

# The Upside-Down Mirror, or Reality Caught in the Act



Catherine Ébert-Zeminová

Faculty of Pedagogy, Charles University, Prague, Department of French Language and Literature  
catherine.ebert@pedf.cuni.cz

## SYNOPSIS

The present contribution, as part of this line of Proustian research that focuses on the specularity and auto-specularity of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, examines self-reflexive comparisons at a micro- or even nano-level. It emphasizes the examples that bring together an artistic and non-artistic element, but at the same time give rise to a blurring of the boundary between what I. A. Richards referred to as the tenor and vehicle, and consequently to a subtle interplay of their status. By using these categories to better understand the free movement between art and non-art, and the back-and-forth that takes place between them, we may arrive at more nuanced answers to the seemingly eternal question of Marcel Proust's relationship between 'art' and 'reality', one of the pivots of his work.

## KEYWORDS

Specularity; auto-specularity; comparison; ambiguity between tenor and vehicle; cognitive and ontological consequences of their undecidable/floating status.

## DOI

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23366680.2024.2.10>

Due to Proust's fame and the prestige of his work, many commonplaces have come to be associated with his name and legacy, to the point where it is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid any of these pervasive stereotypes. Here's one that's less likely to clutter up the beginning of a reflection: among other things, *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a monument to reflectivity. It saturates its horizontal scansion as much as its vertical thickness, and it penetrates right down to specular comparisons and metaphors, particularly the self-reflexive ones. And it is indeed to these figures that I return here. As they multiply, in the polygon that is *La Recherche*, the reflecting planes of a vertiginous intra-textuality of echoes and refractions, I shall offer here an attempt at fleshing out their 'anatomy' or, so to say, text-centred dissection based on the French method of *explication du texte*. This should provide a solid understanding of their hermeneutical significance, in particular the way they contribute not only to self-reflexive structures, but also to the overall meaning of the novel.



If one has the feeling that *La Recherche* has been subjected to the scalpel right down to its most secret recesses,<sup>1</sup> the subject has not remained fallow in this paper either. The findings that are important to my undertaking can be summed up as follows: the incriminating tropes, which I will call figurations because of their complexity, constitute one of the vehicles of Proustian poetics. First, they show that ‘*rapport*’, taken in its ontological and noetic aspects, is a fundamental spring of Proustian writing (Jacobée 2014, p. 175).<sup>2</sup> Among the tropes that posit resemblance or similarity, I have set my sight on those that bring together an artistic and non-artistic element. They weave parallelisms in an extremely subtle way, giving rise to an underlying game, by which I mean a semantic game rather than a structural or formal one — a game of status exchange. It consists in blurring the boundary between the compared and comparator — the tenor and the vehicle according to Richards, or in the free circulation of these two positions between what I shall call ‘art’ and ‘non-art’. Within these limits engendered by the twofold combinatorics — e.g. a one-way movement with a back-and-forth circularity —, these alternations put into question the traditional issue of the relationship between ‘art’ and ‘reality’, the overwhelming pivot of *La Recherche* — nothing could be clearer. What’s much less clear are the answers that it elicits, and which only a meticulous close reading — what I have elsewhere called a ‘nano-reading’ (Ébert-Zeminová 2017, p. 268) — can bring to light.

## I. AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING MIMESIS

*C’est qu’un matin de grande chaleur prématurée, les mille cris des enfants qui jouaient, des baigneurs plaisantant, des marchands de journaux, m’avaient décrit en traits de feu, en flammèches entrelacées, la plage ardente que les petites vagues venaient une à une arroser de leur fraîcheur ; alors avait commencé le concert symphonique mêlé au clapotement de l’eau, dans lequel les violons vibraient comme un essaim d’abeilles égaré sur la mer. Aussitôt j’avais désiré de réentendre le rire d’Albertine, de revoir ses amies, ces jeunes filles se détachant sur les flots, et restées dans mon souvenir le charme inséparable, la flore caractéristique de Balbec ; et j’avais résolu d’envoyer par Françoise un mot à Albertine, pour la semaine prochaine, tandis que, montant doucement, la mer, à chaque déferlement de lame, recouvrait complètement de coulées de cristal la mélodie dont les phrases apparaissaient séparées les unes des autres, comme ces anges luthiers qui, au faite de la cathédrale italienne, s’élèvent entre les crêtes de porphyre bleu et de jade écumant (Proust 1988, pp. 176–177; emphasis added; all references are to this edition).*

- 
- 1 All the aspects that one can imagine have already been not only noticed by research but detailed in ample and uncountable works. It is impossible to refer to them all. I will therefore give only a highly personal choice for each theme or question, the complete bibliography being impossible to control. Proust actually holds the record in the number of publications devoted to him (see Compagnon, ‘Proust: A Memoir of Literature’, a conference given at the Collège de France, December 5, 2012).
  - 2 We could nuance the ‘aesthetics of the relationship’ of which Jacobée speaks by ‘the aesthetics of correspondence’ to evoke the Baudelairian upstream of Proust. In this regard, see Vernet 2013.



