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That Silent Faubourg St. Germain: Ruskin and the Realms of Reading

Jay Russell Curlin

. . . there is a society continually open to us, of people who will talk to us as long as we like, whatever our rank or occupation;—talk to us in the best words they can choose, and of the things nearest their hearts. And this society, because it is so numerous and so gentle, and can be kept waiting round us all day long,—kings and statesmen lingering patiently, not to grant audience, but to gain it!—in those plainly furnished and narrow anterooms, our bookcase shelves,—we make no account of that company, —perhaps never listen to a word they would say, all day long! (*Sesame and Lilies*)

On December 6, 1864, John Ruskin delivered at Rusholme Town Hall in Manchester a lecture entitled “Of Kings’ Treasuries.” Little more than a week later, he delivered in the same venue “Of Queens’ Gardens,” both of which he would publish the following year under the single title *Sesame and Lilies*. Seven days after his death on January 20, 1900, an obituary article appeared on Ruskin in a Parisian paper, authored by Marcel Proust, who would devote much of the next five years to a close study of Ruskin’s works and, though he knew very little English, to translating two of those works into French, *The Bible of Amiens* (1885) and *Sesame and Lilies*. As a recent biographer has claimed, “This intense involvement with the works of Ruskin, entailing the study of French history, geography, architecture, and the Bible, was to prove crucial to the development of Proust’s own style and aes-

thetics" (Carter 292). Indeed, the central idea of his "Against Sainte-Beuve," an essay that evolved into what we know today as *Remembrance of Things Past* and *In Search of Lost Time*, restates one of the chief claims of Ruskin's "Of Kings' Treasuries," that we should come to a work with no idea whatsoever of either our own preconceptions or anything we might know or assume about the author, that we will acquire the "old enchanted Arabian grain, the Sesame, which opens doors" to the treasuries of great literature only by "putting ourselves always in the author's place, annihilating our own personality, and seeking to enter into his" (30).

It is ironic that, in the years since Proust labored slowly to translate the lectures, any scholarly comment about *Sesame and Lilies*, though described by Derrick Leon as "the most widely read of all Ruskin's works," one that found, in Victorian England, "a place in nearly every home and schoolroom" (374-75), has been not only extremely cursory but focused almost entirely upon its author rather than on anything that author has to say about either reading or literature. Aside from W. G. Collingwood's brief synopsis of the lectures in his biography of 1893, all references to the work touch almost exclusively on its historical and biographical context. We learn, for example, how the work reflects Ruskin's deepening "rage at the barbarities" of society (Rosenberg 155) or see the thing primarily in the light of his confession to Mary Gladstone that he had written it "to please one girl," Rose La Touche (Hilton 231); but we hear nothing about a central theme of the first lecture: the need to discard all such considerations when approaching the work itself. Though Ruskin demonstrates in the lecture how one should read by examining a short section of Milton's *Lycidas*, and manages to clarify it considerably without a single reference to anything he might have known of Milton's private life, modern scholarship would suggest that *Sesame and Lilies* is noteworthy chiefly for what it reflects of Ruskin's personal circumstances in 1864.

For an age that has embraced at various times, and in

varied forms, Louise Rosenblatt's description of literature as a "transactional experience" combining both text *and* reader, Ruskin's claims of what reading involves and requires may be hardly inviting, but Ruskin assumed it would be no more popular in the England of his own day, a nation focused so entirely on the acquisition of wealth that it had lost all ability to read. To a "well-intentioned audience gathered to found a library" in Manchester, Ruskin delivered what John Rosenberg rightly called "an indictment of their illiteracy and cruelty" (155):

No reading is possible for a people with its mind in this state. No sentence of any great writer is intelligible to them. It is simply and sternly impossible for the English public, at this moment, to understand any thoughtful writing,—so incapable of thought has it become in its insanity of avarice.
(37)

Far from simply celebrating, for the patrons of a new library, the joys of reading, "Of Kings' Treasuries" is a description of what real treasure is, what kings really are, for a society intent on "advancing in life" in all the wrong directions.

Ruskin's lecture was at least partially inspired by the letters he had received, over the years, from anxious parents concerned about the education of their children, how they might best educate their darlings to guarantee for them a good "position" and continued "advancement in life" (9). What Ruskin knew this really meant was that the well-meaning parents saw education entirely as that "which shall keep a good coat on my son's back" (9), that "advancement in life" for them meant "becoming conspicuous in life," not merely making



money but “being known to have made it; not the accomplishment of any great aim, but the being seen to have accomplished it,” that what they really desired, for both themselves and their children, was “the gratification of our thirst for applause” (10). As Collingwood noted, Ruskin’s time teaching at the Working Men’s College “had not been given that the men might *get on*,—that one should scramble on the shoulders of others and make them carry him, and envy him, and applaud him” (40). As long as such is one’s focus, Ruskin argues, real education is impossible and one is advancing only “in Death” (9).

