BOOKS & THE ARTS

Proust's Prefaces to Ruskin

JEAN AUTRET and WILLIAM BURFORD

Mr. Autret is the author of L'Influence de Ruskin sur la vie, les idées et l'oeuvre de Marcel Proust (*Geneva, Librairie Droz*) *and was formerly professor of French at Vanderbilt University. Mr. Burford's most recent books are a volume of poems,* A Beginning (*W. W. Norton*) *and* The Poet's Vocation: Letters of Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Hart Crane (*University of Texas Press*).

In the spring of 1900, shortly after Ruskin's death, Proust published two essays in his memory. The first, entitled *"Ruskin à Notre Dame d'Amiens,"* appeared in the April issue of *Mercure de France*, and the second, "John Ruskin," was published in two parts in the April 1st and August 1st issues of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. He had also begun translating into French, with the help of his mother and his English friend, Marie Nordlinger, Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens*. The translation was tentatively completed in 1902 but Proust kept working over it, and it was not published by Mercure de France until 1904. It contained many notes by Proust, and a preface consisting of the two essays of 1900, together with a foreword and a lengthy postscript. Thus, the preface to *The Bible of Amiens* spanned a five-year period in Proust's thinking. By 1904 Proust had already undertaken the translation of a second book by Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, and also another essay, *"Sur la lecture"* ("On Reading"), motivated by Ruskin's idea of the importance of books and Proust's own rather divergent and distinctive notions on the subject. This essay was published in June 1905 in the magazine *Renaissance Latine*, and was then reprinted as the preface to Proust's translation of *Sesame and Lilies*, published by Mercure de France later the same year. In 1919 Proust included his two Ruskin prefaces in slightly different form in *Pastiches et mélanges*, published by Gallimard. The following selected passages from the prefaces translated from the versions that appeared originally in the Ruskin volumes, are here printed in English for the first time.

Translators' Note

Fundamentally, it should be the first part of the task of every critic to help the reader to be impressed by these unique traits, to let him see similar traits that enable him to recognize the essential features of the genius of a writer.

If the critic is aware of this, and has helped others to awareness, his function is almost fulfilled. . . .

I conceive, however, that the critic should then go further. He should try to reconstruct what could have been the unique spiritual life of a writer haunted by such special realities: his inspiration being the measure of his vision of those realities; his talent the measure of his ability to re-create them in his work; his ethics, finally, the instinct which, making him consider them from the viewpoint of eternity (however particular these realities appear to us), impelled him to sacrifice to the need of perceiving them and the necessity of reproducing them in order to insure their lasting and clear image, all his pleasures, all his duties, and even his own life, which has no *raison d'être* except as the only possible way of entering into contact with those realities. . . .

—from Preface to *The Bible of Amiens*

Now famous the world over, reproduced in museums in castings which the attendants will not let be touched, these stalls, so old, so illustrious, and so beautiful, continue to exercise their modest function as stalls, as they have been doing for several centuries to the great satisfaction of the Amiénois—like those artists who, having achieved glory, continue nevertheless to hold some trifling post, and to give lessons. These functions consist, even before the instruction of souls, in providing support for the body; and to that end, turned down for each service and showing their backs, they devote themselves unpretentiously.

The wood of these stalls through continual rubbing has little by little taken on, or rather revealed, the dark purple which is as its heart, and which the eye that was once enchanted by it prefers to all else—to the point, even, where it can no longer look at the colors of paintings, finding these coarse by comparison. It is then with a kind of intoxication that one enjoys the glow of that wood, vivid forevermore, which is like the sap of the living tree overflowing with the passage of time. The simplicity of the figures sculpted here seems to take on, from the material in which they live, a certain quality which makes them doubly natural.