Let's commence with a rather cursory glimpse: the narrator is on a second visit to Balbec, and the cheerful sounds of the summer season reach him through the open window of his hotel room. Everything suggests that the protagonist is lying on the bed before getting up, prolonging his rest, and savouring the delights of a state that has since come to be known as 'Proustian momentum'. The mind, halfway between sleep and wakefulness, has all the time it needs to indulge in ramblings in which outer and inner reality merge and communicate intimately. One of the clues to this situation, other aspects aside, is the primacy of acoustic perception, which progressively supplants visual sensations and seems to draw a framework within which the narrator reconstructs the scene with the help of hearing. In the mix of sounds thereby conveyed, we retain the sound of the sea and a piece of music, pointing to the protagonist's perception, respectively, of natural and artificial sound.<sup>3</sup> From the very outset, these two spheres, whose relationships and modalities we will follow, form the 'fabric' of the hero's experience.

The first phase of the figuration, 'les violons vibraient comme un essaim d'abeilles égaré sur la mer' (The violins vibrated like a swarm of bees lost on the sea), unambiguously compares the voice of the violins to the buzzing of bees. The transparency of the process, the clarity with which it separates the sphere of the compared from that of the comparator, and with which these roles are distributed, is altogether unproblematic. The figurative movement here is then, in a brush stroke, moving from art (A), the tenor, to reality (R), the vehicle (Richard 1967).<sup>4</sup> The first section of figuration thus obeys the formulaic diagram  $Art \rightarrow Reality$ , which will be designated by the schema  $A \rightarrow R$ .

However, the following sequence is tinged with equivocation. In 'les phrases [de la mélodie] apparaissaient séparées les unes des autres, comme ces anges luthiers', figuration is now restricted to the artistic realm because it compares the fragments of a musical composition actually heard with the rhythm of an architectural element. It moves from the  $A \rightarrow R$  regime to the  $A \rightarrow A_1$  regime, and thus encapsulates, if not emphasizes, the figurability of one art by another.<sup>5</sup> This shift can be understood either broadly or narrowly. In the first case, it can be argued that the synesthetic affinity of the two arts, whatever their nature, acts as a synecdoche to denote the reciprocal convertibility of all the arts. The action of the figure would be tantamount to an alchemical operation that functions in accordance with the heritage of Symbolism starting with Wagnerism, which in many ways serves as the model for Proust's

3 We leave aside the hubbub of the laughing voices of vacationers, whose position straddling nature and culture is not without interest, as well as the implications of a probable narrativized discourse (*discours narrativisé*) that the beginning of the quote seems to promise.

4 For a gloss on Richards' definition, see Elton 1949, pp. 303–304.

5 It also falls under what Éric Jacobée calls 'multi-artistic metaphors' (Jacobée 2014, pp. 175–204). As this is not a theoretical reflection and in anticipation of what follows, I dismiss the question, which it would otherwise be difficult to avoid, of knowing if, and if so how, multi-artistic comparisons consolidate Proust's aesthetics in which the word art is often used not only in its current sense of the artistic sphere, but in its Latin meaning of know-how, equivalent of Greek *techné*, therefore of *poiesis* in its original sense.



work (Bedriomo 1984; Picard 2006, pp. 449–466; Šuman 2017, pp. 421–457; Tarasti 2016, pp. 273–305).<sup>6</sup>

