

Boris Roman Gibhardt

Configuring Poetic Time

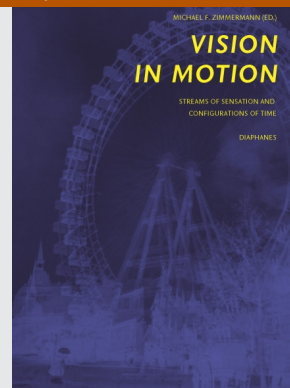
Figures of Movement and Perception in Marcel Proust's "À la recherche du temps perdu"

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Zusammenfassung

Vision is not mere registration of what enters, via the gateway of our eyes, from the outside world into our inner consciousness. Understanding the act of seeing as mirroring the outside world in mental images overlooks its temporal aspect. From Berkeley to Helmholtz, from Goethe to Cézanne, new discourses based on the physiology of the sense organs lead to new conceptions of vision not only conceived of as a mental process, but as a cognitive activity. Even before Freud interpreted dreams, seeing was conceived of as accompanying our life even when we sleep. However, to understand even the stream of the sensations, we have to configure them in pictures. Since the 19th century, the media reflect about the confrontation of seeing as a diachronic activity and of perception as coded in synchronic images. The contributions to the volume investigate the opposition of the stream of sensations and the configuration of time – from early illustrations of plants to the avant-gardes, from gesture to cinema, from decapitation to dance, from David Hume to Bergson and Deleuze. The main objective is a critical examination of images rendering vision in motion, without reducing them to the temporality of narrative.



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(Hg.)**

Vision in Motion Streams of Sensation and Configurations of Time

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**Configuring Poetic Time
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*À la recherche du temps perdu***

Poetics of Perception: Succession, Superposition, Variation

Marcel Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1924) contains a rich reservoir of examples of speech used not simply to recount perception but to mold an equivalent of it by appealing to the reader's power of imagination. This equivalent can act back on the empirical perception through precise literary observation. Accordingly, speech is not conceived as a mere logical instrument by means of which external signs are deciphered. It is a perceptual organ *sui generis* that, although it has its own imponderables and blind spots, so to speak, also produces its own memory and its own order.

In this sense, Proust questions any vitalistic perception of existence secured by experience. He counters the notion of a continuity of impressions that characterized nineteenth-century novels with an assertion of the interminability and alterability of impressions.¹ For instance, in this passage the novel's protagonist tries to perceive the elusive object of his passion, Albertine, as an interconnected whole, at least while she is asleep:

Albertine m'avait souvent paru différente, maintenant, comme si, en accélérant prodigieusement la rapidité des changements de perspective et des changements de coloration que nous offre une personne dans nos diverses rencontres avec elle, j'avais voulu les faire tenir toutes en quelques secondes pour recréer expérimentalement le phénomène qui diversifie l'individualité d'un être et tirer les unes des autres, comme d'un étui, toutes les possibilités qu'il enferme, dans ce court trajet de mes lèvres vers sa joue, c'est dix Albertine que je vis; cette seule jeune fille étant comme une déesse à plusieurs têtes, celle que j'avais vue en dernier, si je tentais de m'approcher d'elle, faisait place à une autre (II, 660).²

- 1 Rainer Warning, ed., *Marcel Proust Schreiben ohne Ende. Prousts Recherche im Spiegel ihrer textkritischen Aufarbeitung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994); Boris Roman Gibhardt, *Das Auge der Sprache. Ornament und Lineatur bei Marcel Proust* (Berlin-Munich-Paris: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2011); Uta Felten and Volker Roloff, eds., *Die Korrespondenz der Sinne. Wahrnehmungsästhetische und intermediale Aspekte im Werk von Proust* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2008).
- 2 Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–1989).

