

**Michel Butor's *Les Mots dans la peinture*:
A 'Museum of Words'?**

ELIZABETH GEARY KEOHANE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO/UNIVERSITY OF
JOHANNESBURG

Abstract:

This article examines Michel Butor's 1969 work *Les Mots dans la peinture*, asserting that its inventive structure has been largely passed over by critics due to its primary use as a key text in word-image studies. Butor proposes to examine words in paintings in this work and in so doing, focuses at length on the museum space. I suggest that Butor's text sets itself up as an imaginary art museum for its reader, and organises itself spatially in such a way as to emulate the visitor's passage through an exhibition space. Butor thus creates what will be termed, following James A.W. Heffernan, a 'museum of words', 'a gallery of art constructed by language alone'.¹ In arguing that the museum space informs the structure as much as the content of *Les Mots dans la peinture*, my article also offers insights into the work's interrogation both of ekphrasis and the role of illustration. Moreover, this piece's sensitivity to Butor's poetic endeavours and experimentation with the essay form, as well as to his thoughts on the interconnected activities of writing, reading, and travelling, further challenges the way in which the aesthetic value of *Les Mots dans la peinture* in its own right has long been overlooked.

This article will analyse the role of illustration in Michel Butor's *Les Mots dans la peinture*, in order to uncover its implications for the limits of ekphrasis.² The book's final line, almost irreverent in tone, communicates Butor's surprising refusal to engage with the presence of illustrations in the work: 'J'ai décidé de ne pas aborder dans cet essai la question des images à l'intérieur des livres, à l'intérieur des livres notamment sur les mots dans la peinture, mais rêvez-y' [*In this essay, I have decided not to broach the question of images in books, notably in books which examine words in paintings, but you can think*

¹ James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 8.

² Ekphrasis is defined by Heffernan as 'the verbal representation of visual representation'. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, p. 3.

about it].³ This declaration has had the effect of partly obscuring the inventive literary project constituted by *Les Mots dans la peinture*. In line with Butor's deliberate glossing over of one of the many problems involved in categorising his text, critics have mostly overlooked the structure of this work in the half-century following its publication. The construction of *Les Mots dans la peinture* will therefore be examined here with a view to providing a more comprehensive analysis of the way in which word and image relations operate in this work.

Les Mots dans la peinture appeared in 1969 with Skira, a publishing house specialising in art editions, and at that time particularly renowned for its high quality visual reproductions, including colour illustrations. The work comprises fifty-one numbered sections which consider the role of words in paintings, from medieval to modern art. It contains fifty-five illustrations. We can see from the aforementioned citation that Butor himself deems it to be an essay, a form whose malleability, I will argue, suits his tentative exploration of the phenomenon of words in paintings.⁴ Jean Duffy is rare among critics in analysing the structure of *Les Mots dans la peinture* in her monograph on Butor, highlighting the thematic organisation of its sections.⁵ She concedes, however, that *Les Mots dans la peinture* dispenses with certain aspects of the (academic) essay model:

If *Les Mots dans la peinture* eschews the conventional apparatus of the academic essay, it is nevertheless a scholarly, analytical and illuminating study of the multifarious functions played by words in paintings and in their reception.⁶

Yet it is precisely as a relatively straightforward study of words in paintings that *Les Mots dans la peinture* has been understood by critics, without lengthy consideration being given to the aesthetics of the text itself, particularly in the light of its unusual and, as I will show, often playful structure. A sustained reflection on the work in its own right, rather than solely as a means of understanding the paintings it discusses, is long overdue. The extent of the compartmentalisation involved in *Les Mots dans la peinture* means that the work,

³ Butor, *Les Mots dans la peinture* (Geneva: Skira 'Les Sentiers de la Création', 1969), p. 151. All subsequent page references are given in the text. All translations are my own.

⁴ Jeff Porter, in his introduction to *Understanding the Essay*, underlines the idea of trial or attempt from which the essay derives its name. See *Understanding the Essay*, ed. by Patricia Foster and Jeff Porter (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2012), p. x.

⁵ See Jean Duffy, *Signs and Designs: Art and Architecture in the Work of Michel Butor* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), p. 223. It has usually been the case that *Les Mots dans la peinture* is referenced as a study. See Richard Hobbs, 'Reading Artists' Words', in *A Companion to Art Theory*, ed. by Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 173-82, Lucien Giraud, *Michel Butor: Le dialogue avec les arts* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2006), and Laurent Jenny, 'Les mots de la peinture moderniste ou les bonheurs d'une mésalliance', in *Versants*, 55 (2009) <http://www.fabula.org/atelier.php?Les_mots_de_la_peinture_moderniste> [accessed June 17 2014].

