

Literature and the Beauty of the World

Jean Starobinski

When the world reveals a part of its beauty, what should our reaction be? How can we respond adequately? Is not our initial reaction one of a "discrepancy between our impressions and their habitual expression?" It is this question that Proust poses in one of the crucial passages early on in his masterpiece. Describing his walks along Méséglise's Way, and "the humble discoveries" he made there, the narrator details for us the overwhelming, decisive impression made on him by a shaft of sunlight:

After an hour of rain and wind, against which I had struggled cheerfully, as I came to the edge of the Montjouvain pond, beside a little hut with a tiled roof in which M. Vinteuil's gardener kept his tools, the sun had just reappeared, and its golden rays, washed clean by the shower, glittered anew in the sky, on the trees, on the wall of the hut and the still wet tiles of the roof, on the ridge of which a hen was strutting. The wind tugged at the wild grass growing from cracks in the wall and at the hen's downy feathers, which floated out horizontally to their full extent with the unre-sisting submissiveness of light and lifeless things. The tiled roof cast upon the pond, translucent again in the sunlight, a dappled pink reflection which I had never observed before. And, seeing upon the water, and on the surface of the wall, a pallid smile responding to the smiling sky, I cried out aloud in my enthusiasm, brandishing my furled umbrella: "Gosh, gosh, gosh, gosh!" But at the same time I felt that I was in duty bound not to content myself with these unilluminating words, but to endeavor to see more clearly into the sources of my rapture.¹

Stunned by the sight, the pedestrian can do little more than gesticulate awkwardly and offer a series of frustrated exclamations. Proust does not show the same indulgence toward his adolescent protagonist (who is none other than Proust himself) as does Rousseau toward the old woman in his *Confessions*, who "in prayer could say nothing more than 'O'."² The young man feels that he has committed a grave mistake by expressing sensual experience so laconically. He should have offered an *articulate* response. He experiences an

ethical imperative (the feeling of a “duty,” of an imperative for knowledge and truth, “to see more clearly”), which remains unrealized. The dance with the umbrella is nothing more than a release of energy. He believes that he should have responded to the external light with “less opaque words,” that is to say, with verbal light, which would have resulted in self-revelation and a labor of clarification.³

Yet, on this page of the book, which in narrative time is written many years after the event, the narrator is able to recapture all his former feelings; thanks to the magic wand of “involuntary memory,” he can recall his simultaneous enthusiasm and aphasia. But now he knows how to express what moved him. He perfectly *describes* the place, its light, the time of day. After having apparently lost a part of his life, he is now able to recapture not only the days and seasons of the past but also a far distant evening when the wind ruffled the feathers of a hen and tugged at the blades of wild grass. By describing this lost experience so well, he is able to recover it. However, this ability has been achieved only through a long process of apprenticeship, a series of initiations in which error, love, jealousy, grief, injury, and disappointment all played a part. Having at last discovered his real purpose in life, Proust took up the calling – a writer’s – that inexorably asserted itself. The reader is led to believe that this ability was granted to him as a form of payment for the trials he underwent, as compensation for his tenacious sufferings. In his current exercise of this power, the narrator can simultaneously express the beauty of a moment in the past, and the feeling of inadequacy and ineptitude that he experienced, back then, in the face of a beauty that left him speechless. Now that this distant impression has been relived, and that the writer has been able to overcome the old discrepancy between impression and expression, he can also experience the pleasure of ironic reflection upon that experience: he can enjoy the feeling of superiority that the awkward smile of a former life now affords him. What was impossible has become possible.

But how did it become possible? And first of all, how did the perception of beauty itself become possible? The pages of which we are speaking impart a philosophical lesson of fundamental importance. In what follows I shall attempt to outline this lesson by following the series of steps that embody the revelation of beauty.

