

Of Trees and Men: The Law of Help in Modern Painters V

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By little twigs the most important fabric on the face of the earth was woven [...] The leaves of the forest are ceaseless toilers; all their existence long they are spinners, and weavers, and miners; and the timber of our largest trees displays the warp and woof of the multiple threads which the ever-working leaves have elaborated.¹

*I*n April 1861, Ruskin gave a prestigious lecture at the Royal Institution in London in order “to point out the connection between the laws of nature and those of art” (7.467). As previous speakers had lectured on weighty topics, the audience may have been surprised that Ruskin chose to speak “On Tree Twigs,” but for Ruskin the “ever-working leaves” had assumed such significance that it is no easy task to trace the many ways in which their “warp and woof” had become deeply interwoven into the “multiple threads” of his own work. A year earlier, *Modern Painters V* had opened with “Of Leaf Beauty,” a study of tree growth that represents some of the least critically-analyzed sections of Ruskin’s five-volume work of art criticism. Ten botanical chapters which include only two cursory discussions of art may seem an unrewarding diversion by “the author of *Modern Painters*,” but while later chapters in the volume have attracted more attention, the importance of Ruskin’s tree studies as a means of understanding the relationship between science, art, and politics in his work has largely remained unexplored, and the status of “Of Leaf Beauty” as an

emblematic moment in the development of Ruskin's emerging social vision has been neglected.

That a significant organic politics was emerging at this time is also clearly evident in "The Law of Help," a later chapter in *Modern Painters V* in which Ruskin admitted that composition, a subject he had previously regarded as "too great and wonderful" to contemplate, had become "the most important part" of his subject (7.204, 203). Ruskin urged readers "to dwell a little on this word 'Help'" for "it is a grave one" (7.205), and argued that an organic law of compositional creativity was universally applicable. As an extended practical exemplar of the Law of Help, "Of Leaf Beauty" intimated that perfected forms of natural and social composition were identical, and that solutions to aesthetic and social problems were to be discovered in environment. The textual adjacency of "The Law of Help" and "Of Leaf Beauty" reflect their parallel concerns, and reveal the crucial role of environment, not merely as a means to articulate social theory, but also to formulate it. "Of Leaf Beauty" described physical composition through the harmonious generational work of leaf builders. Later that year, Ruskin's essays on political economy in *The Cornhill Magazine*, gathered together as *Unto This Last* in 1862, critiqued the composition of unharmonious societies. In subsequent years, he sought to compose an ideal social order via works like *Munera Pulveris* (1863), *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866), and *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (1871-84, 5 vols.); and through the Guild of St. George, a utopian challenge to liberal industrial modernity in the proposed form of self-sufficient, environmentally-sustainable communities. Sheila Emerson finds Ruskin "able to move back and forth between the natural world, pictures and writing by virtue of inherited convictions that the physical creation and art are both inherently languages" (150). I will suggest that, for Ruskin, nature, art, architecture, society, and writing shared essentially the same modes of organization and the same status as creative processes. By examining connections between art, society, and environment in Ruskin's work, this article will reveal that trees played a key role in Ruskin's attempts to produce a universal model of creative composition that could mediate diverse concerns.

I wish to go further, however, and suggest that the organic model articulated in "Of Leaf Beauty" reflected an attempt to synthesize the key influences on the formation of his natural history – Evangelicalism, Romanticism, Natural Theology, and modern science – but that such a synthesis was ultimately unsustainable. Ruskin's environmental vision prior to 1860 was characterized by a dual impulse, as he reached, on the one hand, towards a hierarchical organicism, and, on the other, toward a proto-ecological concept of interdependent mutualism. The tensions evident in this divided vision resulted in an unresolved war at the heart of everything Ruskin attempted to do, a struggle played out far beyond natural history and that continued to operate in his work, affecting his entire epistemology after 1860. Beginning with "The Law of Help" and "Of Leaf Beauty," texts that exemplify Ruskin's organic conundrum, I will argue that they also yield a clear model of compositional creativity that he sought to apply across the whole range of his concerns. In turning to *Unto This Last*, I demonstrate the ways in which the organic ideal of the Law of Help and "Of Leaf Beauty" informed the more directly social writings of the post-1860 period, but in closing I will suggest that in practice Ruskin was unable to translate the harmonious tree community celebrated in "Of Leaf Beauty" into human social politics, and that the divided impulse of Ruskin's natural history was ultimately inscribed in the polity of the Guild of St. George.

