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Proust's Translations of Ruskin Generative Degeneration

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What have John Ruskin and Marcel Proust to do with decadence and translation? The latter protested ‘je ne suis pas *décadent*’ [I am not *decadent*],¹ the former that he was ‘entirely opposed to translations.’² Proust associated the decadent sensibility with ‘insincérité [...], la religion des belles formes de langage, une perversion des sens, une sensibilité malade qui trouve des jouissances très rares dans de lointaines accordances, dans des musiques plutôt suggérées que réellement existantes’ [insincerity [...], worshipping beautiful forms of language, a perversion of the senses, a sickly sensitivity which relishes in esoteric pleasures of distant harmonies or in music which suggests rather than actually exists].³ Although he equated the decadent sensibility with an excessive aestheticism, Proust’s translations of Ruskin can be associated with another aspect of decadence, namely degeneration. As he had not studied English, he relied on his mother and his English-speaking friend Marie Nordlinger for a first draft of the translation, which he then improved stylistically. This collaborative work resulted in error and attrition as his translation was not just second, but third hand.⁴ Proust also deformed the Ruskin original with his overpowering peritext⁵ comprising numerous notes and a long introduction in which he relocates Ruskin’s work in a contemporary French context. At the same time, Proust’s critical apparatus enriches Ruskin’s text and illustrates George Steiner’s point that ‘[t]he work translated is enhanced’.⁶ Proust’s translations of Ruskin comply with Steiner’s definition of translation as ‘a mirror [that] not only reflects but generates light’, even if the light projected casts shadows of decadence.⁷ The aim of this essay is to examine in what ways Proust’s translation produced a degenerated version of Ruskin, while at the same time having a generative impact on his own writing.

Ruskin's Two Paths, Proust's Two Ways

Extracts from *The Two Paths* (1859) were amongst the first of Ruskin's works to be translated into French; they were published in the *Bulletin de l'Union pour l'action morale* where Proust read them.⁸ In his introduction to *The Two Paths*, Ruskin addresses the 'general student', whom he pictures at a crossroads faced with the option of taking the path towards aestheticism and dilettantism, or that leading to the higher spheres of cultured, ethical living. Ruskin presents the choice in figurative terms as:

decisive and conclusive, between two modes of study, which involve ultimately the development, or deadening, of every power he possesses. [...] [T]he way divides itself, one way leading to the Olive mountains – one to the vale of the Salt Sea. There are few crossroads, that I know of, from one to the other. Let him pause at the parting of THE TWO PATHS.⁹

As Jérôme Bastianelli has suggested, Ruskin's two paths, the one leading to the sterility of the Dead Sea and the other to the organic fertility of the trees on the Mount of Olives, might have inspired the two ways mapped in Proust's novel, deceptively paired in the titles *Du côté de chez Swann* and *Le Côté de Guermantes*.¹⁰ In fact, 'Swann's Way', that of the decadent aesthete, converges with the Guermantes' way, that of high society living, leading – in Ruskin's terms – to the Dead Sea. The other, an unidentified way, is that of 'la vraie vie'. This is the path of literature, the way taken by the narrator at the end of the novel – Proust's way: 'La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent réellement vécue, c'est la littérature' [Real life, life which has finally been discovered and enlightened, consequently the only life which has really been lived, is literature].¹¹

Proust's first publication, entitled *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* (1896) – which predates his translations of Ruskin – is the work of a young man hesitating at a crossroads where two paths part. This collection of short pieces pandered to contemporary taste for decadent aesthetics in its precious style and focus on such themes as morbidity, the oneiric, and music. In his preface to the volume, Anatole France evokes its decadent redolence: 'Il nous attire, il nous retient dans une atmosphère de serre chaude, parmi des orchidées savantes qui ne nourrissent pas en terre leur étrange et malade

beauté' [He attracts us and detains us in a hot-house atmosphere, amid wild orchids which do not feed on the earth for their strange, sickly beauty].¹²

Given his youthful claim that he was not decadent, Proust was keen to distance himself from the association suggested by France and consequently engaged in projects of a different nature. In a letter dated 5 December 1899, he tells Marie Nordlinger that he had turned to Ruskin after working on a lengthy project, the one which would be published posthumously as *Jean Santeuil*:

Je travaille depuis très longtemps à un ouvrage de très longue haleine mais sans rien achever. Et il y a des moments où je me demande si je ne ressemble pas au mari de Dorothea Brook [sic] dans *Middlemarch* et si je n'amasse pas des ruines. Depuis une quinzaine de jours je m'occupe à un petit travail absolument différent de ce que je fais généralement, à propos de Ruskin et de certaines cathédrales.

