

“The things that lead to life”: Ruskin and Cultural Value

Sara Atwood

In June 2010 a group of Ruskin scholars gathered at an international Ruskin conference, held on two consecutive days at the University of Liverpool and Lancaster University. “The Laws of Life: Ruskin and Cultural Value,” organized by Professors Dinah Birch and Mark Llewellyn of Liverpool University, was intended to mark the sesquicentennial anniversary of the publication in 1860 of both *Modern Painters V* and *Unto This Last*. It did so successfully: papers were presented by delegates from the United Kingdom, United States, France, and Germany, followed by lively and stimulating discussions that made it refreshingly clear that Ruskin Studies is thriving. The 2010 conference was the impetus for the present special issue on Ruskin,¹ which makes a small number of the conference papers available to a wider audience. It is my hope that this collection will convey the innovative and wide-ranging nature of Ruskin-related research today.

The subject of Ruskin and cultural value, as Professors Birch and Llewellyn recognized, is multifaceted and extends beyond the boundaries of the Victorian period. Further, it is a theme that turns upon Ruskin’s understanding of value itself, which was unorthodox – even heretical – in his own day and remains so in ours.

Ruskin propounded his definition of value in the four essays of *Unto This Last*, which were serialized in the *Cornhill* magazine from August to November 1860, when the resulting public outcry led to their premature cancellation.² The essays represented Ruskin’s first sally in what would become a protracted battle against nineteenth-century

laissez-faire political economy, which he described as a delusion “based on the idea that an advantageous code of social action may be determined irrespectively of the influence of social affection” (17.25).³ Their unpopularity had as much to do with their authorship as with their subject matter. Prior to the publication of *Unto This Last*, Ruskin had been known primarily for his writings on art and architecture, which were both popular and influential. Yet he had begun to realize that readers cared for “pretty language” (36:417) above all and were too often more impressed by his eloquence than by the substance of his message. As he was to put it in an 1864 lecture,⁴ he felt he had become “an architectural man-milliner,” to whom the public looked for advice on “the leading fashion; and what is, in our shops, for the moment, the newest and sweetest thing in pinnacles” (18.434). Critics of *Unto This Last* angrily advised that he had better stick to his last:

So long as Mr. Ruskin confined himself to art, he had a subject on which the presence of a high degree of sensibility and descriptive power would atone for the want of more vigorous qualities; but it is intolerable that a man whose best performances are deformed by constant eruptions of windy hysteria should be able to avail himself of the pages of one of our most popular periodicals for the purpose of pouring out feminine nonsense, in language which women would have far too much self-respect to employ, upon so grave a subject as political economy. (qtd. in Bradley 582)⁵

Ruskin’s interest in social issues was not new or sudden, however, nor did it constitute an abrupt “removal from art to society” (Alexander 154). Rather, it was a natural extension of the moral aesthetic that underpins all his work. Having maintained from the first that good art could only be produced by a good society, he had begun to focus his energy on teaching people how to create such a society. *Unto This Last* was the fruit of nearly a decade of spiritual and intellectual struggle, a period in which Ruskin had come to feel that talking about art was useless

in a society increasingly fractured by materialism, selfish individualism, and avaricious industrialism; social change – indeed transformation – simply had to take precedence. Books such as *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), *The Stones of Venice* (1851, 1853) and *The Political Economy of Art* (1857), in which Ruskin has as much to say about society as about art, reflect this struggle. Though it was the more overtly critical *Unto This Last* that generated controversy, *Modern Painters V*, too, is a work of social as well as aesthetic commentary. Attentive readers should not have been surprised to find Ruskin engaging with social issues; he had been preparing the ground for years. As he told Charles Eliot Norton in a letter of July 1859, he had decided that he did not “care to write any more or do anything more that does not bear directly upon poor people’s bellies – to fill people’s bellies is the only thing a man can do in this generation, I begin to perceive” (LN 1:80). *Unto This Last* was thus a shift in emphasis rather than a change in focus. Declaring that “THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE” (*sic*; 17.105), Ruskin argued for compassion, social responsibility, and a “human economy” against the competitive, self-interested, laissez-faire system. In doing so he found it necessary to redefine the terms of modern political economy.

