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Ruskin, John. *Praeterita*. Ed. Francis O’Gorman. World’s Classics.
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READING JOHN RUSKIN’S *Praeterita* (1885–89) IS NEITHER easy nor comforting, but it is illuminating, fascinating, beautiful, and perhaps most of all, wistfully sad. Reading *Praeterita* can also be described as utterly refreshing in an age that finds autobiography in a state of gossipy self-glorification. Ruskin differs greatly from twenty-first-century entrepreneurial self-biographers such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has recently confessed his faults to the world at the expense of his family. Certainly, Ruskin’s caregiver at the end of his writing career, Joan Severn, feared just such a tell-all possibility from the pen of Ruskin, if not worse, given his inconsolable nostalgia for past times with Rose La Touche. But his autobiography is no precursor to the now standard shock-confessional, as Francis O’Gorman describes it in his introduction to his new Oxford World’s Classics edition: “*Praeterita* is a long rhapsody on what places, companionship, and the writing of others can do to and for a sensitive mind” (xiv). Indeed, thanks to O’Gorman, the experience of reading *Praeterita* has achieved luminous transparency, and it is to be hoped that his new, very finely edited edition finds its way on to book shelves and into syllabuses.

In recent years, Ruskin seems to be regaining his proper place as one of those Victorian figures who simply cannot be ignored. For students of art, architecture, environmentalism, the arts and crafts movement, political economy, class, and education, Ruskin has regained status as an essential progenitor. But if Ruskin is to be remembered, it will be imperative also to

remember his vision of himself, which comprises not only the growth of his mind, but also his urgent attempts to remain in possession of it, both of which provide compelling focal points for understanding his remarkable autobiography.

O’Gorman’s introduction deserves special praise in that it offers readers a comprehensive and insightful discussion of this very difficult text. His even-handed treatment of Ruskin’s mental illness, for example, frames the importance of the oscillations between clarity and confusion that formed the mental state of Ruskin during the years he wrote *Praeterita*. The difficulties that he and Joan Severn confronted, especially in the later years, when Ruskin suffered from “increasingly upsetting, violent, and debilitating mental illness” (xviii), resonate powerfully in the age of Alzheimer’s. Ruskin’s heroic attempts to maintain his rational grasp of the world, as well as Severn’s attempts to care for him, serve as a fascinating sub-textual foundation for the work. And O’Gorman aptly describes the function of Ruskin’s illness in the text: “Ruskin’s sickness meant that, at its most troubled, *Praeterita* struggles. It can offer little help to the reader in stories that break off, incomplete and inconsequential; in memories that are too fragmentary to bear much meaning. And it loses its way more thoroughly on occasions. . . . *Praeterita* is a life history written on occasions from the edges of mental breakdown itself” (xix–xx).

If reading *Praeterita* is made difficult by its tendency to become lost in itself, O’Gorman effectively assists the reader with satisfying explanatory notes, a useful glossary of persons mentioned, a thoroughly adequate index, as well as a well-considered chronology and a bibliography of selected works for further reading. The notes in particular are an important aspect of the apparatus given Ruskin’s assumptions about his readers’ collective body of knowledge. Whereas Ruskin could rely faithfully upon a readership widely versed in the many places and works of art he mentions in *Praeterita*, in large part because he assumed they were familiar with his other works, O’Gorman does not have that luxury. The explanatory notes provide essential guidance and clarification, especially for the neophyte reader of Ruskin.

Although he recognizes the importance of Ruskin’s illness in the shaping of *Praeterita*, O’Gorman takes care also not to

overemphasize it. He avers that the achievement of *Praeterita* rests not in the story of Ruskin's struggles with his mind, but in the ways "[i]t describes the formation of a man who drew unending strength from the best meanings of the past, and from reverent attention to the natural world understood as revelatory of God's will." O'Gorman identifies these two aspects as Ruskin's "enduring subjects" in *Praeterita* because "[t]hey are who he is. Not knowing these, nothing else makes sense" (xxi). One of the many qualities of *Praeterita* that O'Gorman identifies is the remarkable range of Ruskin's associations with people, places, and books. O'Gorman rightly frames an understanding of the extent of Ruskin's knowledge in the context of his reading of the world. In O'Gorman's view, every act of interpretation represents Ruskin reading, whether he focuses on a building, a painting, a book, or a relationship. As O'Gorman acknowledges, Ruskin was especially alert to the writings of Thomas Carlyle, who played a pivotal role in shaping his conception of "enduring subjects." In his recognition of the invisible essence of the visible world, Ruskin is never far removed from Carlyle and his vision of "natural supernaturalism." Though they were different in a variety of respects, Carlyle and Ruskin shared essential affinities, and their relationship manifests itself in important figurative ways in the pages of *Praeterita*.