I. "The highest and first law of the universe"

In "The Law of Help," Ruskin defined aesthetic composition as "the help of everything in the picture by everything else." If even one element of a well-composed painting were removed, the rest became "helpless and valueless" (7.205). This statement of absolute interdependence brings comparisons with natural systems to mind, and nature, rather than art, provided the initial examples by which Ruskin described his crucial law. Ostensibly a chapter on art, "The Law of Help" was in fact preoccupied with fundamental principles of order, and collapsed distinctions between aesthetics and organization. As J.C. Sherburne argues, "the organic basis" (8)

of Ruskin's definition of composition is demonstrated by the way that he began his survey with environment, describing the differing degrees to which parts of nature were able to compose themselves helpfully. Atoms of "clouds, or stones [...] cohere to each other, or consist with each other, but they do not help each other," so that "removal of one part [...] does not injure the rest." In plants, however, such a removal might lead to injury, and occasionally to death. The co-dependency of plant organs became more marked in animals, so that "we may take away the branch of a tree without much harm to it; but not the animal's limb" (7.205). For Joseph Bizup, "The Law of Help" expressed an organic anti-materialism in which Ruskin valorized "closed" organic bodies that are bound by laws of interdependence, and that represent a contained system in their individual, internal organization and, in turn, by their placement within an environmental system. By contrast, materialistic systems (such as railways and telegraphs) were uncontained and ever-extending, acting "as a destructive metallic simulacrum that constricts and threatens to supplant the organic body of nature" (Bizup 86). Emphasizing the dynamic mutuality of natural forms, and the dangers inherent in meddling with organic systems, Ruskin insisted that a condition of the Law of Help was that "intensity of life is also intensity of helpfulness" or a "completeness of depending of each part on all the rest." Because "the ceasing of this help is what we call corruption," Ruskin concluded that "the more intense the life has been, the more terrible is its corruption" (7.205) and established a scale of decay:

The decomposition of a crystal is not necessarily impure at all. The fermentation of a wholesome liquid begins to admit the idea slightly; the decay of leaves yet more; of flowers, more; of animals, with greater painfulness and terribleness in exact proportion to their original vitality; and the foulest of all corruption is that of the body of man. (7.205-6)

Corresponding to this scale of decay was a scale of creative composition in which Ruskin simultaneously celebrated two opposing visions of nature: on the one hand, he forwarded a model of nature, drawn from scriptural anthro-

pocentrism, offering a hierarchy descending from *Homo sapiens*, through other animals, flowers, and leaves, down to crystals and clouds. On the other, he endorsed a mutualistic principle that, in seeing every part of a closed organic system as vital to its harmonious functionality, nodded to a biodynamic understanding of systematic interdependence. As I shall argue later, tensions arising from these competing ways of conceiving environmental order played out repeatedly in Ruskin's natural history and politics.

That social concerns underlay "The Law of Help" became quickly evident in a key passage in which Ruskin asked readers to understand its operations by observing "an ounce or two of the blackest slime of a beaten footpath on a rainy day, near a large manufacturing town" (7.207). Examining its component parts – clay, soot, sand, and water – Ruskin tested the ability of nature and humanity to compose from them. Humanity had combined the elements so that they were "at helpless war with each other," destroying "reciprocally each other's nature and power" and creating an "absolute type of impurity." By placing humanity here at the nadir of the scale of corruption he had earlier erected, Ruskin complicated and undermined his own anthropocentric urges, while permitting the ecological elements of his reading to flourish. If nature were permitted to "follow its own instinct of unity," he insisted, the results would be different:

Let the clay begin. Ridding itself of all foreign substance, it gradually becomes a white earth, already very beautiful; and fit, with help of congealing fire, to be made into finest porcelain [...] Leave it still quiet [...] and it becomes not only white, but clear; not only clear, but hard; not only clear and hard, but so set that it can deal with light in a wonderful way, and gather out of it the loveliest blue rays only, refusing the rest. We call it then a sapphire. (7.207)

If the sand were left in peace, it too "becomes, first, a white earth," and then a "clear and hard" substance that "arranges itself in mysterious, infinitely fine, parallel lines" and eventually forms an opal. The soot, capable of a yet more remarkable transformation, "cannot make itself white at first," but "tries harder and harder, and comes out clear at last, and the

hardest thing in the world.” Bestowing on the crystalline world a degree of agency, Ruskin argued that from its original blackness, it “obtains in exchange the power of reflecting all the rays of the sun at once in the vividest blaze that any solid thing can shoot,” and becomes a diamond. In this organic paean, the power of crystallization even freezes the water. Linking art, politics, and environment, Ruskin reported that “for the ounce of slime which we had by political economy of competition, we have by political economy of co-operation, a sapphire, an opal, and a diamond, set in the midst of a star of snow” (7.208).

At the heart of all creative endeavour, “Help” represented a universal co-operative principle, so that aesthetic composition, as he had argued three years earlier in *The Elements of Drawing* (1857) was merely “the type, in the arts of mankind, of the Providential government of the world” (15.161-62). In what reads like a trial run of the 1860 text, Ruskin argued there that “composition means, literally and simply, putting several things together so as to make *one* thing out of them; the nature and goodness of which they all have a share in producing.” It was “the essence of composition that everything should be in a determined place, perform an intended part, and act, in that part advantageously for everything that is connected with it” (15.161). The social implications of this were addressed more openly in “The Law of Help”:

A pure or holy state of anything, therefore, is that in which all its parts are helpful or consistent [...] The highest or organic purities are composed of many elements in an entirely helpful state. The highest and first law of the universe – and the other name of life is, therefore, “help.” The other name of death is “separation.” Government and co-operation are in all things and eternally the laws of life. Anarchy and competition, eternally, and in all things, the laws of death (7.207).

