



Victorian Beauty: Ruskin's Changing Ideals

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Ruskin, and to some extent his followers, is often seen as the great Victorian prophet of beauty. In his early writing he invests beauty with the force of religious truth. In a passage intended for the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846), he writes of the power of an Alpine avalanche teaching him 'what till then I had not known – the real meaning of the word Beautiful. With all that I had ever seen before – there had come mingled the associations of humanity – the exertion of human power – the action of human mind. The image of self had not been effaced in that of God [...] . It was then that I understood that all which is the type of God's attributes [...] can turn the human soul from gazing upon itself [...] and fix the spirit [...] on the types of that which is to be its food for eternity; – this and this only is in the pure and right sense of the word beautiful' (*Works*, IV, 364–65). But he was never entirely content with this definition, and only two years later writes of the landscape of the Jura in very different terms: 'Those ever springing flowers and ever flowing streams had been dyed by the deep colours of human endurance, valour, and virtue; and the crests of the sable hills that rose against the evening sky received a deeper worship, because their far shadows fell eastward over the iron walls of Joux and the four-square keep of Granson' (VIII, 223–24). In his later work he retreats from his youthful belief that the value of beauty is distinct from human character, claiming instead that 'endurance is nobler than strength, and patience than beauty' (XVI, 372). The perspective of his work shifts to the social and political, and he turns from the analysis of beauty to a critique of the circumstances that excluded men and women from its creation, or its presence. As he became more interested in justice, he grew less interested in beauty. To see the celebration of beauty as the primary motive of his work is to mistake the nature of its persistent challenge.



John Ruskin is often seen as the great Victorian prophet of beauty. There are good reasons for this belief: his influential championing of contemporary painting (J. M. W. Turner, the Pre-Raphaelites); his pioneering role in recognizing the degradation of the environment that followed industrialization; his theoretical and critical writings on art, culminating in his work as Oxford's first professor of fine art, and as the founder of the School of Drawing in Oxford. He never lost sight of what beauty could mean to the imaginative lives of his readers, nor of his commitment to making beauty accessible to all. As Hilary Fraser noted in her perceptive account of Ruskin's aesthetic thought, 'he encouraged artists and laymen alike to appreciate the beauty of nature, art, and architecture, and to deprecate the ugliness of all that deformed nature and human creativity.'¹ But his definitions of beauty were not stable, and his shifting aesthetic models were primarily defined by his ethical values. In his early writing he invests beauty with the force of religious revelation. In a passage intended for the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846), he writes about the experience of witnessing an Alpine avalanche, and how its power had taught him

what till then I had not known — the real meaning of the word Beautiful. With all that I had ever seen before — there had come mingled the associations of humanity — the exertion of human power — the action of human mind. The image of self had not been effaced in that of God. [...] It was then that I understood that all which is the type of God's attributes [...] can turn the human soul from gazing upon itself [...] and fix the spirit [...] on the types of that which is to be its food for eternity; — this and this only is in the pure and right sense of the word BEAUTIFUL.²

In his later work Ruskin retreats from his youthful belief that the deepest meaning of beauty might be distinct from the attributes of humanity, claiming instead that 'endurance is nobler than strength, and patience than beauty'.³ His writing moves from the detached analysis of beauty to a critique of the circumstances that excluded men and women from its creation, or its presence. As he became more interested in justice, he grew less interested in beauty. To see the celebration of beauty as the central motive of his work is to mistake the nature of its persistent challenge.

Ruskin's early thoughts on beauty are cautious. The first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843) includes the chapter 'Of Ideas of Beauty', in which he removes the concept of

¹ Hilary Fraser, *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 112.

² *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library Edition, 39 vols (London: Allen; New York: Longman's, Green, 1903–12), IV: *Modern Painters*, vol. II (1904), pp. 364–65.

