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MARCEL PROUST: THEATRE AND PAINTING BEYOND APPEARANCES

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A picture's beauty does not depend on the things portrayed in it. (Alain de Botton)

The present essay focuses on the conception of art as it is displayed by Marcel Proust in *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*). Using an example from his book, more specifically from *A l'ombre des jeunes filies en fleurs* (*Within a Budding Grove*), where he tells the story of a memorable theatre performance, I shall explore the meaning of the artist's work in terms of content/appearance and private/public space.

In one of his essays, Marcel Proust tries to help a very sad young man (De Botton, 133). The reasons for this man's sadness and disillusion are his inability to afford visiting the cultural centres of Europe. His life is average, ordinary, and, consequently, uninteresting. Proust leads the gloomy man to an exhibition of Jean-Baptiste Chardin.

Chardin depicts the ordinary. No special objects, but objects that we encounter every day without paying attention to them (e.g. bowls, glasses, apples); no noblemen, but ordinary people doing something banal. What is Proust's goal in showing to the young man the exhibition of Chardin's paintings? There is an analogy between the sad man's real life and the life displayed on the canvas:

Chardin had shown him that the kind of environment in which he lived could, for a fraction of the cost, have many of the charms he had previously associated only with palaces and the princely life. No longer would he feel *painfully excluded from the aesthetic realm*, no longer would he be so envious of smart bankers with gold-plated coal tongs and diamond-studded door handles. (De Botton 136)

Chardin shows the "simple," the "ordinary," the "non-pompous". The sad man should be capable of distinguishing a certain opposition between this ordinary appearance and the essence if he is to

understand what art is about and, consequently, change the manner of defining his own life. To decrypt the secret of the bowls and apples, the man has to evolve to a point where he can love and admire Chardin's style.

The simplicity of Chardin's subjects may appear as poverty; this so called "objective" way of painting denotes a certain attitude of the painter toward his models. In *Lettres sur Cézanne* (*Letters on Cézanne*) Rilke says about Van Gogh that he depicts objects that are "sans trace de compassion ou de reproche" (27) —"and it is not pitiful and not at all reproachful (for English version 18). It is a *democracy* of the models; all objects are equally important and are worth depicting. Going on with his commentary, on Cézanne this time, Rilke says that all Cézanne's objects are poor: "les pommes sont toutes des pommes à cuire, les bouteilles auraient leur place dans de vieilles poches de veste évasées par l'usage" (35) —"the apples are all cooking apples, and the wine belong in the roundly bulging pockets of an old coat" (29). Both Van Gogh and Cézanne create richness underneath poverty. In Van Gogh's *L'Arbre fleuri* a great splendour radiates from inside (29; 20 for English). Cézanne takes apples and places them on the bed cover, and among them a bottle or something handy. As for Van Gogh, he makes these ordinary objects become his "saints" and *forces* them to be *beautiful*, to symbolize all the universe and all the joy. It is this beauty that Proust's sad man should discover in the paintings which at first sight do not seem to tell him very much.

In *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* the second part of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* the young narrator goes to the theatre for the first time. He is going to see Berma, the famous actress, performing *Phèdre* in a matinée show. *Phèdre* is already known very well to him; it is certain, therefore, that his attention will focus on the actors' performance and not on the text. This text may be one of the most representative classic pieces of literature, but, as in *the drama of going to bed*, (*Combray*, first part of *A la recherche*) where the mother reads to him, the object presented (which is, in the drama of going to bed, George Sand's book, and, in the episode of the theatre going, Racine's play) is not the main issue. In both cases, the narrator deals with some particular manifestation of art for the first time.

