

Why Ruskin?

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John Ruskin, Sir Hubert von Herkomer, 1879

The National Portrait Gallery, London.

Why Ruskin?¹

The first version of this paper was delivered some years ago at the Faculty Lunch Presentation series at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. This final arrangement might, perhaps, more accurately be called “Why Ruskin Still?” given that my admiration for this great Victorian and his work have only increased in the time that has elapsed between that rendering and this. Such ascending regard aside however, it remains the frustrating case that hardly anyone, English or American, highly educated or less so, lights up in warm recognition when I mention Ruskin’s name and voice the esteem in which I hold him. So, when—not so very long ago—a new friend asked the question I have chosen as my title (only the latest among many who have done so), it occurred to me that a more substantial version of my original remarks might be of some use. In that frame I set to work on the following paragraphs, hoping that, by the time they arrived at their end, the answer to the question would be palpable. Because it allows a relatively informal presentation of sometimes complex material I have decided to keep the “lecture” format of my original talk despite the fact that I am uncomfortably aware that this version will ask a bit more of my reader’s time than the half-hour I was initially allotted.

How I Found Ruskin²

I’d like to begin by sharing a sentence from one of Jonathan Kozol’s books, *Ordinary Resurrections*.³ But before I do, I want to say right away that this isn’t a (poorly) veiled ploy for alerting you to Kozol’s coming lecture at these lovely Colleges of the Seneca—as part of the President’s Forum series, at 8 PM on April 4, at the Smith Opera House—an event which, *were* I making such a pitch, I would exhort you to recommend, in the strongest possible terms, that your students attend. Nor is my use of this excerpt a clandestine way of underscoring my conviction that the chief reason why our young learners should walk to Kozol’s talk in whatever legions we can muster at these small colleges by the long lake is that he is one of our few true American heroes, someone who has dedicated his life to helping the very weakest and deprived among us—the children of our oh-so-many inner-city ghettos—by

¹ Not a few thoughtful heads and kind eyes have helped me arrive at this iteration. Among these I need, first, to acknowledge the editorial perspicacity and helpful comments of Jennifer Morris. But others have offered fine advice as prior versions were created and then amended. To these good souls much thanks is also due. They are: Sara Atwood, Zach Bullock, Alan Davis, Paul Dawson, Stuart Eagles, Mark Frost, Jack Dash Harris, Charlotte Hegyi, Tim Holton, Stephen Lee, Gordon Lewis, Marita Lopez-Mena, Meredith Aldrich Moodie, Tim Rawson, Han van den Blink, Suzanne Varady-Aubert, Alan Vogeler, Martha Vogeler, Stephen Wildman, and Clive Wilmer. To the *always* dedicated, hard-helping staff at Warren Hunting Smith Library, Hobart & William Smith Colleges, I owe more gratitude than any sentence can record: they know who they are but, more importantly, *I* know what they can *do*!

² Or, maybe, it was the other way ‘round?

³ All references can be found in the Bibliography. Specific page references are included in the text.

writing books that describe at first hand (often in the still-hopeful, still-forgiving voices of these unconscionably harmed little ones) the excruciating crises and despair which continue to exist on nearly every street corner and in virtually every apartment in the woeful places where these poor souls live, places all but forgotten and neglected by we who are so much more fortunate. A noble life, then, this of Kozol's, eminently worthy (I'm sure you'd agree) of a couple of hours of our charges' still-forming life trajectories. Of course, I would *dearly* love to make such petition, but resist the temptation because the business of these pending minutes is other: another noble life.

Now that sentence, a musing of Kozol's about the unexpected direction his life took. "I came away from those discussions with my father," he tells us, "with a stronger sense than ever of the foolishness of thinking that we know the journey we are meant to take or that we can predict the consequence of almost any set of choices we ever make." (pp. 288-9)