But the figure moves deeper towards a latent significance, or rather, one that complements its explicit meaning. The coming and going of the waves is perceived, it should be remembered, by hearing, as the narrator, lying in his hotel room, has no view of the beach. If the breaking of the waves produces an acoustic rhythm that alternates *crescendi* and *decrescendi*, the subject hears the sea in turn when the wave breaks. The sound intensity reaches its highest point, and a fragment of the melody when, on the ebb, the sound of the water falls back. As a result, the comparator can also correlate with the natural sound, the latter being one of the phases of the alternation underlying the explicit level of figuration (the sea, with each breaking wave, covered the melody [...] whose phrases appeared...). Alongside the  $A \rightarrow A_1$  regime, we would thus obtain the virtual  $R \rightarrow A$  regime. It will reappear in the rest of the crested trope, completing our review of figurative modalities. In the association that he attaches to the angels standing between the crests of blue porphyry and foaming jade, the operator of equivocity is the word ‘crest’, provided we refuse to get away with declaring it a mere coincidence of vocabulary. The word may seem innocuous in the way it fits in with the contextual logic previously put in place, but it’s this very fact that, if we look at it closely, immediately reveals the ambivalence of the relationships, their radiance in all directions.<sup>7</sup> As the crest develops the vehicle, namely an architectural decoration (the luthier angels), the meaning of the word immediately activated, in accordance with the dictionary definition,<sup>8</sup> is that of ‘the upper edge of a building element’. It is well known that Proust thinks of architecture as a point of reference for the work that is to come,<sup>9</sup> and thus counts among the many parallels between the writer’s work and that of other artists or craftsmen. We are free to agree or disagree with the primacy of the architectural device. Proust’s defenders contest the opposing camp’s reservations, taking the paratexts, and in particular the author’s correspondence, as evidence (Proust 2004, p. 913–915; letter to Jean de Gaigneron, August 1, 1919). Whichever side one takes, it remains undisputed that this analogy was especially dear to Proust and may therefore convey the meanings (motifs) of the sequence/syllepsis that the architectural *paragone* expresses about literary creation in other passages of *La Recherche*. In view of this resonance, the deep semantic latency is illuminated through a binary logic that the crest mobilizes through the underlying but necessary difference between two orientations. If the word refers more broadly to the elevated part of a relief feature, the ridge line, the difference between bottom and top, plane and prominence, crest and hollow means that a vector of figuration is verticality. It might aspire to transcendence, since it is above all the vertical axis that gives the Gothic cathedral its rhythm. That said, this is not the only one to work within the trope. The activity of image-making reaches far beyond. The vehicle of

6 As for the ‘theoretical’ scope of these comparisons, see Vidotto 2020.

7 That Sophie Duval (2007, no paginated) calls ‘iridescence of multidirectional meaning’.

8 ATILF, see <http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/advanced.exe?8;s=2590339215>.

9 Criticism tends to highlight it to the detriment of other parallelisms. Alongside the founding work of Luc Fraisse (*L’Œuvre-cathédrale*, 1990), see Bourlier 1980 and Defer — Coutant 2016.



the simile, which we can assume was chosen from a wealth of others, also translates the balancing of fullness and emptiness (similar to that of merlons and battlements). But this series, in which the roles of background and figure are equally reversible,<sup>10</sup> unfolds along the horizontal axis. If the trope takes a turn at a given moment by doubling a vertical alternation with a horizontal one, it doesn't function in a simply linear fashion: it describes a path of digression or deviation. In this manner, it invites, and even compels, the interpreting imagination and the interpreting image to take first one path, then the other, to branch off, to go back before moving forward again. The actual functioning of the trope, thanks to its structure, is thus analogous to that of memory, but also to that of reading and writing, since it demonstrates and requires the non-linearity of inner time. In particular, the trope not only represents — in the etymological sense of putting into the form of an image — the horizontal and vertical lines and their complementarity, but also their articulation, and thus their cooperation included in its semantic functioning.

As the crest-architecture link connects the trope to the correspondences between architecture and literature, it can be further read in the light of this parallel and given additional meaning. The relationship between the terms of each denotes, wherever a building appears in the book's vehicle, the balance of the work on which its survival depends, and which can only be achieved through mastery of the laws of construction.<sup>11</sup> The crest figuration is a sense experience, but the latent parallelism between architecture and writing can endow it with a qualitatively different sense. Given its recurrence and growing importance, it's possible, though perhaps difficult, to envisage its activation, and to admit that, at this very start, the trope represents perception itself as a pure construction. In this case, the figurative endorsement of the crest testifies to the value the narrator-Proust places on the structuring power of perceptual activities and operations. Through this initial work of arrangement, perception resembles and precludes writing, being a prior structuring or pre-structuring.

