

Ruskin and the Challenge of Modernity

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In 1869, Ruskin was introduced to Henry James. In a letter written soon afterwards, James records his impressions of the great man with all of the novelist's skill in evoking character. "Ruskin, himself," he writes, is a very simple matter. In face, in manner, in talk, in mind, he is weakness pure and simple. I use the word, not invidiously, but scientifically. He has the beauties of his defects; but to see him only confirms the suspicion given by his writing, that he has been scared back by the grim face of reality into the world of unreason and illusion, and that he wanders there without a compass and a guide or any light save the fitful flashes of his beautiful genius. (James 1.103)

It is interesting that James's diagnosis of "weakness" in no way modifies his judgement of Ruskin's "beautiful genius." We perhaps infer that the later Ruskin, soon to be the author of *Fors Clavigera*, is a broken man, or a breaking one, by comparison with the author of *The Stones of Venice*. Moreover, James hints at the increasingly broken character of Ruskin's writings and the unpredictable lurches of thought that overtake them. He is no longer the critic of near dictatorial authority but a vulnerable man on the verge of madness, the madness that within nine years would overwhelm him. At the same time there is a sense that "the fitful flashes" of his genius are profoundly expressive of this grim-faced reality.

I suspect that what James calls “reality” Ruskin himself would have thought of as the changes brought about in our sense of it by the upheavals of the nineteenth century: by industrial and economic change, by the growth of a mobile mass society, by the geologists, whose work he followed closely, and the biologists who followed them, above all by the loss of religious certainties. He sees those changes as betrayals of an earlier mode of life, as he shows in this apocalyptic passage from *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884), which makes an early claim for some sort of climate change:

Blanched Sun, – blighted grass, – blinded man. If, in conclusion, you ask me for any conceivable cause or meaning of these things – I can tell you none, according to your modern beliefs; but I can tell you what meaning it would have borne for the men of old time. Remember, for the last twenty years, England, and all foreign nations, either tempting her, or following her, have blasphemed the name of God deliberately and openly; and have done iniquity by proclamation, every man doing as much injustice to his brother as it is in his power to do. Of states in such moral gloom every seer of old predicted the physical gloom, saying, “The light shall be darkened in the heavens thereof, and the stars shall withdraw their shining.” (34.40-41)²

Ruskin was far from being alone in experiencing modernity in this way. His contemporary Matthew Arnold, for instance, talks of “the strange disease of modern life,” but the effect on Arnold the poet was, first, to make him retreat into classicism, and then to silence him. Ruskin continued to speak out, and I want to suggest that his determination to do so makes him – paradoxically perhaps – the more modern man. Much of what in twentieth century art we now call Modernism is characterised by

horror at modernity. It is most strikingly so in the work of T.S. Eliot, but one finds it as well in Lawrence and Pound, in Picasso and Kandinsky, in Stravinsky and Frank Lloyd Wright. To risk a paradox, it is probably true to say that the more anxious about modernity an artist is, the closer to its spirit he or she seems to be.

If that is right it is not surprising that, early on, Ruskin identified with modernity. He first caught the public's attention with – to give it its full title – *Modern Painters: Their Superiority in Landscape Painting to the Ancient Masters* (1843). That book, as is well-known, was written to champion the audaciously original late paintings of J.M.W. Turner and to challenge the reputations of the Old Masters. Thirty-five years later, he was not only the adversary of Turner's most likely heir, James McNeill Whistler, but the champion of Kate Greenaway:

You have here, for consummate example, a dance of fairies under a mushroom, which she did under challenge to show me what fairies were like. ... in all, you will see that the line is ineffably tender and delicate and can't in the least be represented by the lines of a woodcut. But I have long since shown you the power of line engraving as it was first used in Florence; and if you choose, you may far recover the declining energies of line engraving in England, by encouraging its use in the multiplication, whether of these, or of Turner outlines, or of old Florentine silver point outlines.... (33.344)