It is in “Ad Valorem,” the fourth (and, as it turned out, final) essay of *Unto This Last*, that Ruskin sets out his understanding of value. Working backwards from ‘value’ to “*Valor*, from *valere*, to be well or strong” (17.84), Ruskin declares that

To be ‘valuable,’ therefore, is to ‘avail towards life.’ A truly valuable or availing thing is that which leads to life with its whole strength. In proportion as it does not lead to life, or as its strength is broken, it is less valuable; in proportion as it leads away from life, it is unvaluable or malignant.... The real science of political economy, which has yet to be distinguished from the bastard science, as medicine from witchcraft, and astronomy from astrology, is that which teaches nations to desire and labour for the things that lead to life. (17.84-5)⁶

Ruskin's concept of the Law of Help, the "great unifying theme of *Modern Painters V*" (Davis, "'The dark clue'" 41), echoes this theme: "The highest and first law of the universe – and the other name of life is, therefore, 'help.' The other name of death is 'separation.' Government and co-operation are in all things and eternally the laws of life. Anarchy and competition, eternally, and in all things, the laws of death" (7.207). This understanding is central not only to Ruskin's human economy, but to the whole of his work. It informs his thinking about culture as well as the uses he makes of it.

For Ruskin culture is valuable insofar as it avails toward or enhances life, elevating both mind and soul and leaving one "ennobled and instructed" (3.134). Ruskin does not use the word "culture" in the monumental modern sense of something outside ourselves, erudite and unassailable; rather, Ruskin is always aware of its primary sense of cultivation or development. When he writes, for instance, of "soul-culture," "moral culture," "self-culture," or "mental culture," he means the development of soul, morals, self, and mind. For Ruskin, culture is dynamic, possessing at its best the power to transform individuals and, by extension, communities. It is a means of integrating into life a deep and multifaceted way of looking at and engaging with the world, whether it be through art, the natural world, history, religion, education, or philosophy. In equating 'wealth' with 'life,' Ruskin means much more than the fact of existence or of physical health. His concept of life is drawn from the richness of experience generated by looking, drawing, thinking, and reading. In his books and social schemes, Ruskin sought to extend this vital culture to others, that they too might learn to see clearly and to live richly.

Ruskin's books frequently include illustrations, but before 1860 these were usually employed as examples of artistic principles or architectural details. Yet as his work became increasingly allusive, Ruskin's use of images assumed a deeper meaning. As James L. Spates observes, Ruskin's later work had "a humanizing intent: to help readers realize, as they uncovered new levels of meaning, the meaning of their own lives" (186).

Modern Painters V, a work in which text and pictures work together to create what Alan Davis describes as “a book of revelation, constructed as a composite art form” (“Chateau de Blois” 45), marks the beginning of this more intensely integrated approach. The book’s illustrations are suggestive and symbolic, extending and deepening the ideas expressed in the text in often unexpected ways.⁷ Arguing that the interconnected structure of *Modern Painters* V embodies Ruskin’s principle of mutual helpfulness, Davis has shown how Ruskin uses the engraving of Turner’s *Chateau de Blois* as a visual commentary on the Law of Help, reinforcing his theme with startling, wordless force.⁸ But it is *Fors Clavigera* (1871-1884), Ruskin’s series of ninety-six letters “to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain,” that stands as the consummate example of this composite vision. I have described *Fors* elsewhere as, among other things, a collection of wisdom literature intended to establish a moral basis for life and to instruct readers how to live.⁹ Of all Ruskin’s books, *Fors* most clearly demonstrates “the interwoven temper” (35.56) of his mind and teaching. Throughout the letters, Ruskin combines assorted readings in literature, including Marmontel, Gotthelf, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dante, Plato, and others; readings in English history (Froissart), Greek history and mythology, and heraldry; studies in art, including Carpaccio, Botticelli, Giotto, and Holbein; studies in natural history; sketches of the lives of great men; commentary on current events often accompanied by excerpts from contemporary newspapers or books; and criticism of nineteenth-century social and political economy. He includes images as well – woodcuts, illustrations, and diagrams. As in *Modern Painters* V, these pictures not only supplement, extend, and clarify Ruskin’s argument but, as Jeffrey L. Spear has observed, are meant above all “to illustrate the eternal principles that should guide our understanding of transitory events” (155). Taken together, the varied materials of *Fors* are a “kings’ treasury,”¹⁰ the sort of life-enhancing wealth that cultivates good men and women.

