The Sensory and Its Critics

Alain Cueff

In one of the most famous passages from *In Search of Lost Time*, in the middle of a vast book that produces itself from the experience of life recomposed in and through writing, Marcel Proust offers a striking allegory of the experience of art. Its protagonist is the author Bergotte, who, while reading an article, suddenly remembers the emotion he felt long ago in front of Vermeer's painting, *The View of Delft*.[1] In spite of great physical pain, he rushes off to the museum, where he casts scarcely a glance at the spurious and futile pictures hung on the walls, mere substitutes that are certainly not worth 'the draughts and sunlight in a Venice palazzo or a modest house on the seaside.' The pull of reminiscence is imperious and tolerates no distractions. Finally, Bergotte comes face to face with the *View*. In his memory, inaccurate yet dynamic, it had looked brighter, more immediately attractive. But now his attention is drawn to other details: 'He noticed for the first time the little figures in blue, that the sand was pink, and finally the precious substance of a tiny patch of yellow wall' — and it appears richer, more complex and appealing, and far more thought-provoking than he recalled. More demanding, too. Vermeer's *View* is double: its present appearance, superimposed on the screen of memory, arouses intense, unprecedented sensations.

One never bathes in the same river twice: our perception of everyday things, and still more that of art, is affected by time past, by our dreams and ordeals, being first stored then transformed, by our intuitions and reflections, first jettisoned then reinstated, by our life as we live and remember it. The time has come: at this point Bergotte could appreciate the insufficiencies of his own approach and he fathomed, as if for the first time, the grandeur and profundity of the picture. Between times, his life and work had followed an unpredictable path, and Proust, in the course of Bergotte's emotive and critical confrontation with the painting, in this unique moment during which his whole existence tips over, imagines him regretting bitterly: 'This how I should have written [...] My recent books are too dry; I should have applied several more layers of color to them, rendered each phrase precious in itself, just like this tiny patch of yellow wall.' This would have called for the precision and generosity of Vermeer, his patience, tenderness, and humility, which were directed uniquely at conjuring up that eternity which procures the most ineffable pleasure.[2]

Just as the effervescence of sensation offers him a glimpse of a passion full of promise, Bergotte, at once fulfilled and exhausted, is struck forcibly by the revelation of the Vermeer. Collapsing, he soon dies, of 'indigestion', as the author has

him say with cruel irony, or else of an ecstasy that, *in extremis*, lay just out of reach. 'Dead forever? Who can say? Admittedly, spiritualist experiences, no more than religious dogmas, offer no proof that the soul endures. What one can say is that everything occurs in our life as if we had entered it carrying a burden of obligations contracted in some former existence.' A former existence or the one we dream, imagine, reconstruct, revisit ourselves, while awake and more alive than ever the moment an artwork renders us oblivious to our own existence or holds it up to us in a wholly new light, the goal being now not to end it, but, on the contrary, to begin it again, to restore its faded colors.

In its allegorical persistence, and when its genuine cause is recognized,[3] Bergotte's death offers an equivalent of the supreme rapture and pleasure vouchsafed by the full acknowledgement of the power of art. Aesthetic experience does not take place with a view to an end: it constitutes a commencement. Proust (who often reiterates the idea that the world is being created anew each day) conceives of it as absolute, definitive and com- parable only to the inspiration of love, minus the disappointments: amid our frivolities and routine cares, all yields to it. The intuitions it sparks are capable of illuminating an entire life, of bestowing on it a meaning and consistency of its own.

Such experience offers us feelings that follow codes very different from those that society, as well as our own conformism, individualism and narcissism, impose upon us. Life itself is just a pretext (is not everything destined to finish in a book?), an opportunity to revel in that vertigo of time-honored yet ever renewed sensations in which we are at the same time subject and object, agent and patient, author and reader, in a full and complete *concordance of times*.

The chance afforded by reminiscence—in *Jean Santeuil* and then in *À la Recherche*, summoned up by a *madeleine*, by a slice of toast dunked in tea, by an uneven paving-stone in Aubervilliers or Venice and also through the intermediary of pictorial, musical or literary works by real or fictitious artists—possesses resonances at once Platonic and sensualist. But if Proust manages to overcome this apparent contradiction, it is because, as a reader more in sympathy with *Phaedrus* than *The Republic* and attuned to the refinements of Plato's literary artistry that on occasion jars with the philosopher's ideas, he is mindful to avoid taking Socrates' anathemas against poets literally.