Is the sole purpose of the page in question to measure the distance separating the experience of an emotion and its description in

the transparency of words? To this we can answer: the feeling of a duty to carry out a responsibility is itself not the same as doing it. There must in addition be something else, a supplementary grace or gift. How does it arise? The page in question does not yet give an explanation for the power of speech – we will learn how this power arises only later. We will see that the ability to describe an emotion is tied to what was originally the confession of an inability to express oneself and of the inadequacy of those initial “opaque words.” Making use, after the fact, of all the resources of vocabulary and syntax that the language possesses, the writer is able to reconstruct, with a single stroke, the beauty of a vespertine moment; a moment suspended between rain and sun, light and its reflection. He also recalls the interjection – repeated four times – that was the only verbal response at the time. The *representation* of the scene was desired at the moment it occurred, but this desire remained unrealized; all that was externalized was the disappointment, and the page we read is its delayed representation.

Now a new question must be asked. Does the perception of beauty arise naturally and on its own? And what leads up to it? What is the source of the feeling of duty to depict the experience faithfully?

In order for the eye to be thunderstruck by the sight of a landscape, this eye must, in some more or less conscious way, be prepared to have this reaction. The walk that Proust describes for us is an evening walk, which was preceded by a day of reading.⁴ The works of novelists, painters, and art critics have prepared the way for the enjoyment of the effects of the representation of the exterior world and thus, in a certain sense, for the enjoyment of the exterior world itself. Marcel, a reader of Bergotte, notes that he particularly admired this fictive author’s descriptions of landscapes. Having read Fromentin, Proust knows the powerful impression that Ruisdael’s depiction of sunlight produced on the author of *Maîtres d’autrefois*. Moreover, he could well have admired the way in which Fromentin himself described the sun – a description that was inspired by Ruisdael’s famous painting *The Mill at Wijk, near Duurstede*. Perhaps some of the terms of this literary treatment of a pictorial representation lingered in Proust’s memory. (Fromentin speaks of “a ray of sun that *like a smile* illuminates the cloud’s disk.”) As a reader and translator of Ruskin, Proust learned to appreciate those moments of exquisite sensation that great painters have been able to capture; and – as he had studied the canvases of the Dutch masters, of Constable, Turner, Millet and Monet – his own awak-

ened sensibility may have perceived (or imagined) the exceptional quality of the sun's sudden light after rainfall, somewhere in the countryside. In addition, it is probable that Proust himself – as well as the authors that he read – was sensitive to the aesthetic of Japanese haiku poetry: how not to see elements of it in the simultaneous presence of wind, a ray of sun, a hen on the roof, a reflection on the pond? (It couldn't have been done better in a pastiche.) In brief, the perception of the enchanting spectacle offered by the light of dusk on a forest path by the banks of a pond may have been made possible by a formative experience communicated through books and paintings. And this experience may have simultaneously awakened in the author the feeling of an imperative to take note and to preserve the trace of this sensual joy. Any aesthetic emotion awakened by nature is part of a nexus of accumulated lessons, part of an entire cultural atmosphere and network of historical choices that have given to beauty and to its contemplation their particular status. Oscar Wilde implied as much in an essay that rapidly became famous. There is a circular relationship between the idea of beauty produced and defined in the art and literature of the past, and the contemporary perception of beauty in the external world. Out of this relationship grows a feeling of competition, which necessitates the creation of a new work, be it artistic or literary, in response to this perception of beauty.

This circularity, however, does not imply a pure and simple repetition. Examples and norms change more or less rapidly. From age to age there is a modification in the way the “naturally given” is seen. And as has been pointed out by historians, a new relationship between human culture and nature had to exist before the beauty of the natural landscape could become an object of contemplation. In the Western world – whatever the fundamental causes – a particular intellectual climate had to be established before the individual could feel the desire to travel the world solely in order to revel in its beauty. Prior to that, travel was motivated by the necessity of acquiring new lands, hunting game, seeking out water and markets or, to speak of travel of a different order, visiting sites marked by the presence of a sacred object – spring, stone, statue or reliquary. Did pilgrims stop to linger over a panoramic view on the way to a holy site?

