

Dickinson College

Dickinson Scholar

Faculty and Staff Publications By Year

Faculty and Staff Publications

5-2015

Bergotte's Other Patch of Yellow: A Fragment of Heraclitus in Proust's *La prisonnière*

Jacob Sider Jost
Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.dickinson.edu/faculty_publications



Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sider Jost, Jacob. "Bergotte's Other Patch of Yellow: A Fragment of Heraclitus in Proust's *La prisonnière*." *Modern Philology* 112, no. 4 (2015): 713-720. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/679600>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Bergotte's Other Patch of Yellow: A Fragment of Heraclitus in Proust's *La prisonnière*

JACOB SIDER JOST

Dickinson College

Near the midway point of *La prisonnière* (1923), Proust's narrator interrupts his obsessive account of the love, jealousy, deception, and suffering that link him to Albertine in order to recount the death of Bergotte, the novelist whom Marcel admired as a boy and came to know socially as a young man. In the years leading up to the novelist's death, we learn that "Bergotte had ceased to go out of doors." But despite belonging to the sodality of Proustian shut-ins that includes Aunt Leonie and Marcel at the time during which *La prisonnière* takes place, Bergotte nevertheless keeps his soul, otherwise "in danger of becoming stagnant," in motion by buying the visits of "women—girls, one ought rather to say." These visitors provoke his sensual and erotic interest, although it is implied that he is impotent: the "girls" are "ashamed to receive so much in return for so little."¹ Bergotte justifies his prodigality by reasoning that he is getting something in return: "And so Bergotte said to himself: 'I spend more than a multimillionaire on girls, but the pleasures or disappointments that they give me make me write a book which brings me in money [*l'argent*].' Economically, this argument was absurd, but no doubt he found some charm in thus transmuting gold into caresses and caresses into gold" (3:181).²

I wish to thank Timothy Barnes and Marta Figlerowicz for their pre-Socratic and Proustian insights, respectively. This note is dedicated to Elaine Scarry.

1. "Il y avait des années que Bergotte ne sortait plus de chez lui. . . . Il l'était [i.e., "généreux"] surtout avec des femmes, des fillettes pour mieux dire, et qui étaient honteuses de recevoir tant pour si peu de chose. . . . L'amour . . . agite-t-il . . . la surface de l'âme, qui sans cela risquerait de devenir stagnante" (Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié et al., 4 vols. [Paris: Gallimard, 1987–89], 3:688). English translation from Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and Andreas Mayor, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1981), 3:181. Subsequent parenthetical references are to these editions.

2. "Aussi Bergotte se disait-il: 'Je dépense plus que de multimillionnaires pour des fillettes, mais les plaisirs ou les déceptions qu'elles me donnent me font écrire un livre qui me rapporte

© 2015 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0026-8232/2015/11204-0006\$10.00

The death of Bergotte is a locus classicus in the *Recherche* because it contains the “little patch of yellow wall” in Vermeer’s *View of Delft* in front of which Bergotte suffers his fatal stroke. Bergotte leaves his bedroom seclusion to seek out the *View of Delft* (ca. 1660–61) because an art critic has drawn his attention to an apparently insignificant “patch” that “he could not remember,” although Vermeer’s painting was one “which he adored and imagined that he knew by heart” (3:185).³ In the same spirit, I wish to draw attention to another yellow patch unexamined in this section of the *Recherche* that so many Proustians know by heart, the “gold” (*or*) that Bergotte transmutes into caresses (*en caresse*) and that he then in turn retransmutes, through the alchemy of authorship, back into gold. Beneath the folkloric image of the elderly Bergotte putting the *Stil* back in the Grimms’ Rumpelstilzchen lies an erudite philosophical echo. The narrator’s gloss on Bergotte’s self-justification replicates the structure, and repeats one of the key terms, of a fragment of Heraclitus: “puros te antamoibē ta panta kai pur apantōn hokōsper chrusou chrēmata kai chrēmātōn chrusos” (There is an exchange: all things for fire and fire for all things, like goods for gold and gold for goods).⁴ Kathleen Freeman’s translation replicates the German word order of the translation given by the Diels-Kranz edition; in the Greek, as in Proust’s French, gold/*chrusos/or* stands at the outside, rather than the inside, of the chiasmus. As a phonetic alchemist, Proust turns gold into caresses by transmuting the Greek word *chrusos* into the French *caresse* that it can buy. Heraclitus and Proust share a structure in which exchange and transmutation respectively mediate a two-way movement between gold and another substance. The cost-benefit analysis attributed in direct speech to Bergotte refers only to *l’argent*, “money,” a word whose metallic etymon is a dead metaphor in modern French. It is the narrator’s comment that transforms this silver into gold, thereby gesturing not only to the priceless patch of yellow that is Bergotte’s final earthly vision but also back to the origins of Western philosophy.

