

*“Do you, good reader, know
good style when you get it?”
Learning to Read with Ruskin*

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John Ruskin is acknowledged as one of the great writers in English. George Bernard Shaw once described “the temptation that every lecturer on Ruskin feels to get out of his job by reading [passages from Ruskin], because anything he reads is likely to be better than anything he can say of his own” (10). Ruskin recognized his own worth as an “old littérateur” (29:322). “If I am ever allowed, by public estimate, to know anything whatever, it is – how to write” he declared in *Fors Clavigera* (1871-1884), “the literary men are great hypocrites if they don’t really think me, as they profess to do, fairly up to my work in that line” (29:322). Carlyle, with characteristic spirit, described the fifth letter of *Fors Clavigera* as “words winged with Empyrean wisdom, piercing as lightning” (Cate 159), while Ruskin’s editors praise the “perfectly limpid English” of *Praeterita* (35:lv).

Ruskin’s apprenticeship had been long. Having taught himself to read at age four (characteristically refusing to be taught by orthodox methods), by six he was writing his own books in carefully imitated print and usually failing, again characteristically, to deliver the multiple volumes promised on his title pages. He also wrote summaries of sermons, a good deal of verse, and accounts of the family’s travels. His first piece of published prose, “On the causes of the colour of the Rhine,” appeared in *Loudon’s Magazine of Natural History* in September 1834. Loudon also published Ruskin’s first mature work, *The Poetry of Architecture*, in 1837. Ruskin published poems

in the annual *Friendship's Offering* in 1835, and between 1835 and 1844 contributed twenty-seven poems to *Friendship's Offering*, *Amaranth*, the *Keepsake*, and *The Book of Beauty* (Hilton, *Early Years* 30). In 1835 he began to keep a diary, a practice he would continue for the rest of his life.

Ruskin's literary skill was grounded in his reading, the depth and breadth of which is well attested, and which was an essential part of his life from the start. Margaret Ruskin began the program that would become the central element of her son's early education. During the course of daily Bible lessons, Ruskin was made to learn whole books of the Bible by heart, along with the Scottish paraphrases, and to give close attention to pronunciation, rhythm, and meter as well as to meaning. Ruskin later attributed the "first cultivation of my ear in sound" (28:318; 35:41) to these lessons and certainly their influence is evident in his prose, in his habit of biblical quotation and paraphrase, the cadence and style of his writing, his emphasis on accurate and careful reading, and his interest in etymology. Although Ruskin's parents were committed Evangelicals and many of his studies were "religious in tone" (Warrell 42), they were also cultivated and bookish (as was their social circle), and Ruskin was given the freedom to enjoy contemporary literature, art, and theatre. The Ruskin family library was diverse, including works by Homer, Cicero, Livy, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Chateaubriand, Bunyan, Hazlitt, Edgeworth, Bulwer-Lytton, Byron, and Walter Scott. In the evening, John James Ruskin read aloud to the family. Tim Hilton observes that "the literary atmosphere of the Herne Hill parlour was felt through all Ruskin's life" (*Early Years* 16). Many of the authors he read in childhood became enduring touchstones. Scott in particular is a frequent presence in Ruskin's books, one of the 'great men' whose life and work were held up as exemplary. Ruskin would also come to identify with both Scott's virtues and weaknesses and to see his own experience reflected in that of his 'master.' Other writers who came to occupy a central place in Ruskin's personal canon include Plato, Dante, Wordsworth, and Carlyle. Annotating (and in some cases expunging) Sir John Lubbock's list of 'The Best Hundred Books,' published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1886, Ruskin wrote after Plato's name, "All"; after Carlyle's, "Everything"; and after Scott's, "Every word."

