



Proust's Imaginary Museum

Reproductions and Reproduction in *À la recherche du temps perdu*

Gabrielle Townsend

Peter Lang

Chapter 1

Proust's reliance on the reproduced image

When in 1919, to his despair, Proust was obliged to move out of the flat at 102 boulevard Haussmann where he had lived since 1906, he had to dispose of many possessions. Quantities of inherited furniture that had remained stacked up in the rarely used dining room were to be sold off and Proust suffered considerable anxiety about getting rid of family objects he had known since childhood; as was his wont, he involved several friends in his efforts to find suitable buyers and obtain good prices, which he felt he needed to supplement his depleted income (due to the vagaries of the stock market). In contrast, he seems to have fewer regrets about destroying documents and wrote to a friend that he had burned letters, irreplaceable manuscripts and rare photographs (*Corr.* XVIII, 337–8). However, he preserved a photograph of the recipient of this letter that he had treasured since his youth: ‘Et cela, je n’aurais pas pu le brûler, car c’était encore vivant’ [‘I couldn’t have burnt that one, because it was still alive’]. Thus he would keep photographs that had a personal sentimental value, but the rest could go. When, a year after his mother’s death, he moved to boulevard Haussmann from the flat in rue de Courcelles where the Proust family had lived for many years, he kept his family photographs in order still to feel cocooned by familial memories: ‘Je garderai toutes les photographies chez moi pour faire un choix, car je veux que mes grands-parents même leurs parents, que je n’ai pas connus, mais que Maman a aimés, soient près de moi’ (*Corr.* VI, 278) [‘I shall keep all the photographs at home to make a choice, as I want my grandparents, and even their parents, whom I did not know but whom Mother loved, near me’]. He preferred to keep a photograph of his mother in his room rather than her painted portrait and for a time he communed with it daily.¹

1 Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust: Biographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 567.

If he could burn photographs, to which he attributed an almost supernatural aura (as I discuss elsewhere), they were, on the whole, clearly not portraits of loved ones.² Since there seem to have been large quantities of documents (the letter quoted above refers to ‘grands sacs’) – only some of which, admittedly, would have been photographs – it may be concluded that some of the papers consigned to the flames constituted reference material for his book. By 1919 he had finished writing it, at least in broad outline, and was engaged in correcting proofs and revising and adding to his manuscripts. The main period of research was over, and so much of his visual reference library would have become superfluous.

According to Philip Kolb, Proust had accumulated a collection of engravings and different kinds of reproductions that he asked to be brought to his bedside when he wanted to refer to them for a description he was writing. In her memoir, Proust’s maid Céleste Albaret describes the chest on which he kept the notebooks containing the first draft of his novel, the drawers of which were full of all sorts of photos and other souvenirs amassed over the course of years. We do not know what the subject of these photographs were, but apart from postcards of places his correspondents had visited and engravings of works of art, it seems likely that they were portraits of people. It was fashionable in Proust’s day to have one’s portrait taken by a society photographer such as Otto and then have it printed in postcard form to send to friends.³ Proust had a large collection of these and we know from his correspondence to what lengths he would go to obtain photos of people he was particularly interested in; several incidents in *À la recherche* reflect this obsession, as I discuss in Chapter 3. The acquisition of a photograph was a significant stage in the progress of a desired relationship, as I show in Chapter 4, and as Valérie Sueur describes:

Une importante collection de photographies d’amis et de relations de Proust reste aux mains des actuels descendants de l’écrivain. Cette collection, intéressante d’un point de vue documentaire, l’est surtout par la persévérance

2 See note 6 below.

3 Otto is mentioned in *À la recherche* as having taken the glamorous pictures of Odette in evening dress that Swann dislikes (RTP III, 708).

avec laquelle elle fut constituée par Proust lui-même. Pour quelqu'un qui n'avait pas l'âme d'un collectionneur, cet ensemble [...] est le reflet d'un souci permanent d'obtenir, par tous les moyens, les portraits photographiques de ses amis et des personnes qu'il admirait. [...] La photographie est aussi, on le voit dans le roman, l'étape obligée de la relation amoureuse, marquant le début de la possession de l'être aimé.⁴

[A large collection of photographs of Proust's friends and relations is held by the writer's present descendants. The collection is interesting from a documentary point of view, but above all shows the determination with which Proust himself put it together. For someone who was not at heart a collector, the whole group (...) reflects his unwavering concern to obtain, by any means, photographic portraits of friends and people he admired. (...) We see in the novel that a photograph is a necessary stage in the progress of a love affair, marking the beginning of the possession of the loved one.]