[I have been working for a long time on a long, drawn-out work but without finishing anything. There are moments when I wonder if I'm not like Dorothea Brooke's husband in *Middlemarch* and if I am not piling up ruins. For a fortnight I've been busy with a short piece which is completely different from what I do generally, about Ruskin and some cathedrals.]¹³

Proust draws a parallel here between his own work and Edward Casaubon's painstaking, sterile attempts to compile a 'Key to All Mythologies' in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871). He pinpoints the moment in the narrative when Casaubon's wife, Dorothea, fears she will have to devote her widowhood to 'sorting what might be called shattered mummies, and fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins'.¹⁴ Reading Ruskin rescued Proust from pursuing a project that was, to use Eliot's phrase, 'already withered in birth', as it inspired him to embark on a new, dynamic literary pilgrimage 'in search of lost time'.¹⁵

Proust describes his literary project using terms synonymous with decadence and its etymological origin referring to something falling to pieces, decaying, or degenerating. Decadence is also associated with the morbid and the unhealthy, both of which characterize Casaubon's work as a withered stillborn. In the *Petit Robert* dictionary, the first example given for decadence is 'l'acheminement vers la ruine' [the way to ruin], ruin being a key term used by Proust in his letter to Nordlinger. Proust attempts to break from decadence through the discipline of translation, before translating his 'self' into his novel. Indeed, Proust conceives of writing as a form of self-

translation: ‘le seul livre vrai, un grand écrivain n’a pas, dans le sens courant, à l’inventer puisqu’il existe déjà en chacun de nous, mais à le traduire. Le devoir et la tâche d’un écrivain sont ceux d’un traducteur’ [the only real book, a great writer does not have to invent in the usual sense of the word, but to translated. The duty and the task of a writer are those of a translator].¹⁶ Proust’s use of the terms ‘duty’ and ‘task’ here echo the vocabulary of Ruskin’s Protestant work ethic and illustrate how his writing continues to resonate with Ruskinian overtones despite his efforts to release himself from its influence.

Proust’s Two Ruskins

Proust translated two volumes by Ruskin: his *Bible d’Amiens* was published in 1904, followed by *Sésame et les lys* two years later. Both of Ruskin’s works – *The Bible of Amiens* (1880–85) and *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) – predate the decadent movement though they clearly show how Ruskin adamantly opposed the decadent sensibility, which he equated with corruption. Indeed, we might readily rewrite Huysmans’s title, *À rebours* and assemble Ruskin’s works under the heading ‘Against Decadence’.

The Bible of Amiens was the first – and only – volume of Ruskin’s series ‘Our Fathers have told us’, which he conceived as a multi-volume series on the history of Christendom addressed to young Christian readers. The last chapter of *The Bible of Amiens* is a guide to the western façade of the cathedral, where Ruskin identifies each image with the corresponding passage in the Bible. The version of *Sesame and Lilies* which Proust translated contains two lectures on the importance of literature: the first, ‘Of Kings’ Treasuries’, which will retain our interest here, was delivered on the occasion of the opening of a library in Manchester, and concentrates on the lesson of how to read and respect language, whereas the second, ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’, is devoted to the education of women.

Both volumes translated by Proust contain questions related to translation: *The Bible of Amiens* explicitly so, as it is concerned with the translation of the Word with a capital ‘W’ into

sculpted image and includes a chapter on St Jerome, patron saint of translation. As Proust writes, Ruskin sees the cathedral as ‘une sorte de livre ouvert, écrit dans un langage solennel’ [a kind of open book, written in a solemn language].¹⁷ The first lecture of *Sesame and Lilies* focuses on reading and on the single word. At one point, Ruskin digresses and discusses translation in an unexpected way, linking it to his social preoccupations. He uses the word ‘translator’ in its archaic sense, meaning mender of boots. Then, using red typeface to highlight the tragedy he is about to recount, he tells the story of a family whose main breadwinner was a translator, a poor cobbler, who died of cold and starvation.

Proust: Translator Extraordinary

It is initially surprising that Proust undertook the task of translating Ruskin, given that he did not study English and could not speak the language. His most significant contribution is the addition of what Genette defined as the peritext, in which he overwrote Ruskin’s original and made it his own. He did not intend his system of annotation to constitute a scholarly, exhaustive, critical apparatus, such as the one researched and compiled by the editors of the Library Edition. On the contrary, the connections he makes in his footnotes are essentially subjective.¹⁸ They can be likened to the mechanism of involuntary memory that Proust would turn into the central theme of his multi-volume novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*, as Proust suggests in his choice of terms describing these associations as sudden flashes of memory: ‘Ils ne sont rien qu’un éclair de la mémoire, une lueur de la sensibilité qui éclairent brusquement ensemble deux passages différents’ [They are nothing more than a flash of memory, a glimmer of sensitivity which suddenly illuminates and brings together two different passages].¹⁹ Proust used the critical apparatus of his translation as a means of self-expression. So, when asked whether he could annotate a translation of *Praeterita*, he laid down his condition for doing so saying that he would need a great deal of space and an entire independence of views.²⁰