It is unsurprising, then, that the thirty-nine volumes of Ruskin's *Collected Works* should comprise a significant body of literary commentary, covering a wide range of writing, from the classical to the contemporary, and reflecting a lifetime of deep engagement with literature. This commentary is distributed throughout Ruskin's works, however; he wrote only one book devoted specifically to literary criticism, *Fiction, Fair and Foul* (1880-81), and even this is not a formal study (Hilton cites Ruskin's "unorthodox discussion of poetry" in the book [*Later Years* 407]). Yet his discussion of the nature and role of imagination; his explanation of the Pathetic Fallacy, his analysis of changing attitudes to the natural world and their expression in art and literature, his consideration of "The Nature of Greatness of Style" and the "two orders of poets," his description of contemporary fiction as literature "of the prison house" (34:276), his explorations of the function of taste, and his examination of the work of numerous writers, are examples of Ruskin's thoughtful attention to the craft and function of literature. As Thomas Rankin wrote in 1911, "that which sets Ruskin apart from others who are great is that in so many things he is both good craftsman and great critic" (309). A full study of Ruskin's remarks about literature could easily fill a volume (or volumes) of its own. Charles Eliot Norton's *Comments of John Ruskin on The Divina Commedia* (1903), a selection of excerpts from Ruskin's writing on a single book, runs to two hundred pages, without analysis. A.H.R. Ball's 1928 collection of passages, *Ruskin as Literary Critic*, is closer to three hundred pages, while Harold Bloom's 1965 compendium, *The Literary Criticism of John Ruskin*, reaches 400 – and yet both remain only representative samplings. As I've written elsewhere, there can be no 'Ruskin in a nutshell.' His wide-ranging ideas, on literature as on other subjects, resist narrow classification or definition. I thus make no claims to comprehensiveness in the present essay; my intention is to consider the conceptual framework that shapes and supports Ruskin's critical method and examine where his approach is most successful.

In his effort to define the role of the public critic and the proper function of criticism, Matthew Arnold frequently held Ruskin up as "an object lesson

in [...] what a critic should not be" (Alexander 234). In "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864) he urged the need to "see the object as in itself it really is" ("Function" 4-5). Criticism must steadily refuse "to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas" ("Function" 14). Arnold advocated critical detachment and disinterestedness and strove to model his own critical practice on the "dispassionate observation of science" (Alexander 244). He admired critics such as Sainte-Beuve, whom he felt had mastered this sort of cautious investigation. For Ruskin, lack of passion, affection, and engagement were among the destructive aspects of modern science. Ruskin found Sainte-Beuve shallow and rejected what he called "this kind of polished contemplation of superficies" (36:587). Urged by C.E. Norton to reconsider this judgment in 1870, Ruskin read Sainte-Beuve's study of Virgil and conceded his admirable style, while maintaining that "he is nonetheless shallow and therefore may easily keep his agitation at ripple level" (37:14). Ruskin preferred the force and feeling of his friend and mentor Carlyle, whom Arnold considered too self-willed and eccentric to be an effective critic. Real criticism, Arnold maintained, "obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever" ("Function" 12). Arnold's ideal critic is aloof and cerebral, concerned to keep his criticism within "the pure intellectual sphere" ("Function" 15). For Arnold, the criticism of men such as Cobbett, Carlyle, and Ruskin was compromised by their engagement in political and social debates and the passionate expression of their ideas. Ruskin was no sensualist, but he valued noble emotion as a moral element. "You have heard many outcries against sensation lately;" he wrote in "Of Kings' Treasuries" (1865),

but, I can tell you, it is not less sensation we want, but more.
The ennobling difference between one man and another, –
between one animal and another, – is precisely in this, that
one feels more than another. If we were sponges, perhaps

sensation might not be easily got for us; if we were earthworms, liable at every instant to be cut in two by the spade, perhaps too much sensation might not be good for us. But being human creatures, it is good for us; nay, we are only human in so far as we are sensitive, and our honour is precisely in proportion to our passion. (18:78-9)

Ruskin's literary criticism, like his criticism of art and society, is further rooted in his moral aesthetic, according to which "the art of a nation, so far as it exists, is an exponent of its ethical state" (20:74). Although he later abandoned the Evangelical faith of his childhood, Christianity remained a significant force in his life. For Ruskin, the noblest art and literature express humankind's admiration for God's work: "All great Art is Praise" (15:351). In *Fiction, Fair and Foul*, he declares that "Men are eternally divided into the two classes of poet (believer, maker, praiser) and dunce (or unbeliever, unmaker, and dispraiser). And in the process of ages they have the power of making faithful and formative creatures of themselves, or unfaithful and *deformative*" (34:312). Nearly thirty years earlier, he had asserted that the pathetic fallacy had much to do with a crippled modern faith in which Divinity is separated from the life of nature. It was this separation, too, that had vitiated the poetic achievement of the eighteenth century, which Ruskin denounced in *Fiction, Fair and Foul*:

There is no God, but have we not invented gunpowder? – who wants a God, with that in his pocket? There is no Resurrection, neither angel nor spirit; but have we not paper and pens, and cannot every blockhead print his opinions, and the Day of Judgment become Republican, with everybody for a judge, and the flat of the universe for the throne? There is no law, but only gravitation and congelation, and we are stuck together in an everlasting hail, and melted together in everlasting mud, and great was the day in which our worships were born. And there is no Gospel, but only, whatever we've got, to get more, and, wherever we are, to go somewhere else. And are not these

discoveries, to be sung of, and drummed of, and fiddled of, and generally made melodiously indubitable in the eighteenth-century song of praise? The Fates will not have it so. No word of song is possible, in that century, to mortal lips. Only polished versification, sententious pentameter and hexameter, until, having turned out its toes long enough without dancing, and pattered with its lips long enough without piping, suddenly Astræa returns to the earth, and a Day of Judgment of a sort, and there bursts out a song at last again, a most curtly melodious triplet of Amphisbænic ryme. “Ça ira.” (34:314-15)¹

This is just the sort of thing that Arnold dismissed as “an example of ‘le faux’ in criticism” (“Homer” 161), an indulgence of feeling and rhetoric at the expense of reason. Yet the passage also carries an echo of Ruskin’s indictment of his own age, in “Of Kings’ Treasuries,” as a time when “we cannot read. No reading is possible for a people with its mind in this state. [...] so incapable of thought has it become in its insanity of avarice” (18:83). For Ruskin, both writing and reading are inevitably influenced by the rest of life – Arnold’s “other considerations” – such that a detached criticism can only be incomplete. As Jeffrey L. Spear has written, with Ruskin “the criticism of literature is always intertwined with extra-literary arguments and more general questions of interpretation [...]. Aesthetic experience and analysis, sight and insight, come together in his prose as interpretation and application” (73). In his close reading – of literature as of art and architecture – Ruskin is concerned not only with the analysis of structure and mechanics, but with the deeper meanings and connections these elements reveal.

Ruskin’s approach to literature is further separated from Arnold’s disinterested formalism by a keen capacity for sympathy. Writing about Ruskin and Dante, Norton rightly pointed out that Ruskin’s “imaginative insight and his intense moral sentiment brought him into such sympathy with the poet that he entered deeply into the spiritual purport of the poem, and was thus enabled to reveal and illuminate the truth which often lies hidden within verses that to most readers seem simple narrative” (xiv). As

Proust observes in the preface to his translation of Ruskin's *Bible of Amiens*, "Ruskin lives in a sort of fraternal society with all the great minds of all times, and since he is interested in them only so far as they can answer eternal questions, there are for him neither ancients nor moderns, and he can speak of Herodotus as he would of a contemporary" (181).

Reacting against what he felt to be Arnold's exaggerated praise of Wordsworth in 1880, Ruskin declared that unlike so-called 'Wordsworthians' like Arnold, "I happen myself to have used Wordsworth as a daily text-book from youth to age, and have lived, moreover, in all essential points according to the tenor of his teaching [...] [so] that I know, more vitally by far than they, what is in Wordsworth and what is not" (34:349). Contrasting Ruskin's sympathetic response to the "Immortality Ode" with Arnold's pragmatic one, Kenneth Daly notes that "Unlike Arnold, Ruskin wholly internalized the pattern of experience described by the poem" (26).² Daly's observation is important, as Ruskin tended to internalize the work of those authors he loved best. It is important to note that while Ruskin's incisive analytical power made him an astute and effective critic, some of his most deeply held preferences were rooted in personal feeling and association. This is not to say that his judgment of the work of Wordsworth, Scott, Byron, and others was unfounded, only that in most cases his greatest and lasting regard was for the work of writers with whom he felt some elemental connection, as this passage from a MS sheet of *Fors* demonstrates:

I should not venture to say anything to you of Scott, or of any other great man, unless I knew myself to be in closer sympathy with them than you can generally be yourselves; but observe, in claiming this sympathy I do not claim the least approach to any equality of power. I had sympathy with Tintoret, with Scott, with Turner, with Carlyle – as a child with its father or mother, not as friend with friend. What they feel, I, in a feeble and inferior way, feel also; what they are, I can tell you, because in a poor and weak way I am like them – of their race – but no match for them. (29:539)

As Edward Alexander observes, “Arnold had discovered in Ruskin nearly every shortcoming of temper and intellect that he pronounced baneful to criticism. Ruskin was febrile and irritable; he was subjective and sentimental; he was dogmatic and paradoxical; he was eccentric and extravagant; he tended to become obsessed with particulars at the expense of coherence and wholeness” (236) and, worst of all, he was not ‘detached.’ Ralph Waldo Emerson criticized Ruskin on similar grounds. In the essay “Experience” (1844), Emerson connects vision with mood, figuring our moods as “many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus” (CW 3:30). Our vision is thus subject to mood, which is further linked to temperament. “Temperament also enters fully into the system of illusions,” Emerson explains, “and shuts us in a prison of glass which we cannot see” (CW 3:31). Emerson felt that Ruskin’s temperament, and consequently his worldview, had been clouded by despair and frustration.

Yet Arnold and Emerson failed to understand Ruskin’s essential nature. As Alan Davis has written, Ruskin was “engaged in an urgent dialectic in which life, in its full, imaginative sense, was pitted against a kind of death through spiritual and imaginative poverty” (“Journeys” 38). Ruskin’s literary criticism, like the rest of his work, is connected with his commitment to “the things that lead to life” (17:85). It is a means of integrating into life a deep and multifaceted way of looking at and engaging with the world. His concept of life is drawn from the richness of experience generated by looking, drawing, thinking, and reading. In his literary criticism as in the rest of his work, Ruskin sought to extend this vital culture to others, so that they too might learn to see clearly and to live richly. Ruskin’s assessment of Gothic architecture might be taken to express his thinking about all the arts: “It is not enough that it has the Form,” Ruskin declares, “if it have not also the power and the life” (10:183). It is worth noting, too, the similarities between the flowing, foliated Gothic form and the “interwoven temper” (35:56) of Ruskin’s mind; his tendency to think – and indeed to write – in terms of connections, affinities, allusions and associations. For Ruskin, life is defined by such

interrelations; neither literature, nor anything else, can be properly perceived through a single lens.

None of this is meant to suggest that Ruskin is an ideal critic, in Arnold's sense, but then neither is Arnold (nor anyone else, then or since). He was undoubtedly guilty of some of the faults with which Arnold charged him. Like any critic, Ruskin sometimes blundered. George L. Hersey argues that Ruskin became "the first great negative critic in the history of art [...] [he] concerned himself, equally, with the good and with what he felt, perhaps even more passionately, to be bad" (57). Yet while his negative pronouncements (about many things, not just art and literature) can be entertaining and are often incisive, they are also sometimes misleading and incomplete in understanding.³ For instance, his declaration that Constable's storms were "great-coat weather and nothing more" (3:191), his assertion that Gustave Doré's paintings are "neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill" (27:630), or his dismissal of George Eliot's characters in *The Mill on the Floss* as "simply the sweepings out of a Pentonville omnibus" (34:377), demonstrate not only a lapse in judgment but the unproductive nature of negative criticism generally. Ruskin is at his best when writing constructive, positive criticism, telling us why something is good and worthy of our attention. He is most worth listening to when he says 'I see this, and this is how you can see it too.'