In its conception and organization, the Sheffield Museum (also known as the St. George’s Museum), reflected the structure of *Fors*

Clavigera, giving material form to the teachings of the letters. Just as the readings and studies in literature, biography, history, mythology, art, and scripture of *Fors* work together by connection and association to teach “things that are forever true” (27.250), the museum’s collection of paintings, drawings, engravings, illuminated manuscripts, sculpture, coins, plaster casts, commissioned copies of old master paintings, minerals, and semi-precious stones was intended to illustrate all that is noble in art and nature.¹¹ The museum’s arrangement demanded effort on the part of visitors. As Susan P. Casteras explains, Ruskin “required a considerable amount of self-motivation from artisans, iron-workers, and others” (202); the museum was to provide above all the opportunity for self-improvement. This, again, was culture as cultivation. The curricula of Ruskin’s St. George’s Schools, intended for the children of his Guild of St. George, were similarly designed; when these schools failed to materialize, Ruskin worked instead through existing schools (many of them girls’ schools or colleges), donating minerals, pictures, books, and other items, all ‘valuable’ in the Ruskinian sense. The school books that Ruskin composed for the projected St. George’s Schools, along with the *Bibliotheca Pastorum*, Ruskin’s “Shepherd’s Library”¹² of books intended for use by the Companions of the Guild, further reflect Ruskin’s sense of cultural value; encompassing botany, geology, ornithology, classical philosophy, poetry and political economy, religion, history, and literature, these books were intended to transmit a vital transformative culture predicated on life.¹³ Davis observes that for Ruskin “The intensity of the life that is true wealth is intensity of helpfulness, and the absence of helpfulness is death” (“*Chateau de Blois*” 46). Ruskin himself is a life-enhancing companion, partly because of what he shows us, but also because of what he enables us to see for ourselves. This is why his life and work remain “culturally valuable” to us today.¹⁴

The essays collected here examine our theme through more than one lens, focusing on Ruskin’s sense of cultural value as well as the ways in which his readers and followers drew upon and adapted his ideas, finding them to be culturally valuable in their own right.

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The issue opens with a powerful and perceptive piece by Clive Wilmer, who argues that Ruskin’s apparent rejection of modernity, in particular his strong reaction against figures such as Darwin and Whistler, was in fact an expression of dissent and an attempt “to define a distinctive course in the understanding and measure of cultural value.” This essay was originally presented as the keynote lecture at the 2010 conference and I am delighted that Professor Wilmer has decided to publish it here.

Through careful consideration of Ruskin’s work on the Turner Bequest in 1857-58, Alan Davis reassesses another aspect of Ruskin’s thinking that has often been misunderstood; his response to Turner’s erotic drawings. Drawing connections between Ruskin’s treatment of Turner’s compositions in *Modern Painters V* and his work on the Bequest, Davis refutes the notion that the erotic drawings initiated a crisis in Ruskin’s life, thus opening the way for a new understanding of Ruskin’s darkened perception of Turner after 1858. This paper is also notable for its innovative integration of technology, whereby readers are enabled to view the sketches referred to in the text by accessing them in an online database.