For Proust, translation involved not simply moving from one language to another, but also transposition of the tonality of the text from one cultural framework to another. Translation for him was an exercise in chromatic transposition which required recasting what he called ‘the faded colours’ of Ruskin’s prose into another colour scale.²¹ He associated Ruskin’s ‘faded’ writing with the effete palette of the French decadent artist Gustave Moreau. In his first article on Ruskin in *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1 April 1900), republished as part of the preface to his translation of *The Bible of Amiens*, he likens Ruskin to Moreau’s figure of Apollo in a surprising comparison of the dour sage of Coniston with a languorous, homoerotic figure. No less surprising is the comparison of his weighty volumes to the diaphanous female muses attendant on Apollo: ‘Comme les “Muses quittant Apollon leur père pour aller éclairer le monde”, une à une les idées de Ruskin avaient quitté la tête divine qui les avait portées et, incarnées en livres vivants, étaient allées enseigner les peuples’ [Like the ‘Muses leaving their father Apollo to go and enlighten the world’, one by one Ruskin’s ideas had left the divine head which had borne them, and, embodied in living books, set out to teach the people].²² Proust calls on Moreau in another passage of the same preface, in reference to Ruskin’s senility. He compares it to the bird taking flight in Moreau’s painting of *Le Jeune homme et la mort* (1865): ‘à l’extrême vieillesse, la pensée désert a la tête de Ruskin, comme cet oiseau mystérieux qui dans une toile célèbre de Gustave Moreau n’attend pas l’arrivée de la mort pour fuir la maison’ [in very old age, thought deserted Ruskin’s head, like the mysterious bird in a famous canvas by Gustave Moreau which does not wait for the arrival of death to flee from the house].²³ Proust’s evocation of the ephobic young man at the door of the kingdom of death, with his crown of laurel leaves, colours with decadence the image of the elderly Ruskin beset with incipient insanity.

Proust himself questioned the pertinence of the parallel he drew between Ruskin’s earnest ethics and Moreau’s mystical aesthetics but justified it by arguing that both relied on symbolism, Moreau in his practice of art for art’s sake, Ruskin as a devotee of the religion of beauty:

Il n'y a certes pas lieu de comparer Ruskin à Gustave Moreau, mais on peut dire qu'une tendance naturelle, développée par la fréquentation des Primitifs, les avait conduits tous deux à proscrire en art l'expression des sentiments violents, et, en tant qu'elle s'était appliquée à l'étude des symboles, à quelque fétichisme dans l'adoration des symboles eux-mêmes, fétichisme peu dangereux d'ailleurs pour ces esprits si attachés au fond au sentiment symbolisé qu'ils pouvaient passer d'un symbole à l'autre, sans d'être arrêtés par les diversités de pure surface.

[There are no grounds for comparing Ruskin to Gustave Moreau, but one may say that a natural tendency, developed through familiarity with the Primitives, had led both to proscribe the expression of violent feelings in art, and, in as much as this was applied to the study of symbols, to proscribe a certain fetishism in the worship of symbols themselves, not a very dangerous fetishism for minds basically so attached to the feeling symbolized that they could pass from one symbol to another without being hindered by superficial diversity.]²⁴

As Robert Hewison points out, in '[c]omparing [Ruskin] with the Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau, a surprising but perceptive comparison, Proust detected an "adoration of the symbol for the symbol's sake";²⁵ in that sense, both practised a form of the 'Religion of Beauty' professed by Ruskin.²⁶

Associating Ruskin with Moreau is an eloquent example of how Proust coloured his translation with French references; others include Claude Monet's series of the façade of Rouen cathedral and Paul Helleu's impressionistic views of cathedral interiors, artists – like Moreau – whose work Ruskin did not know. A further step towards his independence from Ruskin was his appropriation of key elements from the texts he translated, which he incorporated into his own work inflecting them with his own associations. As we shall see, this is the case for the Madonna in Amiens and for the title of *Sesame and Lilies*.

The Madonna in Decadence

Ruskin's study of the statue of the Madonna in Amiens in *The Two Paths* was one of the first of his texts that Proust read.²⁷ Some thirty years before writing *The Bible of Amiens*, Ruskin had compared the Queen Madonna in Chartres with the 'Vierge dorée' in Amiens. The relevant passage in *The Two Paths*, which Proust quotes at length in a footnote to his *Bible d'Amiens*, is an extract from 'The

Deteriorative Power of Conventional Art over Nations’, a chapter whose title makes significant use of the verb ‘to deteriorate’ meaning to make worse, degenerate, or lose value.²⁸ According to Ruskin, the Madonna and the figures surrounding her in Chartres, dating from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, ‘possess a dignity and delicate charm’ which is lacking in later works. The earlier Madonna has ‘real nobleness of feature’ and the fall of her drapery is represented with ‘grace, mingled with severity’ producing ‘a most studied finish in composition, every part of the ornamentation tenderly harmonizing with the rest’.²⁹ In contrast, the Madonna in the south transept door of Amiens was sculpted at a later date, after sculpture had gained in dynamism:

the statue is now completely animated; it is no longer fixed as an upright pillar, but bends aside out of its niche, and the floral ornament, instead of being a conventional wreath, is of exquisitely arranged hawthorn. The work, however, as a whole, though perfectly characteristic of the advance of the age in style and purpose, is in some subtler qualities inferior to that of Chartres.³⁰