Given that Ruskin launched directly into political economy later that year in *The Cornhill* essays, this passage reads like a statement of intent, and should also be interpreted as the culmination of a longer period of reflec-

tion. "The Law of Help," with its blurring of discourses of natural history, aesthetics, and political economy, encapsulated ideas that had been evolving for over a decade.

In "The Nature of Gothic" in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53, 3 vols.), Ruskin sought to discern "a greater or lesser degree of *gothicness* in each building we examine" (10.181) and argued that gothic differed from other architectural styles precisely because it was closer to nature. Anticipating the Law of Help, he insisted that its character was "made up of many mingled ideas, and can consist only in their union." Physical features (vaulted roofs, flying buttresses, pointed arches) were insufficient markers, because gothic emerged when a building contained "all or some of these things, and many other things with them, when they come together so as to have life" (10.182). The organic helpfulness of the myriad elements of gothicness was only achievable in a developing structure, and when "certain mental tendencies of the builders" were "legibly expressed" (10.183) in its stones.

In "The Work of Iron," an 1858 lecture to a Tunbridge Wells audience, Ruskin spoke of the universal power of iron oxide, and in doing so again pre-empted the Law of Help. Arguing that "in a certain sense, and almost a literal one, we may say that iron rusted is Living; but when pure or polished, Dead" (16.376-77), he insisted that "it is not a fault in the iron, but a virtue, to be so fond of getting rusted, for in that condition it fulfils its most important functions in the universe" (16.376). "The main service of this metal," Ruskin informed listeners, was "in making the ground we feed from, and nearly all the substances first needful to our existence." Crucially, iron reached its "most perfect and useful state" of rustiness when it had "breath put into [it]," a breath of life both physical and spiritual that created the basis for organic life. Through a "vital change" and through "permanent unity with the purest air" (16.377) iron oxide created landscapes, soils, and building materials only because of compositional combination. Drawing attention to countless examples of ecological exchanges between iron oxide and the wider environment, Ruskin characterized them in terms of help, showing that through oxidization even the lowliest pebble

was granted animation, and even powers of communication through which it insisted on its own “helpful” place in creation:

I am not earth – I am earth and air in one; part of that blue heaven which you love, and long for, is already in me; it is all my life – without it I should be nothing, and able for nothing; I could not minister to you, nor nourish you – I should be a cruel and helpless thing; but, because there is, according to my need and place in creation, a kind of soul in me, I have become capable of good, and helpful in the circles of vitality (16.378).

Such manifestations of a helpful, dynamic, and purposeful environment are to be found throughout Ruskin’s work of the 1850s. As we shall see in Section IV, the degree to which an animated nature might be endowed with “a kind of soul” was also an issue in *Of Leaf Beauty*.

Further back, in the tree studies, “Of Truth of Vegetation” in *Modern Painters I* (1843), Ruskin celebrated the “full, transparent, boundless intricacy” of nature and the “graceful and flexible disorder of innumerable forms” (3.593, 588) that he found in forests. Because “nature contrives never to repeat herself,” and because “the truths of nature are one eternal change – one infinite variety” (3.542, 145) any investigation of landscape art required that “perhaps the first thing we should look for [...] should be the expression of *infinity*” (3.386-87). As his aesthetic and architectural work proceeded, Ruskin developed the idea that infinite variety was a function of biodynamic organization. The 1843 tree studies described trees as static visual entities depicted in the works of artists, but acknowledged the dynamic processes that led to their existence at such captured pictorial moments. In “Of Leaf Beauty,” this dynamism had become his principal concern. Elizabeth Helsinger sensitively maps the emergence in Ruskin’s work after 1850 of a “central impression of an enormous energy within the landscape” (32), arguing that beauty became expressive of an intense organic energy, “an animating spirit, a living force or power felt in all things.” This spirit, partly inspired by his rejection of Evangelicalism in 1858, led Ruskin toward a proto-ecological recognition of systematic en-

ergy within environment, and led him to consider creativity as a primal, universal force. This "living force of power" "felt in all things" could be drawn upon in the creation of beautiful art, fine buildings, and harmonious societies. Raymond Fitch perceives that in the late 1850s Ruskin discovered "organic form as a mythic paradigm of all vital order" and "an inherent unity of purpose that binds ethical, ecological, and mythical concerns together with the aesthetic" (325, 329). As Ruskin became more interested in the beauty of deeds than of appearances, he began to see trees as a means of articulating a bolder notion of creative order. In turning to the arboreal studies of *Modern Painters V*, one finds a simultaneous preoccupation with system, process, beauty, creativity, composition, and society writ large in a text that powerfully articulates an organic social vision and the infinite reach of "The Law of Help."