These words apply to my own journey perfectly. If anyone had suggested to me, say, twenty-five years ago, that I would be talking today about why John Ruskin has been so important to my intellectual growth and personal development, I would have stared back stupefied. For, until the summer of 1985, I am quite sure that I had never heard the name "John Ruskin." Heard it, happily enough, that first time in the midst of some talks I was having with a dear friend, Professor Claudette Kemper Columbus, who thought and taught so brilliantly in our Department of English and Comparative Literature for so long. We were ruminating about how we would teach our approaching course on "London in the 19th Century." As we chatted, good sociologist that I like to think I am, I suggested that, surely, we should read some Engels and some Marx, two giants in my field (particularly Marx). Claudette responded that, just as surely, we should read some Tennyson, some Carlyle, some Dickens. [Marvelous suggestion that last: my mother read great gulps of *The Inimitable* (as Dickens modestly liked to refer to himself!) to me before bed when I was a boy, with the result that, even though I often drifted off during these deliveries, *Oliver Twist*, the Artful Dodger, poor Nancy and terrible Bill Sykes, *David Copperfield*, sad Little Em'ly, noble Ham, the wastrel Steerforth, and ("not to put too fine a point on it") Mr. Micawber, were as deeply embedded in my consciousness as any great theorist of society would later be.] To which list Claudette added: "And we shall read some Ruskin." Well, thought I, this will be interesting. I've never heard of this Ruskin fellow, but if Claudette thinks he's as important as these other eminent Victorians, then he jolly well must be something. Just how much of a "something" Ruskin really was, of course, I had not the foggiest of notions; nor, like Kozol, did I have any inkling of the sea change that was pending for my own life in the wake of this (not so) innocent suggestion made by my esteemed colleague.

So read Ruskin we did. And, as we worked our charges through John Rosenberg's fine selection of excerpts spanning Ruskin's long career (or, more accurately, as my much more knowledgeable colleague worked our students through that collection), I became ever more intrigued with what were Ruskin's patently sociological essays—especially with those drawn from a small book called *Unto This Last*, each essay containing, in one guise or another, no-holds-barred exposes of the unbridled selfishness and misanthropy lurking in the assumptions

of the doctrine known as *laissez-faire* capitalism and that ideology's life-maiming effects, when put into practice, on the hearts, minds, bodies, and souls of its workers and consumers, and nature itself. That was my start.

It wasn't until four years later, however, during the fall of 1989, while I was teaching a group of our students during a semester abroad in London, that I took a decision to *study* Ruskin. Recalling that Rosenberg had included only three of *Unto This Last's* four essays on (what was called during Ruskin's time) "political economy," I began the hunt for the missing piece. Questions at Waterstone's Bookstore in Earl's Court led me to Clive Wilmer's recently published, impeccably annotated,⁴ *Unto This Last and Other Writings by John Ruskin* (still the best introduction to our subject's sociological writings). Reading the four essays *seriatim*, allowed me to see for the first time the truly intrepid and revolutionary nature of his arguments condemning the economic system and culture of his day, an attack sustained at all points by carefully crafted analysis and trenchant example. [I should note that when Ruskin first published his scathing attacks in 1860, he was all but alone in the thankless task, only Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1844) and Marx and Engels' "Communist Manifesto" (1850) preceding him in English.⁵] A fortnight's more mining brought me through the rest of the edition's selections and left me more than a little eager to follow much further the veins of intellectual wealth Wilmer's choices had opened.

But I soon discovered, with the exception of Wilmer's and Rosenberg's collections and a few scholarly treatises on various aspects of Ruskin's work, that nothing else was in print, even (insult of insults) in his native land—which discovery spurred me to some serious routing about in those wonderful second-hand bookstores (which the English call "antiquarian bookshops") in London's Cecil Court, a quaint alley off Leicester Square. From such forays I nearly always returned to the flat I shared with my wife, Tracy, and my children, Jamie and Lauren, with a handful of small, virid books containing, as their number grew, more and more of Ruskin's major writings, not just on political economy but on architecture, art, nature, mythology, and religion. By the time our British semester ended, for a total of about £75, I had amassed nearly two shelves of what, by then, after perusing one after another of these volumes in those moments when I was not teaching, I had begun to think of as shelves of gold in black-and-white.

After the London program, I had a semester's leave. Since one of the sociological hats I wear is the study of cities, I had earlier applied for and been awarded a Fulbright Senior Scholar Research Fellowship so that I might study Cairo for six months. And so it happened that, in January of 1990, our tiny troop decamped London for the Egyptian megalopolis. But by then Ruskin had won me. My dear friend, Alan Davis, once told me that the test of a *great*

⁴ These annotations being essential for understanding Ruskin's 19th century references.

