

Black Devil and Gentle Cloud: Ruskin and Emerson at Odds

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*I*n 1873 two of the most eminent Victorians met in person for the first time at Oxford University. John Ruskin, then Slade Professor of Art at Oxford, was at fifty-four one of the best-known public figures of the age, inspiring deep reverence in his admirers and fulsome criticism from his detractors. Widely regarded for his writings on art, he had by this time firmly established himself as a social critic as well and was embarked upon a visionary scheme of social transformation. Ralph Waldo Emerson, making what would be his final visit to Europe, was seventy this year and in failing health. Yet his reputation as “the spiritual guide of many thousands” (“Books and Bookmen” 880) on both sides of the Atlantic stood firm. The two men had often admired one another’s work and their meeting promised to be memorable. Yet in the event, these two great minds did not so much meet as collide: they argued, and parted ways. What affinities had drawn the two together? And what was it that precipitated their rupture at Oxford?

John Ruskin and Ralph Waldo Emerson are among the ‘representative men’ of the Victorian period. Long-lived and prolific, their lives and work span much of the nineteenth century and bear witness to its intellectual, social, and spiritual ferment on both sides of the Atlantic. Considered prophets, sages, and gospel-makers in their own day, they have by now assumed a place alongside the sort of Great Men whom they esteemed, their books part of the ‘kings’ treasures’¹ of essential wisdom. In a gadgetry-obsessed world dominated by ephemeral popular culture and given to self-absorption, neither man’s work is as widely read (outside of academia)

as it once was, but their ideas have nonetheless become part of the common cultural currency, if sometimes in altered form. Our current debates about education, nature, and labor echo with Ruskinian and Emersonian notions, from self-culture and self-reliance to mutuality and the value of work. We continue to face many of the problems with which they wrestled and to seek answers to the questions they asked.

Surprisingly, although both men are the subject of active and stimulating academic inquiry, with societies, conferences, symposia and publications dedicated to their teaching, and while they are often studied with reference to their mutual friend Carlyle, they are rarely taken together. Yet they knew one another, shared many of the same concerns and convictions, and wielded a similarly powerful national influence. It would be possible, on superficial evidence, to consider them as two sides of the same coin, and anyone looking for correspondences in their work will certainly find them – on subjects such as nature, vision, education, and modern life, one might draw up a list of seemingly parallel expressions and ideas.

Professor Max Müller,² who was present at their 1873 meeting, remembers Ruskin and Emerson in his autobiography as old friends and, in many ways, “cognate soul[s]” (149). Ruskin’s early remarks about Emerson point to a certain affinity. “I’m very glad you like Emerson,” Ruskin wrote to his father in December 1861. “Mamma has a horror of these people – Carlyle, etc. – because she thinks they ‘pervert’ me; but I never understand them till I find the thing out for myself. After ten years’ hard work I find out that ‘every man does his best thing easiest.’ Then I find the brief sentence in Emerson and am pleased; but he does not teach it me” (5.427).³ Five years earlier, in an appendix to *Modern Painters III* (1856) written to defend his work against charges of plagiarism, Ruskin had expressed himself in similar words. “Some time after I had written the concluding chapter of this work,” he explains, “the interesting and powerful poems of Emerson were brought under my notice by one of the members of my class at the Working Men’s College.”⁴ There is much in some of these poems so like parts of the chapter in question, even in turn

of expression, that though I do not usually care to justify myself from the charge of plagiarism, I felt that a few more words were necessary in this instance" (5.427). Ruskin goes on to maintain his habit of working things out for himself, yet acknowledges the beneficial teaching and influence of those writers whom he loves, reminding readers that "all men who have sense and feeling are being continually helped; they are taught by every person whom they meet, and enriched by everything that falls in their way" (5.430). Emerson, who approved of Goethe's notion that "the great genius will never be worth much if he pretends to draw exclusively on his own resources" (Richardson 100) would likely have agreed.

There are many admiring references to Emerson throughout Ruskin's work. Writing to the students of Winnington Hall in January 1860, Ruskin commends the wisdom of the closing lines of Emerson's "Fable" of the mountain and the squirrel, which would have appealed to his own belief in accurately defined and limited human capacity: "Talents differ: all is well and wisely put;/ If I cannot carry forests on my back,/ Neither can you crack a nut." Poems such as "Rhea," "The World Soul," and "Forbearance" are also cited with approbation. In his late autobiography *Praeterita* (1886-89), Ruskin names Emerson, along with Longfellow and Lowell, as one of "the really progressive leaders of thought in his own country" (35.521). In *Fors Clavigera* Letter 26 (February 1873), Ruskin writes of Emerson that "No modern person has truer instinct for heroism than he: nay, he is the only man I know of, among all who ever looked at books of mine, who had nobleness enough to understand and believe the story of Turner's darkening his own picture that it might not take the light out of Lawrence's" (27.476-77).⁵

Emerson, for his part, had read and admired *Modern Painters* (although he observed in *English Traits* that the American Horatio Greenough had anticipated many of Ruskin's ideas) and heard news of Ruskin from Carlyle. Like Ruskin, who had declared that "All great art is praise" (15.351), he believed that one's work should be the praise of what one loves (Richardson 538). In 1871 he was much impressed by Ruskin's *The Two Paths* and, we are told, "praised it at every meal" (Richardson 566).

Yet for all their apparent sympathy, the relation between Ruskin and Emerson is more complex than such instances of mutual admiration would suggest. Their characters and ideas had been formed by very different intellectual and cultural forces, which shaped the way they saw both the world and one another. Considered closely, there appears to be more antagonism than affinity between them.⁶

Müller's description of their meeting, taken in its entirety, hints at the gulf that separates them. These "cognate souls" he tells us, ended by disagreeing: "some quite indifferent subject turned up, a heated discussion ensued, and Ruskin was so upset that he had to quit the room and leave us alone" (148-49). Ruskin's and Emerson's memories of the meeting are more telling. Ruskin wrote a friend that "Emerson came to my rooms a day or two ago. I found his mind a total blank on matters of art, and had a fearful sense of the whole being of him as a gentle cloud – intangible" (38.183). Emerson, looking back, recalled that "I had seen Ruskin at Oxford, and had been charmed by his manner in the lecture-room, but in talking with him at his rooms I found myself wholly out of sympathy with Ruskin's views of the world. I wonder such a genius can be possessed by so black a devil. I cannot pardon him for a despondency so deep. It is detestable in a man of such powers, in a poet, a seer, such as he has been. Children are right with their everlasting hope. Timon is always inevitably wrong" (qtd. 38.183).⁷ These are strikingly perceptive and at the same time devastating insights, for each man effectively convicts the other of lacking that which he believes integral to a right understanding of the world: true vision. Ruskin's dismissal of Emerson's understanding of art, and Emerson's impatience with Ruskin's apparent despondency, both require careful analysis, for while they seem keenly perceptive, these comments can also be seen as wide of the mark, or importantly incomplete. In order to understand these mutual criticisms and the extent to which they are valid responses, it is necessary to examine more closely the qualities, in each man, which elicited them. I shall attempt to do precisely that in the course of this essay.

Ruskin's description of Emerson, while expressed in apparently mild language, is actually severe. In Ruskinian terms, ignorance of art⁸ is

not simply a social failing, but a failure of those faculties that lead to an apprehension of the highest and noblest truths: vision and imagination.⁹ Before proceeding further, we need to consider the importance of both these concepts in Ruskin's understanding of art.

