

Beyond Proust: The Legacy of Ruskin's Thought in France

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To the memory of Philippe Jaudel

It is the privilege of a few great geniuses to take on the patina of the grounds they have trodden on and to receive as much as they have given. Their spirit always outreaches the limits of their home country and while some of the facets of their minds may remain obscure to the foreigner, other and hitherto undiscovered fragments will suddenly reveal themselves to him alone.¹

*F*or various historical reasons, the critical heritage of John Ruskin's writings has not fared well in France. However, in recent years and as interdisciplinary research has opened fresh alleys of discussion, new interests and projects have emerged to show the significance of his writings and aesthetics in French political thought, art history, or literature.² At the time this article is being written, a cycle of three conferences on Ruskin is soon to be held at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris (at the end of March 2011), a clear sign of a revival of interest in the great art critic. At the same time, his critical heritage is to be found in the most unexpected quarters of French literature in the broad sense. Most recently, the famous Goncourt Prize of the year (2010) was awarded to Michel Houellebecq for his book *La Carte et le territoire* [the Map and the Territory] in which Ruskin's ideas – misleadingly described by the novel's character as William Morris' inventions – loom large in the aesthetic background of the novel.

On a more scholarly level, this essay aims at giving a sense of the way Ruskin's ideas have been interpreted and framed by previous literary and art criticism in France. While the first section of the article focuses on the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries and intends to give a bird's eye view of the reception of Ruskin's writings in France, the second section singles out one instance of the resurgence of his ideas and aesthetics in the writings of one of the greatest contemporary French art critics, Daniel Arasse.

There are many ways of approaching the reception of Ruskin's writings in France and the influence his works and ideas have had on French literature, art criticism, or even politics. However, so far, it seems that the most common approach has been to follow the chronological order in which the major pieces of criticism have been written by critics writing in the French language, be they French, Belgian, or Swiss. As Frank D. Curtin writes in his selected survey of French criticism on Ruskin, "chronology affords a convenient pattern, for in general French criticism followed the shifting emphasis of Ruskin himself, from art to social criticism" (103). However, such a "convenient pattern" and, as it were, biased perspective, has had two rather negative effects on the reception of Ruskin in France in the twentieth century: one has been to reduce the various and distinctive critics of Ruskin into one anonymous group, labelled "French criticism"; two, it has encouraged second-hand or third-hand reading of Ruskin and contributed to distorting the view that the original French critics held on Ruskin.

Thus the move of attention from Ruskin's art criticism to social criticism that allegedly followed "the shifting emphasis of Ruskin himself" has recently been questioned by the research of French scholars such as Bénédicte Coste. In her article examining Jacques Bardoux's translations of Ruskin's writings, she shows how the great Victorian's ideas were first translated and interpreted as much for his artistic ideals as for his political ideas. She then demonstrates how such well-known translators as Proust or Robert de la Sizeranne later presented Ruskin to the French audience not so much as a social critic but as an art critic, thus setting the tone for all further critical reading of Ruskin.

Admittedly, to give a fuller and more balanced view of the reception of Ruskin's writings in France would require a long and close look at the position each of these mediators held when they transmitted his ideas, an endeavour that is beyond the scope of this study. However, when examining the main figures that played a key role in bringing Ruskin's ideas to a French audience, we can more easily establish within the limits of this article that Ruskin's writings and ideas have served two kinds of purpose: explaining foreign ideas and accounting for British culture as opposed to the continental one; and giving a background frame to contemporaneous movements in France in the various fields where Ruskin's writings had some direct or indirect impact in social politics, economics, as well as literary and art critical theory. In both cases, the French or French-speaking writers who devoted their attention to Ruskin had a very different and sometimes unacknowledged agenda, depending on their audience and on their particular field of expertise.³

Joseph Milsand's pioneering book, *L'esthétique anglaise: Etude sur M. John Ruskin*, written in Ruskin's lifetime, is a case in point. The study was first published in two different articles in the well-known *Revue des deux mondes*⁴ before being published in book form in 1864. In themselves, the titles of each article tell the reader a lot about the context of Milsand's two lines of argument. As the author states in the book's introduction, his first aim is to set the context of Ruskin's writings on art by providing the reader with an overview of the birth of aesthetics in Europe and offering a contrastive approach of the British and the French temperament. In fact, the first two chapters (that is almost a third of the entire book) are devoted to analysing how the development of the fine arts (meaning poetry, painting and music) has been influenced by the various aesthetic stances adopted to consider them.