⁵ Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England* and Marx's *Capital* were published in German in 1845 and 1867, respectively. Neither appeared in English until much later—Engel's book in 1887 and Marx's in 1885.

book was not that it intrigued but, rather, that it was a thunderclap.⁶ Using that as criterion, looking back, I regard myself as having been, for many of the months of 1989 and 1990, in a mental thunderstorm like no other I had ever known. The result was that, between my dozens of interviews with remarkable Cairo's remarkable residents, I continued, as in London, to read Ruskin voraciously: read him deep into the evenings on the miniature porch of our eleventh floor flat in the suburb of Mohandesseen above Cairo's always busy streets (from which vantage, glancing south, you could see the nightly light show at the pyramids flashing); read him on sunny benches near the Nile not far from the Fulbright office; read him crossing the desert in a rickety bus as four Spates made their bumpy way on weekends to Ras Mohammed, that projection at the tip of the Sinai which affords, in the shimmering waters surrounding its Red Sea coast, the world's best snorkeling.⁷ And, as all this page-turning progressed, day-by-day, week-by-week, I felt myself being transformed: for good.

As mentioned, I had begun by reading, naturally enough, Ruskin's sociology, quickly learning from this scrutiny that, in these remarkable works, I had at last found the sociologist I had been looking for. Long unhappy with my field's adopted and entrenched physical science model of doing its work, a model consequencing in innumerable volumes and articles framed in a "reportorial" or "value free" style, studies carefully avoiding any evaluative comment about the consequences for human happiness or suffering which attend our varied, invented social orders, I discovered in Ruskin a writer in no way chary about commenting on such matters. Indeed, such evaluative remarks were the *raison d'être* for his writing. Here, I found, was a serious student of the social willing, on completion of his analysis, to say flat out that *this* way of arranging society was beneficial for human beings while *that* way of arranging it was inimical; willing, further, to say that, if his analysis convinced, then, straightaway, we should set about finding ways to bring the former living arrangement into being while, with similar alacrity, working out how best to dismantle the defective order.

In fairness to most of my sociological colleagues, I should note that my position on this matter of "proper scientific perspective" is far from the normative center of my field. Indeed, it is so far from that median that some might suggest, perhaps not so gently, that my approach to the study of our society really isn't sociology at all!⁸ But that is matter for debate in another forum. In any event, so enthused, one night, perched on that high Cairo porch, and using my early-edition Radio Shack DOS-based computer (the legendary TRS-80), I composed

⁶ Responsible scholar that he is, Alan tells me that he is definitely not the source of this fine observation. It was C. S. Lewis, characterizing his journey through the writings of Jacob Boehme (Hooper: 328).

⁷ Or so I have been told by those who have snorkeled Australia's Great Barrier Reef, usually regarded as Ras Mohammed's closest contender. Although not directly relevant to our immediate concerns, it may be worth mentioning that cries of unrestrained delight—at least such as can be effected through a snorkel mouthpiece—could be heard burbling up from assorted Spates when, for the first time, we were allowed to gaze upon one of our planet's usually concealed glories: the many-specied, indescribably beautiful schools of (mostly!) smaller swimmers slipping in and out of the corals just below the surface.

⁸ I am, however, not alone in rejecting the aptness of the dominant paradigm in my field. A few individual sociologists (Richard Sennett comes to mind) and some specialized groups (The Society for the Study of Social Problems for example) also demur.

a long letter to Professor Columbus back in that lovely little city we locals affectionately call "The Other Geneva," thanking her effusively for the gift of Ruskin. I think she was delighted with my delight.

