

Misinterpreting Ruskin

New light on the “dark clue” in the basement of the
National Gallery, 1857-58

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*I*t is well known that Ruskin's attitude to Turner changed substantially between the publication of the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843, and the fifth and final volume in 1860. The change is most marked in the fifth volume, where Ruskin's text portrays Turner as a dark and despairing figure, without hope; but there is another, less well-known aspect to this change. About 12 years ago, while researching Ruskin's activities as a printmaker, I noticed unusual anomalies in some of the etchings that Ruskin made for the fifth volume of *Modern Painters*, in illustration of Turner's works. Without mentioning in the text that he had done so, Ruskin changed Turner's compositions significantly.¹ At the time it was unclear why Ruskin came to treat Turner's compositions in this way, but a satisfactory explanation can now be proposed: an explanation that sheds light on Ruskin's marked change of attitude toward Turner in the fifth volume of *Modern Painters*, and which is linked to Ruskin's involvement with the Turner Bequest during 1857-58. In particular, it offers grounds for questioning the soundness of recent emphases on the significance of Ruskin's discovery of erotic material among Turner's sketches. Taking advantage of the availability, online, of high quality reproductions of sketches from the Turner Bequest (so that we are no longer limited by the problem of reproducing coloured drawings adequately), we can now see for ourselves something of what Ruskin saw in the National Gallery basement, with unprecedented ease. The present paper offers an examination of this issue from a fresh perspective, based on this new approach.

This essay begins with a description of the modifications Ruskin made to Turner's compositions when etching his illustrations, and proceeds to examine what they can tell us about Ruskin's changing attitude to Turner during the late 1850s. This will lead us to reconsider what happened when Ruskin worked on the Turner Bequest in the basement of the National Gallery. A pattern emerges that offers a viable and persuasive alternative explanation for Ruskin's darkened perception of Turner that found expression in *Modern Painters V*.



Leaving aside the many wood engravings printed among the text, with which we are not here concerned, Ruskin's activities as an illustrator in *Modern Painters* can be conveniently divided into two types. In the first group, there are the steel plates that were engraved by professional engravers under Ruskin's supervision. Most of Ruskin's full-page illustrations in *Modern Painters* fall into this category. Ruskin regarded the making of steel engravings with profound seriousness, and this aspect of his illustrative work has been examined extensively both in print,² and in an exhibition at the Ruskin Library, Lancaster,³ where the twofold nature of Ruskin's attitude to engraving, and its importance, have been clearly demonstrated. His purposes were first, reproductive or interpretative (that is, to make accurate illustrations of his own, or Turner's, original work); and second, symbolic (that is, to make an appropriately permanent record of noble truths).

The second group of illustrations comprises those relatively few plates that Ruskin etched by his own hand (sometimes with the subsequent addition of mezzotint by a professional engraver to provide tone), and it is specifically the etchings he made in illustration of Turner's work with which we are concerned here. It should be stressed that Ruskin's attitude toward etching was no less serious than his attitude to engraving; and generally speaking his intentions (that is, of accurate, truthful illustration) are the same. This is clearly evident in the third and fourth volumes of *Modern Painters* (1856), but in *Modern Painters V* (1860), a close study of the etchings Ruskin made to illustrate Turner's work re-

veals a number of significant differences between Ruskin's etchings and Turner's original work. It is to these surprising modifications, which have no precedent in the earlier volumes, that we now turn.⁴

Figure 1 reproduces an etching that seems at first sight to be merely an etched copy after Turner (7.402): it is a sketch of the dragon, from Turner's large oil painting of the *Garden of the Hesperides*.⁵ Matters are not quite what they seem, however, and Elizabeth Helsinger's description of this etching is revealing:

The dragon, as Ruskin redraws him out of his original setting, reveals features not easily visible in the full painting: a skeletal form, bat-like wings, a nimbus of flame-shaped clouds. Ruskin's black and white drawing also makes the ridges of the ground on which the dragon lies appear as extensions of its clawlike feet, so that the dragon itself merges into the rock structure (or glacial structure) of the mountain top. All these features Ruskin's text attributes to Turner's dragon, but the drawing that singles them out for clearer representation is no longer Turner's vision, but Ruskin's. (Helsinger, 293-94)

Ruskin could have represented Turner's dragon more accurately by adding mezzotint to his etching and printing in brown ink (as in some of the other plates in *Modern Painters*), but he deliberately rejected this option. Early in 1860, after sending his friend Lady Trevelyan an impression of this etching, he wrote to her: "I'm so glad you like my dragon I'm etching him all myself and won't do him brown – but leave him nice and scratchy."⁶ (The phrase "do him brown" refers to the addition of mezzotint and printing in brown ink, in the style of Turner's *Liber Studiorum*.⁷) This distortion of Turner's image becomes comprehensible if, following Helsinger, we regard the plate as an expression of Ruskin's own imaginative perception of Turner's vision; but what is important here is that Ruskin's choice involved the deliberate sacrifice of a more accurate literal portrayal of Turner's painted dragon, in order to achieve a more effective symbol of his own interpretation of it.



