

The Transactions of Detail

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A painting of asparagus makes a brief appearance in the course of an interminable conversation over dinner in *The Guermantes Way*, Proust's third volume of *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. The Duc de Guermantes is giving vent about a picture that sounds very much like Manet's painting *Une Botte d'asperges* (Figure 1), now in Cologne. It is a very short but famous passage, which has been extensively referenced both in the Proust literature and occasionally also in art-historical accounts of Manet's still life. The presumption that the fictional painting in Proust, painted by the fictional artist Elstir, is actually a real painting by Manet seems to have become so commonplace that it has entered the realm of fact, yet it is only inferred in the novel. The source is a few lines of dialogue that say nothing about the painting itself but reflect back (badly of course) on the speaker as a cipher of his philistinism. The Duc's gripe is that Swann (the connoisseur and amateur of art) 'has a nerve' in trying to get them to buy the painting, 'a bundle of asparagus just like the ones you're eating now'¹. And the point: that it was daylight robbery to charge three hundred francs for it, adding for good measure that the rest of the artist's work was also 'sordid and depressing'.²

Manet had sold the small still-life in 1880 to Charles Ephrussi, the collector and art historian, and Proust, who would later frequent his friend Ephrussi's apartments on the Avenue d'Iena, would have known very well the Manets in his collection. Let's not forget that Proust was himself an amateur of art, particularly of Impressionism and that *A la Recherche* is a vast art historical atlas, saturated with references to individual paintings, like this one, but also to a history of western

painting. His fictional painter Elstir is an Impressionist. Proust could have known the story of the asparagus straight from Ephrussi – a story about art and money - and a joke: Ephrussi sent the artist a cheque for 1000 francs, for the painting *Une Botte d'asperges* for which he had asked 800 francs; so Manet, in return, sent him the remaining asparagus spear, a small painting that is now in the Musee d'Orsay (*Figure 2*), with a note saying 'Il en manquait une a votre botte'³[please add grave accent to a]. It's a good story, often referred to as 'charming'⁴ as if a piece of delicious whimsy. Yet barely any of it appears in Proust's novel. Instead the short exclamation by the Duke only reveals his own vulgar attitude: leaving entirely empty the place where the painting might have been. The Duc dug himself deeper as he went on, declaring that he preferred a little watercolour by Jehan Georges Vibert: 'there's not much in it either', he says, but it is a 'perfect little poem'.⁵ Vibert's picture had details aplenty, to fasten attention and one, in particular, to love: a little dog standing on its hind legs doing tricks.

On the surface at least, this seems like a caricature, setting a philistine taste against the formation of a modernist one (although the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes had a large gallery devoted to Impressionist painting – which over hundred pages before, that is, earlier the same evening, the narrator had been in ecstasies over). But I want to suggest instead that the fictional/factual incident offers a good starting point to think across old oppositions between modernism and realism. It is not simply a matter of a straight contest between the lure of sentimental detail and the aesthetic nuance of a more sophisticated modernist viewer. Of course, the Duc fails on both counts seeing nothing in the painting but only the detail of the price tag and so he betrays himself in so doing. As Walter Benjamin wrote, Proust's most accurate insights were often when he fastened on objects as an insect fastens on a

leaf.⁶ In this context, there is not much to be gained by laboring the point that it is problematic to assume that Proust's fictional impressionist Elstir is Manet, or any of the other painters at the time to which he has been compared and whose characteristics he takes on from time to time (Whistler and Renoir foremost among them). Just as problematically, Swann has been seen to be based on Ephrussi. The biographers continue to argue.

