

Poetics, Today

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Abstract Taking up the time of my encounter with Benjamin Harshav, which was also when *PTL* became *Poetics Today* and a key moment in the development of literary studies toward a more theoretical grounding, this essay raises the issue of the place and status of poetics in today's field of literary studies. Through probing a passage from Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the claim is put forward that the literary text itself, in addition to being poetic, is doing poetics. The passage, in other words, offers an experiment in semiotic sign-making that is fully capable of participating in theoretical debate.

The debate, in this case, concerns the status of visuality in linguistic texts. This is a happy coincidence, since this is a hotly debated issue in today's humanities. After the linguistic and anthropological turns, we are now in the middle of the visual turn. In an attempt to articulate what could be a genuinely visual moment in literature, narrativity and visuality are brought together in the notion of a visual act. To that effect, two standard equations concerning the visual are scrutinized. On the one hand, the equation between image and iconicity is criticized. On the other, the equation between speech acts and acts of looking is underlined. Attending to the subtleties of Proust's text helps understand what a visual act can be instead.

The example allows us to speculate that, among the many advantages the work around the notion of poetics has offered as a tool toward a more theoretical and more scientific literary scholarship, the continued attention to poetic practice as potentially also a theoretical practice is particularly important today, another key moment, when we are turning to interdisciplinarity.

Toward a Harshavian Poetics

Under the heading “poetry,” defined as “any literary work of a distinctly imaginative or elaborate kind,” the *Cambridge Encyclopedia* (1990) defines poetics as follows: “The theory and practice of poetry, concerning itself with such fundamental questions as what poetry is, what it does, and how it should be written, is known as poetics” (Crystal 1990: 954). This succinct definition is just one of several that show how difficult it is for poetics to disassociate description from prescription, and to define literature in general. It is an unfortunate shortcoming, too, for these might well be the most crucial problems of literary studies’ attempt to establish itself as a “serious” academic discipline.

Benjamin Hrushovski, now Harshav, seemed to respond to the ingrained habit of thinking that this quote exemplifies when he started his campaign for a scientific poetics, proposed to the academic community in the first issue of *Poetics and Theory of Literature (PTL)* in 1976. His programmatic statement for the journal puts forward a definition of poetics as theoretical and descriptive, and emphatically not prescriptive. His view of poetics is derived from his conception of science as put forward in the following words: “*The serious study and analysis of literature*. It aims, as any science does, at an objective and systematic understanding and description of an aspect of the world around us, in this case: a field created in human culture, in all its varieties, forms, appearances. It develops a body of knowledge and a system of methods to describe and explain such phenomena in ways which can be verified, argued with, improved upon, or refuted and replaced.” Prescriptive poetics has no place in this “serious study” of literature as he defines it. And whereas terminologies have changed and utopian expectations have been modified, twenty-five years later Harshav’s program still seems to hold.

In my view, more important than the program itself, though, is the community he created in order to do this ambitious job. Indeed, for me it is Harshav’s greatest achievement to have been one of the major figures to break with this age-old tradition of prescribing how writers should write and of confusing literary studies with its object. In establishing the Porter Institute and *PTL*, later *Poetics Today*, he created a context in which a large group of scholars has been able to develop a view of poetics that is not prescriptive, nor derived from the aesthetic statements of writers, but that could become a serious academic field worthy of the name scholarship, discipline, and perhaps, even, science. By bringing together a great variety of scholars from diverse national, cultural, and academic backgrounds, he has fostered an ongoing debate that has been decisive for the current state of poetics, now called “literary theory.” But how can the two—the scientific project and the open community—yield a coherent discipline?

Metalinguage and Visual Poetics

For many, and Harshav is among them, one of the criteria for a scientific discipline is that it must have the potential to articulate a metalanguage that will facilitate the disentanglement of theory from object. In the same founding article, he wrote: “Unifying a text can be done only through using norms and models from outside this text” (xxix). In this call for a metalanguage, he also calls for an understanding of literature’s inextricable interaction with other discourses. This is all the more urgent in the case of the muddled mix of poetics and literature, where both use language as their medium. The success of poetics—as in *Poetics Today*—in developing an effective metalanguage has been considerable, and Harshav’s early work has provided an invaluable inspiration in that respect. Personally, I have always felt this success was greater here than in some of the competing journals that are perhaps more exclusively and rigorously devoted to the scientific endeavor—scientific, as we thought in the seventies, on the model of the sciences. How is that relatively greater success possible? In this contribution, and in honor of the scholar who provided me and countless other young scholars with a context in which I could flourish in precisely the way I needed when I most needed it, I would like to reopen the discussion of metalanguage on the basis of this personal feeling. Needless to say, this project, embodied in such a personal starting point, does not augur well for total agreement, but let me say from the start that whatever differences of opinion may remain, it is only thanks to Harshav and his group, his projects, his journal, and his conferences, that I can venture to speak on this issue at all.¹ And to anticipate my conclusion, the greater success of *Poetics Today*—greater than, say, that of a journal like *Poetics*, which among the competitors is the one I know best—is, to my mind, paradoxically, due to the openness with which the sought-for metalanguage has been considered; indeed, not prescribed.

Two paradoxes underlie my argument here. First, the attempt to move away from a prescriptive poetics has too often led to a deeply prescriptive conception of science. In contrast, *Poetics Today* has continued to exercise an attraction for scholars whose interest in literature as the art of language is grounded in an aesthetic approach to literature. Aesthetics, unlike the poetics Harshav pursues, tends to be deployed prescriptively. It philosophically articulates concepts such as beauty and sublimity, which explain why people get excited about things. In common use, it is then, in a reversal of its explanatory power, brought to bear on value judgments. These in turn become prescriptive criteria. In other words, although this aesthetic approach

1. See on this Bal 1991a, my contribution to the issue commemorating one of the Porter Institute’s founding conferences, ten years later.

need not be prescriptive, it leans extremely heavily on a prescriptive practice. But it also keeps readers geared to what excites them in the first place, thus producing, I like to think, more creativity and depth of thought in its practitioners than a taboo on aesthetics—and an “aesthetics of reading,” as in Iser—would encourage. This has saved the journal from the rigidly prescriptive view of science that dominated in the seventies and that failed to keep in touch with newer conceptions in the scientific field itself. By continuously publishing on literature, and not just on literary theory, both Harshav as a scholar and the journal he founded avoided getting stuck in the prescriptive rigidity that doomed the scientific optimism of the seventies.