II. The Tree Society

"Of Leaf Beauty" should be read, on one level, as an extended examination of "help" in action; and as a striking example of the interpenetration of organic, cultural, and political discourses. Innovative botanical investigations served to answer a "child's question" (7.71) – how a tree grows its trunk. Describing the ontogeny of broadleaved trees, Ruskin drew attention to the manner in which distribution of buds on stems in opposite, alternate, or spiral patterns maximized the exposure of individual leaves to light and acted as a key determinant of tree appearance. An ash, beech, and oak differ not merely because they have different leaves, but because one has opposite buds, one alternate, and the other a fivefold spiralling pattern of development: the shape, attitude, and distribution of branches, and by extension the distinctive appearance of mature trees, was largely due to this seemingly insignificant and little-noted feature. Mathematical rules dictated patterns of bud distribution, but eventual appearance was also affected by environment: loss of leaves to weather, shade, and predation, the site occupied by specific trees, and unique habitat issues faced by trees throughout their lives, meant that while all trees of a species shared fundamental characteristics, a subtle interplay of mathematics and

circumstance ensured that no two were identical and that nature continued to offer “infinite variety.” In investigating botanical literature by august figures including Doctors Link and Lindley, Ruskin found that “the first question which an intelligent child would think of asking about a tree” has not been “fairly put, much less fairly answered” (7.71). Dissatisfied with mainstream botany, Ruskin sought a direct investigative methodology that eschewed preoccupations with nomenclature in favour of a study of plant and environment, and of the wider cultural lessons this might reveal. Noting in the preface that these investigations “cost me much time,” he insisted that “the vegetation question had [...] at all costs, to be made out as best might be” (7.7). The power of arboreal studies lay in shaping readers’ knowledge not merely of trees, but of art, architecture, and society.

Tree growth acted, then, as a vehicle for other discourses, sustaining a series of analogies for social, spiritual, economic, and architectural development.² By living the Law of Help, their organic creativity suggested that success depended upon co-operation. Their tale became a moral journey, a development of self and community, exemplifying what Gillian Beer describes as an organicist emphasis in nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* on “the full entry of individuality into social bonds,” and addressing its concern to conclude with “acceptance of the reduced scale of the individual within society” (110). By showing readers a multiplicity of leaf narratives, Ruskin extended the human-natural metaphor into an investigation of social order. From the beginning, Ruskin played on such connections, defining conifers as warlike “builders with the sword” and broadleaves as nurturing “builders with the shield”. Primarily interested in “the gentlest of the builders” (7.23), Ruskin found in broadleaves a co-operative social principle:

Every leaf has assuredly an infant bud to take care of, laid tenderly, as in a cradle, just where the leaf-stalk forms a safe niche between it and the main stem. The child-bud is thus fondly guarded all summer; but its protecting leaf dies in the autumn; and then the boy-bud is put out to rough winter-schooling, by which he is prepared for personal entrance into public life in the spring (7.25).

This arboreal *Bildungsroman* meant each leaf adopted its old protector's role, nurturing another in an annual cycle of childhood and guardianship.

The apparently limited existence of the leaves still permitted purposeful creativity, for tree growth was "always visibly the result of a volition on the part of the leaf, meeting an external force or fate, to which it is never passively subjected" (7.49). The "will or aim of those sprays [...] in steady inheritance of resolution to reach forward" (7.86) in the search for light made them as freely expressive as gothic builders. Active but never competitive, subject to no hierarchical command structure, but to laws of environmental survival that demanded mutualistic creativity, the leaves were not controlled by a central authority, but part of a joyful collective effort that began with individual will:

Where the sun and air are, the leaf must go [...] So, therefore, in any group, the first consideration with the young leaves is [...] how to keep out of each other's way, that every one may at once leave its neighbours as much free-air pasture as possible, and obtain a relative freedom for itself (7.48).

Describing the buds as brothers, Ruskin claimed that by existing within larger and smaller collectivities, these individuals learnt social practice:

Every branch has others to meet or to cross, sharing with them, in various advantage, what shade, or sun, or rain is to be had. [...] Every single leaf-cluster presents the general aspect of a little family, entirely at unity among themselves, but obliged to get their living by various shifts, concessions, and infringements of the family rules, in order not to invade the privileges of other people in their neighbourhood. (7.48)

Alternate, opposite, or spiral bud patterns meant that leaves emerged at points on the stem that permitted maximum light to pass beneath. Leaves were functional, physical matter existing to gather sunlight, but articulating a cooperative model in which compromise and tolerance were key behaviors. Through insistent social analogies, Ruskin sought to reconcile individualism

and community. Drawing upon a comparison between arboreal and mineral composition, he argued that if humans recognized their own interdependencies, they would relinquish competition. Like humans, mineral crystals “group themselves neither in succession, nor in sympathy,” and “recklessly strive for place,” gathering “in a glittering, yet sordid heap” which is rendered “imperfect or impure.” By comparison, the “order of the leaves” was “one of soft and subdued concession” (7.49) to collective will.

