

The Elements of Ruskin: Ruskin Now

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On the 8th May 1945, the day that signalled the end of the war in Europe, Winston Churchill announced: “We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing” (in Hewison 1981.1). Today, in spite of the cultural wars that are still going on around us, we have rightly allowed ourselves a brief period of rejoicing, not only at the relaunch of the Electronic Elements of Drawing, but also at other ways that modern technology has made Ruskin available to the 21st century: The Venetian Notebooks, the electronic edition of *Modern Painters* volume one, and the electronic version of the Library Edition, which is managing to transcend the ageing process of technological redundancy. Louise Pullen’s contribution has also reminded us of another important relaunch this year, the redisplay of the Museum of the Guild of St George at the Millennium Galleries in Sheffield.

In this spirit of celebration, we might also wish briefly to rejoice in the extent to which Ruskin studies have flourished since the 1970s. It was then that the value of the Ruskin Art Collection at Oxford began to be recognised, not just as a lucky dip of masterpieces and *miscellanea*, but as a sequence with a specifically Ruskinian ratiocination behind it. In Oxford the Ruskin School of Drawing has also revived – and the Ashmolean itself is utterly transformed. The Guild of St George is doing a great deal more than ensuring the display of a collection of treasures – treasures that I recall seeing for the first time mostly in packing cases in a basement at the University of Reading. The Whitehouse Collection, once the object of arduous scholarly pilgrimage to the Isle of Wight, is now housed in Richard McCormac’s jewel box at Lancaster University, and Brantwood, the decaying destination of the international group of enthusiasts who founded the Ruskin Association there at the conference of 1969, flourishes as never before. The Ruskin Association, whose newsletter was James Dearden’s single-handed hard labour of love for so many years, wound itself up

in 2000 because it felt its job was done – and it was in 2000 that that looser, but essential, new grouping, Ruskin To-Day, first proved its value.

The theme I would like to try to address was suggested by one of the spaces on the tool bar of the home page of “The Elements of Drawing: John Ruskin’s Teaching Collection at Oxford”. It is the one marked “Ruskin Now”. In one sense, as long as there are people who are willing to read Ruskin, and so long as he remains available, in print or electronic form, so that they can engage critically with his texts and images, there will always be, I hope, a “Ruskin Now” in the field of scholarship. What Ruskin would have made of his new found electronic availability, and of the technology that supports it, is a counter-factual question, and not really very helpful. Ruskin has been dead for one hundred and eleven years, and is in no position to comment.

But it is clear that Ruskin is more than a scholarly resource: his ideas extend much further than the utilitarian tick boxes of the Research Excellence Framework. The contributions to the Elements of Drawing website by Philip Hoare and Adrian Piggott – and indeed Stephen Farthing’s delightful drawing lessons – show the way that Ruskin stimulates the creative, as well as the purely scholarly, pulse. The “Praeterita” photographs of John Riddy commissioned for Ruskin’s centenary in 2000, the work of Alexander Hamilton and other artists who have stayed at and been inspired by Brantwood, the “Can Art Save Us” exhibition and its successors at Sheffield, Sarah Rodgers’ musical setting of *The King of the Golden River*, the philosophical speculations of Wolfgang Scheppe’s *Done Book* and accompanying exhibition in the British Pavilion at last year’s Architecture Biennale in Venice, are all evidence of an imaginative response to ideas that have Ruskinian roots. So, beyond the field of scholarship, what should our contemporary relationship with the historic Ruskin be?

This is the moment to remind ourselves that Ruskin himself said: “No *true* disciple of mine will ever be a ‘Ruskinian!’” (24.371). I am sure that each one of us can name an aspect of Ruskin’s thought and character that we would not wish to bring forward into the 21st century: his dogmatism, his Ultra-Toryism, his

attitudes to women, his doubts about democracy. Nor would any of us wish to suffer the anguish and distress that religion, sexual repression and emotional obsession brought him. At all times, we must keep a critical distance. Yet there are things that we can take from Ruskin that we can use, in our scholarship, and in our conduct. And we can do this, by adopting a Ruskinian device.

