

“On Reading” by Marcel Proust: The Power of Books (Preface to John Ruskin’s “Sesame and Lilies”)



The taste for books seems to grow as intelligence grows
Marcel Proust

Books are not only powerful instruments to disseminate knowledge, but also agents of change. They are sources for joy and personal development as well as inspiration for freedom and democracy, to the extent that they even drive dictators to ban or destroy them. In order to understand better what reading books implies in Marcel Proust’s preface to John Ruskin’s “*Sesame and Lilies*”, I would like to offer first, as a context, some examples of books in the history of libraries and publishing.

The library has been a popular topic in numerous fiction books. For example, in *The Library of Babel* (*La biblioteca de Babel*), the famous short story by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, there exists a geometrical space or labyrinth with walls filled with books, including one with a magic and cabalistic content. On the other hand, in *Auto da Fé*, the novel written by Elias Canetti, a Literature Nobel Prize laureate, the main character has an obsessive and eventually tragic relationship with his enormous library. Among the non-fiction books dealing with the same motif, *The Library at Night* by Alberto Manguel, a renowned historian on books and reading, contains a serious study of famous libraries, from the biblical Babel and Alexandria to modern days, exploring the histories and anecdotes of book collections as well as their collectors, including a detailed description of his own library in France.

There are also many novels whose plots are based on either real or imaginary books. The famous novel *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco begins with the following sentence: “*On August 16, 1968, I was handed a book written by a certain Abbé Vallet, Le Manuscrit de Dom Adson de Melk, traduit en français d’après l’édition de Dom J. Mabillon (Aux Presses de l’Abbaye de la Source, Paris, 1842).*” Here we have a complete reference of a specific book, including the date of publication. The story continues to tell the quest of “*Le Manuscrit*” while disclosing its secret content.

In this genre we can include publications with lists of favorite books by various authors and their recommendations. Over a hundred years ago a Russian publisher asked two thousand scholars, artists, and men of letters to name the books which were important to them. Tolstoy responded with a list with even the remarks of degrees of influence by ranking each title as: “enormous,” “very great,” or merely “great” (check below the link with the list of Tolstoy). There

are also books dealing with the history of the most famous publishing houses like *The House of MacMillan* by British author Charles Morgan or *At Random* by Bennett Cerf, a writer and editor closely linked with Random House. These days some want to portray publishers as “villains”, whereas these kind of books can help us to understand how the industry works and the important role it plays in promoting a culture.

However, the style of *“On Reading”* by Proust is so great and original, totally different from any conventions mentioned above, that I think it can be considered a “chef-d’œuvre”. Proust used it as a preface to his own French translation of the English art critic John Ruskin’s talk *“Sesame and Lilies”* published in the same book with five other of Ruskin’s lectures that Proust also translated and annotated, i.e. *Sesames of King’s Treasures, Makeshift Memory, Ruskin in Venice, Servitude and Freedom and Resurrection*.

Ruskin’s presentation *“Sesame and Lilies”* was delivered in Rusholme Town Hall, Manchester, in December 1864. There, he told the audience: *“..reading is precisely a conversation with men much wiser and more interesting than those we can know in person...reading, unlike conversation, consists for each of us in receiving the communication of another thought while remaining alone,..”*. It was published in 1865 and attracted wide attention at the time. It was considered a classic nineteenth-century controversial statement on the roles of men and women, but the main focus of the talk actually lies in the importance of books and the rewards of reading.

Proust never met Ruskin but Ruskin’s works inspired Proust to write. Proust was also motivated to admire art, including a visit to Venice following the critic’s steps. Proust took the task of making Ruskin’s lectures available in French so seriously that he devoted eight years of apprenticeship to master English and eventually translate Ruskin’s talks into French with his notes as well as an introduction to the lecture *“Sesame and Lilies”*. This translation in its entirety had been out of print since the early twentieth century until very recently.