This echo may well be a deliberate allusion. Proust studied Heraclitus with the philosopher, university lecturer, and Dreyfusard journalist Paul Desjardins, in 1888. In 1895, Proust received his License in Philosophy, sub-

de l’argent.’ Économiquement ce raisonnement était absurde, mais sans doute trouvait-il quelque agrément à transmuter ainsi l’or en caresse et les caresses en or” (3:689).

3. “Mais un critique ayant écrit que dans la *Vue de Delft* de Ver Meer . . . tableau qu’il adorait et croyant connaître très bien, un petit pan de mur jaune (qu’il ne se rappelait pas) était si bien peint” (3:692).

4. Heraclitus, fragment 90, in *Die Fragmenta der Vorsokratiker, Griechisch und Deutsch*, 6th ed., ed. Hermann Diels and Walter Kranz, 2 vols. (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1951), 1:171. This and subsequent translations are from Kathleen Freeman, trans., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956), 31.

mitting an exam paper on Socrates.⁵ In a letter to Princesse Soutzo in February 1922, Proust quotes the Heraclitean doctrine that “all is flux,” deploying the original Greek word for “all things” that also appears in fragment 90 when he adds, “I realized that this πάντα [*panta*] was no exaggeration, for you had changed (I mean towards me).”⁶ The *Recherche* as a whole contains numerous engagements with Greek literature and philosophy, from Bloch’s pompous Homeric locutions to the Baron de Charlus’s delight at being compared to the Athenian courtesan and Socratic interlocutor Aspasia by Professor Brichot (3:335). Most tellingly, a few sentences after the Heraclitean chiasmus of “gold into caresses, and caresses into gold,” Bergotte himself claims to cite another pre-Socratic philosopher and contemporary of Heraclitus: “After all, my dear fellow, life, as Anaxagoras has said, is a journey” (3:182).⁷ Proust goes out of his way to supply a pre-Socratic intertext; Maxine Arnold Vogely points out that it was not in fact Anaxagoras “but Seneca, who spoke of life as a voyage.”⁸

Proust’s topical, tropical, and phonetic echo of Heraclitus may be a conscious allusion; it may also be an unconscious parallel, a resonance between the aphoristic styles of the pre-Socratic philosopher and his nineteenth-century student. In either case, Proust’s passage responds to a seminal moment at the origins of economics, science, philosophy, and metaphor itself. As Richard Seaford has argued, Heraclitus belongs to the first era of human history when gold and other metals, which had hitherto functioned as precious items used for prizes, gifts, and ransoms, become money in our modern sense of a quantified measure and store of value that is generally accepted in exchange for other goods. For Seaford, “the universal power bestowed by this communal confidence on the abstract substance of money was in turn a precondition for the genesis and subsequent form of presocratic metaphysics, in which universal power belongs to an abstract substance that is, like money, transformed into and from everything else. Presocratic metaphysics involves (without *consisting of*) unconscious cosmological projection of the universal power and universal exchangeability of the abstract substance of money.”⁹ The argument that reality can be described

5. Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust*, trans. Euan Cameron (New York: Viking, 2000), 203–5.

6. Marcel Proust, *Selected Letters*, ed. Philip Kolb, 4 vols. (London: HarperCollins, 1985–2000), 4:300.

7. “Que voulez-vous, mon cher, Anaxagore l’a dit, la vie et un voyage!” (3:689).