For Ruskin, "seeing falsely is worse than blindness" (7.211). The faculty of sight was essential for Ruskin in more than a physiological sense; his life's work was driven by his keen powers of observation and perception. "The main good of my face," Ruskin wrote in *Praeterita*, "as of my life, is in the eyes" (35.281). The education of sight was central to Ruskin's teaching from the start; his own drawing practice and his efforts as an art instructor were directed at leading students toward a clarity of vision that would develop more than mere manual dexterity. Seeing clearly meant seeing *rightly*. For Ruskin, the "dual process of looking and drawing" (Haslam 153) enhanced vision by disclosing new perspectives and insights, the action of the hand aiding the power of the eye. It was for this reason that Ruskin sought to incorporate drawing into general education. He maintained that once the representation of actual appearances has been mastered, other truths, beyond those of mere appearance, can be apprehended. As he put it in *The Eagle's Nest*: "if you have any human faculty of your own, visionary appearances will take place to you which will be nobler and more true than any actual or material appearances; and the realization of these is the function of every fine art, which is founded absolutely, therefore, in truth, and consists absolutely in imagination" (22.221).

In *Praeterita* Ruskin recounts just such a visionary moment:

And to-day [at Fontainebleau, 1845], I [...] found myself lying on the bank of a cart-road in the sand, with no prospect whatever but that small aspen tree against the blue sky. Languidly, but not idly, I began to draw it; and as I drew, the languor passed away: the beautiful lines insisted on being traced, – without weariness. More and more beautiful they became, as each rose out of the rest, and took its place in the air. With wonder increasing

every instant, I saw that they “composed” themselves, by finer laws than any known of men. At last, the tree was there, and everything that I had thought before about trees, nowhere [...]. The woods, which I had only looked on as wilderness, fulfilled I then saw, in their beauty, the same laws which guided the clouds, divided the light, and balanced the wave. “He hath made everything beautiful, in his time,” became for me thenceforward the interpretation of the bond between the human mind and all visible things; and I returned along the wood-road feeling that it had led me far; – Farther than ever fancy had reached, or theodolite measured (35.315).

Understood in this way, drawing is not simply a way of recording facts and appearances, but a means of grasping the profound truths that lie behind them. This is what Ruskin means in *Modern Painters V* when he declares that “if you can paint *one* leaf, you can paint the world” (7.52). True vision leads to true understanding; it is, in Ruskin’s oft-quoted expression, “poetry, prophecy, and religion, – all in one” (5.333). Similarly, books such as *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice* were intended to teach people not just how to look at art, but how to see and interpret the world. “A man who can see, understands a touch,” Ruskin declares in *Modern Painters V*, “a man who cannot, misunderstands an oration” (7.446).

For Ruskin, vision is connected with imagination, the virtue of which “is its reaching, by intuition and intensity of gaze (not by reasoning, but by its authoritative opening and revealing power), a more essential truth than is seen at the surface of things” (4.284).¹⁰ In matters of art, imagination, in its healthy operation, is the faculty responsible for raising art above “a form of pure transcript” (4.223) by modifying and interpreting the facts. There is a spiritual dimension to Ruskin’s insistence on ‘truth to nature,’ which explains why Turner’s paintings, considered by many to be utterly unlike nature, were for him more true to nature than any others. Turner succeeded in communicating “the far

higher and deeper truth of mental vision, rather than that of the physical facts" (6.35-36) – nature mediated by the imagination. For Ruskin, then, the great artist is much more than an accomplished draughtsman; he is an interpreter of profound truths, able to give "meaning and oracular voice" (4.262) to the commonest subjects. It is this spiritual and moral power of the "imagination penetrative" (4.249) that gives art its elevating power, making it not only an instrument of revelation, but of transformation and thus a central element of education. The act of seeing clearly, in developing the faculties of reverence, admiration, and love, ultimately leads to right behavior. Given Ruskin's belief in the connection between art and vision, his judgment of Emerson is doubly damning. In declaring him "a total blank on matters of art," Ruskin not only convicts him of faulty vision, but of cutting himself off from the revelatory vision of those great artists whose interpretation of nature brings us closer to the truth.

For Ruskin the capacity for noble sight, "clear in gentleness, proud in reverence, and joyful in love" (22.208) is what separates humans from the lower forms of life. In this sense it is at the heart of what it means to be human: we are not simply body, but mind and soul as well, which when joined give us a uniquely human, spiritual vision. In *The Eagle's Nest* (1872), Ruskin asserts this unity:

You do not see *with* the lens of the eye. You see *through* that, and by means of that, but you see with the soul of the eye. [...] Sight is an absolutely spiritual phenomenon; accurately, and only, to be so defined; and the 'Let there be light,' is as much, when you understand it, the ordering of intelligence, as the ordering of vision. (22.195)

Ruskin's rejection of "the glacial cold of selfish science" (19.236) and of Darwinism in particular, was driven by what he considered its mechanistic, soulless way of looking at the world.

Yet like Ruskin, Emerson too was preoccupied by vision and perception. Indeed, one might argue that in a century characterized by

“ocularphilia” (Otter 23), Ruskin and Emerson were preeminent in their insistence on the power of sight.¹¹ Emerson wrote often about the eye, both in his journals and in his published work. The “active eye” was for him symbolic of inquiry, knowledge, and wisdom (Richardson 155). Like Ruskin, he felt that “our schools and colleges strangely neglect the general education of the eye” (*Complete* 12.157 “Country Life,”)¹² with the result that most people’s powers of perception are compromised in one way or another. Emerson returns again and again to the notion of impaired vision, writing of eyes that are “muddied and sometimes asquint,” glassed by vice, hampered by “colored and distorted lenses,” “bound [...] by one or another handkerchief.”¹³ In his first published work, *Nature* (1836), Emerson declares that for the majority of people, vision is superficial, affecting only the eye and not the heart. “To speak truly,” he claims, “few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun” (*CW* 1.9). He then offers his most striking – and best known – ocular metaphor:

Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the
blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean
egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am
nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being
circulate through me; I am part or particle of God (*CW*
1.10).

Emerson’s eye is not a mediator between the soul and understanding; here the Self and the eye merge completely, so that as David LaRocca observes, “he is everything he sees, not everything he thinks” (332).¹⁴ Fellow Transcendentalist Christopher Cranch captured the unsettling nature of the image in a caricature, replacing Emerson’s head with an enormous eyeball, perched atop a small body set on long, spindly legs. Emerson’s image, however, is most notable in being *disembodied*. The transfiguration that Emerson describes leaves him impatient of wordly ties and obligations, which become “a trifle and a disturbance” (*CW* 1.10). Emerson’s use of the word “eye-ball” rather than simply “eye” results in a somewhat grotesque image, but he has chosen the word

purposefully, for the spherical, satellitic eyeball can be seen as a sort of self-contained world, suspended in infinite space and immersed in the universe.¹⁵ There is something of Emersonian self-reliance in this, for when vision and Self merge, one's view is unimpeded by convention, conformity or illusion – one *is* what one sees. As LaRocca argues, "For Emerson, seeing and being are not exclusive, but co-extensive, co-creative" (340).