Figure 1. Quivi Trovammo. Etched by Ruskin after Turner

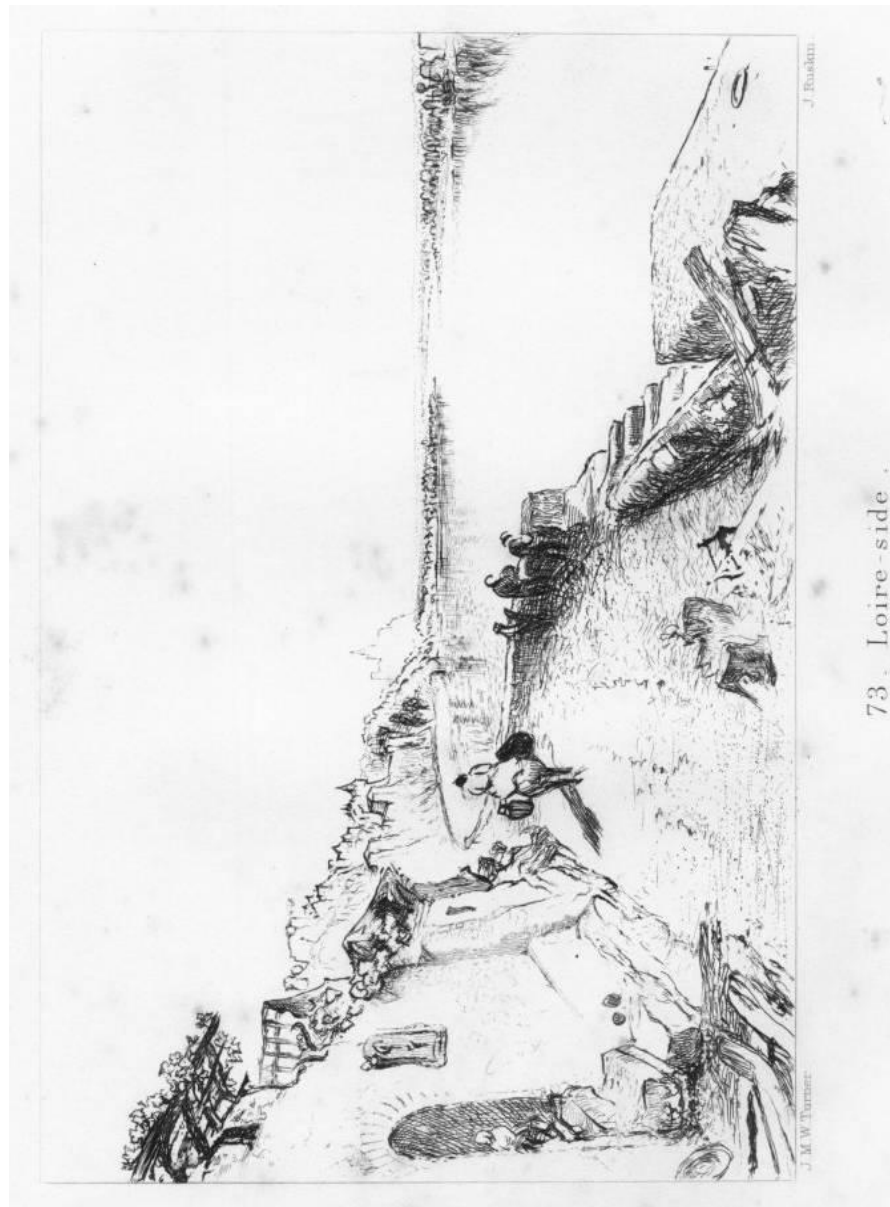


Figure 2. Loire Side. Etched by Ruskin after Turner

Figure 2 reproduces the etching entitled *Loire-side* (7.218), after Turner, and Ruskin himself would have encouraged us to study it closely, for he included an impression of it in the Oxford Educational Series, and commented: “I etched this one for Modern Painters with extreme care, and it is the only etching in the book which satisfied me” (21.127-28). The etching plays a very important part in the chapter “The Task of the Least,” where Ruskin demonstrates how even “the minutest part of a great composition is helpful to the whole” (7.217). Two features, among others, figure prominently in his discussion – which, on the face of it, is typical of the kind of analyses of Turner’s compositions that Ruskin made elsewhere. First he draws attention to the ring in the lower right hand corner, and then he invites the reader to

hide with your finger the little ring on that stone, and
you will find the river has stopped flowing. That ring is
to repeat the curved lines of the river bank, which ex-
press its line of current, and to bring the feeling of them
down near us. (7.219)

Indeed the ring does closely mimic the curve of the river above. Next, he draws our attention to the plates that are leaning against the wall on either side of the doorsteps on the left. The arched door is important, Ruskin argues, because it makes us conscious of the great thickness of the walls, and so its arch needs to be emphasized. Ruskin continues:

the large round plate on one side of the steps, with the
two small ones on the other, are to carry down the ele-
ment of circular curvature. Hide them, and see the result.
(7.219)

Again, one may try it, and take his point. But if we examine, instead, the original Turner watercolour (*Rietz, near Saumur*)⁸ which this etching purports to illustrate, and which was in Ruskin’s possession at the time, we discover that the elliptical shape of the ring on the stone does not, in Turner’s watercolour, echo the curvature of the river as it does in Ruskin’s etching. Its axis points in quite a different direction, parallel to the sides of the stone slab. And of the three plates in the etching that echo

the curved arch so essentially for Ruskin's argument, only the large one can be found in Turner's watercolour. The two small plates are absent. We might wonder if some change has occurred in the watercolour over the years, causing the disappearance of these objects after it left Ruskin's possession, but we can check this by examining the engraving that was made under Turner's supervision during the 1830s, long before the watercolour came into Ruskin's hands.⁹ In the engraving there are some vague marks by the steps, but they do not share the distinctive sharply-defined characteristics of Ruskin's supposed plates. So these "plates" could have played no part in Turner's original composition because they were not there; and as we saw, the echo between the ring and the line of the riverbank exists only in Ruskin's version, and not in Turner's. They are certainly the kind of visual resonances that Turner was in the habit of incorporating into the structure of his pictures; but in this composition Ruskin thought it necessary to enhance or invent them himself, to add to those already there.