Albertine had often appeared different to me, so now—as if, prodigiously accelerating the speed of the changes of perspective and changes of coloring which a person presents to us in the course of our various encounters, I had sought to contain them all in the space of a few seconds so as to reproduce experimentally the phenomenon which diversifies the individuality of a fellow-creature, and to draw out one from another, like a nest of boxes, all the possibilities that it contains—so now, during this brief journey of my lips towards her cheek, it was ten Albertines that I saw; this one girl being like a many-headed goddess, the head I had seen last, when I tried to approach it, gave way to another (III, 499).³

Perception is nothing but the reflection of one's own fancy cast back upon the coverer. It decomposes any recollection. Imagination and perception cannot be sundered. Rather they mutually stimulate each other:

Cette fugacité des êtres [...] nous met dans cet état de poursuite où rien n'arrête plus l'imagination (II, 154).

This evanescence of persons [...] urges us into that state of pursuit in which there is no longer anything to stem the tide of imagination (IV, 513).⁴

Out of this impossibility of representation follows a denial of the boundedness of the images of perception (their “*aspect défini*,” or definite forms)⁵ in favor of their succession, as “*images successives*” (successive images).⁶ Proust also addresses the aim of depiction:

faire surgir de ce que nous croyions une chose à aspect défini, les cent autres choses qu'elle est tout aussi bien, puisque chacune est relative à une perspective non moins légitime (II, 660).

3 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. III, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2003 [1993]), 499.

4 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. IV, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1998 [1992]), 513.

5 Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. II, 60.

6 *Ibid.*, vol. IV, 504.

evoke out of what we believed to be a thing with one definite aspect the hundred other things which it may equally well be, since each is related to a no less legitimate perspective (III, 499).⁷

As will be demonstrated in the following, Proust's point of departure in procuring a creative equivalent to perception in the literary art is the figurativeness of the line. This metaphor returns in innumerable variations of the description of Albertine. One example:

l'exact point de départ, l'amorce inévitable de lignes invisibles en lesquelles l'œil ne pouvait s'empêcher de les prolonger, merveilleuses, engendrées autour de la femme comme le spectre d'une figure idéale projetée sur les ténèbres (II, 341).

the exact starting-point, the inevitable focus of invisible lines into which the eye could not help prolonging them—lines marvelously engendered round the woman like the specter of an ideal figure projected against the darkness (III, 46).⁸

Proust juxtaposes duration with succession, which never threatens to become identical. The uniqueness and unmistakableness of the individual are eroded; what comes back transformed is, rather, one's own projection. The stationary object has already been established as hardly denotable; at most, a saturated recollection of it enters the awareness as disruptions and deformations. The perception of motion poses a still greater challenge, as seen in this cubistic atomization of the perceptual data of a form in the act of motion:

Quelque chose pourtant me frappa qui n'était pas sa figure que je ne voyais pas, [...] mais la disproportion extraordinaire entre le nombre de points différents par où passa son corps et le petit nombre de secondes pendant lesquelles cette sortie qui avait l'air de la sortie tentée par un assiégé, s'exécuta (IV, 389).

Something, however, struck me: not his face, which I did not see, [...] but the extraordinary disproportion between the number of different points which his body successively occupied and the very small number of seconds within which he

7 Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. III, 499.

8 *Ibid.*, 46.

made good this departure which had almost the air of a sortie from a besieged town (VI, 174–75).⁹

The vaguer the perceptual impression, the more the writing in the description itself becomes motion: incapable of hitting the core, incapable of letting go of the shell. When the narrator writes about nearing Albertine’s face—“l’approche de mes lèvres ne différait que par une déviation de lignes infinitésimales”—Proust’s interest in linguistically evoking the line in metaphor is striking. The “différentes superpositions de lignes” characterize, on the one hand, the fragmentation of the viewed, and, on the other hand, the ever-recommenced circling around this viewed absence. The “infinitely small differences of the lines” only yield “mobile faces” (*visages mobiles*) rather than identifiable physiognomies.