For Ruskin, the Amiens Madonna – despite her vitality – is less commendable because the sculptors had become more interested in the decorative frame surrounding her than in her figure and face. He even brands the development as ‘fatal’: ‘at this point a fatal change came over their aim. From the statue they now began to turn the attention chiefly to the niche of the statue, and from the floral ornament to the mouldings that enclosed the floral ornament.’³¹ Ruskin considered the attention paid to ornament to be a ‘catastrophe’ and this new priority to be ‘instant and irrevocable’. His terminology condemning how Gothic architecture perverted the foregoing ideals of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries anticipates characteristics of decadent art: ‘Architecture became in France a mere web of waving lines, – in England a mere grating of perpendicular ones. Redundance was substituted for invention, and geometry for passion; the Gothic art became a mere expression of wanton expenditure, and vulgar mathematics’.³²

Ruskin deplores how the frame no longer served its function of highlighting its contents but distracted the viewer from them by overlaying them with ornamentation: the ‘beautiful niche’ framing a ‘barren figure’, its ‘beautiful tracery’ comprising ‘withered flowers’.³³ In *The Bible of Amiens*, Ruskin pursues his study of the sculpted Madonnas as the embodiment of Ruskin’s two ways. He

distinguishes the Queen Madonna of the western façade of Amiens cathedral, akin to the upright, noble statue of Chartres, from the Nurse Madonna, or ‘Vierge dorée’, in the southern portal of the cathedral, who is more down-to-earth. Ruskin likens her to the mistress of the house and conflates the sacred with the secular in his portrait of her with her ‘nimbus switched a little aside too, like a becoming bonnet’.³⁴ In Ruskin’s eyes, this ‘pretty French Madonna’ is decadent on several counts. First of all, her niche is decorated to excess, although Ruskin concedes that the ‘hawthorn-blossom lintel [is] worth [...] looking at’;³⁵ secondly, she has usurped her place, supplanting St Honoré who originally occupied the niche; thirdly, she represents a degraded form of Catholicism which Ruskin believed played its part in the French Revolution. In the following portrait, he calls her a ‘soubrette’, a French term derived from eighteenth-century comedy and referring to the character of the pert, flirtatious maid. He also has her perform the etymological sense of the word ‘decadence’, in her metaphoric fall from her sacred pedestal:

A Madonna in decadence she is, though, for all, or rather by reason of all, her prettiness, and her gay soubrette’s smile; and she has no business there, neither, for this is St. Honoré’s porch, not hers; and grim and grey St. Honoré used to stand there to receive you, – he is banished now to the north porch, where nobody ever goes in. This was done long ago, in the fourteenth-century days, when the people first began to find Christianity too serious, and devised a merrier faith for France, and would have bright-glancing, soubrette Madonnas everywhere – letting their own dark-eyed Joan of Arc be burnt for a witch. And thenceforward, things went their merry way, straight on, ‘ça allait, ça ira,’ to the merriest days of the guillotine.³⁶

At this point in the translation, Proust adds a footnote referring the reader to the passage in *Modern Painters* in which Ruskin evokes how the dignified Queen Madonna fell – or to use his term ‘sank’³⁷ – and became a more human Nurse Madonna, a dethronement which he would have chastised as decadent had he known that artistic movement: ‘In early times *art was employed for the display of religious facts*; now, *religious facts were employed for the display of art*’.³⁸ As a result, according to Ruskin: ‘the crowned Queen-Virgin of Perugino sank into a simple Italian mother in Raphael’s Madonna of the Chair’.³⁹ In the passage cross-referenced by Proust, Ruskin adds that this is emphatically not a ‘healthy change’.

Proust clearly had his translation of Ruskin in mind when writing *À la recherche du temps perdu*. He translated Ruskin's 'Madonna in decadence' into his novel in the sense that a saint's relics are literally translated – meaning carried – from one place to another. He positions her in the porch of the church in Balbec, which his narrator visits, inspired by his reading of Ruskin.⁴⁰ The Ruskinian intertext is more explicit in some manuscript versions of this passage, where Balbec was identified as 'Amiens'.⁴¹ Proust constructs a setting for the Madonna made up of all the degraded aspects of modern life deplored by Ruskin. The church is integrated into a hub of urban activity, next to a savings bank and an election campaign billboard, opposite a Café advertising 'Billards' on its façade, on the square where two tramway lines intersect. It is further desacralized by the smells coming from the nearby pastry-chef's kitchens.⁴² Proust's church in Balbec shares all the aspects of the European cities whose degradation Ruskin railed against in *Mornings in Florence* (1875), beginning with the space in front of the Campanile there:

Which spot of ground the modern Florentine has made his principal hackney-coach stand and omnibus station. The hackney coaches, with their more or less farmyard-like litter of occasional hay, and smell of variously mixed horse-manure, are yet in more permissible harmony with the place than the ordinary populace of a fashionable promenade would be, with its cigars, spitting, and harlot planned fineries [...].