—from Preface to *The Bible of Amiens*

I confess that reading this page again (from *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*) at the time of Ruskin's death, I was seized with a desire to see the little man of whom he speaks. I went to Rouen, as if obeying a dying wish, and as if Ruskin upon dying had in some way entrusted to his readers the poor creature to which he had given life again by speaking of it, and which unknowingly had just lost forever the person who had done for it as much as its first sculptor. But when I arrived near the huge cathedral and in front of the gate where the saints were warming themselves in the sun, when I saw higher above, the galleries where the kings radiated up to those supreme altitudes of stone I believed uninhabited, and where here a sculptured hermit lived in isolation, letting the birds rest on his forehead, while there a gathering of apostles listened to the message of an angel poised near them, folding his wings, under a flight of pigeons spreading theirs, and not far from a personage who, receiving a child on his back, turned his head in a sudden and secular motion; when I saw, lined up before its porches, or leaning over the balconies of its towers, all the hosts of stone of the mystic city, breathing the sun or the morning shadow, I understood it would be impossible to find a figure of but some centimeters in the midst of this superhuman people. Yet I went to the porch of the Libraries. But how to recognize the tiny figure among hundreds of others? All of a sudden, a talented and promising young sculptress, Mrs. L. Yeatman, told me: "Here is one that looks a bit like it." We looked a little farther down, and . . . there it was. It does not measure ten centimeters. It is crumbling, and yet the look is the same; the stone still has the hole that raises the eyeball and gives it that expression which made me recognize it. The artist, dead for centuries, left there among thousands of others this tiny person who dies a little more each day; and who had been

A communication from Stephen B. Oates, the author of *To Purge This Land With Blood*, appears in our Letters column.

dead long since, lost in the midst of the crowd of others, forever. But he put it there. One day, a man for whom there is no death, for whom there is no material infinity, no oblivion, a man who, casting away from him that nothingness which oppresses us, to follow purposes which dominate his life, purposes so numerous that he will not be able to attain them all, while we seemed to have none, this man came and, among those waves of stone where each lacelike effervescence seemed to resemble the others, seeing there all the laws of life, all the thoughts of the soul, naming them by their names, he said: "See, it is this, it is that." . . . As if he were not destined to die, he accomplishes his immortal task, unconcerned by the size of the thing that occupies his time; and having but one human life to live, he spends several days in front of one of the ten thousand figures of a church. He made a drawing of it. It corresponded for him to those ideas that exercised his brain, indifferent to approaching old age. He made a drawing of it, he spoke of it. And the harmless and monstrous little figure will have come back to life against all hope, from that death which seems more total than the others, which is disappearance into the gulf of infinite numbers and under the leveling down of resemblances, but from which genius has quickly drawn us up. . . .

. . . . At the call of Ruskin, we see the smallest figure which encircles a minuscule quatrefoil resurrected in its proper form, looking at us with the same look that seems to occupy only one millimeter of stone. No doubt, poor little monster, I would not have been skillful enough, among the millions of stones of the cities, to find you, to make out your face, to recognize your personality, to call you, to bring you back to life. But it is not that Infinity, Number, nothingness which oppress us are so strong; it is that my thought is not very strong.

—from Preface to *The Bible of Amiens*

But there is a more inward dilettantism than dilettantism of action (which he overcame), and the true conflict between his idolatry and his sincerity took place not at certain hours of his life, not in certain pages of his books, but at every moment, in those profound, secret regions almost unknown to us, where our personality receives images from the imagination, ideas from the intelligence, words from the memory, and affirms itself in the incessant choice it makes from them, and in some way, without respite, decides the fate of our spiritual and moral life.

—from Preface to *The Bible of Amiens*

Properly speaking, there is no beauty that is entirely deceitful, for aesthetic pleasure is precisely that which accompanies the discovery of a truth. To what order of truth may correspond the very vivid aesthetic pleasure we experience when reading such a page (from *The Stones of Venice*) is rather difficult to say. This page itself is mysterious, full of images of beauty and religion at the same time, like this same church of St. Mark where all the figures of the Old Testament and of the New Testament appear against the background of a sort of splendid obscurity and shifting brilliance. I remember reading it for the first time right in St. Mark's, during an hour of storm and darkness, when the mosaics shone only with their own material light, and with an internal, terrestrial and ancient gold, to which the Venetian sun, which sets ablaze even the angels of the campaniles, mingled nothing of its own; the emotion I felt, as I was reading this page among those angels illuminated from the surrounding darkness, was very great, and yet was not perhaps very pure. In the same manner as the joy of seeing the beautiful mysterious figures increased, but was altered in some way by the pleasure of erudition that I experienced upon understanding the texts that had appeared in Byzantine letters around their haloed brows, just so the beauty of Ruskin's images was intensified and corrupted by the pride of referring to the sacred text. A sort of selfish return to oneself is unavoidable in those joys in which erudition and art are mixed and in which aesthetic pleasure may become more acute but not remain as pure.

