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Ruskin, Proust and the Art of Failure

JOHN COYLE

AS RUSKIN'S READERSHIP and reputation inexorably waned, the six years Proust worked on him were increasingly seen as a waste of time. As early as 1927, Virginia Woolf noted that a recent abridged edition of *Modern Painters* would suggest that, while people still wanted to read Ruskin, they no longer had leisure to read him in the mass. Happily, there remained *Praeterita*, a book 'which contains as in a teaspoon the essence of those waters from which the many-coloured fountains of eloquence and exhortation spring'.¹ 'We none of us need many books', wrote the Ruskin of *Sesame and Lilies*,² and if only one of his books is to be retained for our critical attention, the compact and accessible *Praeterita* would seem the most fitting for those who value its serenity and restraint. As Ruskin's last work, it also possesses a certain valedictory charm which intimates some solace after the bouts of madness of later years. It anticipates Proust, its title alluding to things past possibly reminding us of the Shakespearian tag which Scott-Moncrieff applied to his translation. Like *A la recherche du temps perdu*, it is unfinished, and its evocative treatment of the narrator's childhood recalls some of the most characteristic Proustian reveries. The fact that a plan for Proust to translate *Praeterita* was mooted in 1907-8 might suggest that Proust's novel is based on Ruskin's autobiography. Nevertheless, Ruskin's autobiography is patently not an English analogue of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, whatever its occasional similarities in subject matter and structure. Where Proust aimed to create a text which would constitute itself in the relation of its own genesis,

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Ruskin's final book is a sedate, valedictory appendix to his life and work, in many ways a gesture of final detachment from both. Yet there is evidence of sedation in the sedateness, and the valediction carries strong overtones of loss and sacrifice. *Praeterita* shores up fragments of peace, fulfilment and enlightenment against the intolerable frustration of a life which has attempted to explore and explain too much, and has failed.

The defeatism of *Praeterita* is emblematically present in its title, for 'praeterita' can mean not only 'things past', but also 'things passed by', or things left out. The minor rhetorical figure of 'praeterition' refers to the tactic of omitting to mention something in order to draw attention to its absence. In his 'Discours du récit', which uses Proust's novel as a point of departure for a general poetics of narrative, Gérard Genette adopts 'praeterition' or, more precisely, its synonymous term *paralepsis*, and applies it to non-temporal gaps in narrative structure, where an entire situation – the very existence of Proust's brother, say – is left out, as opposed to a moment or period being skipped. This sort of systematic occultation will be familiar to any reader of *Praeterita* acquainted with the details of Ruskin's life, but its narrative lacunae go far beyond its much-noted sexual reticence. Ruskin's very facility with words encouraged a distrust of figural language, his concern with the truth of revelation leading him to search for ways of bypassing the linguistic medium. In much of his later work, language presses against the object in the hope of forcing out its truth. Having eschewed from the outset of his career any formal solution to the epistemological problem, Ruskin was doomed to wander from passages of great perceptive brilliance to prolixity, hysteria and madness. In this context, *Praeterita* seems to derive from a recognition of failure, a settling back into the reasonable and discursive:

I have written [these sketches] frankly, garrulously, and at ease, speaking of what it gives me joy to remember, at any length I like . . . and passing in total silence things which I have no pleasure in reviewing, and which the reader would find no help in the account of. My described life has thus become more amusing than I expected to

myself, as I summoned its long past scenes for present scrutiny: – its main methods of study, and principles of work, I feel justified in commending to other students. (xxxv. 11)

The reductive tenor of Ruskin's prefatory remarks derives from something more profound than the customary modesty of the memoirist. A deference which in earlier works might be reserved for the divine in nature and in art is here maintained for the reader. The critic and prophet whose combative didacticism demonstrably influenced his age now shows a belated if unwarranted sensitivity to the criticism that he used too many words. Such a charge may be incidentally true, but a sympathetic reader would recognise that the wide range of Ruskin's concerns, and the depth of his commitment to them, could not admit the economies demanded by the occasional reader. Ruskin's own knowledge of literature would tell him that many years of single-minded discipline would be required before a writer would be capable of a satisfactory formal conspectus. Hence the undertones of loss and sacrifice, apparent in the dedication to Ruskin's parents:

I wrote these few prefatory words on my father's birthday, in what was once my nursery in his old house, – to which he brought my mother and me, sixty-two years since, I being then four years old. What would otherwise in the following pages have been little more than an old man's recreation in gathering visionary flowers in fields of youth, has taken, as I wrote, the nobler aspect of a dutiful offering at the grave of parents who trained my childhood to all the good it could attain, and whose memory makes declining life cheerful in the hope of being soon with them. (xxxv. 11-12)

Praeterita is not only an attempt to recreate the emotions and images of childhood, but also a conscious effort to recapture some of the humility and unquestioning obedience demanded by well-intentioned but unimaginative elders. Maudlin allusions to failing faculties, disappointments and approaching death

make what would be self-denial more like wilful self-pity. The pretence that mama, or the reader, knows best is so uncharacteristic of Ruskin's proud and uncompromising intellect that it can only have been sustained in moments of petulant concession. Ruskin's unease with this deference to the *bien-pensant* is evident both from tensions within the text of *Praeterita* and from remarks in his correspondence. In a letter to R. C. Leslie he apologises for the 'please-your-worship and by-your-leave style of *Praeterita*'³ – a style exemplified by such passages as: 'I do not mean this book to be in any avoidable way disagreeable or querulous; but expressive generally of my native disposition – which, though I say it, is extremely amiable, when I'm not bothered' (xxxv. 49).