Nevertheless, all matters of theoretical legitimacy aside, my adoption of Ruskin's strategy for studying society is still, as it was then, a strange pairing. For, despite his many works on economic, political, religious, or other social themes, he remains all but unknown in the social sciences. Indeed, if his name is recognized by many more sociologists than the eight at Hobart and William Smith who, along with myself, admit to being of that stripe, I'd be more than a little surprised. Nor, save for Victorian specialists, does the name "Ruskin" get much recognition anywhere in academe. My learned colleagues both here at HWS and elsewhere know him not. A few recollect vaguely that he was "mentioned" somewhere along their scholarly way, but almost none recall who he was or why, once, he was deemed so worthy of interest. This "blank stares" problem only gets worse out of a university setting. Thus, it should come as no surprise when I report that, over the last quarter century, I have been asked, more times than I can count: "Who is this Ruskin fellow?" and "Why are you so interested in him?" Completely legitimate queries, queries I do my best to answer in what follows. Of course, when that exercise is ended, the (by then, patient!) reader will have to decide whether I have provided evidence sufficient to certify a professor of sociology gone mad, or bad (or both), or whether there just may be a modicum of socially redeeming value to the life of what I still like to call my mind in my abiding admiration of John Ruskin.

Who Ruskin Was

Now, assuming your knowledge of our subject is roughly what mine was when I first heard his name a quarter century and more ago—effectively nothing—I'd like to provide, first, a brief outline of Ruskin's intellectual journey. As I do, I touch on his life story only as it pertains to the development of his thought. Unfortunately, over the course of the century and more which have disappeared since his death in 1900, for complex reasons, that story has been *seriously* misinterpreted by almost all biographers as well as many critics. In my view, such distortions are the root cause of Ruskin's remarkable decline in reputation; which decline, in turn, has consequenced in our modern unfamiliarity with his work. I correct these misrepresentations elsewhere.⁹

So: Ruskin was born in London in 1819 to a well-off sherry merchant of a father and a mother of Evangelical—*deeply* Evangelical—persuasion. He left this life at Brantwood, his home near the village of Coniston in England's lovely Lake District, in 1900, just a few days shy of his eighty-first birthday, his term almost coincident with the Victorian Age. (The Great Queen also saw first light in 1819; she glimpsed her last in 1901.) During his time, Ruskin was all but universally acknowledged as a premier member of that pantheon of geniuses who lived chock-a-block throughout the British nineteenth century. He was as famous as Wordsworth, Turner, Gladstone and Disraeli, as celebrated as Carlyle, Coleridge, Hardy, Darwin, George

⁹ See my articles and the forthcoming book listed in the Bibliography.

Eliot, the Brownings and the sisters Bronte, as revered as Dickens, as illustrious as Tennyson. For more than thirty years (roughly, 1854-85), wherever he spoke, whether in London, Manchester, Dublin, or Edinburgh, halls overflowed. After his appointment as the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford in 1870 (a post he held, excepting two periods of illness, for a decade and a half), his lectures proved so popular the administration had to open the largest theater on campus, the Sheldonian, to handle those who wanted to hear him. Indeed, because of demand, many had to be given twice. When he fell gravely ill in 1878, the Queen asked the country "to pray for Mr. Ruskin's recovery" (the petitions worked). When Poet Laureate Tennyson died in 1892, Prime Minister Gladstone wished to appoint Ruskin, but could not because, once more, Ruskin had been laid low by the most recent of the series of mental attacks which plagued him over the final twenty-two years of his life.

In 1843, just graduated from Oxford, he published his first major book, *Modern Painters*. With few demurs, it took thoughtful England by storm, both because of the remarkable eloquence of its paragraphs, its astonishing portraits of nature (I will share one of these later), and its challenging contention: that the still-living English landscape artist, J. M. W. Turner, was not (as some critics had suggested) "past his prime," but was, instead—as he had been all his life by a distance immense—the *greatest* artist to pick up a brush since the Renaissance (and was manifestly superior to most of the giants of this much praised era as well). What carried the argument was the manner in which Ruskin demonstrated he was right. Knowing that most of the pictures he discussed were accessible, he "walked" those who bought his book from painting to painting in galleries around London, showing them: "See: this is how Claude (Lorrain) painted sunsets. Now, look at how much better, how much truer to nature, Turner's depiction of that daily disappearance is." "See: this is how Poussin painted trees. Now, look at Turner's more accurate depictions, *perfect* in their use of color, in their application of technique, in their grasp of the *life force* of the subject." "See: this is how Gainsborough painted clouds.¹⁰ Now, compare Turner's renderings: they are so much more beautiful, so much more like the clouds we actually see, are they not?"¹¹

