

Craft and Labor in John Ruskin's Romantic Tradition: The Harbours of England

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*I*n 1855, following the proposition of Ernest Gambart, the shrewd and crafty Belgian publisher and picture dealer, a debilitated John Ruskin made a fleeting but decisive choice by agreeing to write a short essay on ships and marine art to which were appended concise analyses of Turner's twelve drawings of the English ports, which was to be entitled *The Harbours of England*. From a purely stylistic standpoint, *The Harbours* is unique. It argues for the ongoing significance of the Ruskin and Turner relationship and commands attention as a response to England's commercial and military prowess in those years when the imperial and commercial expansion of the nation was at its height. Moreover, in its celebration of the craft of ship-building, the book deals with ideas of community, human collaboration, and manual work, and it seems to follow Ruskin's conviction in *Modern Painters* V that "Government and co-operation are in all things and eternally the laws of life" (7.207).¹ More specifically, this essay examines the ways in which the fundamental questions raised by *The Harbours* – notions of tradition and craft, human activities and collaboration – are grounded on Romantic ideology. It also investigates the complicated relationship between Ruskin's book and the modernity of the Victorian period, and it demonstrates that *The Harbours* is an epitome of its time – an intensive concentrated expression of contemporary sensibility, a polyhedric and highly metaphorical text which 'harbors' ideas crucial to nineteenth-century consciousness that also shape modern concerns.

By the time Ruskin came to write his Introductory essay he had been challenged by an emerging interest in the cultural debates of the nineteenth century. The 1850s were certainly a decade in which he achieved different degrees of refinement, sophistication, and success, both in style and content. In these years, his sensitivity toward social problems increased. From 1854 to 1858 he undertook classes at the Working Men's College, an organization founded by F.D. Maurice, guide of the Christian Socialist movement whose principal aim was to enlarge the workman's mental and spiritual horizons and to develop his perceptions in the hope that a better existence would result. The "condition of England" question also became a focus of concern in his writings. Ruskin's principal task was to bring greater harmony and understanding to the master-workman relationship: this is why he was one of the most powerful and indignant voices of the Victorian era. The grief he recognized in society was expressed in his writing.

The 1850s were years that witnessed the growth of iron and steel ships and the craft of shipbuilding became one of the most common occupations of the time.² Steam engines with eventually the triple compound engine and the screw to replace the paddle were the elements of the new age. The Crimean War signalled the arrival of the iron ship, screw-powered for commercial carriage, which also dramatically demonstrated the superiority of the iron-clad in warfare. The end of the wooden hull was in sight. Furthermore, the virtuoso of construction, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who represented for Ruskin "the ills of technical virtuosity,"³ had conceived the *Great Western* steamship as an Atlantic extension of the Great Western Railway; it was soon followed by the legendary *Great Eastern*. The steamships were becoming the élite of the sea. These events significantly affected Ruskin: he did not close his eyes to progress, but Victorian changes appeared problematic to him in their effect on society's collective spiritual, moral, and intellectual development. Christopher Thorpe discusses Ruskin's "most vociferous and unflinching" convictions of the "cultural bleakness of modernity,"⁴ to the extent that Ruskin wanted to re-

turn to a Romantic notion of community grounded on a co-operative interaction with nature – to the story of a Paradise lost and how it might be regained. *The Harbours* is a response to the traditional world of ship building and human craftsmanship.

As numerous commentators have pointed out, Ruskin's notion of the past was grounded on the aesthetics of Romanticism.⁵ A great deal of *The Harbours* attests to this grounding, and Ruskin seeks to promote principles of tradition, "simple work," and the "work of human hands" (13.13-14). His representation of ships draws on his fascination with the organic, the natural, the communal and the pastoral; *The Harbours* can therefore be seen as an example of Romantic modes of representation. Reflecting on Ruskin's thinking, Eileen Boris in *Ruskin, Morris and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (1986) claims that "through the practice of craftsmanship, [Ruskin] hoped to reunite art and labor, mental effort and manual achievement, work and play" so that he was one of the few able to reconcile "the Romantic's reverence for nature, truth and morality"⁶ with the craftsman ideal. This approach shapes our understanding of *The Harbours*. Moreover, Boris is not the only one who sees a relation between the Romantic notion of labor and Ruskin's ideas. Similarly, Richard Sennett sees "Ruskin's craftsman" as a "Romantic figure,"⁷ so that there is an association between ideas of craftsmanship and the Romantic notion of laborers in Ruskin's works. Romanticism and the ethic of work are in his mind indissolubly linked: both lie at the heart of his aesthetics and are a model of inspiration for his art and writing.