The same applies to the shifts in perspective in a landscape. The moving image generated by driving away from the church steeples of Martinville, whose equivalent here is an anthropomorphic dance of silhouettes, is fixed by the youthful narrator and seems to him to be a sign of his literary talent:¹⁰

Ils [the steeples] me faisaient penser aussi aux trois jeunes filles d’une légende, abandonnées dans une solitude où tombait déjà l’obscurité; et tandis que nous nous éloignons au galop, je les vis timidement chercher leur chemin et après quelques gauches trébuchements de leurs nobles silhouettes, se serrer les uns contre les autres, glisser l’un derrière l’autre, ne plus faire sur le ciel encore rose qu’une seule forme noire, charmante et résignée, et s’effacer dans la nuit (I, 180).

They made me think, too, of three maidens in a legend, abandoned in a solitary place over which night had begun to fall; and as we drew away from them at a gallop, I could see them timidly seeking their way, and after some awkward, stumbling movements of their noble silhouettes, drawing close to one another, gliding one behind another, forming now against the still rosy sky no more than a single dusky shape, charming and resigned, and so vanishing in the night (I, 256).¹¹

9 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. VI, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1999 [1992]), 174–75.

10 Note: Italic indicates space; black indicates time; and underlined indicates time and space.

11 Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. I, 256.

Leo Spitzer spoke of self-intertwined “drawing” and “meandering patterns” to describe Proust’s sentences.¹² The last quotation does, in fact, follow the content in its form. Its clauses directly imitate the simultaneous and double advancement of distance (between observer and object) and time (the growing dusk).¹³ This meandering of the line of sight—“mais la route changea de direction”—engenders the image sequence of three young girls “awkward[ly] stumbling” toward the church towers until, at “vanishing into the night,” image and phrase, substance and form, time and space simultaneously expire: a simultaneity of empirical experience and literary image that unifies *signifiant* and *signifié*. This unity is different from a retrospective metaphorical representation; it imitates modal perception in “real time” because the anthropomorphic metaphorical projection of the young girls, those “images it triggered” and their poetic *signifié*, is a result of the viewer’s point of view, while the meandering advancement of the carriage and the phrase, the *signifiant*, ends at the same time as the empirical vision.

One scene that the novel’s hero observes years later from a traveling train runs counter to the success of this motive image. A horizontal line cuts a group of trees at sunset into two domains, one still brightly lit and one already obscured in shadows. This moving “light-dark” in two dimensions is one of those “in between” (*entre deux*) typical of Proust: glimpses of the intermediate. Here the image of motion is experienced as a reminiscence of a recollection whose key would be the line, yet its account remains unfathomable, and, consequently, the “duration” remains unfulfilled:

Le soleil éclairait jusqu’à la moitié de leur tronc une ligne d’arbres qui suivait la voie du chemin de fer. « Arbres », pensai-je, « vous n’avez plus rien à me dire, mon cœur refroidi ne vous entend plus. Je suis pourtant ici en pleine nature, eh bien, c’est avec froideur, avec ennui que mes yeux constatent la ligne qui sépare votre front lumineux de votre tronc d’ombre. Si j’ai jamais pu me croire poète, je sais maintenant que je ne le suis pas » (IV, 433).

The sun was shining on a row of trees that followed the railway line, flooding the upper halves of their trunks with light. “Trees,” I thought, “you no longer have anything to say to me. My heart has grown cold and no longer hears you. I am in the midst of nature. Well, it is with indifference, with boredom that my eyes register

12 Leo Spitzer, *Stilstudien* (Munich: Hueber, 1961), 369; see also Jean Milly, *La Phrase de Proust* (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1974).

13 Compare the readings with different findings in Gérard Genette, “Métonymie chez Proust,” *Poétique* 2 (1970): 156–73; Wolfgang Kemp, “Die Annäherung, Motiv und Verfahren bei Ruskin und Proust,” in *Marcel Proust. Motiv und Verfahren*, ed. Edgar Mass (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 54–78.

the line which separates your radiant foreheads from your shadowy trunks. If ever I thought of myself as a poet, I know now that I am not one.” (VI, 238)¹⁴

The attempt to apprehend the “gilt band of light on the trunks” and the “tree’s oblique line” fails. To him it is not a matter of fragmenting the impression of motion:

Hélas rien que ce mot d’instantanés faisait de ma mémoire comme une de ces expositions de photographies suffisant à m’indiquer que ce n’était pas plus dans elle que dans l’observation directe (IV, 802).