In Milsand's view, England, contrary to France and to the rest of Europe, has resisted systematic rationalism and stuck to its own characteristic insular attitude while taking a new artistic turn. For him, Ruskin is the best advocate and the very embodiment of the general English spirit that has contributed to bringing a welcome renewal to

poetry as well as to painting. What is striking in Milsand's piece of criticism is his recurrent and – to a modern reader, somewhat narrow-minded – reference to national identity as much as his thorough knowledge of the philosophical background to the history of European aesthetics. In the course of his analysis, he again and again describes the English temperament and disposition as the antithesis of the French rational turn of mind and sees Ruskin as displaying the strengths and weaknesses of the English nation at large:

As to his instincts at least, his aesthetics are definitely English. The feeling that inspired his passionate attacks against ancient art and the Renaissance, his natural bent for the Gothic that he always actively defended and the way in which he relished mixing his religious beliefs and his opinions about architecture or painting all stem from the same source.⁵

A frequent traveller to England (Milsand spent six months in London as a private tutor in 1840 and often visited England), the Dijon-born critic certainly had a good command of English and displays a fine understanding of the country's cultural and religious background. At the same time, his approach to Ruskin's writings is clearly tinted with his own particular focus on literature and the arts and on the relation between the two. A regular contributor to arts magazines, Milsand was an active witness of what he called the "artistic turmoil" brought about by the Pre-Raphaelites in England. When introducing Ruskin's ideas to a French audience, he thus conveys the paradox of the latter's stance against the Renaissance as the beginning of decadence that is "the moment when serious thought, true feeling and true imagination had yielded to superficial sensuality, intellectual display of knowledge and skill, and a constant focus on meaningless shape." He then goes on to write: "Such an aversion [to the Renaissance period] is somehow the key to his entire aesthetic outlook and the seed of everything that is right and wrong in his opinions" (57).

In all of his remarks on Ruskin's aesthetics, Milsand's own interest in literature (he published three novels in the course of his life under the

pen name Antoine Dilmans) and in English writers in general,⁶ plays a strong part in his discussion as it allows him to highlight both the force and the weakness of treating art *as* literature. Even when considering architecture, Milsand argues, Ruskin's judgement is literary and not aesthetic: "he judges monuments as a "littérateur," and goes as far as considering that the monuments' windows, roofs and heaps of mute stones should somehow be changed into a large printed sheet embossed with ideas" (95). Milsand's conclusion sounds rather paradoxical with regard to the very subject of his book as he argues that Ruskin's aesthetic theory eventually aspires to negating the plastic element of art.⁷ He then concludes: "if that kind of aesthetics were true, painters could just as well break their brushes and take up writing" (131).

Throughout his study, Milsand points out Ruskin's inconsistencies and does not hesitate to offer a nuanced judgement of his views on art. In stating that one finds in Ruskin "almost a complete expression of the good and ill which literary influence can have upon the plastic arts" (Curtin 103), the critic anticipates later interpretations of Ruskin's achievement in France. As Curtin noted in his article on Ruskin in French criticism, Milsand's analysis in *L'esthétique anglaise* and "the discrimination of his appraisal set the tone of later French criticism of Ruskin" (104). More broadly if perhaps emphatically, one could argue that Milsand's decisive contribution to Ruskin studies in France was not only to offer a didactic approach to his thought by setting the historical, philosophical, and cultural background against which he was writing but also to point to the directions in which his writings could inspire writers as much as artists. Considering the scope and the tour de force of Milsand's book, it should come as no surprise that his work should have had such a long and lasting influence on French literary circles. In fact, all the French writers who later discussed Ruskin referred to Milsand's seminal study and either echoed some of its conclusions or used them as a starting-point to their own assessment of Ruskin's ideas and thought.

