clothe everything we could see in the same aspect as the things of Earth. The only true voyage, the only bath in the Fountain of Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is; and this we can do with an Elstir, with a Vinteuil; with men like these we do really fly from star to star.] (V, 291/343)

A pause for breath and reflection is in order for all concerned: writer, narrator and reader alike. The experience of Vinteuil's *Septet* is clearly overwhelming; but what lies beyond, 'au sortir de ce paradis' (III, 763) ['on emerging from that paradise' (V, 292/344)]? The Narrator at first wonders whether the inherently unanalytical nature of music might have been a means of facilitating communication between 'souls', if language, with its analytical properties, had not been invented (*ibid.*). A pertinent speculation, because it prepares him for making a capital link between Vinteuil's music and the transcendental aspect of his own life. He has experienced an 'appel vers une joie supraterrestre' (III, 765) ['summons to a supraterrestrial joy' (V, 294/347)], and he will never forget it; but will this joy be realisable for him? It is exactly the sensation he enjoys in those rare moments of metaphysical insight such as the Martinville spires; they are 'comme les points de repère,

les amorces, pour la construction d'une vie véritable' (*ibid.*; see also III, 876–7) ['as starting-points, foundation-stones for the construction of a true life' (*ibid.*; see also V, 427–8/504–5)]. The intersection of life and art could not be rendered more explicit, and it has all been made possible as a result of the creative mind of a seemingly insignificant Combray music teacher.

The Narrator's self-confidence in the artistic domain, at first so woefully lacking, is now almost complete. In a neatly judged *mise en abyme* effect, we witness a scene with Albertine where he acts out the same sort of pedagogic role as Elstir had performed in Balbec, one which recognises the necessity of applying analysis to the emotional impact which art conveys. In magisterial, yet unpedantic, tones, he pinpoints the most significant and revelatory features of various painters, writers and composers: Vinteuil, of course, but also non-fictional ones such as Thomas Hardy, Stendhal, Dostoevski, Vermeer. All display structural niceties of a particularly cohesive nature, their discrete works all being 'les fragments d'un même monde' (III, 879) ['fragments of an identical world' (V, 430/508)], vocabulary familiar from the *Septet* episode.

It is only a matter of time now before the Narrator embarks on the fulfilment of his literary vocation, so often put off. How will he effect the transition from inertia to action? We know now that he is fully aware of the need to take account of the theoretical and structural basis of art, without relying solely on the emotional impact – indeed, the latter is ineffectual without the former. So it is that, after the series of 'moments bienheureux' in *Le Temps retrouvé*, he realises that these sensations need to be interpreted and converted into an 'équivalent spirituel' ['spiritual equivalent']: 'Or, ce moyen qui me paraissait le seul, qu'était-ce autre chose que faire une œuvre d'art?' (IV, 457) ['And this method, which seemed to me the sole method, what was it but the creation of a work of art?' (VI, 232/273)]. A momentous realisation, and one which the Narrator is now fit not to flinch from. Instinctively, what he instigates immediately is a review of the critical and theoretical possibilities which the rhetorical question opens up: having had a multiplicity of aesthetic encounters over the years, he is now in the position of formulating his own aesthetic programme.

These pages of *Le Temps retrouvé* (IV, 457–99; VI, 232–86/273–336) have been criticised as being dry and unnovelistic. This is surely erroneous, for the plot of the novel is now the dynamics of the Narrator's own literary production, and aesthetic questions are part and parcel of the story-line. A very striking feature of this section – hardly ever mentioned by critics, if at all – is the almost total absence of reference to other writers, painters and composers: there is the odd passing allusion, but generally speaking this is a solo effort on the Narrator's part, all his own work. It is above all an aesthetics

which is pragmatic, not doctrinaire, one which takes as its starting-point the Narrator's realisation (unsurprising after his meditations on Vinteuil's *Septet*) that

