The Soul of the Eye: Ruskin, Darwin, and the Nature of Vision

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> I have no doubt the Darwinian theory ... is that the feathers of birds once stuck up all erect, like the bristles of a brush, and have only been blown flat by continual flying. Nay, we might even sufficiently represent the general manner of conclusion in the Darwinian system by the statement that if you fasten a hair-brush to a mill-wheel, with the handle forward, so as to develop itself into a neck by moving always in the same direction, and within continual hearing of a steam-whistle, after a certain number of revolutions the hair-brush will fall in love with the whistle; they will marry, lay an egg, and the produce will be a nightingale (25.36).[1]

This passage, from John Ruskin's study of ornithology, *Love's Meinie* (1873-1881), is one of many mocking references to Darwinism that appear in his published writings. It is the sort of comment that his critics seized upon as antiscientific and reactionary, the inevitable response of "a somewhat crotchety and melancholy individual, averse to modern progress, and seeing, as a rule, everything very yellow indeed, with his jaundiced eyes" (Mallock 271).[2] Yet Ruskin's attitude toward Darwinism, like Ruskin himself, was considerably more nuanced and complex, as many modern commentators have recognized. Ruskin was not scientifically ignorant, but he took issue with what he considered the dehumanizing tenden-

cies of modern scientific research, which seemed "insufficiently concerned with preserving the sanctity of organic life" (Mayer 200). It was for this reason that he denounced the study of anatomy and vigorously opposed vivisection, both of which practices reduced men and beasts to mere "bones and meat" (22.233), demeaning human dignity as well as "the blessed harmonies between the human and the lower nature" (22.226). Modern science took no account of the soul, reducing all life to nothing more than "germ cells" (27.380). Darwin and his school, he argued in *Proserpina*, "conceived the quality of things only in their 'properties,' but not in their 'becomingnesses' ... and never saw the difference between ugliness and beauty absolute, decency and indecency absolute, glory or shame absolute, and folly or sense absolute. Whereas the perception of beauty, and the power of defining physical character, are based on moral instinct, and on the power of defining animal or human character" (25.268). Evolutionary theory seemed to lower mankind, while his life's work was directed at trying to raise it. As Alan Davis observes, "Ruskin, above all, has at his heart a reverence for what it's like to be fully human; to see and feel as a human being, operating at its full potential" (Davis 2009).

Today Ruskin's difficulties with Darwinism are often discussed in terms of natural theology, natural science, or aesthetics, and there is indeed much to be said on each of these counts: Ruskin's Christianity, his scientific studies, and his artistic training and experience all contributed to his rejection of Darwinian theory. But I propose to consider whether the deepest roots of his resistance lie in his firmly held conviction of the moral and spiritual significance of sight: "To see clearly," Ruskin famously declared in *Modern Painters* 3, "is poetry, prophecy, and religion, – all in one" (5.333). Conversely, "to see falsely is worse than blindness" (7.211). What Ruskin found most offensive in Darwinism was the flawed and potentially destructive vision that it seemed to invite.

The faculty of sight was essential to both Ruskin and Darwin; their respective careers were shaped by their keen powers of observation and by an ability to see and grasp the most elusive of details. "The main good of my face," Ruskin wrote in *Praeterita*, "as of my life, is in the eyes"

(35.281). Yet for Ruskin, for whom the eye was a spiritual organ – "intellectual lens and moral retina" (4.36) – seeing clearly meant seeing *rightly*. The "education of sight" (Haslam 153) was central to his teaching from the start; his efforts as an art instructor were directed at leading students toward a clarity of vision that would develop more than mere manual dexterity.[3] "Reverence," he declared in 1863, "is as instinctive as anger; – both of them instant on true vision: it is sight and understanding that we have to teach, and these are reverence" (17.243). The act of seeing, weighted as it was with moral and spiritual implications, was important to Ruskin's social teaching; true vision embodied right understanding and apprehended noble truths, which in turn led to right behavior. The only essential science, Ruskin claimed, was "how to behave" (22.233). Yet Darwin, in a short but momentous discussion in *The Origin of Species*, reduced sight to a purely mechanical activity, devoid of any spiritual and moral significance. "It is scarcely possible," Darwin wrote, "to avoid comparing the eye to a telescope" (154).[4] Such an approach threatened to undermine the very foundations of Ruskin's philosophy.