8. Maxine Arnold Vogely, *A Proust Dictionary* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1981), 23.

9. Richard Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind: Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11. The interpretation of Heraclitus and other pre-Socratic philosophers as material monists is a standard one in the history of ancient philosophy, beginning with Aristotle, although the obscurity and diversity of Heraclitus presents some interpretative challenges. See W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 6 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1962–81), 1:54–58, 115–16, 435–69.

in terms of, or transformed into, a single homogenous and uniform material substance, is an imaginative legacy of the development of money. Indeed, as Marc Shell points out, in a reading that anticipates important elements of Seaford's, Heraclitus's projection of money onto the cosmos in fragment 90 is quite explicit: "Gold (the analogue to fire in the first statement) is both one constituent of 'goods' (the analogue to 'all things') and not one constituent of 'goods.' Insofar as gold is considered as a metal, it is a good (or commodity) like all other goods. Insofar as it is considered as coined money, it is a good unlike any other goods; perhaps, according to Heraclitus, is not a good at all but a mere token or measure. Gold is thus both a good and a nongood, as fire is both a thing and an exchange for all things."¹⁰ Furthermore, Shell argues that not only is the content of the fragment "commercial" drawn from the realm of monetary exchange, but "its metaphorization (or form) is also commercial. The fragment is not only about the exchanges of fire or gold but also about its own exchanges of meaning or metaphorization."¹¹ Money is the "third term" in an exchange that takes the form "X-Money-Y" (goods for gold, gold for goods), just as metaphor is predicated on a "third term" yoking two heterogeneous images or concepts (e.g., the yellowish-reddish color that links fire and gold).¹²

What does all of this have to do with Bergotte? In the second, economic half of Heraclitus's fragment, the medium of exchange is at the syntactic outside but conceptual inside of the chiasmus. The word order is "chrusou chrēmata kai chrēmātōn chrusos," but the trader begins and ends with (presumably different) goods, deploying gold, instrumentally, only in the middle. Proust retains the word order but flips the meaning: having transmuted "l'or en caresse et les caresses en or," Bergotte is left with exactly what he started out with, gold. Heraclitus's dynamic scientific-mercantile exchange is replaced by an alchemy that is as sterile as the impotent old master himself. As the narrator comments, Bergotte's reasoning is "absurd."

Heraclitus's account of purchase (or, metaphorically, of metaphor) is a logically complete one: X-Money-Y. Its echo by Proust's narrator, in contrast, omits several necessary steps. This is evident when we contrast it with the steps of the transaction in Bergotte's own self-justification, reported immediately prior in direct speech:

[BERGOTTE] I spend . . . on girls . . . pleasures or disappointments . . . a
book . . . money
[NARRATOR] gold . . . caresses . . . gold. (3:185)

10. Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 54–55.

11. *Ibid.*, 52.

12. *Ibid.*, 56–57.

The narrator's version elides two crucial components: the human beings who provide Bergotte with pleasurable or disappointing caresses and the works of art that he is thus enabled to create. Yet there is a justice in this compression that Bergotte himself acknowledges with his dying words. Having read about the yellow patch of wall in the *View of Delft*, Bergotte

went to the exhibition. . . . He walked past several pictures and was struck by the aridity [*sécheresse*] and pointlessness of such an artificial kind of art. . . . At last he came to the Vermeer . . . he noticed for the first time some small figures in blue, that the sand was pink, and finally, the precious substance of the tiny patch of yellow wall. . . . "That's how I ought to have written," he said. "My last books are too dry [*secs*], I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of colour, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall." . . . In a celestial pair of scales there appeared to him, weighing down one of the pans, his own life, while the other contained the little patch of wall so beautifully painted in yellow. (3:185)¹³

In front of a true Old Master, Bergotte realizes that his final books, those composed of transmuted caresses, are dry and pointless because they are merely a means in the tautological creation of gold out of gold. Unlike the gold that it creates, the language of his late books has no color of its own and thus is not "precious in itself." The scales that guarantee an equal exchange suggest that, rather than trading gold for gold, Bergotte would have done better to put the gold in his books themselves, to trade his whole life for a single patch of yellow.

The *Recherche* succeeds, of course, where Bergotte's late works fail. As Elaine Scarry has demonstrated, Proust is a master of using language to evoke vivid color impressions in the sensoria of readers, not least in the blue, pink, and yellow of this passage.¹⁴ But the text is not merely dramatizing a moment of artistic failure to show off, by contrast, its own achievement. *La prisonnière* is a protest not merely against the artistic venality of the late Bergotte but against the uniformitarian metaphysics of Heraclitus and his tradition. The idea—which Seaford and Shell connect to the emergence of money in archaic Greek society—that all things are ultimately commensurable, convertible to and from fire, appears in numerous frag-