Alas, the very word snapshots made my memory like one of those photography exhibitions, which was enough to indicate to me that there was no more in a memory than in direct observation.¹⁵

As long as the analogy does not, in time, set in and rise to the consciousness, beauty remains merely photographic. Proust is not concerned here with an impressionistic distortion of the distinction of things by means of color, for example, which was the basis of Rainer Warning’s famous interpretation.¹⁶ On the contrary, this “light-dark” line, although it is a negative experience because it is as yet uncreative, does not question which visual suggestion Proust should employ to portray the experience of place and time, whether lines or patches of color. In this instance, the “beauty line” remains puzzling.

Rhetorics of Movement

Elsewhere, however, the linear notion proves to be a source of new phenomenal forms that are potentially informative, as an infinitesimal segment of the continuum of perception. Proust casts the line as the intermediate between the perception and the imagination. For example, he projects onto the contour line of a Venetian arched window (*ogive*) the anthropomorphic form of a smile of a real human figure, his mother, encased

14 Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 6, 238.

15 Original translation by Laura Huffman.

16 Warning, *Schreiben ohne Ende*, 23; Rainer Warning, “Vergessen, Verdrängen, Erinnern in Prousts *A la recherche du temps perdu*,” in *Memoria, Vergessen und Erinnern*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp and Renate Lachmann (Munich: Fink, 1993), 160–84, 161ff.

within this framing image, until the frame and the internal image reappear one-to-one in the lines of sentences, and *signifiant* and *signifié* unify:¹⁷

quand j'avais à peine dépassé Saint-Georges-le-Majeur, j'apercevais cette ogive qui m'avait vu, et l'élan de ses arcs brisés ajoutait à son sourire de bienvenue la distinction d'un regard plus élevé et presque incompris. Et parce que derrière ses balustres de marbre de diverses couleurs, maman lisait en m'attendant, le visage contenu dans une voilette en tulle d'un blanc aussi déchirant que celui de ses cheveux pour moi qui sentais que ma mère l'avait, en cachant ses larmes, ajoutée à son chapeau de paille moins pour avoir l'air habillé devant les gens de l'hôtel que pour me paraître moins en deuil, moins triste, presque consolée de la mort de ma grand-mère; parce que ne m'ayant pas reconnu tout de suite, dès que de la gondole je l'appelais elle envoyait vers moi, du fond de son cœur, son amour qui ne s'arrêtait que là où il n'y avait plus de matière pour la soutenir, à la surface de son regard passionné qu'elle faisait aussi proche de moi que possible, qu'elle cherchait à exhausser, à l'avancée de ses lèvres, en un sourire que semblait m'embrasser, dans le cadre et sous le dais du sourire plus discret de l'ogive illuminée par le soleil de midi : à cause de cela, cette fenêtre a pris dans ma mémoire la douceur des choses qui eurent en même temps que nous, à côté de nous, leur part dans une certaine heure qui sonnait, la même pour nous et pour elles ; et, si pleins de formes admirables que soient ses meneaux, cette fenêtre illustre garde pour moi l'aspect intime d'un homme de génie avec qui nous aurions passé un mois dans une même villégiature, qui y aurait contracté pour nous quelque amitié, et si depuis, chaque fois que je vois le moulage de cette fenêtre dans un musée, je suis obligé de retenir mes larmes, c'est tout simplement parce qu'elle me dit la chose qui peut le plus me toucher : « Je me rappelle très bien votre mère ». (IV, 204).

when I had barely passed San Giorgio Maggiore, I caught sight of this ogival window which had already seen me, and the thrust of its pointed arches added to its smile of welcome the distinction of a loftier, scarcely comprehensible gaze. And because, behind its multi-coloured marble balusters, Mamma was sitting reading while she waited for me to return, her face shrouded in a tulle veil as heartrending in its whiteness as her hair to me who sensed that, hiding her tears, she had pinned