Not all the etchings that Ruskin prepared appear in the first edition of *Modern Painters* V. Three of them (ambitious productions, prepared in the *Liber Studiorum* manner during the late 1850s, with the help of the engraver Thomas Lupton to provide mezzotint) were published only in a later edition, in 1888. Cook and Wedderburn state that the plates were omitted from the first edition because they were not completed in time (7.lxix), though Ruskin himself explained in a letter to Dr John Brown that they were spoiled in mezzotinting.¹⁰ Whatever the reason, it may be these plates to which Ruskin refers in the Preface to the fifth volume:

Many experiments were made in hope of expressing
Turner's peculiar execution and touch by facsimile.
They cost time, and strength, and, for the present, have
failed. (7.7-8)

It is clear, however, that the plates were made with the intention of including them in the volume from the first. *Figure 3* reproduces one of them (7.439): Ruskin's etching (with mezzotint added by Thomas Lupton).

ton) of Turner's *Lake of Zug*, which Ruskin considered to be one of the "truest and mightiest" of Turner's works. In the original watercolour,¹¹ Turner shows the sun's reflection incorrectly, with the strip of reflected light angled down toward the right instead of being vertical (as required by the laws of reflection). In his etching, Ruskin tries to correct the reflection, making it more nearly vertical. Turner shows two figures at bottom left carrying a long object, but Ruskin slightly changes the two figures; he shows the left-hand figure leaning on the long object (rather than carrying it), while the other figure turns away from it. By far the most remarkable change concerns the group of figures in the foreground at lower right (*Figure 4*). In Turner's watercolour, these figures are bare-legged children, one sitting and one standing. In Ruskin's etching the children have been transformed into two ladies in long dresses, one clinging to the other. Twenty years later, Ruskin would describe Turner's watercolour as an "inestimable drawing, but with bad faults, of which I need not point out more than the coarse figure drawing, and falsely oblique reflection of the sun" (13.455). Even so, it is extraordinary, indeed unprecedented, to find him silently replacing elements of Turner's design with inventions of his own.

Figure 5 (7.438) reproduces the last of the etchings to be considered (again, with mezzotint added by Lupton), illustrating one of Turner's most well-known watercolours – *Dawn after the Wreck*. Ruskin describes it in a particularly moving fashion, as one of the "saddest and most tender" of Turner's "momentary dreams":

It is a small space of level sea shore; beyond it a fair, soft light in the east; the last storm clouds melting away, oblique into the morning air; some little vessel – a collier, probably – has gone down in the night, all hands lost; a single dog has come ashore. Utterly exhausted, its limbs failing under it, and sinking into the sand, it stands howling and shivering. The dawn clouds have the first scarlet upon them, a feeble tinge only, reflected with the same feeble blood-stain on the sand. (7.438n)

Alan Davis, "Misinterpreting Ruskin"



Figure 3. The Lake of Zug. Etched by Ruskin with mezzotint by Lupton, after Turner



Figure 4. Lake of Zug. Detail of foreground.

Alan Davis, "Misinterpreting Ruskin"



Figure 5. Dawn after the Wreck. Etched by Ruskin with mezzotint by Lupton, after Turner

Comparison of the etching with Turner's watercolour¹² results in two observations. First, that Ruskin has changed the orientation of the crescent moon; and second, that the emotional impact of Ruskin's plate is curiously lacking in conviction. In particular, the anguish of the dog seems less evident. To understand why, we need to examine Turner's composition more carefully.¹³

The distribution of light in the sky implies that we are facing roughly east, with the sun about to rise at the left hand side of the picture. (Alternative interpretations of the time of day are possible, but this is certainly how Ruskin, rightly or wrongly, understood the picture.) The moon has already risen, but if this is indeed a representation of dawn, then Turner's depiction of the moon's phase is astronomically impossible. With the sun below and to the left, the lower *left* hand side of the moon's disc should be illuminated, yet Turner shows the *right* hand side of the disc illuminated. In other words, he draws the lunar crescent the wrong way round. Ruskin, recognizing this, has corrected the phase of the moon in his etching. But Turner had a reason for his choice of lunar orientation in this picture; and once we understand it, we find ourselves contemplating a superb example of the kind of compositional structure that Ruskin analyzes in "The Task of the Least." A great composition, Ruskin maintained, "always has a leading emotional purpose ... to which all its lines and forms have some relation"; and indeed even "the *minutest* portion of a great composition is helpful to the whole" (7.217).

The moon and the dog are the only compact, distinct features in the composition; they are also, respectively, the lightest and darkest features. The compositional purpose of the curvature of the lunar crescent is to echo and emphasize the arch of the dog's back, and the crescent is given a more vertical orientation than the dog's arched back so as to suggest an upward, anticlockwise rotation which enhances the sense of the upward straining of the dog. It is a simple but brilliant device, for which the loss of astronomical verisimilitude was presumably, for Turner, a price worth paying. It is also a compositional ploy to which we should have expected Ruskin – the writer of "The Task of the Least" – to be sensitive. Yet

Ruskin chose to correct what he considered to be Turner's astronomical mistake, to the considerable loss of the poetic and imaginative impact of the image: we might think it a regrettable lapse of judgement on Ruskin's part, to insist on precise representational accuracy at such cost.

In conclusion, then, we have four etchings that purport to be accurate representations of Turner's original work, but which are not. As we come now to consider the significance of the deliberate changes Ruskin made in these four etchings, it should be emphasized again that there is nothing like this to be found in the third and fourth volumes of *Modern Painters*, where Ruskin's etchings are straightforward attempts to interpret Turner's pictures faithfully. The importance of this development is obvious: something happened between 1856 and 1860 that not only darkened Ruskin's perception of Turner (as evidenced in the text), but also persuaded him to edit some of Turner's finest pictures without acknowledging that he had done so.