In an arboreal nation built on self-sacrifice, less well-positioned siblings routinely “bend aside” in order “to let [a] more favoured brother grow in peace” (7.74). While this might mean “trouble and death” for them, sacrifice did not result from subjugation, but from “perfect fellowship” uniting them “under circumstances of various distress, trial, and pleasure” (7.97-98). Conflating beauty and social order, Ruskin found that purposeful “fellowship” and “individual pleasure” were both essential: “Without the fellowship, no beauty; without the steady purpose, no beauty; without trouble, and death, no beauty; without individual pleasure, freedom, and caprice, so far as may be consistent with the universal good, no beauty” (7.98). This powerful communitarian law of help even generated an organic economics in which each leaf, “from the moment of his complete majority, pays a stated tax to the stalk; that is to say, collects for it a certain quantity of wood” (7.59). This naturally just community of households offered an idealized vision of nation-building that rested upon duty:

A tree [...] is born like a little family from which a great nation is to spring; and at a certain time under peculiar external circumstances, this nation [...] gives itself a new political constitution, and sends out branch colonies, which enforce forms of law and life entirely different from those of the parent state (7.73).

Foregrounding the social applications of his botanical narrative, Ruskin urged readers to recognize that this “history of a tree” could also be “the history of the state” (7.73).

The nature of this social model bears closer investigation, for as we look ahead to Ruskin’s political praxis after 1860, the tree society did not

entirely prefigure the actuality of Ruskin's increasingly Carlylean and Platonic vision. An arboreal society, built "upwards" from its humble constituents, was hardly one of rule and hierarchy. A vision of a nation that provided a constitution for itself, rather than having one imposed; a society built organically from below, dominated by local rather than national agendas; and empowered not by a small cadre of just autocrats, but motivated by a shared "heart law" was, in these respects at least, close to nineteenth-century anarchistic thought. Given Ruskin's various fulminations against anarchism and other forms of radical leftist politics, this is rather surprising. Indicating tensions at the centre of his tree politics, Ruskin defined the four conditions of leaf beauty as "harmony, obedience, distress, and delightful inequality" (7.98). The unquestioning sense of duty of the leaves does in some ways nod toward Ruskin's later belief that the ruled should be obedient to rulers who acted in their interests, but "Of Leaf Beauty" is unmarked by the authoritarian strands of his later social thought. This feature of his tree studies indicated precisely the difficulties he would face in attempting to translate unreflexive communitarianism into human practice. In the tree society, there were no leaders. Could the same be true of a transformed, organic human society, or was it necessary to build order on some form of hierarchy? As we shall see later, this problem became a pressing issue as Ruskin offered pronouncements which predicated harmonious social relations on the acceptance by the poor of a limited (but, for Ruskin, nonetheless crucial) role within a new social order.

III. The "Strange Veil"

"Of Leaf Beauty" reflected an idyllic political vision but also clearly revealed the unstable stew of influences forming Ruskin's natural history. Engagement with scripture, Natural Theology, Romanticism, and modern science was in evidence throughout his work, and yet these proved incompatible bedfellows. In "Of Leaf Beauty" and many other works of the first half of his career, Ruskin attempted to reconcile at least two different ways of conceiving nature itself. On the one hand, he proposed an essentially anthropocentric reading of environment, drawn from scripture and Natural

Theology, in which *Homo sapiens* remained at the apex of a created world, and fundamentally separate from the rest of creation. Here, nature was ordered by hierarchy, separation, classification, and divine intent. On the other hand, Ruskin simultaneously pursued a biocentric reading of environment, drawn from Romanticism and materialist science, in which *Homo sapiens* became inseparable from, and equal to, the rest of environment, and enmeshed within a complex of organic interdependencies. Nature, in this vision, was ordered by connection, interaction, mutuality, and process, dissolving boundaries between organisms, rendering ideas of hierarchy untenable, and undermining notions of design.³

Even at the level of individual sections of text, one finds this simultaneous valorization of opposites in evidence. Early in “Of Leaf Beauty,” in a long passage worth quoting in full, Ruskin offered an apparently orthodox example of natural theology, arguing that vegetation implied “God’s daily preparation of the earth for [us] with beautiful means of life”:

First, a carpet to make it soft for him; then, a coloured fantasy of embroidery thereon; then, tall spreading of foliage to shade him from sun heat [...] Stout wood to bear this leafage: easily to be cut, yet tough and light [...] useless, it had been, if harder; useless, if less fibrous; useless, if less elastic [...] The seeds which are to prolong the race, innumerable according to the need, are made beautiful and palatable, varied into infinitude of appeal to the fancy of man, or provision for his service: cold juice, or glowing spice, or balm, or incense, softening oil, preserving resin, medicine of styptic, febrifuge, or lulling charm. (7.11)

Biblical and Romantic language united in this passage to serve Natural Theology. During this discussion, Ruskin erected a division between humans and the “inanimate and passive” rocks, and situated vegetation between them as “a veil of strange intermediate being,” “an imperfect soul, given to meet the soul of man.” This liminal placement involved the blurring of boundaries. Describing vegetation as a being “which breathes, but has no voice; moves, but cannot leave its appointed place; passes through

life without consciousness, to death without bitterness; wears the beauty of youth, without its passion; and declines to the weakness of age, without its regret" (7.10), he focused equally on that which united and separated vegetation and humanity. In the ongoing descriptions of tree growth, however, he increasingly undermined this insistence that vegetation lacked consciousness, will, and emotion. A Natural Theological purpose – to stress divisions between humanity and a designed creation – was clearly inscribed, but always under question.