Thus, Bardoux's *Le mouvement idéaliste et social dans la littérature anglaise au XIXe siècle* (1901) can be regarded as a way to accommodate

Milsand's aesthetic views with his social ideas. Even though this is, in Curtin's words, probably "the best-balanced study of Ruskin in France" (105), the book draws heavily on Milsand's previous assumptions about Ruskin's biased approach to art. In a more literary vein, Marcel Proust's reading of Ruskin's aesthetics also focuses on the relation between word and image, poetry and painting.⁸ A lot has been written to undermine the influence of Ruskin's writings on Proust, either in an attempt to defend the great novelist's originality or the culture he has come to represent. However, recent research⁹ has shown that Proust knew and used Milsand's book when finalizing his version of his famous article on Ruskin published in *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1900 after the English critic's death. Even though, as Antoine Compagnon argues in his article "Proust contre Ruskin," the French novelist had developed his own passion for art even before reading Ruskin, he clearly refined his own aesthetic perception through reading Ruskin's books. Indeed, as Emily Eells convincingly argues, Proust's goal when translating the *Bible of Amiens* was to provide the French audience with a new optical instrument through which to view French monuments like Amiens cathedral (53).

From translation to interpretation,¹⁰ Proust operates a clear shift in the reception of Ruskin: building on the latter's intuition of the relation between word and image, the French novelist then applies Ruskin's ideas in his own prose style. In terms of critical heritage, however, and at around the same time as Proust, a lesser known admirer of Ruskin actually plants the seed of a modern approach to Ruskin's writings in art history.

Writing in 1897, Robert de la Sizeranne begins his *Ruskin et la religion de la beauté* by acknowledging having read Milsand's book and expressing his wish to complete Milsand's picture in the light of Ruskin's later writings. As a matter of fact, his achievement far exceeds the modest ambition he has assigned himself, for as many critics have noted before, his study has been widely read by a whole generation of young French writers (including Proust) and has turned him into the best

mediator of Ruskin's ideas in France. Translated into English by the Countess of Galloway, the book was even later presented as the well-advised opinion of a foreigner.¹¹ In her introduction to the translation of the book, she thus declares:

Perhaps those who already belong to the band of Ruskin's disciples, those who acknowledge the power of his thought in every day life – will be disappointed to find nothing very new in M. De La Sizeranne's picturesque study of the Master, but it will, I hope, be interesting to them as well as to others to note the impression made upon a foreigner by a personage who, not to mention that he is among the greatest of our stylists in prose, has permanently influenced the opinion of the English-speaking peoples in matters of art. The judgment of one outside ourselves is valuable when we are anxious to divine the charm, by which we are attracted.¹²

As Stephen Bann rightly points out, La Sizeranne's greatest merit lies in his having been a wonderful mediator both because of his knowledge of English and English art and because he understood and shared Ruskin's ideas on aesthetics. Contrary to Curtin's harsh comment that "La Sizeranne's book is nevertheless unlikely to be freshly illuminating to readers of Cook, Collingwood, and Hobson" (105), I would argue that in France, La Sizeranne's exegesis of Ruskin had two major and lasting effects: first, it helped the French audience reconcile the various facets of Ruskin's writings into one coherent whole; second, his intuition concerning Ruskin's contribution and legacy to art history has been proved right by contemporary French art historians.

Indeed, in *Ruskin and the Religion of Beauty*, the author includes long and well-chosen translated extracts of Ruskin's texts. His analysis aims at showing how Ruskin could be placed within the context of French history of art. In a recent article posted on the online art historians' directory published by the Institut National de l'Histoire de l'Art, Stephen Bann offers fresh assessment of La Sizeranne's work and

further develops this point by highlighting the legacy of his work in art history. Again what was true of Milsand can be said about La Sizeranne: the latter's analysis not only focuses on Ruskin but is also a case study following his interest for English painting in general. In fact, his research on Ruskin appeared two years after he had published a book on contemporary English painting¹³ for which he was awarded an academic prize from the prestigious Académie française. Even though the conclusion to the book shares some of Milsand's prejudices against English painting by declaring that one should admire English painting but in no way try to imitate it (qtd. in Bann 111), La Sizeranne's critical assessment of Ruskin's aesthetics along with his focus on such a modern artistic technique as photography and complex issues of aesthetic reception like anachronism foreshadows the ways in which modern art criticism may insert some of his ideas on the reception of art into the history of contemporary art discourse.