The front of Notre Dame of Paris was similarly turned into a coach-office when I last saw it – 1874. Within fifty yards of me as I write, the Oratory of the Holy Ghost [in Venice] is used for a tobacco-store, and in fine, over all Europe, mere Caliban bestiality and Satyric ravage – staggering, drunk and desperate, into every once enchanted cell where the prosperity of kingdoms ruled, and the miraculousness of beauty was shrined in peace. Deluge of profanity, drowning dome and tower in Stygian pool of vilest thought, – nothing now left sacred, in the places where once – nothing was profane.⁴³

Proust's fictional description of the church in Balbec, implanted in its banal, vulgar surroundings, reads like a literary transposition of Ruskin's fiery criticism. As does the account of the narrator's disappointment when he sees the statue of the Madonna he knew from reproductions. It is degraded, corrupted or, as Proust wrote, 'métamorphosée' [metamorphosed].⁴⁴ The statue is covered in soot, and appears to be a little old lady, brought down to earth and so close that her wrinkles can be counted. The narrator imagines scrawling his name in the soot, an act anticipating

contemporary graffiti which – if realized – would have made him into one of those tourists Ruskin holds in contempt, who deface sacred buildings by leaving a mark of their presence.

The narrator's disappointment is countered later on by the painter Elstir's lesson on the aesthetics of the sculpted façade of the church. His words resonate with Ruskin's precepts and preoccupation with the translation of Word into Image on ecclesiastical buildings, though Proust marks his distance from Ruskin here with his incongruous reference to the symbolist art of his contemporary, Odilon Redon: 'Il y a certaines paroles de l'office de l'Assomption qui ont été traduites avec une subtilité qu'un Redon n'a pas égalée' [Some words from the liturgy for the Assumption have been translated with a subtlety that a Redon cannot match].⁴⁵

The Word in Decadence

Ruskin's study of ecclesiastical art in *The Bible of Amiens* shows how his notion of decadence was related to the degeneration of late-Gothic sculpture. Paul Bourget's theory of decadence in his famous essay on Charles Baudelaire helps specify in what ways the text of Proust's second translation, *Sesame and Lilies*, can also be related to decadence. Ruskin would have agreed with Bourget's account of how society can lapse into decadence because individuals do not work together for the collective good: their independence leads to anarchy and the decadence of society as a whole. Bourget draws a parallel with language which slips into decadence when it is no longer viewed as an organic whole but each component – a page of text, a single sentence, an individual word – thrives independently.⁴⁶ Ruskin was concerned to counter the social degeneration Bourget describes here: he stressed the importance of a tightly woven social fabric, resistant to class distinction and inequality. His social preoccupations laid out in *Unto this Last* (1860) transpire at the end of *Sesame and Lilies*, most explicitly in a first version of the text where the 'treasuries of the kings' are not the books held in libraries, but 'the streets of their cities' which socially minded leaders transform into 'crystalline pavements' for everyone's benefit.⁴⁷ Proust's own interest in Ruskin's work was less in his social thought than in his reflections on language, reading, and art.

Ruskin adopts a condescending tone when instructing his listeners or readers how to read and write, concentrating on the meaning of single words: 'I tell you earnestly and authoritatively (I *know* I am right in this), you must get into the habit of looking intensely at words, and assuring yourself of their meaning, syllable by syllable – nay, letter by letter'.⁴⁸ Ruskin considers his readers to be Philistines quite unlike the 'well-educated gentleman' who is schooled in:

learning in the *peerage* of words; knows the words of true descent and ancient blood, at a glance, from words of modern canaille; remembers all their ancestry, their intermarriages, distant relationships, and the extent to when they were admitted, and offices they held, amount the national noblesse of words at any time, and in any country.⁴⁹

A close study of how Proust translated two passages in *Sesame and Lilies* will reveal how he adopted Ruskin's thought while transforming the text through copious annotation.

The first example occurs in the passage on masked words which Ruskin claims can even 'do deadly work sometimes'.⁵⁰ Here Proust makes a cross-reference to the first Ruskin volume he had translated, sending the reader back to the passage describing the tomb of Évrard de Fouilloy.⁵¹ Ruskin had transcribed the thirteenth-century Latin inscription on the frame surrounding the recumbent statue and considered how it could be translated into English. He focused on these lines describing how Evrard behaves towards others:

Vbis,
Mitib agnus erat, tumidis leo, lima supbis.