Darwin was aware that he took a certain risk, in an already controversial endeavor, in attributing the complexity of the eye to natural selection. After all, Ruskin was not alone in interpreting the spiritual power of vision: the Victorians read their Bibles faithfully and had long known that "The light of the body is the eye." Chris Otter, attributing an "ingenuous ocularphilia" (23) to the era observes that "The eye made the Victorians particularly verbose" (22), while Jonathan Smith describes "a century and a culture that were relentlessly, explosively, visual" (30). Darwin was thus understandably wary about discussing vision in purely physiological terms; in fact he was initially unnerved by his own conclusions. Writing to Asa Gray in 1860 he confessed that "The eye to this day gives me a cold shudder, but when I think of the fine known gradations, my reason tells me I ought to conquer the cold shudder" (*Autobiography* 405). In a letter to Lyell of the same year he remarks that his friend and former professor John Henslow, "also shudders at the eye!" (*Autobiography* 272). Darwin succeeded in conquering the shudder, yet he conceded in the *Origin* that

although he believed that in this matter of the eye a man's reason "ought to conquer his imagination; ... I have felt the difficulty far too keenly to be surprised at any degree of hesitation in extending the principles of natural selection to such startling lengths" (153-54).

Darwin's account of the eye appears in Chapter 6 of the *Origin* under the heading "Organs of extreme perfection." Having briefly noted the observable facts regarding structural gradations of the eye across species, Darwin concludes that he "can see no very great difficulty ... in believing that natural selection has converted the simple apparatus of an optic nerve merely coated with pigment and invested by transparent membrane, into an optical instrument as perfect as is possessed by any member of the great Articulate class" (153). He goes on to liken the eye to a telescope, a "living optical instrument" (154) made gradually superior in humans over the course of many millions of years of natural selection. "He who will go thus far," Darwin asserts, "...ought not to hesitate to go further, and to admit that a structure even as perfect as the eye of an eagle might be formed by natural selection" (153). The 'perfect organ' of the higher species appeared even more wonderful in comparison with the obliterated eyes of subterranean animals such as burrowing rodents, cave-dwelling rats, and moles, rendered partially or wholly blind from disuse and no longer required in the darkness. For Ruskin, Darwin's strictly physiological treatment of the eye would have seemed a particularly damaging instance of the "invasive and destructive method of looking" (Mayer 206) that made evolutionary theory so repulsive to him. Darwin's mechanistic, soulless eye was both the symbol and result of a materialist view of the world that seemed to Ruskin and others to legitimize the competitive, selfish impulses of the age. There was clearly a need "that we should learn first of all what eyes are; and what vision they ought to possess – science of sight granted only to clearness of soul" (22.207).

In 1872 Ruskin delivered a series of ten lectures at Oxford "on the relation of natural science to art," subsequently published as *The Eagle's Nest*. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these lectures, the most

comprehensive expression of Ruskin's "gospel on the morality of seeing" (Mayer 202), were intended as a response to Darwin's evolutionary eye. The book's characteristically allusive title refers to the lines from Blake's *Book of Thel* that inspire Ruskin's argument: "Doth the Eagle know what is in the pit/ Or wilt thou go ask the Mole?" It was natural that Ruskin should invoke Blake, whose understanding of vision and perception had influenced his own. As Davis has noted "For Ruskin and for Blake, the issue of perception was not just an interesting subject for intellectual discussion. Rather they were 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" (38). But one suspects that in choosing both title and motto Ruskin also had in mind Darwin's remarks on the eye of the eagle and the blind and burrowing mole. Darwin's use of the eagle as an example was particularly suggestive for Ruskin. Examining the symbolic meanings ascribed to birds by the Greeks in *The Queen of the Air* (1869), Ruskin had placed special emphasis on their interpretation of the eagle as the "hieroglyph of supreme spiritual energy" (19.366), a meaning that subsequently found its way into Christian myths and "thenceforward retains its hold on the human imagination" (19.366).[5] Both eagle and mole assume a symbolic significance in *The Eagle's Nest*, in which the eagle is made the type of noble, elevated sight, and the mole of the blind, degraded vision of modern science. "It is just those who grope with the mole, and cling with the bat, who are vainest of their sight and of their wings," Ruskin warns (22.139).[6] Instead of gazing upwards in search of noble truths, Darwin and his fellow scientists went about blinking at the ground, dimly descrying their "gospel of dirt" (29.78). Drawing on symbolic connections between vision, light, and wisdom, Ruskin set out in *The Eagle's Nest* to teach "the great truth that there is a different kind of knowledge good for every different creature, and that the glory of the higher creatures is in ignorance of what is known to the lower" (22.138).