By drawing upon, rather than ignoring, this admittedly uncertain ground between factual and fictional, visual and verbal registers, I want to think about what detail does (rather than what it is). This may seem unpromising, given the term 'detail' has apparently completely fallen from the discussion of modernist art. You could explain the absence of the word by the fact that there simply *are no* details in modern art. Yet it seems unlikely, even if we take into account the possibility that it has been substituted by other words like 'incident' or 'nuance'. Because 'detail' is characteristically understood as descriptive or empirical it has tended to shore up arguments for certain forms of naturalist painting, and to be abandoned once abstraction's onslaught upon representation got underway. My hunch, though, is that it is worth pursuing a little further – that just as detail was never merely iconographical in realist or naturalist models, nor has it disappeared or become entirely irrelevant to other forms of modern and postmodern art. There is, I suggest, a legacy of detail after realism that continues: for example, Gerhard Richter's series of paintings called *Detail* (1970), which were based on blown-up details of his own abstract paintings; or Eva Hesse's pastry cases of small experimental pieces and leftover sculptures (1968)⁷. But here, rather than look at those more recent instances, my aim is to show that detail, as a technique, was already reconfigured in Manet's late still-life painting..

In her discussion of the *Bar at the Folies Bergères*, Carol Armstrong has focused on the way *Une Botte d'asperges* and *L'Asperge* dramatise a system of exchange, of a commodity world in circulation. She claims that 'the single asparagus' of *L'asperge*, 'interrupts the system of exchange, declaring its own paintedness' and 'short circuits the system of substitution, equivalence and exchange that structures the valuation of illusionistic painting, as well as consumer culture at large'.⁸ A bundle of asparagus, or for that matter a single spear, might not look like the most obvious commodity – and much less so, for example, than a bottle of Bass with a familiar logo as its brand label – but the very fact that they are all commonplace things is part of the force of Armstrong's case.

In the context of my own argument, there is also more to be gleaned from *Une Botte d'asperges* and *L'Asperge*, and especially the relation between the two paintings. The kind of detail at stake is not of the dancing dog variety, for sure. Arguably each of the paintings – small as they are at 44 x 54 cm and 16.5 x 21.5 cm respectively – is a dancing dog, that is to say, its own display of paintedness. Detail, as it operates in these two works, has to be understood rather less descriptively and rather more as a formal operation. I am thinking here of detail in the sense of the original word '*detailler*' [please add acute accent to e], to take apart or cut up, a cutting into pieces, which is linked in its etymological routes with the word '*retailer*', to recut or retell.⁹ That is to say, there is a relationship of *detail* to *retail*. This is another way of thinking about the relationship to consumption. To buy things *en detail* is to buy them item by item, that is, to buy them retail rather *en gros* or wholesale. To buy a bundle of asparagus, is to buy a unit of sale, made up of smaller units (the spears). Those two metal rings transform it into an object that has been counted, made into a bunch and sold (like faggots, like flowers). Tied up in this way,

they are made into a product of culture over nature in the process: food culture, with its rituals of sale and display – note the green leaves that enframe it.

The Duc de Guermantes might not have thought a bunch of asparagus enough to make a picture out of, but Proust certainly did. Both Manet and Proust were extremely well acquainted with the still-life tradition in Dutch painting in particular, both aficionados of the Rijksmuseum, which holds countless such paintings of the most overlooked items, including Adrieen Coorte's extraordinarily luminous bunch of asparagus. And in Volume One of *A la Recherche*, Proust describes a bunch of asparagus – not a painting of it this time but nonetheless a far more painterly description – as if the Duc's ridiculous comments leave out precisely what matters most. Proust has his narrator describe his 'ravisement' before the veritable still-life he glimpses in the kitchen. First, he sees the freshly shelled peas neatly lined up on the table top like green marbles, which Scott Moncrieff, with a fair degree of license, translated as 'platoons of peas drawn up in ranks'.¹⁰ Then, he sees the asparagus 'tremés d'outremer et de rose, et dont l'épi, finement pignoché de mauve et d'azur, se dégrade insensiblement jusqu'au pied...' Again, Moncrieff translated this as 'stippled' with mauve and azure.¹¹ For Proust, this kind of *irisation* – another untranslatable word meaning to become the colour of iris – possesses 'nuances celestes'¹² [please add acute accent to first e of celestes] so clearly at odds with the earth from which the asparagus has been pulled. It is a very painterly description of chromatic variation, as if the pictorial qualities of Manet's painting have been displaced to the *ravisement* of the everyday.