From Quattrocento engraving through Turner to Greenaway: it is not an obvious progression, but it is not a simple matter of regression either. Ruskin became in the eyes of many a sentimentalist and a reactionary. Regardless of Greenaway's virtues as a children's illustrator, to celebrate her work as Ruskin did must be seen in him as a mark of the weakness diagnosed by James – retreating from reality – but it is not a matter sim-

ply of reaction. Ruskin was not a reactionary in the predictable way that comes to adventurous minds once middle age has begun to tame them. He was seeking through Greenaway to affirm something – an antidote to the evils of a harshly competitive era – that was embodied for him in girlhood innocence.³

It must be admitted, nevertheless, that in a number of fields the later Ruskin can seem reactionary, and I want in this essay to explore some instances: his attack on Whistler and his response to Darwinism. Behind both I assume the presence of a third: his assault on modern economic theory. The assaults on Darwin and Whistler are not easy to defend, though I shall have something to say in both cases on Ruskin's behalf, but in *Unto This Last* (serialised 1860, published 1862) we encounter one of his claims to glory; and it is in that book, which I shall not have time to discuss here, that he establishes the core of his doctrine of value: "To be 'valuable' ..., " he says, "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." (17.84)

In 1877, in the 79th letter of *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin launched an attack on Whistler that it is hard to regard as anything other than philistine. The occasion was the first exhibition held by Sir Coutts Lindsay at his Grosvenor Gallery, designed as a setting for the work of the *avant-garde*. He began by praising another exhibitor, his close friend Edward Burne-Jones:

[T]he mannerisms and errors of [Burne-Jones's] pictures, whatever may be their extent, are never affected or indolent. The work is natural to the painter, however strange to us; and it is wrought with utmost conscience of care, however far, to his own or our desire, the result may yet be incomplete. Scarcely so much can be said for any other pictures of the modern schools: their eccentricities are almost always in some degree forced;

and their imperfections gratuitously, if not impertinently, indulged. For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now, but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face. (29.160)

Conscious that Ruskin's attack presented a threat to his reputation and perhaps glimpsing an opening for publicity, Whistler sued Ruskin for libel. The court found against Ruskin but granted the plaintiff a farthing in damages: a contemptuous award.

But our task here is to look at Ruskin's language. The extraordinary phrase "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" – a typically memorable formulation from the great master of nineteenth-century prose – irresistibly recalls the attacks of the 1940s and '50s on Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. It is indeed hard not to think of it as prophetic. It is as if Ruskin had glimpsed the whole line of development from Turner through Whistler and the Impressionists to Kandinsky and eventually Abstract Expressionism. Admirers and students of Ruskin have all encountered the shock and puzzlement of ordinary lovers of art in the face of this. How can we admire a critic who writes like this of any original and imaginative painter? More importantly, how could the man who began his career defending late Turner against a purblind press, have replicated those attacks on Turner's most obvious heir? Linda Merrill, in her book on the libel case, *A Pot of Paint*, attempts an explanation of what must otherwise appear on Ruskin's part a descent into philistinism. She begins by noting how Ruskin's method of praising Burne-Jones involves repeated compari-

sons with Old Masters from Giotto to Tintoretto and even Turner, then goes on to observe:

Reference to the Old Masters is conspicuously absent from the paragraph on Whistler, although the eccentricities and imperfections of his style are contrasted to the idiosyncrasies of Burne-Jones. But the peril of comparison lies in the possibility of imposture. Just as an inferior picture that vaguely resembled a great painting might be accepted by the public as adequate, a Whistler nocturne, which might appear to the average person a little like a Turner, might be mistaken for a masterpiece. Ruskin undoubtedly noticed the resemblance that has since struck every dilettante and scholar, and we may assume that the superficial similarities between Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold* and the late works of Turner infuriated him at least as much as their profound differences. When he wrote his instructions to the lawyers, Ruskin was reminded of the critical lambastes that had initially "provoked" him to write in Turner's defense. One of the first of those critiques, published in 1842, said that the artist's works appeared to have been painted by "throwing handfuls of white, and blue, and red, at the canvas, letting what chanced to stick, stick," and the strikingly similar image in *Fors Clavigera* was probably not coincidental. Ruskin must have thought that Whistler uniquely deserved the words so unfairly flung at Turner more than three decades earlier. (Merrill 50-52)

