The manifestation of life in art, in particular in paintings, can often feel more “authentic” than life itself. In literature, comparisons to art—or as theologian Oleg Bychkov names them, “aesthetic analogies”—can increase the significance of the mundane and commonplace, thus enhancing the allure of la vie quotidienne (Bychkov 119). In its ability to alter our perspective on reality, art gives prominence to life. But to what purpose? To what extent, if at all, are aesthetic analogies related to life, language, and communication?

In order to address this question, let me take an example from my own bilingual reading/writing experiences. In 1913, French wordsmith Marcel Proust published his Du Côté de Chez Swann, the first volume of his novel À La Recherche du Temps Perdu. For Eric Karpeles, a painter and chronicler of Proust, this sprawling first-person narrative “houses a great repository of paintings” which “fulfill an extremely complex role as transitional objects” (10, 22). And I agree—je suis bien d’accord. In Du Côté de Chez Swann, Proust makes allusions to a number of specific artworks, such as Charity by Giotto di Bondone, The Sultan Mehmet II by Gentile Bellini, and St. James Led to Martyrdom by Andrea Mantegna (65, 76, 264). But, more than this, Proust often uses the paintings to better realize his characters: Swann’s mistress, Odette de Crécy, for example, is likened to a figure in a Sandro Botticelli fresco, The Youth of Moses (181). The breadth of Proust’s aesthetic analogies even reaches Madame de Guermantes, a lesser character described as living a life reminiscent of “certaines peintures de Carpaccio” (143).

But what do the aesthetic analogies in Du Côté de Chez Swann do for the reader, bilingual or otherwise? In his essay “Proust’s Aesthetic Analogies: Character and Painting in Swann’s Way,” biographer Jeffrey Meyers proposes that Proust’s use of paintings has an effect akin to that of an archetype, commonplace symbol, or metaphor (378). In light of this definition, he contends that Proust uses of such suggestive comparisons to elicit a new
dimension of meaning. And he is right to say so. If researched, the aesthetic analogies in *Du Côté de Chez Swann* deepen our understanding of characters and narrative alike. In addition, these allusions allow us to access the visual images that Proust considered when drawing out his analogies, and thus to follow his creative process. But Meyers does not account for “casual” readers: those most likely to shrug off the aesthetic comparisons, *pas au courant de l’œuvre de Pieter de Hooch ou Elstir, un peintre Proust a inventé!* Meyers seems to suggest that only “obsessive” readers—those who, like himself, stop to research each mentioned artwork—will come to appreciate Proust’s writing in full.

In truth, *ma première réaction à Du Côté de Chez Swann était tout à fait normale.* I skimmed over the aesthetic analogies at first, unacquainted with most of the thirty-some painters referenced. In one instance, Proust likens “la petite phrase” in a sonata by a composer named Vinteuil to “[les] tableaux de Pieter de Hooch, qu’approfondit le cadre étroit d’une port entr’eouverte, tout au loin” (*Du Côté* 176). In my first reading I shrugged this comparison off as a scrap of information Proust had simply thrown in as an embellishment—not pausing to research the artworks of Pieter de Hooch. Yet, the next time I encountered such an aesthetic parallel it frustrated me and I wasn’t sure why. Perhaps it was because I felt there was, in all these comparisons to artwork, *quelque chose de plus*—to echo the words and the sentiments of art historian Leo Steinberg in his initial encounter with the work of painter Jasper Johns. I was angry with Proust for including such “extraneous” details, as if he were deliberately trying to slow my reading. I was irritated at some of my colleagues for pretending to understand the aesthetic analogies—but with a worried suspicion that perhaps they actually did get them. And thus, I was actually mad at myself for being so dull in comparison, for letting Proust’s well-cultured mind show me up once more (12).

