

Ruskin's Struggle for Coherence:
Self-Representation through Art, Place and Society

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Edited by

Rachel Dickinson and Keith Hanley



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For Marion McClintock

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Abbreviations	xii
Introduction	xiii
Chapter One	1
Ruskin and the Sea Tony Tanner	
Chapter Two.....	21
Ruskin and the Sense of an Ending: Apocalypse and Literary Form Clive Wilmer	
Chapter Three.....	37
Sex and the City—Death in Venice: an Argument about Ruskinian Myth Robert Hewison	
Chapter Four.....	52
Ruskin’s Holy Land: The Sacred Language of Landscape Keith Hanley	
Chapter Five.....	76
Ruskin’s Mountain Gloom Francis O’Gorman	
Chapter Six.....	90
A Fine Grotesque or a Pathetic Fallacy?: The Role of Objects in the Autobiographical Writing of Ruskin and Proust Alison Milbank	

Chapter Seven	106
A Sublime of Memory: Ruskin’s <i>Praeterita</i> Debora Sherman	
Chapter Eight.....	121
Recontextualizing “The Two Boyhoods”: Ruskin, Thornbury and the Double Lives of Turner Andrew Leng	
Chapter Nine	138
Ruskin, Authority, and Adult Education David Thiele	
Chapter Ten.....	154
Reading <i>Unto This Last</i>—A Transformative Experience: Gandhi in South Africa Judith M. Brown	
Works Cited	166
List of Contributors	177
Index.....	180

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Chapter One: Ruskin and the Sea

Fig. 1 Ludolph Bakhuizen (Backhuysen) *Boats in a Storm* (1696). By Permission of the Trustees of Dulwich Picture Gallery.

Fig. 2 J. M. W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhon Coming On* (1840); “The Slave Ship”, photogravure from the painting. (3.PL12, facing 3.572).

Fig. 3 J. M. W. Turner, *Land’s End*. Line engraving after a drawing, by G. Cooke, in *The Southern Coast of England* (London: J. S. Virtue, 1892).

Fig. 4 J. M. W. Turner, *Snow Storm: Steam Boat off a Harbour Mouth*. Engraving in Frederick Wedmore’s *Turner and Ruskin*, vol.2 (London: George Allen, 1900).

Fig. 5 J. M. W. Turner, *Scarborough*. Engraving by T. Lupton, reproduced in *The Harbours of England*. (13.PL12, facing 13.73).

Chapter Four: Ruskin’s Holy Land

Fig. 1 John Ruskin, *Mont Blanc and the Lake of Geneva from the Jura* (1835). From a collection of sales cuttings compiled by J. S. Dearden, The Ruskin Library, University of Lancaster.

Fig. 2 J. M. W. Turner, *Kirby Lonsdale Churchyard*. Drawn c.1818. Engraving by C. Heath, 1822, for T. D. Whitaker’s *An History of Richmondshire* (London: Longman, 1823).

Fig. 3 J. M. W. Turner, *View in Jerusalem. Near the Gate of St. Stephen, traditionally called the Pool of Bethesda*. Engraving by E. Finden from C. Barry’s sketch, in T. H. Horne’s *Landscape Illustrations of the Bible*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1835).

Fig. 4 J. M. W. Turner, *Mount Lebanon and Convent of St Antonio*. Engraving by W. Finden from C. Barry’s sketch, in T. H. Horne’s *Landscape Illustrations of the Bible*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1835).

Fig. 5 J. M. W. Turner, *The Desert of Sinai. With the Rock said by the Arabs to be that which Moses Struck*. Engraving by E. Finden from Major Felix’s sketch, in T. H. Horne’s *Landscape Illustrations of the Bible*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1835).

Fig. 6 J. M. W. Turner, *Sinai's Thunder*. Intaglio print from *The Poetical Works of Thomas Campbell* (London: Moxon, 1837).

Fig. 7 David Roberts, *Convent of the Terra Santa, Nazareth*. Lithograph after drawing, from *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia*, 6 vols. (London: Day, 1855-6).

Fig. 8 William Holman Hunt, *The Scapegoat* (1854-5). By Permission of the National Museums Liverpool (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight).

Chapter Six: A Fine Grotesque or a Pathetic Fallacy?

Fig. 1 John Ruskin, "Plate XIV [sketch from the porch of the booksellers, Rouen]". Engraving by R. P. Cuff, in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. (7.PL14, facing 7.222).

Fig. 2 "True and False Griffins". Engraving by R. P. Cuff: the "True Griffin [medieval]" from a sketch by John Ruskin; the "False Griffin [classical]" from an unidentified lithograph, in *Modern Painters*. (5.PL1, facing 5.141).

Fig.3 John Tenniel. Illustration of the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon from Chapter 9, "The Mock Turtle's Story", in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

Fig. 4 Linley Sambourne, "Lady of the Lake Loquitur", from *Punch, Or: The London Charivari* (Feb. 5, 1876).

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An earlier version of the essay by Andrew Leng has been published in *Prose Studies* 28.1 (April 2006).

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ABBREVIATIONS

Unless otherwise stated, all citations from Ruskin are referred to parenthetically within the text by volume and page number from *The Works of John Ruskin* (Library Edition), 39 volumes, edited by E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-12).

References to Ruskin's published diaries are to *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, 3 volumes, edited by Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-9), referred to in notes as *Diaries* by volume and page number.