Merrill recognizes, in other words, that Ruskin's abuse was not simply a matter of gut reaction or the affronted pride of an authoritarian. It was deliberate, principled, and calculated, and it was delivered partly in response to the claims made for Whistler as a Turnerian. It is note-

worthy that, apart from the image of paint being thrown at the public, the language of Ruskin's critique is entirely moralistic. The charge is one of imposture and impudence, of conceit and ignorance, of cheating the public like a Cockney con-man. It was this language that justified Whistler's action and no doubt affected the jury's verdict. Ruskin was not acting as an art critic; he was impugning Whistler's honor. And that is precisely what he intended to do. The necessary context is provided by, on the one hand, the sculptor of the tomb of Doge Vendramin, who was banished from Venice for forgery,⁴ and on the other hand those manufacturers attacked in *Unto This Last* and elsewhere who increase their profit by adulterating produce.⁵ It is not that Whistler is Turner's heir, but that he is posing as such and charging outrageous prices for the product.

Burne-Jones, by contrast, makes his pictures "with utmost conscience of care." That is to say, their value is not exclusively a matter of *aesthesis*. It derives as much from the humanity that has gone into their making as to the beauty of the result. This is partly what I take is meant by "Cultural Value," the theme of the present issue. But it was not what was understood in the courtroom, and Burne-Jones was complicit to some extent in making sure that it was not. He praised Whistler's command of "atmosphere" – quite rightly, we may think – but criticized the absence of "finish" in his pictures. Finish was an obsession among Victorian critics and is to be associated with the commodification of art. Ruskin, too, wrote in favor of finish, but not in order to recommend tidy products that give themselves to commercial valuation. No one who knows their Ruskin is ever likely to associate *him* with finish, whether in his books or in his pictures; and much the same can be said of his hero Turner. A glance at, for instance, Ruskin's watercolor of the Ca d'Oro is evidence of this.⁶ This was painted in 1845 while the building was being "restored" and is one of Ruskin's attempts to record buildings which in their original form are about to be lost forever. As we know from one of

the recently discovered Ruskin daguerreotypes, the blank space at the bottom right of this picture is not a mark of indolence or frustration. It is there because of scaffolding and building materials that obstructed his view.⁷ Another artist would have reconstructed that part of the building. Ruskin prefers the pictorial equivalent of silence. For him, *not* to finish his picture was a moral act, a refusal to misrepresent the truth of the great *palazzo*. To have done so would have been to act like the restorers and pretend that new work substituted for the original masonry was the genuine article.

Ruskin's first mental breakdown, in February 1878, prevented his attendance at the trial. He had been looking forward, as he told Burne-Jones, to "asserting some principles of art economy which I've never got into the public's head by writing" (qtd. in Burne-Jones 1.86). It is hard to imagine him, had he been present, agreeing with much that was said on his behalf. His counsel, Sir John Holker, played masterfully to the gallery, identifying Ruskin with the plain man's view of things, as if he had been the no-nonsense philistine that his words, out of their context, may have suggested. The spokesman for this perspective at the trial was William Powell Frith, who in the crowded canvases of *Derby Day* and *The Railway Station* had created the most popular images of the day. He was no Ruskinian – he knew what the public liked and painted it for them – but he served Holker's strategy much better than Burne-Jones. Though the strategy was on the whole effective, a gap between Ruskin and Frith emerged in a brief discussion of Turner. Whistler's counsel J.H. Parry, cross-questioning Frith, referred to Ruskin's idolization of Turner. Frith replied: "I believe Mr. Ruskin has a great estimate of Turner's works. I think Turner should be an idol of all painters." Parry then asked Frith if he knew Turner's *Snow Storm*.⁸ Frith confirmed that he did.

PARRY: Are you aware that it has been described by a critic as "a mass of soapsuds and whitewash"? (*Laughter*)

FRITH: I am not.

PARRY: Would you call it a mass of soapsuds and whitewash?