He was also keen to look at sets of family photographs and albums, fascinated as he was by family names and genealogies as raw material for creating solid backgrounds for his characters.⁵ At the same time it was vital for him to be able to contemplate images in solitude, as if to extract their essential nature.⁶ Céleste mentions only two instances of taking out photographs for him, one of his mother and the other of a friend, Mme de Chevigné, but his reaction to them was significant. After keeping the photo of his mother beside him for two or three days – this was years after the period when, in the acuteness of his grief, he needed its constant company – he told Céleste to put it away because ‘Voyez-vous, on s'habitue, et l'habitude empêche que l'on ressente comme on doit le souvenir des êtres et des choses’⁷ [‘You see, one gets used to it, and habit stops one experiencing the memory of people

4 Valérie Sueur, *Marcel Proust: l'écriture et les arts*, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

5 See, for instance, a letter to Louis d'Albufera in 1908 asking to borrow family albums: ‘[...] car à cause des choses que je fais cela m'intéresserait. Car j'ai en train: une étude sur la noblesse; un roman parisien [...]’ (*Corr.* VII, 112).

6 For example, he wrote to his friend Georges de Lauris shortly after the death of the latter's mother, thanking him for the loan of her photograph: ‘Je vous remercie de tout mon cœur du témoignage si doux d'amitié que vous m'avez donné en me prêtant cette photographie. Excusez-moi mon exigence, j'avais besoin de la voir seul, et à l'émotion qu'elle m'a donné [...] je n'ai pas regretté de vous avoir privé de l'avoir emporté avec vous’ (*Corr.* VII, 251).

7 Céleste Albaret, *Monsieur Proust*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

and things as one should']. There are other instances when Proust spoke of the need to preserve the precious essence of a photograph by not looking at it for too long, lest excessive familiarity with it reduce its power. In the case of the photograph of Mme de Chevigné, whom he had just visited and who now was a grey-haired old lady with a croaky voice, he used the image to remind himself of her beauty when she was young, as if to correct a new memory that threatened to contaminate the old memory he wanted to preserve.⁸ Photographs of people seem therefore to act not as simple reminders of what their subjects look like, but as stimuli to the creative reconstruction of their subjects' whole existence. Their role is in this sense analogous to that of the *madeleine* as a spur to the imagination.

Proust was never a collector of art, although like the Narrator, he sometimes dreamed of becoming one: the Narrator says that although with his inheritance '[...] je m'étais promis d'avoir des collections comme Swann, d'acheter des tableaux, des statues, tout mon argent passait à avoir des chevaux, une automobile, des toilettes pour Albertine. Mais ma chambre ne contenait-elle pas une œuvre d'art plus précieuse que toutes celles-là? C'était Albertine elle-même' (RTP III, 884) ['(...) (though) I had always promised myself that I would be a collector like Swann and buy pictures and sculptures, all my money went on horses, a motor car and clothes for Albertine. For did my room not contain a work of art more precious than any other – Albertine herself?']. When discussing the arrangement of his furniture in his new apartment with Mme Catusse, who was providing practical help, Proust, like the Narrator, stipulated that there should be no pictures in his bedroom. While recognizing the value of some of his inherited paintings, he personally did not appreciate them greatly and felt one should only display pictures one had truly desired and saved up for (Corr. VI, 328). He would perhaps have bought pictures if he could have afforded old masters: he wrote that he dreams of acquiring Italian primitives – not those such as Botticelli and Mantegna who are wrongly assigned this title by ignorant 'gens du monde', but rather works by painters such as Vivarini (actually a family of Venetian artists), Simone Memmi and Taddeo Gaddi. But the real attraction of

8 *Ibid.*, p. 291.

such paintings for him is their power to awaken memories by their power of association: ‘Si j’étais riche je ne chercherais pas à acheter des chefs d’œuvres [...] mais de ces tableaux qui gardent l’odeur d’une ville ou l’humidité d’une église et qui comme des bibelots contiennent autant de rêve par association d’idées qu’en eux-mêmes’ (*Corr. VI*, 337) [‘If I were rich, I wouldn’t buy masterpieces, (...) but pictures that preserve the smell of a town or a damp church, like curios that evoke dreams as much by the association of ideas as in themselves’].