INTRODUCTION

In the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin decided to avoid theoretical debates on the subject of the various materials which make up mountains, and to use a simple three-fold division instead. He separates them into “hard, and (generally) central, masses of Crystalline Rocks”; “less hard substances, which appear compact and homogeneous, which we call Coherent Rocks”; and Diluvium “for the scattered debris” (6.133). Then, having established those categories, he begins to problematise their absoluteness—between each other and within themselves. Though he had, for example, “resolved to give generally the term ‘coherent’ to those rocks which appeared to be composed of one compact substance, not of several materials”, he proceeds to consider the qualifications required in describing the “slaty coherents”:

But, as in all the arrangements of Nature we find that her several classes pass into each other by imperceptible gradations, and that there is no ruling of red lines between one and the other, we need not suppose that we shall find any plainly distinguishable limit between the crystalline and the coherent rocks.

The transition on one level, between “a series of rocks which possess an imperfectly crystalline character, passing down into simple coherence”, is “effected through different kinds of slate” (6.156). And on the other, as the slates are themselves laminated, though they preserve “firmness of form” (6.158), they are yet liable to become broken down at the edge, and pass into dust or mud.

I take those rock samples, because Ruskin did everywhere, as much more than geological specimens. Particularly in *The Ethics of the Dust* and *Deucalion*, they take on vast microcosmic meanings when seen in the light of natural theology, Romantic constructions of nature, mythic associations, and aesthetic mediations. Like the stones he refers to in his first significant work, *The Poetry of Architecture*, which are both natural products and potential building blocks, his stones lie on the indeterminate cusp between nature and culture. What I wish to fix on in the text above is the notion of “coherence”: here a term for geophysical formations, but in the context of Ruskin’s work at large, on the point of becoming metaphorical—bordering on other layers of meaning.

Form, lamination and flow. Characteristically, the chapter opens out into the significances for human geography of “the compact coherent rocks [which] are appointed to form the greatest part of the earth’s surface, and by their utility, and easily changed and governed qualities, to tempt man to dwell among them”

(6.172). Before Auden's, it turns into Ruskin's "In Praise of Limestone" and evokes scenery as familiar and comfortable as Tolkien's Shire, underlying "the pretty scenery of the inhabited globe. The sweet winding valleys, with peeping cliffs on either side; the light, irregular wanderings of broken streamlets; the knolls and slopes covered with rounded slopes]" (6.163-4). The cultural effects of occupying an adaptable, temperate middle ground become explicit:

I believe, for general development of human intelligence and sensibility, country of this kind is about the most perfect that exists. A richer landscape, as that of Italy, enervates, or causes wantonness; a poorer contracts the conceptions, and hardens the temperament of both mind and body; and one more curiously or prominently beautiful deadens the sense of beauty. (6.171-2)

But nothing there is immutable. As commonly in Ruskin, the fate of his superlative ("the most perfect that exists") is to be the rhetorical crest of a wave which will surely fall, and "[e]ven what is here of attractiveness,—far exceeding, as it does, that of most of the thickly-peopled districts of the temperate zone,—seems to act harmfully on the poetical character of the Swiss" (6.171-2).

Within these various seams of meaning, however, lies the structuring principle which they also signify beyond themselves—namely, the interplay between the stratification and various spreadings of Ruskin's way of thinking, with its branching continuities. E. T. Cook writes in his introduction to the Index of the monumental Library Edition that "Ruskin distrusted systems and system-mongers; yet he held that there was a logical coherence in his thoughts, though he knew that it was obscured to careless readers by his discursive manner of writing" (39.xvii). Clear-cutting binaries, such as Bakhtin's monological/dialogical split, are constantly confused by another logic which is inherently contradictory, because both open-ended and closed at once. Ruskin defined it unashamedly in a well-known outburst from his "Cambridge Inaugural Address":

Perhaps some of my hearers this evening may occasionally have heard it stated of me that I am apt to contradict myself. I hope I am exceedingly apt to do so. I never met with a question yet, of any importance, which did not need, for the right solution of it, at least one positive and one negative answer, like an equation of the second degree. Mostly, matters of any consequence are three-sided, or four-sided, or polygonal [... .] For myself, I am never satisfied that I have handled a subject properly till I have contradicted myself at least three times. (16.187)

That is the shape of Ruskin's world-view as it sustains its faith in an all-embracing holism by developing any number of angles to accommodate whatever formation the matter takes. As he wrote of the organisation of the utopian Guild of St. George in *Fors Clavigera*: "I am wrong, even in speaking of it as a plan or a scheme at all. It is only a method of uniting the force of all good plans and wise schemes: it is a

principle and tendency, like the law of form in a crystal; not a plan" (28.235). The future Archbishop Frederick Temple understood that Ruskin's wandering thought thrived on—was generated by—an urge for ever greater refinements of form as his path to Truth:

Instead of the rules being despotic, the great artist usually proves his greatness by rightly setting aside rules; and the great critic is he who, while he knows the rule, can appreciate the "law within the law" which overrides the rule. In no other way does Ruskin so fully show his greatness in criticism as in that fine inconsistency for which he has been so often attacked by men who do not see the real consistency that lies beneath. (16.449 n.1)

It marks the creative pressure within Ruskin's critical writing.

Ruskin's polygonal geometry in general harnesses the history of its own formation, a potential which may be felt in the unfolding rhythm of his language but which becomes available for overall contemplation only when the writing is completed. He describes the effect in *The Stones of Venice*, for example, when he writes: "The reader will have some difficulty, I fear, in keeping clearly in his mind the various divisions of our subject; but, when he has once read the chapter through, he will see their places and coherence" (11.160). Similarly, he claimed to have "arranged" what he called "the entire coherence of art-philosophy [...] in the various books written during my professorship at Oxford" (34.557), referring particularly to his *Lectures on Art*. But the vibrancy of the design which comes close to what he called "life" can be best observed in its detailed particulars—the state in which he preferred to leave many of his drawings—rather than in the anxious division and subdivision of his writings into parts, sections, and paragraphs, or the often unresolved and unending production of serial works. So in *The Ethics of the Dust*, the "inherent virtues of the crystal", which determine its producing good effects, derive from the fact that "every atom of it" is "bright with coherent energy" (18.263).