FRITH: I think it very likely I should. (*Laughter*) When I say that Turner should be the idol of all painters, I refer to his earlier works and not to the period when he was half crazy and produced works about as insane as the people who admire them. (*Laughter*) ... The *Snow Storm* was not one of Turner's fine pictures. (Qtd. in Merrill 178)

There was deep irony in this exchange. Few people in the courtroom can have been aware that Ruskin had recently been through a phase of insanity. Many *were* aware, however – one assumes it was Parry's point – that the *Snow Storm* was one of the Turner paintings that in the first volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin had praised most extravagantly (3.569-71). What Parry seemed to be asking was what the difference was between Turner's painting and Whistler's. Both of them were using the abstract qualities of paint to convey what Burne-Jones called "atmosphere." In both pictures, as in Claude Monet's *Impression: Sunrise*, we are initially more conscious of the paint *as* paint than we are of what we come to recognize as the subject.⁹ We have to interpret it – or *read* it, as Ruskin might have said, conscious from his earliest book that (as he says there) painting is a *language*.¹⁰

The painting by Monet that I have just named, attacked in a review in 1873, was to provide the name for a new movement in art: Impressionism. Whistler knew about the movement and learned from it, though he could not truly be called an Impressionist. In all the thirty-nine volumes of *The Works of John Ruskin* the word "Impressionism" never occurs, but "impression" does, and it deserves some careful attention. In *Modern Painters* IV, he quotes Turner as saying to another well-known painter: "do you not know yet, at your age, that you ought to *paint* your *impressions*?" (6.276n). As early as 1840

when he was only 21, he asked his friend Edward Clayton: “Have you not sometimes wondered why, if the object of art be mere servility of imitation of nature, there were as many *styles* as there were great artists? The true reason is that each great artist conveys to you, not so much the scene, as the impression of the scene on his own originality of mind” (1.420-21).¹¹ There can be little doubt that what Ruskin was suggesting in these terms was close to what the Impressionists had found – probably under the influence of Turner, whose work Monet and Pissarro discovered in London during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. We now know, moreover, that Monet read a translation of Ruskin’s book *The Elements of Drawing*, in which he learned of “innocence of the eye” (15.27n).¹²

The most important passage Ruskin wrote on this subject occurs in the chapter “Of Turnerian Topography” in *Modern Painters* IV. This is the passage in which he contrasts Turner’s “The Pass of Faido,” which he and his father had commissioned from the artist, with the same scene as painted by himself.¹³ Ruskin’s version is a consciously unemotional representation of the facts, while Turner’s is full of high Romantic drama. Ruskin tries to explain why what might seem in Turner false and exaggerated is truer to nature than the accurate rendition. In this way, “truth to nature” – the watchword of *Modern Painters* – becomes truth to our human perception of nature, but this is how Ruskin puts it:

[I]f a painter has inventive power, he is to treat his subject in a totally different way; giving not the actual facts of it, but the impression it made on his mind.

And now, once for all, let it clearly be understood, that an “impression on the mind” does not mean a piece of manufacture....

[T]he artist who has real invention ... receives a true

impression of the place itself, and takes care to keep hold of that as his chief good ... and then he sets himself as far as possible to reproduce that impression on the mind of the spectator of his picture.

Now, observe, this impression on the mind never results from the mere piece of scenery which can be included within the limits of the picture. It depends on the temper into which the mind has been brought, both by all the landscape round, and by what has been seen previously in the course of the day; so that no particular spot upon which the painter's glance may at any moment fall, is then to him what, if seen by itself, it will be to the spectator far away; nor is it what it would be, even to that spectator, if he had come to the reality through the steps which Nature has appointed to be the preparation for it, instead of seeing it isolated on an exhibition wall. (6.32-33)

Ruskin, as you may remember, goes on to specify the ways in which specific details of the scene take on a kind of symbolic significance, becoming emblems of Turner's whole experience of the region – or indeed, of his experience of the Alps.