But there was more than superior execution in Turner's drawings, watercolors, and canvases. In each case, Ruskin showed that the painter's works possessed the unique ability, if we saw them properly, to create in us, their viewers, a new and more profound fellowship with nature, a feeling of spiritual connection with the earth and its lovelinesses. In contrast, the works of many celebrated others were more mannered, less enticing, less uplifting. It was a winning approach; one Ruskin would use the rest of his career. Always, he believed, when it came to things viewable, it was an author's responsibility to put forth the evidence, showing readers how to look at and analyze what was at issue. As the next two decades passed and other books appeared on other art themes, his fame deepened and flowed, not only across Britain but on to the Continent and over the waters to America. Indeed, for forty-five years, Ruskin was England's most celebrated critic, single-handedly responsible for raising the level

¹⁰ Ruskin actually liked much of Gainsborough's work.

¹¹ Many of the pictures discussed in the first volume of *Modern Painters* still hang in galleries in or around London. If one is willing to make the effort, much of his remarkable "art walk" can still be experienced.

of public appreciation of art to a height previously unimaginable. Charlotte Brontë's enthusiastic reaction is but one of many expressed in similar vein: "I have lately been reading *Modern Painters*," the novelist wrote to a friend in a letter of 1848: "Hitherto I have only had instinct to guide me in the judging of art and the viewing of nature. I now feel as if I had been walking blindfolded. This book seems to give me eyes." (Shorter, p. 387)

That said, establishing Turner's genius beyond question was not Ruskin's only priority. In the second volume in the *Modern Painters* series, published in 1846 (there would be five when the series ended in 1860), he lavished praise on some of the nearly-forgotten masters of the late Middle Ages and early Italian Renaissance. Strange as it may be for us to contemplate today, before he reminded us of their brilliance, artists like Tintoretto, Fra Angelico, Veronese, the brothers Bellini, Botticelli, Carpaccio and Giorgione, had been all but lost to critical view.

That verb, "remind," is a fine one, isn't it? It means, if you follow it to its root, not just "remembering" (the way we usually use it), but, more deeply, to "put back into the mind something significant that might have slipped out of it." Ruskin was constantly reminding readers that the original sources of words, more often than not, contain their most powerful meanings and many of his works contain delightful etymological searches for forgotten connotations and denotations: "welfare," he reminds us in one place, means to "fare well," and "economy" (a word that will take on greater importance before I finish these remarks), he tells us in another, first designated "the efficient management of a house for the benefit of *all* its occupants." In one lecture he told his audience that it was every educated person's responsibility to *never* let a word escape, that dictionaries were among the most important tools of human growth, and should be easily to hand always. Of course, he allowed, to make a commitment to ferreting out the meaning of *all* new words and images that come one's way over the span of a lifetime would be exacting work, but, he added (knowing from experience it to be so), such sleuthing would prove endlessly interesting and, over time, would add incalculably to the strength of one's character.

In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), Ruskin's focus shifted to the critical role played by edifices in our lives. Because we all live and work in buildings, he suggested that architecture is the one form of art in which everyone participates. At the heart of the argument lay a demonstration designed to prove the superiority of the buildings, ranging from cathedrals to houses, of the then long-despised, decaying-from-neglect architecture of the gothic Middle Ages: *all* of which, he showed, were aesthetically more delightful and technically more sophisticated than the buildings of the over-applauded Renaissance (poor purloins these, he said, of the once-original styles of Greece and Rome) or the power-glorifying palaces of the Baroque (Versailles, Peterhof). The reason for gothic's superiority became apparent as soon as we focused an attentive eye: Gothic architecture was both close *to*, and reflective *of*, nature and, as such, was a style toward which, consciously or not, we (ourselves part of nature) are inevitably drawn. It was also a style in sympathy with and celebratory of human creativity and difference, a community-based form of building in which everyone could (and *did* during the centuries of gothic's preeminence) cooperate, using one's strengths as best one could (the erection of the great cathedrals of Europe over, often,

hundreds of years by local citizens being a prime example). Which discernings led to another (an insight which, not long after, would become a cornerstone of his sociological writings): that *anyone* engaged in labor of *any* sort needed to be accorded respect as *both* worker *and* artist however rudimentary that second designation might be, needed to be given the chance to find their most creative way of contributing to the excellence of the work done. As he put it in another work: "Life without Industry is Sin, Industry without Art, Brutality."¹²

To prove these points, Ruskin once more took his readers on a prose tour, this time of the cities and towns of Europe (Rouen and Beauvais in France, Lucca, Pisa, and Venice in Italy) demonstrating, in chapters laden with beautiful paragraphs and detailed illustrations (most of which he had drawn), his arguments.