Ultimately, there remains something mysterious—beyond the inflected past about the governing principle of Ruskin's coherence, about "How things bind and blend themselves together!" (35.561) A. N. Wilson conjures up the intuitive underpinning which many readers of Ruskin are content to relax into:

Yet the mystery of things—the compositions of crystals, the skill and vision which could produce a landscape by Turner or a face by Carpaccio—were part of the same unnameable Something which also made the over-privileged and solitary Ruskin

aware, as few social observers had been, of what did or did not allow societies to cohere.¹

The writers of the ten essays collected here are much more inquisitive about the origins, construction and procedures of Ruskinian coherence. Some attempt to define the forms and mythic structure of that “skill and vision” in Ruskin’s works and those he criticises. For one, that “mystery” is dangerously close to “mystification”, and for several it engages fruitfully with the “miraculous” in its material and spiritual paradoxes, changing water into wine. “Naming” the “unnameable” is also a recurrent concern in the account several of the essayists give of Ruskin’s demands for representation, whether realising scriptural Revelation, or enabling the material world to speak for itself, as well as exploring the possible content of his silences. Ruskin’s isolation, with its accompanying sense of failure and defeat, is the theme of another contribution, while other writers see the melancholy in the more promising terms of his aesthetic of the grotesque. One even enters into the “dark side” of Ruskin’s own relationship with Turner’s secret life, while another wants to break free of reductive preoccupations with biographical scandals to encounter the cultural life of Ruskin’s object of study, and the vitality of his ideas. The social reformism which Ruskin’s disappointments stung him into advocating are examined in relation to his conflicted educational theories, and the global disseminations of those initiatives are tracked through his influence on his most effective political disciple.

Overall, the volume tries to match Ruskin’s many-sidedness with its interdisciplinary approach. In differing degrees of application, these essays adopt the angles of many disciplines and methodologies, including art and literary criticism, aesthetics, formalism, myth criticism, cultural topography, cultural history and geography, philosophy, psychoanalysis, historicism, poststructuralism, disability studies, neo-colonialism, and sociological and educational theory. But there is no pretension to completion, either individually or altogether, as that would ignore precisely what all Ruskin’s writings are about. Proust recurs, because he learned and developed from Ruskin the realisation that all writing must be at one level a representation of the author’s experience, and so a work of memory which recovers the dimension of time, personal and historical, within art-objects and lived and imagined places. Ruskin’s construction of the good society, whatever its political description, is directed above all to the coherence of individual development within a hierarchised model of active affection, creativity and co-operative life. In this sense, all the contributions are concerned with self-

representation, and, in the present volume, specifically through art, place, and society.

Tony Tanner's essay, "Ruskin and the Sea", which opens this collection, is a virtuoso critical response to Ruskin's response to both the sea and Turner's paintings of it, all three entering into the representation of experiencing its physical reality and its tumultuous but coordinated rhythm which Ruskin above all captures in his prose descriptions: "The constantly shattering and incoherent sea is also 'perpetual form'; and that form is in the sea and the painting alike, because by now nature and Turner have become indistinguishable." Tanner juxtaposes Ruskin's descriptions and Turner's works, and plunges into the depths of meaning they uncover, avoiding explanatory framings, as do Ruskin and Turner, though with a passing nod to Charles S. Peirce's indexicality. He enters into the indeterminacies between matter and spirit, and simply articulates that painter's and writer's entwined grapplings with faith-based typologies on the border between eye-opening and revelation. Tanner also touches on the implications of self-reflexivity, which, again, he leaves finally within the works: "you wonder to what extent [Ruskin's] transcriptions of the turbulences of nature don't also reflect some inner torment of his own."

Clive Wilmer's "Ruskin and the Sense of an Ending: Apocalypse and Literary Form" is the exploration by a poet-critic of the interrelationship in Ruskin's writing of time and spatiality—what he calls "the shape of time". Following hints from the work of Frank Kermode, Wilmer draws out Ruskin's residual feeling for typological patterns and myth, which enables him "to counterpoint the open-ended linearity of our own era against the mythic closure of the old." Related to this interplay is Ruskin's use of both scientific and religious discourses and an inner division of what Heather Henderson refers to as "our sense of development over time" and "a sense of identity outside time". The imminent conflict is critical for the "Apocalypses", or endings, of Ruskin's writings, which reiterate "this tension between the Arcadian and the historical, the mythical and the scientific, the cyclic and the rectilinear", especially that of *Praeterita*. The avoidance of termination, and the return to the accumulations of memory is viewed not so much as a simple circumvention of death as an unwillingness to surrender immersion in the sensuous manifold of human life. The cyclicality resonates with Ruskin's primary mythic adherence to the Fall from Eden and a subsequent restoration, while the fulfilment and arrest are represented by the achieved art of Ruskin's prose.