That Proust was indifferent to the intrinsic monetary value of an original canvas is shown by a letter to his financial adviser, Lionel Hauser, in 1910, in which he wrote that he was interested in buying a copy or copies of famous paintings, for which he might have to sell some shares:

[...] j’ai appris l’existence chez Bernheim jeune de copies de tableaux de maîtres par des peintres que j’admire et j’ai fait demander les prix de ces copies qui contenteraient mon désir de peinture à moins de frais que des originaux et avec moins de fatigue qu’un voyage à Dresde ou même une visite du Louvre. (*Corr. X*, 88)

[...] I have found out that Bernheim jeune (a dealer) has copies of Old Master pictures done by painters I admire. I’ve asked for the price of these copies, which would fulfil my desire for paintings at a lower cost than originals and without the fatigue of going to Dresden or even visiting the Louvre.]

Proust thus shows himself as interested in having easy access to works of art but lacking the acquisitive drive of the collector, in contrast to his avid desire to possess photographs of people. There were periods in his life when he no doubt could have afforded to buy paintings, but ‘buying’ people instead – having enough domestic service, giving lavish presents to friends and hangers-on and extravagant tips to waiters – appears to have seemed a greater necessity. He was indifferent to the status of original works of art: reproductions and copies are just as desirable, because they fulfil the purpose of stimulating memory and imagination and are the starting point for reflections about memory, about beauty, about vision and representation. The

aura of uniqueness surrounding an original work of art does not seem to have been a quality that Proust especially revered.⁹

Philip Kolb writes in the article previously quoted that Proust set great store by the accuracy of detail in his descriptions, and habitually used pictures by well-known artists and photographs for reference. For buildings and works of art, Proust used illustrated books and magazines as his principal resource. The Narrator acknowledges their usefulness in a rather disconcerting comparison with brothels:

les maisons de rendez-vous que je fréquentai quelques années plus tard [...] méritèrent d'être classées par moi à côté de ces autres bienfaiteurs d'origine plus récente mais d'utilité analogue (avant lesquels nous imaginions sans ardeur la séduction de Mantegna, de Wagner, de Sienne, d'après d'autres peintres, d'autres musiciens, d'autres villes): les éditions d'histoire de la peinture illustrées, les concerts symphoniques et les études sur les "Villes d'art". (*RTP I*, 566)

[the houses of assignation that I used to visit some years later (...) deserved my ranking of them on a par with those other benefactors, more recent in origin but of equal usefulness (before which we could imagine without much enthusiasm the attractions of Mantegna, of Wagner, of Siena merely by analogy with other painters, composers and cities): illustrated art-history books, symphony concerts and guidebooks to artistic destinations.]

The point of this apparently odd comparison of brothels and illustrated books is revealing: the young Narrator had vague sexual yearnings but until he has experience of real women his romantic fantasies have nothing real and solid to nourish them. Similarly, to appreciate art and music it is not enough to read about them or imagine them by analogy with other artistic work; one must actually see them in order to experience the necessary and desirable 'ardeur' that the encounter should offer. Since Proust's health rarely allowed him to travel, he was reliant on reproductions to give his imagination the concrete raw material it required; reproductions may not offer the same emotional impact as

9 The actual quality of the reproduction seems to be irrelevant where it is acting as an aide-mémoire, as I mention in Chapter 4. Similarly, when Proust subscribed to the *théâtrophone* in 1910, he complained about the poor sound reception but said that 'pour les opéras de Wagner que je connais presque par cœur, je supplée aux insuffisances de l'acoustique [...]' (*Corr. X*, 254).

viewing an original painting but for Proust they appear, nevertheless, to be just as fruitful a stimulus.