At the end of this section on the historical background to Ruskin's reception in France one can conclude that the most significant studies on Ruskin published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries all draw attention to Ruskin's authority on the art of England as well as gothic France and highlight the influence of his ideas on French art history criticism.

Contrary to Antoine Compagnon's contention that Ruskin's writings only survive in France and in our century in the shape of a footnote to Proust's overall oeuvre (149), I should like to show in the second part of this article how his ideas and theories have developed in many directions, and branched out in the most "foisonnante manière": the French verb *foisonner* has no equivalent in English and an adequate term for the idea is hard to come by. The word describes the movement of expansion and growth usually found in lush vegetation (the English "effloresce" is perhaps closest in meaning). In discussing Ruskin's writings, it describes the way in which his ideas expand and grow from the simplest footnote to an entire outlook on life, art, and aesthetics, as John Dixon Hunt so rightly demonstrated in his article "Oeuvre and Footnote."¹⁴ In a similar way, the

idea in this section is to deal with a footnote and a few allusions to Ruskin in the writings of a contemporary French art historian, Daniel Arasse, who prematurely died in 2003 after a busy and successful career as an art critic. Although I haven't yet been able to establish with certainty at this point whether Arasse read Ruskin first-hand or relied on translations of his works, the idea is to show how such a major figure as Arasse inherited his views on Ruskin from previous French criticism discussed in the first section, and how some of his critical arguments find themselves strikingly in tune with Ruskin's own approach to art.

The goal of such a case study is to show the continuity between the reception of Ruskin in France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the ideas that still circulate about his writings, especially among art historians. Conversely, establishing a parallel between two major figures, Ruskin and Arasse, will perhaps provide a clue as to the way Ruskin's ideas could be reconsidered or re-assessed in the context of the history of French art criticism. Even though Daniel Arasse's reputation has probably extended beyond the borders of France through his critical writings on the Italian Renaissance,¹⁵ it is worth starting by making a few biographical remarks in order to establish the background to the parallel one may draw between him and Ruskin.

Daniel Arasse was born in 1944 and spent most of his academic career as a professor of modern art at the prestigious Sorbonne University in Paris. His main research focused on Italian renaissance painting and he spent seven years in Florence as the head of the French institute there. His final years were spent at the no less prestigious EHESS¹⁶ in Paris where he held the position of "directeur d'études," that is, Head of Department. Although his first degree was in classics, he is recognized today as an expert on Italian art and a formidable teacher and orator. Besides curating major exhibitions such as the Botticelli at the Musée du Luxembourg (2003), one should note that, as his own critical approach became more and more refined, his talent as a public speaker also increased, leading him to popular fame as well as academic success, a rather rare case in a French context.

As an example, his recordings for the high-brow radio station France Culture became a public arena where every listener was able to admire his skill at commenting on Renaissance masterpieces with a new eye, and with the care and passion of a specialist who modestly described himself as a “self-taught art historian.” His major writings are mainly essays on Italian art but also include theoretical writings such as *Le Détail, pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*,¹⁷ where the art critic manages to offer a fresh look at the history of art through a sweeping analysis of the use and effect of detail in painting. In the book, Arasse refers to Ruskin as well as to other literary figures such as Baudelaire, but in a sense, and perhaps unknown even to himself, his critical stance theorizes Ruskin’s use of detail. In reading Ruskin in the light of Arasse, I am fully aware that I am reversing the time line and reading influence backward so to speak, but doing so is also part of Arasse’s original way of looking at the relation between a particular work of art, its production, and its reception.