The kind of plenitude which the most consummate and comprehensive artworks and buildings could represent was subject to the assaults of historical change, and the epitomising sites for his horror of decline and fall were key places,

such as Venice and the Alps, where the spatial representations preserved in personal and cultural memory were threatened by the passage of time. In Ruskin's fight for continuing self-representation within this conflicted world-view, key places operated as the texts through which he worked to regain the vision which had made them possible. In his early adulthood, Venice was *the* place for this interplay, and in his essay here, "Sex and the City—Death in Venice: An Argument about Ruskinian Myth", Robert Hewison, writing as a "sceptical historian", takes issue with autobiographical readings of *The Stones of Venice* as what he calls "a covert piece of life-writing." Illustrating this entrenched approach in Ruskin reception, he particularly points to the distracting lure of psycho-sexual interpretation after Freudian ideas of displacement and sublimation and their suggestive appropriations of "calendrical coincidences" between key dates in Ruskin's private family history and that of Venice. His bold conclusion "that Ruskin's marriage to Effie—and especially its non-consummation—has nothing to do with *The Stones of Venice*" is in part a bid to disembarass the book from a preoccupying fascination with Ruskin's troubled sexuality which has repeatedly hampered a serious engagement with the profounder references of his cultural critique. For Hewison, these involve "the greater myth of Venice", including the "mythic literary identities" the city has been given over centuries as "virgin, whore, Paradise, Babylon", which he unpeels as having constituted the city's individuality, though he does not see them either as what Ruskin's book in particular is finally most about. Neither autobiography nor cultural history, he prefers to view *The Stones of Venice* as "the biography of the city", or, in the sense proposed by John Rosenberg, who sees Ruskin's work in terms of Shakespeare and the Old Testament, as "a great moral drama".

My own essay, "Ruskin's Holy Land: the Sacred Language of Landscape", extends the concerns of Hewison's essay about the representational content of Ruskin's places to consider the relations between place and naming, the material and cultural, in the metaphorical adaptations of another critical site, the Holy Land. My "attempt to historicise [...] Ruskin's very special relation to the Word, that is to language, which in his case is radically represented by the language of the Bible" calls on some terms and ideas from Jacques Lacan to move to an understanding of Ruskin's formative "experience of a sort of visual language, the language of the eye", wherein word and image tended to merge, and which became paradigmatic for what he sought and demanded in cultural and aesthetic representation. Describing the western history of sacred geography, from Zechariah to 1917, I sketch a map of the actual but shifting destinations for pilgrimage, and then briefly recount the redirections and internalisations, national and mental, of the Protestant imagination. What emerges is Ruskin's personalised geography which, exemplified by places of natural beauty in Switzerland and northern England, he saw as offering the visual fulfilment of the written promise, or actualisation of the Word.

But the balance, as he anxiously knew, was precarious. The rerouting of the Protestant imagination is a transformation which depends on the primacy of the Biblical word, and one kind of associated Evangelicalism might lead to a blind literalism. On the other hand, too great an attention simply to reproducing actual appearances might lead to stultifying materialism. The desire for the correspondence of language and place became critical for Ruskin's views on sacred art, which I trace through his critiques of Turner and other Bible illustrators to arrive at his responses to the Pre-Raphaelites, and Holman Hunt in particular. Finally, Ruskin demanded that in order for Biblical subject matter to be adequately represented visually, the accurate drawing of natural phenomena had to cohere with the selection of personally experienced, and, better, deeply known landscapes.

"Where there is sorrow there is holy ground", Wilde wrote in *De Profundis*. "Someday people will realise what that means. They will know nothing of life till they do."² Ruskin's sufferings, and his private and public humiliations, do not benefit from Wilde's self-consolation in Francis O'Gorman's account of Ruskin's increasingly anguished awareness of the collapse of his early aspirations as a great cultural teacher, "Ruskin's Mountain Gloom". This essay, like Hewison's, eschews the private life to trace Ruskin's sense of defeat from the confident high-point of a sure sense of election in the first volume of *Modern Painters*, to its chastened apprehension of provinciality on his first tour of Italy without his parents in 1845 which found self-demolishing expression in his "Preface" to the third edition, 1846, to his reactions to the destruction of architectural monuments on the Continent, to the New Geology, the death of Turner and the disappointments of his initial expectations of Pre-Raphaelitism. O'Gorman describes the cumulative sense of failure of "his most significant efforts", which he lists as: "the response to his defence of Turner, the controversy of *Unto This Last* (1860), the irritation about his "abandonment" of art criticism after 1860, the perceived indifference of Oxford to his teaching in the 1870s, the problems of the Guild of St George, the hardly-heeded battle-cry of *Fors Clavigera* (1871-84)." The sequence culminates in what O'Gorman calls the "pathologization of literary failure in March 1880" when Ruskin claimed: "But I went mad because nothing came of my work."

For all Ruskin's embattled defensiveness, and the offer of alternative narratives of success—such as Carlyle's promise of posthumous recognition for culture heroes, and Ruskin's own "intriguing [...] privileging of failure and imperfection" in *The Stones of Venice*, he was unable to free himself from the melancholic conundrum which O'Gorman sees as centrally defined in the chapter, "Mountain Gloom", in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*. A compensatory proposition that what characterises greatness is its capacity to exhaust all future developments—what O'Gorman calls, in an ironisation of Harold Bloom's famous thesis, "the triumph of *not* having influence"—cannot efface "[t]he baffling logic of the influenceless hills", of the Alps actually producing what Ruskin saw as, in

O’Gorman’s words, “a dispiriting combination of physical deformity and mental deficiency” in their local populations. Ruskin in fact saw in this discontinuity “an exceptionally poignant emblem of his self-conception”—one which, representing “the inconsistency between responsibility and result”, O’Gorman argues problematises the ostensible symmetry of Ruskin’s polygonal framework, with its refusal of “the presence [...] of irresolvable contradiction as a description of the nature of the world”. “This struggle for coherence, or, rather, this struggle to understand coherence in the world’s order, could not be resolved.”