Ruskin was above all concerned with the importance of seeing clearly. The education of sight was for him a far more complex thing than the training of sense perception (Haslam 153). Sight was for Ruskin essentially a spiritual faculty, connected with wisdom and understanding. Vision was essential to Ruskin in more than a physiological sense; his life's work was driven by his keen powers of observation and perception. "The main good of my face," Ruskin wrote in *Praeterita*, "as of my life, is in the eyes" (35:281). "You do not see *with* the lens of the eye," he wrote. "You see *through* that, and by means of that, but you see with the soul of the eye [...]" Sight is an absolutely spiritual phenomenon; accurately, and only, to be so defined; and the 'Let there be light,' is as much, when you understand it, the ordering of intelligence, as the ordering of vision" (22:195). For Ruskin,

vision is connected with imagination, the virtue of which “is its reaching, by intuition and intensity of gaze (not by reasoning, but by its authoritative opening and revealing power), a more essential truth than is seen at the surface of things” (4:284).

Ruskin is as concerned with seeing clearly – in the sense of accurately perceiving – in his writings about literature as he is in his writings about art. Elizabeth Helsinger observes that Ruskin’s “emphasis on active seeing is also reaccompanied by an increasing attention to art and language, particularly to art as employing a variety of symbolic languages that convey meanings requiring interpretation. Reading, whether of art or of literature, becomes an explicit concern in Ruskin’s criticism when he acknowledges that an intelligent response to art is not a gift but an activity that can be learned” (206). In his discussions of literature, Ruskin repeatedly encourages us to become active readers, analyzing alongside him. Using passages from *Henry V* and *Coriolanus* to illustrate Shakespeare’s masterful expression of the kingly and heroic style in *Fiction, Fair and Foul*, Ruskin invites readers to “Let us note, point by point, the conditions of greatness common to both these passages, so opposite in temper” (27:334-35), proceeding to a careful examination of Shakespeare’s language, syntax, and imagery. Discussing Shakespeare’s names in *Munera Pulveris*, Ruskin considers the connection between their etymology and the nature and fate of the characters. Arnold dismissed this particular passage as a whimsical, provincial, and perhaps mentally unbalanced “piece of extravagance” (“Influence” 52), yet Northrop Frye would later observe the curious brilliance of Ruskin’s attempt. “Now whether Ruskin is right or wrong,” Frye wrote, “he is attempting genuine criticism. He is trying to interpret Shakespeare’s names in terms of a conceptual framework which belongs to the critic alone, and yet relates itself to the plays alone [...]. Here it is Arnold who is the provincial” (9).⁴

Ruskin’s critical method is rooted in what we now call ‘close reading,’ a practice that came naturally to Ruskin, given his Evangelical training and study of the Bible. His ‘Sunday letters’ to the pupils of Winnington Hall provide a useful glimpse into Ruskin’s critical (and pedagogical) methods.

In his first 'Sunday letter,' Ruskin directs the girls to various passages about obedience in Matthew, Revelation, and Exodus, asking them to compare the passages, looking closely at the meaning of the words and the structure and balance of various clauses. A passage from the same letter, referring to an ongoing discussion about "the meaning of the word vulgar" (Burd 115), illustrates the ways in which Ruskin taught the girls to read attentively and to think critically:

Mind – when you set next to work, you have not so much to find out what is vulgar, as what *makes* it so – why do you call it vulgar – & not merely 'wrong' or 'clumsy' – or 'ignorant' or 'rude' – Suppose I were to ask you the meaning of the word Apple – It wouldn't do to answer – a Ribston Pippin is an apple – and a Siberian crab is an apple – and a Devonshire (I forget what they call it) is an apple – But what I want to know is – what makes all of them apples – not plums nor pears. All the things you have pronounced vulgar – are so – But what do you mean by the Term itself – as attached to them? (Burd 136)

As Northrop Frye observes, "Ruskin has learned his trade from the great iconological tradition which comes down through Classical and Biblical scholarship into Dante and Spenser, both of whom he had studied carefully, and which is incorporated in the medieval cathedrals he had pored over in such detail" (10).