Like Ruskin at Fontainebleau, Emerson too writes of a transformative moment of vision, at Mt. Auburn in April 1834:

I opened my eyes and let what would pass through them into the soul. I saw no more my relation how near and petty to Cambridge or Boston, I heeded no more what minute or hour our Massachusetts clocks might indicate – I saw only the noble earth on which I was born, with the great star which warms and enlightens it. I saw the clouds [...]. It was Day, that was all Heaven said. The pines glittered with their innumerable green pine needles in the light and seemed to challenge me to read their riddle. The drab oak leaves of the last year turned their little somersaults and lay still again. And the wind bustled high overhead in the forest top. (qtd. in Richardson 162)

The two experiences – Ruskin's at Fontainebleau and Emerson's at Mt. Auburn – share a similarly heightened awareness of the natural world, yet there are subtle but important differences. Ruskin's vision of the aspen is intimate and immediate; in drawing the tree, he discovers its essential qualities and feels intensely the bond between man and nature. Ruskin's editors observe that "The human interest was never long absent from his thoughts when contemplating scenes of natural beauty or grandeur" (5.lix) and Ruskin himself declared that the distinctive character of his books lay in "their bringing everything to a root in human passion or human hope" (7.257). The panoptic quality of Emerson's vision at Mt. Auburn has something in common with his "transparent eye-ball"; the

Self and its earthly bonds dissolve and he seems to observe the scene from a distance. Ruskin's vision brings him closer to the tree itself; Emerson's deepens his perception of the entire world of which the tree is a part. These are both spiritual, even mystical, experiences, but the insight they offer is of a different sort and leads to different results. R.B. Stein points out that "although Ruskin used the transcendental argument to make nature more meaningful, he did not see nature as symbolic in the sense that Emerson and Coleridge did. Nature for Ruskin was metaphorical or allegorical, rather than the basis for a symbolic vision" (38).

Both Ruskin and Emerson perceive correspondences between nature and human nature; Emerson's declaration that the facts of natural history are barren until they are "in any way associated to human nature" (*CW* 1.19) seems almost to anticipate Ruskin's mythopoeic natural history books, *Proserpina*, *Love's Meinie*, and *Deucalion*.¹⁶ Yet for Ruskin "the study of nature was a call to action" (*C&W* 5. lix); the truths that he perceived through his experience of the natural world influenced his efforts at social reform and his vision of the ideal society. The formation of crystals and the growth of leaves become for Ruskin analogies of the interdependence of human society. Stein writes that "Ruskin was attempting to find the continuity between man and the world" (87). "Independence you had better cease to talk of," Ruskin advises in *Fors Clavigera*, "for you are dependent not only on every act of people whom you never heard of, who are living round you, but on every past act of what has been dust for a thousand years. So also does the course of a thousand years to come depend upon the little perishing strength that is in you" (27.50). Emerson, too, is interested in analogies of nature and holds that "The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass" (*CW* 1.21 *Nature*), but his study of nature leads him to conclude instead that "every stone will fall where it is due [...] we need not assist the administration of the universe" (*CW* 3.166 "New England Reformers"). Emerson images society as a wave: "The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed, does not. The same particle does not rise from the valley to the ridge. Its unity is only phenomenal.

The persons who make up a nation to-day, next year die, and their experience with them" (*CW* 2.49 "Self-Reliance").

Both men held that individual transformation was central to social change, but it is unlikely that Emerson, who describes the failure of association in the essay "New England Reformers," would have sympathized with Ruskin's St. George's Guild,¹⁷ the self-sufficient ideal community that he established in 1871 in opposition to the industrialism and materialism of modern England. "Each man, if he attempts to join himself to others," Emerson wrote, "is on all sides cramped and diminished of his proportion But leave him alone, to recognize in every hour and place the secret soul, he will go up and down doing the works of a true member" (*CW* 3.157 "New England Reformers").¹⁸ For his part, Ruskin felt that a misplaced emphasis on individualism had resulted in the doctrine "that you serve your neighbor best by letting him alone" (30.15). "Is not a man better than a town?" Emerson declares in "Self-Reliance" (*CW* 2.50). Ruskin would answer that good men are meant to work together to create a strong town, or nation.

Ruskin's and Emerson's belief in the spiritual nature of vision, while certainly influenced by Christian tradition, is strongly connected with their reading of Plato,¹⁹ for whom sight and soul are inextricably linked. Emerson, in his essay on Plato, calls him "the greatedeyd Plato" [*sic*] (*CW* 4.44). Ruskin's "soul of the eye" and Emerson's transparent eye-ball are related, each in its own way, to Plato's assertion that "the soul is like the eye; when resting upon that on which truth and being shine, the soul perceives and understands and is radiant with intelligence; but when turned towards the twilight of becoming and perishing, then she has opinion only, and goes blinking about, and is first of one opinion and then of another, and seems to have no intelligence" (*Republic* 508). Indeed, for both men the soul, via the act of seeing truly, is "the perceiver and revealer of truth" (*CW* 2.166 "Over-Soul"). Emerson's eye-ball, mingling with the "currents of the Universal Being," looks forward to his notion of the Over-Soul, that "universal mind [...] the great soul" in which man "will live with a divine unity" (*CW* 2.175 "The Over-Soul").

Emerson is somewhat closer, in his emphasis on the universal mind, to the Plato who, as Jowett remarks, “came into the world to convince men – first of the fallibility of sense and opinion, and secondly of the reality of abstract ideas” (Introduction, *Republic* clx). “A single object,” Emerson declares, “is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace,” and Beauty “is the herald of inward and eternal beauty and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good” (*CW* 1.17 *Nature*).²⁰ Ruskin does not follow either Plato or Emerson so far into the aether. For him, the material world is more than a symbol of the universal mind; it is primarily an intricate network of vital relationships. Ruskin values the flower not only for what it might tell us of the divine, but for the “blessed harmonies” (22.225) it reveals between all forms of life. Ruskin’s ‘Law of Help’ – the idea that all the elements of life, in nature as in society, work together to sustain and complement the whole – underlies all his teaching, whereas Emerson’s sense of the world’s unity is more akin to what he describes as Plato’s perception of “an all-dissolving Unity, – the first stair on the scale to the temple of the Mind” (*CW* 6.163 “Beauty”). What some commentators have inexactly described as Ruskin’s materialism is what he himself called “my Spiritual Platonism” (36.592). Summing the message of *Modern Painters* in an 1888 Epilogue, Ruskin asserted his conviction “that the knowledge of what is beautiful leads on, and is the first step, to the knowledge of the things which are lovely and of good report;²¹ and that the laws, the life, and the joy of beauty in the material world of God, are as eternal and sacred parts of his creation as, in the world of spirits, virtue; and in the world of angels, praise” (7.464, my italics).

Yet it will not do to set up too stark an opposition between Ruskin and Emerson in this regard. Despite what William Dean Howells called his “starry substance” (784) – and what Ruskin experiences as his unsettling, cloud-like intangibility – Emerson too is a keen observer of the material world, taking plenty of joy in its beauty. In some passages Emerson’s understanding of the artistic imagination seems to approach Ruskin’s. When he writes that the artist “value[s] the expression of nature & not nature itself” (qtd. in Smith 325), he does not seem too far from Rus-

kin's notion that "The aim of the great inventive landscape painter must be to give the far higher and deeper truth of mental vision, rather than that of the physical facts" (6.35-36). Yet whereas Ruskin spent his life closely observing, interpreting, and writing about art, Emerson's published writings on the subject tend to the general rather than the specific. He is concerned not with particular pictures, technique, and practice, or the development, genius, and insights of great artists, but with the connection of art with "the mind that formed Nature" and "eternal Reason" (*CW* 7.25-26 "Art").