It informs a non-reflexive discourse, but still one that straddles narration, description, and even introspection, as is the rule with Proust, albeit to a lesser degree here than elsewhere. The hybridization of discourses has obviously not gone unnoticed,<sup>12</sup> linking in a symbiotic intimacy the immediacy of perception and its examination, the affinity between the bewitching power of the sensible accompanied by a tension towards the work of intelligence, or more substantial intellectual elaboration ('intellectualizing' experience, *TR*, p. 483), and the narrator's diligence in yielding to this call. The mechanism operates in the sphere of the involuntary, but it is all the more assumed. The writer takes it upon himself and cultivates his availability to it, until he finds in it the masterly principle of his aesthetic. This efficiency, towards which the trope points in its underground niche or in a fold, is also that of consciousness itself, where the two levels — the sensible and the intelligible, the other pair of bilateral-

10 Which enters the fundamental principle of the psychology of perception, an aspect of Proust that has already been pointed out (e.g. Fraisse 2011).

11 One of the recurrences of architecture appears in the passage located at the epilogue of the novel (*Le Temps retrouvé*; Proust 1988, p. 637–638) where it is directly linked to the work to come in a parade of nine comparators that Vidotto (2023) describes as 'dizzying'.

12 E. g. as a 'poetics of perception' or a 'writing of perception' (Gibhardt 2011, p. 10, 11 ff.).



isms at work in *La Recherche* (Perrier 2011, unpaginated) — converge, wide open to the world, ready to gather its epiphany in peak-moments, one might be tempted to say.

By virtue of *La Recherche*'s composition *en abyme*, it is possible to argue that the meaning of the series of alternations we've seen at work is extended by an ultimate component. It is embedded in the infra-semantics of figuration, and would render the pulsation, the endless palpitation of the work in which the alternations take place.

We have no doubt noticed that in both regimes,  $A \rightarrow A_1$  and  $R \rightarrow A$  (music  $\rightarrow$  architecture and the sound of the sea  $\rightarrow$  architecture), the crest transposes the auditory into the visual, i.e. the fleeting into the lasting, the fluid into the solid. As a result, the relationship between figurative and non-figurative features becomes more complex in a few ways. Proust's conversion of a rhythm perceptible only in duration into a rhythm realized in the simultaneity or instantaneity of vision, while not new,<sup>13</sup> is surprising. Proust is reputed to have been fond of strategies that render the dynamism of the psyche above all else, 'defacing' language and endowing it with a suppleness that captures the transience and diffuse nature of transitions. In short, Proustian writing constantly questions the instability of appearances, and, needless to say, this narrative strategy places the author of *La Recherche* at the heart of modernity. To which we might add that the figures that fix the fugitive obey another great Proustian ambition, that of removing the impermanent from the inexorable *panta rhei* of the universe — from the memento of *tempus fugit* — to house it with the timeless or rather atemporal essence of being in a work of art: an ambition that is also modern, dependent in this case on the modernity in which Baudelaire plays his master part, and which can be apprehended as the basis of one of his major paradoxes (see Compagnon 1990).

## II. MIMESIS IN A FEEDBACK LOOP

That said, the complexity goes even further, also affecting the boundaries between tenor and vehicle. In the syntagmatic and functional structure of figuration, as well as in terms of patent semantics, the crest belongs to the vehicle. The fact that it merely develops and specifies this order, and that it depends on it syntactically, does nothing to diminish the significance of the phenomenon we're about to describe. The usual denotative meaning of the word is divided into two semantic areas, the crest of the roof and the crest of the wave, linked by their isomorphism — based on the motif of the highest part of a concrete, natural or cultural entity. But the second semantic area happens to be that of tenor itself. It might seem pedantic to draw attention to it, but that would be to ignore the fact that the coincidence is not self-evident. And it holds up all the more because it is supported and fleshed out by two elements that lend credence to it, but which we'll bracket for the moment, preferring to return to them at the end of this analysis. The weaving of the figuration, whose subtlety is

<sup>13</sup> 'Rhythm is a quality of movement.' (Guyau 1884, p. 46). In this sense, the Greeks spoke of the rhythm of a statue, highlighting the idea of continuous and fluid movement specific to rhythm (from  $\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ , flow), whether this movement is virtual (suggested by objects) or real (music, language).