Romanticism was characterized by a general rejection of the disillusionment, mechanization, and artificiality of the modern industrialized, urban world. Ruskin's commendation of the freedom of the laborer's imagination is part of his Romantic legacy. He encourages the workman to respond as an individual to the various details of the natural world by saying that "we might sometimes see vessels introduced by the noblest workmen, and treated by them with as much delight as they would show in scattering luster over an embroidered dress, or

knitting the links of a coat of mail" (13.30). We can recognize in Ruskin's thinking about the manufacturing and handcrafting of boats a relation to Blake's and Wordsworth's notions of spontaneity.⁸ Saree Makdisi has demonstrated that both imagination and spontaneity are central to Blake's art and writing, arguing that his work is comparable to that of a "skilled craftsman."⁹ Notably, Blake tended to construct a coherent argument on the importance of craftsmanship, and as David Simpson comments, "he indeed made a big case for [...] (imagination) against (rational) inspiration."¹⁰ The poet's notion of naturalness, which is particularly explored in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), is reflected in Ruskin's views on the spontaneity of art in opposition to the constraints of the intellectual faculties. This diversity is an important aspect of *The Harbours*. Ruskin observes the activities of the mariners and applauds the efficiency of their work in a manner reminiscent of Blake.

There is evidence that Ruskin in his early years responded to Blake's writing with enthusiasm: in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *Ariadne Florentina*, for example, he elevates Blake to a status comparable with his beloved Turner (8.256n), and in the *Eagle's Nest* Blake's poetry is referred to as "the words of a great and wise mind ... sometimes giving forth in fiery aphorism some of the most precious words of existing literature" (22.138). Something else that Ruskin admired and inherited from Blake is his concern for society. Blake reacted fervently to the ways in which the Church and State conspired to restrict the lives of individuals. His prophetic poems such as *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, for example, reveal this rhetorical strategy at work. Blake suggests to his readers that a radical transformation of the nation's social views must take place in order to eliminate, as Robert Ryan puts it, "the exploitation of the poor, the degradation of labour, the subordination of women, the abridgment of political liberty, the repression of sexual energy."¹¹ Despite their different political views, Ruskin, like Blake, highlighted the plight of the worker and denounced British society as being based

on a greed that created misery in inverse proportion. He wanted to improve the social order through education and the development of the individual. *The Harbours* turns increasingly to complex and personal exploration of the connection of cultural, social, and moral issues in which mariners endeavor to establish themselves in the natural and communal world of wooden ships. Thus, Ruskin championed ideals inherent in Romanticism and used them as a foundation in his writing on social theory.

Ruskin's fascination with Romantic poetry is also evident from the *Athenaeum's* generous tribute to *The Harbours*, which declares that "since Byron's 'Address to the Ocean,' a more beautiful poem on the sea has not been written than Mr. Ruskin's preliminary chapter." The book also demonstrates the continuity between those images of spontaneity that recur in Romantic poetry and ideas of nationalism and patriotism which had taken root in Romantic ideology. It is only in this completeness that *The Harbours* can be fully appreciated as "worthy of the nation of Blake and Nelson, of Drake and Howe, and true island's hearts will beat quicker as they read" (13.xxi). With thoughtful accuracy, the *Athenaeum* had prophesied the fate of the book, remarking on the thematic complexity of an essay representative of the anxieties and contradictions of its age. Within these shifting positions, Ruskin suggests a series of possibilities for his writing as traditional and conservative on the one hand, and based on contemporary and patriotic anxieties on the other. There is little doubt, therefore, that Ruskin's fascination with the "Ship of the Line," for many years the largest wooden warship in the world, which he defines as "the most honourable thing that man, [...] has ever produced" (13.28) – metaphorically embodies an achievement in labor and exemplifies the efforts accomplished by Britain, a maritime nation that was at that time ruling the waves (as Venice had previously) in its unique power at Sea.¹² As such, the "Ship" becomes for Ruskin strongly representative of the national identity of England and of specifically English virtues. Ruskin concludes his

views on the great nautical achievements of the nineteenth century by thus firmly stating:

Considering, then, our shipping, under the three principal types of fishing-boat, collier, and ship of the line, as the great glory of this age; and the “New Forest” of mast and yard that follows the winding of the Thames, [...]; it has always been a matter of serious thought to me how far this chiefly substantial thing done by the nation ought to be represented by the art of the nation. (13.28-29)

Although the author considers the three kinds of boats as “the glory” of the time, he is principally concerned with their representation in art, and *The Harbours* remains a “singularly interesting essay on the painting of sea and ships” (7.lviii). Ruskin is asking “great artists” to transmit to the new generations, through artistic representations of wooden boats, the power gained by their country at war. As a book, *The Harbours* expresses concern for art in the nineteenth century but, more deeply, for Turner – Ruskin’s greatest Romantic hero. Turner’s two paintings of *The Battle of Trafalgar* and the *Fighting Téméraire* (Ruskin’s *Old Téméraire*), which the author mentions in passing in *The Harbours*, are judged by him as “among the most valuable” paintings that “[Turner] ever produced” where “the shipping is thoroughly principal, and studied from existing ships” (13.46-47). It seems as if Ruskin’s writing and Turner’s art are the only ways in which traditions can be made secure and permanent, and the teaching of *The Harbours* therefore seeks to increase knowledge and to communicate it to posterity.

At the beginning of his Introductory chapter, for example, Ruskin wonders about the bow of a boat, which, though small if compared to the magnificence of the boat itself, becomes an emblem of perfection. Ruskin has borrowed the notion of Romantic inspiration. The Romantics tended to live for the moment, celebrate individual glory, make grand gestures, and some of them believed that man could achieve some form of perfection, at least in individuality and uniqueness. The idea of perfection, which frequently recurs in the text – “I know nothing else which is

perfect but that [...] no other work of human hands ever gained so much" (13.13) – indicates the accomplishment of man's handiwork and enhances the sense of the magnificence of the boat and its distinctive manual construction. This association between "perfection" and "human hands" was to play an increasingly important role in Ruskin's writing and critical agenda. The frequent reiteration of expressions such as "hands" and "human hands" emphasizes Ruskin's concern with human craftsmanship and the naturalness of the final product, so that we can see that he is interested not only in tradition but also in the ultimate result of ship building. The idea of perfection attributed to the creation of the boat runs through most of the text.

In *The Harbours* Ruskin associates the idea of faultlessness with "strangeness": when Ruskin writes that "there is an infinite strangeness in the perfection of the thing" (13.14), his words remind us of the terms "Savageness" and "Grotesqueness" (10.184) that appear for the first time in "The Nature of Gothic" (1853), where Ruskin had already argued that "no good work whatever can be perfect, and *the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art*" (10.202). The distinction between "perfection" and "imperfection" has clear affinities with the way in which Ruskin viewed craftsmanship in the art of shipbuilding. The reference to "strangeness" makes it clear that we are being presented with Ruskin's idea of manufacture as the making of anything completely uninfluenced by intellectual faculties. Ruskin values Gothic architecture exactly because it admits such imperfection; in *The Harbours* he similarly celebrates the "architecture of the sea" (13.24) of ships and boats and rewards the flowering of human imagination.

Ruskin here gives freedom to the workman's creativity, encouraging the inaccurate marks of hands that cut rough stones. "Work" and "art" as discussed in "The Nature of Gothic" are thus virtually synonymous and remain so in *The Harbours*. Ruskin believed that individual craftsmen produced the most beautiful and unique work if given liberty to design. There is a Romantic element to his commentary on the imagination, in which defending the creativity of the workers can be read as an attempt

at exploring nature through their eyes. This recurrent ambiguity between (im)perfection and nobleness is, however, only one of the essay's many elusive qualities. Thus, the "strange perfection" of the thing accomplished not only refers to a "grossly unskilful" work (10.202) but can also be read as "foreign," "alien," "unfamiliar," "unknown" on the one hand, and "peculiar," "surprising," "unexpected" on the other. Ruskin uses the concept of imperfection and freedom to explain the roughness, energy, and variety of Gothic. The idea of the nobility of imperfection in production was fundamental to early twentieth-century understandings and interpretations of Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic," and *The Harbours* likewise defends the human dignity of the laborer and celebrates the nobility of unrefined objects manufactured by the skill of humans rather than machines.