Of course, this description is not a direct or even indirect description of Manet's painting, or even of a painting at all. It is Proust describing everyday things

as if they were a still-life as was his characteristic method. It is a description that preempts the mention of the painting by Elstir at the dinner where they are eating asparagus in a mousseline sauce. The still-life in the kitchen anticipates the painting, but is also detached from it, as if each moment is incomplete without the other. The reader remembers, attuned to the constant to and fro of memory and the cross fire of connections across the whole novel. The asparagus both signals a temporal disjuncture and dramatizes it. Such minute descriptions of platoons of peas, bundles of asparagus, all these groupings of small things are entirely characteristic of Proust's hyper-attention to detail. What's articulated in these two moments in the novel is not a distinction between fact and fiction, the fact of seeing versus the fiction of painting, but rather a more complicated and circumstantial sense of what it is to live in an object-world. In these two, temporally dislocated but conjoined passages, we can grasp the compounding of subjective and objective experience. It is as if the ravishing if lacerating recognition of what Barthes would call the *punctum* – the detail that pierces the subject – were merely the flipside of the coin of Foucault's regulatory vision of detail as the *modus vivendi* of life.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault imagined a historical inventory of detail that would trace the emergence of a disciplinary regime that was internalized in all subjects. His aim was to provide what he termed a 'political anatomy of detail',¹³ that is, an analysis of the regulation of the smallest fragments of life. He mentions at one point that he was thinking of writing a History of Detail (he never would) that would chart the history of regulation from the theological understanding that God is in the detail to Napoleon's vision of a vast machine from which no detail could possibly escape. His own history, then, would look to the eighteenth century as the historical fulcrum of the emergence of the detail, from the pedagogic exercises of Jean Baptiste

de la Salle, through Leibniz, to Napoleon's 'awareness of control of men...through a whole set of techniques'.¹⁴

Detail, according to this account, is a modern technique. It is not exempt from an ideological or symbolic structure (as the *punctum* is to the *stadium*, according to Barthes' subjectivist sensibility) but itself a means of structuration. It follows that in the case for regulation, Foucault includes a description of detail as technique – which could draw on examples such as charts, ledgers, time-tables and military marching patterns. The latter – as envisaged in the Napoleonic fantasy of domination by detail – are some of his most vivid examples. After all, as he claimed, time was a primary condition of a disciplinary method. Paying attention to the length and time of the steps in a marching pattern was not a marginal concern, but central to what a political anatomy of detail might entail. The length and time of a step in marching pattern is the measure of a military machine. A bunch of asparagus, in the domestic realm, is also a measure of the organization of life. As Carole Armstrong argued, this is not merely private but porous: the abstraction of monetary exchange calibrated there as much as the intimate exchanges of tokens, for example, a small painting of a posy of violets Manet gave to Berthe Morisot. We might note in passing that such a saturation of formats and networks, penetrating into all aspects of life, look like precursors of the formatting of life in the data-sodden age we now live in.

I am not sure, though, that it's enough to say that painting's power to circumvent or interrupt such circuits of exchange lies in its 'paintedness'. Rather, I suspect that *Une Botte d'Asperges* mobilizes detail against detail. Just as Proust's narrator would see in the timetable not only some objective discipline but 'the most absorbing kind of geometry', more pleasurable than any guidebook.¹⁵ It created a way

of imagining himself elsewhere, whilst not moving from the spot. It's easy to think of Proust (too easy) as a trembling aesthete, concerned only with interiority and private fantasy. This scattering of the subject's attention on the site of a single detail is a much more far-reaching critical operation. Fredric Jameson reminds us that something of this order of disjunction is also at work in realist literature. For example, in his book *The Antinomies of Realism*, he describes how Tolstoy 'shows his character thinking or saying one thing, while physically absorbed in doing something else, something unrelated (brushing his uniform, lighting a match, watching a dog in the yard'.¹⁶ Thus he construes character as 'heterogeneity, a mosaic of fragments held together by a body and a name'.¹⁷

Such an interpretation of the realist novel builds on the great critics of the Russian Formalist school like Boris Eichenbaum and Roman Jakobson, who famously argued for realism as a metonymic rather than a metaphorical method. Their approach to detail is illuminating in this context, even at the broad level of analogy, because of the innovative ways in which they defined detail as a realist technique against the grain of then prevailing assumptions about realism in literature (which of course is what I am attempting to do here in terms of the different pictorial procedure of Manet's still-life). Jakobson's key example was Anna Karenina's red purse, which Tolstoy spends longer describing in the suicide scene than Anna's own thoughts: what for Jameson amounts to a form of affective distraction.¹⁸ Jameson's overriding concern with realism as a temporal mode is inevitably drawn to precisely these aspects: distraction, postponement, delay and so on. None of this makes Proust, or for that matter Manet a realist, but it shows I think how both built on techniques that were already powerfully complex within the realist tradition.