⁶ Duffy, *Signs and Designs: Art and Architecture in the Work of Michel Butor*, p. 224.

fragmented as it is into these fifty-one sections, lends itself particularly well to the essay form.⁷ Indeed, Theodor Adorno argues that fragmentation is the very process through which an essay coheres: '[i]t thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over.'⁸ Butor's insistence both upon fragmentation within *Les Mots dans la peinture* and a certain crossing of genres and influences (the essay, the poem, the *livre d'art*) therefore deserves to be understood as integral to the work's aesthetic, since he will be seen to allow the content of *Les Mots dans la peinture* to inform its structure. Butor's engagement with form in this text sees him develop a string of brief encounters with different artworks over the course of the book, allowing us to align our progression through the text, as readers, with the trajectory of a visitor leisurely making her or his way through an exhibition space.

The first image that confronts the reader as she or he engages with *Les Mots dans la peinture* precedes the written text, and is a detail of a Marc Chagall painting entitled 'La place du marché' (c.1917). The detail depicts a figure who has just put a foot over the threshold of a building (a grocer's, as the sign in Russian above the door tells us). Arguably, for Butor, the image of crossing a threshold marries well with the idea of beginning a book, or taking the first step of a journey into a narrative, since he discusses at length the possibility of 'travelling' within and through a given text in his seminal 1972 essay 'Le Voyage et l'écriture'. Butor establishes the indissoluble link that exists between the activities of reading and travelling early on in this essay:

Il y a donc voyage, même si l'ouvrage, à première approximation du moins, n'est pas un récit de voyage, et ceci pour deux raisons :

d'abord parce qu'il y a un trajet au moins de l'œil de signe en signe [...]

ensuite parce qu'il y a cette issue, cette fuite, ce retrait, parce qu'à travers cette lucarne qu'est la page, je me trouve ailleurs [...]

[A journey is therefore at stake, even if the work, at first glance at least, is not a piece of travel writing, and there are two reasons for this:

firstly, because there is at the very least the movement of the eye from sign to sign [...]

⁷ Porter also elucidates the particular fragmentation that the essay form can often favour: 'We eagerly embrace the essay's nonlinear quality, losing ourselves in its unpredictable twists and turns [...] Yet getting lost in an essay is not the same as getting lost in a novel. Novels have plots; the essay is famous for rambling, its paratactic structure favoring breaks and digressions over continuity [...]' *Understanding the Essay*, p. x. Furthermore, Charles Forsdick underlines the ambulatory nature of the essay in 'De la plume comme des pieds: the Essay as a Peripatetic Genre', in *The Modern Essay in French: Movement, Instability, Performance*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and Andy Stafford (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 45-59.

⁸ Theodor Adorno, 'Essay as Form', *New German Critique*, 32 (1984), trans. by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, pp. 151-171 (p. 164).

then because there exists such an exit, such an escape, such a retreat, because through the skylight of the page, I find myself in another place [...]]⁹

In the case of *Les Mots dans la peinture*, Butor engages the reader by inviting her or him to ‘travel’ from sign to sign, from section to section and from painting to painting, just as a guide leads the way during a museum visit (notably, Butor at one point describes the text’s trajectory as ‘notre sinueux cheminement’ [*the winding path we forge*], p. 118). In the context of this article, the idea of the museum is understood specifically as an interior space that houses a curated art collection, and is open to the public. If Butor’s text sets itself up as an imaginary art museum for its reader, and organises itself spatially in such a way as to emulate the visitor’s passage through an exhibition space, then the compartmentalised structure of *Les Mots dans la peinture* can be said to take on an architectural quality, referencing the spatial layout and anticipated rhythm of the museum: at each point the text stalls us, as if we were in front of the painting it discusses, and makes us look, before guiding us towards the next artwork. Those sections that operate as verbal representations of visual representations, and which can then be seen to constitute a series of ekphrastic efforts, allow us to underline further this spatial analogy, since they usually situate the encounter with a given painting in a museum setting, notably a characteristic of much modern ekphrastic work.¹⁰