Second, the liberal yet structured approach to methodology has been conducive to transgressions of the principles of methodology—such as the firm distinction between meta- and object-language—which have ended up contributing greatly to the furthering of poetics as literary theory. There is a good epistemological reason for this. Indeed, for a long time, physics has been the model for academic attempts to construct reliable, objective knowledge (Code 1991). If I question the definition of metalanguage as rigorously separate from object-language, it is in view not of an antiscientific stance but, on the contrary, of a revised epistemology that serves the object better by complicating, not countering, the production of a metalanguage, albeit one of a different kind. Following Code, the complication is best understood as a shift of model, from physics to the social sciences. The model is no longer the physical world (a world which, significantly, does not, in the uses of this model, include life) that appears (only appears!) to lend itself to being endlessly divided into ever smaller units seen as building blocks (Stengers 1987; Stengers and Schlanger 1991). The knowledge that is most relevant for the cultural disciplines is modeled on “knowing other people.” Code develops an extensive list of properties for such knowledge. Of her list, the property I would like to foreground here concerns the provisional and changing nature of such knowledge, which is constantly revised in its encounter with other people. I would like to explore the productive potential of this view through a specific case that, as it happens, meets Harshav in the end in his recent work.

There are many reasons for my choice of the sample analysis below as my way of honoring Benjamin Harshav. First of all, I wish to foreground the ongoing actuality of the title of his project. This actuality is best embodied by the journal he founded and by *its* title, on the condition that a Lacanian, displacing comma is added to it. Second, the journal’s characteristic I value most is primarily his to take credit for, namely its openness to “other people,” to colleagues with views different from his own. This is, I contend, how the journal can remain a journal *of poetics*, in the sense that

it has defined that, as a metalanguage, and *of today*, in the sense that it is capable of absorbing new views of epistemology, hence, of methodology: of poetics, today. Third, and moreover, it seems significant that Harshav's groundbreaking contributions to poetics (e.g., 1982, 1984) have included the poetics of metaphor and character. These two topics may well be the most central, productive, and also problematic topics in theoretical poetics. For metaphor is a discursive practice based on transference from one experiential domain to another and has remained intractable to rigorous metalanguage. And character, in addition to being the least easily understood concept of literary theory in terms of metalanguage, also lends itself to be the site of the fiercest controversy between humanist and postmodern scholarship, between a mimetic and a constructivist narratology.

It is because of its antihumanism that postmodernism is most ferociously resisted, whereas the example from Proust developed below demonstrates that this is a misunderstanding. It is my contention that instead of underestimating the importance of "other people," this cultural philosophy of today, to which a poetics for today belongs, is extremely alert to, and respectful of, "other people." Antihumanism, as Proust already proposed and as the scientific ambition of literary theory or poetics demonstrates, is not anti-human or antihumanity but anti the universalist and often arrogant claims to knowledge that makes the humanistic, if uncritically endorsed, detrimental to humans — and to knowledge.

It is perhaps provocative to be taking Marcel Proust, of all major writers of world literature, as the author or inventor of a particular *poetics*. His work is both imaginative and elaborate — both, in fact, to the extreme — and utters strong opinions on "what poetry is, what it does, and how it should be written." This definition of poetics remains a confusion of categories, levels, and genres. Yet I would like to explore the possibilities that such a description of what poetics might be is less ill conceived than one might think, and that it could be more productive if it is taken not as a definition but as a heuristic principle. In other words, rather than *confusing* what poetry is with what it does, I will take these two aspects as purposely distinct, meaningfully combined, and leading up to the kind of immanent poetics that demonstrate, by "doing poetics," not "how it should be written" but how it should be understood. In other words, I will radicalize the notion that literary analysis can further both the understanding of literature — the goal of poetics — and the development of a metalanguage, albeit one not so rigorously distinguishable from the object-language, since it forms a part of it. I will, then, position metalanguage *within* the object-language. This positioning does not entail giving up the former nor yielding to a prescriptive confusion.

Prescriptive poetics runs counter to everything Harshav has always stood for. Any prescription for how to write poetry is fatally essentializing and hopelessly generalizing. Precluding the possibility of a scientific discipline, prescriptive poetics also ruins poetry. For by essentializing and generalizing, it destroys what most people consider to be an important feature of literature, namely its creativity, its originality, its difference, and its novelty. But there is one situation in which seemingly prescriptive discourse can actually be precisely that—innovative; this is where it is gentle suggestion rather than bossy prescription. This is the situation where an extant, culturally active discourse is brought to bear on another discourse with which it has no self-evident congeniality. I hope to demonstrate this by endorsing the conception of metaphor as a convergence of frames (Hrushovski 1984) or discourses. This particular kind of metaphoricity underlies the methodology of Proust’s “visual poetics.” He develops this poetics through a revision of character.

If a poetical discourse were not so much to explicitly prescribe as to implicitly take its clues from a discourse generally considered foreign to it, then, what would otherwise be tediously prescriptive could become innovatively explorative, so as to suspend the description/prescription opposition itself. Such a poetical discourse turned poetological would demonstrate “how it [poetry] should be written” by insisting on the deployment of its “other.” Literature’s “other,” here, is visuality. Embedding the specific case of the presence of literature’s “other” within itself, within the larger problem of literary methodology, my argument will probe the issue of a metalanguage for poetics through a close scrutiny of Proust’s visual poetics. The use and misuse of Charles Peirce’s semiotic categories on the one hand, and the application and misapplication of the communication model on the other, will be the conceptual problems confronted with Proust’s practice in this domain. My goal is to attach this technical issue of poetics-as-science to the larger one coming from the tradition of poetics—prescription—and to the larger one coming from epistemology—“knowing other people” as the model or paradigm of knowledge production. This essay ends on a position that is as anachronistic and misplaced for Harshav as it is for Proust, but that, I submit, honors the actuality of both, for poetics, today.