In "The Nature of Gothic," by stating "it is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labour can be made happy" (10.201), Ruskin consolidates the idea that Gothic art and architecture convey the humble, earnest, and sincere work of the builders, as expressive of their free and independent will. The same principle similarly occurs in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), where Ruskin is preoccupied with the construction of the building as well as the moral condition of the workman, whose labor "will always give a building dignity, even though there be some abruptness or awkwardness in the resulting arrangements" (8.48). As we have seen, Ruskin also took this approach in other books. As early as *Pre-Raphaelitism* (1851) he firmly states that "[God] intends every man to be happy in his work" (12.341); and as late as *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (1871-84) he declares "you are to do good work, whether you live or die" (27.129).¹³ In a similar way, *Modern Painters* (1843-60), *Crown of the Wild Olive* (1866), *Time and Tide* (1867), and *Munera Pulveris* (1872) all attest to Ruskin's engagement with social criticism. *Unto This Last* (1862) in particular is a cry of anger against unjust and inhuman conditions of labor. These works established Ruskin's social

commitment as he communicated his moral and communal vision of sincere labor.

Similarly, in *The Harbours* Ruskin promotes analogous principles of craftsmanship and natural product so that the idea of the boat's perfection runs through most of the text. In his assertion that "the boat's bow is naively perfect: complete without an effort" (13.14), one feels that the author's attitude toward craftsmanship and manufacturing are closely associated with the natural world of which they form a part. Moreover, Ruskin has subjected the bow of the boat to minute examination:

you may magnify it or decorate as you will: you do not add to the wonder of it. Lengthen it into hatchet-like edge of iron – strengthen it with complex tracery of ribs of oak, – carve it and gild it till a column of light moves beneath it on the sea, – you have made no more of it than it was at first. (13.13)

By suggesting that the underlying design is unaffected by various other kinds of adornment, Ruskin tells us that although the artisan works to refine the bow's natural beauty, he can do little to make it more perfect. In other words, the qualities Ruskin admired in handicraft took their forms from nature, as

there is not, except the very loveliest creatures of the living world, anything in nature so absolutely notable, bewitching, and, according to its means and measure, heart-occupying, as a well-handled ship under sail in a stormy day. Any ship, from lowest to proudest, has due place in that architecture of the sea; beautiful, not so much in this or that piece of it, as in the unity of all [...]. (13.24)

Ruskin links nature and ship-building, and he views art, morality, and the natural world as unified. In particular the art of ship-building according to him takes inspiration from nature. The craftsmen have been able to create something "beautiful" while bending the planks of the vessel "into ... mysterious, ever-changing curves" "on its delicate rounding" (13.14),

which reflects the fluidity of the sea and its curvatures. Ruskin expresses the intimate affection that the craftsmen put into their creations; his style recreates the natural maritime world along with the boat's design. *The Harbours*, in other words, roars and foams with art, poetry, and nature.

In *The Two Paths* (1859), Ruskin recapitulates these ideas when he insists that manufacture is

the making of anything by hands directly or indirectly
with or without the help of instruments or machines.
Anything proceeding from the hands of man is manufacture;
but it must have proceeded from his hand only, acting
mechanically, and uninfluenced at the moment by direct
intelligence. (16.294)

Throughout this definition, Ruskin seeks to promote the same principles of instinct and spontaneity that he had already brought forth in his text of 1856. His understanding of the world owes much to the Romantics' "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings": Ruskin's prose, like Wordsworth's, Burns's, Bloomfield's, and Clare's poetry, portrays man in his daily life and occupations as part of nature. Ruskin depicts people from humble life because, being nearer to nature than others, they are on the whole more direct in their expression of passion – and it is for this direct expression of passion that he values their modest and harmonious activities. Specific Wordsworthian echoes occur in Ruskin's work and mark a link with what Keith Hanley defines as "Ruskin and Romantic discourses of tradition."¹⁴ The success of Wordsworth's rural poems "The Ruined Cottage" (1797-98), "Michael" (1800), *Peter Bell* (1819) (a poem that Ruskin discusses in *The Harbours*) establishes, according to Hanley, a preoccupation with "the rift between agrarian and industrial society,"¹⁵