For Ruskin the capacity for noble sight, "clear in gentleness, proud in reverence, and joyful in love" (22.208), is what separates humans from

the lower forms of life. In this sense it is at the heart of what it means to be human; we are not simply body, but mind and soul as well, which when joined give us a uniquely human, spiritual vision. Ruskin had written in *The Queen of the Air* (1869) that "the body is only the soul made visible" (19.414); in minding only earthly things, Darwin and his fellow scientists had divided the body from the soul, degrading both. In *The Eagle's Nest* Ruskin asserts their unity:

> You do not see *with* the lens of the eye. 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)

Optics, as Ruskin defines it in T*he Eagle's Nest*, is the "science of light"; "fiat lux" is "fiat anima." The eyes of living organisms, he maintains, are animated by light – "the power that affects the eyes of animals with the sensation proper to them" (22.194) – and are powerful according to the degree of animation. The light of the sun gives not only physical but mental – and by extension moral – power, in proportion to the creature's ability to receive it. The higher the creature the nobler its sight – not physiologically, as Darwin would have it, but spiritually. For Ruskin, the structural gradations of the eye have moral implications:

> Comparative sight is a far more important question than comparative anatomy. It is no matter, though we sometimes walk – and it may often be desirable to climb – like apes; but suppose we only see like apes, or like lower creatures? I can tell you, the science of optics is an essential one to us; for exactly according to these infinitely grotesque directions and multiplications of instrument you have correspondent, not only intellectual, but moral, faculty in the soul of the creatures. Literally, if the eye be pure, the body is pure; but, if the light of the body be but darkness, how great is that darkness! (22.199-200)

There is also a pointed reference here to Darwin's argument for the relation of man to primates in *The Descent of Man*, which was for Ruskin another instance of Darwin's reductive vision of organic life.[7] As far as Ruskin was concerned, Darwin's descent theory was inherently flawed; it didn't matter what man had been, but what he now was and how he lived. "It is every man's duty," he wrote in reference to Darwinism in 1886, "to know what he is, and not to think of the embryo he was, nor the skeleton that he shall be" (34.586). Darwin focuses solely on the physical comparisons among species, whereas the "blessed harmonies" (22.225) that Ruskin recognizes between man and animals are an integral part of his belief in the unity of all life. Yet these harmonies are balanced by "infinite differences" (22.225) that give to each creature its "appointed conditions of existence" (22.194). Thus the higher in the race of being one ascends, the higher the dignity and moral sense. Eight years before Darwin published his *Descent*, Ruskin had argued that "Both moral and physical qualities are communicated by descent" (17.150). The materialist eye of the scientist, searching only for physical similarity, failed to see the spiritual meaning – the true essence of life – in his subjects of study, be they flowers, birds, or men. Ruskin holds that living things are best seen and understood in their association with the whole of life: a flower, for instance, should be watched as it grows, not torn to pieces and scrutinized under a microscope. Such scrutiny diminishes the vital relationships of life, which make a flower more to us than a mere bundle of fibers, charcoal, and water.[8] Speaking of flowers in *The Queen of the Air*, Ruskin observes:

> in all cases, the presence of life is asserted by characters *in which the human sight takes pleasure*, and which seem prepared with distinct reference to us, or rather, bear, in being delightful, evidence of having been produced by the power of the same spirit as our own. And we are led to feel this still more strongly, because all the distinctions of species, both in plants and animals, appear to have similar connection with human character.