³ 'The Two Paths (1859)', in *Works*, ed. by Cook and Wedderburn, XVI: 'A Joy for Ever' and *The Two Paths with Letters on the Oxford Museum and Various Addresses 1856–1860* (1905), pp. 245–424 (p. 372).

beauty from the exercise of abstract thought: ‘Any material object which can give us pleasure [...] without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful.’⁴ Here the point is that ideas of beauty ‘are the subjects of moral, but not of intellectual perception’ (III, 111). Ruskin’s principal argument is that our pleasure in what we perceive to be beautiful cannot be separated from the principles underlying the evangelical faith that underpins his early analysis of landscape painting. The claim is reinforced in the second volume of a work that was finally to extend over five volumes, published over seventeen years. This book represents Ruskin’s most sustained attempt to arrive at a reasoned theoretical basis for the revisionary principles as an art critic. His confidence in evangelical values was at its height in the 1840s, and he has no hesitation in warning his readers against the work of those of ‘an impious or unreflecting nature’, with a perception of beauty ‘cultivated on principles merely *aesthetic*’. ‘There is’, Ruskin asserts, ‘in all works of such men a taint and stain’ (IV, 211, emphasis in original). The right principles will guide our understanding of beauty. Ruskin is equally confident that our experience of natural beauty, infused with Christian faith, will nourish our moral life. Taking issue with Schiller’s claim that ‘the sense of beauty never farthered the performance of a single duty’, Ruskin claims that

it is not possible for a Christian man to walk across so much as a rood of the natural earth, with mind unagitated and rightly poised, without receiving strength and hope from some stone, flower, leaf, or sound, nor without a sense of a dew falling upon him out of the sky. (IV, 215–16)

Nature and religion combine to create a morally grounded understanding of beauty.

On completing the second volume of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin turned from writing about painting and landscape to his major works on architecture, initiated by the publication of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). This is less of a radical departure than it might seem, for his views on nature and architecture are closely aligned. If the beauty of the natural world endows humanity with ‘strength and hope’, as Ruskin had previously argued, those very qualities work to enrich our understanding of architecture, in a reciprocal relationship of meaning. He had moved away from his earlier assertion that ‘associations with humanity’ could only weaken the selfless perception of beauty. In writing of the landscapes of Jura in *The Seven Lamps*, Ruskin now claims that their meaning is inseparable from their human history:

Those ever springing flowers and ever flowing streams had been dyed by the deep colours of human endurance, valour, and virtue; and the crests of the sable hills that

⁴ Works, III: *Modern Painters*, vol. I (1903), p. 109.

rose against the evening sky received a deeper worship, because their far shadows fell eastward over the iron walls of Joux, and the four-square keep of Granson.⁵

Throughout *The Seven Lamps* Ruskin argues — or assumes — that the beauty of any building depends on its association with the natural world, just as the beauty of the natural world depends on its relations with humanity. In ‘The Lamp of Beauty’ closely observed examples of this association within the traditions of Gothic architecture become the focus of Ruskin’s observations, rather than the analysis of beauty as an abstract concept. As Paul Guyer has noted,

one major accomplishment of Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps* is a profound enrichment of the conception of the aesthetic appeal of architecture that makes room for emotional and historical responses to architecture while also, in the principle of truth, suggesting the connection between beauty and structural technology that would subsequently become so important.⁶

Ruskin is now content with ‘the ordinary understanding of what is meant by the term Beauty’. Since enquiries on the matter

presume that the feeling of mankind on this subject is universal and instinctive, I shall base my present investigation on this assumption; and only asserting that to be beautiful which I believe will be granted me to be so without dispute. (VII, 138,139)

The variously disputed definitions of beauty are no longer the point. The significance of beauty is derived from human understanding, human endeavour, and human morality.

This evolution in Ruskin’s thought continues to direct his work in architectural history, notably in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53), and throughout the increasingly various preoccupations of the later volumes of *Modern Painters*. As Ruskin claimed in *Proserpina* (1875–86), his idiosyncratic study of the science of botany, ‘the perception of beauty, and the power of defining physical character, are based on moral instinct, and on the power of defining animal or human character.’⁷ But as the range of Ruskin’s interests, and his activities, began to expand, he found himself confronted with a dilemma. How could he reconcile a preoccupation with beauty, however defined, and wherever encountered, with his growing anger with what he felt to be the destructive consequences of capitalism? The fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters*, published in 1860, shows Ruskin beginning to brood on a darkening understanding of the relations

⁵ *Works*, VIII: *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1903), pp. 223–24.

⁶ Paul Guyer, *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 90.