In *Le Détail*, Arasse’s reference to Ruskin appears in contrast to Baudelaire’s position regarding details in his Salon writings. Arasse qualifies Ruskin’s defence of Pre-Raphaelite painting as exemplifying the return of attention to detail in painting. Echoing La Sizeranne’s famous *Ruskin and the Religion of Beauty* discussed above, Arasse begins his commentary on Ruskin in a section called “The religion of detail” and shows how Ruskin’s emphasis on detail derives from his belief in the sacred nature of the world. In contrast to Baudelaire, he argues, “Ruskin’s romanticism harks back to a religious feeling that is foreign to Baudelaire. Ruskin’s innocent eye theory derives from his interpreting the artist’s understanding of the intimate laws of nature as almost mystical” (108). Whereas pictorial detail is rejected by Baudelaire as dépassé and relegated to the past, in Ruskin, detail is praised as evidence of God’s presence in nature. A bit further down, Arasse quotes a passage from *Modern Painters* V, and highlights what he sees as the major points in Ruskin’s text: to paint what you see, and not what you know, and to use detail as a pivotal element in the composition of a

picture. What Arasse points out in Ruskin's approach to nature and representation and what he later formulates in his own analysis of detail is a particular mode of interaction that entails two simultaneous attitudes to nature and art.

The first one implies placing faith in man's powers of perception and seeing each detail as part of the divine ordering in nature. In Ruskin, detail in painting thus becomes a moment of embodiment, where the Word is made flesh, the invisible rendered visible by the painter's skill or the perceiving eye. In Arasse's treatment of detail, the sacramental power of detail to embody and convey meaning is not strictly speaking religious but belongs to what Bertrand Rougé describes as the performative quality of painting.¹⁸ For instance, an Annunciation scene could be regarded in its *telos* or *storia* as an exemplum of the coming into being of the very idea of the story described in the Bible, but also of the very act of painting. Beyond each individual work of art, the Annunciation scene as a genre could therefore be seen as a paradigm, or an illustration showing how, through painting, something immaterial becomes material. In the process, the critic's position in viewing painting implies that he or she should take the plunge and accept temporary surrender to sensation or empathy. Here we can recall, for example, Ruskin's masterful description of Venice and his famous words: "Yes, Mr Turner, now we're in Venice" (3.257).

Such an endeavour, in both Ruskin and Arasse, inevitably engages eyesight and requires temporary self-effacement so as to give way to the picture's impression. *On n'y voit rien* [one can't see anything], the cheeky title of Daniel Arasse's last book, argues for a necessary surrender of, not feeling, but intellect that eventually leads to revision – that is insight into well-known works of art or simply revision as another vision/version. The direct consequence of such an outlook on art criticism is to open up each piece of art to myriad interpretations.

The second attitude that Arasse inherits from Ruskin and develops in his own approach to art, is a kind of selectivity by which the art critic does not hesitate to express his personal view of a particular painting,

sometimes even using the artist's biography to serve his argument, a common practice in Ruskin. The obvious example is perhaps to be found in *Modern Painters I*, in the chapter "The Two Boyhoods," where Ruskin makes a selection of significant biographical details about Turner and Giorgione in order to sustain his argument and demonstrate the difference in temperament between the two painters. He later also uses Turner's English background to justify what he sees as his inadequate rendition of Italy.

Two centuries later, beyond structuralism and the rejection of biography in French critical theory in general, Arasse contends that every detail, including biography, should be taken into account in one's analysis of painting. In this light, Ruskin's "wayward methodology and misattributions" (Hewison 228) when dealing with art history (in Robert Hewison's expression) and his subjective interpretation of particular details in Turner's painting find an echo in Arasse's own attention to salient features or even faults in the pictures he examines (such as *repentirs*). Instead of only relying on iconographical detail, Arasse revisits the very notion of detail and gives it a definition that includes the specific and the general.

Building on the distinction found in Italian between two terms, "particolare" and "detaglio," he insists on the need to combine both approaches in interpreting painting: looking at a single part (particolare) but also detailing, that is properly offering one's subjective interpretation.

Such a broad and yet precise definition implies that the critical eye is sovereign in its decision to view such and such detail, and free to focus on what attracts its attention in a particular painting, be it a dog, a shell, or a stain such as in Turner's oil painting, *Mortlake Terrace* (1827).¹⁹ It thus displaces the appreciation of art from its production to its reception and encourages a movement by which painting acquires another dimension. Picking up on the Goncourts' famous expression that at some point in the viewing act, "the picture arises," Arasse envisages art criticism as an artistic gesture that brings out the relief or the architecture of each particular work of art. Just as the structure of a mountain is made

up of many layers or strata, the reception of a painting is made up of all the commentaries that have been written about it over time.