A further, less direct way of receiving Ruskin’s despair at the inefficacy of his cultural and social interventions may be the underlying fear of the arbitrariness of the human—including his own—imagination. Shelley had entertained the realisation among the Alps, and Hopkins wrote,

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed³

and the capacity of the material world to figure the defeat of human meanings is the distressing intimation Ruskin himself experiences at times, for example in the description of sunset “among the broken masses of pine forest [...] above the village of Champagnole, in the Jura” (8.221), in “The Lamp of Memory”, from *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. A “sudden blankness and chill” were cast upon the scene when the writer

endeavoured, in order more strictly to arrive at the sources of its impressiveness, to imagine it, for a moment, a scene in some aboriginal forest of the New Continent. The flowers in an instant lost their light, the river its music; the hills became oppressively desolate; a heaviness in the boughs of the darkened forest showed how much of their former power had been dependent upon a life which was not theirs. (223)

In her essay, “A Fine Grotesque or a Pathetic Fallacy? The Role of Objects in the Autobiographical Writing of Ruskin and Proust”, Alison Milbank celebrates the disjunction between the world of external objects and Ruskin’s subjectivism as the working of Ruskin’s “grotesque”, which is “an aesthetic mode that dramatises the fallenness of creation, and thus the fragmentary nature of the grotesque object and its distance from coherence.” Not only does this grotesque witness to “the fallen and divided nature of humanity”, but also, as a consequence of (borrowing from Roland Barthes) its “unreadability”, it points both to the mind’s incapacity and to something beyond its grasp: “[allowing] the transcendent to be viewed, if aporetically, through the real.” Milbank directs her reading chiefly to *Praeterita*, and elucidates its procedures with reference to the operation of Proust’s memory in his Ruskin-related texts and the ending of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. There

she demonstrates how Ruskin reconstructs his past by “a recovery of the world of phenomena”, and a pattern of visual self-objectification, but she also points out the dangers of a false, subjectively produced grotesque which she explicates in two comically revealing distortions of Ruskinian ideas drawn by John Tenniel and the *Punch* cartoonist, Linley Sambourne. More characteristic, however, is Ruskin's “grotesque method” in his autobiography “whereby young and old selves are violently juxtaposed rather than combined [...] to allow otherness to emerge, whether of persons or things.” The danger, as Ruskin defined it, is the “pathetic fallacy”, “in which the mind, under sway of emotion, ascribes agency and intentionality to inanimate nature and sees it in relation to itself.” Following the hint of Ruskin's own use of a camera lucida, Milbank coopts it as “a controlling metaphor for *Praeterita*”, because its illusionary effects are always apparent: “the user artfully collaborates by direct vision into the prism or lens, and the result [...] is evidently virtual, not least because the eye is directed both to the present object and to the mediating equipment”. Ruskin, as camera lucida, “renders the past memory itself as a composite image and a miniature version of temporal disjunction”, and like Byron and Dante he is both hidden and displayed as the author and protagonist of his poems.

Milbank is one of the essayists in this collection to dwell at length on the ending of *Praeterita* culminating in the passage on the fireflies at Siena, the last formal writing Ruskin composed, beginning: “How things bind and blend themselves together!” Wilmer, for whom it is “the most marvellous and least moralistic of his perorations”, responds to its “patterns of rhythm [...] constantly running into suggestions of the Shakespearean pentameter”. He finds parallelisms in the development of its imagery “clustered around the central image of wine, the product of fermentation, [standing] for maturity, growth, emotion, the acknowledgment of weakness and the acceptance of death.” Satisfaction with the fireflies, even with their “fallen-ness, as somehow superior to innocence”, becomes the keynote: “We are discharged from the mythical world into the richness of reality”. As for Tanner, an artificial assurance of order has been radically challenged, only, miraculously, to be turned into a darker and richer coherence. Milbank discovers a similar promise of “the redemption of memory”, and one derived as in Wilmer not simply from a resilient affirmation of all-embracing symmetry so much, in her case, as from the “grotesque juxtaposition” of discrete recollections. Clarified by Proust's analysis of “involuntary memory” and intertextualities with Dante's infernal fires, these reveal a fresh sense of wonder, imminent in perceptions which have only now become evident in the process of recall. But for Milbank, the miraculous change which finds ultimate expression within the series of firefly memories takes Ruskin not only “out of himself and towards [...] participation with the world”, but also “towards divine communion”.

For her here, and *pace* O’Gormon’s residual sense of tragedy, what exceeds more facile forms of organisation is an intimation of the supernatural.

Deborah Sherman centres her essay, “A Sublime of Memory: Ruskin’s *Praeterita*”, on the same final two paragraphs, and like Milbank she extends hints from Elizabeth Helsinger in reading them in terms of what Helsinger calls “the reduced sublimity of grotesque perception”. Sherman examines the implications of “reduction” in this mode: “there is some irony, some incompatibility, in the idea of the sublime as memory, domesticated to the particular, embedded in the immediate, the human and humanly”, and she focuses on the sublime traits which still inhere in the operations of Ruskin’s memory. Like Milbank, she lodges the revision of the sublime in the diminution of the subjectivised element which she views as “transvaluation of the philosophic for the psychological”, and she also stresses the physiological origins of recollected experience, as well as what remains out of sight through the co-presence of forgetting. With reference to Proust again, the fireflies occupy a remembered landscape which is at once “spatialized and temporalized”, deriving its liminally figural effect from the redistributions of time and allusion, while at the same time constructing an “eternising present”, a “space [which] is literally full of the cloud of fireflies”.