To words of men,
If gentle, a lamb; if violent, a lion; if proud, biting steel.⁵²

Ruskin explains that English cannot translate 'lima' by the word 'file' because the latter has been corrupted by its use in slang to mean a swindler, or cheat (probably derived from the verb 'to defile'). The contamination is close to blasphemy and exemplifies how language has been degraded:

I could not end my translation of this epitaph, as the old Latinist could, with the exactly accurate image: 'to the proud, a file' – because of the abuse of the word in lower English, retaining however, quite shrewdly, the thirteenth-century idea. But the *exact* force of the symbol here is in its allusion to jewellers' work, filing down facets. A proud man is often also a precious one: and may be made brighter in surface, and the purity of his inner self shown, by good *filing*.⁵³

Ruskin's note on translating 'lima' and Proust's cross-referencing foreground an example of the degenerative use of language and an implicit plea to counter it.

The second example occurs in Ruskin's discussion of social rank, when he suggests that to be a king one does not have to be sovereign of a realm but well-read and in possession of a good library. He embeds a reference to Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*, in his statement: 'It matters very little whether Trent cuts you a cantel out here, or Rhine rounds you a castle less there'.⁵⁴ The quotation comes from Act III, Scene One, when Hotspur – his finger on the map – complains that the division of the kingdom is unfair as the course of the river Trent reduces his portion. Proust's footnote quotes seventeen lines from the play in translation whereas the editors of the complete works of Ruskin cite only these three:

See how this river comes me cranking in,
And cuts me from the best of all my land
A huge half-moon, a monstrous cantel out.⁵⁵

Proust gave more context to Ruskin's quotation and included a note of humour not cited by Cook and Wedderburn when he added Glendower's rejoinder from several lines further down to the effect that they will have the course of the river changed to suit Hotspur: 'come, you shall have Trent turn'd'.⁵⁶ His footnote confirms that his task as translator included compiling notes apprising his readers of cultural references they might not know.

Proust's translation was alert to Ruskin's choice of the word 'canel', which derives from the word 'scant' meaning meagre or small in quantity. He explained in a letter to the first editor of this text that he had made a studied choice of terms which should not be corrected on the proofs:

Je n'ai aucune recommandation spéciale à faire sauf pour 'château' et 'château' (au commencement du § 44). Ce n'est pas une erreur, j'ai bien mis une fois 'château' et l'autre fois 'château'. Il y a dans le texte 'canel' et 'castel' et j'ai ainsi conservé, voire renforcé, l'allitération. Je sais bien que château n'est pas très usité mais canel ne l'est pas davantage. C'est d'ailleurs le même mot, et d'une dérivation identique.

[I have no particular recommendation to make except concerning 'château' and 'château' at the beginning of § 44. It's not a mistake: in one instance I put 'château' and in the other 'château'. 'Canel' and 'Castel' are in the original text and I have kept – and even improved – the alliteration. I know very well that 'château' is not often used but 'canel' isn't either. Besides it's the same word with an identical etymology.]⁵⁷

Proust's translation of these paired words shows how he had taken on board Ruskin's lesson that their original meanings should not be degraded.

Proust's translation of Ruskin's passage on masked words again illustrates how attentive he was to Ruskin's choice of vocabulary and how he punctuates the translation with his own thoughts and references. According to Ruskin, masked words are polysemous and can thus lead to ambiguity or imprecise usage; loose in meaning, they are, in a word, degenerate. In his definition of them, he adopts an imperious tone and strengthens his message through alliteration and the repeated use of the verbal participle. Ruskin is prescient when he speaks of 'infectious "information"', or rather deformation, which sounds like he is railing against what is today called fake news:

words, if they are not watched, will do deadly work sometimes. There are masked words droning and skulking about us in Europe just now, – (there never were so many, owing to the spread of a shallow, blotching, blundering, infectious 'information,' or rather deformation, everywhere, and to the teaching of catechisms and phrases at school instead of human meanings) – there are masked words abroad, I say, which nobody understands, but which everybody uses, and most people will also fight for, live for, or even die for, fancying they mean this or that, or the other, of things dear to them: for such words wear chameleon cloaks – 'ground-lion' cloaks, of the colour of the ground of any man's fancy: on that ground they lie in wait, and rend them with a spring from it.⁵⁸

In a note on the cover of one of the notebooks he used for his translation, Proust queries the meaning of 'ground-lion cloaks' in that sentence.⁵⁹ He learned that the word 'chameleon' came from the Greek meaning 'ground-lion' and thus added a footnote to that effect.⁶⁰ This close attention to the etymology of words proves how scrupulous Proust was as a translator, even though he took the liberty of transforming the original text with his invasive annotation.

