

Praeterita: The Autobiography of John Ruskin, ed. Kenneth Clark. 592 pp. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 1978. \$7.95. (Reprint of 1949 hardcover edition)

Recently reissued in paperback, this is Ruskin's most attractive book as well as (with the possible exception of Fors) his most personal. Observation of particulars abounds and generalization, while present, never obtrudes unduly on the writer's vivid rendering of fact: the fact, by turns, of personality, incident, locale and, most strikingly, pattern. Pattern may be decorative and two-dimensional (vide the famous carpet passage); fleetingly configurational (clouds); three-dimensional-decorative (Gothic filigree) or truly integral to volume, structure, as in Ruskin's geological descriptions. Ruskin's analysis of phenomena -- as Kenneth Clark has pointed out here and elsewhere -- tends to be strictly delimited, in a paradoxical way both embedded in context and withdrawn, "abstracted" from it. What matters is that the writer's eye remained steadfastly, inexorably, trained on its object and that generalization -- if and when it occurred -- was permitted free rein only after each feature of the object had been exhaustively studied and set down. What we have here is indeed a classical case (and vindication) of the tenet universalia post rem.

However tantalized the reader of Praeterita may find himself by Ruskin's omissions or exclusions -- so often commented on by Ruskin scholars and critics -- these hiatuses present no serious embarrassment to the continuity of discourse. Omission rarely results in fragmentation or in violent stylistic breaks and shifts: a credit to Ruskin's extraordinary skill as a "carpet weaver." It might also be pointed out that what was omitted has only external relevance to Ruskin's narrative scheme and that, furthermore, much of the documentary evidence we possess today was not within the writer's reach at the time but only discovered, or made available, after his death. If, as a result, the reader's curiosity finds itself frequently foiled, his psychological appetite unslaked, the blame should not be laid at the door of the author. As in the case of any autobiography, one may safely conjecture that some measure of conscious suppression or unconscious Verdrängung attended the composition of Praeterita; yet it seems to us that a work of this kind stands or falls by the character of its literary strategy and the final shape it takes as a literary whole, rather than by the fullness of report the author has been able or willing to vouchsafe his audience.

Ruskin's autobiography is not as widely read as it deserves. (Nor is every devotee of the Pre-Raphaelites ipso facto a devotee of Ruskin.) I would refer readers who are unfamiliar with Praeterita or familiar only with such set pieces as "The Springs of Wandel," "The Banks of