Ruskin's great artist is led by his imagination to the discovery of noble truths, and though there is something of the divine about him "the most wonderful piece of divine work in the whole matter – [is] the great human spirit through which it is manifested to us" (5.187). Emerson's great artist, on the other hand, must be "one through whom the soul of all men circulates, as the common air through his lungs. He must work in the spirit in which we conceive a prophet to speak, or an angel of the Lord to act, that is, he is not to speak his own words, or do his own works, or think his own thoughts, but he is to be an organ through which the universal mind acts" (*CW* 7.24 "Art"). Ruskin's great artist, in glimpsing the divine, enriches our humanity; Emerson's great artist, in subordinating his humanity, lifts us closer to the divine unity. Whereas Emerson, as an early commentator noted, is resolved "to detach every object from personal relations and see it in the light of thought" ("Books and Bookmen" 880), Ruskin urges the importance of personal relations and community. Matthew Arnold held that "Emerson is the aider and friend of those who would live in the spirit" (8); adapting his words, one might say that Ruskin is the aider and friend of those who must live in the world.

Emerson's worldview is essentially optimistic. "My whole philosophy," he wrote in 1841, "which is very real, teaches acquiescence and optimism. Sure I am that the right word will be spoken, though I cut out my tongue" (*Selected Letters* 257). As Arnold observed in 1884, "the secret of [Emerson's] effect [...] is in the hopeful, serene, beautiful

temper” (10) that governs his perception. Carlyle, whose temper was far from serene, declared in an 1852 letter to Emerson that he had been “like an angel to me, and absorbed in the beautifullest manner all thunderclouds into the depths of your immeasurable Aether” (*CL* 27:107-9).²² William Dean Howells remembered Emerson’s “beautiful Greek serenity” and “wise sweetness,” which “always left the same spiritual image in the eye” (784). Allowing for the somewhat star-struck quality of Howells’ account, it is clear from this and other descriptions that despite his very earthly standing as a family man and public figure, many observers were struck by a certain otherworldliness in Emerson. Yet such impressions may say more about those who registered them than they do about Emerson. Wesley T. Mott argues that Emerson’s “cultivation of feeling” is “one of the most neglected and misunderstood aspects of his personality and vision” (367). Although some, such as Margaret Fuller, complained of his aloofness, many contemporaries found Emerson engaging. In his account of “A Western Journey With Mr. Emerson” (1884), James Bradley Thayer recalls a warm and altogether human figure:

There was never a more agreeable travelling-companion; he was always accessible, cheerful, sympathetic, considerate, tolerant; and there was always that same respectful interest in those with whom he talked, even the humblest, which raised them in their own estimation. One thing particularly impressed me, – the sense that he seemed to have of a certain great amplitude of time and leisure. It was the behavior of one who really *believed* in an immortal life, and had adjusted his conduct accordingly; so that, beautiful and grand as the natural objects were, among which our journey lay, they were matched by the sweet elevation of character and the spiritual charm of our gracious friend (96-97).²³

Emerson’s doctrine of compensation both springs from and underpins his optimistic view of the world. In the essay “Compensation,” pub-

lished in 1841, Emerson affirms that "Justice is not postponed. A perfect equity adjusts its balance in all parts of life. [...] Every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainty" (*CW* 2.60). This is not naïveté – Emerson is no Pollyanna and he was no stranger to the failings of the modern world – but rather a conclusion based on the notion that "an inevitable dualism bisects nature," such that "All things are double, one against another" (*CW* 2.57; 64). Thus each action contains within it the seed of its reward or retribution: injustice will be punished and love will beget love. This great law of life is further implicated in the workings of Fate, which for Emerson is the fruit of character, the "Beautiful Necessity" (*CW* 6.26 "Fate"), whereas Ruskin conceives it as *Fors Clavigera* – Fortune bearing the nail – who "offers to men the conditions of prosperity; and as these conditions are accepted or refused, nails down and fastens their fate for ever" (28.106). Startlingly, for a man who had already suffered the loss of many family members – including his father, young siblings, two beloved brothers, and his first wife – and who would lose his young son to scarlet fever, Emerson goes so far as to find compensation in the death of loved ones. In what might be read as an effort to make sense of his own pain, Emerson argues that after the initial shock, the event "assumes the aspect of a guide or genius; for it commonly operates revolutions in our way of life [...] and the man or woman who would have remained a sunny garden flower, with no room for its roots and too much sunshine for its head, by the falling of the walls and the neglect of the gardener, is made the banian [*sic*] of the forest, yielding shade and fruit to wide neighborhoods of men" (*CW* 2.73 "Compensation"). Mott suggests that Emerson's apparent Stoicism is in fact "a momentary stay against the terror of irretrievable loss" (377). Ultimately, Mott argues. "Emerson realizes that compensation often comes not instantly but with the perspective of time and reflection" (387). Ruskin, who would be forever marked by the death in 1875 of Rose LaTouche, the difficult young woman whom he had hoped for many years to marry, saw little possibility of compensation for such wrenching personal loss.

"I fancy Emerson's essay on Compensation must have been written when he was very comfortable" (36. 511), Ruskin remarked in an 1866 letter to Charles Eliot Norton. Ruskin himself was anything but comfortable at the time. Over the course of the previous decade he had developed his own great law of life, the Law of Help, according to which "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). Declaring that "There is no wealth but life," he had set out to convince others of the value of "the things that lead to life" (17.85).²⁴ Yet on the evidence of the materialism and self-seeking avarice of modern society it seemed that the laws of death were in the ascendant. While his view of human nature, like Emerson's, was essentially hopeful, he was less sanguine about the 'convertability' of men. Whereas Emerson refused to be warped "from the belief, that every man is a lover of truth" (*CW* 3.163 "New England Reformers"), Ruskin warned that for all its inherent goodness, human nature is also "narrow and blind; and can only with difficulty conceive anything but what it immediately sees and feels" (20:92). The challenge was to teach people how to see clearly and truly.

Ruskin rejected Emersonian compensation not because he was stubbornly pessimistic, but because it contradicted his own experience of the world. He saw that the times were out of joint and his own efforts had taught him the difficulty of struggling against the tide of received opinion and practice. In *Time and Tide* (1867) Ruskin responds directly to Emerson's doctrine:

It is true, of course, that, in the end of ends, nothing but the right conquers; the prevalent thorns of wrong, at last, crackle away in indiscriminate flame: and of the good seed sown, one grain in a thousand some day comes up – and somebody lives by it; but most of our great teachers, not excepting Carlyle and Emerson themselves, are a little too encouraging in their proclamation of this comfort, not, to my mind, very sufficient, when for the present

our fields are full of nothing but darnel instead of wheat, and cockle instead of barley; and none of them seem to me yet to have enough insisted on the inevitable power and infectiousness of all evil, and the easy and utter extinguishableness of good. Medicine often fails of its effect – but poison never: and while, in summing the observation of past life, not unwatchfully spent, I can truly say that I have a thousand times seen patience disappointed of her hope, and wisdom of her aim, I have never yet seen folly fruitless of mischief, nor vice conclude but in calamity (17.374).