> nous ne sommes nullement libres devant l'œuvre d'art, que nous ne la faisons pas à notre gré, mais que, préexistant à nous, nous devons, à la fois parce qu'elle est nécessaire et cachée, et comme nous ferions pour une loi de la nature, la découvrir. (IV, 459)
>
> [in fashioning a work of art we are by no means free, that we do not choose how we shall make it but that it pre-exists us, and therefore we are obliged, since it is both necessary and hidden, to do what we should have to do if it were a law of nature – to discover it.] (VI, 235/276–7)

The ways of enacting this discovery are not obvious in themselves: the immediate task of the Narrator is to work out how, in his own case, this can best be done. Theory in itself is a hindrance: 'Une œuvre où il y a des théories est comme un objet sur lequel on laisse la marque du prix' (IV, 461) ['A work in which there are theories is like an object which still has its price-tag on it' (VI, 236/278)]; an aggressively realist, descriptive type of writing cannot simultaneously accommodate the individual's past and present *personae* (IV, 463–4; VI, 241/284); popular and patriotic literature debase reader and subject-matter alike (IV, 467; VI, 237–8/279–80); and documentary writing is hopelessly superficial (IV, 473; VI, 253/297–8).

The whole of the Narrator's artistic experiences are now concentrated on this one, crucial point of his existence. In a sudden flash, he grasps that 'tous ces matériaux de l'œuvre littéraire, c'était ma vie passée' (IV, 478) ['all these materials for a work of literature were simply my past life' (VI, 258/304)], a realisation that neatly dovetails with an assertion he had just made that '[le] livre essentiel, le seul livre vrai, un grand écrivain n'a pas, dans le sens courant, à l'inventer puisqu'il existe déjà en chacun de nous, mais à le traduire. Le devoir et la tâche d'un écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur' (IV, 469) ['the essential, the only true book, though in the ordinary sense of the word it does not have to be "invented" by a great writer – for it exists already in each one of us – has to be translated by him. The function and the task of a writer are those of a translator' (VI, 247/291)]. The attitude of the artisan prevails over that of the theorist in a gesture of modesty – a frame of mind which touchingly informs the final pages of the novel. So, having declared that 'chaque lecteur est quand il lit le propre lecteur de soi-même' (IV, 489) ['every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self' (VI, 273/322)], he prolongs the image by suggesting that readers of his future book would use it like one of those magnifying-glasses sold by the Combray optician: 'mon livre, grâce auquel je leur fournirais le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes' (IV, 610) ['it would be my book, but with its help I would furnish them with the means of reading what lay inside themselves' (VI, 432/508)]. And when it comes to the actual physical composition of the book, he would piece the individual sheets of paper together, 'je n'ose pas dire ambitieusement comme une cathédrale, mais tout simplement comme une robe' (*ibid.*) ['I dare not say ambitiously like a cathedral, but quite simply like a dress' (VI, 432/509)].

It is a disarming feeling – but a refreshingly agreeable one – that after so much fastidious and agonising investigation of the arts things should be 'reduced' to this humble level. Yet it demonstrates how completely the Narrator has learned the lesson that art and life intertwine inseparably, and in exercising his mastery in this area, he requires no further support from other artists' examples. It is in the humdrum details of existence that the seeds of greatness lie: he will take them as his starting-point and transform them into the permanency of art. 'La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent pleinement vécue, c'est la littérature' (IV, 474) ['Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated – the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived – is literature' (VI, 253/298)]. With this uncompromising credo freshly formulated, the Narrator can now leap into the future and become a creator. We as readers can readily share in his excitement as he embarks on his task: we know it will be a masterpiece, because we have just read Proust's.

NOTES

1 The fact is mentioned in all the biographies; see, for example, Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p.754.
2 On Mayol, see Tadié, *Marcel Proust*, p.598. On the street-criers, III, 624–5, 633–4, 643–4.
3 See Marcel Proust, *Pleasures and Regrets*, transl. Louise Varese with a Preface by D.J. Enright (London: Grafton Books, 1988), pp.138–9.
4 See Marcel Proust, *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*, transl. with an Introduction by John Sturrock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), pp.122–31.