The degree to which the trees of "Of Leaf Beauty" were imbued with agency is evident in passages quoted earlier, but also in another key description of a tree:

A marvellous creation; nay, might we not almost say, a marvellous creature, full of prescience in its infancy, foreboding even, in the earliest gladness of its opening to sunshine, the hour of fainting strength and falling leaf, and guarding under the shade of its faithful shields the bud that is to bear its hope through winter's shieldless sleep? (7.24)

This question – creation or creature – remained unanswered. Failing to impose a particular reading, the passage queried divisions between humanity and the "strange intermediate" realm of vegetation; and in speaking of something that is "almost [...] a creature" as experiencing prescience, foreboding, joy, and faith, Ruskin offered characteristics in conflict with the earlier depiction of a "being" without consciousness, bitterness, passion, or regret. That leaves may experience consciousness was further suggested by talk of an "exquisite sensibility" and "watchful instinct" that led them to "anticipate their companions' courses" (7.24, 10, 48):

Patiently each awaits its appointed time, accepts its prepared place, yields its required observance. Under every oppression of external accident, the group yet follows a law laid down in its own heart and all the members of it, whether in sickness or health [...] combine to carry out this first and last heart law [...] seeming to desire for themselves and for each other, only life which they may communicate. (7.49-50)

The “seeming” here only partially arrested the movement toward a characterization of individuals who suffer, strive, and feel joy, who can be “watchful” and “anticipate,” and who demonstrate “help, submission [and] sorrow.” Vegetation began these chapters as a designed entity, became a “realm of strange intermediate being” and an “imperfect soul,” and by the close, was scornful of human claims to superiority, as Ruskin warned readers that “we who live for ourselves, and neither know how to use nor keep the work of past time, may humbly learn [...] from the leaf, reverence” (7.99-100).

This spiritual reading of environment indicated immersion in ecological modes of thought that interrogated the ontological divisions his anthropocentrism had erected, stressing instead interdependent co-operation, and pushing in a direction quite at odds with Evangelicalism or Natural Theology. “Of Leaf Beauty” is not Christian *or* materialist – it is both; it is not an exercise in Natural Theology *or* ecology – it is both. In a manner typical of Ruskin’s natural history of the 1850s and 1860s, tensions between anthropocentric and biocentric readings remain unresolved. While organicism was writ large in Ruskin’s approach to environment, culture, creative practice, and intellectual enquiry, it co-existed alongside a contrary commitment to less naturalistic notions of order. Critical attempts to use organicism to resolve the contradictory and contrary impulses within Ruskin’s work merely become another attempt to impose a closed order on that which has none. Instead, Ruskin’s works can only be approached with their internal contradictions acknowledged, and when his work is recognized as a site of considerable instability. There is no possibility of closing the Ruskin text, of limiting its meanings, or tidying up the contradictions, and so instead of seeking order, one must attend both to Ruskin’s desire for order, and to the disorder and disunity that arose out of this desire. The conflict that I describe here is nowhere more apparent than in Ruskin’s politics.

IV. Organic political economy

Central to Ruskin’s critique in *Unto This Last* of “the modern *soi-distant* science of political economy” was his belief that this was a pheno-

menon akin to "alchemy, astrology, witchcraft, and other such popular creeds." For Ruskin, the economic doctrine "that an advantageous code of social action may be determined irrespectively of the influence of social affection" was morally and logically flawed, and he grounded his analysis in deliberately scientific language:

Supposing a body in motion to be influenced by constant and inconstant forces, it is usually the simplest way of examining its course to trace it first under the persistent conditions, and afterwards introduce the causes of variation. But the disturbing elements in the social problem are not of the same nature as the constant ones; they alter the essence of the creature under examination. (17.25)

These "disturbing elements," he argued, "operate, not mathematically, but chemically, introducing conditions which render all our previous knowledge unavailable" (17.25-26). Mainstream economics was scientifically and ethically unsustainable because human beings were not matter. To adopt the approach of the physical sciences in economics would, he insisted, be inappropriate to a study of organic and cultural beings. Instead, Ruskin located economics, in part, within biology.