Ruskin's defense of the "agrarian" and ordered domain that accompanies *The Harbours'* references to human co-operation and craftsmanship imply a rejection of the effects of industrialization. The references to different kinds of ships in *The Harbours* (old wooden boats, warships, fishing boats, merchant brigs, coasters) express the importance to him of

collaborative achievement, a *topos* which echoes mid-Victorian views of unity and co-operation. Similarly, the work of their crews, whose "limbs slack, like the ropes above them, entangled as they are in those inextricable meshes about the patched knots and ill-reefed sable sail" (13.27), inspire something like an elegy to a physical, labor-intensive manual experience, and *The Harbours*, in its celebration of community, recalls the occupations of its time, a period when most of the mid-Victorian laborers were manual workers engaged in manufacturing and handcrafting trades. Here is a particularly interesting meditation on the collaborative activities of the mariners, who are almost organically assimilated to their boats:

What a majestic sense of service in all that languor! the rest of human limbs and hearts, at utter need, not in sweet meadows or soft air, but in harbour slime and biting fog; so drawing their breath once more, to go out again, without lament, from between the two skeletons of pier-heads, vocal with wash of under wave, into the grey troughs of tumbling brine; there, as they can, with slacked rope, and patched sail, and leaky hull, again to roll and stagger far away amidst the wind and salt sleet, from dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn, winning day by day their daily bread; and for last reward, when their old hands, on some winter night, lose feeling along the frozen ropes, and their old eyes miss mark of the lighthouse quenched in foam, the so-long impossible Rest, that shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more,¹⁶ – their eyes and mouths filled with the brown sea-sand.
(13.27)

By recalling an age-old *topos*, Ruskin's words suggest a link between sea-journeys and the course of human life: old sailors sail to heaven through virtuous work. The idea of work is realistically emphasized by the mariners' repetitive actions, which regularly take place "from dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn." The continuity of their behavior is

also increased by the phrases “old hands” and “old eyes,” which both stress the passing of time and the energy spent in labor. The pleasure in handiwork is transmitted by the idea of “reward” and completion. Ruskin believed that the crew must have a sense of success in its work, which must be well and fruitfully done. Any discussion and analysis of his beliefs about human activities must be set against the background of this passage in order to remind us that its constant ingredient is collaboration. Peter Anthony has demonstrated that Ruskin has “achieved the most subtle and sensitive understanding of the meaning of work” by focusing especially on its “complexities and contradictions, the pleasure and pain of the human condition.”¹⁷ *The Harbours* thereby moves beyond a simple analysis of labor so that people’s lives become the dominant theme.

When Ruskin writes of English harbours, he sees in his mind’s eye the lives of the mariners; he understands their activities and their relationship with the sea. The port, as one of Turner’s illustrations, becomes a safe abode, the protected land where ships and boats can shelter: it ‘harbors’ the mariners’ preoccupations but also diffuses the anxieties of the entire age. Hanley reminds us that Ruskin’s fascination with “the human presence should be seen as part of the landscape”: the sense of productivity and onerous labor that derives from people’s activities is also part of his Romantic tradition.¹⁸ Although the Romantics are often known as “nature poets,” it has long been established that their concerns were primarily humanitarian. Similarly, in *The Harbours* Ruskin seeks to underscore the importance of philanthropy and human rights, and he is concerned with new beginnings and possibilities, particularly the improvement of life for the working classes. Ruskin draws attention to the Wordsworthian idea of “what man has made of man”¹⁹ by using the landscape as his vehicle. In his encounter with Turner’s illustrations of English ports, Ruskin focuses on the working environment of the poor and humble. His humanitarian concerns are at the center of his writing and offer a sympathetic yet realistic portrayal of manual workers and the value of craftsmanship.