Combinations of circumstance and temperament ensured that Ruskin was 'not bothered' very rarely in the latter part of his life. Given the amount of public calumny which was aimed at him, it would be understandable that he should, like Bellow's Moses Herzog, be overcome by 'the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends'.⁴ This is what happens in *Fors Clavigera*, where Ruskin, again like Bellow's hero, tries to argue the case for the Romantic imagination in a post-Romantic age by means of epistolary self-revelation, the addressees being incapable of answering back (xxvi. 186). In *Praeterita* such self-analysis is attempted only intermittently, and only then in grudging deference to his tormentors. Chapter 2 of the autobiography, 'Herne Hill Almond Blossoms', sees Ruskin counting the blessings and calamities of his life (xxxv. 45-6). Of the former, the most important gifts have been 'Peace, Obedience and Faith (that is, the blessings of religion), the habit of fixed attention with both eyes and mind, and an extreme perfection of palate' (xxxv. 44). The 'calamities' are the omissions of his upbringing which had such bitter and violent consequences in later years – the absence of objects of affection, the want of opportunity to practise fortitude, the omission from his education of any precision or etiquette in manners, and 'lastly and chief of evils . . . my judgement of right and wrong and powers of independent action, [which] were left entirely undeveloped, because the bridle and blinkers were never taken off me' (xxxv. 46).

Ruskin's attempt to evoke the landscape of his childhood, and to place his former self as an observer of that landscape, anticipates Proust's evocations of Combray. But Proust locates his narrator/former self in a position of privileged vision, unobstructed by irrelevancies and undisturbed by authority, not in an ivory tower, but in a 'little room smelling of orris-root' at the top of his aunt's house, where the three secret practices of reading, masturbation and observation are thematically linked. (One might add a fourth intimate activity, that of writing itself: *Swann*, p. 158.⁵) The Proustian hero's sense of dependence on authority has been exorcised by the earlier drama of going to bed. The presence of his mother, previously sought out, has become oppressive, and escape from it is now not just possible but necessary if his guilt is to be assuaged. Marcel's freedom is both reward and punishment for his earlier lapse, and is exercised in long hours of solitary indulgence. The epithet 'self-indulgent' is so often used in condemnation that it might blind readers to the prominence of indulgence and self-indulgence as an argument of Proust's novel. Ruskin shows himself to be equally aware of fundamental doubts about writing as an anti-social activity when he invokes his mother's judgement that he had been too much indulged as a child. In expiation he sets out with some reluctance to chasten his prose:

Thus far, with some omissions, I have merely reprinted the account of these times given in *Fors*: and I fear the sequel may be more trivial, because much is concentrated in the foregoing broad statement, which I have now to continue by slower steps; – and yet less amusing, because I tried always in *Fors* to say things, if I could, a little piquantly, and the rest of the things related in this book will be told as plainly as I can. But whether I succeeded in writing piquantly in *Fors* or not, I certainly wrote often obscurely; and the description above given of Herne Hill seems to me to need at once some reduction to plainer terms. (xxxv. 46-7)

Ruskin makes some attempt to follow these precepts in the subsequent description of Herne Hill and environs, for the

most part an amiable ramble as bland as any local guidebook. Before long, however, the congenial style is interrupted by some typically Ruskinian anticipations and digressions. The Norwood hills have sufficient space and height in their sweep as to give some promise of 'true hill-districts', but the prospect of further exploration is denied by the present-day monstrosity of the Crystal Palace. Ruskin attempts to return to the vision of his childhood, but the depth and intensity of the mind's eye's involvement in the landscape can no longer be re-enacted, only alluded to by means of an anecdote tantalising in its terse self-deprecation:

But then, the Nor-wood, or North wood, so called as it was seen in Croydon, in opposition to the South wood of the Surrey downs, drew itself in sweeping crescent a good five miles round Dulwich to the South, broken by lanes of ascent, Gipsy Hill and others; and, from the top, commanding views towards Dartford and over the plain of Croydon, – in contemplation of which I one day frightened my mother out of her wits by saying 'the eyes were coming out of my head!'. She thought it must be an attack of 'coup de soleil'. (xxxv. 47-8)