But in the same way as he claimed that paintings were to be cherished for the associations that they evoked, photographs of places were doubly valuable when they were associated with friends in whose company he had visited them. Thus he wrote in 1901 to Antoine Bibesco that Bibesco's 'precious photographs' brought back memories of visits they had made together to cathedrals when Proust was still fit enough to travel (*Corr.* II, 439). To Bertrand de Fénelon, for whom he had strong romantic feelings when they visited Belgium and Holland together in 1902, he wrote in 1904 'Je suis honteux de ne t'avoir remercié des belles reproductions qui me rendent doublement précieuses mon admiration pour Vermeer et mon amitié pour toi' (*Corr.* IV, 368) ['I am ashamed of not having thanked you for the fine reproductions which make my admiration for Vermeer and my fondness for you doubly precious']. Two years later Proust wrote to thank him for a postcard from Göttingen and letters describing his travels. Not merely, Proust says, do such letters allow him to journey in his imagination but in his memory, recalling the journey they had made together (*Corr.* VI, 267). The revival of poignant memories of people, places and feelings long past is thus a precious function that photographs can perform, as *À la recherche* persistently demonstrates.

'Les Villes d'art célèbres' was a collection of illustrated books published by Éditions Laurens that included volumes on Milan, Amsterdam and Haarlem, Padua and Verona, Venice and Florence. Laurens also published a collection called *Les Grands Artistes*, one volume of which was a study of Gainsborough by Gabriel Mourey, reviewed by Proust for a journal in 1907. Proust used both sets of publications extensively, as he acknowledged, referring to 'cette excellente collection Laurens' (CSB, 524–5). He also frequently consulted the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, an illustrated journal whose owner and director, Charles Ephrussi, one of the earliest collectors of painters such as Monet, Manet and Renoir, and one of the models for Swann, had a formative influence on Proust. Proust collaborated on the journal from 1900 and also wrote for its weekly, non-illustrated

sister publication *La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité*.¹⁰ He used the offices of the *Gazette* as a library, to consult the journal and review copies of books it had received and read other publications, such as the *Burlington Magazine*. He expressed his gratitude to Ephrussi in the preface to his translation of Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens*.¹¹ He often asked for the advice or help of the *Gazette*'s secretary, the art historian and critic Auguste Marguillier. In 1906 he wanted to borrow a book on Carpaccio and offered to write a review of it if one had not already been commissioned. In 1908 he asked Marguillier 'ne vous serait-il possible de me faire adresser à condition quelques-unes de vos gravures anglaises, notamment de celles où un animal est représenté à côté du ou des personnages dont elle donne le portrait' (Corr. VIII, 25) ['could you possibly send me on approval some of your English engravings, especially those where an animal appears next to the person or people whose portrait it is?']. (The *Gazette* published individual plates that could be purchased separately from the magazine.) This request relates, according to Philip Kolb, to a scene, 'Robert et le chevreau' ['Robert and the kid'] that Proust was working on at the time.¹²

Jérôme Picon has made a list of the works of art cited in *À la recherche* that were reproduced in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* and *Les Villes d'art célèbres*. They amount to sixty-four out of what I calculate to be just over 100 works of art mentioned in the novel. Considering that Proust also referred to reproductions from other sources – postcards, engravings, other illustrated books – this figure shows conclusively that Proust was overwhelmingly reliant on reproductions as inspiration and aides-mémoire for his work. Many of the most important paintings featured in *À la recherche* are to be found in this list, including Corot's *Chartres Cathedral*, Giotto's *Charity*, *Env*

10 See Philip Kolb and Jean Adhémar, 'Charles Ephrussi (1849–1905); ses secrétaires: Laforgue, A. Renan, Proust; "sa" *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, January 1984, pp 29–41.

11 Reproduced as a note to 'Journées de pèlerinage' in *Pastiches et mélanges (CSB*, 730).

12 Philip Kolb, 'Le "mystère" des gravures anglaises recherchées par Proust', (Paris: *Mercure de France* 116, 1956), pp 750–4 (p. 753).

and *The Entombment of Christ*, *The Legend of Saint Ursula* by Carpaccio, Botticelli's *Life of Moses* and Vermeer's *View of Delft*.