The two paintings by Manet have a narrative connection which remains important: the one that is by now familiar in the story of Ephrussi, Manet's joke, and so on. But their connection also cannot be reduced to that story. They relate to one another in ways at least as complex as the two moments in Proust that I have described – but as paintings, of course, they do very different work. They are not simply two scenes in that narrative. If we imagine the 'marching time' of the first the *Bundle of Asparagus*, as being in part their measure for sale, then they also play on this in significant ways – if not entirely to reverse it then at least to put in question what constitutes a measure of value. It is not only the commodity 'painting' that is at stake, as an abstract equivalence, but the process of making it, the *work* that went into the work, that is made clearly manifest.

In both of these paintings there is a kind of unraveling that occurs. The bundle – the singular object that is not singular, is displayed on and enframed by the ground of green leaves, as if it is playing out the object-to-be-looked-at that a painting is. *Une Botte d'Asperges* breaks painting down into an inventory of different kinds of brushstroke: the gestural strokes of the foliage, the mainly horizontal shorter strokes of the spears of asparagus. The tips of the asparagus become mere dabs. The length and time of the strokes becomes very complex indeed. And it is hard here not to think about the brush of the artist that also has a tip with which he is painting the 'touches' that become almost inchoate. Whether or not Proust was thinking consciously of Manet's painting, his word 'irisation' is a very apt description of these little violet dabs of paint. The stippling dramatizes the tip of the brush as it is making its 'touches'.

This inventory of strokes recalls Manet's self-portrait of the previous year, with its brushes looking like digits or fingers (*Figure 3*). The comparison with the

stippling of a Divisionist technique that is emerging around the same time is only enlightening because artists like Seurat were abstracting a scientific system (the marching time of modern life), whereas Manet definitely was not. Consumption here is both commercial and corporeal, and intensely so. Again Proust's fictional descriptions got this absolutely right: the orality of the marks, the insistent thought of eating, the ways the colours are 'nibbled' or eaten in little bits. The word *pignoché* also means to paint with very small brushstrokes (*coups du pinceau*). The tip of a spear of asparagus links to the tip of a brush (*le bout du pinceau*) but also suggests *la bout de la langue*, the tip of the tongue, both in the sense of eating and in the sense of anticipation of having something to say, but not being able to spit it out. This metonymic chain is continued in Proust, even if it gets to be taken in the opposite direction entirely: that is, the moment when the Duc de Guermantes is unable to 'swallow' the price. The whole painting becomes more staccato, more frenetic, not necessarily in order to make it harder to guess, as in Jakobson's classic formulation, but to make the certainties of 'length and time' falter a little.

The painting *L'Asperge* is like a phantom double of *Une Botte d'asperges*, but instead of following a logic of display it does the opposite. Rather than a stippling effect, it is much more fluid, much more quickly painted and virtually half the size. An after thought, it mimics the being forgotten very vividly. It is camouflaged: a white asparagus against the white marble surface, merging with it almost entirely. No wonder that stray spear got left behind, though as we look at the painting, our attention falters on the little bit of it that overlaps the edge of the slab, like a kind of visual double take. Now left over, it has become a circumstantial detail, just a detail of another detail. *Une Botte* and *L'Asperge* can be regarded as a single painting in two parts then, dislocated in time. The first part: the bundle is for show, on its bed of

green, displayed, as it had been on a market stall, placed there to be looked at. Then the single shoot, by contrast, negates everything the first painting was. It is a picture that paradoxically draws attention to something hidden within it, not meant to be seen easily, only discernible by the different direction of the brush, the nuances of the strokes, the faint stipples of the tip. One has colour, the other has none: it is virtually white on white.