It is important to notice Ruskin's use of the phrase "for the present," for his reforming urge is always focused on 'to-day,'²⁵ on what needs to be done and can be done in the present. This isn't to say that Ruskin doesn't look forward, but it helps to explain why Emerson's notion of compensation seems too optimistic, because it requires awaiting a result often too long in coming. Ruskin's ever-increasing awareness of social failure and injustice combined with new insights into Turner's work to darken Ruskin's vision of the world. It is ultimately this darkened perspective that most effectively separates him from Emerson.

Ruskin would have recognized Emerson's fondness for presenting issues dialectically; as Alan Davis observes, Ruskin was a dialectical thinker and his thought often "progresses by contemplation of polarities or opposites" ("Ruskin's Dialectic" 6) as evidenced, for instance, by his formulation of the Law of Help and by the "Mountain Gloom" and "Mountain Glory" chapters of *Modern Painters IV*. Yet whereas Emerson tends to find resolution in a monistic conclusion, such as mind or the over-soul, Ruskin often conveys the sense of an ongoing struggle between oppositional forces. His is "a dialectic which seems to remain unresolved" (Davis, "Ruskin's Dialectic" 7). Ruskin declares that "government and cooperation" are "*eternally and in all things*" the laws of life, just as "anarchy and competition" are "*eternally and in all things*" the laws of death; one condition does not contain within it the seed of the

other; rather, one is a *corruption* of the other. There is something in this of what Paul Fussell calls “gross dichotomy”: “one thing opposed to another, not with some Hegelian hope of synthesis involving a dissolution of both extremes [...], but with a sense that one of the poles embodies so wicked a deficiency or flaw or perversion that its total submission is called for” (79).

Emerson’s optimism extends to the idea that even evil has its uses and that good often comes of wickedness: “the first lesson of history is the good of evil.” Emerson declares, “Good is a good doctor, but Bad is sometimes a better. [...] The sharpest evils are bent into that periodicity which makes the errors of planets, and the fevers and distempers of men, self-limiting” (*CW* 6.134-35 “Considerations by the Way”). Ruskin admits no such thing – declares, on the contrary (and it is worth quoting at length), that those who believe in “the passing of all evil into some form of good” are incapable of feeling

the sorrow for any of the phenomena of nature, or terror in any material danger which would occur to another. The absence of personal fear, the consciousness of security as great in the midst of pestilence and storm, as amidst beds of flowers on a summer’s morning, and the certainty that whatever appeared evil, or was assuredly painful, must eventually issue in a far greater and enduring good – this general feeling and conviction, I say, would gradually lull, and at last put to entire rest, the physical sensations of grief and fear; so that the man would look upon danger without dread, – expect pain without lamentation. It may perhaps be thought that this is a very high and right state of mind. Unfortunately, it appears that the attainment of it is never possible without inducing some form of intellectual weakness. (7.266-67)

For Ruskin, evil is not a function of the universal necessity, inseparable from and preexisting in things and circumstances, but a “Deadly reality” whose power and presence “*is here; in the world, with us, and within us*”

(17.365) and with which we are constantly at war. "It is the sorrowful law of this universe," he maintains, "that evil, even unconscious and unintended, never fails of *its* effect" (17.374). He sees this power shadowed forth even in nature, which is not always beneficent but often wrathful and destructive. For all his love of the natural world and conviction of its divinely-influenced beauty, he warns against a willful blindness to "the work of sin" (11.164):

in the utmost solitudes of nature, the existence of Hell seems to me as legibly declared by a thousand spiritual utterances, as that of Heaven. It is well for us to dwell with thankfulness of the unfolding of the flower, and the falling of the dew, and the sleep of the green fields in the sunshine; but the blasted trunk, the barren rock, the moaning of the bleak winds, the roar of the black, perilous, merciless whirlpools of the mountain streams, the solemn solitudes of moors and seas, the continual fading of all beauty into darkness, and of all strength into dust, have these no language for us? We may seek to escape their teaching by reasoning touching the good which is wrought out of all evil; but it is vain sophistry. The good succeeds to the evil as day succeeds the night, but so also the evil to the good. (11.164-65)

The dark view of nature that many readers associate with Ruskin's later years has its roots in this passage of 1853, published long before *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth-Century* (1884) with its vision of "Blanched sun, – blighted grass, – blinded man" (34.40). As he grew older, personal loss, ill health, and a conviction of the failure of his life's work combined only to *intensify* Ruskin's sense of a sinister power at work in the world – he had recognized its existence years before.

Ruskin had glimpsed this darkness in the course of his geological studies, pursued during a period of remarkable and unsettling insights into the age of the earth and the destructive natural forces that had shaped it.²⁶ The Evangelicalism of his youth, with its emphasis on the

antagonism “between good and evil, heaven and hell, the chosen and the damned” (Hewison 3) played its part, as did the Romanticism that since childhood had helped to shape his response to natural and spiritual phenomena.²⁷ His growing awareness of social injustice and fragmentation, what Robert Hewison describes as “the modern wilderness that followed the Fall” (244), intensified his sense of threatening gloom. Mechanistic science and war, materialism, competition and selfish individualism seemed to be triumphing over the things that lead to life. “Once I could speak joyfully about beautiful things,” Ruskin announces in *Modern Painters V*, “thinking to be understood; – now I cannot any more; for it seems to me that no one regards them. Wherever I look or travel in England or abroad, I see that men, wherever they can reach, destroy all beauty. They seem to have no other desire or hope but to have large houses and to be able to move fast. Every perfect and lovely spot which they can touch, they defile” (7.422-23).

Ruskin had also been led to consider the reality of evil through his study of art, the greatest works of which, as he saw it, demonstrated a victory of the human spirit over the power of evil. “In my own field of inquiry [...]” he explains in *Modern Painters V*, “all great and beautiful work has come of first gazing without shrinking into the darkness” (7.271).²⁸ Beginning in the 1850s, this darkness was made visible in unexpected and unsettling ways through the eyes of the artist he most admired, J.M.W. Turner.

Turner’s influence upon Ruskin was powerful and transcended the merely aesthetic; Ruskin identified strongly with Turner and recognized in the painter aspects of his own character. What Turner feels, he writes in *Fors Clavigera*, “I, in a feeble and inferior way, feel also; [...] because in a poor and weak way I am like [him]” (29.539). Turner’s art had been an epiphany for the young Ruskin, who had greeted him as a visionary with powers far above his peers, “sent as a prophet of God to reveal to men the mysteries of his universe” (3.254). Turner was for Ruskin the preeminent painter of “the loveliness and light of the creation” (7.410). Yet Turner’s death in 1851 disclosed personal imperfections that significantly altered

Ruskin's interpretation of his work. Much misguided commentary has been written about Ruskin's experience as executor of the Turner Bequest in 1857-58. Ruskin was shattered, critics claim, by the discovery of erotic drawings that simultaneously sullied his hero's character and triggered his own sexual anxiety. Alan Davis offers a compelling argument against this too-widely accepted theory, asserting that it was not sex that upset Ruskin in the National Gallery basement, but the revelation of Turner's gradual loss of hope and faith.²⁹ The painter's soul, Ruskin wrote to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "had been gradually crushed within him, leaving him at the close of his life weak, sinful, desolate – nothing but his generosity and kindness of heart left" (36.292). It is this realization, Davis argues, that accounts for the "tragic image of Turner" ("Misrepresenting Ruskin" 48) that Ruskin presents in *Modern Painters V* – and that contributed to Ruskin's darkened vision of the world.