In *On n'y voit rien*, he writes: "it's as if the picture itself visually produced its own meaning, regardless and beyond every idea that the painter or his patron ever conceived of it, and long after their deaths. That must be, what we mean by "chef d'oeuvre" – masterpiece" (189). Such a focus on the physical dimension of painting finds an echo in Ruskin's attention to geological details (such as in *Modern Painters IV*) and in the way his critical eye brings alive every mineral or vegetal element in landscape scenes, for example.

By reading Ruskin's insistence on detail as a spiritual posture as well as an aesthetic move, and by offering a view of art that implies paradox, contradictions, and reversibility, Arasse's critical stance sets a modern frame to Ruskin's critical writings on art. The notion of distance, which in Ruskin refers either to the right distance from which to view a picture or to the representation of far away elements in the painting itself becomes, in Arasse's aesthetics, a moving frontier: "de près, de loin," Arasse's bifocal mode of vision reiterates Ruskin's constant oscillation between his close-up descriptions of minute details and his broad overviews or aerial views of, say, the Alps. In both cases, the shift in point of view is a way of exploring the elusive nature of truth in painting.

As one might have expected, the main artist that Arasse considers in relation to Ruskin and truth is Turner. Here again, Ruskin's name is mentioned as, he says, "an interesting reminder of Turner's attention to truth" (*le Détail* 192). Even though Arasse shows how Ruskin's analysis of Turner's clouds, for example, is fairly biased and corresponds to the critic's well-known focus on drawing (as developed in *The Elements of Drawing*), I would argue that Ruskin's verbal descriptions of Turner's paintings do manage to operate the shift between the two dimensions of the painting and the third dimension in which the picture may arise in the viewer's and the reader's imagination. My favourite example is Ruskin's description of Turner's *War. The Exile and the Rock Limpet* (1842) in which he encourages the reader to truly experience the effect of the

painting, as if he himself repeated Turner's well-known experiments with nature.

Suppose where the Napoleon hung in the Academy, there could have been left, instead, an opening in the wall, and through that opening, in the midst of the obscurity of the dim room and the smoke-laden atmosphere, there could suddenly have been poured the full glory of a tropical sunset, reverberated from the sea; how would you have shrunk, blinded, from its scarlet and intolerable lightnings! (1.126)

In that commentary just as in the famous description of the storm in Mount Saint-Alban (3.278-79), Ruskin does not offer a static reading of the painting but encourages the viewer/ reader to see it as a transactional object, whereby the relation between the subject and the viewed object is questioned. In the viewing experience, both time and emotion play an important role and in that respect, one can again notice strong similarities between Ruskin's and Arasse's way of considering the notion of time as part of a piece of art.

As Arasse argues in his writings on anachronism, every piece of art is fundamentally anachronistic because it combines three different kinds of time: the present time, which he defines as "the contemporary presence of the piece of art"; bygone time, that is, the time when it was first produced; and between these two, the time that has elapsed between its production and reception, which one may call the work's particular sheen or patina.

In Arasse's understanding of the relation between painting and time, there is no closure, and every piece is left open, as if both containing its meaning and awaiting further interpretation. To speak more broadly, for Arasse, the history of art itself is not linear but is always in the making, as every work of art that is being created changes the outlook on all the previous works in a never-ending dialogue that may also include other media, such as texts or drawings. The truth of a particular painting is not established once and for all but shifts according to point of view and time of viewing.

Such a liberated or even liberating view of art history, which Arasse often calls a discipline for graveyard custodians,²⁰ rehabilitates Ruskin's own multilayered aesthetic commentary, and makes in turn his own practice of quoting (from the Bible, for instance), a modern critical endeavour.