This idea was prompted by being invited to write an afterword to Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic" for a reprint, in a semi-facsimile version, by Pallas Athene, of William Morris's Kelmscott edition of 1892. Morris's edition – a kind of post-Pre-Raphaelite makeover – is in itself an example of a creative response to Ruskin's ideas.

"The Nature of Gothic" is the keystone to the architecture of *The Stones of Venice*. The chapter is set at the centre of the second of its three volumes, and is supported by studies of two buildings: the Byzantine St Mark's, and the Gothic Ducal Palace. What is striking, however, is that unlike these framing chapters, it is consciously ahistorical, addressing neither a particular building nor a particular period. It is able to stand alone because it is not about the historical details, but the moral essence of what he called "*Gothicness*" (10.181). And just as the chapter marks a turning point in Ruskin's narrative of the rise, decline and fall of Venice, it also marks a point of transition in the trajectory of his thought: from art critic to cultural historian; from cultural critic to social critic.

What I would like to propose is that we take a similarly ahistorical approach to Ruskin himself. Just as "Gothic" is not a term that you will find used in the fourteenth century, and the Gothic world that Ruskin describes is at least in part his own invention, is it possible that we can transpose Ruskin's use of the Gothic as a source of moral imagery, and as a past from which he was able to criticise the present, to Ruskin's own arguments and values? After all, *The Stones of Venice* was not just about architecture. The Gothic was a metaphor for the right relationship between man and nature, and for the right conduct of society. That is why the Christian Socialist founders of the London Working Men's College

reprinted their version of the chapter in 1854. That Ruskin's use of architecture as a moral metaphor should be reprinted not once but twice in his lifetime, shows that his message was not ignored. It did indeed, as Morris wrote in his introduction to the Kelmscott edition: "point out a new road on which the world should travel" (10.460).

The key to what Ruskin meant by the Nature of Gothic is that the six characteristics of the Gothic that he identifies are simultaneously formal, aesthetic categories, and what he calls "moral elements". Each aesthetic category – Savageness, Changefulness, Naturalism, Grotesqueness, Rigidity and Redundance – has its correspondent human characteristic: Rudeness (meaning rough virility rather than bad manners), Love of Change, Love of Nature, Disturbed Imagination, Obstinacy and Generosity. Not all six is given equal weight or development. Crucially, "Grotesqueness", by which he meant not absurdity, but the transformation of fact into symbol by the "Disturbed Imagination", was set aside for discussion in the last volume of *The Stones*, where it plays a crucial role in the evolution of Ruskin's theory of symbolism.

The title of the chapter is carefully crafted, for "Nature" means more than essence; it is also the ruling spirit of the values that he identifies. The single word that encapsulates that spirit is the one that Ruskin used to convey all the positive values he argued for in his later economic writings, quite simply: "life". The organicism, the energy, the variety, the abundance of Gothic architecture expressed this vital quality. Yet, after the hungry 1840s, and the year of revolutions in 1848 that had put Venice under siege, Ruskin saw that man was alienated from Nature. It was a double alienation: man had crowded into cities, where he tried to compensate for his separation from the natural world through the evolution of Gothic architecture. And now man was alienated also from the Gothic. The forces of Classicism and Industrialism had combined to turn men into slaves.

Ruskin's analysis of the Nature of Labour and its alienation is conservative and revolutionary at the same time. He knew nothing of Marx, but both were

addressing the same social and economic conditions at the same period, and both concluded that man's alienation was the consequence of having the value of his labour stolen from him. For Marx, the value was economic; for Ruskin, it was aesthetic. Any man has some capacity, however small, to create, and in that capacity lies his humanity. But the division of labour, Ruskin argued – taking Adam Smith head-on by using the example of pin making that Smith used in *The Wealth of Nations* – meant that “it is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men” (10.196). Atomised, men become mere parts of an industrial machine. Thus it should be no surprise that the “great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities” was that “we manufacture everything there except men” (10.196).