Amongst the most important of Ruskin's scientific debts was to the work of the comparative anatomist, Baron Georges Cuvier. Perhaps the most telling impact of Cuvier's work on Ruskin's politics was an insistence that natural organisms could not be studied using the approach of physical sciences. Cuvier argued that "Natural History" differed from "General Physics" (which "examines, abstractedly, each of the properties of those moveable and extended beings which we call bodies") and chemistry ("a science almost wholly experimental") because these disciplines consisted "in isolating bodies, reducing them to their utmost simplicity" in order to calculate, experiment upon, and observe their properties "for the purpose of establishing a body of doctrine, and, if possible, of referring the whole to one single law." Natural History, conversely, was "confined to objects which do not allow of rigorous calculation, or of precise measurement." Although biological science "should, in strictness, employ the same

modes of procedure as the general sciences,” it was generally “very seldom” the case that its subjects were “so little complex as to permit of it” (1-2, 2). Crucially, Cuvier insisted that a correct understanding of an organism could only be achieved by studying the whole organism within the context of its environment. Applying Cuvierian logic, Ruskin insisted that human society must be examined using natural science and ethics. By treating human beings as if they were matter, mainstream political economy failed to identify the subject of their investigations:

Observe, I neither impugn nor doubt the conclusions of the science, if the terms are accepted. I am simply uninterested in them, as I should be in those of a science of gymnastics which assumed that men had no skeletons.
(17.26)

Such a science might show “that it would be advantageous to roll the students up into pellets, flatten them into cakes, or stretch them into cables.” Wryly noting that Utilitarianists would merely observe that “the reinsertion of the skeleton would be attended with various inconveniences to their constitutions,” Ruskin argued that they assumed that human beings were “all skeleton” and based “an ossifant theory of progress on this negation of a soul” (17.26). By further assuming that human interaction was reducible to antagonistic relations, it became “convenient to consider men as actuated by no other moral influences than those which affect rats or swine” (17.27). Economists asserted that “the greatest average of work will be obtained from the servant” by providing the minimum quantity of wages, and the minimum quality of accommodation and working conditions which would still permit the servant to function. In Cuvierian terms, Ruskin emphatically rejected this reduction of humans to an economic unit of labour, and the separation of humans from their surrounding conditions:

It would be so if the servant were an engine of which the motive power was steam, magnetism, gravitation, or any other agent of calculable force. But he being, on the contrary, an engine whose motive power is a Soul, the force of this very peculiar agent, as an unknown quantity, enters

into all the political economist's equations, without his knowledge, and falsifies every one of their results (17.29).

Ruskin repeatedly insisted that political economy could not comprehend or resolve social issues because it failed to recognize *Homo sapiens* as a being biologically located within a complex environment and culturally located in a realm of moral judgements and feeling. For Ruskin, individuals could neither be happy, productive, nor moral if the environment in which they lived and worked remained untransformed. Economics must not be concerned with narrow, individualistic self-interest, but with the development of a more organic community. For Ruskin, though, the question remained whether the social model articulated in "Of Leaf Beauty" could be translated into human life. To test this question, it is instructive to turn to the St. George's Guild.

V. Organic politics on the ground

In 1871, in *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin announced his desire to found a society that would offer a practical alternative to the perceived ills of Victorian liberal modernity. A remarkable phenomenon in the tradition of radical utopianism, the St. George's Guild was a tangible response to Ruskin's fear that "the Foundations of Society are rotten with every imaginable plague, and must be struck at and swept away, and others built in Christ, instead of on the back of the Leviathan of the Northern Foam" (28.180). What was to replace these rotten foundations was a subject on which Ruskin expended much energy during his stewardship as Master of the Guild. Described variously as "a romantic dream," an "eccentric vision of a feudal kingdom," "an expensive failure," and a "serio-comic history" (Hardy 80; Rosenberg 196; Harris 15; Spear 148), the Guild was an ultimately futile effort to solve two linked problems: exploitative management of land; and the large numbers of men who were employed in what Ruskin regarded as degrading, industrial labour harmful to the health, creativity, and identity of self and nation. Ruskin hoped that the Guild would gather wide support and attract strong, just military and aristocratic leaders to administer large landed estates. Devoted artisan laborers dedicated to the

production of the means of life would offer a practical working-out of the Law of Help. Self-sustaining Guild communities would produce healthy food, equitable goods, and necessary services, and this pastoral idyll would be built not with steam machinery, but through cultivation “by Englishmen with their own hands, and such help of force as they can find in wind and wave” (27.95). Equitable wages and rents would be conjoined to healthy working and living conditions. Schools and museums would provide education to courteous, moral, and useful Guild Companions who would provide a practical alternative to a society darkened by the forces of competition, materialism, and irreligion.

In asking how the Guild might have worked many critics have focused on its hierarchical structure. While for Derrick Leon, the Guild was “a living organism based upon fundamental principles of a permanent nature” (458), others find Guild agrarianism troubling. A vision of “a restoration of ‘lost-values’ through a return to a form of economy based on agriculture and crafts” (Hardy 79) represented, for Brian Maidment, “a reactionary social programme based on subsistence agriculture” (206). Ruskin’s prescriptions for estate life were certainly neither socialist nor democratic: “we will have no liberty upon it; but instant obedience to known law, and appointed persons: no equality upon it; but recognition of every betterness that we can find and reprobation of every worseness” (27.96). Guild laws would slightly modify “those of Florence in the fourteenth century,” and “its principles of labour” would “be consistently monastic” (28.23, 19). Feudal overtones were readily apparent in the Guild’s proposed structure. Its “Comites Ministrantes” or “first and highest class” would be landlords, bishops, or administrators benevolently governing the “Comites Militantes,” a “second, or middle class” comprised of “persons occupied actually in manual labour.” A third class, the “Comites Consilii,” (28.539) would be made up of affiliated members living in mainstream society.