There is no shortage of significant biographical events between those years. He experienced the "Queen of Sheba crash" at Turin (29.89); he met Rose La Touche (Hilton, 262-68); but most significantly, he worked on the Turner Bequest. For much of 1857, and until May 1858, Ruskin was "at work ... every day, all day long, and often far into the night," inspecting and arranging the drawings of the Turner Bequest, and "seeing unfolded the whole career of Turner's mind during his life" (7.5). He was exposed to the full range and quantity of Turner's work to an extent that was wholly unprecedented – not only for him, but for anyone else; and he wrote to Ellen Heaton in December 1857 of "the excitement of discovering something precious or learning something new every half minute."¹⁴ But by June of the following year his thoughts had taken a much more sombre turn. In a letter to his father, referring to his work on the Turner sketches, he wrote as follows (it is necessary to pay careful attention to his choice of words, for we shall return to them):

There is evidence in those sketches of a gradual moral decline in the painter's mind from the beginning of life to its end ... sometimes in mode of work even indolent

and slovenly – the powers of art and knowledge of nature increasing all the while, but not now employed with the same calm or great purpose – his kindness of heart never deserting him, but encumbered with sensuality, suspicion, pride, vain regrets, hopelessness, langour, and all kinds of darkness and oppression of heart.¹⁵

The dark mood stuck. The following October he wrote to Elizabeth Barrett Browning complaining that “I have had cloud upon me this year,” having ascertained how Turner’s soul “had been gradually crushed within him, leaving him at the close of his life weak, sinful, desolate – nothing but his generosity and kindness of heart left” (36.292). Here are the origins of the tragic image of Turner that Ruskin was to present in the fifth volume of *Modern Painters*. Ruskin had never considered Turner’s art to be free from error, but he had attributed his errors to his “having suffered under the instruction of the Royal Academy” (5.388). By 1860, however, this was insufficient to account for the deep flaws in Turner that Ruskin now perceived. He had come to believe of Turner that “all his failure and error, deep and strange, came of his faithlessness” (7.444).

One explanation of this despairing view has emerged with considerable force in recent years. Turner’s Bequest contained a number of erotic drawings (the number is uncertain, but it was possibly no more than about a hundred).¹⁶ It has been proposed that the shock of Ruskin’s exposure to these brought about one of the great crises – possibly *the* great crisis – of his life. Helen Viljoen, whose views on the matter have been thoroughly examined by James Spates, believed that Ruskin’s exposure to the erotic drawings was the “real turning point” in his life (Spates, 174). Ian Warrell, who organized an exhibition of Turner’s erotic drawings, has suggested that Ruskin’s discovery of them “contributed substantially to one of the most profound crises in his own life, stripping away the certainties with which he had surrounded himself.”¹⁷ Robert Hewison concurs with this view (259). This interpretation has received so much exposure that there is a risk of its becoming set in stone in the Ruskin biography by force of repetition, if not by weight of argument; so

it is important to consider whether possible alternative explanations for Ruskin's disillusion about Turner have been overlooked.

We are prone to what I have called a "temporal or retrospective pathetic fallacy" with regard to sexuality.¹⁸ We project our modern preoccupations with sexuality into the past, and this projection takes various forms. For instance, one casualty of the temporal pathetic fallacy arises from the popular modern interpretation of the word "sensual." It is often subconsciously assumed that the sensual implies the *sexual*, instead of merely including the sexual as one among many aspects of sensuality. It is important to remember this when we find Ruskin using the word – as, for example, when he speaks of Turner's kindness of heart being "encumbered with sensuality."¹⁹ This projective tendency is so deeply embedded in our culture that most people are unaware that they are doing it, and that it is a pathetic fallacy; and the outcome has been disastrous not only to the general perception of Ruskin's life, but to the dissemination of the cultural value of his work. As Rachel Dickinson observes, "Anecdotally, if someone knows just one fact about Ruskin, it relates either to his annulled marriage or to his interest in girls" (40-41). A third "fact" is now well on the way to joining them – the "profound crisis" brought about by his discovery of Turner's erotic drawings. This has the potential to obscure still further the cultural value of Ruskin's work, and present yet another obstacle to its dissemination. If we are to admit it into the accepted Ruskin biography, it is particularly important that we subject it to close scrutiny.

My contention is that the supposed great significance of the erotic drawings discovery is at least partly the result of a temporal pathetic fallacy, and the central purpose of what follows is to demonstrate that Ruskin's darkened perception of Turner in *Modern Painters* V can be readily explained without it. No doubt Ruskin was shocked and distressed by his discovery of the erotic drawings; but we shall see that they represent just one factor among a very large number of dismaying discoveries that he made in the Turner Bequest. What needs to be stressed (and which is invariably overlooked or underplayed in discussions of this subject) is that there was an enormous body of material – not just a few

dozen sexy scribbles – that Ruskin interpreted as signifying Turner’s “moral decline.” It is necessary for us to resist our tendency to seize upon the sexual aspects as especially important, and return to the National Gallery basement to consider carefully what Ruskin saw, and did.

One cause of distress was Turner’s neglect of his most precious work. Some sketches were “rotted into holes,” others “eaten away by damp and mildew.” Some were “worm-eaten,” others “mouse-eaten.” “Dust of thirty years’ accumulation, black, dense, and sooty, lay in the rents of the crushed and crumpled edges” of the bundles, Ruskin recalled (7.4). But worse revelations were to come as he examined the sketches themselves.