Ruskin's first mention of Carlyle in *Praeterita* comes as a rather benign allusion to his biography of Frederick the Great (65), and he alludes to his friend's Prussian epic on several occasions. But in his second reference to Carlyle in *Praeterita*—simultaneously a complaint and an acknowledgment of his influence—Ruskin incorporates Carlyle into the broader vision of the autobiography. Ruskin quotes a letter from Carlyle to Ralph Waldo Emerson in which he finds an "entirely disputable, and to my thought so far as undisputed, much blameable and pitiable—exclamation of my master's: 'Not till we can think that here and there one is thinking of us, one is loving us, does this waste earth become a peopled garden'" (110) This letter, dated 12 August 1834, is in all likelihood the first letter that Carlyle wrote to his friend in Boston. And although O'Gorman points to the source of the quote as "unnamed" it is in fact Carlyle's loose translation from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's*. Ruskin, in other words, quotes his "master" who is in fact quoting his own master,

which creates an intellectual umbrella that encompasses a rich tradition.

But Ruskin's complaint is more interesting and significant than his acknowledgment that Carlyle was his "master." Ruskin counters Carlyle's vision of a garden with one of his own: "My times of happiness had always been when *nobody* was thinking of me; and the main discomfort and drawback to all proceedings and designs, the attention and interference of the public—represented by my mother and the gardener. The garden was no waste place to me, because I did not suppose myself an object of interest either to the ants or the butterflies" (110). Ruskin misreads the passage as Carlyle's lament that "the rest of the world was waste to him unless he had admirers in it." He goes on to call it "a sorry sentiment enough," one that he is "somewhat tempted, for once, to admire the exactly opposite temper of my own solitude. My entire delight was in observing without being myself noticed—if I could have been invisible, all the better" (110–11). The function of Ruskin's misreading of Carlyle (who was, after all, merely thanking Emerson for a gift, as O'Gorman notes) becomes suggestive as he articulates his own worldview in contrast to Carlyle's: "I was absolutely interested in men and their ways, as I was interested in marmots and chamois, in tomtits and trout. If only they would stay still and let me look at them, and not get into their holes and up their heights!" Ruskin is not Diogenes Teufelsdröckh peering down on the world from his tower in Weissnichtwo, or in the garret room of Cheyne Row for that matter, bellowing forth misgivings that no one seemed to hear. Ruskin's desired intellectual space is that of the invisible observer: "The living inhabitation of the world—the grazing and nesting in it,—the spiritual power of the air the rocks, the waters, to be in the midst of it, and rejoice and wonder at it, and help it if I could—happier if it needed no help of mine, this was the essential love of *Nature* in me, this the root of all that I have usefully become, and the light of all that I have learned" (111). If Nature served Wordsworth as anchor, nurse, guide, guardian, and soul, as he claims in "Tintern Abbey" (110–11), then the same might be said of Ruskin, whose own garden served as an essential spiritual focal point.

Ruskin's next extended reference to Carlyle occurs in the chapter entitled "Otterburn," written in 1887 while he was ill

and fearing that this might be the last installment of *Praeterita*. Ruskin feels compelled to write of Carlyle before his end so that he might “throw more lovely light on his character than any he has written,— as indeed his instantly vivid words always did; and it is a bitter blame and shame to me that I have not recorded those spoken to myself, often with trust and affection, always with kindness” (296–97). Ruskin then offers an entry from his diary (25 October 1874) that recalls one of their many conversations. Ruskin recounts that Carlyle told him of his childhood education and the death of Adam Alexander, the headmaster of the Edinburgh Royal High School where Carlyle attended for a time and the author of the Latin grammar used by Ruskin as a boy (see xxii). Carlyle only remembered Adams’s funeral and the boys weeping for him: “The sound of the boys’ wail is in my ears yet.” Ruskin then relates Carlyle’s story of Margaret, the daughter of his first Latin tutor. When she died at the age of 27, Carlyle confesses, “The last time that I wept aloud in the world, I think was at her death” (297).

