

RUSKIN'S LITERARY SELF

"If I get tiresome, the reader must skip," writes John Ruskin in Praeterita. "I write, for the moment, to amuse myself, and not him."¹ Rarely tiresome, Ruskin's memoirs are full of charm and care: love of parents, homage to the painter Turner, delight in visual effects, judgment of architecture. Of the many charms of this book, one of the chief is the unforced, almost incidental revelation of the author's literary bearing. Memories occasion side-comments on his own writing; so integrated with his career is this literary practice that hardly any subject is removed from consideration of his own prose. He speaks not only of his early reading but of his own poetic effusions; not only of his prose heritage but of his own style; not only of his judgment of Byron and Scott but of his mentors in non-fiction as well. Throughout Praeterita there are specifically literary comments, glancing as well as concentrated, that together outline a portrait of what Ruskin called, with tongue in cheek, "my dawning literary reputation" (I, 180). The "autobiography" bespeaks a self-conscious artist in prose, a disappointed poet, a literary critic of high order, and a man of modest pride; there is also a reader of novels unable to appreciate fiction. It is a somewhat complex portrait that the artist sketches, made all the more sketchy for its lacunae and its random recollection. My purpose is to retrace this sketch.

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By far the greatest influence on the young man was the Bible, which his mother had him read through annually and memorize parts of. Ruskin is clear about the effect of this regimen:

. . . once knowing the 32nd of Deuteronomy, the 119th Psalm, the 15th of 1st Corinthians, the Sermon on the Mount, and most of the Apocalypse, every syllable by heart, and having always a way of thinking with myself what words meant, it was not possible for me, even in the foolishlest times of youth, to write entirely superficial or formal English

(I, 3)

This is testimony to the power of a thoroughly learned and understood model of prose. Of course, the Bible and its content were to have other effects as well, but although Ruskin was to modify the influence of his Evangelical mother and the literal interpretation of the text, he would not -- perhaps could not -- claim a more pervasive influence on his prose. The child who learned chapters and chapters of the Bible would become the man of a powerful style.