The scale of Ruskin’s dismissal of much of Turner’s work is remarkable. There were more than 19,000 watercolours, drawings and sketches in the Turner Bequest, from which Ruskin selected 1,900 works as suitable for exhibition. He divided the rest into 303 parcels, labelling an astonishing 108 of those parcels as “entire rubbish” (Weil, 3). In his report to the National Gallery in March 1858, he drew attention to this “large mass” of drawings, “so slight or careless as to possess hardly any value,” and whose “inferiority would cast unjust discredit on the finer works with which they were associated”; but he observed that “they form illustrations, often dependent as much *on their quantity* as on their style, of the habits of life and tones of temper, and, *too often, errors of judgement*, of the greatest landscape painter who ever lived” (13.324, *emphases added*). It is clear from this statement that when Ruskin wrote to his father about Turner’s “hopelessness, langour, and all kinds of darkness and oppression of heart” in 1858 (see above), he was talking about something that he had perceived over and over again, throughout the mass of Turner’s work – not just in a small part of it. If we are to understand this, we need to attempt to recover what it was that Ruskin was seeing.

Ruskin’s original parcels no longer exist, and it would be a difficult task, now, to try to identify the many thousands of problematic sketches and seek to understand in detail why Ruskin dismissed them. But we can attempt a useful sampling exercise on a smaller scale, because one group

of especially accessible sketches form a very manageable exception: the Petworth sketches, made by Turner about 1827, at Petworth Park while he stayed there under the patronage of Lord Egremont. Reproductions of all these sketches have been published (in print and online), and they are greatly admired today; Ruskin, however, had serious misgivings about them. He bundled many of them into three separate packets labelled "Inferior," "Rubbish," and "Worse"; and although his bundles were long ago dismantled, enough information is preserved for us to reconstitute at least part of their contents, using numbers that Ruskin wrote on the backs of some of the sketches.²⁰ By examining sketches from those parcels, we can try to gain some insight into why Ruskin dismissed them; and, by extension, we can discover what *kinds* of things were troubling him about the sketches in the Bequest. Among the Petworth group as a whole, we can identify fourteen sketches that Ruskin thought were "Inferior"; eight that he labelled "Rubbish"; and forty-three that were "Worse."

Before we consider some of them, it is important to recall Ruskin's opinion, not of Turner, but of *Constable*. Ruskin, it will be recalled, was indignant about the idea of regarding Constable as a great artist, on the same kind of level as Turner,²¹ and regarded admiration for Constable as actually "harmful" (16.415). What dismayed Ruskin about Constable were his "clumsy hand" (14.301); his "blotting and blundering" (5.423); his "idle sweeps of the brush" (5.164); his "morbid preference of subjects of a low order" (3.191); his production of "the kind of work which is produced by an uninventive person dashing about idly, with a brush" (5.162). Constable's tree-drawing was "idle, and undefined in every respect" (6.101). Indeed, Ruskin insisted that he had "never seen any work of [Constable's] in which there were any signs of his being able to draw" (3.191). Had he been able to achieve any careful discipline, there was "perhaps, the making, in Constable, of a second or third rate painter" (16.415). For Ruskin, up to the time of his work on the Turner Bequest, there was an unbridgeable gulf between Turner, and the inferior kind of artist he believed Constable to be. We do not of course need to share Ruskin's views on Constable; but it is essential to bear those descriptions in mind as we approach the

Petworth sketches, and to be aware of the deeply troubling impact it would make on Ruskin to find large quantities of Turner's work displaying all the harmful faults he perceived in Constable.²²

It would be impracticable to reproduce the required Petworth sketches here, but high quality reproductions of them are readily available for inspection either in print,²³ or online at the Tate website. Full details of how to access the online images most conveniently, and most rapidly, are given in the Appendices to this paper. What follows should be read with reproductions of the sketches to hand.

At least three categories of problematic sketch are identifiable, and several of the Petworth sketches have been selected (see Appendices 1 and 2) that are representative of each category. First, there are those sketches that belong to the class referred to by Turner scholars as "colour beginnings" or "colour structures." Six examples have been chosen (five of them are among the eight in Ruskin's "rubbish" parcel) and their Accession Numbers are as follows: D22707, D22708, D22710, D22711, D22713, D22717.²⁴ Ruskin could have had no means of understanding these sketches (which are much more accessible to modern eyes, accustomed to abstract art). In works like these, Turner is exploring the abstract structure, in tone and colour, of compositions that he was contemplating, but to Ruskin they would have seemed to be merely (to use a derisive comment he made about Constable) "the kind of work which is produced by an uninventive person dashing about idly, with a brush."

The second category includes sketches of identifiable subjects that would have seemed to Ruskin as badly observed and executed as anything Constable might have painted: "idle and undefined in every respect," or "blotting and blundering," as Ruskin would have it; or sketched with "idle sweeps of the brush." The following eight are examples: D22706, D22709, D22721, D22732, D22740, D22742, D22747, D22763.²⁵

Finally, there are sketches where Ruskin would probably have objected to the subject matter itself – indicating a "morbid preference for

subjects of a low order" that was different in detail but comparable in spirit with Constable's. Many of the sketches depict the Earl of Egremont's guests enjoying indolent pursuits around the house and grounds. Ruskin rejected at least seventy per cent of them. Here are five examples, all of them from Ruskin's "Worse" parcel: D22688, D22700, D22705, D22722, D22731.²⁶

Some sketches straddle these rough boundaries, and many more examples could be added to the lists, but the important point is that the abundance of this sort of scruffy, scrappy, lazy work (as Ruskin would have regarded it), idly depicting idle people engaged in idle (sometimes merely sensual) activities, was to Ruskin a clear indication of what he described as the "gradually more sensual – capricious – ... indolent and slovenly" trend that so depressed him about Turner, after working on the Bequest. The real shock to Ruskin was not that Turner drew a few sexy pictures. It was that he drew *thousands* of sketches that Ruskin considered to be idly conceived, badly observed, and executed in a slovenly manner – just the sort of work that supposedly inferior artists like Constable might have produced, and which Ruskin held in contempt. The importance of this must not be underestimated. What Ruskin had discovered was capable of undermining everything he had written about Turner's art and character since 1843, and it had very little to do with sexuality.