13. "Bergotte . . . entra à l'exposition. . . . Il passa devant plusieurs tableaux et eut l'impression de la sécheresse et l'inutilité d'un art si factice. . . . Enfin il fut devant le Ver Meer . . . il remarqua pour la première fois des petits personnages en blue, the le sable était rose, et enfin la précieuse matière du tout petit pan de mur jaune. . . . 'C'est ainsi que j'aurais dû écrire, disait-il. Mes derniers livres sont trop secs, il aurait fallu passer plusieurs couches de couleur, rendre ma phrase en elle-même précieuse, comme ce petit pan de mur jaune.' . . . Dans une céleste balance lui apparaissait, chargeant l'un des plateaux, sa propre vie, tandis que l'autre contenait le petit pan de mur si bien peint en jaune" (3:692).

14. Elaine Scarry, "Imaging Color" (Clark Lectures, Trinity College, Cambridge, 2007).

ments of Heraclitus: "When you have listened, not to me but to the law [*logos*], it is wise to agree that all things are one"; "This ordered universe [*cosmos*], which is the same for all, was not created by any one of the gods or of mankind, but it was ever and is and shall be ever-living fire, kindled in measure and quenched in measure."¹⁵ Similar ideas are attributed to other pre-Socratic philosophers, who believed that the cosmos could be reduced to water (Thales) or air (Anaximenes).¹⁶ For Proust, such a *logos* is "the materialist hypothesis," according to which the "states of soul" evoked by Vinteuil's phrases and the taste of a madeleine soaked in linden flower tea contain "nothing to assure [one] that the vagueness of such states was a sign of profundity rather than of our not having learned to analyse them, so that there might be nothing more real in them than in other states" (3:388).¹⁷ Proust rejects this uniform universe in which individual experiences can be analyzed down to a common factor. Instead, he conceives of art as an emissary from another world, incommensurable with our own: "It is indeed a unique accent, an unmistakable voice, to which in spite of themselves those great singers that original composers are rise and return, and which is a proof of the irreducibly individual existence of the soul. . . . Each artist seems thus to be the native of an unknown country, which he himself has forgotten, and which is different from that whence another great artist, setting sail for the earth, will eventually emerge" (3:258).¹⁸ In Proust, the *cosmos* is not "the same for all." The patch of yellow in Vermeer's painting symbolizes this "unique accent" by pointing to the use value of gold, its inextricable yellowness and changeless endurance, rather than its exchange value as money.

Indeed, *La prisonnière* stages a larger critique of exchange as the criterion of value in the vicissitudes of jealousy and bored satiety that constitute Marcel's attitude to his eponymous captive. Like a stock or commodity traded on a *bourse*, a mistress's value fluctuates wildly in a lover's eyes on the basis of the actions of other potential buyers: "It might well occur to us, were we better able to analyse our loves, to see that women often attract us only because of the counterpoise of all the men with whom we have to compete

15. Heraclitus, fragments 50, 30, in Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 28, 26. See Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 242–55.

16. See Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy*, 1:54–58, 115–16.

17. "L'hypothèse matérialiste . . . il se pourrait que si les phrases de Vinteuil semblaient l'expression de certains états de l'âme—analogues à celui que j'avais éprouvé en goûtant la madeleine trempée dans la tasse de thé—rien ne m'assurait que le vague de tels états fût une marque de leur profondeur, mais seulement de ce que nous n'avons pas encore su les analyser, qu'il n'y aurait donc rien de plus réel en eux que dans d'autres" (3:883).

18. "C'est bien un accent unique auquel s'élèvent, auquel reviennent malgré eux ces grands chanteurs que sont les musiciens originaux, et qui est une preuve de l'existence irréductiblement individuelle de l'âme. . . . Chaque artiste semble ainsi comme le citoyen d'une patrie inconnue, oubliée de lui-même, différente de celle d'où viendra, appareillant pour la terre, un autre grand artiste" (3:761).