Thus, the "dark clue" (7.436) of the final volume of *Modern Painters*, "points not to sex (not even covertly), but to death, in its various forms, both physical and moral" (Davis, "Misrepresenting Ruskin" 56). Francis O'Gorman writes that "Turner had come to see the world as blighted" and rightly emphasizes the importance of "understanding the awfulness for Ruskin in the later 1850s of perceiving the world under a curse, not a blessing, and knowing that Turner had seen that too" (71). Turner's sorrowful vision dismayed Ruskin, oppressed as he was by a sense of the power of death at work in the world, and shook his own increasingly tentative grasp on hope. In the powerful "Two Boyhoods" chapter of *Modern Painters V*, Ruskin implicates the *dis*-ease of modern England in Turner's awareness of "the labor and sorrow and passing away of men [as] the great human truth visible to him" (7.386). In the two chapters that follow, he goes on to interpret Turner's rendering of the Dragon of the Hesperides³⁰ and of the Python slain by Apollo.

The Dragon appears in Turner's painting *The Goddess of Discord Choosing the Apple of Contention in the Garden of the Hesperides* (1806). In the chapter devoted to the painting, "The Nereid's Guard," Ruskin, citing Hesiod's account, explores the meaning and implications of the

Hesperides story as understood by the ancient Greeks. He points to the ways in which Turner's picture reflects both this understanding and the interpretations of later writers such as Virgil, Dante, and Spenser. Turner's garden, like the mythical garden, is shown to have a twofold meaning, just as it has two guardians: as the source of "household peace and plenty [it] is watched by the singing nymphs – the Hesperides. But as the source of household sorrow and desolation, it is watched by the Dragon" (7.396). On one level, Ruskin explains, the Dragon represents earth-storm and the fiery simoon winds, but its moral significance lies in its descent from mythical figures associated with covetousness and malignity, its nearest relation being the Gorgons. In Turner's picture, the Dragon stretches its treacherous length across the top of a bare mountain that marks the limit of the garden. Storm clouds swirl above and behind him, his gloom intensifying and mingling with that of the foreground scene, where the Goddess of Discord makes her choice. Ruskin points to the darkness of the stream that runs through the garden, and to the broken apple tree, as further indications of Turner's sorrowful intent. For Ruskin the painting reveals Turner's sense of England's spiritual and physical decline and depicts the country's great spiritual truth – "the Assumption of the Dragon" (7.408). It is, he tells us, a religious painting, depicting the "chief worship which lay at the nation's heart" (7.408). "That power, it appears, on the hill-top, is our British Madonna;" Ruskin writes, "whom, reverently, the English devotional painter must paint, thus enthroned, with nimbus about the gracious head [...]. This is no irony. The fact is verily so" (7.408). Modern England having taken the Dragon for her Lord, "the time has at last come. Another nation has arisen in the strength of its Black anger; and another hand has pourtrayed [*sic*] the spirit of its toil. Crowned with fire, and with the wings of the bat" (7.408).³¹

In the following chapter, "The Hesperid Aeglé," Ruskin teases out the meaning of a second Turnerian dragon, "this time not triumphant, but in death-pang; the Python, slain by Apollo" (7.409). *Apollo and Python* (1811), Ruskin tells us, establishes Turner as "the painter of the loveliness and light of the creation" (7.410) and a master of color. Where the *Garden*

of the *Hesperides* is somber, Turner's portrayal of the contest between good and evil glows with the light of love and of redemption; this serpent being more terrible than the Hesperid Dragon, its conquest is more glorious: "That Hesperid dragon was a treasure-guardian. This is the treasure-destroyer, – where moth and rust doth corrupt – the worm of eternal decay" (7.420). The contest is the type of man's struggle against deadly sin. Yet this picture too, for all its brightness, reveals Turner's hopelessness, for where the Python lays dying he has painted a smaller worm rising from its wound. "Alas for Turner!" Ruskin exclaims, "This smaller serpent-worm, it seemed he could not conceive to be slain. In the midst of all the power and beauty of nature, he still saw this death-worm writhing among the weeds" (7.420), a grim symbol of the regeneration of evil and the power of death. This is the "dark clue" of Turner's life, traced with care and sorrow by Ruskin in the pages of *Modern Painters V*. During the 1850s, Ruskin had realized that Turner was dogged by despair, painfully alive to the degeneration of the modern world and wounded by a public that had failed to properly appreciate his gifts or to grasp his teaching. O'Gorman observes that "All that Turner had seemingly understood of divine blessing, of a world made for human beings by God, had failed him. Death had become the conqueror in a world of life" (72). This was a painful revelation for Ruskin, who was waging his own battle against "the laws of death" and feeling increasingly that he was losing.

As Dinah Birch suggests, in "talking about Turner, Ruskin is talking about himself [...]. As he had first seen his task as a Christian author in equaling Turner's teaching of the divine glory of nature, so he came to feel the need to follow Turner's expression of darker implications in nature's morality and man's corruption" (52). Ruskin was able to plumb Turner's darkness because he knew its depths, and the deeper he looked, the more dangerously sanguine did an optimism such as Emerson's appear. The dandelion and cockle needed weeding 'to-day,' lest the field be overwhelmed. By the 1880s, Ruskin had begun to see the moral and spiritual deterioration of England imaged in the physical world, in the plague-cloud that signaled more than a change in the atmosphere.³²

For Emerson, who maintained that “There is no pure lie, no pure malignity in nature” (*CW* 3.163 “New England Reformers”), Ruskin’s belief in the existence of a present and corrupting evil was a betrayal of his genius. “The entertainment of the proposition of depravity is the last profligacy and profanation” (*CW* 3.163), Emerson declared. Ruskin’s vision of the world, which Emerson found so despondent, seemed to convict him of just such a profanation. In the essay “Experience” (1844), Emerson connects vision with mood, figuring our moods as “many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus” (*CW* 3.30). Our vision is thus subject to mood, which is further linked to temperament. “Temperament also enters fully into the system of illusions,” Emerson explains, “and shuts us in a prison of glass which we cannot see. There is an optical illusion about every person we meet. In truth, they are all creatures of given temperament [...] whose boundaries they will never pass” (*CW* 3.31). As LaRocca puts it, “Our temperament explains what we see, and therefore, what we are” (337). Emerson felt that Ruskin’s vision had been skewed by an unparadonable despair – a black devil that had glassed his eye. Emerson believed that we judge of a man’s wisdom by his hope. Perceiving Ruskin to be without hope, Emerson questioned his wisdom.

Yet even when he had been brought low by ill health, personal misfortune, and the conviction of the failure of his life’s work, Ruskin did not entirely lose hope. To the end he held to the belief that “Human nature is a noble and beautiful thing, not a foul, nor a base thing” (18.474), and that it would ultimately prove capable of transformation. As Davis has written, Ruskin was “engaged in an urgent dialectic in which life, in its full, imaginative sense, was pitted against a kind of death through spiritual and imaginative poverty” (“Journeys” 38). Ruskin concludes the final letter of *Fors Clavigera*, December 1884, by declaring that the time has come for the faithful to be “no more hidden, nor overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good [...] ought we not, at last, to redeem?” (29.528). Ruskin’s lifelong attempt to teach people to see clearly and to live nobly was in itself an act of hope.