17 Italic indicates time; black indicates space (ornamentation); underlined indicates anthropomorphisms and vague perceptions; and black and underlined indicates motive ("smile") and counter-motive ("tears").

it to her straw hat not so much with the idea of appearing “dressed” in the eyes of the hotel staff as in order to appear to me to be less in mourning, less sad, almost consoled for the death of my grandmother; because, not having recognised me at first, as soon as I called to her from the gondola, she sent out to me, from the bottom of her heart, a love which stopped only where there was no longer any corporeal matter to sustain it, on the surface of her impassioned gaze which she brought as close to me as possible, which she tried to thrust forward to the advanced post of her lips, in a smile which seemed to be kissing me, within the frame and beneath the canopy of the more discreet smile of the arched window lit up by the midday sun—because of this, that window has assumed in my memory the precious quality of things that have had, simultaneously with us, side by side with us, their share in a certain hour that struck, the same for us and for them; and however full of admirable tracery its mullions may be, that illustrious window retains in my eyes the intimate aspect of a man of genius with whom we have spent a month in some holiday resort, where he has acquired a friendly regard for us; and if, ever since then, whenever I see a cast of that window in a museum, I am obliged to hold back my tears, it is simply because it says to me the thing that touches me more than anything else in the world: “I remember your mother so well.” (V, 846–47).¹⁸

Proust borrowed this window image from a drawing by John Ruskin (fig. 1),¹⁹ yet he sabotages it, so to speak, by building perceptual disturbances into it—for instance, the hero takes in this “superpositioning” of the lines of motion from a gondola—and, with a reference to Ruskin’s “innocence of the eye,” gathers out of the ambiguity of perception the equivocality of linear speech.

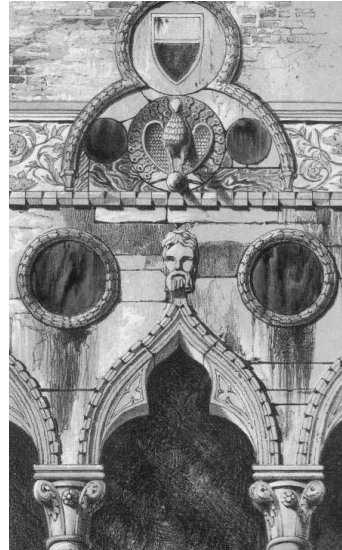
Proust’s descriptive images can be read on the basis of their abstraction and their resulting indicative character as figures or “configurations”²⁰ of perception in time. Whereas in the descriptions of Albertine imagination appeared as a necessary disturbance and deformation, in this concept of a figure it is understood at the same time as craft, as “la marque de la transformation que la pensée fait subir à la réalité,”²¹ in

18 Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. V, 846–47.

19 John Ruskin, *Works*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London-New York: Palazzo dei Badoari Partecipazzi, 1903), vol. 9, 288f; see also Boris Roman Gibhardt, “Le sourire de la ligne. Ornement arabe et perception littéraire chez Marcel Proust,” *Bulletin d’Informations Proustiennes* 43 (2013), 85–94; Gibhardt, *Das Auge der Sprache*, S. 51–58.

20 “La configuration d’une chose, n’est pas seulement l’image de sa nature, c’est le mot de sa destinée et le tracé de son histoire,” Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve. Pastiches et Mélanges. Essais et articles*, ed. Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 112.

21 Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 269.



1 John Ruskin, Palazzo dei Badoari Partecipazzi, 1851.

order to intervene in and alter empirical perception to manifest something else in its image. The question that criticism must decide each time, though, is: how close to or remote from the visual perception is Proust's figurativeness? The figure means an absence, in Genette's and Auerbach's meaning, and in Proust's poetics, a mere substitute for the ultimate, notwithstanding a wholly conceived plasticity,²² a constellation of archetype, copy, and illusion (*Urbild*, *Abbild*, *Trugbild*). The figure does not leave the bounds of visual evidence here, however. It is to the figure that Proust's perspectivism of "rapprochement," "contagion," and "ressemblance" lays claim, which culminates in the visual, structural appeal of the line. In contrast to Rilke's and Mallarmé's absolute amimetic concept of the figure, aimed at calculatedly making a visual and empirical action invisible as a linguistic figure, a *notion pure*—be it Rilke's toss of a ball or Mallarmé's wave of a fan²³—Proust insists on the sensuality of his objects. In Proust, the

22 Gérard Genette, *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 210; see also, on the history of the figure, Erich Auerbach, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Munich-Bern: Francke, 1967), 55–92, esp. 61, 63, 89.