Ruskin, therefore, "the great Romantic analyst of craft" as Richard Sennett puts it, "made of the craftsman's labours in his own age a blazon of resistance."²⁰ In *The Harbours* he relates tradition and progress in his association of traditional with more progressive boats. He celebrates human effort while objecting to the wholesale use of machinery, which brings forth "a Romantic critique of industrialism by analysing the relation of art to labor and the relation of both to the human soul."²¹ Ruskin seeks a palliative for modern life, and *The Harbours* proposes an alternative to the mechanized era. The natural world he depicts resembles those "incidents and situations from common life" that Wordsworth describes in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). Ruskin recalls, for instance, Wordsworth's "Prologue" to *Peter Bell*, who "imagine[s] no other way of visiting the stars than in a boat 'no bigger than the crescent moon'" (13.16), or to Shelley's "tiny vessel" that was "run down by a felucca" and caused the young poet's death while sailing the Mediterranean (13.16). It is clear that Ruskin felt the need to dwell on Romantic precedents in his descriptions of boats: small wooden ships particularly intrigued Ruskin since they represented traditional construction.

Hence Ruskin's admiration for tradition shapes most of *The Harbours*' framework. Claus Uhlig describes Ruskin's nostalgia for the past as a "striking anticipation of Bakhtin's principle of 'historical inversion,' whereby the bygone is enriched at the expense of both the present and the future."²² Ruskin lays the foundations of his art and writing in a pastoral vision of the modern world. Whether it was his fascination for the Hellenic world of mythology in *The Queen of the Air*, or the medieval world of cathedrals and monasteries in *The Seven Lamps*, or the Renaissance world of Venice in *The Stones* or in *St. Mark's*, they all appealed to his Romantic imagination and it is in this framework that his appreciation of the past needs to be understood. Tradition and community in *The Harbours* is transmitted by the image of the boat. His nostalgia for the past can also be associated with his fascination with the notion of organicism, which indicates a world of genuineness and authenticity, akin to Ruskin's Gothic. In *The Harbours*, Ruskin intends the word organic in

its “wholeness” to imply the total operation and participation of the human being. Gill Cockram’s *Ruskin and Social Reform* (2007) endorses the widely-held view that the author’s “organic approach to society” “was based upon fellowship, and the higher collectivist principles necessary to the improvement of the quality of life.”²³ *The Harbours* describes the organic world of boat-making animated by the principle of love and friendship, which perhaps recalls the Pantisocratic community founded in 1794 by Coleridge and Southey, and which is also akin to much of the poetry of the time. The works of Wordsworth, Coleridge’s conversational poems, Keats’s “Hymn to Pan” and *Endymion*, and most of John Clare’s poetry indicate the extent to which earlier Romantic poetry draws on rural landscapes that might have affected Ruskin’s predilection for “Organicism.” Organic harmony evolved from Romantic origins is a central motif of *The Harbours*.

This is all part of Ruskin’s Romantic reaction against industrialism. Ruskin objected to the wholesale use of machinery, which he saw as destroying the pleasure of human labor. His ideas about collaboration and the sense of community inspired the foundation of the Guild of St. George, Ruskin’s utopian (and organic) experiment of the 1870s that promoted an agrarian quest for a simple, natural, and moral life. While re-evoking the Romantic notion of spontaneity, Ruskin’s ideal division of society into guilds was also based on his sense of organic forms. According to Ruskin, the companions of St. George were meant to earn “their daily bread by their own labour” (17.396-97) and to cultivate the body for the happiness of the mind and spirit. These principles conform to the moral code of Christianity and connect Ruskin’s literary interests with the cultural and spiritual world at large.

For Ruskin the natural world is a reflection of God’s creation. In the second volume of *Modern Painters* he defines the “Typical” or “Vital Beauty of Things” (4.146-47) that can help human beings to renew their sight and that has been adversely affected by the utilitarian view of a mechanized industrial society. Ruskin urged his readers to “see” and to rediscover the original “Innocence of the Eye” (15.27n). Ruskin’s thinking

parallels the thought of Wordsworth in its emphasis on childish perceptions. In *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* (1815), Wordsworth remembers the childish perception in which the life of the mind is the only reality and in which outward things fall away and seem to vanish into immateriality. Similarly, Ruskin addresses the poet's views within the imagined landscapes of his own mind and envisages a child-like innocence that may be consciously recaptured by human beings. The idea of the "Innocence of the Eye" was a common one during both the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Hartley tended to present sense perceptions through ocular metaphors and to describe the operations of the mind in terms of visual phenomena. The decade in which *Modern Painters I* (1843) was written, for example, saw the publication of Goethe's critique of Newton's *Opticks* (1704) in *Farbenlehre* (1810).²⁴ The repeated emphasis in Goethe's work on sight and the ambiguities of seeing links Ruskin with empirical theories of perception. In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin in a visionary Blakean tone firmly states: "the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way.... To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion, – all in one" (5.333). This passage articulates a new kind of observer who is capable of a purified subjective vision, a sight from within, a holy, sacred vision – of one who can really see.