And meanwhile, the aesthetic analogies remained with me—*me narguais avec la possibilité d’une compréhension plus profonde.* Proust’s allusions to Giotto, Bellini, and Mantegna’s artwork, among others, left me with a distinct sense of dissatisfaction with my own historical art knowledge or, rather, lack thereof. In *Du Côté de Chez Swann,* there was one instance, in particular, that stayed with me: the mock-heroic comparison of Marcel’s boyhood friend Bloch to the painting *The Sultan Mehmet II* by Gentile Bellini (76). “It’s an
astonishing likeness”; “il a les mêmes sourcils circonflexes, le même nez recourbé, les mêmes pommettes saillantes. Quand il aura une barbiche ce sera la même personne” (Swann’s Way 64, Du Côté 76). In reading this aesthetic analogy, some may say that the Jewish Bloch and The Sultan Mehmet II share no more than a Levantine correspondence. In fact, in my first reading of both Du Côté de Chez Swann and Swann’s Way, its English translation, I myself paid little regard to the analogy. In researching The Sultan Mehmet II, however, the character of Bloch sprang into being for me. In spite of this association, I was still bothered by my previous gap in knowledge. But was this reason enough to get so frustrated? If such things frustrated me, why not ignore them?

It was not that simple. In reading Du Côté de Chez Swann, what really frustrated me was what I felt these comparisons could do to all other pieces of writing. The aesthetic analogies, once researched, not only deepened my basic understanding of Proust’s writing but also somehow provided a higher form of reality. In his mention, for example, of The Youth of Moses, Proust provides us with a better picture of Odette de Crécy, both regarding her personality and physical features (Swann’s Way 181). But, more than that, the correlation allows for revelations about the reconstruction of a displeasing reality, the function of memory, and the relationship between art and ethical truth. In “Swann in Love,” the smitten Charles Swann contributes another description of Odette: “a piece of perfection” (125). The French original, “une perfection,” provides a more complex portrayal, suggesting that Odette is, in fact, the embodiment of perfection itself (Du Côté 153). Yet, neither my English nor French reading of this description provided the same depth of insight as Proust’s aesthetic analogy, specifically, a fresco of the biblical Zipporah in the Sistine Chapel. In this case, the analogy seems to heighten the other descriptions of Odette, indicating that it is perhaps a higher-level form of reality. Mais comment est-ce possible?

In “Eye and Mind”—the 1964 English translation of “L’Œil et l’Esprit”—the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty attempts to answer this troubling question of an imaginative higher reality. In doing so, he proposes that artwork presents the act of looking upon the world with an open engagement that is more representative than reality itself. L’article réfute le point de vue scientifique de l’évaluation objective: instead, Merleau-Ponty describes the world with a kind of interconnectedness, arguing “I do not see
According to its exterior envelope; I live in it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me . . . ” (178). In this “immersed” reality, we both recognize and associate ourselves with others and our surroundings—there is no distinction between our bodies and the lived world. In “False and Untenable Positions,” English psychoanalyst R. D. Laing even proposes that a lack of such associations may place us in a “false position” either “induced by self” or “induced by others” (Laing 107, 116). The challenge, however, is not how to understand such a “false position,” but rather, how to have the openness to perceive it.

In light of Meyers, Merleau-Ponty, and Laing’s articles, it seems that aesthetic analogies do, in fact, concern “the widest implication of perspective—the way an author shapes his vision of the world and enforces his way of seeing upon the reader” (Meyers 378). In researching analogies to artworks, therefore, we—the “obsessive” readers—become privy to the author’s innermost thoughts. The visual reproduction, description, and subsequent interpretation of Charity, The Sultan Mehmet II, and St. James Led to Martyrdom, among other paintings, allow us to see the interior workings of Proust’s mind. In addition, “reality,” according to Proust, “is a certain relationship between sensations and memories which surround us at the same time” (Proust, qtd. in Meyers 377). In this definition, an individual’s understanding of art—and thus, of aesthetic analogies—is tied into the experience of “sensations and memories.” In literature, therefore, art-driven allusions may allow others—such as Proust or Merleau-Ponty—to impose their own perspective of the lived world on us, potentially falsifying our position. It is, therefore, possible for aesthetic analogies to depict a higher form of reality: ils dépeignent une perspective unique de la vérité, colored by the sensations and memories of the author interpreting them.

