Proust and Whistler

Proust’s admiration of Whistler, whose name he never managed to spell correctly in his letters, was genuine. The only work of art that hung in Proust’s bedroom for years was a reproduction of Whistler’s portrait of Thomas Carlyle. When he was ready to create his fictional painter for *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust invented Elstir, in whose syllables one hears the clear echo of the way the French pronounce Whistler.

Writing to his artist friend Marie Nordlinger, Proust told her he had not known Whistler, “except for one evening when I made him say a few kind words about Ruskin!—and appropriated his handsome gray gloves which I’ve since lost.” In his letter, Marcel asked Marie to tell Mr. (Charles Land) Freer about his interest in Whistler: “in my intentionally bare room there is only one reproduction of a work of art: an excellent photograph of Whistler’s *Carlyle* in a serpentine overcoat like the dress in his portrait of his mother. The more I think about the theories of Ruskin and Whistler the more I believe they are not irreconcilable. Whistler is right when he says in *Ten O’clock* that Art is distinct from Morality. And yet Ruskin, too, utters a truth, on a different plane, when he says that all great art is morality. Marcel Proust, *Selected Letters in English* 2: 137 (translation modified)