It seems to me that Ruskin's conceptions of sight and of human psychology here are profoundly modern. There is first of all his conviction of the uniqueness of every consciousness and with it the risk of relativism and omnipotent subjectivity. There is also in rudimentary form a conception of the unconscious and its role in art: not perhaps on the Freudian model but not so remote from it that the two might not be brought into some relation. But this set of insights, of which he is deeply persuaded, runs the risk of undermining his fundamental conceptions of art and nature. For nature, in Ruskin's original view of things, has been created by God for our benefit, a common source for us all of delight and instruction. For the time being he

can sustain the balance between the truth of what God has created and how each individually created person may perceive it – how, moreover, each person's perception contributes to the common human culture and consciousness. By 1877, however, the divine dimension of this structure is grievously under threat.

It was under threat from Darwin and Tyndall, from Malthus and Mill, from Whistler and Walter Pater. It was one thing to think of the leaves on a tree as minutely diverse, all working together according to "the Law of Help" (7.205-7). It was quite another to think of them locked together in competition. In much the same way, the ideal collaboration of craftsmen and artisans, each manifesting "the individual value of every soul" (10.190), as adumbrated in "The Nature of Gothic," could be reconfigured by Malthus and Darwin as "the struggle for life." It was to their godless world that Whistler belonged. Ruskin's disquiet with regard to *Nocturne in Black and Gold* may have been exacerbated by Whistler's subject. Cremorne Gardens on the south bank of the Thames was notoriously decadent, well-known as a resort for prostitution. The brief and wasteful illumination of fireworks over the darkness of such a place may have been for Ruskin the very image of decadent hedonism and spiritual emptiness. If he had read the Conclusion to Pater's book, *The Renaissance* (1873), he may have been reminded of those sentences that evoke the ephemerality of life. Pater, too, had something to say about impressions: "if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind" (Pater 187). These flickering impressions are strikingly Whistlerian, and not Turnerian at all. For Turner, at least in Ruskin's account of him, uses impressions to reveal a reality external to the self –

one which it is possible for the mind to interpret and communicate. But Pater is resistant to that sort of philosophical realism and the theistic assumptions that go with it: "With this sense of the splendour of our experience and its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch" (Pater 189). Ruskin, by contrast, had early in his career set *theoria* above *aesthesis* – contemplation above sensation – as the touchstone for true appreciation of art,¹⁴ and Pater, writing the sentence I have quoted, may have had Ruskin's argument in mind. Ruskin would certainly have wanted the particulars he experienced with the same intensity as Pater and Whistler to add up to something – not so much a theory as an apprehensible meaning, moral or religious.

He may also have understood Whistler's method of painting. Living in Chelsea beside the Thames, with Cremorne not far away on the other bank, Whistler became obsessed with the river at night, its ceaseless flow and the intermittent lights amid its darkness. He would hire a boatman to row him along the river through the night and, back in his studio at first light of day, would sketch his memories of what he had seen. By the end of the next day he would have turned the sketch into a Nocturne. In other words, he was engaged in a subjective process and he worked very rapidly. It was not a matter of studying what he saw and humbly acknowledging the wonders of nature. It was not, that is to say, at all like Turner. The painter of "The Pass of Faïdo" certainly gave a subjective impression of the place, but the purpose of submitting to that impression was to give the place back to the spectator: not to indulge in his own interiority, but to show a landscape as it might be seen, the subjectivity authenticating the experience and affirming the value of it. The paradox is that, if we are individuals, subjectivity is something we have in common. Whistler, as he declared in his writings – admittedly to incense Ruskin's admirers –

was not interested in nature: only in art. Ruskin's famous advice to modern painters, delivered in his first book, had been to "go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth" (3.624). Whistler was consciously repudiating this when – no doubt with some desire to scandalize his audience – he wrote:

That Nature is always right, is an assertion, artistically, as untrue, as it is one whose truth is universally taken for granted – Nature is very rarely right, to such an extent even, that it might almost be said that nature is usually wrong – that is to say – the condition of things that shall bring about the perfection of harmony worthy of a picture, is rare, and not common at all – (Whistler 14)¹⁵

As Ruskin well understood, Whistler was not painting nature at all, but recording, and reflecting on, his own interior world. What appalled Ruskin was the loss of a world out there, the fabulous gift to man from a loving God.