The loathing for sensation that morality and the intellect exact from the philosopher remains entirely alien to Proust. On the contrary, he strives to make the passion of the senses a mechanism for contemplating the world, in parallel propounding the 'inferiority of the intelligence', since it is only after shaking it off, as he explains in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 'that the writer can recapture something of our impressions, that is, achieve something from himself, with just the material of art.'[4] Still, intelligence remains valuable for classifying or explaining instinct (though remaining subsidiary in the hierarchy of the virtues), for getting it to bear fruit. In other words, limits must be fixed to intelligence, confined to a precise role

to prevent it from stifling the epiphany of phenomena. By and large, in aesthetic analysis, what Proust manages to resolve within the continuity of his poetic vision is perceived as the dilemma of perception versus comprehension, sensation versus critical acumen—a quandary highly characteristic of modernity, which, since it has so seldom been confronted (or, rather, since it has been systematically circumvented), has ended up besetting our relationship to art.

It took the unfettered, unalienated, genius of a writer like Proust to harness the intensity of our encounter with the artwork, the irreversible quality of its miraculously concrete impact, its count- less extrapolations into our consciousness. But, then, owing to a cultural turning-point that imposed its rule during the 20th century, modernity today habitually apprehends artefacts more through history and theory than through literature (which was, in the 18th and 19th centuries, from Diderot to Baudelaire, from Stendhal to Huysmans, the form par excellence of aesthetic discourse), conceived of as a place where sometimes contradictory levels of conscious can condense.

Starting with Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, history has been fostered on art lovers as the almost exclusive model for incorporating within a coherent ensemble of data of various descriptions, not only in order to further elucidation, but also to refine, perhaps even to improve, taste. Against the obscurantism and indulgence of the present day, such a notion strikes one as salutary. It would allow us to perceive what past centuries, in their unthinking subordination to the present, may have neglected, and so furnish human life with a direction, with a shifting shape, instead of solidifying it an immutable substance. If animals, as Nietzsche writes, are *unhistorical* beings, prisoners of a succession of undifferentiated instants,[5] man is characterized by the particular form of his relationship to time as it unfolds in history. Knowledge of the past prepares the ground both for the comprehension of the present and for the advent of the future. Our timescales are interwoven: to try to do without the one means discarding the others. As the proverb declares: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'—as punishment or as farce. By serving as a crucible for an analytical, explanatory will, and by co-opting the social sciences and borrowing their theoretical models, History since Hegel (the philosopher who first conceived of its end) has exerted a still more determinant influence on the human intellect to the point (as in the case of David Strauss and Ernest Renan) of proposing it might dissipate the mysteries of religion.

In his second *Untimely Meditations*—after praising the science as eminently necessary, Nietzsche postulates that 'the over- saturation of an age with history' is 'hostile and dangerous to life' as it weakens perspicuity and energy, and strengthens to excess the fiction of 'the old age of mankind, the belief that one is a latecomer and an epigone,' likewise exacerbating an overweening 'mood of irony in regard to itself.'[6] An 'overdose' of history prevents humans from appreciating the uncertainty of experience by arranging it all too conveniently into a succession of

causes and effects, thereby obscuring the interest and benefits of venturing into uncharted waters.

Nietzsche's critique becomes particularly applicable to the field of art since history, viewed as an overarching, normative narrative capable of accounting for the long line of art's '-isms', started harboring prescriptive ambitions. The very influential Clement Greenberg, with his faculty for ignoring the aspirations of certain artists whose work fails to conform to his lofty principles or, in some cases, to one of his vaguer speculations, furnishes an extreme example of this phenomenon. The innocent eye does not exist: often adduced, this self-evident fact has endowed the discipline with a dogmatic strain its object could readily dispense with. Problems arise when theory neglects the sensorial mode of understanding garnered from experience and erects as a substitute the logic of an entirely autonomous form of reasoning detached from any substrate and operating within the narrow bounds of a history of modernism. The *doxa* of modernity is unwilling to consider periods and places, which, since they cannot be subsumed within it, might jeopardize its structure. If the opportune anachronistic views of an Aby Warburg, by paving the way for the comparison between the incomparable and for the development of heterodox concepts, opened up some profitable vistas, modern art remains generally thought of as a hermetically sealed discipline whence truth emerges dressed as certainty.