⁷ ‘Proserpina (1875–1886)’, in *Works*, XXV: *Love’s Meinie and Proserpina* (1906), pp. 191–536 (p. 268).

between natural beauty and human experience. Responding to the ‘rhapsodies’ of a ‘zealous, useful, and able’ Scottish clergyman on the beauties of a Highland scene — ‘sunshine, and fresh breezes, and bleating lambs, and clean tartans, and all manner of pleasantness’ — as a demonstration of ‘the goodness of God’, Ruskin points out that, ‘looked close at’, such a scene ‘has its shadows’. He illustrates his point:

Here, for instance, is the very fact of one, as pretty as I can remember — having seen many. It is a little valley of soft turf, enclosed in its narrow oval by jutting rocks and broad flakes of nodding fern. From one side of it to the other winds, serpentine, a clear brown stream, drooping into quicker ripple as it reaches the end of the oval field, and then, first islanding a purple and white rock with an amber pool, it dashes away into a narrow fall of foam under a thicket of mountain-ash and alder. The autumn sun, low but clear, shines on the scarlet ash-berries and on the golden birch-leaves, which, fallen here and there, when the breeze has not caught them, rest quiet in the crannies of the purple rock. Beside the rock, in the hollow under the thicket, the carcass of a ewe, drowned in the last flood, lies nearly bare to the bone, its white ribs protruding through the skin, raven-torn; and the rags of its wool still flickering from the branches that first stayed it as the stream swept it down. A little lower, the current plunges, roaring, into a circular chasm like a well, surrounded on three sides by a chimney-like hollowness of polished rock, down which the foam slips in detached snow-flakes. Round the edges of the pool beneath, the water circles slowly, like black oil; a little butterfly lies on its back, its wings glued to one of the eddies, its limbs feebly quivering; a fish rises, and it is gone. Lower down the stream, I can just see over a knoll, the green and damp turf roofs of four or five hovels, built at the edge of a morass, which is trodden by the cattle into a black Slough of Despond at their doors, and traversed by a few ill-set stepping-stones, with here and there a flat slab on the tops, where they have sunk out of sight, and at the turn of the brook I see a man fishing, with a boy and a dog — a picturesque and pretty group enough certainly, if they had not been there all day starving. I know them, and I know the dog’s ribs also, which are nearly as bare as the dead ewe’s; and the child’s wasted shoulders, cutting his old tartan jacket through, so sharp are they.⁸

What Ruskin had previously described as beautiful, in a celebratory spirit not entirely dissimilar from that of the rhapsodizing Scottish clergyman, is here dismissed as merely ‘pretty’ — a much less weighted word. Other things matter more. The scene must be ‘looked at close’ before the human suffering it reveals emerges from its picturesque setting. That close looking, always central to Ruskin’s critical approach, had led him to areas of social thought and action, in which beauty had a less prominent part to play.

⁸ *Works*, VII: *Modern Painters*, vol. V (1905), pp. 268–69.

Ruskin had at this point in his life lost the evangelical faith that had fused with his interpretation of late romanticism to drive his early challenge to critical orthodoxies. Restless and unhappy, he turned from the monumental multivolume publications that had made his name to the production of a series of shorter texts (essays, journal articles, and lectures), often published in collected form, addressing what he had come to see as the political and economic abuses of the day. *Unto This Last*, a series of four polemical essays on political economy first published in Thackeray's *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, signalled a radical change of direction in Ruskin's work. His readership, formerly respectful and sufficiently affluent to be able to afford his lavishly produced and expensive publications, began to fragment. *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice* continued to be read and admired, while his newly polemical publications divided opinion. The widely shared belief (in part encouraged by Ruskin himself) that he was universally castigated for the changing form and nature of his writing has been shown to be partly misplaced. Broadly speaking, the reception of his attack on the established ideologies of commercial and industrial expansion in the middle decades of the nineteenth century tended to be hostile among literary and political circles of London and the south-east of England, while the communities in the industrial Midlands and North were often more hospitable.⁹ The provincial press, which included successful and widely read weeklies with circulation figures that often exceeded those of their London-based rivals, was warily inclined to give the new focus of Ruskin's work a positive reception. This established a pattern that persisted throughout Ruskin's later years. Those who identified most closely with the changing direction of his thought were often those who felt themselves to be at some distance from cultural centres of power and influence. They were women, or working men, or businessmen based in the industrial cities of the Midlands and the North — sympathetic audiences for Ruskin's attack on political and economic orthodoxies.¹⁰

If, as Ruskin affirmed, the beauty of art is fundamentally derived from the beauty of nature, then the industrialized assaults on nature that he witnessed with deep dismay also amounted to an attack on art: 'All Schools of Art are nonsense, when you have destroyed Nature.'¹¹ The neglect of the human capital represented by the working people who were compelled to produce the false affluence facilitated by industrial production ('illth', rather than wealth), contributed to the same harmful pattern of behaviour:

⁹ For an analysis of this regional pattern, see Daryl Lim, 'The Reception of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, 1860–2' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Cambridge, 2013). Cited with the permission of the author.