—from Preface to *The Bible of Amiens*

But when I speak of this passion, a little artificial at first and then so deep, that I had for the thought of Ruskin, I

ADDRESS TO THE SMALLER ANIMALS

I walk through the dark a heavy-footed animal
Smaller animals take cover I'm coming
through the dark streams of the sky and through the pines

All animals smaller than me I'm coming
Weasel I'm coming Woodchuck I'm coming
Mole smaller than me Porcupine smaller than me
Fieldmouse smaller than me

Snake slide into your hole
Rustle your cold scales over the rock snake
listen to me
on the rock next to you as you move fast
liquifying and condensing your dark links

Worm do the same thing you are a slitherer also
Spider do the same thing—feel my sound in the tree next to you
screw up your bridges of spit into you spider
Chipmunk someone is coming who is larger than owl
Night-flitting bat someone is on his way
who is greater than owl

As I walk through the wood heavily
Rabbit bounds off a little way
and stops and looks back
Deer bounds off a little way and looks back
arching his neck
Partridge looks back

Curious to see me who am no different from
everyman?

Why these animals all have the loveliest eyes!

while I go stumbling and stumbling through the dark
brothers under the dark stream of the sky
between the black dykes of the pines
the sky condenses and rarefies over my head

Robert Nichols

speak with the help of memory, of a memory that recalls the facts only—"but from the deep past nothing can be recovered." It is only when certain periods of our lives have come to a close forever, when, even during the hours in which power and freedom seem given to us, we are forbidden to reopen certain doors furtively, it is when we are incapable of putting ourselves even for an instant back into our former state, it is only then that we refuse to believe that such things may have been entirely obliterated. We can no longer sing of them, having ignored the wise warning of Goethe, that there is poetry only in those things one still feels. But being unable to rekindle the flames of the past, we want at least to gather its ashes. Lacking a resurrection we can no longer bring about, with the cold memory we have kept of those things—the memory of facts telling us: "you were thus," without permitting us to become thus again, affirming to us the reality of a lost paradise, instead of giving it back to us in recollection—we want at least to describe it and to compose our knowledge of it.

—from Preface to *The Bible of Amiens*

I leave it to people with taste to decorate their homes with the reproduction of masterpieces they admire, and to relieve their memory from the care of preserving for them a precious image by entrusting it to a sculptured wooden frame. I leave it to people with taste to make of their room the very image of their taste, and to fill it only with things which they can approve. As for me, I feel myself living and thinking in a room where everything is the creation and the language of lives profoundly different from mine, of a taste opposite to mine, where I find nothing of my conscious thought, where my imagination is exalted by feeling itself plunged in the depths of the non-ego; I feel happy only when setting foot—on the Avenue de la Gare, on the Port, or on the Place de l'Eglise—in one of those provincial hotels with cold long corridors where the wind from outside contends successfully against the efforts of the heating system, where the detailed geographic map of the district is still the sole ornament of the walls, where each noise helps only to make the silence appear by displacing it, where the rooms keep a musty perfume which the open air comes to wash, but does not eliminate, and which the nostrils inhale a hundred times in order to bring it to the imagination, which is enchanted with it, which has it pose like a model to try to re-create it in her with all that it contains of thoughts and remembrances; where in the evening, when opening the door of one's room, one has the feeling of violating all the life that has remained scattered there, of taking it boldly by the hand when, once the door is closed, one enters farther, up to the table or the window; to sit with it in a kind of free promiscuousness on the sofa designed by the local upholsterer in what he believed to be the style of Paris; to touch everywhere the nakedness of that life with the intention of being troubled by one's own familiarity, by putting here and there one's things, pretending to be the master of that room full to the brim with the soul of others and which keeps even in the shape of its andirons and the pattern of its curtains the imprint of their dream, by walking barefoot on its unknown carpet; one has then the feeling of shutting in with oneself this secret life, when one goes, all trembling, to bolt the door; of pushing it in front of one into the bed and finally lying down with it in the large white sheets which come up over your face, while close by the church rings for the whole town the hours of insomnia of the dying and the lovers.