The first half of Ruskin's well-known essay about books and reading, "Of Kings' Treasuries" (1865), might be described as a lesson in close reading. Just as he reads buildings through attentive observation of architectural detail, Ruskin urges the necessity of "looking intensely at words, and assuring yourself of their meaning syllable by syllable – nay, letter by letter [...] A few words, well chosen, and distinguished, will do work that a thousand cannot, when every one is acting, equivocally, in the function of another. Yes; and words, if they are not watched, will do deadly work sometimes" (18:64-66). He affirms the connection between careful, accurate looking and clear thinking:

You might read all the books in the British Museum (if you could live long enough), and remain an utterly “illiterate,” uneducated person; but [...] if you read ten pages of a good book, letter by letter, – that is to say, with real accuracy, – you are for evermore in some sense an educated person. The entire difference between education and non-education (as regards the merely intellectual part of it) consists in this accuracy. (18:65)⁵

Ruskin advises readers to learn the Greek alphabet, get good Latin, Greek, French, and English dictionaries, and read Max Müller’s lectures.⁶ He then performs a close reading of a passage from “Lycidas,” analyzing and interpreting the poem line by line, word by word – *doing* what he has been describing. He urges the importance of putting oneself in the author’s place, annihilating one’s own personality “so as to be able assuredly to say ‘Thus Milton thought,’ not ‘Thus *I* thought, in mis-reading Milton’” (18:75). Ruskin’s analysis of “Lycidas” exemplifies the principles and practices that make him a great critic.

Ruskin chooses the lines in question, 108-129, as being well known to the English public, but poorly understood:

Last came, and last did go,
The pilot of the Galilean lake.
Two massy keys he bore of metals twain,
(The golden opes, the iron shuts amain,)
He shook his mitred locks, and stern bespake,
How well could I have spared for thee, young swain,
Enow of such as for their bellies’ sake
Creep, and intrude, and climb into the fold!
Of other care they little reckoning make,
Than how to scramble at the shearers’ feast,
And shove away the worthy bidden guest;
Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold
A sheep-hook, or have learn’d aught else, the least
That to the faithful herdman’s art belongs!

What recks it them? What need they? They are sped;
And when they list, their lean and flashy songs
Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw;
The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
But, swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw,
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread;
Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw
Daily devours apace, and nothing said.⁷

Ruskin invites us to think over and examine Milton's words, beginning with his description of St. Peter's "mitred locks" and "massy keys." How is it, Ruskin asks, that a poet who disdained bishops, figures St. Peter as so fully episcopal? It is not merely poetical license, for "Great men do not play stage tricks with the doctrines of life and death" (18:70). Milton's language alludes to Matthew 16:19: "For I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of Heaven," a verse that we must understand, Ruskin writes, if we hope to understand Milton. The poet's image of St. Peter as a true bishop is meant to underscore the failings of false ones and, by extension, of "false claimants of power and rank in the body of the clergy, who 'for their bellies' sake, creep, intrude, and climb into the fold'" (18:71). Ruskin next examines Milton's deliberate and considered choice of these three verbs, each of which reflects the sort of men who seek ecclesiastical power dishonestly: those who creep cunningly, feigning servility so as to secure influence; those who intrude, gaining control through thrusting self-assertion; and those who climb, gaining dignities through selfish ambition.

Ruskin's next analyzes the apparently awkward phrase, "Blind mouths" (line 119). While the expression may sound careless, Ruskin writes, in fact "its very audacity and pithiness are intended to make us look close [*sic*] at the phrase and remember it" (18:72), for it is an image of the two great Church offices – Bishop (one who sees) and Pastor (one who feeds) – corrupted, their proper functions reversed and replaced by blindness and greedy hunger. Following the meaning out further, Ruskin connects it to Milton's recognition that most of the evils in the Church are the result of bishops' having abandoned their obligations to the people in favor of power

and authority. The duty of a clergyman, Ruskin observes, is that of a father to his children, and while this may not be the modern idea of a bishop, “it was St. Paul’s; and it was Milton’s. They may be right or we may be; but we must not think we are reading either one or the other by putting our meaning into their words” (18:73).