23 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke in drei Bänden* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991); Gihardt, *Das Auge der Sprache*, 73ff.; Anita Kay, "A la recherche de ce qui est caché dans le pli. Une étude d'Autre Eventail de Mallarmé," *Chimères* 11 (1977): 44–55; Beda Allemann, "Rilke und Mallarmé. Entwicklung einer Grundfrage der symbolistischen Poetik," in *Rilke in neuer Sicht*, ed. Käte Hamburger (Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln: Kohlhammer, 1971), 63–82.

object does not disappear in linguistic figurativeness; instead, the figures remain linked to the sensitive qualities of the empirical objects as a model of viewing.

He elevated his rhetoric of motion, as it were, to allegory with his description of a real and spectacular waterwork—more precisely, a fountain—by first introducing the object to be described, the “jet d’eau de Saint-Cloud,” as a rigid representation, namely by referencing a real painting by Hubert Robert²⁴ as the image, until the hero sees the fountain with his own eyes and criticizes Robert’s style of petrifying it. Proust launches here a little *paragone*—a competition between the various visual arts such as sculpture and painting—between pictorial and verbal artifice:

Celui-ci [un unique élan] était en réalité aussi souvent interrompu que l’éparpillement de la chute, alors que, de loin, il m’avait paru inflexible, dense, d’une continuité sans lacune. D’un peu près, on voyait que cette continuité, en apparence toute linéaire, était assurée à tous les points de l’ascension du jet, partout où il aurait dû se briser, par l’entrée en ligne, par la reprise latérale d’un jet parallèle qui montait plus haut que le premier et était lui-même, à une plus grande hauteur, mais déjà fatigante pour lui, relevé par une troisième « [...] » De près, des gouttes sans force retombaient de la colonne d’eau en croisant au passage leurs sœurs montantes et, parfois, déchirées, saisies dans un remous de l’air troublé par ce jaillissement sans trêve, flottaient avant d’être chavirées dans le bassin (III, 56).

This was in reality as often interrupted as the scattering of the fall, whereas from a distance it had appeared to me dense, inflexible, unbroken in its continuity. From a little nearer, one saw that this continuity, apparently complete, was assured, at every point in the ascent of the jet where it must otherwise have been broken, by the entering into line, by the lateral incorporation, of a parallel jet which mounted higher than the first and was itself, at a greater altitude which was however already a strain upon its endurance, relieved by a third [...]. From close to, exhausted drops could be seen falling back from the column of water, passing their sisters on the way up, and at times, torn and scattered, caught in an eddy of the night air, disturbed by this unremitting surge, floating awhile before being drowned in the basin (IV, 76).²⁵

24 Hubert Robert, *View of a park with Fountain*, 1783, The Louvre.

25 Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. IV, 76.

Proust decomposes every form of static pictoriality for the motive image. The literary expression utilizes elements of draftsmanship, but instead of fixing contours simulates motion. The description of the flow lines and their multifarious processual detailed motions (marked in black) represents the *jet d'eau* as a living piece in the art of waterworks, as opposed to Robert's almost frozen view from afar. But when Proust asserts elsewhere,

des moments—que je sépare artificiellement aujourd'hui comme si je pratiquais des sections à des hauteurs différents d'un jet d'eau irisé et en apparence immobile (I, 86),²⁶

moments—which I isolate artificially today as though I were cutting sections at different heights in a jet of water, iridescent but seemingly without flow or motion (I, 119–20),²⁷

Robert's painting appears in another light; namely, as an *art mnémonique*, an arabesque figure. Although it does not correspond to modal seeing, it contains all possible motions, such as its synthesis in time, and in this way surpasses the empirical perception by the craft of art. The competition is left undecided because the true ideal of perception, as a sum of all perceptions, purportedly lies only in the simultaneity of perspectives—perhaps an impossible but genuinely poetic enterprise of a persisting “intermediate,” a permutation of the visual angle; so the fountain, whether Proust's or Robert's, serves throughout the whole novel as an allegory of that other motion, the stream of words, the rising up of poetic inspiration.