Carmen Casaliggi’s contribution explores the Ruskin-Turner relationship from another perspective, focusing on Ruskin’s introductory essay to Turner’s *Harbours of England* as both an expression of Ruskin’s Romantic heritage and his organic vision of society. *The Harbours* is less familiar to many readers than Ruskin’s better-known writings, yet Casaliggi makes a strong case for its significance, demonstrating that in this book, as in all his works, Ruskin is primarily concerned with preserving a life-enhancing tradition of handicraft and labor.

Mark Frost takes up the theme of organicism in his examination of Ruskin’s use of organic metaphors in *Modern Painters V* to express his vision of a mutualistic society founded on the Law of Help. Frost further considers the ways in which this organic model is often at odds with Ruskin’s belief in hierarchy and order, particularly in the structure and administration of the Guild of St. George.

With the remaining essays in the volume we move from Ruskin's sense of cultural value to the reach of Ruskin's cultural influence. Ruskin's teaching was taken up by numerous individuals and groups, both during and after his lifetime, many of whom adapted his ideas in light of their own concerns. Peter Yeandle introduces us to a dynamic figure who deserves to be better known. The Reverend Stewart Duckworth Headlam was both a disciple of Ruskin and a colorful and controversial Christian socialist who, as Yeandle tells us, "preached the gospel according to Ruskin."

Laurence Roussillon-Constanty's essay directs our attention to the critical reception of Ruskin in France between 1864 and the early part of the twentieth century, deliberately excepting the contribution of Proust, whose commentary has tended to dominate discussions of Ruskin and France. Constanty then proceeds to sound the Ruskinian echoes that can be heard in the work of the modern French art historian and critic Daniel Arasse. By "reading influence backward" in this way, Constanty reveals the enduring vitality of Ruskin's ideas and the extent to which they have been absorbed and reinterpreted by generations of French thinkers and writers.

The volume concludes with Stuart Eagles' ambitious study of Ruskin's influence in Russia, another paper that speaks to the cultural value that others found in Ruskin's work. Eagles explores entirely new ground here, introducing us to the Russian figures – political economists, architects, creative elites and others – who translated and forwarded his teaching. Tracing the publication history of Ruskin's works in Russia, Eagles uncovers a network of people committed to making the English writer's ideas available to a Russian audience. His careful research reveals exciting evidence of "late imperial Russia's cultural engagement with Ruskin" and opens a vein of research that promises to yield rich results.

Books reviewed in this special issue include two new studies of Ruskin, Stuart Eagles' *After Ruskin: The Social and Political Legacies of a Victorian Prophet, 1870-1920* (Oxford UP) and my own *Ruskin's Educational Ideals* (Ashgate), as well as Ann C. Colley's *Victorians in*

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the Mountains (Ashgate), which includes a chapter on Ruskin’s engagement with the Alps.

In the 1864 lecture quoted above, Ruskin warned his listeners against the popular conception of wealth:

Continue to make that forbidden deity your principal one, and soon no more art, no more science, no more pleasure will be possible. Catastrophe will come; or worse than Catastrophe, slow mouldering and withering into Hades. But if you can fix some conception of a true human state of life to be striven for – life for all men as for yourselves – if you can determine some honest and simple order of existence; following those trodden ways of wisdom, which are pleasantness, and seeking her quiet and withdrawn paths, which are peace, then, and so sanctifying wealth into “commonwealth,” all your art, your literature, your daily labours, your domestic affections, and citizen’s duty, will join and increase into one magnificent harmony. You will know then how to build, well enough; you will build with stone well, but with flesh better; temples not made with hands, but riveted of hearts; and that kind of marble, crimson-veined, is indeed eternal. (18:458)

Yet we continue to make our temples with hands. The modern global economy is built upon a purely monetary definition of wealth. The last three years have shown us, with often painful clarity, that such a foundation is dangerously and inherently unstable. As we watch it crumble around us, many have begun to realize that when it comes to rebuilding, the old bricks won’t do. Instead, we must seek stronger and better materials with which to fashion a life-sustaining engagement with the world and with others. Ruskin offers to show us where to begin.¹⁵

Chandler, Arizona

Notes

¹ This is the second such special issue published by *Nineteenth-Century Prose*. The first appeared as Volume 35, No. 1 (Spring 2008), with Sharon Aronofsky Weltman as guest editor.