¹⁰ A detailed account of Ruskin's influence in this respect is to be found in Amy Woodson-Boulton, *Transformative Beauty: Art Museums in Industrial Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹¹ 'To the Derby School of Art' [1873], in *Works*, XXXIV: *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century, On the Old Road, Arrows of the Chace, Ruskiniana* (1905), pp. 510–12 (p. 512).

'*The Stones of Venice* taught the laws of constructive Art, and the dependence of all human work or edifice, for its beauty, on the happy life of the workman.'¹² The beauty of nature and the welfare of working people were inseparable; and in Ruskin's view his self-interested contemporaries were bent on destroying both.

The connected web of perception and ethical responsibility that once sustained the possibility of beauty in our lives had disintegrated:

Once I could speak joyfully about beautiful things, 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. (VII, 422–23)

Ruskin's dismay deepened as he aged and saw more and more clearly the ruin of the necessary balance between human activity and the integrity of the natural world:

That harmony is now broken, and broken the world round: fragments, indeed, of what existed still exist, and hours of what is past still return; but month by month the darkness gains upon the day, and the ashes of the Antipodes glare through the night.¹³

Here, in his quasi-apocalyptic lecture 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century' (1884), Ruskin is speaking about the phenomenon we would now describe as climate change. He was one of the first to argue that human activity could degrade the climate, and though his understanding of the mechanisms by which this process might operate necessarily differed from the conclusions of contemporary science, his anger has made him a significant figure among a new generation of ecological critics.¹⁴ James Phillips argues that Ruskin turns beauty into a 'fact', claiming that his influence is an expression of disinterested observation, rather than the advocacy of a subjective version of aesthetic taste: 'Aesthetics has to be reinvented in order to meet the ecological and political challenges of the day, for to pretend that nothing has gone

¹² 'Letter 78 (June 1877)', in *Works*, XXIX: *Fors Clavigera, Letters 73–96* (1907), pp. 124–45 (p. 137). Ruskin introduced the term 'illth' in *Unto This Last* (*Works*, XVII: *Unto This Last, Munera Pulveris, Time and Tide, with Other Writings on Political Economy 1860–73* (1905), pp. 1–114 (p. 89)). Yuichi Shionoya describes Ruskin's intervention in economic debates of the mid-nineteenth century in 'Ruskin's Romantic Triangle: Neither Wealth nor Beauty but Life', *History of Economic Ideas*, 22 (2014), 15–49.

¹³ 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century', in *Works*, XXXIV, 1–80 (p. 78).

¹⁴ Heidi C. M. Scott has argued for the continuing importance of 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century' in 'Industrial Souls: Climate Change, Immorality, and Victorian Anticipations of the Good Anthropocene', *Victorian Studies*, 60 (2018), 588–610. See also, Jesse Oak Taylor, 'Storm-Clouds on the Horizon: John Ruskin and the Emergence of Anthropogenic Climate Change', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 26 (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.802>>.

awry is to collude with the havoc wrought by industrialization.’¹⁵ Phillips’s point is that Ruskin’s uncompromising position might serve as a model for activists in an age where our understanding of beauty is trivialized by digital technologies: ‘Beautiful landscapes and works of art are sought out in order to be photographed and for the resulting digital images to be uploaded to social media’ (Phillips, p. 75). For many years, Ruskin’s identity as an environmental and political moralist seemed to make him an outdated and irrelevant figure. It is now a decisive reason for the revival of his reputation, as a new generation of readers discovers the moral vitality of his connected thought.

¹⁵ James Phillips, ‘Beauty Is a Fact under Siege: John Ruskin as Critic in a State of Ecological Emergency’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 25 (2020), 63–76 (p. 64).