There is a change from the scene in *Combray* and this scene in *A l'ombre*. In the former scene, he "meets" the novel. He is too young and too tired to catch all that is happening in the book, but, nevertheless, he learns what a "classical" novel is about. In the latter scene, he moves from a read *text* to a *performed play*, and this time he is

extremely attentive to the actors' acting. Although it may sound odd, the mother and the actress Berma have something in common; in their enterprise to initiate the narrator, they both act as teachers:

...une actrice entra par le fond, qui avait la figure et la voix qu'on n'avait dit être celles de la Berma. On avait dû changer la distribution, tout le soin que j'avais mis à étudier le rôle de la femme de Thésée devenait inutile. Mais une autre actrice donna la réplique à la première. J'avais dû me tromper en prenant celle-là pour la Berma, car la seconde lui ressemblait davantage encore et, plus que l'autre, avait sa diction. Toutes les deux d'ailleurs *ajoutaient à leur rôle de nobles gestes* - que je distinguais *clairement* et dont *je comprenais la relation avec le texte*, tandis qu'elles soulevaient leurs beaux péplums - et aussi des intonations ingénieuses, tantôt passionnées, tantôt ironiques, qui me faisaient comprendre la signification d'un vers que j'avais lu chez moi sans apporter assez d'attention à ce qu'il voulait dire. Mais tout d'un coup, dans l'écartement du rideau rouge du sanctuaire, comme dans un cadre, une femme parut et aussitôt, à la peur que j'eus, bien plus anxieuse que pouvait être celle de la Berma...; - à ma façon, plus absolue encore que celle de la Berma, de ne considérer, dès cet instant, salle, public, acteurs, pièce, et man propre corps que comme un milieu acoustique n'ayant d'importance que dans la mesure où il était favorable aux inflexions de cette voix, je compris que les deux actrices que j'admirais depuis quelques minutes *n'avaient aucune ressemblance avec celle* que j'étais venu entendre. (Proust 1. 440)

In describing the first moments of the performance, the narrator tries to lead us to reflect on the quality of art: what is a good actress, what is a bad actress, what would be the difference between them? Trying to express what is exactly the difference between the *real* art and the *non-real* art in painting, Alain de Botton writes:

It is remarkable to what extent bad paintings of spring resemble, though are still distinct from, good ones. Bad painters may be excellent draftsmen, good on clouds, clever on budding leaves, dutiful in roots, and yet still lack a command of those *elusive elements* in which the particular charms of spring are lodged. They cannot, for instance, depict, and hence make us notice, the pinkish border on the edge of the blossom of a tree, the contrast between storm and sunshine in the light across the field, the gnarled quality of bark or the vulnerable tentative appearance of flowers on the side of a country track—small details no doubt, but in the end, the only things on which our sense of, and enthusiasm for, springtime can be based. (144)

The main idea would be that in bad paintings there is obviousness and description of an exterior object; the good paintings have “elusive elements,” they can surprise the “pinkish border” and the “tentative appearance,” which is *the un-capturable*. Since the bad painters are “excellent draftsmen”—they go straight to the visible elements, to a “fidelity” related strictly to what the picture represents—bad

paintings are similar.

Let us go back to the quotation from *A l'ombre*. The first two actresses try to “enrich” the speech, to do *noble* gestures, and to add brilliance to their reciting. The child-spectator understands clearly the significance of their acting and also the relationship to the text. Like the bad paintings described by De Botton, which are linked to the object represented by a fidelity easy to grasp, the actresses, through their intonations either “passionate” or “ironic,” make the viewer see the text. These two actresses have nothing in common with Berma. Berma seems to offer a *plain* and simple discourse; she would follow Racine’s text but nothing more: “Je l’écoutais comme j’aurais lu *Phèdre*, ou comme si Phèdre elle-même avait dit en ce moment les choses que j’entendais sans que le talent de la Berma semblât leur avoir rien ajouté” (1. 440). Gilles Deleuze, in *Proust et les signes (Proust and the Signs)* comments:

Le héros souhaite de toutes ses forces entendre la Berma, à cerner son talent, à l’isoler pour pouvoir enfin le désigner. C’est la Berma, “j’entends enfin la Berma”. Il perçoit une intonation particulièrement intelligente, d’une justesse admirable. D’un coup, c’est Phèdre en personne. Pourtant, rien ne peut empêcher la déception. Car cette intonation n’a de valeur qu’intelligible, elle a un sens parfaitement défini, elle est seulement le fruit de l’intelligence et du travail. Peut-être fallait-il entendre autrement la Berma. (Deleuze 45)