Ruskin here refuses an opportunity for the sort of autobiographical journey into the landscape which characterised his earlier writings, such as the dual evocation of an English cathedral close and the approach to St Mark's Square in *The Stones of Venice* (x. 78-84). In such passages, as indeed in *The Bible of Amiens* (xxx. 128-31), Ruskin constructs an ideal re-creation of his first sight of a landscape or building in order to guide the reader to the fullest understanding and appreciation of both place and event. Proust praises Ruskin for this solicitude for the reader, and for the personal dimension which he brings to the role of guide, fetching you at the station rather than leaving you to find your own way to the cathedral.⁶ In such passages Ruskin insists on accompanying the reader through the labyrinthine complexities of the surrounding streets, but he also appears to recognise the limitations of this guiding role, especially when it is the open country rather than the city

which is to be negotiated. In *Modern Painters*, the paintings of Turner mediate between the reader and Ruskin's verbal evocations of landscape, even if Ruskin believed that he himself was mediating between reader and painter. With no Turner to act as a template for his vision, and no science to impose order on his crowded impressions, the boy is left exposed to the act of seeing as either self-transcendence or madness, alternatives which the ageing memorialist is reluctant to explore.

As Elizabeth Helsinger has shown, Ruskin was one of the first to react against the 'sublime egotism' of Romanticism.⁷ Scepticism about the Wordsworthian 'single path' of introspection, shared with writers as diverse as Tennyson, Arnold and Pater, is allied in Ruskin with doubt about the value of language itself. This comes to the fore in the section of *Sesame and Lilies* entitled 'The Mystery of Life and its Arts' (xviii. 145-87) – the one part of the book ignored by Proust – where Ruskin insists that 'the moment a man can really do his work he becomes speechless about it. All words become idle to him – all theories'. If it be argued that this statement implies oppositions between manual and intellectual labour, between plastic and verbal arts, it should be remembered that an earlier part of the lecture had dwelt on the failures of the greatest of literary artists, of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. Ruskin asks if they have 'any peace to promise to our unrest, or any redemption to our misery', and concludes that:

they do but play upon sweetly modulated pipes; with pompous nomenclature adorn the councils of hell; touch a troubadour's guitar to the courses of the suns; and fill the openings of eternity, before which prophets have veiled their faces, and which angels desire to look into, with idle puppets of their scholastic imagination, and melancholy lights of frantic faith in their lost mortal love. (xviii. 158)

Although the lecture ends in an appeal to practical Christianity, as an alternative to the 'morbid corruption and waste of vital power in religious sentiment'⁸ which had estranged Rose La Touche, 'The Mystery of Life and its Arts' indicates an abiding

doubt about the expressive powers of the self and language. This doubt derives from Ruskin's sense that the authority of the language of Revelation surpassed that of Homer. The knowledge that this first phase of language can no longer be aspired to evokes in Ruskin an attitude of pessimistic perseverance:

the more beautiful the art, the more it is essentially the work of people who *feel themselves wrong*; – who are striving for the fulfilment of a law, and the grasp of a loveliness, which they have not yet attained, which they feel even farther and farther from attaining the more they strive for it. (xviii. 174)

As though lost in the maze of the uncompleted self and committed to finding a way towards a sense of mutuality or of the divine, Ruskin is still able – by a sequence of descriptive passages, closely linked by imagery and by conscious recall – to give *Praeterita* a definite structure which it first seems to lack. Helsinger's formula – 'metaphoric and affective connotations' – recalls for us both the implicit and explicit structures of *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

There is no doubting the fictiveness of Ruskin's autobiography. It was not that he omitted or simply forgot, but an acceptance of the fact that he re-creates and reimagines past experiences in terms recognisable to the author at the moment of writing. The fictive nature of *Praeterita* has been established by the documentary research of Van Aken Burd, who has compared episodes related in the autobiography with Ruskin's diary at the time.⁹ The epiphany at Fontainebleau, where the act of sketching a single aspen gives him an insight into a new sylvan world, is not recorded in the diary of that year. *Praeterita* surmises that the feelings or discoveries of that year were too many, and bewildering, to be written down. This may have been so, but the mundane fact is that there was a diary, given to Charles Eliot Norton in 1872, which does not record any epiphany or even suggest any humbled reticence which could be read as its consequence. Nor, as Ruskin's most recent biographer reminds us, is there any contemporary drawing of an aspen which might correspond with these reminiscences.¹⁰ In so far as it adumbrates the dramatic structure explicitly formulated in *A la*

recherche du temps perdu, *Praeterita* may indeed be said to be closer to Proust's work than to any English novel. If *Praeterita* is an unusually fictive autobiography, *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a uniquely autobiographical fiction. It is not just that the two works share some common ground, rather that each approaches the other by relinquishing some of the original concerns of its genre, with the result that the characters of Proust's novel are feared by the narrator to be monstrous creations, while Ruskin's autobiography is almost useless as a record of his public and professional career.