*

The quest for the beautiful through the contemplation of landscape is again called into question later in the novel, by the emergence of

new circumstances that create a new direction for thought. As we pursue our reading of Proust, a new lesson emerges: beauty can not be possessed. The desire to possess beauty, to cease contemplating it from a distance, is the most certain means of losing it. During other walks along this same Méséglise "Way," the young man dreamed of seeing a "young peasant girl" – the personification of the landscape and the incarnation of its beauty – come to meet him. This wish is chimerical. And it is false, because carnal. Desire tries to substitute an embrace of the beautiful for the diffuse beauty of the real world. However, there can be no response to the call of this miraculous incarnation: its image cannot take the form of a living person. This unattainable desire doubles back on itself and becomes autoerotic pleasure, seeking a way out within the body itself. But without the imaginary being, the meaning of the landscape is lost and so, consequently, is its aesthetic dimension. The countryside and woods are now but a hollow scene. This is because beauty seems to disappear once it is perceived as attainable. There can be no *intimate* relationship to beauty.⁵

This is not, however, the end of the experience: one must read further. After the moment of inexpressible beauty, and after the disappointment caused by the inability to possess it, the tone of Proust's narrative turns dark. Those who have the capacity to perceive the world's beauty, we learn, are also those who experience the full anguish of its sufferings. Suffering and evil exist, and this suffering and evil can eclipse aesthetic pleasure. At nightfall, several years later, not long after the death of the composer Vinteuil, the narrator finds himself in the same area where he had been overwhelmed by the vision of sunlight; this time, however, he is the secret witness, through an open window, to a "sadistic scene" played out between Vinteuil's daughter and her female lover. Thus the emphasis has shifted from the aesthetic pleasure caused by a rural landscape to an ethical inquiry suggested by what may be a vision of evil. There is nothing accidental about this shift. It is perfectly in line with the development of the novelist's thought as expressed in an episode composed much later – although symmetrical with the earlier description – in which he explores the theme of his calling as a writer: "Trees, . . . you can no longer have anything to say to me. My heart has grown cold and no longer hears you. I am in the midst of nature. Well, it is with indifference, it is with boredom that my eyes register the line that separates the luminous from the shadowy side of your trunks. . . . Perhaps in the new, in the

so desiccated part of my life which is about to begin, human beings may yet inspire in me what nature can no longer say."⁶ This reflection is preceded by the statement that literature is "vanity" and "a lie." No longer will his interest be centered on natural beauty and its description; thanks to the acute revelations of memory, he will turn toward *human truth*, which until now he had misunderstood. The book to be written must be conceived differently from those (such as those written by Bergotte) in which descriptive beauty is the sole end. Marcel's book is to be charged with a meta-aesthetic purpose that will give new legitimacy to the "work of art." Literature, through its condemnation, discovers the possibility of its rebirth. What counts now is the truth of sensation through which an analogy with the depth of time can be established. For mortal beings, this is the truth that brings them closest to immortality. And here too is the source of the irony in the description of the adolescent's reaction to the sight of sunlight and the pink reflection in the pond: such a sight can only be a first step to art, and is indeed almost a trap. More perilous knowledge is called for, a more daring investigation of the question of evil. The future author of *The Remembrance of Things Past* has realized that he has nothing more to learn from a literature whose sole concern is to "sing" the beauties of nature. And the writer's gift seems to have been accorded to him only at the price of his renouncing the quest to become an "artist."

*

Proust challenges the primacy of beauty in the name of truth, which for him is an absolute. His novel, so imbued with aestheticism, so attentive to sensation and the world of the senses, is in fact imbued with an anti-aesthetic undercurrent. It bears witness to the contentious history that, in the West, has for centuries surrounded the question of the status of beauty.

In its original form, the "religious" sacred had, in all probability, no regularized relationship to beauty. It was only at a later stage that the sacred vested itself with the additional prestige of beauty. Then beauty emancipated itself. And it claimed to have inherited the mantle of the sacred: it assumed (or usurped) its sovereign authority. Still later, beauty became a completely autonomous value in our civilization: objects of worship were integrated into museum collections, and holy books were included in literary canons. Yet the challenge to the reign of the beautiful – in the face of the attempt to secure for it a transcendental foundation – was more vigorous than

the challenge to the reign of the sacred. This is because the presence of evil in the world, which was used as evidence against God, was even more effective in rejecting the claims of the beauty of the world and of the "saintliness" of art.