Ruskin's exposure, day after day for several months, to the large quantities of what he considered to be inferior and slipshod work in the Bequest, changed his perception of even the finest of Turner's works. The slovenliness and moral laxity that Ruskin believed he detected in the Bequest meant that the nobility of almost every touch of Turner's could no longer be taken for granted, despite his greatness. It would lead him to perceive flaws even in the great Swiss watercolours of the early 1840s: "All his failures and errors are chronicled, no less than his advanced knowledge and passion, in the Swiss drawings" (13.521). Having traced Turner's loss of hope and moral decline throughout the thousands of sketches in the Bequest, Ruskin – Turner's interpreter, Turner's executor,

and now in his etched illustrations, Turner's *editor* – appears to have felt justified in trying to repair the damage where he could, editing Turner's compositions where he considered it necessary. It seems that he was unwilling to entrust such editing to his professional engravers, and restricted it only to the plates etched by his own hand: modifying tonal qualities and textures in accordance with his interpretation of the meaning of Turner's dragon; fine-tuning compositional details in Turner's Loire landscape; correcting astronomical inaccuracies in *Dawn after the Wreck*; restoring the law of reflection and eliminating minor vulgarities in the *Lake of Zug*. If Ruskin's decisions appear questionable, we must allow for some degree of confusion and errors of judgment, as he confronted the complex task of concluding *Modern Painters* against the background of his own disillusion and bewilderment about Turner. Ruskin himself did not properly understand what was going on. He wrote to Charles Eliot Norton about it afterwards, overwhelmed by what he described as

the mystery of it all – the God's making of the great mind, and the martyrdom of it, and the uselessness of it all for ever, as far as human eyes can see or thoughts travel. All these things it is of no use talking about.
(36.533)

What, then, should we conclude about the hypothesis that the discovery of Turner's erotica brought about a major crisis in Ruskin's life – a crisis of sufficient severity as to bring about the substantially changed view of Turner that we encounter in *Modern Painters* V? It is not relevant here to address the problem of whether any erotic drawings were burned or not: that has been thoroughly discussed by Ian Warrell.²⁷ Neither is it helpful to discuss the well-known sensationalist narrative of discussions with Ruskin in the late 1880s by Frank Harris, beyond observing that its evidential value concerning Ruskin's response to the erotic drawings episode is doubtful.²⁸ Clearly the discovery of the erotica is a *possible* explanation for Ruskin's changed attitude to Turner after 1858, even though the evidence for it is uncertain, and the suggestion largely

conjectural. But we would do well to adopt the more demanding attitude required for the testing of scientific hypotheses, admirably explained by the mathematician and astronomer, Douglas Heggie (Heggie, 21-22). He was speaking of an entirely different field of study, but the principle is transferable: it is not enough for a hypothesis merely to fit the facts. If we are to be persuaded to take the hypothesis seriously, *we must ask whether there is something improbable about what we find in Ruskin's life and work, post-1858, if we maintain that the hypothesis is wrong.* And the "erotic drawings crisis" hypothesis fails this test. As we have seen, Ruskin's contemptuous rejection of so very many sketches, on grounds that can be clearly identified and understood in terms of what we know he would have regarded as shoddy and unacceptable work, is entirely sufficient to explain his changed attitude to Turner. This implies that the hypothesis of an "erotic drawings crisis" is misleading in its emphasis. Even if there had been no erotic drawings for Ruskin to discover, there was still an enormous body of material that Ruskin would have interpreted as evidence for Turner's moral and artistic decline – quite enough to account for the darkened figure of Turner that we meet in *Modern Painters V*, and to explain Ruskin's editing of Turner's work. Ruskin's discovery of Turner's erotica is only a small part of a bigger and much more important story.

This fresh perspective matters a good deal when we come to consider the interpretation of Ruskin's remarks about Turner in the fifth volume of *Modern Painters*. It would be seriously misleading to read *Modern Painters V* as if it contains a darkly sexual subtext resulting from Ruskin's confrontation with the erotica in the Turner Bequest. On the contrary, Ruskin seems to have been able to adopt a remarkably robust attitude to sensuality of all kinds during the period following his work on the Bequest, as suggested for example by his observations about Titian in *Modern Painters V*. Titian (Ruskin writes) knew that

the sensual passion in man was not only a fact, but a Divine fact; the human creature, though the highest of the animals was, nevertheless, a perfect animal, and his hap-

piness, health, and nobleness depended on the due power of every animal passion, as well as on the cultivation of every spiritual tendency. (7.296-97)

Again, writing notes to his father from Turin in August 1858 (a few months after completing his work on the Bequest), Ruskin observes:

Homer, Shakespeare, Tintoret, Veronese, Titian, Michael Angelo, Sir Joshua, Rubens, Velasquez, Correggio, Turner, are all of them boldly Animal. ... A good, stout, self-commanding, magnificent Animality is the make for poets and artists, it seems to me. ... One day when I was working from the beautiful maid of honour in Veronese's picture, I was struck by the Gorgeousness of life which the world seems to be constituted to develop, when it is made the best of. (7.xl-xli)

These are not the words of a man in horrified retreat from sexuality, overwhelmed by the trauma of discovering Turner's erotica. Rather, they are the words of a man seeking to revel in the variety and richness of the sensual experiences offered by the world.²⁹ To interpret Ruskin's meanings accurately, we must recognize that the "dark clue" of *Modern Painters V* points not to sex (not even covertly), but to death, in its various forms, both physical and moral (7.436-37).³⁰ What Ruskin would have regarded as the dark side of Turner's sexual nature doubtless has a role to play in that story, but as we have seen, it represented for Ruskin merely one among many indications of Turner's moral decline, and recent emphases on its importance may be more illuminating of present-day critical concerns than of Ruskin's. Whether we are interpreting the meaning of *Modern Painters V* in particular, or seeking to disseminate the cultural value of Ruskin's work in general, it is essential to get the biographical balance right: and that includes recognizing the discovery of Turner's erotica as an interesting but probably not particularly important footnote in the Ruskin biography.