Proust was not a scholar; nor are most literary authors. But in light of his writing, it would be a mistake to say that in order to be respectable as an academic field, poetics ought to sever itself from its object. This, I will argue in this essay, is the most important lesson to be drawn from what I will present here as Proust’s *visual poetics*. I would like to submit that the problematic element in the pursuit of a metalanguage is best articulated through the relation of transference—a metaphoric relation—between literature and

visual imagery, because vision offers a different model of the relationship between subject (of analysis) and object (the text). The neat distinction between subject and object on which the very notion of metalanguage is based becomes problematic once visibility is taken into account. As it happens, a questioning of the clear and subordinating relationship between subject and object lies at the center of the experiment Proust conducted. He did this in a poetics of subjectivity (a modernist tenet), which attempts to test its own premises by exploring in detail the limits of the subject and the relation between a wavering subjectivity and the object whose status is equally under scrutiny.

In what follows, I will take the domain of visibility in Proust as exemplary for that exploration, as parallel to methodology's tenacious problems with metalanguage. This is, emphatically, not to suggest that the visual is privileged in Proust's work. Others might suggest, and indeed have suggested, something similar for music (Christie McDonald) or architecture (Georges Poulet). My point is that the input of visibility is Proust's way of answering the question that informs his ambition as a writer—"how [poetry] should be written"—in a manner that can be taken as allegorical of what I consider to be the fundamental problem of a literary science: the relationship, the antagonism, and the entanglement of subject and object.

Signing a Literary Masterpiece

Public figures tend to have a "signature piece." Harshav's was the early article on character, at least for me. For, like a *mise en abyme* of his project, this article struck a decisive note by integrating the two aspects of poetics: the search for a metalanguage and the sensitivity to literature, while, as an additional bonus, concerning those "paper people" who defy the distinction between subject and object most keenly. (For a scholar who changed his name to make us stop using his first name only, this seems a significant gesture!) The signature passage of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* is, of course, the one in which a piece of cake soaked in linden-blossom tea evokes the involuntary memory that has so centrally figured in the reception of this literary masterpiece. In it, Proust seems to give "instructions for use," dictating how to read his novel. A great deal of scholarship—recently by Julia Kristeva—has stopped at this passage to scrutinize its secrets and marvel at its complexity, at the way in which it would not simply yield a foolproof solution to its own enigma.

I sometimes wonder if the author would not turn in his grave if he knew how many misunderstandings have resulted from his attempt to dominate his readers by means of the poetic device that would later be called *mise*

en abyme.² The prescriptive quality appears to inhere in the sense that the passage is so dense that it can only be meant to stand in for something more far-reaching than itself or its narrative environment. It is this kind of passage that, in the public opinion, has turned Proust into a philosopher of time, sensation, and art.³

As a result of the bad habit of believing an author whenever his work is an uncontested masterpiece, the other important characteristic of the book that I will call here its *visual poetics* has suffered from the same willing suspension of disbelief. As a result, attempts to understand Proust's visuality usually amount to discussing his descriptions of paintings. Doing Proust justice, however, requires shedding automatic acquiescence to his opinions and looking at his writing as if we knew nothing of what he thought—or rather, of what he put into the mouth of his often unreliable narrator-protagonist. As soon as Marcel says “nous,” one had better be alert: here he goes again, philosophizing.⁴ Instead, it is in the maddest, least believable, and least respectable passages that Proust is at his most creative in terms of innovative writing—of a poetics. For it is here that he emulates—not imitates, or describes, or theorizes—visual art and other visual images, in its status as stimulating poetical other. It is the kind of emulation that undercuts the opposition between description and prescription.⁵

Let me trade the signature piece, then, for a piece on the signature. The signature: a crossroads of linguistic and visual signs, uniquely naming and utterly falsifiable, the sign of human individuality and the object of fictional exploration of what it means to be someone: a character, and a metaphor of a character. A figure of changing names, designed to question the subject-

2. On Proust's deployment of the figure of *mise en abyme*, see Collier 1991. On the figure of *mise en abyme* in general, see Dällenbach 1977.

3. Vincent Descombes (1992) warned against reading Proust's philosophy off the page of his explicit philosophical discourse. He distinguished the novelistic from the essayistic discourse, proposing to read the philosophical thrust of the text in the novelistic passages rather than the essayistic ones. This seems to me a very valid idea, one that is, unfortunately, not often heeded. Kristeva (1994) considers Proust a philosopher of sensation and time. Proust on art has been the subject of many studies that have remained confined to the references to art, and none of which have considered the visual domain as a whole in terms of the text's poetics. See, for example, Bucknall 1969; Guillerm 1987; Henry 1981, 1983; and Uenishi 1988. An exception is Bertho 1990.

4. Antoine Compagnon is one of very few who explicitly takes issue with the tendency to “believe” Proust literally. “I would like to have shown that a work remains present and alive because of its flaws and its disparities, that these defects are what indicate that the work is rooted in time” (Compagnon 1992: 299), and “It is by this kind of general law that Proust hopes to give consistency to the novel over and above the dissipation of its individual instants. But do we have to believe in the law?” (48).