not surprising in Proust, betrays a deep logic, whether it be the fruit of intuition, the unconscious, imaging work, or on the contrary an intellectual elaboration. The result is that the border between the two poles of the figuration becomes thinner until it forms only a diaphanous screen. The precariousness of the demarcation line between tenor and vehicle with the semantic bifidity of the crest from which it results allows the second denotative area of the crest to semantically reinsert this word in the order of the tenor which, through the reciprocity of co-text, reactivates it (tautology, circular path); or, to make it shorter, the vehicle reintroduces itself into the tenor. In concrete terms, at the risk of paraphrasing the text, the wave-crest showing or floating through the architecture-crest recovers the sound of the waves which intersperses the piece of music played by the orchestra.<sup>14</sup> This turn, about-face, or slippage of meaning therefore re-establishes or decompartmentalizes the isotopy. And this becomes the terrain in which the latent line of figuration can engage. From this point on, the figurative process splits into two. The comparison continues to follow the straight line of the  $A \rightarrow A_1$  regime, the manifest line introduced by the angels, while on its latent plane it forks or even turns backwards, so much so that, passing from crest-architecture to crest-wave, it passes from A to R. As soon as the vehicle has completed its backward movement and re-joins the tenor, the trope returns to its starting point to close again in a loop  $R \rightarrow A \rightarrow R$ .

By way of partial conclusion, we would like to make four observations about the sophisticated structure we have just noted. Firstly, it could mean, in a very discrete way, that the functions of the compounds of a *simile* are reversible within a single trope, and that they can swap positions (I).<sup>15</sup> At first sight, this observation might seem obvious, however the consequences not only of their reversibility, but of their actual reversion, are more far-reaching. For — secondly — the to-and-fro of tenor and vehicle between the aesthetic sphere (art) and the extra-aesthetic sphere (reality), could imply that it is not only art that ‘holds up the mirror’ to reality, but it is also reality that holds up the mirror to art and reflects it (II). The traditional meaning of *mimesis* is inverted by the regime, in the  $A \rightarrow R$  stage, as is the hierarchy it presupposes. This precise point, the conception of the relationship between ‘art’ and ‘life’ on which centuries of our culture have pondered, divides Proustian criticism into two opposing camps. While the majority (since the beginning of Proust’s reception, passing through Gérard Genette and up to Sophie Duval, for example) maintain that the writer gives clear primacy to art over life, others (Anne Simon) are reserved about such a clear-cut solution. They assert that the great ‘master of synaesthesia’, the great herald-hero of the quest for unity, synthesis and totality-completeness-plenitude, aspired rather to make the two communicate and even commune in almost sacral fashion; and that, although art legitimizes and surpasses life, Proust recognizes life as a foundation, a reservoir necessary to art, without which the latter would be undernourished and wither away. This schematic overview of Proust’s reception brings us to the third point. The shaking of the tenor and vehicle within an elaborate *simile*

14 We reverse the elements whose alternation produces the rhythm given that they are reversible, to give more relief to our analysis.

15 L. Fraisse remarks the same reversibility in elements pertaining to the autoreferential auto-reflectivity (Fraisse 2011).



seems to confirm the second attitude: that of preserving reality from the scant weight that Proust's opponents believe it to carry, and which often goes so far as to misunderstand or even despise reality. As for the figure and interpretation we propose, they find strong support in a passage from *Le Temps retrouvé*. In this volume, which is both a key to the whole and its cornerstone, the narrator's firm resolve to put an end to worldly pursuits and devote himself to his work brings him face to face with the double challenge that every artist must inevitably encounter, the question of 'what' and 'how'. For Proust, as we know, it was a matter of extracting from his life the great truths or essences whose universality depends on their uniqueness, and of housing them in his work. If the work thus takes in and gathers the writer's personal existence, we're back to the good old-fashioned equation of work = life. But, according to the narrator, the resemblance also goes in the opposite direction, a point of view that is not usually appreciated by the general public:

[...] *on ne songe pas assez que la vie de l'écrivain n'est pas terminée avec cette œuvre*<sup>16</sup>  
 [...]. *À ce premier point de vue*<sup>17</sup> *l'œuvre doit être considérée seulement comme un amour malheureux qui en présage fatalement d'autres et qui fera que la vie ressemblera à l'œuvre, que le poète n'aura presque plus besoin d'écrire, tant il pourra trouver dans ce qu'il a écrit la figure anticipée de ce qui arrivera* (Proust 1988, p. 483).