This was also Ruskin's problem in his struggle with Darwinism, which was never really a matter of intellectual disagreement. He was not alone, of course, in having religious convictions that balked at the theory of Natural Selection. Not only was he brought up as a scriptural Protestant, but he was taught at Oxford by William Buckland of *The Bridgewater Treatises* and became personally attached to him. Buckland, as one of Ruskin's biographers puts it, "combined benevolent Christianity with an unparalleled scientific curiosity" (Leon 47).¹⁶ Ruskin believed as firmly as Buckland did that the beauties of nature were created by God for our pleasure and instruction, and much of *Modern Painters* is concerned with

the relation of God's art to human art. The question we have to ask, however, is how Ruskin understood natural beauty. Did he understand natural forms to be stable and unchanging? Was the world we live in now identical to the world that came into being when, in the words of the Psalmist, God's "hands prepared the dry land"?¹⁷ Are such words as the Psalmist's, moreover, to be taken literally? And even if they are, can they be understood in any way as the word of God? He provides no answer to many of these questions, but we do know that by 1859, the year of *The Origin of Species*, he had lost that Evangelical trust in the objective truth of the Bible, and his fascinated study of Alpine glaciers suggests that he knew perfectly well how the face of the earth had altered in the course of uncountable ages. In the previous year, by his own account, he had been 'unconverted' and had adopted the 'Religion of Humanity'; and yet, remaining a profoundly religious man, he was poised in a sort of spiritual limbo.¹⁸ Nevertheless, his understanding of nature continued to include the Law of Help. As his eccentric dialogue on geology *The Ethics of the Dust* (1866) suggests, for instance, he understood the relation of one mineral to an adjacent one as a matter of neighbourliness, and we have already seen how his view of growth in plants – as expressed in his study of wayside flowers *Proserpina* (1875-86) – may be compared to his account of medieval building in "The Nature of Gothic," each artisan contributing from the uniqueness of his imagination to a great and glorious social artefact. Ruskin saw society as in effect an extended family; by implication, he also saw nature as a kind of society. This is perhaps to say that his theories of nature and society were as closely intertwined as Darwin's but that the social assumptions he made were strikingly different.

Nevertheless, in his emphasis on unique and various development, Ruskin is essentially in agreement with Darwin. Ruskin understood perfectly well – and understood it before he lost his religious faith – that simple Creationism would not do. He was well acquainted with the geological literature that had helped to shape Darwin's theory. His famous

statement of 1851 that he could hear the clinking hammers of the geologists “at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses” (36.115) is sufficient evidence that he had grasped the implications of, for instance, Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830), even if like Lyell he saw no need to follow the argument as far as a theory of Evolution. He was also familiar with a range of materialist science – from Lamarck through Cuvier to Agassiz – which, though hardly to be understood as leading to Natural Selection, is nonetheless part of the intellectual atmosphere in which Darwin’s theory was born. Even Buckland, though a committed Catastrophist, had drawn attention to the difficulties of strict Creationism. Though he had sought to reconcile modern geology with the Biblical accounts of Creation and the Flood, he inadvertently and perhaps inevitably exposed the inherent problems and was forced to recognize that science and religion speak different languages. It was not just a matter of the seven days of Creation, easily understood as standing for seven eras; there were also more troubling problems, such as the extinction of species. For these were evidence that creatures had died and even killed one another before the arrival of man and Original Sin, which (as Christian theology had always argued) “Brought death into the world and all our woe.” Ruskin’s fiercely Evangelical mother – by no means an anti-intellectual, it should be said – was of the view that Buckland might have been wiser to “let the Bible alone” (*Ruskin Family Letters* 2.584). We can see how Ruskin follows from Buckland in *Modern Painters* IV, the volume in which he discusses the “materials” of Creation that the artist must learn to depict, as well as the matter of the artist painting his impressions, on which we have just reflected. There he seems to dismiss the sort of problem that Buckland had notably raised: “What space of time was in reality occupied by the ‘day’ of Genesis,” he writes, “is not, at present, of any importance for us to consider” (6.16), as if the question were one that had never troubled him. Later on in the same book, discussing “The Firmament,” he quotes from the Psalms: “He bowed the

heavens also, and came down; he made darkness pavilions round about him, dark waters, and thick clouds of the skies,"¹⁹ and he comments as follows:

By accepting the words in their simple sense, we are thus led to apprehend the immediate presence of the Deity, and His purpose of manifesting Himself as near us whenever the storm-cloud stoops upon its course; while by our vague and inaccurate acceptance of the words we remove the idea of His presence far from us, into a region which we can neither see nor know; and gradually, from the close realisation of a living God who "maketh the clouds his chariot" we refine and explain ourselves into a dim and distant suspicion of an inactive God, inhabiting inconceivable places, and fading into the multitudinous formalisms of the Laws of Nature. (6.110)

Such statements would appear to belong to the same tradition of Creationist or Catastrophist argument as those pursued by Buckland. But do they in fact? It is clear that Ruskin repudiates the deistic implications of Paleyan natural theology – "the multitudinous formalisms of the laws of Nature" – and is repelled by the tendency of liberal Christianity to symbolize the biblical narrative out of existence. It was this that finally put him out of sympathy with his ally in social policy, F.D. Maurice, and crucially separates him, even in his humanist phase, from the likes of Matthew Arnold – one cannot imagine him ever defining God as "*the stream of tendency by which all things seek to fulfil the law of their being,*" or "*the enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness,*" as Arnold did in 1873 (Arnold 6.189, 200; original italics). Yet he is also insisting that biblical language is not to be understood in a literal way. His objection is to the translation of that language into different terms and, in this, Ruskin's Christianity is far more radical than that of the liberals and might be thought to look towards a modern kind of religion.

In the passage from *Modern Painters* IV that I have quoted Ruskin is suggesting that the accounts of Creation in Genesis or the Psalms or the Book of Proverbs are written in the language of myth, and that the language of myth is distinct from the language of science. As far back as 1840 when he wrote his *Letters to a College Friend* (1.399-502), Ruskin had recognised that the Bible could no longer be regarded as literally the word of God, and in 1867, in his post-Evangelical phase, he examined the matter systematically in one of the letters of *Time and Tide* (17.347-51). What he appears to be saying in the passage I have quoted is that the further we move from the mythical language of the Bible, the more likely we are to lose the sense of a divine Creator. But that is not to accept that the earth was created literally in the way the Bible describes it. That process must have been in some sense of the word – not necessarily Darwin’s – evolutionary. The biblical language reminds us of the mystery – the starkly physical mystery – that science may describe but cannot explain. To know what happened at the Big Bang is not to know *why* it happened.

We have here, as we also do in Ruskin’s account of Turner, a Neo-Platonic understanding of things. A thing is valuable, you will remember, in so far as it “avails towards life.” Value, for Ruskin as for Plato, is intrinsic. The purpose of the artist is not to invent that value or construct it out of his or her subjective impressions, but to reveal it through close attention to the infinite variety of particulars of which the world is made. We confuse Whistler and Turner because it is not always easy to see the difference between invention and revelation, between materialism and the real value of material things. That is what we mean when we say of the food we eat “It is *good* for you.”

I doubt if there are many modern readers of Ruskin who question the fundamentals of Darwin’s theory. I doubt if there are many who think Whistler a bad painter or wish that modern art had