Again, this is an aesthetic argument: the rules of Classical, “Pagan” architecture demanded a regularity, a symmetry, a consistency of repetition that left no room for individual, what he called “Protestant”, self-expression. It was Roman slavery all over again. Worse, the industrialisation of labour made it possible to demand perfect finish, and to achieve an untruth to materials that created the modern domestic interior, whose “perfectnesses are signs of a slavery in our England a thousand times more bitter and more degrading than that of the scourged African, or helot Greek” (10.192).

The answer to this aesthetic and industrial oppression was to rediscover the liberating qualities of the Gothic: its fecundity, its vitality, its flexibility, its expressiveness. Above all, its imperfection. This does not mean that the artist should seek imperfection, but that he must accept that “no good work whatever can be perfect” (10.202). The artist must do the utmost to extend his creative capacities as far as they will go, but objectively, beyond that he can go no further. Ruskin names an eclectic group of artists who outreach the rest, and whose perfections, it should be noted, are all very different. The noble artisan must similarly be encouraged to put all his expressive qualities into his work, however limited his capabilities and savage the results. “Perfect” craftsmanship is dead craftsmanship, whereas the infinite plenitude of the Gothic has space within it to accommodate everything from the slightest skills to the greatest powers.

Two cultural traditions support this argument. The first is Romantic: he writes “imperfection is in some sort essential to all that we know of life” (10.203). Bearing in mind the particular value that Ruskin placed on “life”, art and architecture can only be a response to the greater natural world, which is itself imperfect. But behind that stands a much older and stronger tradition, the theological tradition of the Fall. Art can but be imperfect, because man is imperfect. He is a fallen creature because of Adam and Eve’s original sin, just as the earth bears the scars of the punishment of the Flood. Because of the Fall, Paradise is lost. Understanding this, the pursuit of perfection and the failure to acknowledge our fallen nature becomes arrogance, folly, even blasphemy.

What I like to think of as Ruskin’s Doctrine of Imperfection might be the first aesthetic and moral characteristic of “*Ruskiness*”: aspects of Ruskin’s thought that we could adapt for our own time. Acceptance of imperfection is a recognition of difference. Uniformity is not just a deadening ideal; it is an illiberal form of government and a crushing form of social organisation. For the sterile purity of uniform perfection, we need to substitute the imperfections of diversity. This is not simply out of openhearted generosity to those who are different to ourselves, and who do not conform to our specific rules of conduct and order. It is out of pure self-interest: only through difference and diversity are we able to renew ourselves. It is at the margins, where ideas, images and values rub up against each other, conflict, combine and miscegenate, that regeneration takes place, new concepts and ways of being emerge. Diversity is a modern version of Ruskin’s “changefulness”, where the admission of imperfection liberates the possibility of creation.

There is an obvious biological metaphor at work in the aesthetic and sociological claims I am making for the benefits of diversity. We are talking about that ultimate Ruskinian value, “life”. Ruskin’s organicism, whether we take it under the heading of Gothic Naturalism or Gothic Redundance, has such a direct link to what we now call Environmentalism that it scarcely needs pointing out. But such is the evidence of the contemporary prevalence of Ruskin’s ultimate anti-

value, “death” – the death of seas, the death of lands, the death of species – then what he has to say about a right relation to the earth has a direct relevance.

What cultural economists such as David Throsby (Throsby 2001) call “bequest value” – the un-measurable value that things today will have when inherited tomorrow by a future generation, a version of what the environmentalists call “intergenerational equity” – the principle of justice that those future generations should be able to enjoy the same natural world that we do – was anticipated in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*:

God has lent us the earth for our life; it is a great entail. It belongs as much to those who come after us, and whose names are already written in the book of creation, as to us; and we have no right, by anything we do or neglect, to involve them in necessary penalties, or deprive them of benefits which it was in our power to bequeath (8.233).

The quotation comes from “The Lamp of Memory”, the chapter that set the terms for the continuing debate about the principles of architectural conservation, and long anticipated contemporary criticisms of the heritage industry.