A tremendous change occurred in the period between Ronsard and Shakespeare. The cosmology of late antiquity, with its closed and hierarchical model of the world, which was inherited by the Renaissance, was compatible with religious faith. Poetry did not hesitate to make this model the source of its material. Ronsard, in his *Hymn to the Heavens* (*Hymne du ciel*) (1555), brilliantly captures the tone of a religious service; and by the image of the world that he conjures, he ably transmits the teachings of theology and natural philosophy, endowing them with the solemnity of a high literary style. But this purely poetic act is not a liturgical act; it is a literary feat. The God of the Christian religion is but one demiurge among others, as are pagan and mythological motifs. In their rigorism, the Protestants of the Counter-Reformation were offended at this companionship in which a religious rite was used as a pretext for aesthetic pleasure, to the benefit of the latter. A double and fabulous simulacrum! The lyric discourse unfolds in a succession of majestic poetic lines:

O sky, round and vaulted, sublime house of God
You who made a place in your heart for all things
[. . .]
O sky, vast runner, you complete your grand circle
On feet that never tire, in the course of a single day!
[. . .]
The spirit of the Eternal, inspiring your course
Expands inside you, like living water
It enlivens and moves you from all sides
Making you turn roundly. O sphere
Most perfect, because in the circular form
Lies perfection, where everything abounds.

Ronsard, as a good Hellenist, could not fail to note the aesthetic implication of the word "cosmos" in Greek. And the Greeks were correct, he implies, in giving the universe such "a beautiful name":

Whosoever inspects you will only find
An ornament, a jewel of pure beauty
A flawless compass, an exact measure
In brief: a perfect circle, whose immense grandeur
And height, width, breadth and depth

Make a beautiful edifice, showing us
How full of invention is the spirit of God.

God is thus a builder, an artistic monarch. And his immense palace is also a perfect musical instrument. His architecture is sonorous: the intervals between the spheres form a vast diapason. The poet-singer sees himself as the disciple of the musician's world:

Even conducting such a large company
You create a sweet and pleasing harmony
Our lutes are nothing compared with the least
Sounds that echo in concert on high.

But this ideal of harmony was fragile. Shakespeare's characters, we know, lived in a world in which this harmony threatened to break down; their vision of the world included the possibility of evil committed by men, and of a monstrous rebellion whose violence could cause the rotation of the celestial spheres to be disturbed, plunging the world into chaos and confusion. The beautiful planetary instrument could go out of tune just as the hierarchical order of earthly societies could be shaken (*Troilus and Cressida*, I, 3). The monstrosity of human crimes could taint the entire universe. Thus Hamlet, his consciousness troubled by the revelations of the ghost, sees the face of the world change and the cosmic palace collapse:

and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire – why, it appeareth no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is a man! [. . .] the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! and yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?

"To me"! Here the individual's point of view, subjectivity, is taken into account. Here too we are presented with a contrast between evil and the beauty of the world. As a generalization, one might venture to say that over the centuries, as the individual has taken more and more liberty in choosing his own personal perspective on the world, there has been both a corresponding increase in the demand for expressiveness in art and, as a counterweight, – at least among the great artists – the presence of an explicit or implicit reflection on evil, and on the limits of art. In the eighteenth century, the beauty of the world was often invoked in order to back up physico-theological arguments for the existence of God – a proof that was the more welcome because it was needed to replace dog-