Using ekphrasis to understand Butor’s aesthetic efforts allows the literary value of this work to be more easily uncovered, highlighting the author’s experimentation with the intrinsic malleability of the essay or the creative challenge of positing the artworks of others as the primary material of one’s own text, for instance. Identifying the ekphrastic bent of *Les Mots dans la peinture* also inserts this work into the long and illustrious history of ekphrastic literature.¹¹ Certainly, given that each section has its own title, is of a comparable length to the others, and constitutes a sustained reflection on a given artwork, the possibility that these vignettes might also be deliberately and playfully engaging with the long-established difficulty surrounding the definition of the prose poem cannot be ignored.¹² Although Section 51, entitled ‘ut pictura poesis’ (usually translated as ‘as is painting, so is poetry’), and offered as the text’s conclusion, ostensibly discusses a Juan

⁹ Michel Butor, ‘Le Voyage et l’écriture’, *Romantisme*, 4 (1972), 4-19 (p. 5).

¹⁰ Heffernan, p. 8.

¹¹ Heffernan’s study, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, begins with the shield of Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*, and works up to contemporary poetry.

¹² Alexandra Wettlaufer discusses the difficulty in defining the prose poem in her study *In the Mind’s Eye: The Visual Impulse in Diderot, Baudelaire and Ruskin* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi ‘Faux titre’, 2003). She notes that ‘the *poème en prose* is a prose passage that, like a poem, is brief and intense in its effect, and, as Baudelaire also indicates [...], there is a deliberate unity of impression, a “totalité d’effet” that transforms poetic prose into a true prose poem’ (pp. 124-25). Notably, Wettlaufer underlines that, for Baudelaire, this principle also applies to painting: ‘for in the *Salon de 1859* he insists that the two essential conditions for art are “l’unité d’impression et la totalité d’effet”’ (p. 125).

Gris artwork for the most part, there is an abiding sense that Butor's literary project as a whole posits itself as a work of art, a type of poetic endeavour that would seem to merit the same analysis as the paintings it considers.¹³ At this juncture, it is important to remember that Butor's text includes illustrations of many of the artworks he describes (mostly black-and-white; only a few are in colour). It might be noted, however, that Butor, in an interview with Martine Reid, sees the printed page of text as itself inescapably visual, asserting that '[i]n an illustrated book, you are dealing with a fundamental plastic structure which is the rectangle of the double page [...] All one has to do is move away a bit to see that the rectangle of the text is also a rectangle of drawing and color [...]'.¹⁴ While Butor clearly demonstrates a sensitivity to the visual nature of the verbal, it will be seen, however, that illustrating an ekphrastic text in particular intensifies the ongoing power struggle between word and image. Indeed, Butor exploits this struggle to his own creative ends in *Les Mots dans la peinture*.

If the reader can 'travel' through this text in the wake of the writer, then the latter does not only operate as a spectator in his own right (aside from being the person who has 'curated' the selection of paintings under discussion), but also *supplants* the museum guide, in elucidating certain key paintings for the reader via his comments.¹⁵ Positioning the Chagall doorway, magnified to fill the first page of the work, as a point of entry, the rectangular space of the page would seem to suggest a doorframe, or an archway, accordingly hinting at the potential for the reader to 'travel' from one section to the next. Butor's museum is an imaginary and somewhat idiosyncratic one, as it groups together paintings from galleries all over the world, and from a variety of periods, without the conservationist's regard for organising artworks chronologically. Instead, given the overarching thematic organisation of the paintings it considers, as noted by Duffy, it can be said that Butor's work houses a series of projected exhibitions.¹⁶ Might we then understand *Les Mots dans la peinture* to be a 'museum of words', to borrow the term James A. W. Heffernan uses to describe the ekphrastic text? Can *Les Mots dans la peinture*, like many other examples of ekphrastic writing, be seen as 'a gallery of art constructed by language

¹³ To give an example of the poetic quality of Butor's work, I quote a passage from Section 5, 'la chute d'Icare' [*The Fall of Icarus*]: 'Une grande sphère d'indifférence s'est développée dans l'espace autour de cette catastrophe [...], et une sorte de chaîne va lier pour nos yeux désormais, à travers voiles et mâts du navire, l'imprudent fils de Dédale à son désir, à son meurtrier, le soleil à l'horizon [...]' [*A great sphere of indifference developed around this catastrophe [...] and, in our eyes, a sort of chain is henceforth going to link, by means of the sails and masts of the ship, the reckless son of Dedalus to his burning desire, to his murderer: the sun on the horizon [...]*] (pp. 14-15).