For both art critics, the main point is to share one's point of view and use detail to seize the emotion produced by the viewing experience and attempt to make it visible without removing its particular aura or mystery. In this light, both critics' interest in photography and their use of it can be seen as a way of magnifying specific points that their texts then take up and expand in the same way that a photographic lens magnifies specific parts in a picture. In the writing experience and in the recasting of pictures in unusual frames, both critics re-enact the painter's own experience, as Alexandra Wettlaufer underlines:

If the painter tries to attract the spectator's mind to those objects most worthy of its contemplation, and to inform him of the thoughts and feelings with which these were regarded by the artist himself [3:133], the critic must similarly try to impart his thoughts, feelings and experience of the painted scene. Although at three removes from the actual landscape, the reader must have access to the same emotions that the painter felt as he translated the scene to his canvas, and that Ruskin had as he witnessed the painted translation. (216-17)

In a similar way, Arasse revives well-known works of art and uses his voice as a mediating tool to convey his truth. In both men's way of appreciating art, the senses play a major role, which is certainly what draws them both to analyse Turner as the ultimate painter of sensation. For Arasse, painting is necessarily a matter of desire and sensation, for as he says: "Painting is for me a constant object of desire. I choose to write or talk about painting precisely because it defies writing and discourse" (*Histoires* 320).²¹ In the same way, even though some critics tend to present Ruskin as a prudish killer of desire and a great moralizer, recent

studies have shown²² that he too is on the side of desire, consciously and unconsciously. As Alexandra Wettlaufer suggests in *Ruskin and the language of images*, Ruskin himself did acknowledge possessing “a sensual faculty of pleasure in sight as far as I know unparalleled” (35.619). This sensual pleasure at sight and seeing is also very present in most of his verbal descriptions of natural scenes, especially in his hide-and-seek game with the mountain caps that he records in his diary as early as July 1835:

This half of the panorama from the Aiguille de Tour to the Buet was cloudless, but over the Bernese Alps, which are almost visible from the Col de Balme, over the Simplon, and the whole range of the high Alps, floated masses of thick white clouds – not rain clouds – which concealed the summits, continually tantalizing you with the view of their bases. (16)²³

Further down, he repeats: “Accordingly all view in this direction was concealed by tantalizing fair-weather clouds.”²⁴ The frustration at not seeing the mountains around is somewhat alleviated by the pursuit of precious stones and the hope of geological finds. The passage fittingly concludes with how the “géologiste en herbe” finally obtained a long desired “large octohedric crystal of rose fluor,” thereby associating the love of minerals and a sense of longing for an object that the mountain can either give or deny. Without going too far down the road of Lacanian theory,²⁵ one can just notice in these lines that such a desire to see, dissect and finally revive the visual experience is perhaps what inevitably draws both writers together into what Arasse calls “la fête de l’œil” – the eye’s festival.

Anachronistically, subjectively, I have tried to show that Daniel Arasse shared more of Ruskin’s idiosyncratic views than he probably expressed or imagined, precisely because both men shared a particular outlook on art and perhaps on life as a seeing experience. It should therefore come as no surprise that echoes of that brotherhood should keep cropping up in the most unusual ways. Thus, in the recently

published volume on Daniel Arasse's writings, Diane Watteau, a contemporary artist writing about Arasse and modern art, reiterates what Proust said about artists, which is in turn what Charlotte Brontë famously said about Ruskin's art criticism: "Arasse makes us see how the artist reveals his art to us. His central achievement has been to unseal the viewers' and the readers' eyes to make them see seeing. He has opened my eyes" (267).²⁶ Beyond Proust and the clichés written about Ruskin's thought, language, and ideas that have been passed down from one generation of French critics to the next and that have tended to obscure the modernity of his aesthetics, a more objective and detailed study of the reception of Ruskin in France remains to be written. Such a study would undoubtedly bring out salient and unexpected features and offer a chance to examine such complex and engaging issues as anachronism, impressionism (in painting as much as in writing), and photography.

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Notes

¹ "C'est le privilège des grands génies de prendre ainsi la patine des terres auxquelles ils abordent, et de recevoir presque autant qu'ils donnent. Leur âme déborde toujours un peu de leur patrie et si toute une face en reste invisible à l'esprit étranger, il en est des fragments, jusqu'ici inconnus, que celui-ci sera seul à découvrir." *Conférences sur l'architecture et la peinture*, tr. E. Cammaerts, 13. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the French have been made by me.

² See for instance the conference held at Lille University entitled, "La postérité de John Ruskin."

³ Incidentally one would also have to consider how much English each French critic had, which is difficult to assess.

⁴ "Une nouvelle théorie de l'art en Angleterre," 1 July 1860; "De l'influence de la littérature sur les beaux arts" (15 August 1861).