> Whatever the origin of species may be, or however those species, once formed, may be influenced by external accident, the groups into which birth or accident reduce them have distinct relation to the spirit of man. (19.358; emphasis added)[9]

Darwin and his colleagues were thus as good as blind, according to Ruskin, for only "in the degree in which you delight in the life of any creature, you can see it; no otherwise" (22.242).

According to Ruskin's own anti-Darwinian argument, Darwin's investigations, no matter how scientifically accurate, were useless because they separated the material facts of existence from the deeper moral and spiritual implications of that existence. Ruskin would take up and enlarge upon these ideas in his mytho-poetical treatment of birds and flowers in *Love's Meinie* (1873-81) and *Proserpina* (1875-86), which as Smith observes is "an exercise in understanding rather than mastery, in self-effacement rather than aggrandizement" (128). In *The Eagle's Nest* Ruskin argues that the true function of vision is to lead men and women to the noblest knowledge and truths. Enable a man to see a bird rightly, he declares, and you will have gone some way toward educating him: "Then the next thing to be contrived would be that he should be able to see a man rightly, as well as a bird; to understand and love what was good in a man, so that supposing his master was a good man, the sight of his master should be a joy to him.... Then the last part of education will be – whatever is meant by that beatitude of the pure in heart – seeing God rightly" (22.242).

The Eagle's Nest owes more to Blake than its motto; it shares his belief in the spirituality of sight. Alan Davis has shown that Blake was partly responsible for shaping Ruskin's understanding of vision and perception. Intensely visual himself, Ruskin, not surprisingly, was drawn to Blake, who invests vision with prophetic power. Davis notes that by 1863 Ruskin would have been familiar with these lines from Blake's notebook, reprinted in Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, and so like Ruskin's description of sight in *The Eagle's Nest*: "I question not

my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro' it & not with it" (Davis 38). Ruskin would also have been drawn to Blake's rejection of the mechanistic view of the universe embraced by the Deists of his time. Blake, like Ruskin, "affirmed the holiness of life, omnipresent, no less in the tiny than in the vast" (Raine 50). Blake, too, believed that the essence, or spirit, of life could not be grasped or explained scientifically; it is not surprising that Ruskin would have felt an affinity for the man who could write of seeing "a World in a Grain of Sand/ And Heaven in a Wild Flower."

Of course Ruskin's ideas about vision were also influenced by Christianity, in which light is connected with vision and with ideas of wisdom, purity, reverence, and justice. In *The Eagle's Nest* Matthew 6:22-23 becomes an important part of Ruskin's argument and a means of defining both right vision and its opposite. Similarly, the idea of Christ as the Light of the World, another key image in *The Eagle's Nest*, is for Ruskin no metaphor but a manifestation of purity and reverence. But Ruskin's understanding of vision has yet another, more ancient source in his classical studies, which had assumed a deeper and lasting significance during the 1860s as he gradually abandoned Evangelicalism in favor of a broader, more humanistic belief. Ultimately these sacred and profane studies became inextricably linked in Ruskin's mind so that by the 1880s he could find the germ of one in the other, declaring that "it was from the Bible that I learned the symbols of Homer, and the faith of Horace: the duty enforced upon me in early youth of reading every word of the gospels and prophecies as if written by the hand of God, gave me the habit of awed attention which afterward made many passages of the profane writers, frivolous to an irreligious reader, deeply grave to me" (33.119). While the Bible remained Ruskin's "Ur-text" (Spear 76), he drew increasingly upon "the wisdom which the Masters of all men – the dead Senate of the noblest among the nations – [have] left for the guidance of the ages yet to be" (29.401).

Among the classical writers, Ruskin was especially drawn to Plato. In 1843 he wrote Edward Clayton that "I ... think myself very wrong if I do not read a little bit of Plato very accurately every day" (1.494); as his studies of Greek mythology and philosophy intensified, he combined his daily Bible reading with readings in Plato, paying close attention to the ways in which their teaching intersected; in later years he began each morning by translating passages of Plato's *Laws* in his diary. W.R. Inge, Dean of St. Paul's, remarked in 1919 that Ruskin may have owed more to Plato than to his contemporary 'master' Carlyle (29); more recently, Tim Hilton has suggested that Ruskin might always have been "a Platonist by temperament" (*Later Years* 54). Plato is one of five men whom Ruskin urged readers of *Fors Clavigera* to study for the lessons he might teach modern England. Plato both confirmed and shaped Ruskin's views on political economy, social justice, education, and the ideal state. He also influenced Ruskin's understanding of the spiritual nature of vision.