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Notes

The material described here has benefited from discussions over many years with members of the Ruskin Seminar at Lancaster University, and I record my thanks to them all here. Thanks, too, go to Cecilia Powell, who first suggested to me that the online availability of Turner's sketches made this new kind of multimedia-referenced paper possible, solving almost all the problems of reproducing large numbers of colour images, at a stroke. Finally, I am grateful to Sara Atwood and Ray Haslam for their helpful encouragement about earlier versions of this paper, to Peter Yeandle for his comments on its penultimate draft, and to Robert Hewison for valuable, candid discussion about the significance of the discovery of Turner's erotica.

Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical Ruskin citations (including volume and page number) refer to the Cook and Wedderburn library edition, *Works of John Ruskin*.

¹ These changes are described and discussed in Davis, "Ruskin, Turner, and the Crescent Moon" and in Davis, "Inventing the Truth: Ruskin's Etched Illustrations after Turner in *Modern Painters V*."

² See Davis, "Job's Iron Pen: Ruskin's use of engraved illustration in *Modern Painters*."

³ The exhibition, curated by Alan Davis, was "A Pen of Iron": *Ruskin and Printmaking*. 11 January to 30 March, 2003.

⁴ The discussions that follow are extracted and adapted from Davis, "Ruskin, Turner, and the Crescent Moon" and Davis, "Inventing the Truth: Ruskin's Etched Illustrations after Turner in *Modern Painters V*."

⁵ See Butlin and Joll, cat. 57. The picture can be viewed online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/SimpleSearch> by entering **N00477** into the Accession Number box and selecting "Search." Ruskin did not reverse the image when drawing it on the steel plate, and so his final printed image appears reversed compared to Turner's original work.

⁶ See the letter to Lady Trevelyan, probably written in April 1860, in Surtees, ed., *Reflections of a Friendship*, 144.

⁷ For the importance of the *Liber Studiorum* for Ruskin, see Davis, "The 'Dark Clue' and the Law of Help: Ruskin, Turner, and the *Liber Studiorum*."

⁸ See Wilton, cat. 942. This watercolour is reproduced in colour in Birch, 78; also in Warrell, *Turner on the Loire*, 114. It can be viewed online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/SimpleSearch> by entering **Rietz Saumur** into the “Work Title” box and selecting “Search.” Ruskin did not reverse the image when drawing it on the steel plate, and so the final printed image appears reversed compared to Turner’s original work, as with Figure 1.

⁹ For the engraving by Robert Brandard, see Rawlinson, cat. 444. It is reproduced in Turner, *The Rivers of France*, 49.

¹⁰ Forrest, ed., 292.

¹¹ See Wilton, cat. 1535. The watercolor is reproduced in color in Warrell, *Through Switzerland with Turner*, 67. It is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and can be viewed online at <http://www.metmuseum.org/home.asp> by entering **Turner Zug** into the search box.

¹² See Wilton, cat. 1398. The watercolor is reproduced in color in Selbourne, Wilton and Powell, 147. Also in Hermann, plate 171. It can be viewed online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/SimpleSearch> by entering **Dawn Wreck** into the “Work Title” box and selecting “Search.”

¹³ This discussion, together with further consideration of the accuracy of Turner’s depictions of astronomical phenomena, may be found in Davis, “Ruskin, Turner, and the Crescent Moon.” The question of whether Turner was depicting dawn or sunset in this picture is a contentious one, and is fully discussed in Davis, “Sunrise or Sunset? New Light on the Moon in *Dawn after the Wreck*.”

¹⁴ Letter from Ruskin to Ellen Heaton, 7 December 1857, in Surtees, ed., *Sublime and Instructive*, 215.

¹⁵ Letter from Ruskin to his father, 20 June 1858, Hayman, ed., 52.

¹⁶ The uncertainty about how many erotic sketches there may have been is thoroughly discussed in Warrell, “Exploring the ‘dark side’: Ruskin and the problem of Turner’s erotica.”

¹⁷ Warrell, “Exploring the ‘dark side’: Ruskin and the problem of Turner’s erotica,” 5.

¹⁸ Davis, Editorial, 3-4.

¹⁹ Letter from Ruskin to his father, 20 June 1858, Hayman, ed., 52.

²⁰ For full details, see Butlin, Luther, and Warrell, 70, n.1.

²¹ Ruskin protests in *Modern Painters* III about the foolishness of C.R. Leslie (Constable's friend and biographer), who "suffered his personal regard for Constable so far to prevail over his judgement as to bring him forward as a great artist, comparable in some kind with Turner" (5.423).

²² Fleming-Williams and Parris have observed that "Ruskin's view of Constable appears to have been based on remarkably little knowledge of his works" (51). Most particularly, Ruskin's knowledge of Constable's work seems to have come largely through the mezzotints from Constable's *English Landscape Scenery* that were included in the first edition of C.R. Leslie's *Memoir of the Life of John Constable R.A.* (1843). It is from those mezzotints that Ruskin draws his examples in the plates of *Modern Painters* (5.162, 6.98). They are considered to be among the masterpieces of nineteenth-century printmaking today, but it is not entirely surprising that Ruskin failed to appreciate their merits. For a more detailed discussion of Ruskin and Constable see Fleming-Williams and Parris, 49-51.