5. Harold Bloom's rather Oedipally based study (1973) of influence among poets resonates here, but it is the difference between them—generational versus medial—that makes all the difference. For an alternative view of emulation and influence, see Lord 1999.

object distinction, and to probe the possibility of knowing by exploring the failed knowledge of another person. Symbolically for the deunifying vision that emerges from it, it is a two-part piece, one fragment coming from the first volume, from the chapter “Within a Budding Grove,” and one from the third, from the chapter “The Fugitive.” Both fragments describe the signature of Gilberte Swann, the childhood sweetheart of the hero, graphically, visually, that is. In terms of the communicative power of written language, Gilberte writes rather poorly; her handwriting is practically illegible. This already quite subtly undermines the commonsense distinction that holds that in language, meaning making is based on convention, and in pictures on iconicity. Gilberte writes illegibly, but she also writes well, visually, since she creates a beautiful but, more important, strong, memorable form. This form is not iconic but, as standard artspeak would have it, abstract expressionist, betraying the “hand” of the artist so that index replaces both icon—in visual art—and symbol—in language:

I opened it [the letter] carelessly, since it could not bear the one signature that would have made me happy, the name of Gilberte, with whom I had no relations outside the Champs-Élysées. But there, at the foot of the page, which was embossed with a silver seal representing a helmeted head above a scroll with the device *Per viam rectam*, beneath a letter written in a large and flowing hand in which almost every phrase appeared to be underlined, simply because the crosses of the “t”s ran not across but over them, and so drew a line beneath the corresponding letters of the word above, it was precisely Gilberte’s signature that I saw. But because I knew this to be impossible in a letter addressed to me, the sight of it unaccompanied by any belief in it gave me no pleasure. For a moment it merely gave an impression of unreality to everything around me. With dizzy speed the improbable signature danced about my bed, the fireplace, the four walls. (Proust 1981 1.538)

Emblematic of the difficulty of seeing, which only grows with desire and on closer inspection, the first description of this handwriting suggests an extreme illegibility due to an excess of pen strokes. The effect of this signature is characterized by a delaying action: the joy that the narrator should have felt in receiving a note from his dear friend is not instantaneous.⁶ The narrator uses this example to argue for a radical disjunction between perception and reading, or between seeing and acceptance by the mind.

Both the effect of delay and the discrepancy between seeing and reading are again crucial in a later reflection on, and description of, Gilberte’s signature. Much later, when the narrator is in Venice with his mother, the same

6. For more on the delaying effect of the signature and its performativity in general, see Bal 1994, my article on Esther.

signature leads him to think that Albertine, whom he knows to be dead, has been resurrected. Days later he realizes his error, for

as the somewhat belabored originality of Gilberte's handwriting consisted chiefly, when she wrote a line, in introducing into the line above the strokes of her t's which appeared to be underlining the words, or the dots over her i's which appeared to be punctuating the sentence above them, and on the other hand in interspersing the line below with the tails and flourishes of the words immediately above, it was quite natural that the clerk who dispatched the telegram should have read the loops of s's or y's in the line above as an "-ine" attached to the word "Gilberte." The dot over the i of Gilberte had climbed up to make a full stop. As for her capital G, it resembled a gothic A. (Proust 1981 3.671)

All of this would come close to madness if it were not precisely for the question of what is involved in image-writing, that is, in "flat" writing. By "flat" writing, I refer to a poetic that emulates the flat image rather than the "art" image, and that, on the contrary, absorbs the other meaning of "flat"—vulgar, banal.⁷ It integrates the banality of a modernist poetics that no longer endorses the romantic belief in originality with an endorsement of the epistemic limits of the possibility of knowing others. In Proust, whose ambivalent relationship to modern technology is well known, flatness becomes the two-dimensionality of literature's written page, art's two-dimensionality, and the reproducible, flat, glossy image of the photograph, all at the same time.⁸

Just before receiving the telegram, the hero has again been in touch with Gilberte, having brushed against her, watched her, and then been introduced to her without having recognized her as his childhood love. This failed encounter primarily serves the purpose of stating that the point of the telegram's evocation of the signature is not to suggest some idealized closeness that Marcel would have maintained in his mind with Gilberte. There is no miraculous resurrection of Gilberte, only a fleeting moment of the much less miraculous resurrection of Albertine, whose temporal distance from the narrator is so much smaller than Gilberte's (whereas her ontological distance is so much larger).

When Marcel receives the telegram in Venice, he does not see the signature of his correspondent, as would normally be the case in telegrams. In fact, he ascribes his own reading error to the clerk's transcription of Gilberte's handwriting. Nevertheless, and despite his earlier failure to recognize her face, he is able to describe Gilberte's signature, which he saw once as a child, without having it before him, and in such minute detail that all

7. On the notion of flat writing, see Bal 1997, my book on the subject.

8. On the investment of modernism in technology, see Armstrong 1998.

concerns about plausibility are suspended. Realism must yield to semiotics. For the signature is—hyperbolically, taken literally—the paradoxical sign that guarantees the authenticity and the originality of the *absent* subject. It is the most characteristic index, and yet it is also capable of being falsified, of being an icon passing for an index.

It is as if this appeal to semiotic difference is needed in order to make a case—prescriptively—for a form of narration in which plausibility yields to experiment and subjectivity is detached from individuality. Person becomes character, character becomes structure, flesh becomes sign, and names, well . . . what’s in a name? It is the only moment in the entire work where Gilberte and Albertine—the lover defined by existence in time and the lover who, elusive, is defined by existence in space—are not only joined together but actually and explicitly confused, so that two long and major stretches of the narrative lose their semblance of realistic narrative and yield to sign reading. Both “doing” and “being” lose their defining power to produce a character, and only flatness, failed naming, remains.

It is this potential of the signature to “pass,” pass for what it is not—an index of existential subjectivity—in other words, to be used in order to lie (Eco 1976: 10), that is the very nature of the sign. And it seems significant to me that this crucial moment, where novelistic narrative yields to semiotic experimentation, is heavily invested in visuality. By means of the graphic signature of Gilberte/Albertine, the imaginary graphics and the image of grammé, the importance of the visual for Proustian poetics is sketched out and “signs itself.”

Semiotics for a Visual Poetics

The importance of this double passage as a *mise en abyme* of a visual poetics resides first and foremost in its effect of eliminating two misconceptions about such a poetics. First, there is no connection whatsoever with “high art,” with painting, or even with any recognized visual genre. Nor is there any connection with language as a meaningful sign system. The signature is just there, as a visual object of remembrance no less, infused with mood and feeling, so as to radiate meaning outside of the linguistic, which is only arbitrary scribbling unless read. Second, the term “iconic,” so often applied to the visual in yet another misconception, cannot be adduced to “read” the signature’s description either.⁹ Thus, the literary object disagrees with a widespread, often unquestioned assumption of theoretical poetics.