Plato's emphasis on the unity and interdependence of all life was especially significant for Ruskin and influenced his conception of the Law of Help. As an aesthetic principle the Law of Help refers to the way in which all elements of a drawing or painting work together to produce an organic whole. It also figures in the natural world, in the growth of leaves and the structure of clouds, all parts serving to make up and complement the whole. But the Law of Help extends beyond the boundaries of art and nature to human society as well, where individuals are expected to work together in mutually helpful fellowship, and to the wider world, where all life exists in balance. "A pure or holy state," Ruskin writes in *Modern Painters* 5 "is that in which all its parts are helpful and consistent. They may or may not be homogeneous.... The highest and first law of the universe – and the other name of life is, therefore, 'help.' The other name of death is 'separation.'"(7.207). The Law of Help underpins all of Ruskin's teaching and has its counterpart in Plato's assertion that "the larger stones do not lie well without the lesser" (*Laws* 902).[10] "The ruler of the universe has ordered all things with a view to the excellence and preservation of the whole," Plato's Athenian declares

in *Laws* 10, "and each part, as far as may be, has an action and passion appropriate to it" (Laws 903).

Plato extends this principle of unity to the individual as well. The Greeks, as Edith Hamilton observes, recognized that "We are composite creatures, made up of soul and body, mind and spirit" (21). For Ruskin the Greek concern for physical and spiritual unity both strengthened and shaped his own understanding of human nature as "body and soul" (17.149). Plato's educational ideal – and Ruskin would follow him in this as well – is conceived in reference to this duality. The two primary branches of education he describes, gymnastic and music, are directed at developing both body and mind to the fullest; in connection with other necessary studies, these fundamental disciplines draw the soul toward the apprehension of the highest truth, the good. For Plato this process is connected, both symbolically and actually, with the faculty of vision and with seeing clearly. In *The Republic* and *Laws* in particular, for Ruskin the "two great treatises" (29.227) of Plato, sight and soul are inextricably linked.

Ruskin's "science of light" owes as much to Platonic as to Christian imagery, which is itself influenced by Greek interpretations of light and vision.[11] In *The Republic* Plato observes that the eye, "the most costly and complex piece of workmanship which the artificer of the senses ever contrived" (507), requires light in order to function. Yet he clearly means light in a spiritual sense. Light, "the bond which links together sight and visibility" (*Republic* 508), has a heavenly origin in the god of light, the sun, which for Plato is the "author of sight .... the child of the good, whom the good begat in his own likeness, to be in the visible world, in relation to sight and the things of sight, what the good is in the intellectual world in relation to mind and the things of mind" (*Republic* 508). Light is thus wisdom, truth, and being, that which elevates vision from mere mechanical seeing to understanding. Plato's notion of light as a god-given, spiritual element is present in the Christian concept of Christ as the Light of the World. Underscoring this connection in *The Eagle's Nest*, Ruskin observes that "To the Persian, the Greek, and the Christian, the sense of the power

of the God of Light has been one and the same" (22.204). It is this ancient and spiritual sense, disregarded by modern science, which informs Ruskin's understanding of light in its relation to vision.

According to Plato, as the sun is the author of sight so the eye is most like the sun and thus most able to perceive the good. Deprived of the light, however, the eye becomes not only physically but spiritually blind. Ruskin's "soul of the eye" has its counterpart in Plato's assertion that "the soul is like the eye; when resting upon that on which truth and being shine, the soul perceives and understands and is radiant with intelligence; but when turned toward the twilight of becoming and perishing, then she has opinion only, and goes blinking about, and is first of one opinion and then of another, and seems to have no intelligence" (*Republic* 508). For Ruskin these words confirmed his conviction that Darwin and his fellow scientists, in narrowing their focus to the lowest aspects of life, had become blind to its "blessed harmonies." There is something of Plato's Parable of the Cave in Ruskin's opposition to Darwinian vision as well, with Darwin appearing like one of the prisoners in the cave, perceiving the truth in mere shadows.