In reality, as Pasolini declared in *Petrolio*, 'if we are so keen on history (certainly keener than on any other science) it is precisely because what is most significant in it utterly eludes us.'[7] It is solely by taking account of this congenital, if productive, defect that it becomes possible to save history from the false logic in which it is draped and appraise it correctly. Understanding the road is preferable to obsessing about the destination. Contrary to what occurs in the more empirical, less dictatorial history of literature,[8] the systematic mind, concerned above all with ensuring its own coherence, obfuscates or overlooks the contradictions inherent in creativity and in its reception. In so doing it has tended to restrict the conditions of experience, constraining the freedom of action of subjective interpretation and granting it little more than a marginal and irrelevant role predicated upon an order of instituted rules.

Paradoxically enough, this passion for forging predetermined causal chains coincided with the growing difficulty of adumbrating a working definition of art that takes account of the concerns of the artist, the philosopher and the art lover. Even the upheaval brought about by the radical alteration in what is expected of painting (the shift from imitation to abstraction, from autonomy to interactivity), the diversification of artistic practices, and an initially antagonistic then cooperative relationship with mass culture, has failed to call into question a method that betrays a tendency to treat itself as its own object. Nonetheless, there does exist an eye of the 19th century, an eye of the 20th century, just as Michael Baxandall described for the Quattrocento.[9] The problem has grown in complexity since the

model of history has been transferred unaltered over to critiques of the present, as if, anxious to rebut accusations of irrelevance, the artwork had to be strapped into the straitjacket of objective standards, instead of the imponderable character of the experience being considered as the primary factor.

Since John Dewey, in his only essay devoted to art, strove above all to understand the general character of its experience, his study cannot strictly be said to constitute a treatise in aesthetics. 'The task,' he writes, 'is to restore confidence between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.'[10] From this point of view, Dewey's insistence on the interaction between the heterogeneous components contributing to the production of a work is valuable since it seeks to emancipate aesthetics from its narrow and stifling formalism. Dewey posits a manner of thinking specific to the artist, 'embodied in the object,' developing along a path essentially distinct from the principles of scientific thought with which there is no reason to assimilate it.[11] In furthering his demonstration, Dewey tends to reduce the unique value of the artwork, to treat it as just one experience among many—if better prepared and directed than those thrown up by the accidents of life,—a prospect taken up by Allan Kaprow as 'mixing art and life'. Thus Dewey apprehends works as things, whereas Proust's thought centers on the encounter with the object, as far as this constitutes a sensory phenomenon susceptible to becoming a material for art. Preferring to stress the instrumental value of art, if conceived of according to highly exalted ambitions and immune to the hierarchies that separate museum art from its so-called 'folk' alternatives, the pragmatist philosopher emphasizes its propaedeutic dimension rather than the pleasure it might procure. In this he sees eye to eye with the collector Alfred C. Barnes, for whom art constituted a privileged educational tool. In defiance of a thoughtless hedonism unworthy of hardworking America (and in keeping with a utilitarianism stigmatized by Lewis Mumford), Dewey's philosophy of virtue applied to art remains 'puritan', as if pleasure, in responding inconstantly to its stimulus, is a parasite likely to undermine the cognitive process and jeopardize any potential intellectual benefit.

Hans Robert Jauss has remarked on the 'bad conscience' of the specialist that leads him to dissociate a priori and methodically the pleasure afforded by art from scientific analysis, as if the one inevitably excludes the other, or might undermine it, while in fact the former proceeds and nourishes the latter. The thesis he proposes at the start of *Kleine Apologie der ästhetischen Erfahrung* dating to 1972 has lost nothing of its relevance: 'The attitude of pleasure the possibility of which is implied by art and which it arouses is the very foundation of aesthetic experience. It is impossible to overlook it. On the contrary; if we want today to uphold the social function of art and defend the scientific disciplines in its service against their detractors, intellectual and otherwise, it should be readdressed as a theoretical object of reflection.'[12] This wide-ranging program is far from easy to apply: Jauss details the

misunderstandings of a tradition that has led de facto to the instrumentalization of art as exemplum, something advantageous chiefly to philosophy and morality. One of the most eminent representatives of this tendency is Theodor W. Adorno.

In the eyes of this philosopher only a philistine can derive any pleasure whatsoever from engaging with an artwork: the patrician contempt Adorno voices for jazz, for example, stems from his conviction that all art is asceticism and that allowing oneself to bathe in the sensual gratifications of a partially improvised music lies beyond the pale. Pleasure, he writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, is petty. Symptomatic of an unsophisticated sensibility, it betrays something infantile. Preoccupied by his ideological battles—justified moreover by the dangers of totalitarianism on the one hand and by the threat that mass culture, the *Kulturindustrie*, presents to art and to the very possibility of discourse on the other—denouncing 'commodification' and fetishism, and railing against the pre-eminence of the 'effect', Adorno concedes that his analytical grid is inevitably normative.