¹⁴ 'Bricolage: An Interview with Michel Butor', trans. by Noah Guynn, *Yale French Studies*, 84 (1994), 17-26 (p. 19).

¹⁵ The essay form in particular allows the writer to remain to the fore. As Pierre Glaudes and Jean-François Louette note, in the case of the essay 'le moi de l'énonciateur est sans cesse présent'. See *L'essai* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), p 295.

¹⁶ The term used here invites comparisons with André Malraux's *Le Musée imaginaire* (Geneva: Skira, 1947), an illustrated volume notably also published by Skira. Butor's 'musée imaginaire', however, does not appear to engage with the hegemonic and reductive discourses of appropriation central to Malraux's.

alone’?¹⁷ How might such a perspective be reconciled with the presence of photographic reproductions of many of the paintings which inspire the written text? In fact, viewing *Les Mots dans la peinture* in terms of a museum space is not solely a case of understanding its content as having an influence on form; it also allows us to uncover the extent of Butor’s remarkable innovativeness in organising text and image. The spatial reading that the structure of this work would appear to encourage in fact leads us to revisit the way(s) in which we approach the relationship between ekphrasis and book illustration.

Although the presence of illustrations in *Les Mots dans la peinture* might first of all enable the work to portray the struggle for dominance that invariably characterises text-image relations, Butor focuses on this particular tension only when it applies to the phenomenon of words appearing in paintings, as the following extract from Section 1 shows:¹⁸

Des mots dans la peinture occidentale? Dès qu’on a posé la question, on s’aperçoit qu’ils y sont innombrables, mais qu’on ne les a pour ainsi dire pas étudiés. Intéressant aveuglement, car la présence de ces mots ruine en effet le mur fondamental édifié par notre enseignement entre les lettres et les arts.

[Words in Western painting? Once the question is raised, you realise that they are innumerable but, as such, they have not been studied. This is an interesting blind spot, since the presence of these words effectively destroys the fundamental wall between the humanities and the visual arts that has been constructed by our education.] (p. 5)

We see that a figure of architecture is immediately invoked by Butor: ‘le mur fondamental édifié par notre enseignement entre les lettres et les arts’. If this wall is destroyed not simply by the presence of these words, but by *admitting* and *highlighting* their presence, Butor has, in this work, carved out a new space for discussing their impact. The first three sections consider the status of word and image relations, pointing explicitly towards the museum setting, and the role of this space in reinforcing what Butor sees as the unbreakable link between word and image. Sections 4, 5, 6, 10, 21, 22, 26, 31, and 44 all carry the titles of the paintings they discuss, and work together to illustrate the points Butor raises early on about the irresistible pull that draws the viewer to the title, as well as the latter’s power in shaping our understanding of the artwork it names. Section 1, ‘au

¹⁷ Heffernan, p. 8.

¹⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell foregrounds this power struggle throughout *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, stating that ‘[t]he history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a “nature” to which only it has access’. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 43. See also Part Two ‘Image Versus Text: Figures of the Difference’, pp. 47-52.

milieu des mots' [*Among words/In a verbal environment*], firmly establishes that paintings cannot be said to exist in a non-verbal vacuum: 'Nous ne voyons jamais les tableaux seuls, notre vision n'est jamais pure vision' [*We never see paintings in isolation; our vision is never pure vision*] (p. 5). Moreover, Butor's subsequent explanation for the inevitable dominance of the verbal plunges us immediately into the museum space:

Dès que nous nous mêlons tant soit peu de beaux-arts, on nous a parlé, on nous a montré, nous avons reçu une invitation, vu des affiches, feuilleté, lu parfois un catalogue, nous sommes venus voir quelque chose qui avait déjà dans notre esprit une forte détermination : bien plus forte encore si nous allons dans un musée. Que de paroles, en effet, y conduisent ou troublent notre visite!