- 26 See Gibhardt, *Das Auge der Sprache*, 80–87. Compare the readings with different findings by Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), quoted in de Man, *Allegorien des Lesens*, trans. Werner Hamacher and Peter Krumme (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 105 and 112, and by Marie-Madeleine Chiro, “Sodome et Gomorrhe II. Le jet d'eau d'Hubert Robert,” *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes* 24 (1993): 119–26. On the “fountain of the I-discourse” (“Fontäne des Ich-Diskurses”) and his “Spektralanalyse,” see Manfred Schneider, *Die erkaltete Herzensschrift. Der autobiographische Text im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich-Vienna: Hanser, 1986), 56; Philippe Lejeune, “Ecriture et sexualité,” *Europe* 49 (1971): 113–43, 141; Ulrike Sprenger: “Un acte exceptionnel d'autofécondation. Schreiben und Befruchten bei Proust,” *Erotische Recherchen. Zur Decodierung von Intimität bei Marcel Proust*, ed. Friedrich Balke and Volker Roloff (Munich: Fink, 2003), 80–98. See also the representation of the jet of water frozen solid and its thus newly acquired significance in I, 390.
- 27 Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. I, 119–20.

Ever-Varying Lines and Endless Writing

In the novel's own art history, the artwork of the fictitious painter called Elstir serves to rehabilitate the modal processuality of perception and at the same time to explore literary figurativeness within it. In fact, by viewing Elstir's paintings, the narrator rediscovers his own boyhood literary attempt: the prose poem about the "model" vision from the carriage cited above. But Elstir, as well as the narrator as a young man, does not seem to be a supporter of Ruskin's "innocence of the eye"; circumscriptions of Elstir's painting intimate this via metaphors, superpositions, and inversions.²⁸ The narrator depicts these landscape paintings and portraits exactly the way he sees them before him, yet the described scenes could not possibly have taken place at the same time or within the same space. All habitual and intellectual associations—those of matter, gender, and time—are eroded in this multifaceted and equivocal metaphorical imagery. Hence, Elstir's dialectically reversible images do not outline *disegno*. They rather constellate empirical spaces into a *bel équilibre*, a balance that reveals the similarity of the seemingly distinct. The sketched pictorial strategies of "superposition," "inversion," and "comparaison" are all at the service of this new "authenticité." It realizes what the hero-poet had failed at in the sunset example in attempting to describe, the "correspondance" between space and time; Proust does, in a way, do justice to it in the Venetian *ogive* quote, with the arabesque potentiation of frame and interior image. Elstir also drafted such a nonfixing line language, a kind of osmotic contour. Its reference in art history, insofar as there is one, would be toward cubism or surrealism via Proust's model cases Monet, Whistler, and Vuillard.²⁹

Proust's ideal writer would accordingly be—here is where the switch from the painterly line of flow into the *ductus litterarum* happens—

un littérateur à qui l'idée serait venue de traiter vingt fois, avec des lumières diverses, le même thème.³⁰

28 Genette, "Métonymie chez Proust"; Roland Barthes, "Une idée de recherche," *Recherches de Proust*, ed. Roland Barthes et al. (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 34–39.