The degradation of the environment – both natural and urban – is a measure of the state of our economic relations. There is, as Ruskin constantly reminds us, “no wealth but life”, and let us not forget the other key sentence in *Unto This Last*, the reiteration of an aesthetic principle laid down in *Modern Painters* volume five: “Government and co-operation are in all things the Laws of Life; anarchy and competition the Laws of Death” (17.75). The representation here of so many, independent institutions that have a claim to the Ruskinian legacy is a demonstration of the principle of co-operation, as it is of the value of diversity. Co-operation, indeed, is the way to make diversity work.

The concept of co-operation can be a healthy challenge to management theory. Recently I have been able to observe how the Royal Shakespeare Company has transformed itself from a hierarchical, jealousy-riven, secretive, oppressive and imaginatively limited institution into an open, dynamic, confident and truly creative organisation, through the application of the principles of *ensemble* (see Hewison *et al.* 2010). The principle of collaboration by a group of people who know and trust each other is an established practice in the rehearsal

room, but at the RSC it is now applied to the company's organisation as a whole, from the nursery to the armourers and the carpentry shop.

Ensemble beautifully combines Ruskinian co-operation with Ruskinian "government", for plays still have directors who bear ultimate responsibility for the production, and the RSC still has a leader responsible for its artistic vision. But the combination of "government and co-operation" generates what the management theorists call "distributed leadership", a collaborative form of government that generates trust and releases creativity in a way that the command and control of hierarchical structures cannot.

Ruskin saw that economic relations were also social relations, and that any attempt to create an abstraction known as "economic man" was bound to fail. "The market" is a similar abstraction, where supposedly rational beings, economic men and women equipped with perfect knowledge and all possessing the means of equal access to the market, will rationally follow their self-interest to ensure the most efficient production and distribution of goods, guided only by Adam Smith's invisible hand, the law of supply and demand. Recent events must surely persuade us that economic men and women – shall we call them bankers? – do not have perfect knowledge, do not behave rationally, that the tendency of markets is not towards efficient production and even distribution, but to the establishment of monopoly, and that from time to time markets must be rescued from their own folly by the visible hand of state intervention. Anarchy and competition are indeed the Laws of Death.

Sadly, our present government wishes all our social relations to be governed by the economic relations of the market. Economic competition has become so normalised that we regard competition as the natural state for individual relations. So the government wishes to extend a system that has so spectacularly failed into areas where the laws of capital and commodities simply do not apply – in education, in public health and social care. The attempt to rig the market in higher education demonstrates firstly that so-called free markets do not work, and secondly that political cynicism and manipulation will trump any neo-liberal belief in their inviolability.

The aesthetic and sociological significances of co-operation in our social and economic relations coalesce around our unavoidable engagement with the world through work. William Morris was spot on when he wrote in his introduction to "The Nature of Gothic" that Ruskin teaches us that "art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour" (10.460), and that beauty should be "a natural and necessary accompaniment of productive labour" (10.460). Through art, and by releasing the powers of self-expression belonging to each one of us, we can overcome that material and aesthetic alienation that Ruskin identified so powerfully in his analysis of the conditions of labour. Modern technology has removed much of the need for arduous physical labour, has given us the possibility of easy entry to visual and verbal expression, and enlarged the possibilities of co-creation, making audiences active rather than passive participants in culture – as the Elements of Drawing website demonstrates. But we also need to limit the need for dull and repetitious mental labour by liberating the imagination.

To make all labour creative, to convert all work into art, may sound hopelessly idealistic, as fanciful and impractical as the founding principles of one of the aesthetic communities of the late 19th century. Yet it is through art that we can access the supra-rational and the sublime. I am not talking about faith. I have already suggested that the structures of religion were one of the causes of Ruskin's distress, although it is remarkable how ecumenical he finally became, as the "creed" of the Guild of St George shows (28.667). But I am talking about access to the numinous and the spiritual, that something other that Ruskin found in both the natural world and in art, and was able to communicate through his prose. Epiphanies are rarely offered by contemporary culture, but they do occur, and people should be encouraged to seek them out. We need to experience the transcendent, and art, in forms that Ruskin would not recognise, and might possibly deplore, is the medium that offers the means to access it.