So a primary aim of the lecture is to describe for us a different type of advancement that enables us to associate with the only type of aristocracy that has any value, what Ruskin describes as that “silent Faubourg St. Germain” of the great authors of the past, at whose gates “there is but brief question, Do you deserve to enter? Pass. Do you ask to be the companion of nobles? Make yourself noble, and you shall be. Do you long for the conversation of the wise? Learn to understand it, and you shall hear it. But on other terms?—no. If you will not rise to us, we cannot stoop to you” (17). To rise to that level, Ruskin tells us that we must begin by loving that company and showing our love, to begin with, “by a true desire to be taught by them, and to enter into their thoughts,” to “be sure that you go to the author to get at *his* meaning, not find yours” (18). A generation before, Shelley had described this very aspect of reading as one of the great benefits of literature, its power to awaken and enlarge the mind by taking us “out of our own nature, and identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own” (550).¹

To demonstrate how a reader can “put himself in the place of another,” Ruskin offers the example of the passage in *Lycidas*

in which Milton, through the persona of St. Peter, condemns the corruption of the clergy, still familiar enough to a British audience of 1864 for Ruskin to preface his analysis with the claim “No English words are more familiar to us, yet few perhaps have been read with less sincerity” (24). Readers approaching the passage with thoughts of a Protestant Milton and his attitude toward the Papacy might be greatly bewildered to find Peter described as having “mitred locks,” and they might throw up their hands in hopeless confusion at the seeming “broken metaphor” of the “blind mouths” of those shepherds who have neglected their flocks. But those reading closely, word by word, assuming that “Milton means what he says; and means it with his might too” (25), realize that, while Milton most certainly does condemn *false* bishops, he has no problem whatsoever with true ones like St. Peter, whom he regards as “the type and head of true episcopal power” (25), symbolized in the passage by the two “massy keys” that he holds and the miter on his head. As for the “blind mouths” of those who have usurped that authority, Ruskin points us to our dictionaries, where we find that *bishop* combines the Greek words for *overseer* and *watcher*, or, in Ruskin’s words, a “person that sees,” while a pastor is a “person that feeds”:

The most unbishoply character a man can have is therefore to be Blind.

The most unpastoral is, instead of feeding, to want to be fed,—to be a Mouth. (27)

Those long familiar with *Lycidas* and with the particularly memorable passage of Peter’s indictment of the “corrupted Clergy” can easily be excused if such a reading casts the passage in a new light, especially if their own interpretations have come



after viewing the lines through a variety of lenses. To any who might protest, “But that’s not our idea of a bishop,” Ruskin replies, “Perhaps not; but it was St. Paul’s; and it was Milton’s. They may be right, or we may be; but we must not think we are reading either one or the other by putting our meaning into their words” (28). Ruskin’s point is simply that any meaning we find in *Lycidas* needs to come as close as possible to Milton’s, by “putting ourselves always in the author’s place, annihilating our own personality, and seeking to enter into his, so as to be able assuredly to say, ‘Thus Milton thought,’ not ‘Thus *I* thought, in mis-reading Milton” (30). Readers who make this type of reading habitual achieve Shelley’s end of awakening and enlarging the mind by seeing with the eyes of others, but Ruskin notes that they will also come gradually to place less and less emphasis on personal “opinion,” on what *they* happen to think, and become increasingly more interested in the thoughts of others. Indeed, Ruskin claims that, unless one is “a very singular person,” one has “no legitimate right to an ‘opinion’ on any business, except that instantly under [one’s] hand”:

that the best you can do, even though you may be a well-educated person, is to be silent, and strive to be wiser every day, and to understand a little more of the thoughts of others, which so soon as you try to do honestly, you will discover that the thoughts even of the wisest are very little more than pertinent questions. (31)

We have all been reared with repeated assurances that the individual is hugely important, that *every* soul is a “singular person,” and that “everyone has a right to an opinion”; so it is hardly surprising that *Sesame and Lilies* “occasioned, on its first appearance, a good deal of envenomed criticism” (Leon 374), especially with Ruskin suggesting that the hearts of his audience were no better than their heads. It is not enough, he tells us, to enter into the thoughts of great writers; readers “have yet this

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higher advance to make;—you have to enter into their Hearts” (33): “We come . . . to the great concourse of the Dead, not merely to know from them what is True, but chiefly to feel with them what is just. Now, to feel with them, we must be like them; and none of us can become that without pains” (34). Ruskin thought this particularly so with the England of 1864, in which he saw all around him evidence of a people that had lost all capacity either to think or to feel, having come to despise everything in a civilization that might help them to do so.