One may be tempted to suggest that this model merely emphasizes a marked increase in Ruskin’s conservatism in later years, but such a reading would be unsatisfactory on a number of levels. Ruskin’s Tory credentials go back to his childhood, and his later politics were not simply authoritarian.

While some critics find "authoritarian power structures" (Kemp 371) and argue that "companionship and social order" would be regulated through "a rigid hierarchy of control" (Hardy 79), others offer more nuanced readings, for while Ruskin valorized hierarchy, he also insisted that "Comites Ministrantes" should exercise local independence. Catherine Morley argues that Florentine laws represented "the idea of decentralised government" (34), and Ruskin certainly required a system that made limited demands on his time. In practice a poor autocrat, Ruskin delegated much of the daily running of the Guild to others, and was often unavailable when needed by Companions, as he acknowledged in the March 1880 *Fors*, where he lamented that the Guild's "slackness of growth" was "more the Master's fault than any one else's" (29.395). In September 1877, at a point of crisis in an agricultural experiment at the Guild's Totley (or Abbeydale) estate, Ruskin admitted that "I ought to be at Abbey Dale, and truly I would not fail to be there, if I had only the Guild's *business* to think of." By this time, he saw his role within the Guild primarily in connection to the recently-established Sheffield Museum, and as he was "wholly occupied in examining the growth of *Anagallis tenella*" in Italy, he felt that "the Dalesmen must take care of themselves" (29.208). Shortly afterward, the Totley experiment collapsed amidst acrimony, although it is unlikely that Ruskin could have averted this, and clear that his approach invited the self-governance of its participants. His confession that after 1877 he prioritized the Museum over "the Guild's wider cares" (30.395) suggests that the principle of central control was far from clear-cut. A telling description of "strictly hierarchical, self-sufficient agricultural bodies" (Morley 1) indicates an unresolved structural tension – a desire for central authority *and* decentralized autonomy that is deeply reminiscent of the tension between hierarchical anthropocentrism and ecological mutualism in his natural history.

VI. Conclusion

While Ruskin imagined the Law of Help to be universally applicable – as relevant to society as to aesthetics and environment – its practical application proved too difficult for him. In "Of Leaf Beauty," Ruskin envi-

sioned a society of helpful social relations underpinned by unquestioning duty and characterized by a potentially radical form of organicism, but when attempting to pursue a revision of existing society he was unable to reproduce the guiding elements of his tree community, and permitted a degree of hierarchy that was inimical to its spirit. At the same time, the characteristic dualism of his natural history can be discerned in his politics. The Guild represented an alternative society that was deeply hierarchical, characterized by rigid ranks and power structures, but also wildly decentralized and in practice devoid of a clear, working line of authority; that called on members to provide solutions to local problems and to display local leadership, but to submit and show deference to their “betters”; that sought to overturn the social and economic relationships of industrial liberal capitalism, but which strove to maintain property and social division; and that was overseen by an all-powerful, but often absent, distant, or delegatory master.⁴ In all of this, the Guild fatally reproduced the contradictory impulse at the heart of Ruskin’s whole approach to epistemology and intellectual enquiry, and helped make the Guild of St. George an inherently dysfunctional organization. The unreflexive communitarianism of “Of Leaf Beauty” was conjoined to a hierarchical model drawn from Plato and Carlyle. The dual impulse I described earlier in relation to Ruskin’s natural history had a long reach and diverse consequences. Across all discourses, Ruskin sought the synthesis of two incompatible conceptions of the external world, creativity, society, and aesthetics. The tensions resulting from this attempted synthesis played out at all times and all moments in his work, and mean that his work on art, architecture, environment, and politics cannot be studied in isolation, but as manifestations of a chaotic and fascinating, but ultimately productive and provocative epistemology. Although the “ever-working leaves” (7.467) could not be reproduced in a Guild that refused working-class activists genuine agency, the potential of the Law of Help as a model of radical social cooperation remains undiminished.

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Notes

¹ This passage is from a report on the lecture in the 27 April edition of the *London Review*. All subsequent references to Ruskin's work will refer to E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., *The Library Edition of John Ruskin's Works*, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12), these being given parenthetically in the text in the form of volume and page numbers. For example, the quotation above occurs at 7.467.

² An extended examination of the interplay of architecture and trees in Ruskin's work can be found in Frost (2009).

³ A fuller analysis of this dual impulse is pursued in Frost (2011).

⁴ Frost (2012) will provide a detailed study of the actualities of life on the ground for the small number of the Guild's active "Comites Ministrantes" and a critical overview of the tensions inherent in the organization's structure.

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