However, Adorno, offering evidence of his impressive capacity for self-criticism, which, moreover, leaves hanging in the air a cloud of enthralling contradictions, shows his hand in a revealing aside that Jauss is quick to pick up on: 'Yet if the last traces of pleasure were extirpated, the question of what artworks are for would be an embarrassment.'[13] This is the closest he gets to admitting the notion that pleasure, as a testimony of the encounter with sensation, might indeed be endowed with critical scope. And, as Proust noted, to abandon pleasure is simultaneously to abandon hope.[14] Acknowledging Proustian reminiscence as a model for a creative relationship to the sensory ('the search for lost time [...] recalls to life a long-vanished world in its totality'[15]), Jauss continues by stressing how in the modern age the task of aesthetics has consisted in 'opposing to an experience drained of meaning and a language subsidiary to the consumer society an aesthetic perception seen as an agent of linguistic and artistic critique; in compensating for the plethora of roles man plays in society and the faces science presents of the world, by maintaining present an image of a single entity, shared by all—a totality that is most effectively revealed as attainable, or as worth attaining, through art.'[16]

From this point of view, nothing can replace our personal, private experience of an artwork, since, as for Bergotte, it prepares the ground for a rediscovery of the organic dimension of the world, to reconstitute, with our own language and imagination, an environment we can inhabit, without embarking on a quest for a privileged position attainable, or not, by dint of some form of appropriation. An authentic aesthetic experience does not derive from the *effects* produced by a little patch of yellow wall or anything else: on the contrary, it is carried by the empathic recognition of such or such a form, or color, or rhythm, together disposed in a manner so to endow the world with a shape, a consistency, a resonance. Instead of dividing up one's sensations so as to explain them, one should try to assemble them and understand them. The focus of such comprehension cannot, obviously, be one dimensional or exclusively intellectual. In a letter to Eugène Lefébure dated

1867, Stéphane Mallarmé, one of the most cerebral and most hermetic of poets, expressed this venerable but virtually taboo idea with a clarity that characterizes the acknowledgement of a debt. 'I believe,' he wrote, 'that to really become man, as nature thinking itself, one has to think with the entire body—it is this that constitutes thought as a whole, in unison, like the strings of a violin instantly vibrating over its hollow wooden box.'[17]

To think with the entire body: to place oneself totally at the disposal of the world, by embracing all its constraints, but also all its plasticity, mobility and sensuality. The body takes liberties that the analytical mind would like to deprive it of so as to fix it in an identifiable, recordable position. There exists, Bergson insisted, 'a logic of the body, a prolongation of desire, exercised long before the intelligence acquires conceptual form.'[18] If emotion (which sets in motion the body as well as thought) wins over reflection, the fact does not exclude the latter. It was, after all, *from* his garden that Claude Monet painted his *Waterlilies*: these pictures are neither a transcription nor an equivalent but a condensed prolongation of what he had not only seen, but more crucially felt over the passing days, with his body and eye, with his body and soul. The phenomenon that supervenes in his pictures is not the product of the visual organ alone, but of the five senses as a whole, crystallized into a succession of individualized instants. Consequently, his painting dissipates the misapprehensions of what is known as 'abstraction', commonly defined as an intellectual process of reduction, while, in Monet's practice, as in František Kupka's and Wassily Kandinsky's, it would be more correct to consider it as an act of condensation: of physical sensations, of the intuitive sense and knowledge acquired by long practice, of all kinds of hypotheses and possible materializations and, in what is far from a coincidence, from an often-musical form of inspiration. A daring operation of reframing, Monet's suppression of the horizon line bears the evidence of the movement of his body and his eye suddenly intersecting with sensations that encapsulate the entire cosmos in a detail. If it is a challenge for the artist, such condensation also directs an appeal to the viewer: he recognizes the closure of the visual field, but can attain it only by way of what lies outside the picture space, that is, by his own experiential knowledge of his surroundings. The pleasure derived from such attentiveness consists in emotionally and spiritually bestowing a new structure on what the painter has objectified through the activity of his thinking. The sensorial experience of art equates to a transmutation *of* a transmutation—the subjective redeployment of a reality that already serves as the subject of substantialization. Inspiration follows expiration—merging, repeating, unfolding. From Allan Kaprow to Olafur Eliasson, not forgetting Donald Judd (whose works are both more corporeal and more spiritual than he cared to admitted), installation has provided the materialization of this ambition to reintegrate the body and sensation into an aesthetic experience. Freed to an extent from the rigorous constraints of history, contemporary art is thus able to tackle the sensory *bodily*; a fact that seems all the more necessary in an age in which algorithms predict our desires