9. The use of “iconic” for /visual/ is very widespread, even among avowed semioticians. See, for example, Louis Marin, who, in spite of his brilliance, is remarkably confused about iconicity (1983) and sometimes disappoints because of it (e.g., 1988). His posthumous volume

Iconicity invariably shows up in inquiries on the contributions of the visual domain to the domain that appears to be its systemic counterpoint, the literary. To be sure, there are well-known cases of iconicity in onomatopoeia, in visual poetry such as Apollinaire's, and in novels where a blank page hides either a crime (Robbe-Grillet's *Le voyeur*) or an immeasurable duration of sleep (Duras's *L'après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas*). But the concept is of little help in accounting for the invasion of one sense—vision—of the realm of another, by means of the concepts of semiotics. Semiotics's thrust is precisely to offer an intermedia perspective, not to pin down each medium to just one of semiotics's concepts. The distribution of Peircean concepts among the media kills their critical potential. If iconicity equals the visual, and symbolicity equals the literary, there is absolutely nothing to be gained.

In contrast, I am interested in examining to what extent and in which ways the senses' *encounter* with the concepts can take place at the crossroad between the media while preserving the dominant medium—here, literary language—and in assessing the importance of the other medium *qua* other. The issue is exchange between frames, or discourses, a meta-metaphor so to speak. Proust's text is almost too good to be true as a playing field for such an inquiry. Rich in visual evocations, it isn't particularly rich in icons, and those icons that it does contain are more often auditory than visual. But it is replete with visual "takes," as well as with reflections on what it means to *look*.

The famous passage where Peirce defines the three categories of signs according to their *ground*—close, but not identical to *code*—has suffered, like various canonical examples of literary theory, from overciting and underreading. Yet it deserves to be quoted to remind us that there is no special affiliation between iconicity and visuality:

An *icon* is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line. An *index* is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for instance, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not. A *symbol* is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification. (Peirce, in Innis 1984: 9–10)

(1993) is less focused on the ill-guided attempt to equate looking with speech acts, and much more profound on visual discourse as a result.

In the case of the icon, it is the sign itself that possesses its “ground.” And far from leading to the kind of realism that informs the equation of icon with image, the definition, based as it is on resemblance, stipulates that the object—the signified or meaning rather than the referent—does not need to be anything at all (“even though its object had no existence”).

The example of an icon does recall Gilberte’s signature (“such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line”), but what defines the streak as an icon is *being* a streak to which we give a different name: a line. The signature is an icon because it is self-enclosed; it owes its ontological status to nothing but itself. It is an effective sign because it enables one to lie, as Eco’s (1976: 10) famous definition has it. Here, again hyperbolically, it enables error; it promotes the mistaken identity that calls forth the childhood memory in all its visual intensity, precisely because it does *not exist*: there is no signature on telegrams, Gilberte is a different person from the girl he loved, and Albertine is dead.

It is an example of the index that brings into the discussion the interpretive mania (“a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole”) that makes lawyers pore over a signature with a magnifying glass to assess its visual resemblance to the “authentic” signature, the guarantee of the existential origin in the body of the person it signifies. According to Peirce, no *interpretant* is necessary. But Proust’s narrator, in his (modernist) exploration of subjectivity, emphasizes the reverse of this: the interpretant *becomes* the object. Proust, here, revises a concept from semiotic metalanguage.

Is iconicity bound up with resemblance, analogy, conformity? Peirce doesn’t say. But it is a sign that possesses a quality of its meaning. This can lead to resemblance if, and only if, the quality is predominantly visual, even if the sign as a whole is not.¹⁰ The example Peirce gives is neither more nor less visual than the example of the index. But, without the existence of the object, we have no other standard than a *presumed* resemblance, a resemblance that is neither ontological nor total, and that does not overrule difference.

Proust’s revisionist iconicity has an important implication for poetics, both theoretical and historical. What is important in the definition of the icon is primarily its negativity, which suspends the ontology of the object. The icon is constructed or conceived by the reader, the decipherer of signs that we all are in our quality of *homo semioticus*. In other words, what makes the notion of iconicity important for reading is not that it leads to some

10. See Eco’s (1976) relevant critique of the motivated signs—icon and index—which defines resemblance more on the basis of ontology than I think is warranted for Peirce.

preestablished, “real” model but that it produces *fiction*. But one would be unable to make the streak signify anything outside of a cultural environment in which geometry and handwriting both circulate and are based on lines. Hence, the second important feature of the icon thus conceived is that it can only emerge from an underlying symbolicity. It is as a *trace* that the pencil leaves the streak behind when it is guided by the hand that projects it. The fluidity of the categories is inherent in their definitions. It is in this sense that Peirce’s basic concepts can be of use for an analysis of literary visuality, of *visual poetics*. This entails not a rejection of metalanguage but the porousness of its distinction from object-language. The object-language, here, revises the metalanguage, but the latter in turn further illuminates the former.

I contend that thinking about visual poetics fares better if it does not take definition and delimitation as its starting point. This is not to argue that a metalanguage should be avoided but that it should be developed in much closer touch—literally, that is, indexically—with the literary text that offers its elements and cases to its formation. For such a poetics can only work if its primary premise remains the undeniable ontological boundary that separates visual from linguistic utterances. The very attempts to produce intermedia texts prove it, and the existence of essentially mixed-media texts such as cinema and video doesn’t contradict this at all. Moreover, one cannot deny the visual aspect of textuality in general—the visual act of reading—yet textuality cannot be grasped at a glance.¹¹ And, although reading requires seeing, the blind can read more easily than they can see paintings or photographs.¹² The fact that Proust situates this probing of the metalinguistic concept of iconicity in the realm of ontology announces the commitment of postmodern poetics to ontological questioning. This is where the signature piece contributes to historical poetics, as I will propose in the next section.