So far I have managed to match or reconfigure five aspects of Ruskin's thought that might be useful to us now: Diversity, Organicism, Co-Operation, Creativity,

and Spirituality. But there were six elements to the Nature of Gothic, and in response to Ruskin's praise for organic, as opposed to mechanical, symmetry, I feel obliged to offer a sixth, one that encompasses all the others and offers us a way forward.

Contemporary society is at a stage of such imminent breakdown that we need to adopt a new guiding principle, one that all Ruskin's work points to, even though he never articulated the word. We appear to be rushing headlong towards some kind of catastrophe from which there will be no return, whether it be peak oil, carbon saturation, demographic overload, nuclear proliferation, international financial collapse. What we have assumed was the great equilibrium of the earth is about to finally and irrevocably lose its balance. Yet our only measure of success is still more growth, a process of perpetual expansion that drives us forward, lemming-like, towards the economic and social precipice that we know is there, yet seem to have no means of avoiding, since to cease this forward motion risks collapse. Growth may sound benign, natural and inevitable, but the linear progression of destruction and consumption upon which our current economic and social system depends is the opposite of the cycle of birth and decay that is truly organic. For growth, we must substitute sustainability.

Sustainability is not stasis: it is a process of discard and renewal, but within limits that mean that resources are not exhausted, and so can restore themselves. It does not mean atrophy, since sustainability involves a steady process of repair and renovation. Nor does it mean entropy: entropy is the exhaustion of energy; sustainability is a dynamic cycle of change and exchange. Vitally, the principle of sustainability does not mean the exclusion of access to resources for those who, as a result of the destructive consumption of developed countries, have been rendered incapable of supporting themselves. They should have more, but that can only be achieved by recognising that we have enough.

Instead of growth, we need a capacity for adaption that accepts diversity, recognises our organic relationship to the earth, substitutes co-operation for acquisition, transforms labour into creation, and allows us to think beyond our material desires towards the possibility of transcendence. Sustainability calls for

government and co-operation: the outcome of the alternative, anarchy and competition, is Death.

I realise that in this paper I have exceeded the conventions of what is considered appropriate to academic discourse – but then, Ruskin didn't bother with them much either. I also appreciate that the values that I am proposing are difficult to adopt, and that the self-redemption that I am calling for is unlikely to be achieved. Such is our fallen nature, and it may well be that Paradise is not lost, because it never existed. Yet that should not stop us believing that it might. As scholars, we must acknowledge that Ruskin's practical schemes for reform, from road building to crossing sweeping, from the School of Drawing to the Guild of St George, were failures in his lifetime. But we must also acknowledge their emblematic success – and in the case of the School and the Guild, their survival.

What I have learned from my academic study of Ruskin, and, since I am still alive, for me this is "Ruskin Now", is that although man is a fallen creature, the corollary must be that he may yet be saved, and if Paradise is lost, it may yet be regained. Thus Ruskin's doctrine of imperfection, which seeks to acknowledge this fallen state, also brings with it the possibility of redemption. We must use what few creative capacities that we have to realise our own nature, and so find our place in the great chain of being that will allow the survival, if not of ourselves, then at least of our values and ideas. They will have life. As Ruskin defined it: "Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration" (17.105).

References

References to Ruskin's published works are taken from *The Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition (1903-1912), ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols., London, George Allen. They are indicated by volume and page number in the text, thus volume 28 page 312 appears as: (28.312).

The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter of the Stones of Venice, edited with an introduction by William Morris, was first published by Morris's Kelmscott Press in 1892. In 2011 was reprinted in a facsimile edition by Pallas Athene Arts, 42 Spencer Rise, London NW5 1AP, with "afterwords" by Robert Hewison and Tony Pinkney.

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