As records of a peculiar sensibility coming to terms with empirical reality through a series of epiphanies, both works employ a sophisticated rhetoric of conversion which undermines the conventions of the genre to which they belong. The arguments sustained by these rhetorical structures are, however, diametrically opposed. While the argument of *A la recherche du temps perdu* can be reduced to the formula 'Marcel devient écrivain', that of *Praeterita* is Ruskin's failure as an artist, and not only as a pictorial artist, but also as a writer. *Praeterita* is packed with allusions to its author's creative incapacity; its interest, and even its mystery, lie in the evocation of incidents which would support this contention.

This opposition is best brought out if we compare the relevant passages of *Praeterita* with those episodes of Proust's novel which are similarly torn between the promise of aesthetic deliverance and the threat of failure. Of all the chapters of Ruskin's autobiography, 'Fontainebleau' insists most on its author's mingled sense of promise and incapacity. It opens on the themes of illness and submission to discipline. A planned tour in Wales with his boyhood friend, Richard Fall, Ruskin's 'first independent journey' (xxxv. 299) is scotched by his father's insistence that he return to Leamington Spa in order to follow the regime imposed by Dr Jephson. For six weeks, 'not unpleasant, now remembered', the young man submits to this discipline, finding life still worth living on these terms, and is surprised to note that while he had been extremely dull under Mount Avenine, the grotesquely prosaic nature of his present surroundings here leaves him much less so. He reads a book on fossils, delighted by the lithographs, but concludes that its

author Agassiz is a blockhead and that ‘it didn’t matter a stale herring to any mortal whether [the fish] had any names or not’. From his frustration Ruskin derives a consoling knowledge of the superiority of the artist to the scientist, and continues with an elaborate drawing of the Château of Amboise, in imitation of Turner’s grandest manner, but the subsequently recognised failure of both this and its accompanying verses ‘[proved] to me that in those directions of imagination I was even a worse blockhead than Agassiz himself’ (xxxv. 233). This period marks the end of Ruskin’s poetic ambitions, yet it was also at this time that he composed his one work of fiction.

‘The King of the Golden River’ was written to amuse a little girl; and being a fairly good imitation of Grimm and Dickens, mixed with a little true Alpine feeling of my own, has been rightly pleasing to nice children, and good for them. But it is totally valueless, for all that. I can no more write a story than compose a picture. (xxxv. 303-4)

Within the space of a couple of pages Ruskin has renounced any ambition to creative expression. For all its tonal lapses into irascibility and coyness, the Fontainebleau chapter cunningly interweaves and juxtaposes themes of discipline and renunciation, artistic ambition and failure, even the pressures of love and friendship on literary production. The little girl for whom ‘The King of the Golden River’ was written was Effie Gray, and Ruskin’s dismissal of the story is just as much a dismissal of the childishness of its addressee. Coupled with this is the author’s contempt for his own callow enthusiasms, calling this period a ‘particularly foolish crisis of life’ and contrasting his own fruitless ambitions with the achievements of such masters as Dickens and Turner. Ruskin, however, is not content to dwell on past pretensions; his incapacities are translated into the present tense: ‘I can no more write a story than compose a picture’. It is in this conflation of past and present that *Praeterita* is most anomalous, not only with regard to the Proustian *roman d’apprentissage*, but also within the historical development of autobiography.

In Ruskin's account of drawing the aspen we find some evidence that his failure as an artist was rooted in a refusal to recognise his own capacity to perceive formal correspondences except on a strictly local level:

Languidly, but not idly, I began to draw it; and as I drew, the languor passed away; the beautiful hues insisted on being traced, – without weariness. More and more beautiful they became, as each rose out of the rest, and took its place in the air. With wonder increasing every instant, I saw that they 'composed' themselves by finer laws than any known of men. At last, the tree was there, and everything I had thought before about trees, nowhere. (xxxv. 314)

What distinguishes this euphorically intense engagement from both the much-anthologised Ruskinian purple passages and the modernist epiphanies of Proust or Joyce is the absence of any trace of either the initial aesthetic impression or the resulting work of art. The form or status of this work of art can vary, from Ruskin's expansive prose poetry in the guise of scientific description, through Stephen Dedalus's villanelle in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, to Marcel's juvenile sketch prompted by his vision of the steeples of Martinville (*Swann*, pp. 180-2). What these imaginary artworks have in common is their real or supposed inferiority to the felt drama of aesthetic discovery – a drama which is itself enacted, often with greater literary resource, in the preparation for the epiphany.