Although the actress’s voice and its intonation are perfect, our young spectator is disappointed. At this age, Marcel cannot see exactly what Berma’s talent is; he will be able to do that later on when he learns what exceptional means (see *Le côté de Guermantes (Guermantes Way)*). For the moment the *transparency* of Berma’s performance is not grasped by the narrator:

...Berma se sert de sa voix, de ses bras. Mais ses gestes, au lieu de témoigner de “connexités musculaires”, forment un corps transparent qui réfracte une essence, une Idée. Les actrices médiocres ont besoin de pleurer pour faire signe que leur rôle comporte la douleur: “excédent de larmes qu’on voyait couler, parce qu’elles n’avaient pu s’y imbiber, sur la voix de marbre d’Aricie ou d’Isméne.” Mais toutes les expressions de la Berma, comme chez un grand violoniste, sont devenues des qualités de timbre. Dans sa voix, “ne subsistait pas un seul déchet de matière inerte et réfractaire à l’esprit.” (Deleuze 50)

Berma becomes a transparent *medium* for Racine’s Phèdre. She *is* Phèdre. The tone of Berma’s voice is *monotonous*; she seems to be in a rush; she seems simple. The narrator listens to her speech as if he read *Phèdre* himself. He does not understand that actually her simplicity is part of her talent. So, he is disappointed. He cannot bridge the distance between the spectator and the actress.

In the final version of *A la recherche* the narrator goes to the theatre to see only *Phèdre*. In one of his sketches, Proust has in mind to comment on two different pieces of literature—a classic one and a modern one:

Même elle-même [the actress] me paraissait donner à sa vie théâtrale un caractère enjouant de ses anciens rôles. C'était montrer que les pièces avaient un intérêt qui survivait au moment où *même modernes* elles étaient venues sur la scène et en autorisait la reprise, que c'était des sortes de morceaux de musée qu'il était intéressant de ressortir quelquefois; l'imprévu même de celles qu'elle ressortait, une fois *Le Demi-Monde* une fois *Mademoiselle de la Seiglière* une fois *Les Enfants d'Edouard* la montrant comme ayant en effet dans la tête tout un musée où elle conférait l'intérêt plus grand et les choses qu'elle avait jouées et que son jeu était aussi quelque chose qui avait de l'intérêt qui était *indépendant de ce qu'elle jouait* et pouvait exciter l'intérêt des amateurs. (1. 1006)

In the beginning, the narrator believes that the talent of Berma may be displayed *because* she acts in an ancient play. *Phèdre's* part interests him because it is more “beautiful,” Berma’s talent looks “more true,” it is founded on something “more real”; briefly, to see Berma in Racine’s play is a great feast. She seems to have a “more artistic” theatre life by playing the ancients. But the modern parts show him that Berma’s talent does not depend on *what* she plays; like Chardin’s and Cézanne’s paintings which depict banal objects, Berma’s repertoire demonstrates that art does not consist on the object depicted. Berma and Cézanne are not opaque objects, objects in themselves, but they are transparent. They reflect ideas; namely, they open the path to these ideas. Theatre for the young narrator, as paintings for the sad man from Proust’s essay, is *supposed* to be shining, glamorous, and noble in the sense of an obvious nobility. The teenager believes that Berma’s acting should do something “more” with Racine’s text. The sad man thinks that the paintings worth seeing are Veronese’s, because they represent aristocrat figures and these objects would be “naturally” beautiful because luxurious. According to these ideas, art appears to be what they should discover it is not.

The art which the sad man and the narrator are exposed to does not deal with that kind of easily recognizable beauty. It seems that there is no transition between the object and the representation of the object. It seems that ordinary existence of humans and of objects is taken from everyday life and put on a canvas: Racine’s text is taken and recited *as it is*. The easiness of this process is of course only apparent. The painter’s and the actress’ work is not evident at first sight: “By saying that great painters were the ones by whom our eyes

were opened, Proust was at the same time implying that our sense of beauty was not immobile, and could be sensitized by painters, who would, through their canvases, inculcate in us an appreciation of *once neglected aesthetic qualities*" (De Botton 139).