Jacques Nathan's analysis of the importance to Proust of these illustrated books is worth quoting at length:

[...] il semble que ces volumes lui aient servi de répertoire d'images, fournissant des aliments à son imagination à propos des villes qu'il ne connaissait pas, rajeunissant ses souvenirs à propos de celles qu'il avait visitées. Le cas de Venise est particulièrement révélateur. Il serait facile de montrer avec exemples à l'appui que Proust a décrit de préférence les monuments, les tableaux et les sculptures qui figurent dans le volume, et les a décrits sous l'aspect même que fournit la reproduction photographique, et cela même quand ces œuvres sont beaucoup moins célèbres que d'autres qui n'y figurent pas. Il serait alors tentant de supposer – et certaines pages de *À la recherche du temps perdu* favoriseraient cette interprétation – que Proust n'a vu les œuvres d'art qu'à travers ses souvenirs livresques d'enfant. Mais cette induction serait contraire aux faits. En 1902 quand le livre de la collection Laurens consacré à Venise parut, 'l'enfant' avait trente-deux ans, et il avait déjà accompli son voyage en Italie. Si donc notre hypothèse se justifie, et si la collection des 'Villes d'art' a bien inspiré Proust, il faut tirer de ce fait une conclusion bien différente: parmi les œuvres qu'il connaît pour les avoir vues, son esprit se repose de préférence à celles qu'il a retrouvées dans les albums feuilletés au coin du feu. Ainsi, [...] entre la vie et le livre, il choisit le livre. A trente ans passés, son monde artistique de préférences est celui des livres d'images.¹³

[...] these volumes seem to have served as a catalogue for him, feeding his imagination in the case of towns he did not know and rejuvenating his memories of those he had visited. The instance of Venice is particularly revealing. It would be easy to demonstrate, with supporting examples, that Proust described with preference the monuments, pictures and sculptures that appear in the (Laurens collection's) book, and described them just as they appear in the photograph, even when these works are much less famous than others that are not reproduced. Thus it would be tempting to suppose – and some pages of *À la recherche du temps perdu* would favour this interpretation – that Proust saw works of art only via memories of the books of his childhood. But such an inference would contradict the facts. In 1902 when the book in the Laurens collection devoted to Venice came out, the 'child' was thirty-two and has already visited Italy. So if my hypothesis is right, and if the 'Villes d'art' collection did indeed provide inspiration for Proust, one must draw a quite

13 Jacques Nathan, *Citations, références et allusions de Marcel Proust*, *op. cit.*, pp 15–16.

different conclusion: from among the works he knew from having seen them (in real life), he preferred to rely on those found again in the picture books he leafed through by his fireside. Thus, (...) between real life and books he chooses books. Aged over thirty, his preferred artistic world is that of the illustrated book.]

Although Nathan's image of 'albums feuilletés au coin du feu' seems too cosy a view of Proust's determined, even obsessive, pursuit of the right reference, visual or verbal, for an element in his book, the figures previously quoted certainly bear out his opinion of Proust's reliance on illustrated books. Whether Proust really always used them 'de préférence' to describing places and pictures he had seen in real life is a more problematic question, and in the next chapter I look at the relationship between works seen by Proust and those he knew only from reproductions in terms of how they are used and described in the text. Pierre Jacquillard, who also draws attention to Proust's use of secondary sources, gives examples of descriptions of scenes seemingly transposed from works of art. One such is the description of the fountain in the Prince de Guermantes's garden that soaks Mme d'Arpajon, for which Proust may have been inspired by a water-colour by Hubert Robert because of the phrase 'la rectitude et la tension de cette tige, portant au-dessus de soi un nuage oblong fait de mille gouttelettes, mais en apparence peint en brun doré et immuable' (Jacquillard's emphasis) (*RTP* III, 56–7) ['the vertical tension of the shaft, bearing above it an oblong cloud made up of a thousand tiny drops, but seemingly painted in a golden-brown, and motionless'].¹⁴ Jacquillard suggests that Proust might have seen this water-colour in the Louvre and that the strangeness – for a description of gushing water – of the words emphasized suggest a work of art as the inspiration for the passage. I would also point out the importance of the existence of a *reproduction* of this image in a book about Robert in a series called *Les Artistes célèbres*, which Jacquillard mentions only in a footnote. It is much more likely, in my view, that Proust referred to this book than that he recalled seeing the original.¹⁵ (Immobilizing movement and rendering coloured scenes or images as