Pursuing these insights, Sherman reconsiders them in the light of trauma theory and disability studies by linking them to Ruskin’s late mental breakdowns, then diagnosed as “brain fever”, and his final extended silence. She scrutinises the borderland “between sickness and health, silence and speech”, between Ruskin’s creative memory and the symptomatic, to conclude that it mirrors poststructuralist approaches to the sublime which are “paradigmatically about loss, both philosophically and linguistically.” Calling on a series of psychological and poststructuralist theorists of the sublime, Sherman points to their common concern with the “linguistic turn”, which recovers the originating loss from within the textuality itself, partly as the condition of all representation. Referring to Lyotard’s interest in “the boundary between what is representable and what is and can only be unrepresentable” and Lacan’s thesis that the subject is irremediably split by its coming into cultural being—an irrecoverable event which nonetheless remains present in language use, Sherman insists on the productivity of trauma in “the memory-text [...] the *something* that emerges [...] no matter how damaged.”

The sociological approach of disability studies offers a different perspective to recover “a postmodern and dismodern body that is no longer idea but materialized in its difference”, and Sherman explores the Ruskinian grotesque, with its valuation of imperfection and challenge to established aesthetic criteria, against the grain of Ruskin’s actual responses to deformity in life and art. Ruskin himself became the subject of those categories by which his final silence was judged to be defective, but if an inarticulate presence can be recovered from the ending of *Praeterita* as an indication of the sublime then may that not problematise presiding

cultural distinctions when “pathological” silence becomes associated with our most value-laden mode of apprehension? Sherman concludes by suggesting the relocations involved in acknowledging the primacy of “non-linguistic experience” inflected in the Ruskinian grotesque and the counter-values of “Joanna’s Care”, which is the greater context of the end of *Praeterita*, as defined in Lennard Davis’s account of the “dismodernist mode” which “aims to create a new category based on the partial, incomplete subject whose realization is not autonomy and independence but dependency and interdependence”.

If Ruskin’s self-representation in his autobiography is characterised by indeterminacies of absent presences, the same mode extends in different ways into the biographies he did and did not write about his idealised, but flawed, cultural heroes—Scott and Turner. Scott’s bankruptcy and the commercialisation of his art constituted disturbing scandals for Ruskin and his father, just as the posthumous revelations of Turner’s dissoluteness and his erotica became major embarrassments for father and son. In the upshot, Ruskin was to produce neither of the biographies he had contemplated, except in the fragmentary forms of five letters for *Fors Clavigera* and the chapter in the fifth volume of *Modern Painters* on “The Two Boyhoods”. But Andrew Leng, in his essay, “Recontextualizing ‘The Two Boyhoods’: Ruskin, Thornbury and the Double Lives of Turner”, argues that Ruskin’s controlling part in the first formal, two-volume *Life of Turner* by Walter Thornbury was to an extent a biographical intervention by proxy, as Lady Eastlake had claimed in 1862 when, as Leng writes, she “accused Ruskin of secretly betraying Turner through Thornbury.” The story is told of how Ruskin’s own undertaking to write Turner’s life was hampered by a number of distracting considerations, most especially the discrepancy between the quasi-spiritual claims he had made for the artist’s truthfulness and moral soundness and the facts which had leaked out, which rendered Turner’s “character [...] inexplicable” to him and “the materials within [his] reach [...] imperfect”, in more than one sense. Leng sees the “Two Boyhoods” chapter, which was published two years before Thornbury’s *Life*, as “a mythologized, minimalist biography of Turner” which is “densely overwrought” and deeply ambivalent, and which “is haunted by an unexplained sense of foreboding—because he believes that Turner is a lost soul”. He shows how Ruskin’s boy Turner “lives the secret life of the depraved septuagenarian subtextually, through Ruskin’s cryptically proleptic—and thus disorienting—London topography.” In particular, Leng sees the discovery of the pornographic art as “the defining moment of Ruskin’s life and career as a critic and patron”, and argues that Ruskin’s relations with Thornbury became a way of managing the publication of the sordid truth (he had adjured Thornbury: “Don’t try to mask the dark side”) while keeping his own hands clean, officially maintaining the illusion that Turner’s life was “uneventful and secluded.” The later veiled *agon* between Ruskin and Thornbury in their accounts of each other’s work, including

Thornbury's rejection of Ruskin's defence of Turner's topographical inaccuracies, completes the aftermath. Many further questions are aroused by Leng's essay, particularly those circling around Ruskin's anxiety that the whole body of his Turner critique might be brought into doubt, though in another way the changed situation gave him critical mastery over Turner the painter.

As Leng writes, Ruskin came to believe that "the ominous landscape" of Turner's early London became his "trademark because he only discovered 'the strength of nature' [...] in rural Yorkshire too late: in 1797, when he was only 22, but far too long after his view of the world had been malformed in the 'darksome Vanity Fair' of London." Ruskin believed we are fated by early environmental influences, and though educational benefits may still be acquired later in life, there is no short-cut to true access, or acquisitions which require long and matured experience. He was an Aristotelian whose theory of life depended on the unfolding of individual potential—when provided with the right and adequate conditions, which may or may not be individually or historically available. In his essay, "Ruskin, Authority, and Adult Education", David Thiele examines the contradictory tensions in that worldview as it relates to his educational outlook, both liberal and illiberal, in the context of "the Victorian movement for adult 'self-culture' and 'knowledge diffusion' ", particularly in the practices and ideology of the London Working Men's College (WMC). Though the movement responded to the effects of social fragmentation, the implicit theoretical debates took place within a bourgeois mind-set, and in the case of the WMC resulted in a "collective paternalist" approach which Ruskin believed enabled its Christian Socialist leader, F. D. Maurice, "to enjoy demagogic authority while simultaneously breeding a lack of respect for authority". Eventually, Ruskin rejected it for what Thiele calls "an independent, apostate paternalism", taking with him two chosen pupils. Though Ruskin's personally motivated demand for an anti-democratic authoritarianism set him against Maurice's institution, Thiele demonstrates that the WMC was itself anti-democratic in ways with which Ruskin agreed.