In the final analysis, the sphere of life and the sphere of work do indeed communicate in both directions, like proverbial vases, or, if you like, they constitute a circuit, a path of circulation, or two mirrors situated one opposite the other and joined together by their rigorously reciprocal exchange. In other words, we come up against a substantial non-decidability between referential and self-referential specularity (III).

And finally, this circulation or circularity, detected at the micro-level, recopies the grandiose circularity formed by *La Recherche* as a monumental whole (IV), and thus endorses the fractal character of the work, which in this respect heralds the darling of postmodernity.<sup>18</sup>

We said we were saving for last a syntagm that develops the central focus of figuration and hence of our work: the crest. There are two reasons for this postponement. Firstly, the phrase is in the position of an additional element, in that its examination provides a further argument in favour of our thesis, albeit not a decisive one. And secondly, such an examination would risk blunting and rendering less coherent the analysis of the essential framework of figuration.

16 By this the narrator means his future work as well as works of this genre.

17 That of pain, of sorrow, because its experience 'serves' the writer in its polarity between suffering and happiness.

18 The fractal of course differs from circularity but is not far from it in that both forms participate in displaying it and pose the challenge of rebound and iterability. An example of the middle level like a joint between two almost Pascalian dimensions, the fractal form appears in a heraldic element. When Monsieur de Cambremer explains to Madame Verdurin the arms of their family (*Sodome et Gomorrhe*, p. 353), he evokes a recrossed cross, a cross whose branches end in four small crosses.





The analyzed passage closes with two determinative complements of the ‘crest’, set in its final sequence like two jewels that enhance the finesse of its elaboration. The two nouns (‘porphyre’ and ‘jade’) work in common. Chosen from the same referential sphere, mineralogy, they maintain the semantic range of the crest-architecture as building materials, thus consolidating its semantic coherence. But insofar as porphyry and jade are precious stones, they create a further layer beneath this manifest line of figuration, since they are endowed with an underlying rhetorical and discursive history that was, at the time Proust wrote *La Recherche*, recent. This type of mineral is well known to Parnasse and Symbolo-Decadentism (Šuman — Ébert-Zeminová 2022). Let’s not forget that they owe it mainly to three qualities. Parnasse privileged them above all for their decorative value and hardness, which predisposed them to evoke, *eo ipso*, the virtuosity of the master stonecutter, goldsmith, or jeweller, as well as, in the associative network of fixity and immobility, the permanence of the work whose perfection puts it beyond the reach of time.<sup>19</sup> In Symbolo-Decadentism, gemstones were favoured for their shimmering and reflections, but the same aesthetic qualities lent themselves to two distinct aspirations: Decadence’s showy, overstated ‘decorativism’ and, through the unsettling interplay of their diaphaneity — i.e. the half-tone shifts between transparency and opacity, a common effect of the brilliance and reflectivity of these materials — Symbolism’s Platonic preoccupation with surface and depth, metaphors for the pairing of appearance and essence, the sensible and the intelligible.

Although they belong to the immobile and solid, the cores of the two complements maintain the referential link between the crest and the wave: the first, [crests] of blue porphyry, via the association between the colour of the rock and that, emblematic, of the sea; the second, of foaming jade, by means of two links. The colour of this gemstone also contributes to the reference to the sea, as it features a vast range of blues and greens, and even their mixtures. It varies from pale green or pale blue to dark blue and dark green, from apple-green to green-black, so much so that the range of its appearances covers the chromaticism of the sea. Apart from that, the epithet makes the second complement of crest, unlike the first, a figure, which complicates the situation, without saying that its function as determinative of another figure that’s quite complex in itself, as we’ve seen, increases its potential. For this reason, the entire sequence, ‘les crêtes [...] de jade écumant’, calls for a two-stage approach. Analysis must first isolate the syntagm to deconstruct it in its immanence, and then take into account the double anchoring of the governing noun and reconsider the complement in the light of the whole. ‘Jade’ splits its qualifier ‘écumant’ into two ranges of meaning. The figurative and interpretative activity is then concurrently magnetized by each of them.