He wrote a number of books about Venice describing the wonders of that still astonishing city on the Adriatic. In *The Stones of Venice* (3 volumes, 1851-53), he made the case that Venice was one of the most important cities in Western history, partly because of the (fast-fading) record it had left of the glorious days when it was at its commercial, cultural, and aesthetic zenith, and partly because of the warnings which could be gleaned from a study of its sad decline after, corrupted by the pleasure-loving, self-congratulatory influence of the Renaissance, it began to slip away, like one of its gondolas into a darkening fog, losing connection, decade by decade, with the moral underpinnings (fair trade, charity for the poor, reverence for God and life) which had once anchored it against adversity. It was an argument which raised hackles in the Renaissance-loving culture of the England and Europe of his time. But having based his pages on intricate study of hundreds of buildings in the floating city, Ruskin challenged readers to go and judge for themselves. And go they did. It is a well-documented fact that, for at least six decades after *The Stones of Venice* appeared, tourists could be seen hefting his volumes about the city, using them as guides as they peered intently at church after church, statue after statue, painting after painting. So important was Ruskin's appreciation of their city's greatness to Venetians, immediately after his death in 1900, they placed, on the façade of one of the pensiones at which he had stayed, a plaque proclaiming him an honorary citizen. It reads: "Priest of Art,/In our Stones, in our St. Mark's,/Almost in Every Monument of Italy,/ He sought together/The Spirit of the Artisan and the Spirit of the People./Every Marble, every Bronze, every Canvas,/Everything cried to him/That Beauty was Religion/If the Spirit of Man seeks it/And the Reverence of the People welcomes it."¹³

There is a lamentable irony to this story. For so effectively did Ruskin make his case for the historical importance and beauty of "La Serinissima," that, in time, not only European and American elites flowed down the Grand Canal but so did anyone with money enough to get to

¹² After his death in 1900, Ruskin's works were gathered into the 39-volume *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (hereafter, LE). This remains the standard collection. All Ruskin references to follow direct the reader to the appropriate volume and page. The present excerpt, for instance, can be found on page 464 in Volume 7, and can be briefly referenced as 7: 387. Later LE quotations will be referenced similarly.

¹³ The plaque is on the upper wall of Pensione La Calcina on the Zattere in Venice's Dorsoduro quarter. I am grateful to my colleague, Professor of Art Elena Ciletti, for this translation.

Venice (the graffitists, alas—too cowardly to come out by day—have, I recently noticed, been making their indelible “contributions” to the Rialto Bridge and other irreplaceable monuments). From which perspective (and here the irony), a compelling argument could be made that our subject (he would be appalled at the prospect) is in a strange way at least partially responsible for the sinking city’s current crises of corrosive overtourism and uncontrollable pollution.

I said that Ruskin was Turner’s champion and that his impassioned arguments for that painter’s supremacy were responsible for bringing him back to critical and popular acclaim. (It would be the odd-argument-out these days which did not acknowledge Turner as Britain’s greatest painter.) In the 1850s, Ruskin was to pen similar approbations for a new group of artists calling themselves “Pre-Raphaelites”—among them Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, and Edward Burne-Jones—all of whom, like Turner, we now regard as picture-makers of genius. In keeping with the arguments he had made celebrating the near-perfection of Turner’s art and the architecture of the Middle Ages, Ruskin contended that the canvases created by these young men were not just magnificent in execution (for him, mastery of technique was but the entrée qualification for any consideration of an artist as one “for all seasons”), but because, in theme and execution, their efforts “returned” to the era “before Raphael” (*i.e.*, before the High Renaissance), a time when the artist’s role in society was still seen as didactic and painters, sculptors, and architects were *expected* to dedicate their days to the creation of works which raised the great moral and aesthetic issues of life. (Ruskin believed that one of the greatest tragedies attending the spreading ethos of modernity was its easy, self-indulgent acceptance of the notion that art exists “for art’s sake”—in other words, solely for the expression of the artist—rather than as a principal means for aiding the enlightenment of its audience.)