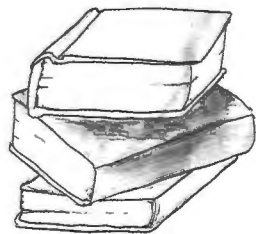
Far from reading correctly, their priorities suggested that they actually “despised literature”: “How much do you think we spend altogether on our libraries, public or private, as compared with what we spend on our horses?” (38). Though delighted to profit by any technological advances produced by science, nothing of the national expenditures would indicate that they attached any real value to science in itself. As for Nature, England seemed bent on making “race-courses of the cathedrals of the earth”:

“there is not a quiet valley in England that you have not filled with bellowing fire; there is no particle left of English land which you have not trampled coal ashes into” (42-43). And compassion was most certainly despised in a land filled with poverty and starvation, where Ruskin could happen upon a random newspaper account of a family slowly starving over years and an inquest on the



death of the father in which the jury wondered only why the family had not gone to the workhouse, before reaching the simple verdict “That deceased died from exhaustion, from want of food and the common necessaries of life; also through want of medical aid” (46).

For Ruskin, such a land seemed hardly ready to discuss the importance of reading, since the state of the country suggested that the great majority of its people were, in all essential respects, illiterate, uneducated “in the most ordinary habits of thought” (51). As long as such was the case, any libraries they might build would remain like graveyards in which children come to play, stacking books upon tombstones only to throw rocks at them, “little thinking those leaves which the wind scatters had been piled, not only upon a gravestone, but upon the seal of an enchanted vault—nay, the gate of a great city of sleeping kings, who would awake for us, and walk with us, if we knew but how to call them by their names” (51). This is the great invitation and the daunting challenge of the lecture, the assurance that we can enter that enchanted vault, that great city, and spend our days among kings and queens, but only if we become noble ourselves, seeing through their eyes, entering into their minds and hearts, and becoming, as a consequence, like them.



Many would surely think this far too great a challenge for treasures not especially appealing, but Ruskin reminds us of the alternative, the consequences of avoiding the challenge. All that he has described of Victorian England, all of the “national faults and miseries” are one result, a state of affairs that can grow only worse if its populace remains illiterate children. But Ruskin paints an even darker portrait of the single individual who has chosen to “advance in life” by some other means, one more in keeping with the Faubourg St. Germain of *this* world. For Ruskin, real advancement can be in only one direction, and anyone not truly advancing in life is becoming a corpse while his heart is still beating. The analogy he offers is a grisly one, but one especially convicting, an old Scythian funeral custom in which, when the head of a house died, his corpse would be richly dressed, paraded

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around in his chariot, and taken from one home to another to sit at the head of the table while his neighbors feasted around him.

Ruskin asks us if we would enjoy such a custom ourselves, if we would take such an offer if the Angel of Death were to make it in these terms:

You shall die slowly; your blood shall daily grow cold, your flesh petrify, your heart beat at last only as a rusted group of iron valves. Your life shall fade from you, and sink through the earth into the ice of Caina; but, day by day, your body shall be dressed more gaily, and set in higher chariots, and have more orders on its breast—crowns on its head, if you will. Men shall bow before it, stare and shout round it, crowd after it up and down the streets; build palaces for it, feast with it at their tables' heads all the night long; your soul shall stay enough within it to know what they do, and feel the weight of the golden dress on its shoulders, and the furrow of the crown-edge on the skull;—no more. Would you take the offer, verbally made by the death-angel? Would the meanest among us take it, think you? Yet practically and verily we grasp at it, every one of us, in a measure; many of us grasp at it in its fullness of horror. Every man accepts it, who desires to advance in life without knowing what life is; who means only that he is to get more horses, and more footmen, and more fortune, and more public honor, and—*not* more personal soul. He only is advancing in life, whose heart is getting softer, whose blood warmer, whose brain quicker, whose spirit is entering into Living peace. And the men who have this life in them are the true lords or kings of the earth—they, and they only. (53)

In short, the *silent* Faubourg St. Germain, those enchanted realms

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where readers rub elbows with the mighty dead, is the very place, paradoxically, where our presence shows that we are learning to live.

Note

¹ Almost a century after Ruskin's lecture, C. S. Lewis developed this theme in his little-known but wonderful *Experiment in Criticism*, in which he argues that any reading must begin with the reader's "total surrender" to the text, reading initially with no intention other than to see through the eyes of another: "My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many, is not enough. I will see what others have invented. Even the eyes of all humanity are not enough. I regret that the brutes cannot write books. Very gladly would I learn what face things present to a mouse or a bee; more gladly still would I perceive the olfactory world charged with all the information and emotion it carries for a dog" (140).

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