The force of attraction of the first range of semantics of ‘écumant’ directs this activity — or imagination of matter according to Bachelard — towards a supple, fluffy

---

<sup>19</sup> It is through this aptitude that they solicit the imagination of the material: in the lead the Parnassian Baudelaire with his beauty like ‘a dream of stone’, the heroes and above all the heroines adorned with goldwork with unbridled opulence and transformed in statues, in barely animated and frozen beings, literally petrified, in a hieratic, languid or sensual posture, all in all *tremenda* and *fascinans*, Narcissus and Salome of all stripes, hetaerae, lovers and mistresses of the Byzantine novel with the eternal Salammô for tutelary figure...



consistency, given that foam is composed of air and water. The starting point of the hermeneutic journey, the image that determines it, is itself determined by the sensory qualities of gas and liquid: the suppleness, fluidity, and absence of proper form, and therefore of sharp, reliable contours, that these two states of matter imply. And as the figurative *manœuvre* brings them together through and in foam, it denotes in its own way the chemical and physical kinship of liquid and gaseous bodies that the respective sciences have manifested by subsuming them under the common appellation and category of fluids. The conjunction of these substances, with their similar, if not identical, material qualities for the imagination, obviously adds to them, especially to the vagueness that the impetus of the imagination, operating in sequence, projects downstream of its effervescence and sparkle. The associative logic of the first semantic range of 'écumant' then drives the *translatio* (*tropein*) operation, moving between the sensible and the intelligible towards the image of the malleable, the unstable, even the elusive and evanescent, because the elusive links up with the fleeting, and the inconsistent with the inconstant. Acting in this way, i.e. setting it in motion, energizing it, the simile proceeds in the opposite direction to that seen fixing the movement of the sea when the breaking of the waves was compared to the spacing of statues in regime R → A. And it's almost superfluous to add that it deploys the same power as the gemstone figure, for just like them, liquids and gases occupy a place of honour among the *topoi* of the moving.

But 'écumant' also suggests another image. It can refer to the design of the mineral. Nature has arranged elongated lines and curves by winding and unwinding them, softening the outline, diluting the contour in the iridescent indefiniteness of a line, or re-absorbing the line in a watercolour opalization. In fact, it's almost impossible for the texture of the stone not to be reminiscent of waves, or at the very least of the various formations of water and especially foam on a stormy sea. In other words, the second range of meanings of foaming is opposed to the first and produces an opposite effect: the drawing engraved in stone by cataclysms or millennial transformations and associated by the intrinsic continuity of the figuration with the sea (as a reminder, the breaking of the waves), freezes its movement in the texture bequeathed to us by 'the mists of time' and which associates an exceptional solidity, jade being a very hard and therefore very resistant stone. This interplay of competing, not to say conflicting, meanings of the figure imbues its syntagmatic progression as well as its verticality with a tension similar to that which we observed with 'crest'.

Our examination of the foaming jade, which we wanted to be as close to an anatomy as possible, has revealed several particularities. Firstly, the qualifier ('jade écumant') of the main figure ('crête') is constructed analogously to its overriding structure. These forms, mimicking the fractal in the latter image ('porphyre bleu'), complementing the one we have identified between the circularity of the figure and the circularity of the work as a whole (*cf. supra*). The triple nature of the fractal testifies to the fruitfulness of the principle in *La Recherche*.

Secondly, when the foaming jade, to which a range of meanings gives the appearance of an oxymoron, places two opposing states of matter side by side, the narrator chooses the metaphors of the permanent and ephemeral with topical value (as components of *topoi*) for each of the two poles. As a result, the qualifier is not only endowed with an underlying rhetorical or discursive history that excavates it *en*

*abyss* but is also perfectly balanced. This ingenious symmetry, apart from making it a filigree jewel that's a source of enjoyment, increases its evocative power tenfold, setting it up as an example of happy cooperation in which the topical corroborates the tropic and *vice versa*.

Thirdly, if it's true that the conflict between the permanent and ephemeral, traditionally associated in our culture with art and life respectively, is one of Proust's overriding leitmotifs, and if it's also true that it translates into the twin nature of the novelist's sensualist idealism and idealist sensualism, it's no less true that the fractal observed above infuses this conflict right down to the micro- or nano-echelons of the text.

I shall like to end on a note that I imagine the novelist would not have denied. The returns to his personality and his texts, of which our common reflections presented some important milestones, mark out our recent past and our present. Through these eternal returns, *La Recherche* proves to be, again and again, a work of singular scope and timelessness. Through architecture, some of whose binding processes we have explored, it reiterates a law of high cohesion that ancient Hermeticism affirmed and that modern science, despite its superiority complex, has been forced to ratify. Marcel Proust's work-universe makes this law of cosmic analogies, in which the infinitely small resembles the infinitely large by reflecting it, its own, and through the exalting and unifying power it possesses, it invites us to take part in it — the part that belongs to us.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

**Proust, Marcel:** *À la recherche du temps perdu, Sodome et Gomorrhe II*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié. Gallimard, coll. Pléiade, Paris 1988.