But the question of the visual within the literary—of a visual poetics—is best not answered by definition and delimitation, by a mode of classification that turns difference into opposition and “family resemblance” into hierarchical polarization. The question is not *if* literary texts are able to have a visual dimension but *how* the visual writes itself, and how literary writers can deploy visuality in their artistic projects. An analysis that invokes semiotic concepts not to define but to overcome stultifying definitions—that follows the intertwinements of the three modes of meaning making that are

11. Nor is the glance so self-evident as a way of apprehending the image, as I have argued at length (Bal 1991b, 1999). But the glance remains the basis of the distinction between an object that is primarily spatial and one that is primarily temporal, even if neither can exist without the other dimension.

12. On blind seeing, in particular seeing visual art, see Eriksson 1998.

never “pure”—can contribute to a richer understanding of a poetics that is irreducible to a linguistic structure, yet irreducibly linguistic.

Serial Killing: Postmortem Poetics

Since for Proust, poetical, libidinal, and epistemological considerations are one and the same, the problems of representation he raised tend to be problems pertaining to the integration of these three domains. It is specifically for this reason that I find Proust a good guide in helping to understand what a visual poetics can be. It is here, too, that Proust provides a specific answer to the call by Harshav (then Hrushovski) for norms and models drawn from other cultural discourses than literature. For example, the reflection on the changing nature of beings, *êtres de fuite*, articulates the issue of ontology—what is the other?—as one of epistemology—how can I know that? Thus, Morel, the love object of all the homosexuals in the novel, is compared to an old medieval book full of errors: “He resembled an old book of the Middle Ages, full of mistakes, of absurd traditions, of obscenities” (Proust 1981 2.1066), a comparison that suggests an epistemology. But as a result, he is qualified as “extraordinarily composite,” in other words, as *being* a plurality.

According to Brian McHale (1987), this shift from epistemological to ontological uncertainty is crucially bound up with the shift from modernism to postmodernism. Of course, Proust’s work is a monument of modernism, and a postmodernist reading of it is offensive to the delicate sensibilities of literary historians. In my reading of the novel, however, I draw it in the postmodern direction because it is precisely in the shift from epistemology to ontology that the radical otherness becomes the ultimate object of desire. Proust’s signature piece thus engages critically with the tendency of historical poetics to chronological linearity, offering support, for example, to McHale’s positioning of Faulkner between modernism and postmodernism.

The character who makes epistemology tumble into ontology is Albertine. The entire *roman d’Albertine* is a quest for knowledge about her, but this epistemological anxiety is constantly fed by glimpses of her ontological difference. She is unknowable because, as a woman and a lesbian, she is doubly other. And the representation of this ontological otherness is carried out by way of snapshot effects. This object of obsessive jealousy is a fugitive being because all she leaves behind is snapshots. Jealousy, paranoia, and certain types of images appear to be bound up together.

The ontology of the snapshot consists of the denial of depth, of existence, behind or beneath the glossy, random surface of the accessible visual

present.¹³ Albertine is the figuration of this ontology by means of a “snapshot effect.” She was selected as a love object the moment she visually detached herself from the “take” of the girls on the beach, setting off on her bicycle and thus riding out of the picture, necessitating the change of photographic aesthetic from group portrait to quick snapshot.

This is now beginning to look like something that we might call a visual poetics. The “essence” of the novel is its preoccupation with the ontological consequences of epistemic doubt; and desire, that motor which so massively informs the novel’s forward movement, is anchored in, based on, and itself becomes sick from, the fine but absolute line between the two domains. The desire that is strictly never gratified and the jealousy that instead turns desire into paranoia are propelled by a visual poetics that offers a “theory”—precisely a “novelistic,” not an “essayistic” one—for the need, as well as the impossibility, of disentangling what separates “modern” from “postmodern” vision.

Indeed, in *The Prisoner*, Albertine, who has lost her former, fixed quality of the photo taken that day on the beach, consists only of a series of snapshots: “. . . a person, scattered in space and time, is no longer a woman but a series of events on which we can throw *no light*, a series of insoluble problems” (3.99–100; my emphasis). As I argued in *The Mottled Screen* (1997), the shift from epistemology (“no light”) to ontology (“is no longer a woman”) announces postmodernism, and the phrase “scattered in time and space” (*disséminé*) with its Derridean overtones articulates that shift.¹⁴ That “woman” as “other” falls prey to this existential craze of the snapshot is, of course, no coincidence. This dissolution into visual, flat seriality is only aggravated as Marcel tries to counter it and “fix” Albertine by means of “light” thrown onto her, and onto paper. Thus she ends up *becoming* (ontology) the sheet on which the images (epistemology) of jealousy are going to be fixed: “For I possessed in my memory only a series of Albertines, separate from one another, incomplete, a collection of profiles or snapshots, and so my jealousy was restricted to a discontinuous expression, at once fugitive and fixed” (Proust 1981 3.145–46).

With the word “*mémoire*” also keeping the issue on the level of epistemology and subjectivity, ontological “fugitivity” is presented here as a perversion of the former. The final words here, “à la fois fugitive et fixée,” define quite precisely the nature of the series of snapshots and explain the specific

13. The concept of the snapshot effect is further elaborated in Bal 1997.

14. Derrida, “Différance,” most accessible in *Writing and Difference* (1978) and *Dissemination* (1981). For a feminist critique of the concept of dissemination, see Bal 1991b: 19–23 and 1993: 49–64.

use of this poetics in the novel. The importance of eroticism is crucial: the object of this fugitive fixing is the love object whose sexual orientation the narrator, focalizing with his desiring gaze, is unable to fix. Desire does not lead to penetration—a word that is, here, both epistemological and erotic in meaning.