In the Martinville section of *Du côté de chez Swann* this inferiority is made explicit. The narrator's impressions here are no less significant than, and as well evoked as, those of the uneven paving stones, the starched napkins, or the tinkling spoon in *Le Temps retrouvé*. What does impose dramatic meaning on the contrast between one experience and the later set of others is the author's recognition that a single lyrical expression of the euphoric moment will not preserve that

moment; rather than an act of preservation, it is an evacuation and a dereliction:

I never thought of this page again, but at that moment, when in the corner of the seat where the doctor's coachman usually placed in a basket the poultry he had bought at the market in Martinville, I had finished writing it, I was so happy, I felt it had so perfectly relieved me of those steeples and what they had been hiding behind them, that, as if I myself were a hen and had just laid an egg, I began to sing at the top of my voice. (*Swann*, p. 182)

The symbolic importance of the impression produced by the Martinville steeples is well documented within the novel itself. This impression, like those of the three trees of Hudemesnil, of the works of Vinteuil, and of the madeleine itself, is an emanation of the *vraie vie* which haunts the narrator. But just as significant, although less foregrounded in the narrative, is the fate of the prose sketch written at the time. This sketch is particularly important because, in this archetypically autobiographical novel which, moreover, purports to be the history of a vocation, it represents the only 'concrete' – however fictive – evidence of the narrator's vocation. In so far as *A la recherche du temps perdu* can be said to enact its own genesis, the whole novel itself exists as proof of that vocation, but in its qualitative isolation from the rest of the text the Martinville section and its eventual destiny play a crucial part in the rhetoric of success and failure which governs our notion of the integrity of the work.

Proust's 'prose poem' re-emerges three times in the course of the novel, although on the first occasion there is a slight ambiguity. When Marcel shows to M. de Norpois something he 'had written one year at Combray on the way home from an outing' (*Young Girls in Flower*, p. 29), it could well be construed as the Martinville sketch, which is written in Dr Percepied's carriage on the way home from a walk, but it might also refer to some other short prose work written on returning home from one of Marcel's many walks along the Swann or Guermantes ways. Norpois's mannered, philistine response to

Marcel's submission temporarily destroys the latter's faith in himself as a writer. Handing it back to him without comment, Norpois only delivers his sententious opinions when he discerns the malign influence of Bergotte. The old ambassador's diatribe is one of the finest caricatures of the Sainte-Beuviste fallacy to be found in the novel, and yet Marcel's own motives for raising the subject of Bergotte are shown to be romantic and social – he only wants to turn the conversation towards Bergotte as an acquaintance of Gilberte's father.

Bergotte is presented here as the practitioner of the pure and self-sufficient art to which the young ought to aspire, and for both textual and biographical reasons Bergotte is commonly thought to share many ideals and characteristics with Ruskin. In this episode, however, Norpois, the anti-Bergotte, voices several opinions which can be read as travesties of Ruskin's thought, notably the trite comparison of Romanesque and Gothic architecture and the denunciation of artists who follow the cult of pure form at a time when the barbarians are at the gate. Marcel's own perceptions are at this time contaminated by the false talk and blinkered vision of those who surround him, by 'this perpetual error, which is nothing but "life" itself' (*The Fugitive*, p. 573). Art offers an escape which the hero – blinded by social and emotional concerns – has forgotten.

The second recurrence of the Martinville sketch comes in the second chapter of Book 2 of *Le Côté de Guermantes*, where the primary obstacle to aesthetic fulfilment is not social or sexual ambition but the demands of friendship. The narrative voice is here more confident, more insistent on the superficiality of social relations, however noble or intellectual, and on the incommunicability of our real selves save through the medium of art. The prose poem has been rediscovered, altered, submitted to and rejected by *Le Figaro*. This information is given in parenthesis, in the midst of a passage which foretells the novel's final revelation in *Le Temps retrouvé*. The presence of Robert de Saint Loup denies Marcel the solitude necessary to pursue his momentary insight into the nature of time and memory.

As I took note of this I felt a sense of inspired exhilaration, which might have resulted in something had I remained

alone and so avoided the detour of the many futile years I was yet to spend before discovering the invisible vocation which is the subject of this book. Had this discovery been made that evening, the carriage I found myself in would have deserved to rank as more memorable than Dr Percepié's, in which I had composed the little descriptive piece about the Martinville steeples, recently unearthed, as it happened, and which I had reworked and offered without success to the *Figaro*. (*Guermentes*, p. 395)

The absence of the prose sketch in the text is a sign of the narrator-hero's failure. Had the impulse and lesson of Martinville and episodes like it been rediscovered and sustained, the vocation which constitutes the real story of the novel would no longer have been invisible and occluded. The detour of wasted years would be avoided, but since this detour constitutes the substance of much of the novel, earlier discovery of the narrator's true vocation here would have weakened rather than reinforced the arch thrown between *Combray* and *Le Temps retrouvé*. We are reminded of past revelations and forewarned of those to come, but such is the preterition of the associative moment and the suppression of aesthetic evidence, that we are forcefully reminded of Ruskin's painful derelictions in his late autobiography. The deferral of the pure aesthetic moment, the blaming of friends, is itself recognisably Augustinian.