For Plato as for Ruskin the eye was "designed to look up at the stars" (*Republic* 530), seeking the highest truths:

> that knowledge only which is of being and of the unseen can make the soul look upwards, and whether a man gapes at the heavens or blinks on the ground, seeking to learn some particular of sense, I would deny that he can learn, for nothing of that sort is matter of science; his soul is looking downwards, not upwards, whether his way to knowledge is by water or by land, whether he floats, or only lies on his back. (*Republic* 529)

The danger that Ruskin saw in Darwinism lay in what he considered its resolutely downward gaze, which seemed to degrade the human intellect and spirit by reducing all life to mechanism. Ruskin followed Plato in maintaining the priority of the soul, "the oldest of all things .... [that] orders and inhabits all things that move, however moving" (*Laws* 896). In

Fors Letter 82 Ruskin cites a passage from the *Laws* that one suspects has been chosen in reference to the materialist science he abhorred (the parenthetical interjection is Ruskin's):

> For to the vulgar it seems that people dealing with astronomy and the other arts that are concerned with necessary law, must become atheists, in seeing that things come of necessity, and not of the conception formed by a will desiring accomplishment of good. But that has been so only when they looked at them (in the imperfect and idiotic way) thinking that the soul was newer than matter, instead of older than matter, and after it, instead of before it, – thinking which, they turned all things upside-down, and themselves also: so that they could not see in the heavenly bodies anything but lifeless stones and dirt. (29.228)

Plato's emphasis, which surely appealed to Ruskin, is on an incorrect way of looking and the consequences of not seeing clearly or rightly. It seemed to Ruskin that in fixing the attention only on the body, Darwin and his colleagues threatened to disrupt a system of traditional values anchored in an age-old understanding of life and of human nature. "It is not the arrangement of new systems, nor the discovery of new facts, which constitutes a man of science" Ruskin declares in *The Eagle's Nest*, "but the submission to an eternal system, and the proper grasp of facts already known" (22.150). Darwin's findings and the startling new perspective they offered threatened to overturn the eternal system that Ruskin was committed to upholding and to strip existence of both beauty and mystery.

Ruskin was not alone in opposing the mystery of life to the inhumanity of modern scientific research. He counted among his colleagues and friends at Oxford the esteemed linguist Friedrich Max Müller. Ruskin especially admired Müller's work in etymology, a subject in which he himself took great interest. In "Of Kings' Treasuries" he recommends his audience to "read Max Müller's lectures [on The Science of Language] thoroughly, to begin with; and, after that, never let a word escape you that looks suspicious" (18.69).[12] Müller's teaching was also appealing on another level, for it invested lan-

guage with the sort of spiritual power that Ruskin gave to vision. With new linguistic studies focused on reducing language to "a phonetic totality independent of representation and human control" (Dowling 161), Müller argued that language was in fact intimately bound up in human experience and values. As Linda Dowling has argued, "Although Müller himself quickly became the leading exponent of the new linguistic science, he obtained his great popular success ... by being quite unscientific about language" (160). Eschewing technical jargon, Müller employed a literary, symbolic prose that connected his "science of language" to traditional ideas and beliefs. For Müller, language was not merely one of the infinite differences between man and animals, but the primary difference. Language, he wrote,

> forms an impassible barrier between man and beast .... language which alone makes man man; language has made him the lord of nature, and has restored to him the consciousness of his own true Self.... That language has raised man into an entirely new atmosphere, an intellectual atmosphere which no other animal is able to breathe, is admitted on all sides. (9-10)

Language elevates man by making it possible for him to formulate and express concepts: "Only by being named does this universe become our universe" (37) Müller declared, evoking the Biblical account so familiar – and so reassuring – to his contemporaries. The "science of language" he claimed, thus presented the best opportunity for understanding man's appointed condition of existence.