²³ Butlin, Luther, and Warrell, 151-285.

²⁴ These correspond to Plates 81, 40, 56, 96, 28, 100 respectively, in Butlin, Luther, and Warrell.

²⁵ These correspond to Plates 33, 34, 98, 63, 21, 26, 68, 15 respectively, in Butlin, Luther, and Warrell.

²⁶ These correspond to Plates 25, 31, 134, 131, 64 respectively, in Butlin, Luther, and Warrell.

²⁷ Warrell, "Exploring the 'dark side': Ruskin and the problem of Turner's erotica," 9-10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹ To the examples already cited could be added his account, in a letter to his father in September 1858, of the young girl he saw at Turin on a heap of sand, "with her black hair over her eyes and half naked – bare-limbed to above the knees – and beautifully limbed – lying on the sand like a snake" (Hayman ed., 171; the letter should be read in full, in order to see this passage in its context, where Ruskin is comparing aspects of Italian and French culture). The incident so haunted Ruskin – see for example his recollection

of it seven years later (19.82) – that Tim Hilton marks this episode as an indication of the beginnings of paedophilia (Hilton, 253-54). That interpretation is seriously questionable however (for an illuminating discussion of such matters, see Dickinson, ed., 33-51), and the Turin episode is more helpfully regarded as indicating Ruskin's developing positive attitude towards a range of aspects of sensuality. (Its impact may also have been related to the new exploration of Greek myths that Ruskin embarked upon around this time: Ruskin's response to the myth of Kore – the archetypal bud/divine maiden – was closely related to the tragedy of his relationship with Rose La Touche. For further discussion of Ruskin's awakening sensitivity towards the Kore myth at this time, and subsequently, see Davis, "Ruskin and Persephone Revisited: The Goddess, the Maiden and the Bud," 9-18.)

³⁰ For further discussion of death and the "dark clue" in *Modern Painters* V, see Davis, "Chateau de Blois and the Law of Help," 43-48.

³¹ The Finberg catalogue number for D22708 is given incorrectly in the caption to Plate 40 in Butlin, Luther, and Warrell (190), but is corrected here.

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Appendix 1

Instructions for using the Tate website to select the group of Petworth sketches discussed in this paper

The discussion in this paper is based on the inspection of 19 Petworth sketches, selected, as exemplars of their type, from the Turner Bequest. All of them are accessible as high quality colour images via the Tate website. The instructions below provide a quick means of accessing and conveniently gathering together the images, using the Tate website as it exists at the time of writing. If the detailed structure of the website should change at some point in the future, the Accession Numbers will be the same, so the images should still be accessible, using whatever new system may replace the present one.

1. Go to <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/SimpleSearch>
2. In the right hand half of the grey panel put a tick in the box next to “Turner”; and then (when the additional options appear), select “Turner at Tate.”
3. On the left hand side, in the text box labelled “Finberg number,” type CCXLIV (case insensitive).
4. Click the “search” button. Over a hundred Petworth sketches will be displayed through several pages, each with its own Accession Number, and with an option to select it.

5. Put a tick in the box corresponding to each of the following sketches, paging through as necessary. The sketches required have the following Accession Numbers:

D22688, D22700, D22705, D22706, D22707, D22708, D22709, D22710, D22711, D22713, D22717, D22721, D22722, D22731, D22732, D22740, D22742, D22747, D22763.

6. In the list of options on the right, click "My selection." You should now have access to the specific selection of 19 Turner sketches on which this paper is based, collected together in a virtual basket, and conveniently separated out from all the others. Each thumbnail image can be enlarged by clicking on it.

[Alternatively, at stage 3, the Accession Numbers can be entered one by one into the "Accession Number" box, and the sketches added to the basket one at a time. Yet another option is to conduct the search by entering the Finberg catalogue number for each separate sketch into the box labelled "Finberg Number." The Finberg Number for each sketch is given in Appendix 2. The provision of this additional information should safeguard the usefulness of this paper against any future changes in the way the search facility for the Tate website is presented.]

Appendix 2

Useful information about the selection of nineteen sketches

For convenience, this table presents the nineteen Petworth sketches in the three distinct groups discussed in the paper. The left hand column gives the Accession Number of the sketch; the second column gives the corresponding plate number in Butlin, Luther, and Warrell (BLW); the third column gives the catalogue reference for the sketch in A.J. Finberg's *Complete Inventory of the Drawings in the Turner Bequest* (1909); and the final column indicates into which of his three labelled parcels Ruskin placed the sketch.

Accession Number	BLW Plate Number	Finberg Number	Ruskin Parcel
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First Group (“Colour beginnings”)

D22707	81	ccxliv 45	Rubbish
D22708	40	ccxliv 46 ³¹	Rubbish
D22710	56	ccxliv 48	Rubbish
D22711	96	ccxliv 49	Rubbish
D22713	28	ccxliv 51	Rubbish
D22717	100	ccxliv 55	Inferior

Second Group (“Blotting and blundering”)

D22706	33	ccxliv 44	Rubbish
D22709	34	ccxliv 47	Rubbish
D22721	98	ccxliv 59	Worse
D22732	63	ccxliv 70	Inferior
D22740	21	ccxliv 78	Worse
D22742	26	ccxliv 80	Worse
D22747	68	ccxliv 85	Worse
D22763	15	ccxliv 101	Worse

Third Group (“Subjects of a low order”)

D22688	25	ccxliv 26	Worse
D22700	31	ccxliv 38	Worse
D22705	134	ccxliv 43	Worse
D22722	131	ccxliv 60	Worse
D22731	64	ccxliv 69	Worse