For Ruskin, the ignorance of art that he identified in Emerson was part of what made him "intangible." The education of Emerson's sight being thus incomplete, his entire worldview was called into question; he was unable to see *rightly*. Not having confronted the world's sorrow as revealed by art, and particularly by the vision of great artists like Turner, he had failed (in Ruskin's estimation) to rightly perceive the world's darkness or to understand its implications and the resultant need for action. In *refusing* to entertain the proposition of depravity, Emerson had blinded himself to the necessity of actively struggling against the 'deadly reality.' Believing this, Ruskin came to doubt Emerson's teaching and to esteem his ideas, however mistakenly, as Carlyle once had before knowing him better – "elevated, but airy, idle; made of moonshine, mostly, alas!" (CL 22: 183-84).³³

By the 1880s, Ruskin's opinion of Emerson had soured markedly. In a letter of February 1883 he wrote of Emerson as "little more than a clever gossip, [whose] egotism reiterates itself to provocation" (34.563), and although a month later he described the recently published Emerson letters as "infinitely sweet and wise" in a letter to Norton (their editor), they were also "here and there [...] unintelligible to me" (37.440).³⁴ In an 1886 letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* regarding Sir John Lubbock's list of "The Best Hundred Books," Ruskin offered an emended list, declaring that after "Putting my pen lightly through the needless – and blottesquely through the rubbish and poison of Sir John's list – I leave enough for a life's liberal reading – and choice for any true worker's loyal reading" (34.722). Under the heading of "General Literature," he had drawn a heavy black line through Emerson's name.

It is true that Ruskin's opinions, always keen-edged, often sharpened dramatically in the decade before he fell silent. Yet his late rejection of Emerson is not the work of madness, but a reaction against a way of seeing that had long qualified his admiration, just as Emerson's characterization of Ruskin as Timon was provoked by those aspects of Ruskin's vision that were alien to him.³⁵

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Notes

¹ In the essay “Of Kings’ Treasuries” (1865), Ruskin uses the term to describe those books which are the repositories of vital wisdom.

² Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), German philologist and Orientalist, first Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford.

³ John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin (Library Edition)*, 39 vols., ed. E.T. Cook & Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-1912). Subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴ The member in question was William Ward, who had been introduced to Ruskin’s work in 1854 and began attending the Working Men’s College at that time. Ward commented in a written account that “Upon one of these occasions [tea at the Greyhound with Ruskin and fellow students], I gave Mr. Ruskin a favorite book of mine, the Poems of Emerson, which he had not seen. He told me at a subsequent meeting that the poem he liked best was “The Mountain and the Squirrel” [i.e. “A Fable”].

⁵ In his *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* (1853), Ruskin had recounted the following: “When Turner’s picture of Cologne was exhibited in the year 1826, it was hung between two portraits by Sir Thomas Lawrence [...]. The sky of Turner’s picture was exceedingly bright, and it had a most injurious effect on the colour of the two portraits. Lawrence naturally felt mortified, and complained openly of the position of his pictures. You are aware that artists were at that time permitted to retouch their pictures on the walls of the Academy. On the morning of the opening of the exhibition, at the private view, a friend of Turner’s who had seen the Cologne in all its splendour, led a group of expectant critics up to the picture. He started at it in consternation. The golden sky had changed to a dun colour. He ran up to Turner, who was in another part of the room. “Turner, *what* have you been doing to your picture?” “Oh,” muttered Turner, in a low voice, “poor Lawrence was so unhappy. It’s only lamp-black. It’ll all wash off after the exhibition!” He had actually passed a wash of lamp-black in water-colour over the whole sky, and utterly spoiled his picture for the time, and so left it through the exhibition, lest it should hurt Lawrence’s” (12.130-31).

⁶ The author of an unsigned article in *Harper's Weekly*, April 1903, claims that "Between Emerson and Ruskin there was no affinity, rather antagonism" (880).

⁷ According to another mutual friend, the Harvard professor Charles Eliot Norton, Emerson thought that Ruskin "was serious enough, but his perversity made you angry, you could not talk with a man who insisted on being hopeless to the extreme of denial of the progress of the world. He should come to America to be restored to sanity" (Norton 513). Ruskin never did visit America, in which country he found much to dislike. Having spoken critically of America in *Time and Tide*, Ruskin goes on to declare that "My American friends [...] tell me that I know nothing of America. It may be so, and they must do me the justice to observe that I, therefore, usually *say* nothing about America. But this much I have said, because the Americans, as a nation, set their trust in liberty and in equality, of which I detest the one, and deny the possibility of the other; and because, also, as a nation, they are wholly undesirous of Rest, and incapable of it; irreverent of themselves, both in the present and in the future; discontented with what they are, yet having no ideal of anything which they desire to become" (17.432).

⁸ Throughout this essay I use the word 'art' to refer to the visual arts.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of Ruskin and vision see Sara Atwood, "The Soul of the Eye: Ruskin, Darwin and the Nature of Vision," *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Spring 2011), 127-46.

¹⁰ In *Modern Painters II* (1846), Ruskin divides the imagination into three forms, according to its various functions: the Imagination Associative "seizes and combines" (4.235) ideas to create an organic unity; the Imagination Penetrative apprehends what the Imagination Associative has selected, seeing into the inmost heart of things; the Imagination Contemplative regards what the two more powerful forms of imagination have conceived. The three forms of imagination are further distinguished from Fancy (also subsequently subdivided), which is restless, concerned only with externals, and cannot feel or be made serious. The highest im-

aginative faculty, Imagination Penetrative, is inimical to all forms of simple imitation.

¹¹ The eye trouble that both had suffered sharpened their awareness of the power of vision. In 1825, Emerson developed uveitis, probably due to suppressed tuberculosis. He entirely lost the use of first one and then the other eye. That same year he “underwent two eye operations in which his cornea was incised with a cataract knife” (LaRocca 331); the surgery was successful and a year later his uveitis had resolved. A comment in *Nature* suggests that Emerson felt a lasting anxiety about his eyesight. Nature is so restorative, Emerson writes, that “There I feel that nothing can befall [*sic*] me in life, – no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair” (*CW* 1.10). Ruskin suffered from ‘floaters’ and was often anxious about what he felt to be a weakness of the eyes. As an undergraduate he went so far as to wear specially tinted glasses to protect them.

¹² I have used the standard edition of Emerson’s work, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, Joseph Slater, and Douglas Emory Wilson, *et al.* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971-2013 (10 volumes). These references are cited as *CW*. As Robert N. Hudspeth explains elsewhere in this volume, the Harvard edition includes “only those works [...] that Emerson himself saw into print, those over which he exerted control” (2, above). The essay “Country Life,” to which I refer on page 136 above, was culled from Emerson’s MSS after his death and was thus not included by the Harvard editors. In using it, I have cited *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1904).

¹³ In “Spritual Laws,” “Experience,” and “Self-Reliance,” respectively.

¹⁴ I am indebted to David LaRocca’s fine essay on Emersonian vision, “Seeing Metaphors” (in *Emerson for the Twenty-First Century: Global Perspectives on an American Icon*, ed. Barry Tharaud (U of Delaware P, 2010), 331-48).