The simplicity of what Chardin paints, and of the manner of Berma's acting, must make the viewer stop and reflect. It is exactly because these two seem to do easy and maybe *usual* things, that they should open the spectator's eyes by suggesting another sense of beauty.

The discovery of art takes place in a particular space. The space of the theatre that the narrator enters for the first time appears as a public space *par excellence*. It is a space opened to the people, it is a space where people gather to sit in the same room, to watch and to talk. The theatre is at the same time private. All the seats are disposed in such a way that each spectator feels that s/he is the only viewer and that s/he has the best possible seat: "Je pensais qu'on devait être empêché de bien voir par les autres spectateurs comme on l'est au milieu d'une foule; or je me rendis compte qu'au contraire ... chacun se sent le centre du théâtre" (Proust 1. 438).

The relationship established between the spectator and the art of performing is of a private nature. The space of the theatre is thus both private and public. This dual nature means that the private space has "*pignon sur la rue*," but that it also has its secret; the home separates the human from the world, but this separation does not isolate her/him as it makes work possible (Levinas, 167; 156 for English). The actress on the stage is presenting something on which she has been working for a long time, and, at the same time, she is working at the moment of the performance. The stage space is opened to the public, but still possesses its secret.

The distance between the spectators and the performers should be "shortened," but it is not the "material" distance from the seats to the stage. "Je dis à ma grand-mère que je ne voyais pas bien, elle me passa sa lorgnette" (Proust 1. 441): Marcel believes that with the help of his grandmother's binoculars he would be able to bring Berma "closer." But getting closer to La Berma means approaching the dramatic art from her perspective. And this takes time: in *Le Côté de Guermantes* (see 2. 346-52), the narrator makes an analysis post-performance which reveals his understanding of Art a few years after the *matinée*. Marcel is desperately trying to be attentive: "J'aurais voulu —pour pouvoir l'approfondir, pour tâcher d'y découvrir ce qu'elle avait de beau— arrêter, immobiliser longtemps devant moi chaque intonation de l'artiste, chaque expression de sa physionomie"

(1. 440-41). He wants to possess the secret of Berma's acting. The secret, which must be of a private nature, is at least partially disclosed to Marcel: on the one hand, *enough*, so that he can become curious and interested, and, on the other hand, insufficiently, so that he can be frustrated and disappointed.

The dual nature of the space is felt by the narrator as soon he enters the theatre. The curtains once pulled up would reveal a world supposed to be different:

Ce rideau une fois levé—quand sur la scène une table à écrire et une cheminée, assez ordinaires d'ailleurs, signifèrent que les personnages qui allaient entrer seraient, non pas des acteurs venus pour réciter comme j'en avais vu une fois en soirée, mais des hommes en train de vivre chez eux un jour de leur vie dans laquelle je pénétrais par effraction sans qu'ils puissent me voir. (Proust 1. 439)

The stage space seems private and the spectator feels s/he penetrates a universe meant not to be seen by any kind of public. Marcel feels like a voyeur¹ who enters one's private life in which he would not be allowed to participate. But this time it is kind of false voyeurism since the conversations of actors are meant to be opened, seen, displayed.

The artist—the performer on stage or the painter displaying his works—has to move from the private space to a public one. The room which belongs to the artist has to be like the room of the writer, a room of working, according to Virginia Woolf (see *A Room of One's Own*) it has to be under the control of the person who lives there. In this way, the artist can unlock the door and make his art travel towards the public.

What the Proustian narrator learns is eventually the essence of art: (1) the beauty of Berma's performances or of Chardin's paintings does not depend on the object represented. The viewer or the spectator must apprehend the artist's talent beyond the first image displayed under his eyes; (2) as the writer who needs a room of her/his own, the painter and the performer need their private space and thus, the artist's private space transforms into a public one without losing its secret.

¹ The narrator as a voyeur is a recurrent theme in *A la recherche* at least two instances deal exactly with what is most intimate, namely sexual life: the dialogue between Mlle de Vinteuil and her girlfriend in *Du Côté de chez Swann* and, respectively, the encounter of Jupien with baron Charlus in *Sodome and Gomorrhe*.

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