By the time Carlyle reaches the conclusion of the story and his description of delivering the girl’s body to her family, who expected her to return alive and well, Ruskin can no longer transcribe: “Carlyle was so much affected, and spoke so low, that I could not venture to press him on detail” (298). After recounting these three emotionally charged and melancholy narratives Ruskin recalls that the conversation then turned to John Stuart Mill’s recently published *Three Essays on Religion*. Carlyle’s initial explosion of “vituperative contempt” is followed by a more incisive summary, which Ruskin deftly interprets: “‘Among my acquaintance I have not seen a person talking of a thing he so little understood.’ The point of his indignation was Mill’s supposing that, if God did not make everybody ‘happy,’ it was because He had no sufficient power, ‘was not supplied enough with the article.’ Nothing makes Carlyle more contemptuous than this coveting of happiness.” Again, a reference to Carlyle begins as a memory and ends as an important thematic element of the work. Ruskin continues the chapter by insinuating that he is going to define happiness—“Perhaps we had better hear what Polissena and the nun of Florence . . . have to say about happiness” (298)—but after an explanation of “Scottish temper” reverts to the explication of a

“pure Scotch phrase” and a brief discussion of *Guy Mannering*, Ruskin seems to have forgotten the topic. Ruskin does not covet happiness in *Praeterita*, but its absence and his struggle to find it, somehow, invests his autobiography with a sense of shimmering poignancy.

Near the end of *Praeterita*, Ruskin recalls a visit from Carlyle at Denmark Hill: “Carlyle rode up the front garden, joyfully and reverently received as always; and stayed the whole afternoon; even, (Joan says) sitting with us during our early dinner at five. Many a day after that, he used to come; and one evening, ‘in describing with some rapture how he had once as a young man had a delightful trip into Galloway, “where he was most hospitably entertained in the town of Wigtown by a Mr Tweddale,” I (Joan) said quietly, “I *am* so glad! That was my grandfather, and Wigtown is my native place!” (347). Joan, present in the parenthetical acknowledgments and in the confusion of the quotation marks, now remembers Ruskin’s “master” for him. She goes on to recall Carlyle’s story of an encounter with the minister of the Church at Cummertrees known as “Daft Davie Gillespie.” As Davie was “preaching a sermon on ‘Youth and Beauty being laid in the grave’ something tickled Carlyle, and he was seen to smile; upon which Mr Gillespie stopped suddenly, looked with a frown at Carlyle, . . . and said, ‘Mistake me not young man; it is *youth alone* that *you* possess” (348). Ruskin then reclaims the reins of his narrative: “I am so glad to be led back to the thoughts of Carlyle, as he showed himself to her, and to me, in those spring days, when he used to take pleasure in the quiet of the Denmark Hill garden.” Ruskin recognized that this Carlyle, his friend and mentor, was not the Carlyle of *Latter-Day Pamphlets* or of the “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question.” Ruskin’s vision of Carlyle relied upon personal observation not critical analysis, but his memory is not without regret: “Both at the time, and ever since, I have felt bitter remorse that I did not make Carlyle free of the garden, and his horse of the stables, whether we were at home or not; for the fresh air, and bright view of the Norwood hills, were entirely grateful and healing to him, when the little back garden at Cheyne Row was too hot, or the neighborhood of it too noisy, for his comfort” (348). The literal remorse of Ruskin here blends with the figurative. Carlyle often complained of

the heat in his Cheyne Row garden, and escaped it when practicable. But Ruskin also suggests that his remorse stems from the possibility that his friend, who believed happiness to be impossible, might at least have had more extended periods of both physical and psychological comfort. In the context of *Praeterita*, Ruskin's one last return to the garden with Carlyle anticipates the higher spiritual purpose of his autobiography.

As Ruskin begins *Praeterita*, he prepares readers who seek to understand his true identity as a thinker: "I AM, and my father was before me, a violent Tory of the old school" (7). From this beginning one might expect a continuation of the socio-political discourse Ruskin had begun in *Fors Clavigera*, an understandable assumption given the genesis of *Praeterita* in the letters of *Fors*. But by the end of *Praeterita* the journey has taken a strikingly different course. Here, Ruskin imaginatively returns to his "own home" so that he might re-experience "the peace, and hope, and loveliness of it, and the Elysian walks with Joanie, and Paradisiacal with Rosie" (362). He returns to his garden. Marveling at "[h]ow things bind and blend themselves together!" (362), Ruskin ends *Praeterita* with a unified and visionary description of a garden "behind the Gate of Siena's heart" with "the fireflies everywhere in sky and cloud rising and falling, mixed with the lightning, and more intense than the stars" (363). Ruskin has taken his readers from the instructively literal mode of political and social commentary to the expressively painted, visionary heights of Turner at his best. It is a journey well worth taking with him.

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