Revelatory arguments in his time, these. Certainly revelatory to *me*—thunderclaps!—when I first read them.

Nevertheless, failed arguments all. Or so Ruskin thought. For, by the time the 1850s drew to their close, he had come to believe that all his work had been in vain. In his art and architecture writings, he had wanted to accomplish two things: to write so that, as his pages turned, his readers, sensing themselves not so, would resolve to become more in tune with the natural world and its beauties; as well, he had taken inordinate pains to compose so that these readers would realize, in a way they had not before, that it was their “time on watch,” that they had a moral responsibility for ensuring the well-being of our delicate world, not merely because such care would serve their own sustenance and delight but because it would leave the planet in a state which would provide sustenance and delight for generations to come. For, if they, the capable, privileged, and powerful, were not so responsible, then just who might be?

But, patently, the arguments had not carried. After two decades of nearly holidayless writing and the publication of nine books (and three or four times that number of essays and lectures), thousands of pages which had won him, by the age of forty, secure standing among

the eminents of his age, Ruskin was convinced that most who read his books read them because they became enchanted by his fine words and images. (That he was a writer of the very *highest* order, I will show shortly. Some, who have certainly earned the right to say so, contend that he was, and still is, the greatest prose stylist the English language has produced.) Much worse, most readers took to heart only his artistic "recommendations," not his urgent messages. In short, he had succeeded in driving up the prices for Turner and Pre-Raphaelite paintings and had put gothic cathedrals and Northern Italian cities back on tourist routes, but, save for a pitiful few, he had changed almost no one fundamentally. It was a laughable fiasco. He had *not* made—his reason for writing, his justification for being!—the world a better place. In fact, if one looked carefully (and Ruskin was a master of such scrutiny), it was plainly, painfully, pitifully clear that his society was further down the road to perdition than when he first put pen to paper in the early 1840s. Looking in the mirror of his own life in 1859, he saw unmitigated sorrow and defeat peering back at him, however unintentionally these had arrived in the glass. The sight all but shattered him.

So, in desperation and, he believed, out of imperative need, he turned to writing and lecturing on society and its manifest and worsening problems. As 1860 dawned, the Industrial Revolution (to all but universal cheers from members of the social classes driving it) was rising into its eighth decade, striding with juggernaut ferocity over the few places in England, Scotland, and Wales where it was not already ensconced, carrying in its train riches for the few (hence the applause) and ever-more widespread and deepening poverty for its working millions. Fully aware of such horrors for more than a decade,¹⁴ Ruskin found himself, as each succeeding year ended, ever more furious at the callousness and cupidity of those his mentor in social criticism, Thomas Carlyle, called "the Captains of Industry." A single passage (one of many) gives a sense of this anger. Never one to dissimulate, his nineteenth century, Ruskin wrote, had succeeded in producing a society where the life of its citizens was being daily "tramped out in the slime of the street, crushed to dust amidst the roaring of the wheel," a world which could only be likened to a "pallid charnel-house, a ball strewn bright with human ashes glaring in poised sway beneath the sun, all blinding white, with death from pole-to-pole. Death, not of myriads of poor bodies only, but of will, and mercy, and conscience." (7: 387)

There was nothing for it but to take the Captains on. From this determination came a little book (mentioned earlier) containing four essays on political economy bearing the title, *Unto This Last*, a phrase taken from Christ's parable about the owner of a vineyard and his choice to treat his workers kindly and fairly.¹⁵ For the rest of his life, Ruskin believed *Unto This Last* to be his most important book. But to readers of the *Cornhill Magazine*, where the essays first appeared before he collected them into that small volume, they were not unlike the effects of salt being poured into open wounds, causing such consternation throughout Britain that the novelist, William Makepeace Thackeray, the *Cornhill's* editor, bombarded by letters written by outraged readers and subscribers, was forced to tell Ruskin that, after his third essay appeared, allowing but one additional, the magazine would not print more. (Six essays

¹⁴ Ruskin's concern with social matters dates at least from *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849).