The Martinville sketch recurs a third time in a passage at the beginning of *La Prisonnière*:

I rang for Françoise. I opened the *Figaro*. I looked for, and once more did not find, an article or something calling itself an article which I had sent to that newspaper and which was nothing but a slightly rearranged version of the recently rediscovered page which I had written in Dr Percepié's carriage while looking at the steeples of Martinville. Then I read mama's latest letter. She found it strange, shocking, that an unmarried girl should be living alone with me. (*The Prisoner*, p. 6)

The rapid sequence of imperfect verbs in the French text convinces us in a typically Proustian manner of Marcel's repeated failure to realise his ambition to be a writer. By using the same tense to refer to a quite different phenomenon – his mother's constantly held opinion – the text implies persuasively but not abruptly the connection between the hero's frustrated ambitions and his frustrations with Albertine. For all his possessiveness, Marcel is denied knowledge and control of what Albertine desires. Similarly, he now finds himself impotent and ignorant with regard to his own writing. Leo Bersani has suggested that Marcel's aesthetic desires are just one facet of his compulsive need to possess something different from himself.¹¹ Following this compulsion, exhaustive description comes to seem the equivalent of possession. At the beginning of *La Prisonnière*, Albertine, the unknown, has come under the hero's limited control, rather as the impressions of Martinville were provisionally captured by the prose sketch. These captive insights are themselves in thrall, however, to the judgement of outsiders, the newspaper editors, while Marcel's act of sequestration is questioned and delimited by those powerful moral forces from his past, his mother and Françoise.

The Martinville text is thus gradually removed from the reader's attention, becoming as unknowable as Albertine. When Marcel eventually does succeed in getting an article published in *Le Figaro* it has little to do with a descriptive epiphany. As a piece of superior journalism, remarkable only for its allusion to the now fashionable Elstir, the article seems to have degenerated into what Gilles Deleuze has called an 'empty sign',¹² the power of judging its truth having been delivered from the author into the hands of a diverse and partial audience. By a prettily damning conceit, the newspaper is described as 'the spiritual bread . . . still warm and moist as it emerges from the press . . . this miraculous loaf' (*The Fugitive*, p. 532).

Swann himself is a more convincing fictional counterpart to Ruskin than Bergotte is. He is the teacher whose failure is an example to his pupil; although a dilettante, his interest in the visual arts involves the submission of word to image. He introduces the hero to Balbec as Ruskin introduced Proust to

Venice and Amiens, and just as Proust values Ruskin's works more for their incitement to writing than for their content, so Swann is paid tribute by the narrator of *Le Temps retrouvé* for the consequence of having gone to Balbec, indeed for having unconsciously supplied the raw material for the whole book. Swann is also like Ruskin in that, blinded by personal obsessions, he is unable to recognise that the true cult, in Proustian terms, is that of the artistic vocation, and not that of art itself.

Swann rejects the meretriciousness of newspapers in terms which could have come straight out of *Sesame and Lilies*:

What I fault the newspapers for is that day after day they draw our attention to insignificant things whereas only three or four times in our lives do we read a book in which there is something really essential. (*Swann*, p. 29)

The eventual insignificance of the prose poem inspired by the Martinville experience is thus prefigured by Swann's remark – the judgement of a failed artist, perhaps, but nevertheless of one who is aware of his failure and where failure lies. Ruskin may have chosen the word 'Today' as his motto, but his life's work seeks to expound the paradox that, while truth and beauty can be discovered in the perception of the ephemeral, the meaning of such perceptions can only be grounded in a framework of interpretation in which history and prophecy are subsumed under a timeless principle of vision. In this scheme of things fine writing has no place: hence Ruskin's constant depreciation of his own skills beyond those of a teacher. It was impossible for Ruskin to envisage any work of fiction which would combine 'poetry, Philosophy and religion – all in one' (v. 333), these being his conditions for seeing clearly. In his view, Dante was the last writer possessed of the strength of faith and fund of myth sufficient for such an undertaking. Later artists, such as Wagner, Proust, Rilke, or Joyce, who had the hubris to attempt such a task, would have been beyond the comprehension of Ruskin, who explored for so many years the labyrinth of nature before realising, too late, that its creator had absconded.

The Fontainebleau episode is often held up as a late example of the typical Ruskinian prose poem which reconstructs the perceptual process, but its omissions and absences are more important than what is written. Like Proust's Martinville sketch, it demonstrates the worthlessness of the contemporary account of an impression compared with the fact of the lesson learned from the impression, and from its recurrences across time. The Martinville sketch is gradually obliterated through the narrative progression of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The Fontainebleau sketch, whether verbal or visual, had also disappeared by the time its author came to write *Praeterita*. The lessons of Fontainebleau and Martinville have to be expressed differently, on a wider canvas.

Praeterita foreshadows the Proustian novel in its exploration of different modes of aesthetic disappointment, but in theory and execution it is a much more pessimistic work. It has been remarked that Ruskin's repeated variations on the theme of failed imagination are similar, even indebted to, Wordsworth's 'Immortality' and Coleridge's 'Dejection' odes, and that Proust's theory of involuntary memory is similar in proposed function if not in source to the Coleridgean ideas of the imagination.¹³ For Ruskin, however, the temporary failure of adequate response is much more than a rhetorical device, as it is for Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Proust. Where these writers used moments of *accidie* as incitements to creation, Ruskin, in this more truly a post-Romantic writer than Proust, saw such moments more as intimations of incapacity. Thus in the 'Cumae' chapter of *Praeterita*, which precedes 'Fontainebleau', extracts from his 1840 journals registering his disgust with Rome and with himself are included as 'perhaps worth keeping'.