The comparisons to art in Du Côté de Chez Swann kept me brooding and, in the footsteps of Steinberg, I kept going back (12). And little by little something came through me—a feeling of relief more divine than that depicted in Botticelli’s fresco of Zipporah, Jethro’s daughter. I could not quite place it, mais il y avait une certaine aisance dans l’observation des peintures. In my bilingual reading, I found solace in the visual component of the aesthetic analogies; as I moved between French and English, the artworks remained constant. In both Du Côté de Chez Swann and Swann’s Way, “la fille
“de cuisine” or kitchen maid at Aunt Léonie’s Combray household is more-or-less described as “an abstract personality, a permanent institution to which an invariable set of attributes assured a sort of fixity and continuity and identity throughout the long series of transitory human shapes in which that personality was incarnate” (Du Côté 65, Swann’s Way 63). I struggled to grasp this paradox—that of a fixed yet ever-changing persona—in spite of the two explanations given, one in French and the other English. Yet the aesthetic analogy, albeit somewhat mock-heroic, of the kitchen maid and the virgin in Giotto’s painting brought some clarity—and with it, a sense of solace.

But then, another inversion—I began to wonder what this sentiment de réconfort really was and concluded that it must be the absence of some frustration held elsewhere. It then dawned on me that perhaps this solace came from the language-transcendent quality of art. “Art—in all its forms—is not exclusive,” Hilary Wallis writes: “[i]t transcends language and culture, bridges social and political chasms and nurtures a collective understanding” (Artfully). In this way, art—whether painting, sculpture, or mosaic—functions as a ubiquitous mother tongue to people of all genders, races, nationalities, ages, and socioeconomic situations. It is timeless and breaks through many barriers, y compris le langage. In doing so, art provides une compréhension collective that neither French nor English—nor even a combination of the two—can provide. And so my initial resistance to these aesthetic analogies was merely a foil for my larger struggle with language—one that would ultimately prevent me from discussing my bilingual experience of Proust’s work. The comparison of Odette with Botticelli’s virgin, for example, grants similar insights to the attentive reader of Du Côté de Chez Swann and Swann’s Way. And it is this language-transcendent quality that makes aesthetic analogies so profound. But how is this language-transcendent quality of art constructed?

In his collection of essays Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols, the philosopher Nelson Goodman defines art as symbols within symbolic systems. The heart of Goodman’s symbolic theory is “reference”: the notion that one thing can stand for another (5). In particular, reference is expressed as “denotation”—the relationship between a label and the thing labeled—and “exemplification”—a literal explanation for style and form as well as a metaphoric explanation for artistic expression (Goodman 4-5, 3-6,
52-56). In the painting *The Sultan Mehm et II*, for example, Bellini uses a rich color palette, dramatic contrasts, detailed composition, and intricate brushwork: *le style et la forme littérale*. Furthermore, in a metaphorical sense, the painting exemplifies, or rather, expresses, feelings of despotic self-assurance and power. And so—as paintings are symbols and languages are symbolic systems—art can be defined as its own language or, at the very least, as transcending of other forms of communication. Perhaps it is naïve for me to say that something as subjective as art could allow for such *une compréhension collective*. But if art does not, what does?

These, then, were some of my ponderings as I contemplated Proust’s frequent comparisons to art. I am now, however, faced with a number of questions *et un sentiment d’anxiété obsédante*. Did I draw this conclusion from the aesthetic analogies themselves or did I somehow read it into them? Do my interpretations correspond, to any extent, with Proust’s intentions for *Du Côté de Chez Swann*? And furthermore, do they match up with other people’s experiences, to reassure me that my judgments are not ill-founded? *En l’bonnêteté, je ne sais pas*. These are questions without end, *et leurs réponses ne sont pas évidentes*—but I suppose that this is all right. It is, thus, a kind of self-analysis that this analogical procedure can throw you into, and for which I am appreciative. “Painting,” as Marcel Proust writes, “can pierce to the unchanging reality of things, and so establish itself as a rival of literature,” and perhaps of language (Proust, qtd. in Meyers 1). It demands only that you pursue it: for artwork—and, in turn, aesthetic analogies—function as instruments of knowledge and communication. They are, in essence, the key to *un terrain d’entente*, a common ground.

**WORKS CITED**