Proust's idiosyncratic translation process reverses the movement of Bourget's definition of decadence as the disintegration of a whole into separate entities: he reconstructs Ruskin's text in French by reassembling the individual pieces after he has made sense of them. Although he did not speak English, Proust learnt Ruskin's language as he explains: 'à force d'approfondir le sens de chaque mot, la portée de chaque expression, le lien de toutes les idées, je suis arrivé à une

connaissance [...] précise de ce texte' [By delving into the meaning of each word, the thrust of each expression, the link between all the ideas, I have arrived at a precise knowledge of his text].⁶¹

As Proust had turned to translation to rid himself of the decadent taint with which Anatole France had branded him, he would have been heartened by Albert Sorel's review of his first translation of Ruskin:

Cet esthète pénétré ne traduit pas ses pensées en prose décadente. Il écrit, quand il médite ou rêve, un français flexible, flottant, enveloppant, en échappements infinis de couleurs et de nuances, mais toujours translucide, et qui fait songer aux verreries où Gallé enferme ses lianes.

[This committed aesthete does not translate his thoughts into decadent prose. He writes, when he meditates or dreams, flexible French which is floating, enveloping, fugitive in myriad colours and nuances, but always translucent, resembling Gallé's glass works festooned with creepers.]⁶²

Although Sorel asserts that Proust's writing is not decadent, he nevertheless associates him with decadence, speaking of him not as a disciplined translator but as one who indulges in meditation and dreams. Sorel might praise the limpidity of Proust's prose, but he also finds it ethereal, hinting that the translator is subjective as he 'meditates and dreams'. The adjectives he uses to describe his prose – floating, fugitive, enveloping – and the association with Émile Gallé's art nouveau glass work – are all redolent of decadence.

Proust's translations of Ruskin have a decadent resonance, but it is thanks to them that Ruskin's critical fortune was assured in France. Proust tried in vain to break free of Ruskin's influence but his language bears its mark. He even borrows Ruskin's terminology to thank Gabriel Mourey, the editor of the periodical *Les Arts de la vie*, for agreeing to publish extracts of *Sésame et les lys* before the complete volume was issued by the *Mercure de France*. He echoes the titles of the two lectures when he refers to Ruskin as a king and to his books as 'treasures' or 'lilies'. For Proust, translation is a form of transplanting from the soil of one land to another.

Je suis bien heureux de penser que dans cette atmosphère fraternelle les beaux lys ruskiniens que j'avais l'audace sacrilège de vouloir transplanter, ne se sentiront pas dépaysés, pourront retrouver sur cette terre hospitalière et amie une vie nouvelle et prolongée.

Un roi comme Ruskin se décidant à passer le détroit, avec ses trésors, vous étiez le seul personnage assez qualifié chez qu'il pût descendre.

[I am delighted to think that the beautiful Ruskinian lilies which I had the sacrilegious audacity to transplant will not feel disoriented in that congenial atmosphere, that they will find a friendly, hospitable soil to embed in and enjoy a new and prolonged life.

When a king like Ruskin decides to cross the channel, with his treasures, you are the only one in a position to offer him hospitality.]⁶³

Proust's objective to bring new and prolonged life to Ruskin's work was fulfilled in that he ensured its afterlife in France. Proust was not overstating the case when he qualified himself as boldly sacrilegious. Given his invasive presence as a translator, and the way he imposed his cultural references onto Ruskin, it could be said that he desacralized Ruskin's work and contaminated it with decadent references. His translation is degenerative in the sense that it derives and deviates from the original. In turn, it has given way to another, bizarre distortion which moves even further away from Ruskin: Goodlake Lowen's retranslations of *La Bible d'Amiens* and *Sésame et le lys* into English, for example, use Proust's version as the source text.⁶⁴ The French references Proust added to Ruskin's text and the decadent resonance he lent it are thus transferred back into the English language.

Proust's translation not only ensured Ruskin's reception in France, it also stimulated the germination of his own novel. Any reader of *À la recherche du temps perdu* would have difficulty finding explicit references to Ruskin in it. Indeed, Proust only names him on four occasions though he constructs his work on an extensive Ruskinian intertext. Ruskin is embedded in Proust's novel as firmly as involuntary memory is its central theme. Reading and translating Ruskin, Proust paused at the crossroads and chose his path, following the way of literature which he had identified in Ruskin. However, he parted from him by practising a form of the religion of beauty which put aesthetics before ethics. Twice in his novel he contradicts Ruskin's work ethic by associating his name with a sybaritic lifestyle: the first pictures the narrator in Venice indulging in a sherbet at Florian's while reading *The Stones of Venice*, and the second borrows Ruskin's masked word 'sesame' and adopts it as the password to a homosexual brothel. In this way Ruskin's texts have become both tainted with degeneracy and indissociable from Proust. In turn, Proust's text bears the

watermark of Ruskin's presence just as his language has an English ring to it. As Daniel Karlin has demonstrated in *Proust's English*,⁶⁵ Proust wrote a kind of 'langue intermédiaire' [intermediary language],⁶⁶ mediating between English and French. His activity as a translator helped him forge his own style, creating a new 'langue étrangère' [foreign language]⁶⁷ which he defined as the hallmark of a work of literature.