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. Take away that language, and man is lower than the dumb animals of the field and of the forest. Give us that language, and we are not only higher than all animals, but lifted up into a

new world, thinking thoughts and speaking words which the animal may obey, may even imitate, but which no animal can ever create, or even impart to its own offspring" (38). This passage appears very close, in both spirit and expression, to Ruskin's argument about the spiritual and moral power of vision. Indeed many of Müller's admirers saw his teaching as a bulwark against the assaults of modern theories and ideas. Although Müller himself claimed that he had been "a Darwinian long before Darwin" (49), Dowling observes that his work was often employed as "a shield against the Darwinians" (161). "While Max Müller spoke, and while his audiences listened," Dowling writes, "the science of language became the physical science of man's immortal breath" (175).

In a May 1886 letter to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* explaining his resistance to Darwinism, Ruskin maintained that Darwin's theory "is mischievous, not only in looking to the past germ instead of the present creature, – but looking also in the creature itself – to the Growth of the Flesh instead of the Breath of the Spirit. The loss of mere happiness, in such modes of thought, is incalculable. When I see a girl dance, I thank Heaven that made her cheerful as well as graceful; and envy neither the science nor sentiment of my Darwinian friend, who sees in her only a cross between a Dodo and a Daddy-long-legs" (34.596). Darwin himself might not have entirely disagreed with this assessment. Lamenting his loss of the higher aesthetic tastes in his *Autobiography*, he remarks that "My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive .... The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature" (62).

It is important to recognize that despite his deeply felt and often unfortunately expressed opposition to evolutionary theory Ruskin never declared Darwinism to be unequivocally wrong, nor did he feel any animosity toward Darwin himself. He was enough of a scientist to admit the accuracy of many of Darwin's findings and at times even seems

to express a reluctant acceptance. But Ruskin was concerned with the implications of Darwinism, not with the science. "The facts on which I am about to dwell," he observes in *The Queen of the Air*, "are in nowise antagonistic to the theories which Mr. Darwin's unwearied and unerring investigations are every day rendering more probable. The aesthetic relations of species are independent of their origin" (19.358). So were the spiritual relations. The fact is that Ruskin and Darwin approached the evolutionary debate from completely different cultural positions: Ruskin and age-old, traditional wisdom versus Darwin and modern science. They viewed the world from opposite vantage points and there was little chance that their perceptions could be reconciled.[13] Given Ruskin's understanding of the moral and spiritual nature of vision, he simply could not embrace Darwinism; he saw no truth, and no humanity, in Darwin's shadows. "[Y]ou will find," Ruskin declares in *The Eagle's Nest*, "that, according to the clearness of sight, is indeed the kindness of sight, and that at last the noble eyes of humanity look through humanity, from heart into heart, and with no mechanical vision. And the Light of the body is in the eye – yes, and in happy life, the light of the heart also" (22.201).

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Notes

[1] John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin (Library Edition)*, 39 vols., ed. E.T. Cook & Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), vol. 25, p. 36. Subsequent references are to this edition and are contained in the text.

[2] "[W]ell – to begin, then. You think me – you need not deny it, for I know you think me – a somewhat crotchety and melancholy individual, averse to modern knowledge and to modern progress, and seeing, as a rule, everything very yellow indeed, with his jaundiced eyes. But I think, myself, that I am not by any means so obstinate and so wrong-headed as I am quite aware that I appear to you; nay, my own opinion is that I err, rather, in not being quite obstinate enough...." These lines, from Mallock's *The New Republic* (1877), are spoken by Mr. Herbert, who

represents Ruskin in the novel. As Jose Harris has pointed out, Mallock portrays Ruskin as "the one teacher of wisdom in a world of canting hypocrites and false prophets" (20). As for Ruskin's eyes, they were actually intensely striking. In his biography of Ruskin, W.G. Collingwood remembered them as "the fiercest blue eyes, that changed with changing expression, from grave to gay, from lively to severe; that riveted you, magnetized you, seemed to look through you and read your soul; and indeed, when they lighted on you, you felt you had a soul of a sort" (C2.385). It seems only fitting that the eyes of the man who placed so much importance on visual perception should be credited with such power of their own

[3] Ruskin expressed the desire to try his methods on Darwin as well. "If I had him here in Oxford for a week," he declares in *Proserpina*, "and could force him to try to copy a feather by Bewick, or to draw for himself a boy's thumbed marble, his notions of feathers, and balls, would be changed for all the rest of his life" (25.264).