for them. . . . This counterpoise removed, the charm of the woman declines" (3:420; cf. a very similar formulation on 3:943).¹⁹ Scarcity, rather than intrinsic value, is what makes a loved one valuable: "in love, the best way to get oneself sought after is to withhold oneself" (3:377).²⁰ Like Bergotte, Marcel spends his money on a "girl," to the detriment of his engagement with art: "Although . . . I had resolved to become a collector like Swann . . . all my money went on horses, a motor-car, dresses for Albertine" (3:389).²¹ The inheritance that Marcel uses to buy Albertine on the erotic market ends up imprisoning him as well as her. Coming home from a visit to the Verdurins undertaken exclusively to investigate Albertine's activities, Marcel looks up to the bars of light coming from her shuttered window and sees himself imprisoned in a relationship to a woman whose use value to him is minimal (she bores and constrains him) but whose exchange value, as represented by her suspected infidelities, makes her incalculably precious: "I seemed to behold the luminous gates which were about to close behind me and of which I myself had forged, for an eternal slavery, the inflexible bars of gold" (3:337).²² The narrator presents this critique of exchange value by presenting us with yet another patch of golden yellow, metaphoric ingots of light that can buy neither sailboats nor a Rolls-Royce but do present a vivid image of captivity to the reader. Proust reintroduces the two elements—a living woman and the vivid imagery of art—that were ancillary to the commercial transaction undertaken by Bergotte in his late works.²³

Heraclitus imagines a world in which all things can be exchanged for fire; by comparing this exchange to a market transaction, he implies that this exchange need not take place in some world-ending cataclysm but rather inheres in the scientific and economic process of converting things into other things. Apocalyptic conflagration and everyday quantitative conflation are two versions of the same process. Both the vignette of Bergotte's meretricious final years and penitent death, with its Heraclitean intertext, and the cautionary image of Marcel's mind-forged cage of gold protest against this view.

In closing, I wish to make explicit the stance of hermeneutic modesty that I believe this reading entails on the critic who proposes it. Attempts to

19. "Il arriverait, si nous savions mieux analyser nos amours, de voir que souvent les femmes ne nous plaisent qu'à cause du contrepoids d'hommes à qui nous avons à les disputer; ce contrepoids supprimé, le charme de la femme tombe" (3:914).

20. "En amour, la meilleure manière qu'on vous recherche, c'est de se refuser" (3:872).

21. "Car . . . je m'étais promis d'avoir des collections comme Swann . . . tout mon argent passait à avoir des chevaux, une automobile, des toilettes pour Albertine" (3:884).

22. "Il me sembla voir le lumineux grillage qui allait se refermer sur moi et dont j'avais forgé moi-même, pour une servitude éternelle, les inflexibles barreaux d'or" (3:834).

23. *Le temps retrouvé* revisits this image of golden light seen from a dark street, this time during a wartime blackout (*Remembrance of Things Past*, 3:758).

transmute the variegated text of the *Recherche* into a single argument about “art” or “materialism” must always entail a feat of synecdochic hocus-pocus (often one that implicitly privileges *Du côté de chez Swann* [1913] or *Le temps retrouvé* [1927] over the intervening volumes as privileged sites of the “meaning” of the text as a whole). Admittedly, the text supplies some warrant for ambitious arguments from part to whole: in an evening conversation held a few days before Albertine’s defection, Marcel tells her that “the great men of letters have never created more than a single work, or rather have never done more than refract through various media an identical beauty which they bring into the world” (3:382).²⁴ But even if Marcel does seem at times to displace the uniformitarianism of Heraclitean physics from the material world to the creating artist, we should nevertheless be wary of trying to articulate the artist’s “identical beauty” as a single critical thesis.

The death of Bergotte is a particularly fitting exemplum for the heterogeneity of the text, given that he reappears alive several times in subsequent pages—Proust himself died before he could kill off his fellow novelist for good (3:219, 604, 719). I have confined my argument almost entirely to *La prisonnière*, but even that text admits other assessments of Bergotte, other interpretations of the relationship between Marcel and Albertine. My goal thus has not been to convert the goods of Proust into an equivalent quantum of critical currency. As the narrator himself says in *Le temps retrouvé*, “A work in which there are theories is like an object which still has its price-tag on it” (3:916).²⁵ Nor do I seek to imprison the *Recherche* inside the golden bars of my interpretation. Rather, like the unnamed art critic whom Bergotte reads, I intend to draw us back to the gallery of the *Recherche* to see, with new eyes, a golden patch of Proustian color.

24. “Les grands littérateurs n’ont jamais fait qu’une seule oeuvre, ou plutôt réfracté à travers des milieux divers une même beauté qu’ils apportent au monde” (3:877).

25. “Une oeuvre où il y a des théories est comme un objet sur lequel on laisse la marque du prix” (4:461).