¹ Marcel Proust, *Correspondance*, ed. by Philip Kolb, 21 vols (Paris: Plon, 1970–1993), XXI, p. 552. Letter written in May 1888. Emphasis in original. All translations are my own.

² John Ruskin, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903–1912), XXXIV, p. 616.

³ Proust, *Correspondance*, XXI, p. 552.

⁴ See Jérôme Bastianelli, *Dictionnaire Proust-Ruskin* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017), pp. 239–48.

⁵ In *Seuils*, Gérard Genette defines this term as the text which frames the body of the text (the title, subtitle, preface, footnotes, etc.). See Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 10.

⁶ George Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975. Repr. 1998), p. 316.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁸ The *Bulletin de l'Union pour l'action morale* published two lines from *St Mark's Rest* in November 1893 followed by longer extracts from his other works starting in 1895.

⁹ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XVI, pp. 253–54.

¹⁰ See Bastianelli, *Dictionnaire Proust-Ruskin*, pp. 714–15.

¹¹ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1987–1989), IV, p. 474.

¹² Marcel Proust, *Jean Santeuil*, précédé de *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, ed. by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1971), p. 4.

¹³ Proust, *Correspondance*, II, p. 377.

¹⁴ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 449–50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

¹⁶ Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, IV, p. 469.

¹⁷ John Ruskin, *La Bible d'Amiens*, trans. by Marcel Proust (Paris: Mercure de France, 1904), p. 45.

¹⁸ See John Ruskin, *Sésame et les lys*, trans. by Marcel Proust [1906], ed. by Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1987), p. 38: 'Ces rapprochements tels que je les conçois sont essentiellement individuels'.

¹⁹ Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Sésame*, p. 38.

²⁰ See Proust, *Correspondance*, VIII, p. 102.

²¹ See Proust, *Correspondance*, where he wrote 'Praeterita c'est écrit avec des couleurs "passées"' (VIII, p. 102).

²² Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Amiens*, p. 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁵ Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 193.

²⁶ This is the title of the first significant book on Ruskin to be published in France: Robert de la Sizeranne's *Ruskin et la religion de la beauté* (Paris: Hachette 1897).

²⁷ It was published in French translation in *Le Bulletin de l'union pour l'action morale* on 1 December 1896, pp. 37–44.

²⁸ Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Amiens*, pp. 260–62.

²⁹ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XVI, p. 279.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 281–82.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 283.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 282, n. 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, XXXIII, p. 128.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–29.

³⁷ Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Amiens*, pp. 323–24.

- ³⁸ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, V, p. 77. Emphasis in original.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 78.
- ⁴⁰ See Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, II, p. 9. The narrator's mother motivates him by evoking the 'voyageur ravi dont parle Ruskin' [the exalted traveller of whom Ruskin speaks].
- ⁴¹ See Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, II, p. 889, for a transcription of his working version.
- ⁴² Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, II, p. 19.
- ⁴³ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XXIII, pp. 413–14.
- ⁴⁴ Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, II, p. 21.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 197.
- ⁴⁶ Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, 3 vols (Paris: Plon, 1924), I, pp. 19–26.
- ⁴⁷ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XVIII, p. 105, n. 1.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 64. Emphasis in original.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 65. Emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 66.
- ⁵¹ He refers the reader to *The Bible of Amiens* IV, §25. See Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Sésame*, p. 142.
- ⁵² Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XVIII, p. 139.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 141. Emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 101.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., n. 4.
- ⁵⁶ See Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Sésame*, p. 229.
- ⁵⁷ Unpublished letter from Proust to Gabriel Mourey, transcribed in the *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes*, 45 (2015), p. 225. Emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁸ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XVIII, p. 66.
- ⁵⁹ The notebook belongs to the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*. Classmark: N.A.fr. 16628.
- ⁶⁰ He made the correction of the proofs, see N.A.Fr. 16621 95 r^o, and Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Sésame*, p. 143, n. 32.
- ⁶¹ Proust, *Correspondance*, III, p. 220.
- ⁶² Albert Sorel, 'Variétés: Pèlerinage de beauté; *La Bible d'Amiens*, de John Ruskin, traduite et annotée, avec une préface, par Marcel Proust', *Le Temps*, 11 July 1904, p. 3.
- ⁶³ Proust, *Correspondance*, IV, p. 124.
- ⁶⁴ See R. A. Goodlake Lowen, trans., *Proust by Way of Ruskin*, 2 vols (New York: Bell & Clews, 2014).
- ⁶⁵ See Daniel Karlin, *Proust's English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- ⁶⁶ Proust, *Correspondance*, X, p. 321.
- ⁶⁷ The full quotation reads: 'Les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère' [Beautiful books are written in a kind of foreign language]. See Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, ed. by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1971), p. 305.