—from "On Reading," Preface to *Sesame and Lilies*

This appearance with which they charm and deceive us, beyond which

we would like to go, is the very essence of that thing without thickness, so to speak—mirage fixed on a canvas—that a vision is. And that mist which our eager eyes would like to pierce is the last word of the painter's art. The supreme effort of the writer as of the painter succeeds only in partially raising for us the veil of ugliness and insignificance which leaves us indifferent before the universe. Then he tells us: "Look, look. . . . Look at the house in Zealand, pink and shiny as a seashell. Look! Learn how to see!" And then he disappears. Such is the price of reading, and such is also its insufficiency. To make a discipline of it is to give too great a role to what is but an initiation. Reading is at the threshold of spiritual life; it can introduce us to it; it does not constitute it.

There are, however, certain cases, certain pathological cases, so to speak, of spiritual depression in which reading can become a sort of curative discipline and assume the task, through repeated stimulations, of continuously reintroducing a lazy mind into the life of the spirit. Books then play for it a role similar to that of the psychotherapists for certain neurasthenics.

It is known that in certain diseases of the nervous system the patient, without any of his organs being affected, is engulfed in a kind of impossibility of willing, as if he were in a deep rut out of which he cannot pull himself, on his own, and in which he would finally waste away, if a powerful and helping hand were not extended to him. His brain, his legs, his lungs, his stomach are intact. He has no real inability to work, to walk, to expose himself to cold, to eat. But these various actions which he could quite capably perform, he is incapable of willing. And an organic decay, that would end by becoming the equivalent of diseases he does not have, would be the irremediable consequence of the inertia of his will, if the impulse he cannot find in himself did not come to him from outside, from a doctor who wills for him, until the day when little by little his various organic wills have been re-educated. Now, there are certain minds which one could compare to these sick people and which a kind of laziness or frivolity prevents from descending spontaneously into the deep regions of the self where the true life of the mind begins. It is not that once they have been led there they are not able to discover and exploit its true riches, but without this foreign intervention they live on the surface in a perpetual forgetfulness of themselves, in a kind of passivity which makes them the toy of all pleasures,

DOGBABY

Lady buying carrots and two pears:
that is a dogbaby in your carriage.

It's warm.
You've tucked the blanket anyway
around his collar (hers).
Confusion
of identity. I mean
precisely who or what
or where one takes the proper space
among his peers.
There is always some confusion.

Is it a dog?
A baby?

Or having done with categories
are dogs and babies
all the same to you?
Our hearts are much too strict.
And separate.

D. H. Melhem

diminishes them to the size of those who surround and agitate them; and like that nobleman, who sharing since his childhood the life of highway robbers, does not remember his name, having for too long ceased to bear it, they would finally extinguish in themselves all feeling and all remembrance of their spiritual nobility if an impulse from outside did not come to reintroduce them in some way forcefully into the life of the spirit, where they suddenly find again the power to think for themselves and to create.