[*Once we get the slightest bit involved in the fine arts, someone has addressed us, someone has shown something to us, we have received an invite, seen posters, leafed through or sometimes read a catalogue, we have come to see something which, in our minds, is already clearly defined: even more so if we go to a museum. In fact, so many words steer or even stir up our visit there!*] (p. 6)

The use of the verb 'troubler' – meaning 'to cloud' and 'to disrupt', as well as 'to stir' (emotions, in particular) – would appear to betray a feeling that one's encounter with a visual work of art can be impaired in some way by the impingement of the ever-present verbal. Indeed, Section 1 concludes by presenting Butor's professed surprise at the identical trajectories silently followed by certain museum-goers during a visit to the National Gallery of Washington. He then realises that they are listening to audio guides: '[u]ne voix secrète les faisait voir' [*a secret voice enabled them to see*] (p. 7), as opposed to the 'commentatrices visibles' [*visible museum guides*] (p. 6) who lead other groups. The idea of a 'voix secrète' guiding one's appreciation of a painting also points toward the influence that Butor's numerous commentaries on paintings will have upon our way of seeing these artworks, as we, whether knowingly or not, progress through his 'museum of words'.

Once the mode of ekphrasis can be identified in a given text, it might be suggested that the original work of art has been reinterpreted or even regenerated in some way. The status of the work of art in such a situation does not escape Butor in *Les Mots dans la peinture*. Indeed, his comments benefit from being considered in the light of certain points raised by Walter Benjamin in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', particularly those pertaining to the 'aura' of the original work of art. In his seminal essay, Benjamin states that '[e]ven the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space [...] That which withers in the age of mechanical

reproduction is the aura of the work of art.¹⁹ For Butor, the idea of any such aura is rendered unviable by what he sees as the ‘halo verbal’ [*verbal halo*] attached to the work of art *and* its reproductions:

Si je voulais décrire la structure aujourd’hui de toute expérience picturale, il me faudrait naturellement préciser comment l’œuvre d’art « elle-même » est le noyau, parfois d’ailleurs déjà détruit [...], d’un ensemble de reproductions plus ou moins fidèles, autrefois fort clairsemé, souvent très dense maintenant, et comment le halo verbal s’enracine d’abord à l’original, mais peut se multiplier, se diversifier autour des différentes reproductions.

[*If I wanted to describe today the structure of any pictorial experience, it would be necessary for me to point out the way in which the artwork ‘itself’ is the kernel, sometimes even already destroyed, of a whole collection of relatively faithful reproductions (one that was sparse in the past but is now often very dense), and the way in which the verbal halo attaches itself first of all to the original, but can multiply and vary around the different reproductions.*] (p. 9)

Given that the paintings illustrated constitute in part what inspires Butor to write *Les Mots dans la peinture*, the textual component of the work, by Butor’s own logic, acts as the ‘verbal halo’ attached to these images. Moreover, the presence of illustrations in a book that focuses on ekphrastic writing raises other key questions: does a black-and-white or colour reproduction of a work of art necessarily engage the reader? If these illustrations represent the ‘source’ of a given section, are they accordingly more powerful than the ekphrastic text itself, or does ekphrasis, if a type of ‘verbal halo’, in any way subjugate the painting to which it is attached? To what extent does the fragmentary composition of *Les Mots dans la peinture* affect the relationship between word and image? For alongside the work’s fifty-one sections, it is necessary to bear in mind the impact of the fragmented representation of many of the paintings discussed in *Les Mots dans la peinture*. Reproducing but a detail of an artwork keeps the reader from appreciating the painting as a whole: she or he must instead focus on the text that describes it. The frequent isolation of details of certain paintings in *Les Mots dans la peinture* in fact pushes us back towards the text that accompanies them. Even if Butor eschews a systematic discussion of the presence of these illustrations in his work, their insertion into the text proves his thesis concerning the consequent power of the verbal over the visual. Moreover, a marked playfulness typifies Butor’s use of illustrations, allowing his book to recreate the incessant interplay between the visual (the painting viewed) and the verbal (the white card which indicates,

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 211-44 (p. 215).

among other details, the title of said artwork; the catalogue; the museum guide's voice) that characterises a museum visit.