L'Asperge seems to sabotage the very notion of detail as that which fastens attention to itself. By contrast using the most abbreviated strokes, Manet seems to have 'painted away' its subject to make an almost empty space. The ground mainly consists of the empty marble counter, where the bunch of asparagus would have been. The veins in the marble are rendered by thin strokes of grey paint that all run obliquely across the surface, in the same direction as the asparagus spear. The strokes are fluid but broken, marking the pattern in the mineral surface, but also serving to conceal the missing object or part that has been left behind. The signature too, the short black barely legible 'M' is also camouflaged against the marks of the graining.

The different kinds of strokes become markers, that not only serve to confuse the spatial relationship between things, but more importantly here, their temporal coordinates. *L'asperge* can be thought of as a ghost of an earlier stage in the painting process, the sketch (or *esquisse*), when thinner strokes, more swiftly applied, had laid out a more preliminary version before the body of colour is added. Manet has created a series of temporal shuttles: a sketch that comes after a painting has been painted, only then to return as the piece of the painting that had previously been lost. It may be a conceit, but it plays on the marching time of a pictorial economy, not least with ideas about process, finish and completion. *L'Asperge* dramatizes precisely the small adjustments and displacements involved in how we notice things in a field of visual

perception. The logic of camouflage, which works to conceal rather than reveal, only heightens those effects of what it is like to inhabit an object-world. The painting mimics that visual experience of temporal adjustment. It's a sharp rejoinder to the idea that art has moved beyond detail.

¹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 3 (*The Guermantes Way*), trans. Mark Trehane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), p. 500

² Proust, *Lost Time*, trans. Trehane, p.500

³ *Manet (1832-83)* Editions de la Reunion des Musees nationaux, (Paris 1883) p.451

⁴ *Manet (1832-83)*, p. 450

⁵ Proust. *Lost Time*, trans. Trehane, vol. 3, p. 500. Jehan Georges Vibert (1840-1902) was a French painter of anecdotal genres scenes, for instance *The Marvellous Sauce*, c.1890 Allbright Knox Gallery.

⁶ Walter Benjamin 'The Image of Proust' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 208

⁷ Richter's abstracts play on the photographic close-up in intriguing ways, and clearly the notion of the 'photographic detail' would need careful treatment in any extended discussion of these works. Hesse's use of glass display cases, on the other hand, borrowed the idea from Claus Oldenburg's pastry cases full of cakes and fancies, which relates more closely to the still-life genre under discussion here. See the discussion of the pastry cases in Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse Studiowork* Fruitmarket Gallery Edinburgh (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), especially pp.84-101.

⁸ Carol Armstrong, *Manet/Manette* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002) p. 280

⁹ Daniel Arras also mentions this etymology in his very useful but differently-oriented discussion of detail in western painting from the Renaissance until the 19th century (though not in relation to modernism specifically), in his book, Daniel Arras *Le Detail: pour une histoire rapprochee de la peinture*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1996)

¹⁰ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Part 1 (*Swann's Way*), (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976) p.163.

¹¹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Part 1 (*Swann's Way*), (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976) p.164. This is slightly less strongly marked in Lydia Davis' translation as 'delicately painted with little strokes of azure and mauve', Proust, *Lost Time*, trans. Davis, vol. 1 (*The Way by Swann's*), p. 122

¹² Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, ed Jean-Yves Tadie, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade (Paris: Gallimard) 1987-9, vol. 1, p. 119 [acute accent on e of Tadie and Pleiade, grave accent on Bibilotheque]

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977) p.139. This is mentioned briefly by Naomi Schor at the beginning of her important book, Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London: Methuen, 1987), p.xlii

¹⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 141

¹⁵ Proust. *Lost Time*, Vol 2 trans. James Grieve, p. 224 (?242)

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013) p. 89

¹⁷ Jameson, *Antinomies*, p. 89

¹⁸ Roman Jakobson, 'On Realism in Art', in Ladslav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds), *Readings in Russian Poetic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978) p. 44.