—from "On Reading," Preface to *Sesame and Lilies*

No doubt friendship, friendship for individuals, is a frivolous thing, and reading is a friendship. But at least it is a sincere friendship, and the fact that it is directed to one who is dead, who is absent, gives it something disinterested, almost moving. It is moreover a friendship unencumbered with all that makes up the ugliness of other kinds. Since all of us, we the living, are but the dead who have not yet assumed our roles, all these compliments, all these greetings in the hall which we call deference, gratitude, devotion, and in which we mingle so many lies, are sterile and tiresome. Furthermore—from first relations of sympathy, admiration, gratitude—the first words we speak, the first letters we write, weave around us the initial threads of a web of habits, of a veritable manner of being from which we can no longer extricate ourselves in ensuing friendships; without reckoning that during that time the excessive words we have spoken re-

main like bills of exchange which we have to pay, or which we will pay still more dearly all our life with the remorse of having let them be refused. In reading, friendship is suddenly brought back to its first purity. With books, no amiability. These friends, if we spend an evening with them, it is truly because we desire them. . . . Nor is there any deference: we laugh at what Molière says only to the exact degree we find him funny; when he bores us we are not afraid to appear bored, and when we decidedly have enough of being with him, we put him back in his place as bluntly as if he had neither genius nor fame.

—from "On Reading," Preface to *Sesame and Lilies*

But there is another cause to which I prefer, in closing, to attribute this predilection of great minds for the works of antiquity. It is because they do not have for us, like contemporary works, only the beauty which the mind that created them knew how to put there. They harbor another beauty still more moving from the fact that their very matter, I mean the language in which they were written, is like a mirror of life. A little of the happiness one experiences while taking a walk in a city like Beaune, which keeps intact its fifteenth century hospital, with its well, its wash-house, its vault of paneled and painted timber, its roof with high gables pierced with skylights crowned with light hammered lead spikes (all those things which a disappearing period seems to have forgotten there, all those things that belonged to it only, since none of the periods which followed saw any similar things appear)—one still experiences a little of that happiness when wandering in the midst of a tragedy by Racine, or a book by Saint-Simon. For they contain all the beautiful outdated forms of language which preserve the memory of usages and ways of feeling that no longer exist, persistent traces of the past which nothing in the present resembles, and of which time alone, passing over them, has still been able to embellish the coloring.

A tragedy by Racine, a book of memoirs by Saint-Simon, resemble beautiful things that are no longer made. The language in which they have been sculpted by great artists with a freedom that makes their sweetness shine and their native force stand out, moves us like the sight of certain marbles no longer used today, which the workers of the past used. No doubt in those old buildings the stone has faithfully kept the thought of the sculptor, but also, thanks to the sculptor, the stone, of a kind unknown today, has been preserved for us, adorned with all the colors he knew how to obtain from it, to make come out, to harmonize. It is indeed the living syntax of the France of the seventeenth century—and in it customs and a manner of thought now vanished—that we like to find in the verses of Racine. It is the very forms of that syntax, laid bare, revered, embellished by his chisel so frank and so delicate, which move us in those turns of phrase familiar to the point of singularity and audacity, and whose abrupt pattern we see, in the sweetest and most touching passages, fading like a swift arrow or coming back again in beautiful broken lines.

—from "On Reading," Preface to *Sesame and Lilies*

Power to the Partial People

THE PARAGON. *By John Knowles. Random House. 210 pp. $5.95.*

PETER ROWLEY
Mr. Rowley has written for the New Statesman, The Economist, The New Republic *and* The New York Times. *His book,* New Gods in America, *will be published in May (McKay).*

John Knowles, though belonging to an older generation, speaks in this novel for the young, or at least for the offspring of middle- and upper-income Americans. Far more effectively and lucidly than Charles Reich in *The Greening of America,* he describes their rebellion and their disillusionment with their parents, the corporate state, the lily-white suburbs, the ecological mess, and the country's military madness. He understands their doubts. He catches their enthusiasm. He sympathizes with their hunger for genuine love and the opportunity for self-expression. Nor is he an academic hippie offering vague protest and a world of inaction held together by a kind of abstract affection. His heroes, both in his latest novel, *The Paragon,* and the earlier *A Separate Peace,* are hopeful activists, eager to contribute to a new society in their own way.

The chief characters of *The Paragon* are Louis Colfax and Gordon Durant. "Lou" is an erratic genius with a passion for oceanography, an inventor of un-