[4] In Lecture 6 of *The Eagle's Nest* Ruskin refers to Huxley's use of the same analogy, remarking that "all his physiology had never taught him the difference between eyes and telescopes" (22.195). Compare "The Story of Arachne" 20.373.

[5] Ruskin examined the connections between the Greek and Christian symbolism of the eagle in "The Eagle of Elis," a series of notes for a lecture planned in connection with *Aratra Pentelici* (1870).

[6] A passage in *Proserpina* includes an allusion to the blind bats of the *Origin*: "All these materialisms, in their unclean stupidity, are essentially the work of human bats; men of semi-faculty or semi-education, who are more or less incapable of so much as seeing, much less thinking about, color..." (25.263).

[7] In December 1875 Ruskin warned readers of *Fors* that "in order to see an ape in perfection, you must not be an ape yourself, whatever Mr. Darwin may say" (28.466).

[8] In *Praeterita*, Ruskin remarks that "Flowers, like everything else that is lovely in the visible world, are only to be seen rightly with the

eyes which the God who made them gave us; and neither with microscopes nor spectacles. These have their uses for the curious and the aged; as stilts and crutches have for people who want to walk in mud, or cannot safely walk but on three legs anywhere. But in health of mind and body, men should see with their own eyes, hear and speak without trumpets, walk on their feet, not on wheels, and work and war with their arms, not with engine-beams, nor rifles warranted to kill twenty men at a shot before you can see them. The use of the great mechanical powers may indeed sometimes be compatible with the due exercise of our own; but the use of instruments for exaggerating the powers of sight necessarily deprives us of the best pleasures of sight. A flower is to be watched as it grows, in its association with the earth, the air, and the dew; its leaves are to be seen as they expand in sunshine; its colours, as they embroider the field, or illumine the forest. Dissect or magnify them, and all you discover or learn at last will be that oaks, roses, and daisies, are all made of fibres and bubbles; and these again, of charcoal and water; but, for all their peeping and probing, nobody knows how" (35.430).

[9] *Cf*. the following passage, also from *The Queen of the Air*: "But the sum of all is, that over the entire surface of the earth and its waters, as influenced by the power of the air under solar light, there is developed a series of changing forms, in clouds, plants, and animals, all of which have reference, in their action, or nature, to the human intelligence that perceives them; and on which, in their aspects of horror and beauty, and their qualities of good and evil, there is engraved a series of myths, or words of the forming power, which, according to the true passion and energy of the human race, they have been enabled to read into religion" (19.378).

[10] Passages from the *Republic* and *Laws* not given in Ruskin's own translation are taken from Jowett. My references are given according to Stephanus pagination. Thus *Laws* 902 refers not to the page number but to the marginal Stephanus number, which is constant in every edition.

[11] In *The Queen of the Air*, Ruskin examines "the principal epithet applied to Athena, 'Glaukopis,' 'with eyes full of light,' the first syllable being connected, by its root, with words signifying sight" (19.379).

[12] One imagines that Ruskin, whose *Proserpina* was the result of his dissatisfaction with modern botanical books, would have relished Müller's comments on scientific language. Having quoted an extract from a book on botany ("Begoniaceae, by their anthero-connectival fabric indicate a close relationship with anonaceo-hydro-charideo-nymphaeoid forms, an affinity confirmed by the seroentarioid flexuoso-nodulous stem..."), Müller declares: "I doubt whether any Englishman, unless he be a botanist by profession, would understand the hidden meaning of these sentences, and though these words have to be admitted into an English dictionary that professes to be complete, they cannot be said to form part of the commonwealth of English undefiled" (*Lectures on the Science of Language* 24).

[13] In his biographical account of his father, Francis Darwin relates the now familiar story of a visit Darwin made to Ruskin's home in Denmark Hill: "when he was looking at the Turners in Mr. Ruskin's bedroom, he did not confess, as he did afterwards, that he could make out absolutely nothing of what Mr. Ruskin saw in them" (95). This rather amusing anecdote is nonetheless indicative of the deeper visual gulf that separated Ruskin and Darwin.

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