In *The Harbours* Ruskin uses biblical allusions to suggest a joyful setting in the organic, natural world of the making of boats. The relationship between humans, their environment, and the religious dimension of life was dear to Ruskin. His belief in the divinity of nature is part of his Romantic legacy, and Clive Wilmer is right when he states that Ruskin "could not escape the implications of Biblical teaching on questions of money, labour, food and the status of the poor."²⁵ In *The Harbours*, Ruskin's tone and language are frequently determined by and saturated with theological references. His approach was motivated by a desire to perceive an almighty presence in the world. We have already seen how he refers to mariners who "shall

hunger no more, neither thirst any more" (13.27), a line taken from Revelation.²⁶ Ruskin conceives the natural world and the people living in it as enlightened by God's teaching in the Bible. In *The Harbours* Ruskin was describing a kind of earthly Paradise: the boat and each of its planks acquire a special meaning from the enthusiasm of the artisan for his creation and for the spiritual connotations it often acquires. Through his effective metaphor, the craftsmen's lives are intertwined with the planks of the boat, "and every plank thenceforward is a Fate, and has men's lives wreathed in the knots of it, as the cloth-yard shaft had their deaths in its plumes" (13.14). John Hughes in *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism* (2007), discusses the moral teleological dimension that links art, social criticism, and nature throughout Ruskin's work.²⁷ This is very much the language of *The Harbours*. But there is something more. Ruskin touches the boat's "spirit": the relationship between the artisan's labor and the product he creates is symbiotic as he describes how a simple and unelaborated raft changes into a proper boat after cooperation in handiwork:

What had once been a mere raft, with rows of formal benches, pushed along by laborious flap of oars, and with infinite fluttering of flags and swelling of poops above, gradually began to lean more heavily into the deep water, to sustain a gloomy weight of guns, to draw back its spider-like feebleness of limb, and open its bosom to the wind, and finally darkened down from all its painted vanities into the long, low hull, familiar with the overflying foam. (13.24)

Such a refined and realistic passage reinforces the idea that the qualities Ruskin admired in ship-building took their forms from nature, and more specifically Romantic nature. Gill Cockram observes that Ruskin's interpretation of organicism owed nothing to Social Darwinism but is strongly embedded in the Romantic tradition: whether in nature, art, science, or society, for Ruskin, all things are seen in relation

to each other and given life by a unifying spirit; nothing can survive in isolation.²⁸

The mutuality of work is suggested when Ruskin declares that "the nails that fasten together the planks of the boat's bow are the rivets of the fellowship of the world" whose iron "leads love round the earth" (13.14). The soul of brotherhood is the symbolic meaning of the boat, which intensifies line after line and "gain[s] continually in grace, strength, audacity, and beauty, until at last it has reached such a pitch of all these" (13.24). In sum, Ruskin's ship embodies maritime laws, the code of honor, and all the values of community from which *The Harbours* draws inspiration. Craftsmanship is more than technical practice: the craftsmen's habits raise ethical questions about how we anchor ourselves in the world around us.

In conclusion, Ruskin's *The Harbours* is a highly suggestive metaphor: the text is an ideological sanctuary for old, handmade wooden ships, as well as a place of key concerns of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The general framework of the book is informed by a complex set of sociological, historical, and religious ideas. The notions of tradition and organicism are part of the intellectual legacy that Ruskin inherited from Romanticism, and the guiding principle of the Introductory essay combines human enterprise with glad submission to the Divine Law, which is a keynote to most of Ruskin's writings, as the author increasingly doubted the sustainability of progress and confirmed that "what is chiefly needed today is the desire for a Rich Life by Joyful Human Labour" (17.105).