I have been walking backwards and forwards on the Pincian, being unable to do anything else since this con-founded illness, and trying to find out why every imaginable delight palls so very rapidly on even the keenest feelings. I had all Rome before me; towers, cupolas, cypresses, and palaces mingled in every possible grouping; a light Decemberish mist, mixed with the slightest vestige of wood smoke, hovering between the distances, and giving beautiful grey

outlines of every form between the eye and the sun; and over the rich evergreen oaks of the Borghese gardens, a range of Appenine, with one principal pyramid of pure snow, like a piece of sudden comet-light fallen on the earth. It was not like moonlight, nor like sunlight, but as soft as the one, and as powerful as the other. And yet with all this around me, I could not feel it. (xxxv. 383)

Like Coleridge, he saw but could not feel. Ruskin's judgements of Wordsworth tended to be harsh. In the 'Roslyn Chapel' section of *Praeterita*, for example, he remarks that 'On the journey of 1837, when I was eighteen, I felt, for the last time, the pure childish love of nature which Wordsworth so idly takes for an intimation of immortality' (xxxv. 218). An equally damning judgement comes in 'Fiction Fair and Foul':

Wordsworth is simply a Westmoreland peasant, with considerably less shrewdness than most border Englishmen or Scotsmen inherit, and no sense of humour; but gifted (in this singularly) with a vivid sense of natural beauty, and a pretty turn for reflections, not always acute, but as far as they reach, medicinal to the fever of the restless and corrupted life around him. (xxxiv. 318)

The dismissal of the conquest of time by the Romantic imagination as, respectively, an idle extrapolation from the childish love of nature and 'a pretty turn for reflections' is another indication of Ruskin's distaste for protracted introspection. In his insistence that meaning is located beyond the individual consciousness, Ruskin is perhaps less old-fashioned than his detractors and ambitious disciples might suppose. Certainly, in his reflection on the intimations of immortality, he deserts both fine writing and the pulpit tone for a quiet plangency:

It is a feeling only possible to youth, for all care, regret, or knowledge of evil destroys it; and it requires also the full sensibility of nerve and blood, the conscious strength of heart, and hope; not but that I suppose the purity of youth may feel what is best of it even through sickness

and the waiting for death, but only in thinking death itself God's sending. (xxxiv. 318)

The consolations of art are denied Ruskin, partly because artistic modes of knowledge are compromised and extended by scientific curiosity: 'A snowdrop was to me, as to Wordsworth, part of the Sermon on the Mount, but I never should have written sonnets to the celandine, because it is of a coarse, yellow and imperfect form' (xxxv. 223). Ruskin as scientist denies himself the evasions of Ruskin the poet. Theories should pertain to the outside world, whether this is governed by God, nature or language. The Proustian distinction between outer and inner chronology, a distinction imposed by the imminence of death is, for all its gracious convenience, still fortuitous, in bad faith. Ruskin's mingled curiosity and disgust is met in Baudelaire or Sartre, but not in Romantics like Wordsworth or the Proust of *Le Temps retrouvé*. Ruskin recognises that language is committed to the description and interpretation not only of facts and people, but of itself. Introspective writing is that which reflects upon itself and its tasks, not upon upper-case metaphorical concepts such as God, or Nature. Ruskin consistently writes as though meaning is located beyond the individual consciousness, while denying that consciousness, with its individuality and its suspect ignorance, the right to dictate the boundaries of contingent knowledge.

It has been a commonplace of modernism that the artist and his works be taken at his own estimation. Ruskin, in his over-reaching modesty, rejects the tendency to equate self with world. 'With Shelley, I loved blue sky and blue eyes, but never in the least confused the heavens with my own poor little Psychidion' (*Praeterita*; xxxv. 220). In literature as in the visual arts, Ruskin's aesthetic demands a return to first principles, to an apprenticeship of vision which, for one so catholic in his knowledge and interests, implies the rejection of any premature espousal of limiting formal patterns. The divergent aspects of his theories – on the one hand aspiring to an ever-widening knowledge of what has been achieved, and on the other wishing oneself beyond knowledge towards a primal innocence of vision – result in works which are permanently provisional.