Ruskin, however, shrewdly identified the inherent dilemmas which had been "mystified" in the bourgeois programme of the WMC, as Thiele defines them: "First, that the social mobility this newly accessible liberal education seemed to offer working adults contradicted the actual needs and motives of the diffusers, and second, that is contradicted the logic of status itself." Yet Thiele further argues that "Ruskin's struggles to reconcile contradictory strands of educational thought reproduce fault lines embedded in the rhetoric of the wider movement." Ruskin's time at the WMC coincided with the writing of *Unto This Last*, and the assumption of his role as social critic which was also to produce his two letter series addressed to workmen, *Time and Tide* and *Fors Clavigera*, and all these texts are infused with Ruskin's historical compromise between "not only the promise of inclusion but also an entire system of exclusion." While Ruskin wished, for example, to

promote the formation of gentlemen and gentlewomen, he saw that it would not be accomplished in a single generation. Ruskin may have put his finger on the mystification of the WMC, but he had only substituted what Thiele calls “The Glance”—or intuitive sense of power and superiority as well as the immediate expression of accumulated knowledge, including a kind of class unconscious. In the end, for Thiele, Ruskin’s views on liberal education are conflicted by the contrary appeals of access and elitism.

As a social thinker it is mostly the radical questions which he mobilised rather than the specific answers he propounded which have proceeded to unfold from Ruskin’s writings. His mixture of strong doctrine and contradictoriness made him a particularly potent source of fertilisation. “Such as I am”, he wrote in 1875, at the age of 56, “to my own amazement, I stand—so far as I can discern—alone in conviction, in hope, and in resolution, in the wilderness of this modern world” (28.425). But despite his sense of rejection in his lifetime, he has had such vast and wide-spread influences, for example, as those on English design and craft through Morris, on conservation and preservation through the National Trust, on French Impressionism through Monet, on the modern novel through Proust, on Catholic social teaching through Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, and on modernist architecture, through Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Walter Gropius. His radical critique of capitalist industrial civilisation provided an affinity for those who were in process of rejecting the effective values of western society in his time and since, so that there has been in his case a far-flung diaspora of Ruskinian continuities, involving processes of “hybridisation” or “creolisation”, of combining and mixing cultural constructions, from metropolitan centre and periphery, to produce quite new social and cultural phenomena. This “alternative” Ruskin has informed, for example, the communitarianism of the Distributivists, Chesterton and Belloc, Eric Gill’s Ditchling, Tolstoy’s complete rejection of the machine and the glorification of hand labour and spinning in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and Ruskin’s leading Japanese disciple, Ryuzo Mikimoto’s factory church in Tokyo. But the most significant impact was made on the subject of Judith M. Brown’s essay, “Reading *Unto This Last*—A Transformative Experience: Gandhi in South Africa”.

Partly, Brown argues, the influence is attributable to “the power and spread of the English language during Britain’s ‘imperial century’ ”, and partly to the compatibility of what she calls “ideals rooted in the Hindu tradition.” Passing through an experience of, in his words, “mental churning”, Gandhi was seeking for “God and striving for self-realization”, as he wrote in *his Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927), when he read the Everyman edition of *Unto this Last*, published by Dent in 1907, and including Ruskin’s *Essays on Political Economy*—a volume which Gandhi had with him from 1907 to 1914, and which was to play its part in the running down of the empire. In those essays,

Ruskin calls for precisely the same social and political activities which Gandhi was to echo: volunteer ploughing rather than military exercises, domestic spinning throughout the nation, and, most importantly, the doctrines of non-co-operation and non-violence which were to be Gandhi's most influential agenda for modern India. Ruskin wrote:

Thus, precisely according to the number of just men in a nation, is their power of avoiding either intestine or foreign war. All disputes may be peaceably settled if a sufficient number of persons have been trained to submit to the principle of justice, while the necessity for war is in direct ratio to the number of unjust persons who are incapable of determining a quarrel but by violence. (17.285)

Brown gives an account of Gandhi's 1908 paraphrase of *Unto This Last*, its attempt to translate key terms and its personal conclusion intimating his doctrine of self-rule for India. She relates how the fresh realisation he drew from the work was "that the life of labour, as an agriculturalist or craftsman was the life worthy living", which, he wrote in his *Autobiography* had "never occurred to [him]." He also wrote that he "arose with the dawn, ready to reduce these principles to practice", which soon found expression in the community of Phoenix which he founded near Durban where he advocated and practised the virtues of manual labour for all. The ideas which Ruskin had tried to realise in the Guild of St. George were part of the imagination behind Gandhi's other future communities in South Africa and India, and were associated with his religious *ashrams*. Brown concludes that the "interaction" between Ruskin and Gandhi was one "between two men over a generation apart, from very different cultures, but with similar temperaments, who struggled to achieve a sustained critique of contemporary western society based on industrialization and assumptions about 'economic man.'" The struggle arose from the inherent opposition of their ideas to the dominant discourses of their societies, then and now, so that India soon reverted to the processes of competitive industrialisation following Gandhi's assassination in 1948.