Moving on to line 126, “But, swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw,” Ruskin affirms that the words are Milton’s answer to the vulgar notion that though the poor may be hungry, they have spiritual food. Considering the etymology of the word ‘Spirit,’ – from the Latin for ‘breath’ (*spiritus*) and the Greek word for ‘wind’ (*pneuma*) – Ruskin declares that

there are two kinds of breath with which the flock may be filled, – God’s breath, and man’s. The breath of God is health, and life, and peace to them, as the air of heaven is to the flocks on the hills; but man’s breath – the word which he calls spiritual – is disease and contagion to them, as the fog of the fen. They rot inwardly with it; they are puffed up by it, as a dead body by the vapours of its own decomposition. This is literally true of all false religious teaching; the first and last, and fatalest sign of it, is that – ‘puffing up.’ (18:73-74)

Ruskin then returns to the first lines of the passage, about the power of the keys, comparing Milton’s interpretation with Dante’s and concluding that whereas Dante supposes both keys to belong to Heaven’s gate, Milton gives us a golden Heavenly key and an iron key which will be used to imprison the wicked teachers of Luke 11:52, who have “taken away the key of knowledge, yet entered not in themselves.”

Ruskin’s intention here, as in the many passages of close reading throughout his work, is not merely explication. Throughout his discussion of “Lycidas” he has been teaching us how to see clearly, pointing our focus so that we might learn how to read with greater accuracy and sensitivity, “so as always to *think* of things as they truly are, and to *see* them as they truly are, as far as in us rests” (17:399). Ruskin has the artist’s eye for detail, and his literary criticism retains the careful methods of his art criticism – looking

to the spirit and substance of the writing as well as the mechanics. As Alan Davis remarks, Ruskin "demonstrates, at last, the wonderfulness of the writing by putting us in a position to see it for ourselves" (Davis 2015). He doesn't simply tell us how good Milton's lines are, he *shows* us.

Arnold, for all his disparagement of Ruskin's critical acuity, struggled with this sort of close reading and interpretation. Where Ruskin attentively examines language and structure, Arnold tends to fall back on abstract criteria – nobleness, seriousness, truth: "the presence or absence of the grand style," Arnold declares, "can only be spiritually discerned" ("Homer" 211). According to Arnold, Burns is not truly great because he lacks "high seriousness"; Chaucer, despite many admirable qualities, is without the "high and excellent seriousness which Aristotle assigns as one of the grand virtues of poetry"; Homer's "grand manner" makes him superior to Scott ("Study" 303; 295; "Homer" 213). Yet Arnold doesn't define the grand style, relying instead on a supposed instinct, an ear for greatness shared by his readers, which allows him to sidestep detailed literary analysis.⁸ Although he quotes frequently from the writers that he discusses, he offers little detailed commentary. George Watson noted that Arnold was "a master rhetorician, lulling readers into accepting the validity of his arguments by persuasive tones and mesmerizing language" (qtd Mazzeno 55). After offering the reader a string of passages from Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton in "The Study of Poetry," Arnold concludes that "These few lines, if we have tact and can use them, are enough even of themselves to keep clear and sound our judgments about poetry, to save us from fallacious estimates of it, to conduct us to a real estimate" (289). Arnold tells, but he rarely shows. In *Fiction, Fair and Foul* Ruskin asks, "do you, good reader, *know* good style when you get it? Can you say, of half-a-dozen given lines taken anywhere out of a novel, or poem, or play, that is good, essentially, in style, or bad, essentially? And can you say why half-a-dozen lines are good, or bad?" (34:334). Arnold had no trouble with the first two questions, but the third often caused him to stumble. Leon Gottfried, citing Arnold's critical insufficiencies, notes that "his powers as an analytic critic suffered from a kind of inattentiveness to how poems are actually made. Consequently, the

touchstone method came into increasing prominence as a way of avoiding particular analysis” (43).