¹⁵ Emerson makes frequent use of the imagery of globes, spheres and balls.

¹⁶ Intended as school-books, these addressed botany, ornithology, and geology.

¹⁷ Ruskin devotes a good part of *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 26 (February 1873) to disputing Emerson's version of the story of Saint George, a central figure in Ruskin's personal mythology and public teaching. Emerson had described St. George, in *English Traits*, as "a low parasite, who got a lucrative contract to supply the army with bacon. A rogue and informer [... who] was lynched, as he deserved" (*CW* 5.85).

¹⁸ It is equally unlikely that Emerson would have approved of the hierarchical structure of the Guild, which called for a Master (Ruskin was the first) followed by three separate classes of Companions. "Government," Emerson maintained, "will be adamantine without any governor" (*CW* 3.157 "New England Reformers").

¹⁹ Plato was for both one of the world's great men. Ruskin felt a strong affinity with Plato, whose teaching informs his work in political economy, social justice, and education. Emerson's essay on the value of Plato's teaching was included in the volume *Representative Men* (1850). For further discussion of Ruskin and Plato see Sara Atwood, "Ruskin, Plato and the Education of the Soul," *Ruskin Review and Bulletin*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 2011), 6-14; and "Imitation and Imagination: Ruskin, Plato and Aesthetics," *Carlyle Studies Annual*, No. 26 (2010), 141-64.

²⁰ Emerson was further influenced by his study of Eastern philosophy, in which he saw parallels with Plato's teaching. Carlyle refers to Emerson's interest in the subject in a letter of May 1852 in which he registers his "dissent from your Gymnosophist view of Heaven and Earth" (*CL* 27:107-9) In his essay on Emerson, Matthew Arnold prints the following previously unpublished poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes (Arnold calls it "ingenious and interesting," but one suspects that it would not have met his exacting standards for a truly good poem):

Where in the realm of thought, whose air is song,
Does he, the Buddha of the West, belong?
He seems a winged Franklin, sweetly wise,
Born to unlock the secret of the skies;

And which the nobler calling – if 'tis fair
Terrestrial with celestial to compare –
To guide the storm-cloud's elemental flame,
Or walk the chambers whence the lightning came
Amidst the sources of its subtile fire,
And steal their effluence for his lips and lyre? (Arnold 13)

Ruskin himself, in a September 1882 letter to Susan Beever, has this to say of some common friends: "I'm very glad to hear of those sweet, shy girls, poor things. I suppose the sister they are now anxious about is the one that would live by herself on the other side of the Lake, and study Emerson and aspire to Buddhism!" (37.411).

²¹ See Phillipians 4:8.

²² TC to Ralph Waldo Emerson (7 May 1852).

²³ Emerson often accused himself, in letters and in his journal, of coldness. In a letter to Carlyle, Emerson describes himself as a "cold, fastidious, ebbing person" (qtd. in Arnold 7). Yet he was not usually perceived this way by others, including Carlyle. Thayer relates the following humorous anecdote, which seems to belie Emerson's own account of himself: "On the next morning, May 11, we left the great valley before seven o'clock. At breakfast we had, among other things, pie. This article at breakfast was one of Mr. Emerson's weaknesses. A pie stood before him now. He offered to help somebody from it, who declined; and then one or two others, who also declined; and then Mr. – ; he too declined. 'But Mr. – !' Mr. Emerson remonstrated, with humorous emphasis, thrusting the knife under a piece of the pie, and putting the entire weight of his character into his manner, – 'but Mr. – , *what is pie for?*'" (95).

²⁴ See also Sara Atwood, "'The things that lead to life': Ruskin and Cultural Value." *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, Special Issue on John Ruskin, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Fall 2011), 1-12.

²⁵ Ruskin took the word "To-day" as his motto, "tacitly underlined to myself with the warning 'The night cometh when no man can work'" (35.391).

²⁶ As Robert MacFarlane observes, "Seen through the optic of Ruskin's prose, geology became war or apocalypse; the view from the top of a mountain became a panorama over battlegrounds upon which competing armies of rock, stone and ice had warred for epochs" (54).

²⁷ Just as Ruskin's Evangelical training contributed to his sense of the world's darkness, Emerson's Unitarian heritage may account in part for his persistent optimism. The Unitarian faith in which Emerson had been raised and had served for a time as a minister, was marked by "the relocation of the essence of the religious from Calvinist creedal theology to a liberal Christian ethics" (Buell 20). Unitarians largely rejected harsh Calvinist doctrine. As Lawrence Buell observes, Emerson's "vocational model, William Ellery Channing, was the Unitarian leader with the maximum of charisma and the minimum of doctrinal prescription" (20).

²⁸ Emerson maintained that even Art benefitted from the existence of evil. "[...] Art lives and thrills in new use and combining of contrasts, and mining into the dark evermore for blacker pits of night," he declares. "What would painter do, or what would poet or saint, but for crucifixions and hells?" (*CW* 6.135 "Considerations by the Way"). Ruskin would have rejected this notion; he grieved for those painters, such as Salvator, who "saw only what was gross and terrible [...] the horror of it, and in that horror fascination" (7.308). Those artists who had been "conquered by the evil, infected by the dragon breath of it, and at last brought into captivity, so as to take delight in evil forever" (7.271) might produce "powerful sensualistic art" (7.271), but never great or noble art.

²⁹ See Alan Davis, "Misinterpreting Ruskin: New light on the 'Dark Clue' in the basement of the National Gallery, 1857-58," *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Fall 2011), 35-64.

³⁰ Ladon, brother of the dragon slain by Jason.

³¹ The unnamed author of an article about Emerson published in the April 1903 volume of *Harper's Weekly* declares that "To-day the poet in [Emerson], which turned the world of physical forces that he recognized to a thing of beauty – dear, habitable to the moral imagination – is becoming strangely justified [...] and Emerson's mysticism looks, like his

optimism, natural and plausible” (880). Yet eleven years on, it was Ruskin’s vision that seemed to have been justified, as 1914 ushered in an era of darkness and “Another nation [arose] in the strength of its Black anger [...]. Crowned with fire, and with the wings of a bat” (7.408).

³² There is likely a cultural influence at work here as well. As Davis points out, Ruskin believed that Turner’s work – and his own efforts in *Modern Painters V* – were “connected by all manner of strange intellectual chords and nerves with the pathos and history of this old English country of ours; and on the other side, with the history of the European mind from earliest mythology down to modern rationalism and *irrationalism*” (35.533). Turner’s loss of faith, and Ruskin’s own dark perceptions, sprang from a sense of the death of an entire way of life. Emerson’s optimism, in turn, was influenced by the very newness of the American nation. In *English Traits*, he remarks that for all the sense, spirit, and success of the English, “I surely know that, as soon as I return to Massachusetts, I shall lapse at once into the feeling, which the geography of America inevitably inspires, that we play the game with immense advantage [...] and that England, an old and exhausted island, must one day be contented, like other parents, to be strong only in her children” (5.155).

³³ Thomas Carlyle to Charles Redwood, December 1847. There is an interesting similarity between Carlyle’s description of Emerson as “elevated” and “airy” and Ruskin’s notion of him as a “gentle cloud – intangible.”

³⁴ *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1834-1872*, was edited by Norton and published in 1883.

³⁵ I would like to thank Alan Davis for his characteristically insightful comments on this essay.

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