Several sections in particular, all of which work to sustain Butor's 'museum of words', help us further uncover his understanding of the relationship between book illustration and ekphrasis. Section 27, 'Johannes Van Eyck fuit hic', contains a detail of the artist's signature on the Arnolfini wedding portrait and, on the following page, an image of the painting as a whole. The artist's signature, reproduced and magnified to the same scale as many of the images of paintings in this book, not only distorts our vision but in fact reminds us that this book is already 'inscribed' by others, those artists who have created the works upon which Butor comments. The reappearance of Van Eyck's signature as an element of the portrait reproduced on the following page further disconcerts us, since the lettering has now become difficult to detect. In subtly connecting the two illustrations of the same painting in this section, Butor sheds light on the distance at which the visual artist can be held in ekphrastic writing: Van Eyck is brought into focus and shunned in equal measure here, as the new text emanating from his work attempts to assert the authority and originality of its interpretations.²⁰ We might also consider the way a detail from the Van Gogh painting 'Arbre d'après Hiroshige' is deployed here as a page border for Section 46, 'écritures imitées' [*Imitated writings*]. Disconnected from the original artwork in this way, the Van Gogh fragment forces the eye back to Butor's text on painterly imitations of non-Roman alphabets; a reproduction of the Van Gogh painting in its entirety does not appear. The chosen detail, depicting ideograms presumably meant to resemble Japanese writing (given that the painting's title pays homage to Hiroshige), also operates as a framing device in Van Gogh's painting, where the image of the tree is flanked by two vertical lines of ideograms. Occupying the outer margin of the page, the use of this detail from the painting to frame the typeface in *Les Mots dans la peinture*, just as it frames the image of the tree in the original artwork, once again calls into question attempts to differentiate and dissociate word and image in a clear-cut way. Moreover, Butor further complicates the relationship between word and image by highlighting the 'propriétés plastiques de l'imprimé' [*plastic properties of printed matter*] in the text of the same section (p. 46). The final section of his work, 'ut pictura poesis', engages with its subject in a similarly inventive way. The text from the Juan Gris artwork is reproduced in full in this section, and thus takes on the appearance of a stand-alone poem. It seems independent of

²⁰ See my article on Henri Michaux's text *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques*, a series of ekphrastic poems inspired by the paintings of René Magritte. In this article, I note that ekphrasis often attempts to disengage itself from its source of inspiration. Elizabeth Geary Keohane, 'Ekphrasis and the Creative Process in Henri Michaux's *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques* (1972)', *French Studies*, 64.3 (2010), 265-275 (p. 275).

the original painting, yet it is embedded in an ekphrastic piece of writing that itself only exists because this artwork inspires it. As shown by each of these instances, Butor's frequent tendency to interrogate and even reverse the conventional functions of both book illustration and ekphrasis leads to a work which extends beyond its self-imposed brief of investigating words in paintings in order to *reframe* the verbal in terms of the visual.

It has already been established that the work's closing comment, cited at the beginning of this article, displays Butor's acute awareness of the importance that we might accord to illustrations in this text, even if he sidesteps such an analysis himself. The phrasing takes care to reference the work's own self-reflexive impulse: 'la question des images à l'intérieur des livres, à l'intérieur des livres notamment sur les mots dans la peinture' [*the question of images in books, notably in books which examine words in paintings*] (p. 151; my emphasis). Sections 41-45 discuss the presence of books, manuscripts, letters and printed material in paintings, and each section is accompanied by one or more illustrations. Section 42, 'livres jaunes', features reproductions of three still life paintings by Vincent Van Gogh, all of which depict books. Two of these three paintings portray open books, offering a visual representation of the interior of books *as* the interior of the book, thus heightening the self-reflexivity hinted at in Butor's text. This playfulness extends to Section 44, 'Marat assassiné', where the letter still held by the murdered Marat (clasped horizontally in David's painting) is magnified, rotated into an upright position, reproduced as a detail, and offered as part of a double page, facing Butor's prose. It is at once a painting of a page, and the contents of an entire page of *Les Mots dans la peinture*. Alongside the earlier examples examined here, these instances underline the way in which the struggle between the verbal and visual generates a ludic dimension for the reader in Butor's 'museum of words', akin to (and yet entirely independent of) that experienced by the real-life museum-goer.

If, as Butor so convincingly argues, our way of seeing the so-called sister arts needs to be reassessed, it is important that *Les Mots dans la peinture* also be revisited. Having been somewhat overlooked because of a general – and often surprisingly uncritical – acceptance of its role as a key analytic text in word and image studies, it deserves to be understood as an inventive and protean piece of literature in its own right. I have shown here the way in which it operates as a 'museum of words', at once referencing and attempting to supplant the art museum. This spatial analogy highlights not only the dynamic manner in which *Les Mots dans la peinture* foregrounds novel approaches to topics such as ekphrasis and the role of illustration, but also the innovative way in which the book itself comes together.