29 Boris Roman Gibhardt and Julie Ramos, "Langages du décoratif autour de 1900. De l'unité des arts à l'unicité romanesque," in *Marcel Proust et les arts décoratifs. Poétique, matérialité, histoire*, ed. Boris Roman Gibhardt and Julie Ramos (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013), 233–58; Martin Sundberg, "La surface saturée. Edouard Vuillard, Marcel Proust, et le flottement ornemental," in *ibid.*, 151–70; Gottfried Boehm, "Ungesicherte Äquivalente. Formen der Modernität am Jahrhundertende," in *Fin de siècle*, ed. Rainer Warning and Winfried Wehle (München: Fink, 2002), 9–26.

30 Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 276.

a writer to whom the idea would occur to treat twenty times, in varying lights, the same theme.³¹

Paralleling the pictorial arts, Proust also tests multifaceted aspects by disjointing the surfaces individually in order to be able to play through decoratively, so to speak, the indeterminacies inherent in every aesthetic perception. The text, far removed from a mere narrational disposition to represent elapsed events, thereby arrives at the reservoir of—to use Proust’s terms—“exemples” or “échantillons de production,” in short, figurations of possible actions of the perception, which in unity comprehend their seeming opposites.

There is no line in this often graphic or decorative *figuram mutare* in which there would not also be a transversal of the ornamental whole. Therefore, it itself would establish a similarity to other linear figures and constantly refer back to the sentential line. The rhetorical license *ornatus* takes in deviating from *perspicuitas*³² has absolutized itself so far in this ornamental overall structure that plot and narration begin to dissolve, to yield to a rotating form of unity, the *unité qui s’ignore*. The fine order becomes precarious in the process. In the novel’s closing sentence, again highlighting the “synapses” of time and space, Proust calls the vigorously ranking images in the vortex of the text:

des êtres monstrueux, comme occupant une place si considérable, à côté de celle si restreinte qui leur est réservée dans l’espace, une place au contraire prolongée sans mesure puisqu’ils touchent simultanément, comme des géants plongés dans les années à des époques, vécues par eux si distantes, entre lesquelles tant de jours sont venus se placer — dans le Temps (IV, 625).

monsters, to describe men as occupying so considerable a place, compared with the restricted place which is reserved for them in space, a place on the contrary prolonged past measure, for simultaneously, like giants plunged into the years, they touch the distant epochs through which they have lived, between which so many days have come to range themselves—in Time (VI, 531–32).³³

31 Original translation by Laura Huffman.

32 See Heinrich Lausberg, *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik* (Munich: Hueber, 1963), 59.

33 Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. VI, 531–32.

The ordering of time for Proust crystallizes into an alternation between formation and dissolution; in the line metaphor, it is equivalent to interminable perception in a language that doubts everything that habitual sight presents as secure. Proust thus cancels literature's classical illustrative relationship and declares the medium of representation a medium of perception, even though the immoderacy of these relations—these “rapports,” “superpositions,” and “variations”—causes writing in descriptive imagery only to end, in order to start anew, as it were, in an endless melody or “perpetuated approximation” that leads only by chance to a convergence of times.

This stream of consciousness leads not only from perception to speech; the imaginary figures of speech themselves participate in each new perception of the world as well. Figures of the memory define our sensory impressions, in the sense of a superpositioning. Indeed, figures of the memory can originate from verbal perception and recur in concrete seeing, for images, once found by speech, exert an influence in their own right on a later empirical perception, the same way that the latter acts on the conception of the verbal perception. This is certainly the case for the poet but also for the reader in the process of learning how to see, which would be the act of reading, and beyond that, in the impressions of the sensorial world—entirely like those impressions described by one forerunner of Proust's language of written perception: Baudelaire. With an eye directed toward reality, Baudelaire recalls words and verses from earlier readings that the perception practically stumbles upon:

Je vais m'exercer seul à ma fantasque escrime,
Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime,
Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés,
Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés.³⁴

I practise my quaint swordsmanship alone,
Stumbling on words as over paving stones,
Sniffing in corners all the risks of rhyme,
To find a verse I'd dreamt of a long time.³⁵

34 Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*. *Die Blumen des Bösen*, ed. Friedhelm Kemp (Munich: DTV, 1998), 176 (*Tableaux Parisiens*, *Le soleil*).

35 Charles Baudelaire, “The Sun,” in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 169.