² They were published as a volume in 1862.

³ References to Ruskin's published works, both here and throughout this volume, are taken from *The Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols, (London: George Allen, and New York: Longmans, 1903-1912). References are cited parenthetically in the text and are indicated by volume and page number.

⁴ The lecture, delivered at Bradford in April 1864, was published under the title "Traffic" in *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866).

⁵ From a notice published in *The Saturday Review* for 10 November 1860.

⁶ Not only to desire and labor for these things, but to use them nobly, for as Ruskin goes on to explain, the value of a thing must be estimated along with the valor of its possessor, so that "Wealth, therefore, is 'THE POSSESSION OF THE VALUABLE BY THE VALIANT'" (*sic*; 17.88).

⁷ For a thorough discussion of this aspect of *Modern Painters* V as a composite art form see Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (Harvard UP, 1982), 292ff.

⁸ See Alan Davis, "Chateau de Blois and the Law of Help." *Ruskin Review and Bulletin*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring 2010), 43-48.

⁹ See Chapter 5, "'Riveder de stelle': *Fors Clavigera* and Ruskin's Educational Experiment" in Sara Atwood, *Ruskin's Educational Ideals* (Ashgate 2011).

¹⁰ Ruskin's lecture "Of Kings' Treasuries" was published in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865).

¹¹ Dr. Marcus Waithe of Cambridge University is leader of the fascinating online project "Ruskin at Walkley" (www.ruskinatwalkley.org), which allows visitors to explore the St. George's Museum as it existed at Walkley in Sheffield by navigating "a series of interactive

pages that evoke the way one might move about the rooms of a physical museum.” The project is jointly sponsored by the University of Sheffield’s Knowledge Transfer Project Fund, the present-day Guild of St. George, and Museums Sheffield.

¹² The name of the series was inspired by Ruskin’s visit to young Agnes Stalker and her family recounted in Letter 50, in which he considers what sort of books might best suit this daughter of a local shepherd-farmer, “our little Agnes of the hill-side” (28.264).

¹³ Ruskin’s school-books included “The Grammar of Art,” begun in *The Laws of Fésole*, as well as *Proserpina* (botany), *Love’s Meinie* (ornithology), *Deucalion* (geology), and the elementary history book *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, published as *The Bible of Amiens*. The *Bibliotheca Pastorum* was to include Xenophon’s *Economist*; Jeremias Gotthelf’s *Ulric the Farm Servant*; a history of England after the Norman Conquest; a life of Moses and a life and writings of David; a complete Hesiod; the first and second *Georgics* of Virgil, along with the sixth book of the *Aeneid*; books one and two of Livy; Dante; Chaucer (excluding *Canterbury Tales*); and St. John the Divine. Of the projected volumes, only the Xenophon (1876), translated by Ruskin’s Oxford pupils W.G. Collingwood and Alexander Wedderburn, and Gotthelf’s *Ulric* (1886-88), translated by Julia Firth and edited by Ruskin, were published. Later, Sir Philip Sidney’s psalter was published under the title *Rock Honeycomb* (1877), and Ruskin’s own biography of Sir Herbert Edwardes, a soldier and administrator in the Punjab, appeared as *A Knight’s Faith* (1885).

¹⁴ I would like to thank Alan Davis for reading this introduction in draft and providing characteristically insightful and sensitive feedback.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Barry Tharaud, the editor of *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, for giving me the opportunity to guest-edit this special issue. I have not only enjoyed the experience, but have learned a good deal from it as well.

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