**Proust, Marcel:** *Lettres*, ed. Phillipe Kolb. Plon, Paris 2004.

### Secondary Sources

**Compagnon, Antoine:** *Les Cinq Paradoxes de la modernité*. Seuil, Paris 1990.

**Bedriomo, Emile:** *Wagner, Proust et la coïncidence des arts*. Gunter Narr Verlag, Tübingen — Éditions J.-M. Place, Paris 1984.

**Bourlier, Kay:** *Marcel Proust et l'architecture*. Presses de l'Université de Montréal, Montréal 1980.

**Defer, Dominique — Coutant, Francis:** *Proust and Initiatory Architecture*. Honoré Champion, Paris 2016.

**Duval, Sophie:** L'“essence précieuse” de l'œuvre proustienne : l'humour et la mise en jeu de la valeur. In: Dominique Rabaté (ed.) : *L'art et question de la valeur*. Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, Bordeaux 2007, unpaginated

<<https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pub.2585>> [14. 7. 2024].

**Ébert-Zeminová, Catherine:** De l'un au deux : dans l'entre-deux. Symbolisme ou décadence ? In: Eva Voldřichová Beránková, Šárka Graurová (eds.): *Dusk and Dawn: Literature between Two Centuries*. FF UK, Prague 2017, pp. 266–303.

**Elton, William:** 'A Glossary of the New Criticism (Continued)'. *Poetry* 73, 1949, no. 5, pp. 296–307.

**Fraisse, Luc:** L'autoréflexivité en pratique. *Poétique* 166, 2011, no. 2, pp. 155–170.

**Fraisse, Luc:** *L'Œuvre-cathédrale. Proust et l'architecture médiévale* [1990]. Classiques Garnier, Paris 2014.





**Guyau, Jean-Marie:** *Problems of Contemporary Aesthetics*. Alcan, Paris 1884.

**Jacobée, Éric:** Métaphores et comparaisons de Marcel Proust et recreation du sens dans des dictionnaires d'hier et d'aujourd'hui. In: Giovanni Dotoli (ed.): *La Révolution du dictionnaire (XIXe-XXIe siècles)*. Hermann, coll. Vertige de la langue, Paris 2014, pp. 175–204.

**Perrier, Guillaume:** Architecture médiévale et art de la mémoire dans *À la recherche du temps perdu*, de Marcel Proust. *Littérature et architecture* 42, 2011, no. 1, pp. 13–22.

**Picard, Timothée:** Wagner selon Proust : une dramaturgie de l'écriture sotériologique. In: *Wagner, une question européenne : Contribution à une étude du wagnérisme (1860–2004)*. Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2006, pp. 449–466.

**Ricœur, Paul:** *La Métaphore vive*. Seuil, Paris 1997.

**Richards, Ivor Armstrong:** *Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Oxford University Press, London 1967.

**Simon, Anne:** *Proust ou le réel retrouvé. Le sensible et son expression dans À la recherche du temps perdu*. Honoré Champion, Paris 2018.

**Šuman, Závíř:** Laboratoire tardif du symbolisme : doctrine vitaliste de Tancrède de Visan. In: Eva Voldřichová Beránková — Šárka Grauová (eds.): *Dusk and Dawn: Literature between Two Centuries*. FF UK, Prague 2017, pp. 421–457.

**Šuman, Závíř — Ébert-Zeminová, Catherine:** L'indécidable comme valeur esthétique de la décadence : le *je ne sais quoi* dans *Monsieur de Phocas* de Jean Lorrain. *Écho des études romanes* 18, 2022, no. 2, pp. 73–85.

**Vernet, Matthieu:** *Mémoire et oubli de Baudelaire chez Proust*. Dissertation, under the direction of Antoine Compagnon, defended 23.11.2013 in Paris 4.

**Vidotto, Ilaria:** *Proust et la comparaison vive*. Classiques Garnier, Paris 2020.

**Vidotto, Ilaria:** Vertiges de la comparaison. À propos d'un passage du *Temps retrouvé*. *MaLiCe. Magazine des littératures & cultures à l'ère du numérique*, 2023, no. 17 <<https://cielam.univ-amu.fr/malice/articles/vertiges-comparaison-a-propos-dun-passage-temps-retrouve>> [14.10.2023].