matic proofs whose persuasiveness was no longer felt. If the beauty of majestic landscapes was not in itself convincing enough, the theory of the sublime strove, at a higher level, to establish a relationship between the individual and the world: the fury of the elements and the great cataclysms of the physical world (the violent side of beauty) could, even as they manifested the menace of destruction, be an occasion for the soul to reaffirm itself in its immaterial superiority. This idea, however, was soon reduced to a commonplace notion that was an object of derision and iconoclastic rejection. On this score one need only re-read, in *Le Voyage au Mont Blanc* or the *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*,⁸ the disillusioned pages of Chateaubriand. The most grave attack on beauty is when its celebration is proclaimed from the mouth of stupidity, itself a form of evil. Flaubert thus has the public notary, in conversation with Emma Bovary, express these banal thoughts: "A cousin of mine toured Switzerland last year, and he says you just can't imagine the poetry of its lakes, the charm of its waterfalls, the vast spectacle of its glaciers. . . . These sights must inspire you, move you to ecstasy."⁹

*

The special counterpoint between evil and beauty can be better understood through a comparison of two exemplary texts of the nineteenth century. As far as I know, the two texts are not connected in any direct way, which makes their similarity even more striking.

The first comes from the second part of Goethe's *Faust*. These famous lines are spoken by the watchman Lynceus from a high tower in the dark of night. He begins with a joyous song in praise of seeing and of finding beauty everywhere:

Sight is my birthright
assigned to this tower
to watch is my task
and the world is my joy.
I gaze into the distance
or look at what's near –
the moon and the stars,
the forest with deer.
In what I behold
there always is beauty;
content with it all,
I'm content with myself.
Oh fortunate eyes!

whatever you've seen
whatever the outcome
you have known beauty!

(Pause.)

I have not been stationed here
simply for my private pleasure –
what's this threat of monstrous horror
from the dark world down below!
Through the lindens' twofold night
I see flashing sparks explode;
incandescence, fanned by breezes,
swirls in ever greater rage.
Woe! the fire's in the cottage . . .¹⁰

In the course of a few moments, contemplative pleasure has given way to horror. The scene of beauty in which Lynceus was reveling only moments before is suddenly contrasted with a scene of destruction. The cottage that is burning is that of Philemon and Baucis. Faust had wanted to evict this old, happy couple in order to construct a belvedere so that he could contemplate his latest conquest, a country across the sea: "A vast space will soon be cleared that will grant me a boundless view." But Mephistopheles and his mighty men have carried out Faust's desire more brutally than he had expected. The old man and woman have perished in the fire. Their outdated, idyllic world gives way to an ambiguous one in which violence is done to nature and to people. Faust's view is not the same as the watchman's; Faust sees the landscape from the point of view of a man of action. His yearning is not for the natural horizon but for a view of the transformations wrought upon nature by the collective labor of humans. Soon, however, *Worry – Die Sorge* – appears on the scene and, by the end of their dialogue, Faust's labors have been taken from him: he has been blinded. Yet even as he dies he continues to pursue his aims, taking the noise of the spades that are digging his grave as a sign of success.¹¹

The same opposition between serene contemplation and horror – and bearing the same symbolism – reappears in one of Baudelaire's prose poems. This opposition in fact constitutes the structure of the poem itself. In the short narrative "The Cake," Baudelaire begins by describing a mountain climb. In terms that are reminiscent of a famous page of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (which itself harkens back to a famous page of Petrarch),¹² the narrator describes a sublime locale: having climbed above the clouds, he feels drunk with "the lightness of the atmosphere." He feels far from "vulgar passions, such as

hatred and profane love." Will his spirit now turn in the direction of sacred love? Like Rousseau's hero, he feels a sensation of inner purification. He also, however, discerns a certain darkness in the landscape. This darkness prompts anguish and the feeling of fear that marks the border of beauty. (August von Platen and, later, Rilke expressed the same feeling.)¹³ Yet the grandeur of the locale is so overwhelming that he gives in to the feeling of universal peace. But is it truly peace? The narrator's voice becomes ironic here, hinting at an illusion. The wanderer had believed that the beauty of the world assured the goodness of humanity. He had given in to the happy idea that nature and moral good were partners. The narrator, whose experience goes beyond this initial stage of contemplation, knows better now: in a few lines he denounces the error of aestheticism that, when exalted by the sight of nature, falsely concludes evil does not exist on the earth:

my soul seemed as vast and as pure as the sky's cupola in which I was enveloped. . . . On the little motionless lake, so immensely deep it seemed black, there sometimes passed the shadow of a cloud, like the reflection of the cloak of a winged giant flying through the skies. And I remember that the solemn and rare sensation which is caused by swift and utterly silent movement filled me with a joy mingled with fear. In a word, I felt, thanks to the inspiring beauty which surrounded me, perfectly at peace with myself and with the universe. I even believe that, in my perfect bliss and my complete oblivion of all earthly ills, I had reached the point of no longer finding so ridiculous those newspapers claiming that man is born good.

This ecstatic description, marked by a suspicious insistence on the vocabulary of perfection, ends with a choleric jab at the Rousseauism of the journalists. "Earthly ills" cannot be put out of mind for long. The voyager, having reached the summit (which bears some resemblance to the guard tower of Lynceus), takes time to rest and to cut himself a piece of bread to relieve his hunger. Suddenly, in front of him, stands "a little ragged creature, black and tousled; his hollow eyes, wild and seemingly supplicating, devoured the piece of bread. And I heard him sigh, in a low rough voice, the word, 'cake.'" The voyager generously offers a slice of this bread to the hungry little child. Another child appears, looking "exactly like the first." A fight breaks out between the two unfortunate creatures. It is a horrible battle, "a hideous struggle," which results in the bread being scattered into crumbs "as small as the grains of sand with which it mingled." Because of the violence of

the struggle, nothing remains to be eaten. Evil therefore exists. Man is a hateful and violent creature; the world and society, which leave little creatures to die, is unjust; these little creatures, like beasts of prey, can count only on their "claws" in order to survive. The poem ends on this sad note:

This spectacle had cast a pall over the countryside as far as I was concerned, and the calm joy in which my soul had taken such delight before I caught sight of these small men had totally vanished; for long it grieved me, and I would constantly repeat to myself: "So there is then a superb country where bread is called *cake* and is so rare a delicacy that it is enough to cause a war which is completely fratricidal!"¹⁴

The world's limpid beauty has therefore served as a foil to the somber intrusion of unhappiness and violence. Beauty itself is tarnished by the appearance of evil. The sadness of Baudelaire's narrator, like Worry for Faust, has obliterated aesthetic enjoyment by its melancholy. For Baudelaire, it is the sight of evil and the torments of ethical conscience that discredit and burden contemplative pleasure with guilt: this contemplation was based on the belief that the world of the senses was a reconciled world and that the self was within its rights to identify itself with this reconciliation; in fact, though, this contemplation remained narrowly circumscribed since it disregarded the presence of evil and suffering that in fact lay close by. To cross a landscape with eyes open only to its beauty, to cross it with the heart sensitive only to its harmonies, requires one never to have known misery and never to have experienced violence.

*

Between the writing of *Jean Santeuil* and the writing of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust translated Ruskin (the same Ruskin whose thought has been analyzed by R. de la Sixeranne in a book entitled *Religion de la beauté*). It may seem strange that Proust, in the pages that we have analyzed, emerges as an author who abandoned the religion of beauty, himself unwilling to be satisfied by the kind of aestheticism that so many of his characters live by. Yet the text is clear on this score, even if our analysis must be delicately shaded. For the anti-aestheticism of the beginning of this century does not speak with a single voice: for instance, we should not too closely associate Proust's anti-aestheticism (paradoxically oriented toward perception and the reliving of perception) with Tolstoy's. While denouncing the inadequacies of art, Proust, like Baudelaire, never lost his love of images. However, neither of them believed that the

figures cast by the magic lantern of art were in themselves sufficient. It would indeed be tempting to define one of the traits of their *modernity* as an ethical imperative and desire for truth that prevailed over all others. The source of the novelty of their art was not merely the desire to innovate and to create a new kind of beauty: rather, it was the will to pursue a goal different from the one afforded by submission to the exclusive authority of the beautiful. In so doing, they ran a great risk. In our time, what does it mean to take leave of modernity? There is no clear answer to this question. Perhaps it is the unwillingness to take the risk we have just defined. If we fail to take it, however, I believe a lot will be lost.