resisted the logic of Impressionism. Yet we all think that Ruskin is worth attending to. Walter Pater, writing of art in an era transformed by Darwin, says: "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (Pater 188). With Pater, as with Darwin, we can follow the process of things but we cannot declare their value or their purpose. The loss of value and purpose, I want to argue, remains significant. An obvious consequence of it today is that an artist is no longer a person who, by a process of skill, enables us to see the world we live in. Artists are people who have declared themselves to be artists. We tend to esteem them more for their distinctiveness than for the worth of what they show us. We know that we ourselves are part of a process that culminates in death. We cannot claim that our lives are of any significance. The objects we make or use acquire monetary value according to mysterious laws which seem unrelated to the good those objects may confer. We do not think of value as intrinsic, but as determined by forces we know we cannot control. When we say, as we sometimes do, that Ruskin has prophetic qualities, we partly mean that he foresees these problems and suggests that what has happened was not inevitable. It may now seem to us that it was, and yet we find ourselves looking for ways of rediscovering objective value. It is perhaps the quest for such value that has led me and others to become Companions of Ruskin's charity the Guild of St George, which is still active today. I am moved, for instance, by the work of my fellow Companions, John and Linda Iles, who in the Worcestershire countryside are working to restore pieces of land that modern industrial farming and market forces had effectively killed off. John talks of the pleasure of watching the land heal, season by season, as once again it yields its rich variety. Or I watch another friend, the letter-cutter Lida Cardozo Kindersley, cutting into slabs of slate "with utmost conscience of care," finding a visual and tactile

equivalent for the beauty of human language and, simultaneously, augmenting the natural beauty of the stone itself. Or I think of another Companion, the artist Alexander Hamilton, who has revived an early form of photography, the cyanotype, by means of which plants laid on paper, steeped in certain chemicals and exposed to sunlight, transfer their DNA to the paper, leaving a white image in a field of cerulean blue. In this way, it is the light, rather than the artist – though he of course facilitates the process – that reveals the plant's inherent beauty to us. There is no sense in which the work of these individuals refutes the insights of Darwin and modern science or questions the value of experiment in art. Instead, they affirm that the value of a thing is not a matter of functional exchange or the earth simply a field for exploitation, but that the physical world is a living organism that grows and changes as we do – that being human we find value inherent in physical things and, finding such value, add to it.

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Notes

¹ Clive Wilmer is the fourteenth Master of the Guild, Ruskin having been the first. St George's Company was founded by Ruskin in 1871 and registered as the Guild of St George in 1878.

² The biblical quotation is from Joel 2.10

³ See Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of Victorian Gentlemen* (Princeton UP, 2001)

⁴ *The Stones of Venice* I (9.52).

⁵ *Unto This Last* (17.41).

⁶ John Ruskin, *Façade of the Ca d'Oro*, 1845, pencil, watercolour and bodycolour, Ruskin Library, Lancaster.

⁷ Unknown photographer, *The Ca d'Oro under restoration*, 1945, daguerreotype, private collection. The comparison has been made by Robert

Hewison, *Ruskin on Venice: "The Paradise of Cities"* (Yale UP, 2009), 101-2.

⁸ J.M.W. Turner, *Snow Storm – Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich*, 1842, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London.

⁹ Claude Monet, *Impression, soleil levant*, 1873, oil on canvas, Musée Marmottan, Paris.

¹⁰ 3.87.

¹¹ This letter of 11 September 1840 is included in *Letters Addressed to a College Friend 1840-1845*, published by George Allen in 1894.

¹² "Monet is reported as saying in 1900 that 'ninety-per-cent of the theory of Impressionism is ... in "Elements of Drawing."'" John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 294 n.130.

¹³ 6.33-36, including Plates 20 and 21.

¹⁴ "Of the Theoretic Faculty," *Modern Painters* II (4.25-28).

¹⁵ In this passage, Whistler is clearly taking issue with Ruskin's insistence that nature is the only source of beauty and can do no wrong.

¹⁶ For much of what I say here about Buckland, I am indebted to Van Akin Burd, "Ruskin and his 'Good Master,' William Buckland," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36 (2008), 299-315.

¹⁷ Psalm 95.5. In the Church of England, this Psalm, known as the 'Venite', is sung every Sunday morning at the service of Matins. Ruskin quotes not from the Bible but from the version in *The Book of Common Prayer* used in that service.

¹⁸ Ruskin's main account of his "unconversion" is given in *Praeterita* (35.495-96). He acknowledges the phrase "*Religion of Humanity*" as Frederic Harrison's (29.88n).

¹⁹ Psalm 18.9, 11. Ruskin conflates two verses, perhaps misremembering a passage he had learnt.

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