⁵ "Quant à ses instincts du moins, son esthétique est franchement anglaise. Le sentiment d'où sont sorties ses attaques passionnées contre

l'art antique et la Renaissance, le penchant qui a fait de lui un apôtre si fervent du Gothique, la manière même dont il aime à mêler sa théologie et ses idées sur l'architecture ou la peinture, tout chez lui procède de la même source" (Milsand 94).

⁶ The first article, on Thomas Carlyle, was published in the September issue of *La Revue Indépendante*. He then published articles on G. Darley (*Revue Indépendante*, February 1847); C. Dickens (*Revue Indépendante*, March 1847); E. Bulwer-Lytton (*Revue des Deux Mondes*, June 1849); G. Fox (*Revue des Deux Mondes*, April 1850); T. Campbell (*Revue des Deux Mondes*, September 1850); and A. Tennyson (*Revue des Deux Mondes*, July 1851). In the August 1851 issue, Milsand continued to focus on English writers with a review of Robert Browning's *Poems* (1849).

⁷ "En dernier terme, au bout de ces principes du gradué d'Oxford, nous avons une théorie de l'art qui aspire surtout à ravalier l'élément plastique" (Milsand 129).

⁸ For a recent study of Proust's œuvre in relation to painting, see *Proust et ses peintres*, ed. Sophie Bertho, *Cahiers de Recherche Interuniversitaires Néerlandaises* (C.R.I.N.) 37 (Rodopi, 2000). See also Nayla Tamraz, *Proust portrait peinture* (Paris: Editions Orizons, coll. "Universités- Domaine littéraire," 2010).

⁹ Yasué Kato, "La genèse de la préface de La Bible d'Amiens (suite)," *Bulletin d'Informations Proustiennes* 36 (2006), 21-36.

¹⁰ On Proust and interpretation, see Cynthia Gamble's book, *Proust as Interpreter of Ruskin: The Seven Lamps of Translation* (AL: Summa Publications, 2002).

¹¹ See Stephen Bann's article, "Robert de la Sizeranne, médiateur de Ruskin et de la peinture anglaise," *Relire Ruskin* (*op. cit.*, 2003), 101-19.

¹² R. de la Sizeranne, *Ruskin and the Religion of Beauty*, tr. Countess of Galloway, qtd. S. Bann, 118.

¹³ *La peinture anglaise contemporaine* (Paris: Hachette, 1895).

¹⁴ John Dixon Hunt, "Œuvre and Footnote," *The Ruskin Polygon* (1982), 1-20.

¹⁵ His main publications in English include: *Leonardo da Vinci* (William S. Konecky Associates, 1998); *Anselm Kiefer* (Abrams, 2001) (with dual French-English text).

¹⁶ Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

¹⁷ One might translate the title as: *Detail, a close-up history of painting*.

¹⁸ Bertrand Rougé, "Annonciation/ Visitation: la distance ou l'étreinte. Vers une poétique picturale?" *La pensée jubilatoire des œuvres d'art*, ed. B. Lafargue (2009), 101.

¹⁹ *Mortlake Terrace*, 1827, oil on canvas, Andrew W. Mellon Collection.

²⁰ In *On n'y voit rien*, Daniel Arasse mentions how art historians see themselves as "graveyard custodians, draped in what they assume to be the dignified costume of their discipline, and in the name of austere knowledge they insist that one should never laugh when looking at paintings" (11).

²¹ Daniel Arasse, *Histoires de peintures*, 320.

²² See Clive Wilmer's recent article, "A Venetian Excursion – Ruskin in Verona," *Prose Studies*, volume 31, no. 2 (August 2009), 93-101.

²³ *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, ed. Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-59). The manuscript diaries consulted for this article are kept in the Ruskin Library, Lancaster University.

²⁴ *Diaries*, 16.

²⁵ However, one could almost certainly establish a striking parallel between Ruskin's longing for the lost mountain and the fort-da game identified by Lacan in *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*.

²⁶ "Toute son oeuvre s'est employée à déciller les yeux, à 'dévoiler le regard' des spectateurs et de ses lecteurs. Il a ouvert les miens."

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