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Notes

¹ Quotations from Ruskin's published works are taken from the Library Edition, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12). References are given by volume and page number: (13.13).

² See Sydney G. Checkland, *The Rise of Industrial Society in Eng-*

land 1815-1885 (London: Longman, 1982). The most common professions in Mid-Victorian England concerned above all cotton and wool manufacturing and handicraft trades: from domestic service to agricultural work, textiles, stitching and washing. The most relevant craft skills of the period were printing, engineering, and shipbuilding. All the workers were divided into conflicting interest groups (*trades*), separated by income, residence, religion, ethnic origin, and occupation. See also K. Theodore Hoppen, *Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-1886* (Oxford UP, 1998).

³ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (Yale UP, 2008), 117.

⁴ Christopher Thorpe, "Imagining Italy and the Italians in the 'Age of Machinery': Spectres of Industrial Modernity in the Italianate Visions of John Ruskin and D.H. Lawrence," *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 9 (2008), 90.

⁵ See in particular, Gill Cockram, "The Interpretation of History in Ruskin's Social Thought," *Ruskin Review and Bulletin*, vol. 5, No. 2 (Autumn 2009), 5-15; Clive Wilmer, ed., "Introduction," *Unto This Last and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 rpt. 1997), 8ff.

⁶ Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Temple UP, 1986), 3-4.

⁷ Sennett, 115.

⁸ For further reference to Blake's notion of spontaneity against science see T.S. Eliot, "Blake," *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London; New York: Methuen, 1920, rpt. 1986), 151-58.

⁹ Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790's* (U of Chicago P, 2002), 83.

¹⁰ David Simpson, "Blake and Romanticism," *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge UP, 2003), 176.

¹¹ Robert Ryan, "Blake and Religion," *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, 150.

¹² In the opening lines of *The Stones of Venice* (9.17), and throughout that book, Ruskin also uses the example of Venice as a warning: Venice lost her strength and power and he presages that England, if she con-

tinues to follow the paths of self-interest and materialism, may suffer the same fate. For further references between the relationship of England and Venice, see Carmen Casaliggi, "From Venice to England: Tradition, Modernity and Commerce in *The Stones* and *The Harbours*," *Ruskin, Venice and 19th Century Cultural Travel*, ed. Keith Hanley and Emma Sdegno (U of Ca' Foscari P, 2011), 381-98.

¹³ See Francis O'Gorman, "'Do Good Work Whether You Live or Die': *Fors Clavigera*, Usefulness, and the Crisis of the Commune," *Late Ruskin: New Contexts*, ed. Francis O'Gorman (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 81-95.

¹⁴ Keith Hanley, "The Stains of Time: Ruskin and Romantic discourses of tradition," *The Lamp of Memory: Ruskin, Tradition and Architecture*, ed. Michael Wheeler and Nigel Whiteley (Manchester UP, 1992), 98-122.

¹⁵ Hanley, 105.

¹⁶ Cook and Wedderburn tell us that this line has been quoted from Revelation VII.16.

¹⁷ Peter Anthony, *John Ruskin's Labour: A Study of Ruskin's Social Theory* (Cambridge UP, 1983), 3.

¹⁸ Hanley, 99.

¹⁹ *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Chatham: Wordsworth, 1994), 482.

²⁰ Sennett, 84.

²¹ Boris, 4.

²² Claus Uhlig, "Nostalgia for Organicism. Art and Society in Ruskin and Pater," *John Ruskin. Werk und Wirkung*, ed. Werner Oechslin (Zürich: gta Verlag; Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2002), 108.

²³ Gill Cockram, *Ruskin and Social Reform: Ethics and Economics in the Victorian Age* (London: I.B. Tauris), 113.

²⁴ The full title of Goethe's text is *Materialien zur Geschichte der Farbenlehre. Zur Farbenlehre* (1808-10). For the English translation see Johann W. von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, tr. Charles Lock Eastlake (MIT Press, 1982).

²⁵ Wilmer, "Introduction," 22.

²⁶ Quotations from the Bible are taken from the Cambridge University Press Pitt Previer Edition of the Authorized Version of the Bible.

²⁷ John Hughes, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 97-133.

²⁸ Cockram, 9.