14 Pierre Jacquillard, *BAMP* 9, 1959, pp 126–33.

15 Pierre Jacquillard, *ibid.*, p. 129.

monochrome is of course a characteristic of reproductions, and one that I consider in detail in Chapter 4.)

Consulting guidebooks, such as the Guides Joanne, and timetables could be a form of nostalgic escapism for Proust, who took refuge from his illness and (largely self-imposed) solitude by planning journeys he knew he would never make: they allowed him to ‘[...] combiner des voyages, de rechercher des villes ... et de ne pas partir’ (*Corr.* VII, 224) [‘plan journeys, research towns ... and not go away’]. But reference books are only marginally a resource for daydreaming; far more importantly, they are an essential tool for research.¹⁶

Another set of illustrated books that Proust referred to constantly was the Library Edition of the complete works of Ruskin, the first set of which he received in January 1905.¹⁷ He wrote to Marie Nordlinger, his friend and collaborator in translating Ruskin, ‘J’ai reçu en étrennes la nouvelle édition splendide de Ruskin. [...] vous verrez quelles illustrations belles et nouvelles’ (*Corr.* V, 42) [‘I have been given the splendid new edition of Ruskin as a New Year’s present. (...) You will see what fine new illustrations there are’]. In 1907 he wrote to one correspondent that he had all the volumes that had so far appeared and to Reynaldo Hahn he sent a request from Cabourg to have several volumes sent urgently from his Paris flat (*Corr.* VII, 260). It was Ruskin’s copy of Botticelli’s *Zipporah*, reproduced as the frontispiece to volume XXIII of the Library Edition, published in 1906, which contained *Mornings in Florence* and *Val d’Arno*, that Proust used for his description of Zéphorah in *Un amour de Swann*. Although Proust was very familiar with most of Ruskin’s work and owned several volumes of an earlier edition, the letter to Hahn shows that the illustrated volumes immediately became indispensable to him.

Proust was thoroughly familiar with the vocabulary of the reproduction of images, as I show in a later chapter in respect of photography. He also refers to *estampes* [prints], *épreuves* [proofs] and *gravures* [engravings] in the novel and in his correspondence in

16 There are other references to the Guides Joanne in Proust’s correspondence, e.g. V, 103, 153 and 167.

17 *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Washburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903–12).

both literal and metaphorical ways that show his understanding of the different techniques. (Indeed, he specifically uses examples from this vocabulary to condemn weak metaphors used by careless writers [*Corr.* XIX, 371].) This familiarity is long-standing: in *À la recherche* the Narrator's first acquaintance with works of art is via the reproductions that his grandmother and Swann give him – engravings when possible, as she regarded these as more artistic than photographs.¹⁸ The fact that they were displayed in the schoolroom or study at Combray is significant: as Valérie Sueur writes, it is no accident that all the reproduced images of the masterpieces that Proust admired appear throughout the text in his bedroom or schoolroom.¹⁹ Before he moved from rue de Courcelles Proust had as sole decoration in his bedroom a photo of Whistler's portrait of Carlyle (*Corr.* V, 41), a photo of the Mona Lisa and one of the Golden Virgin of Amiens Cathedral (*CSB*, 86). Thus reproduced images, for Proust and the Narrator, are intimately bound up with childhood, nostalgia, accession to and appreciation of art, and memory. They are companions, but also work tools, as necessary for the writer as his pen and paper. Unravelling the relationship of reproductions with these essential Proustian themes is the project this study attempts.

- 18 Of the fourteen uses of the word 'gravure' in *À la recherche* no less than ten occur in *Du côté de chez Swann*.
- 19 Valérie Sueur, "Impressions et réimpressions": Proust et l'image multiple", in *Marcel Proust: l'écriture et les arts, op. cit.*, p. 91.