For Ruskin as for Proust, illumination is intermittent, and the writing of experience must reflect or enact this intermittence. Unlike Proust, however, Ruskin seems unwilling or unable to compromise his insight by imposing a general, all-explaining structure on his work. The unfinished *Praeterita*, where the sequence of illuminations seems unresolved, and the very repetition of moments of epiphany connotes failure, suggests a want of confidence in any rhetoric of conversion. A similar judgement was made in the case of the unfinished *A la recherche du temps perdu*:

Proust's conclusion has not been published yet, and his admirers say that when it comes everything will fall into its place, times past will be recaptured and fixed, we shall have a perfect whole. I do not believe this. The work seems to me a progressive rather than an aesthetic confession, for with the elaboration of Albertine the author is getting tired. Bits of news may await us, but it will be surprising if we have to revise our opinion of the whole book. The book is chaotic, ill-constructed, it has and will have no external shape; and yet it hangs together because it is stitched internally, because it contains rhythm.¹⁴

Although the conclusive form of *Le Temps retrouvé* makes nonsense of Forster's predictions, some of his strictures concerning the unresolvable mass of the middle sections remain pertinent. The framework pre-elected for the novel seems to most readers too flimsy properly to contain the weight of unrevised experience presented in its central books. The containing volumes of *A la recherche*, *Swann* and *Le Temps retrouvé*, are still the most read and the most admired. Yet it is well established that both of these would have been expanded to something like the dimensions of the middle section had Proust's formal or writing procedures (unusually among modernist writers, these are not the same) not been denied by the deadlines of publisher and mortality. The closing cadences of *Le Temps retrouvé* argue for a greater degree of formal resolution than is actually attained.

A misinterpretation similar to Forster's is difficult to avoid when faced with the uncompleted *Praeterita*. Ruskin did set

out a scheme which might allow a provisional estimation of what he might have achieved, and it certainly permits a more generous evaluation of what he did. He originally planned for *Praeterita* to comprise three books, each of twelve chapters. The third volume of the autobiography as we have it ends with chapter 4, 'Joanna's Care'. A manuscript scheme for the remainder of Book 3, reprinted as an appendix in the Library Edition, tells us much about Ruskin's working principles and the ultimate plan arrived at for his valedictory work. Most of *Praeterita's* chapter headings celebrate place names with a resonance which seems to suggest some sort of structural or thematic principle at work. Ruskin in fact uses places, and the names of places, in a way which undoubtedly foreshadows Proust's celebrated distinction between 'noms de pays – le nom' and 'noms de pays – le pays'. Ruskin explores, as does his disciple, the similarities and divergences between inner and outer topographies, between the physical fact of places and the mythic/symbolic resonance given them by art or word. The result is a kind of pilgrimage, whose purpose is to reconcile self with world by means of the word. The two paths of Proust's narrator's boyhood are thus reconciled in *Le Temps retrouvé*, although not in the way the narrator suggests, in the figure of Gilberte's daughter. This meeting of the paths is redundant in that for the reader there has never been a divergence. Both Swann's Way and the Guermantes Way have from the beginning of our experience of the book been equally charmed, the act of writing having already performed the magic which Proust has to rehearse for structural and rhetorical reasons in his final volume.

Ruskin's scheme for the completion of *Praeterita* shows a similar impulse at work. His lists of alternative chapter titles are an indication of how he sought the maximum resonance for each one. Other titles considered for 'Joanna's Care', for example, were 'The Lost Sunsets' or 'The Sunsets that Nobody Saw'. Titles seem to dictate subject matter, rather than the other way round, as though Ruskin's discursiveness could be tamed, closed in, only by the sibylline multivalency of a chapter heading. The proposed final chapters of *Praeterita* may suggest that Ruskin intended a grand *ricorso* in the Proustian manner: they are noted respectively as 'xi. *Shakespeare's*

Cliff. Early Dover returned to. Summing of literary purpose. Last review of England.’; ‘xii. *Calais Pier*. Early France returned to and ended with. Last review of France.’ (xxxv. 634). These are, admittedly, titles only, but they support the idea that, in *Praeterita*, Ruskin was tempted to a death-bed pact with a formalism which he spent the best part of his career rejecting.

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NOTES

¹ Virginia Woolf, ‘*Praeterita*’, in *Books and Portraits* (St Albans, 1979), pp. 76-9.

² *The Works of John Ruskin: The Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (1903-12), vol. xviii, p. 33. References in the text are to volume and page number of this edition.

³ Ruskin to R. C. Leslie, *ibid.*, p. liii.

⁴ Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 8.

⁵ References are to *In Search of Lost Time*, gen. ed. Christopher Prendergast (Harmondsworth, 2002).

⁶ *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 72.

⁷ Elizabeth Helsinger, ‘Ruskin and the Poets: Alterations in Autobiography’, *Modern Philology* (1976), 147.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 185-6.

⁹ Van Aken Burd, ‘Another Light on the Writing of *Modern Painters*’, *PMLA* 68 (1953), 755-63.

¹⁰ Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years* (New Haven and London, 1985), p. 68.

¹¹ Leo Bersani, ‘Déguisements du moi et art fragmentaire’, in Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov (eds.), *Recherche de Proust* (Paris, 1980).

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes* (Paris, 1979), p. 22.

¹³ John Dixon Hunt, *The Wider Sea: A Life of John Ruskin* (1982), p. 107.

¹⁴ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 166.