This implication of the passage produces a “philosophy”—narratively embodied thought—of looking as fixing—that will become a particular, visual form of killing—that is, both contiguous with and quite different from the standard theory of the gaze as control, which sometimes comes close to a paranoid iconophobia.¹⁵ Most readings of Lacan’s theory of the gaze emphasize the confining aspect of it, although it seems obvious that the symbolic underpinnings of the visual imaginary also enable social intercourse through semiotic exchange. Proust explores this more cheerful, in fact saving, aspect of the gaze in other passages.¹⁶ Here the snapshot produces unhappiness but primarily for the photographer himself, who is forced into the awareness of an incurable existential solitude. In terms of the problematics of a visual poetics, the question is, who acts here—as the subject of the visual utterance—and who is the object of the act?

But this is not a whodunit. The question of whether the object of photography (Albertine) or the subject (Marcel) is the agent who produces the representation is moot. Is there a “being” doing the “doing” or has “character” become something else, a flat image, closer to a glossy photograph than a human being? Albertine, ironed out ontologically, does not benefit from this at all. If looking is a form of killing, a possibility of agency that the phrase “if looks could kill” denies yet evokes while horror films about voyeurism suggest it (Adams 1996), then it might be important that looking away is what kills Albertine. The moment she turns from an *être de fuite* into a real fugitive, running away from the obsessive attempts to flatten and fix her, she is killed off by redundancy, a state the author, with his genius for cultural anticipation, represents in a superbly proto-postmodern play, by her literal death.¹⁷ Remarkably, however, it is not the subject, Marcel, who *looks* away but the object, Albertine, who *runs* away.

15. See Martin Jay’s seminal account of iconophobia in contemporary thought, *Downcast Eyes* (1993).

16. A wonderful example is the passage describing the encounter between Robert the Saint-Loup and the “impassioned stroller.” See Bal 1997: chap. 15.

17. Thus the earlier decision to “live” his novel with her is here coming to a symmetrical closure, when she is killed off “in reality” but resurrected in a posthumously received letter, and later in the misread telegram. This is one argument why it is necessary to interpret Proust’s way as at least proto-postmodern. Either that or he qualifies as a misogynistic, sadistic monster, a view that few of his readers will want to endorse, although, astonishingly, some do (e.g., Georgan 1991).

But proto-postmodernism is proto- precisely because it feeds off modernism to nurture its future postmodernism. The ontology of the snapshot needs, and is predicated upon, the utterly subjectivist epistemology that founds it. And the foundation of the integration is, precisely, visual. During Albertine's presence at his side, the narrator composes an album, in the vain hope of fixing the inaccessible other in existential contiguity with himself: in indexicality. But the photograph's flatness has yet another feature, one that hinders the very attempt that makes the narrator cultivate it: it encourages deceit, role-playing, masks; what is fixed is, precisely, the exterior, the appearance, which only hides more effectively the being underneath it. But in the case of Albertine, one is justified in assuming that this being does not exist outside of the album. If the serial picture-taking helps the subject to an epistemological trick, the fixing of an image on paper bears on the object as well, and hence the endeavor cannot but fail: "And before she pulled herself together and spoke to me, there was an instant during which Albertine did not move, smiled into the empty air, with the same air of feigned spontaneity and secret pleasure as if she were posing for somebody to take her photograph, or even seeking to assume before the camera a more dashing pose . . ." (Proust 1981 3,146). The ontology is grafted upon the epistemology, because what is at stake is not, or not primarily, the fugitive being herself. The series of snapshots functions to reveal not the other's essence but the relationship between subject and other in all its problematic suspension—the double bind of vision predicated upon a failing subject-object opposition. This is why it matters that this is a narrative text, and thus why it needs to be considered as such. This is why, in other words, it is a visual *poetics* that is worked out here, not a pseudovisuality or an emulation with "high art." On the one hand, the relationship happens, between the subject of perception, interpretation, desire, and knowledge, and on the other, the object, whose sole function is to elude being grasped, is transient, tenuous, changing, and, ultimately, elusive—so as to posit her existence as a subject in her own right.

Thus, taken seriously, the series of snapshots explores the limit of epistemic discretion when the object is another human being. In other words, it partakes of a methodological exploration of ethnography in which the other's being cannot be assessed without knowledge, yet knowledge infringes upon being. Albertine is the embodiment of this problem, and therefore it is crucial that she be gay, a woman, and literally fugitive; she has to *be* (other) so that he can never *know* her. Once this is established, Albertine, already rather un-autonomous, can "die," a death that allows for the fleeting resurrection through the telegram, misread by the puppet player who created her according to his needs. The proto-postmodern ontology does

not reduce the character to an antihumanist glossy image but acknowledges that spectatorship, like knowledge, cannot “penetrate” the other.

Visual Acts

The gaze at stake here is a gaze that produces meaningful signals; it is a semiotic mode. Active but secretive, masking understanding with visibility, pursuing a knowledge that is more profound and new for being unacknowledged: this is the particular form of vision that I want to put forward here as the visual poetics that the ambitious modernist writer develops in emulation of flat, banal, reproducible images. The modernist author takes postmodern vision as his poetic model.

But even if the whodunit question—*who killed Albertine?*—is inappropriate because she never lived anyway, the question *who acts* in the event of looking that narratively kills her off remains relevant for the tensions it reveals in that other background often invoked for the study of word/image interaction. I now mean not semiotics as a theory designed for intermedia relations, yet often used to blur distinctions, but the philosophy of language in its guise as a revisionist speech-act theory. Once the equation of iconicity and visibility is out of the way, there is that other frequently endorsed equation to be taken care of. Looking at a visual object—say, a painting—cannot be equated to speaking, in an undertheorized “speech-act theory of looking.”¹⁸ Looking is an act parallel to listening, or reading, not to speaking or writing. It is a reception, not an utterance. The subject of looking is the object of the visual agent that compels her to look.