That struggle lies not only in the politics of reformism, but in the operation of Ruskin's coherence which runs through it and what he intends to impart to his readers. For Ruskin, who inherited an Evangelical doctrine of work, aesthetic consumption and interpretation required active participation, and they had to be allowed time for their elaboration of knowledge and experience into conviction or satisfaction. For all his interventions, he is above all a writer. That is why, however increasingly challenging we may find his language, it is perverse simply to try to summarise his ideas or teaching. They, as is the fate of influence, have either been admirably assimilated or, if they remain powerful though unregarded, they do so precisely because Ruskin makes them the expression of a whole, still deeply resonant world view.

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Notes

¹ *God's Funeral* (New York and London: Norton, 1999), 276.

² *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Wordsworth, 1998), 1070.

³ "No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief", *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed., Norman H. MacKenzie, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 1.182, lines 9-10.

CHAPTER ONE

RUSKIN AND THE SEA

TONY TANNER

In Jane Austen's *Sanditon*, Sir Edward Denham, an impoverished baronet and compulsive womaniser, tries out his charms on the level-headed Charlotte:

He began, in a tone of great Taste and Feeling, to talk of the Sea and the Sea shore—and ran with Energy through all the usual Phrases employed in praise of their Sublimity, and descriptive of the *undescribable* Emotions they excite in the Mind of Sensibility.—The terrific Grandeur of the Ocean in a Storm, its glassy surface in a calm, its Gulls and its Samphire, and the deep fathoms of its Abysses, its quick vicissitudes, its direful Deceptions, its Mariners tempting it in Sunshine and overwhelmed by the sudden Tempest, All were eagerly and fluently touched;—rather commonplace perhaps—but doing very well from the Lips of a handsome Sir Edward,—and she could not but think him a Man of Feeling—till he began to stagger her with the number of his Quotations, and the bewilderment of some of his sentences.—“Do you remember,” said he, “Scott’s beautiful Lines on the Sea?—Oh! what a description they convey! They are never out of my Thoughts when I walk here.—That man who can read them unmoved must have the nerves of an Assassin! Heaven defend me from meeting such a Man un-armed.”—“What description do you mean?”—said Charlotte. “I remember none at this moment, of the Sea, in either of Scott’s Poems.”—“Do you not indeed?—Nor can I exactly recall the beginning at this moment—But—you cannot have forgotten his description of Woman.—”¹

And he’s off again. We may leave Sir Edward inflicting his balderdash on the eminently sensible Charlotte, with no fears for her safety. But it is interesting to see how quickly—at least to the unerring ear of Jane Austen—what we may call the Romantic sea (of Byron, Shelley, Coleridge) has become a tissue of clichés. The sea has been banalised, if I may so put it. It is worth bearing this in mind as we approach Ruskin, and, of course, Turner. Whatever else they do, and it is of course much, they de-banalise the sea.

Scott doesn’t describe the sea, but the Solway Firth figures importantly in his work. In the “Joanna’s Care” section of *Praeterita* Ruskin is reminiscing about his early “impressions of the Solway sands” (“part of the greatest teaching that ever I

received during the joy of youth”) which leads him, naturally enough, to start writing about Scott. He quotes a character in *Redgauntlet* who claims “*I was born within hearing of the roar of Solway*” (45.549). This prompts one of those self-interrupting spontaneous digressions for which we are so grateful:

I must pause again to tell the modern reader that no word is ever used by Scott in a hackneyed sense. For three hundred years of English commonplace, *roar* has rhymed to *shore*, as *breeze* to *trees*; yet in this sentence the word is as powerful as if it had never been written till now! for no other sound of the sea is for an instant comparable to the breaking of deep ocean, as it rises over great spaces of sand. In its rise and fall on a rocky coast, it is either perfectly silent, or, if it strike, it is with a crash, or a blow like that of a heavy gun. Therefore, under ordinary conditions, there may be either *splash*, or *crash*, or *sigh*, or *boom*; but not *roar*. But the hollow sound of the countless ranks of surfy breakers, rolling mile after mile in ceaseless following, every one of them with the apparent anger and threatening of a fate which is assured death unless fled from,—the sound of this approach, over quicksands, and into inextricable gulfs of mountain bay, this, heard far out at sea, or heard inland, through the peace of secure night—or stormless day, is still an eternal voice, with the harmony in it of a mighty law, and the gloom of a mortal warning. (35.550)

Thus does a single word-gloss grow and exfoliate and expand in Ruskin.

Somewhere remotely behind this is the Byronic sea—“There is a society where none intrudes/By the deep Sea, and music in its roar”²—but Ruskin, as ever, is after more exactitude, finer discriminations, enhanced classification. This is proto-scientific prose intensifying itself into the condition of poetry. At the same time Ruskin seeks somehow to mimic, emulate and evoke the phenomenon he is describing. Not just the right word for the noise, but something of the noise itself. And the noise is not “music”. As we shall see, when Ruskin writes of the sea, it is as if he wanted you to feel both soaked and imperilled while you are reading him.

As I have introduced Jane Austen, I just want to quote what I find to be perhaps the most surprising sentence in her work. In her description of the coast and sea at Lyme in *Persuasion*, she refers to a group “lingering” on the seashore “as all must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea, who ever deserve to look on it at all.”³ (Compare Emma’s father—“I have been long perfectly convinced [...] that the sea is very rarely of use to any body.”)⁴ Let me immediately bring in another piece from *Praeterita* (“Under New Tutorships”).

But before everything, at this time, came my pleasure in merely watching the sea. I was not allowed to row, far less to sail, nor to walk near the harbour alone; so that I learned nothing of shipping or anything else worth learning, but spent four or five hours every day in simply staring and wondering at the sea—an occupation which never failed me till I was forty. Whenever I could get to a beach it was enough for me to have the waves to look at, and hear, and pursue and fly from. I never took to