Translated from the French by Thomas Epstein

Notes

1. Proust, Marcel, *Remembrance of Things Past*, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, New York, 1981, p. 169.

2. *Confessions*, Book XII, Paris, Pléiade, Gallimard, 1959, p. 642.

3. "The walls of houses, the Tansonville hedge, the trees of Roussainville wood, the bushes adjoining Montjouvain, all must bear the blows of my walking-stick or umbrella, must hear my shouts of happiness, these being no more than expressions of the confused ideas which exhilarated me, and which had not achieved the repose of enlightenment, preferring the pleasures of a lazy drift towards an immediate outlet rather than submit to a slow and difficult course of elucidation" (*op. cit.*, p. 169). By opposing an "immediate outlet" to the painstaking work of "elucidation," Proust makes use of a vocabulary that was common among the psychologists of the generation that preceded him. Freud, who for the most part uses the same metaphors as his contemporaries, insists on a distinction between the processes of derivation or discharge (*Ableitung*, *Entladung*, which are far from being synonyms) and "sublimation."

4. In Proust's novel we are informed that the then-adolescent author had spent his day reading Augustin Thierry's *Histoire de la conquête de l'Angleterre*. His ecstatic reaction to the rural landscape can thus be viewed as a kind of recompense.

5. In his superb allegorical novel *La Beauté sur la terre* (1928), C.F. Ramuz shows, for his part, how beauty escapes from anyone who wishes to hold it captive.

6. Proust, *op. cit.* volume III, p. 886. This description occurs in connection with a view of open country occasioned by the stoppage of a train. The author sees a "curtain of trees illuminated by the light of the setting sun," and a house "which appeared to be built out of a strange pink substance." This view, however, is the source of nothing but a feeling of indifference, which convinces him that he lacks "an artist's soul." The analogies with the description of the pond at Montjouvain are not, it seems to me, accidental. In addition, it should be pointed out that this lack of interest in trees and the light of the setting sun coincides with a new stage in the history of painting, i.e., when the "impressionist" interest in landscapes and atmosphere gives way to preoccupations of a totally different order.

7. Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene IV.

8. "I scale the rocks in vain: my spirit does not become more elevated, my soul more pure; I carry the cares of the world and bear the burden of human turpitude. . . . God appears no greater to me from the summit of a mountain than from the bottom of a valley." *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*, Livre IV, I, 16.

9. *Madame Bovary*, second part, II.

10. Goethe, *Faust*, Part II, translated by Stuart Atkins, Boston, 1984, p. 285.

11. It should be mentioned here that the agreement Faust enters into with Mephistopheles is partially based on redefining beauty as the future possibility of an *instant* of joyous plenitude – an instant that Faust never attains, and of which he will only have a "presentiment," since his demands are unrealizable: "*Verweile doch, du bist so schön.*" However, it is not the natural world that promises this happiness; this happiness can only result from the ability to look upon accomplished labors and upon a people who are setting off to settle a land that is far across the sea and that has been conquered with great difficulty. The beauty of this instant – in the future – will be the result of the contemplation of the finished work. But this work and this anticipated momentary beauty themselves constitute the act of capitulation to the spirit of evil, the climax of the pact with the devil.

12. We are referring to the letter describing the climb of Mount Ventoux, in which Petrarch's wonder at the dazzling spectacle of nature is brutally interrupted by the Augustan imperative of introspection.

13. "He who has seen beauty with his eyes / Already belongs to Death," Platen writes (*Sämtliche Werke*, 4 volumes, Cotta, t. I, pp. 130–131). In the first of the *Duino Elegies*, we read (lines 4–5): "Beauty is nothing / But the beginning of terror." And how not to think of Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*? "A kiss would kill me / If beauty was not death. . . ."

14. Baudelaire, *The Prose Poems and La Fanfarlo*, translated by Rosemary Lloyd, Oxford, 1991, pp. 49–50.