Proust’s Preface uses the same introspective style as that of his monumental work *A la recherche du temps perdu (Remembrance of Things Past or Things Remembered from the Past)*. In *On Writing* Proust describes with great detail his experience as a young man on holidays in the countryside with his aunt and uncle, probably in Illiers-Combray. It is full of vivid illustrations of the mind such as the objects in his bedroom *“these.. filled the room with a silent and multifarious life, with a mystery in which my own personality found itself at once lost and enchanted”*. He recalls the sounds of the conversations with the cook and other daily events of little importance such as his uncle brewing coffee or his aunt commenting on food, music or manners. I am especially impressed by the way in which he describes his irresistible urge to finish dinner or end outdoor games that he *“was forced to play”* as he could not wait to go back to his room to continue reading.

Proust also talks about the sadness that he feels when a book is finished, giving details of his desire to continue reading: he, like other passionate readers, *“.. wanted the book to keep going, and, if that were not possible, wanted more information about all of its characters, wanted to learn something further about their lives,..”*. In another description of his feeling after reaching the end of a book, Proust notes *“..when the last page had been read, the book was finished. With a deep sigh I had to halt the frantic racing of my eyes and of my voices, which had followed after my eyes without making a sound, stopping only to catch its breath.”*

Proust also dedicates some space to talk about the relationship between authors and their books, describing how *“...the greatest writers, in the hours when they are not in direct communication with their thoughts, enjoy the company of books.”* then even adding *“thinkers have a much greater capacity for productive reading (if one may put it this way) than creative writers”*. Another thing that Proust and Ruskin both strongly suggest is that reading should be an intimate activity practiced in solitude.

Proust reveals his philosophical wisdom distinguishing what historians and scholars seek by consulting books from what a regular reader expects. The former are looking for references to prove a theory or a superficial fact that they consider to be “a truth”, in his own words: *“...this truth that they seek at a distance, in a book, is properly speaking less the truth itself than a sign or a proof, something that therefore makes way for another truth that it suggests or verifies and this latter truth at least is an individual creation of his spirit.”* The latter, especially what Proust considers the “literary man” *“reads for the sake of reading, to store up what he has read.”*

Proust here also shows his perception of issues related to psychological health as he writes about the healing quality that reading offers particularly to ease depression: *“There are ... pathological circumstances one might say, of spiritual depression, in which reading can become a sort of curative discipline...”* then, becoming more explicit, he adds, *“Books then play for the person in these circumstances a role analogous to that played by psychotherapists”*.

In *“On Reading”* Proust lists names of many authors like Tacitus, Horace, Plato, Euripides, Ovid, Dante, Pascal, Montaigne, Diderot, Hugo, Molière, Descartes, Shakespeare and many more. But the only work that he describes with some details is *Captain Fracasse* by Théophile Gautier that he used to read in childhood, which shows the influence the book has on Proust.

We certainly live in a time very different from the early 20th Century when Proust translated Ruskin’s dissertations and wrote the brilliant preface that we have just reviewed. Reading today can be conducted other than through books printed on paper. Technology allows us to bring our entire electronic library in a small device like an iPhone or iPad wherever we go. The supply of books has also become almost unlimited with the advent of “self publishing” which facilitates the publishing of one’s writings. However, the challenge for us today might be how to dedicate time to reading and to getting quality reading material. It is very common today to find some people spend considerable time on emails and all forms of social media which many use obsessively. For those, we imagine, very little time could be left for real book reading.

In spite of the criticism and challenges that publishing houses face today, generally speaking, they are still the main source of quality books, with their professional text editing, type-setting and cover designs. Moreover, for centuries, some conscientious publishers have produced lots of “beautiful books”, therefore, in Proust’s expression, nourishing and promoting the most outstanding authors, including all the Literature Nobel Prize laureates among others. As Proust brilliantly describes one of his experiences finishing reading a book is like ending an intimate conversation with its author and its main characters: *“... is one of the great and wondrous characteristics of beautiful books (and one which enables us to understand the simultaneously essential and limited role that reading can play in our spiritual life): that for the author they may be called Conclusions, but for the reader, Provocations. We can feel that our wisdom begins where the author’s ends”*

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