One of the very few scholars who has not taken the equation between looking and speaking for granted but who has instead theorized the issues that call it forth is the philosopher of art Hubert Damisch.¹⁹ In his seminal book *L'origine de la perspective*, Damisch posits that perspective provided painters—the “speakers,” that is, not the receivers—with a network of indexical signs equivalent to the system of enunciation in language. This is a fundamentally anti-iconic conception of visibility. To show the basic symbolism of visual representation, Damisch demonstrates various possibilities of relating to the “law” of perspective. Either one obeys or ignores the law, in which case two narrative situations are unambiguously represented, or, as a third possibility, one only puts in a sign or two of it, not necessarily coherent within the work but enough to make the “law” work: to make sure

18. See my argument against this equation (Bal 1991b: chap. 7), taking issue with Marin and his followers, among whom John Searle (1980), who ought to know better.

19. In this assessment of Damisch’s position, I quote extensively from my book *Double Exposures* (Bal 1996: chap. 5), modifying my remarks for the present discussion.

it will be assumed, endorsed by the viewer. This is how perspective, even within the practice of painting, is a discourse: it can be intertextually signified without being obeyed and yet it will be read. This would be as close as one visually gets to “third person” narrative with an invisible narrator. Or, as a fourth option, a painting can refer to the model, only to deny it. Damisch demonstrates this with Raphael’s *Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia*, where perspective is heavily signified but not obeyed.²⁰ Such a denial can work as an ironic, self-reflective statement. Damisch rightly adds that rather than undermining or invalidating it, such a denial reaffirms the system.

In his analysis of perspective, Damisch (1987: 345) sees it as a device for the demarcation of subjectivity. He shows a keen sense of the issue when he writes, in a passage of great theoretical momentum: “In order for the things in this world to become objects for perception, the subject must take distance from itself. . . . But that movement, even in its slight theatricality, remains subjected to the law which is the law of representation: the distance the subject takes in relation to the object . . . allows him to escape to the immediately lived experience; but he can only discover that he is implicated, irremediably so, in the spectacle which takes its truth from that very implication.”²¹ This implicatedness is the very essence of the system of perspective—and of the ontology of the subject. Overcoming it constitutes the system’s major motivation. Its analysis helps Damisch to understand the “difference within” perspective as illusion, bound up with realism but not with reality, a provider of the illusion of original and autonomous subjectivity. Ironically, the subject who needs to see its origin mirrored in the system of perspective, “that subject which is considered ‘dominating’ since it appears to be established in a position of domination, is tenuously established (*ne tient qu’à un fil*)” (354).

Domination, then, is not the political background of representational realism but its product; knowledge production has not innocently inherited domination but actively produced it. Yet, at the same time, that product is illusionary, imaginary.²² The fundamental confusion underlying the equation of speech and the look in a speech-act oriented theory of vision is precisely the same illusionary origin that Damisch’s entire book works to explain yet discursively reaffirms in this theoretical moment of his text. For the subject of vision is not the subject of painting but its addressee.

Damisch’s study is concerned with painting. But what happens to visual

20. Raphael, *The Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia*, about 1515–16, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna (Damisch 1987: 38–40).

21. Translation modified.

22. The Lacanian overtones are obvious here. See the famous short essay on the mirror stage in Lacan 1977: 1–7.

culture with the advent of the visual medium that became so important, primarily because of how it differs from painting, its greater reliability in terms of representation of reality: photography? Proust takes advantage of the fact that photography makes these subject-positions and their illusory counterparts a little more difficult to disentangle. Both in individual confrontations with particular images and in the visual narrative Proust writes, the viewer is a second person addressed by the image or by the expository agent. The subject of painting is the expository agent who *represents* his vision within the painting so as to propose it as a model for identification. Flattered by this invitation to share the position of master, scholars tend to step in and identify with the subject, assuming that they see and think themselves what is exposed to them.²³ Thus they relinquish their own subjecthood and vacate the slot of the “you.” The occurrence of this confusion inherited from a premodern anthropocentrism in the work of major theorists seriously engaged in the pursuit of a metalanguage demonstrates the difficulty of that pursuit. Proust’s probing of the subject-object distinction contributes, thus, on the same level as theorists of poetics rather than as the latter’s object.

For this is emphatically *not* what Proust is doing with his attribution of agency to vision. He does not consider either looking as an utterance or an image as an object. Nor is he at all interested in the making of the photographs, in other words, in considering the relation between the stand-in for the painter and the image, a relation we see as indexical. What makes his use of vision so special, so compelling, and so productive that it can be called a poetics, is the exploration of the power of looking and the agency of the image *at the same time*, in an irresolvable tension that is heavy with consequence. What exactly am I doing when I take this visual writing and writing of visibility as a poetics, in the stricter sense following from Harshav’s writings? I contend that my step does not entail a disillusioned abandonment of the pursuit of a metalanguage. True, it does entail giving up the separation of meta- and object-language. But this is for the benefit of, not against, the scientific project for which Harshav’s work has so firmly stood. In the precise and limited sense I have tried to elaborate here, Proust’s poetics is a true, potentially scientific poetics. It promotes the confrontation between theory and literary practice that is literary studies’ moment of truth, or rather, of falsification.

Over the last decade, many literary scholars have turned to studying visual art. Benjamin Harshav is one of them. His work on modern art demonstrates the relevance of such work, in which the general semiotic per-

23. I have discussed this issue at length elsewhere (Bal 1991b: 247–85), in a discussion with Foucault (1973), Searle (1980), and Snyder and Cohen (1980). The conflation has been widely practiced by followers of Marin’s influential essay (1988).

spective enables the literary scholar to cross over into a different semiotic system. It may sound perverse, but what I am proposing here is a return to literature with the baggage that such excursions have furnished. A semiotic, perhaps even “literary,” understanding of how images mean, as well as of how they create, can, in a convoluted way, further illuminate literature.

Perhaps this detour can accomplish what literary theory has had so much trouble doing: overcome the dogmatic status of the linearity of language. Not to deny difference between language and imagery but to understand how each harbors the other. If a poetics for postmodern literature is possible, then Proust offers insight into how it can be articulated. And like Proust, who anticipated postmodernism from within modernism, Harshav, standing in the vital middle of structuralism, allowed, inspired, and facilitated the entrance of a self-critical, sometimes deconstructive, poetics inside its own metalanguage.

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