and procure us, with- out the will coming into play, virtually instantaneous satisfaction. Accordingly, the attitude of an artist vis-à-vis our world is less determined by objects (that was the chief concern of the 20th century), by the images and products of mass culture, than by the intuition of a universal enigma that theoretical history no longer compels it to solve by rational equations. If present- day artists tend to deal in extremely diverse media it is not because they are motivated by a conventional preoccupation with multi-disciplinarity but, rather, because they perceive that sensory experience today can only obtain through a range of means: reality has never actually been 'one' or compressed into one univocal rationality.

To think with the entire body, to feel with every faculty, now presupposes that one has to do more than simply to see—and that because the visible itself has changed in nature, since science, technology, and its extensions in the media, having first cut us off from nature, have now severed all our unmediated connections with the world. Impressionists, Futurists and Cubists could produce great art by focusing on the modalities of the visual: the challenge today is to find room for sensation; to allow things to morph in our presence and become manifest in original constructs of a physical and spiritual concordance of the times. Whenever art regains the metonymic power increased specialization has tended to forestall, this is the most exciting prospect facing it today: to incorporate and relocate diverse points of view within one and the same work; to persuade viewers to venture beyond the pre-established limits of conventional experience by offering them the chance to experience for themselves the intersection and conjunction between sensation and significance.

Translation from the French:
David Radzinowicz
Published in *Keys to a Passion*,
Paris, Fondation Louis-Vuitton,
2015, pp. 52-57.

1 All the quotations from Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* were trans- lated by David Radzinowicz from *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, Editions Gallimard (Bibliothèque de La Pléiade), Paris. Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *La prisonnière*, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de La Pléiade), Paris, vol. 3, 1988, pp. 692-93. Vermeer's painting on the Mauritshuis website: https://www.mauritshuis.nl/fr/decouvrir-la-collection/oeuvres-d-art/92-vue-de-delft/. **2** Proust writes to the critic Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, who had published several articles on Vermeer: 'Looking at *The View of Delft* in the museum in The Hague, I realized I'd seen the most beautiful picture in the world,' *La Correspondance de Marcel Proust* (ed. P. Kolb), vol. 20, Plon, Paris, 1955, p. 226; *À la recherche du temps perdu*, *La prisonnière*, *op. cit.,* p. 1740. **3** 'Consequently, the idea that Bergotte was not forever dead is not totally improbable,' Proust, *op. cit.*, p. 693. And, as if to underscore the allegorical character of this death, Proust adds in the following paragraph that the newspapers, 'all repeating the same information,' reported that he had died the previous day. **4** Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Gallimard (Folio), Paris, [1954], 1987, p. 42. **5** 'Consider the cattle grazing as they pass you by: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored [...] Thus the animal lives *un-historically*: for it is contained in the present, like a number without any awkward fraction left over...' Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (I), in *Untimely Meditations* (tr. R. J. Hollingdale), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 60-61. **6** F. Nietzsche, *op. cit*., (V), p. 87. **7** In Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Pétrole*, Paris: Gallimard, 1995, p. 280. **8** Hans Belting notes this disparity between the history of art and the history of literature in *The End of the History of Art?* (tr. C. S. Wood), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p. 62. **9** Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1972. **10** John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York: Putnam, New York, 1934, p. 3. **11** *Ibid*., p. 6. **12** As from Hans Robert Jauss, *Petite apologie de l'expérience esthétique* (tr. C. Maillard), Allia, Paris, 2007, p. 10. See *Towards an aesthetic of literary reception; the quoted text is a chapter from this book*. **13** Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (tr. R. Hullet-Kentor), Continuum, London, 2002, p. 13. **14** Having renounced enjoyment, we can no longer charm ourselves with hope. To hope without hope, if eminently wise, is impossible.' Marcel Proust, *Jean Santeuil*, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Paris, 1971, p. 140. **15** Jauss, *op. cit.,* p. 56. **16** *Ibid.,* p. 57. **17** He continues: 'Thoughts emerging from a single brain (which I so abused last summer and part of this winter) now appear to me like those tunes played on the highest reaches of the top string [*chanterelle*], whose sound is not taken up by the box,—which flit by and vanish, without creating themselves, without leaving any trace.' Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance*, followed by *Lettres sur la poésie*, Gallimard, Paris, [1959], 1995, p. 353. **18** Henri Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, 1932, p. 175.