A true book, as Ruskin defines it, is an expression of the author’s essential self:

The author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful. So far as he knows, no one else has yet said it; so far as he knows, no one else can say it. He is bound to say it, clearly and melodiously if he may; clearly, at all events. In the sum of his life he finds this to be the thing, or group of things, manifest to him; – this, the piece of true knowledge, or sight, which his share of sunshine and earth has permitted him to seize. He would fain set it down for ever; engrave it on rock, if he could saying, “This is the best of me; for the rest I ate, and drank, and slept, loved, and hated, like another; my life was as the vapour, and is not; but this I saw and knew: this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory.” That is his “writing”; it is, in his small human way, and with whatever degree of true inspiration is in him, his inscription, or scripture. That is a “Book.” (18:61)

The reader’s job is not to listen for the echo of his own thoughts, but to look for the author’s meaning, his “piece of true knowledge, or sight.” The critic’s job, as understood and exemplified by Ruskin at his best, is to teach readers how to see.⁹

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Notes

¹ Ruskin made exception for Pope, whom he described in his 1870 Slade lectures as “the most perfect representative we have, since Chaucer, of the true English mind,” content with his allotted share of life and trusting the problem of salvation “to Him in whose hand lies that of the universe” (20:77).

² As Daly points out, Ruskin remained sympathetic to the *Ode*'s depiction of the intense but evanescent feelings and perceptions of childhood, but in later life he became critical of Wordsworth's philosophy (26-29).

³ George L. Hersey observes that Ruskin's "negative-critical cannon" sometimes strikes the guilty as well as the innocent. "If he is unfair to Cuyp," Hersey writes, "we have to admit that he is right about Gaspar Dughet" (60), whose depictions of storm Ruskin describes as "massive concretions of ink and indigo, wrung and twisted very hard, apparently in a vain effort to get some moisture out of them" (3:396). Ruskin's editors suggest that "The judicious reader, in the case of Ruskin's literary, as in that of his artistic, criticism, finds firmer ground perhaps in his praises than in his disparagements" (34:xxxv).

⁴ "Of Shakspeare's [*sic*] names I will afterwards speak at more length: they are curiously – often barbarously – much by Providence, – but assuredly not without Shakspeare's cunning purpose – mixed out of the various traditions he confusedly adopted, and languages which he imperfectly knew. Three of the clearest in meaning have been already noticed. 'Desdemona,' 'δυσδαιμονία' 'miserable fortune,' is also plain enough. Othello is, I believe, 'the careful'; all the calamity of the tragedy arising from the single flaw and error in his magnificently collected strength. 'Ophelia,' 'serviceableness,' the true lost wife of Hamlet, is marked as having a Greek name by that of her brother, Laertes; and its signification is once exquisitely alluded to in that brother's last word of her, where her gentle preciousness is opposed to the uselessness of the churlish clergy – 'A *ministering* angel shall my sister be, when thou liest howling.' Hamlet is, I believe, connected in some way with – homely, the entire event of the tragedy turning on betrayal of home duty." (17:258-59).

⁵ Compare Ruskin's comments in the following letter to George Allen, dated Boulogne, 4 August 1861: "Reading for education consists mainly in reading attentively and only what you wish permanently to know or remember. Never pass a word, if you can help it, without understanding it,

and all about it. Read always with maps, if possible, when you read about places, and leave the book at every sentence if necessary to hunt down a difficulty. What does Punjaub mean? Where is the district? How large? Bunnoo – where? – Afghanistan – where? – and so on. What is a ‘Sikh’ – how are Sikhs armed – what is the origin of their race? – etc., etc. Indian money – a rupee – how much? – a lac of rupees – how much? – origin of word rupee? Pronunciation of it? Half a page read this way is worth more than half a volume read for amusement” (36:377).

⁶ Müller invested language with the sort of spiritual power that Ruskin gave to vision, arguing that language is in fact intimately bound up in human experience and values. Like Ruskin, Müller also drew upon the symbolic connection between light and understanding. “The first rays of language,” he wrote, “like the first rays of dawn, change the world from night to day, from darkness to light, from a strange phantom into our own home” (36). And again, “But there is a light within us, which not only lights up our own true self, but throws its rays upon the whole world that surrounds and holds us. That light is language” (38).

⁷ In *Fors Clavigera* Letter 49, allusively titled “From the Prophet Even Unto the Priest,” Ruskin’s use of the wolf metaphor echoes the sort of explication performed in “Of Kings’ Treasuries.” See *The Works of John Ruskin* 28:242-3.

⁸ In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin writes that “all criticism must be useless when the terms or grounds of it are in any degree ambiguous” (3:85).

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