¹⁵ *Matthew 21: 1-16*. The four essays of *Unto This Last* can be found in Wilmer's collection and in LE 17.

had been agreed on.) Two years later, publishing another set of essays on political economy, the shabby process repeated: *Fraser's Magazine*, experiencing like the *Cornhill* intense negative pressure from subscribers as Ruskin's arguments for a kinder, gentler capitalism appeared, told their author that further incendiary sentences would not be welcome.¹⁶

The choler is not difficult to understand. Focusing on how people trade with each other, Ruskin had the temerity to submit that it should be axiomatic that we be *honest* and *open* in our dealings, that the business of business was not to get rich or disadvantage or destroy your competitor, or inveigle as much as you could from your customers' pockets but, rather, was to promote the welfare, the "faring well" (here's the root sense of that word), of customers, workers, and society generally—argue further that we should shun, like the plague itself, anything that might contribute to the "illth" (his coinage) of our fellow human beings.

Flying in the face of most of the principal practices of the magnates and merchants of his age (and still, alas, in the face of many of the principal practices of magnates and merchants of our age), it hardly surprises that these "radical" arguments were not warmly received. As a result, throughout the 1860s, the decade when Ruskin published most of his works on society, he was vociferously attacked in newspapers and magazines by fulminating letters and editorials (some bordering on calumny) for a fool: "You have no idea how our world works," was the general chant and remonstrance: "Business exists to make money; indeed, if you are adroit enough, a lot of money. It is about gaining market share, about beating your competitors and trumping—or driving out of the game entirely—the inept. Besides, there are sharks out there. If we acted as you suggest, we would be pulled under in moments, like sailors on one of our tea ships bound for Ceylon (today, Sri Lanka), who, stupidly, decided to take a swim in waters known to be infested by ravenous creatures. We liked you better as an art critic. You should have stayed one."

He had touched a nerve. One of the most interesting experiences which attends a reading of Ruskin's social essays is to encounter some of these raging reactions. (His father, always so proud of "My Son," even when his issue was actively biting the hand that had fed him more than tolerably well for forty years, clipped all the critiques—as before he had clipped the manifold praises of his boy's art criticism—for pasting into "John's scrapbook."¹⁷) Stunned at first by the carps, Ruskin went on rankling. Every time a new book or essay on social or economic life appeared, the howlings began anew and, as they did, his prior popularity waned, notoriety its replacement. Nevertheless, for the rest of his career, which effectively lasted into the mid-1880s, even in his writings on geology and botany, Ruskin refused to rein in his attack on what he saw as the unconscionable beliefs that had been so easily and self-servingly adopted by his contemporaries, beliefs which legitimated

¹⁶ These essays Ruskin published as *Munera Pulveris* in 1870: see LE 17. I should note that this sentence means what it says: Despite the fact that some who read him (Morris, for instance) used Ruskin's revisionist sociological ideas as foundational arguments for making a shift from capitalism to socialism, Ruskin, though well-aware of that movement, never supported it, believing that the fundamental problem was not *structural* but *moral*. I will return to this argument.

¹⁷ John James Ruskin's scrapbooks of his son's notices can be studied at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

rapaciousness and relentless exploitation of one's neighbor in the pursuit of pelf, beliefs zealously held in the hearts and minds of his "Christian" contemporaries, people who could be more accurately described, in his view, as "devourers of widow's houses who make pretense of long prayer" (7:381; cf. *Matthew: 23: 14*). (I should note that Ruskin's deridings of the businesspeople and practices of his time are based on more than what we might be tempted to pigeonhole, a century and a half on, as a species of naiveté or idealism, an early instance of "bleeding-heart liberalism." As I will show, his case against his *laissez-faire* contemporaries was always grounded in sound, evidence-supported, argument.)

From these critiques emerged a set of prescriptions for how we should treat each other if we wished to live together well and happily. To give a sense of how extraordinary these counsels were and are, I'd like to share a list, a list I heard read to our students first in shorter form by Professor Columbus during our course on London in the Nineteenth Century. Regarding these recommendations, it's important to note that, in *every* instance, Ruskin was either the first, or one of the first, to suggest the change. Even though we have lost any awareness that all source back to him, it will quickly be apparent that not a few of his proposals have "taken" and are now seen as among the "self-evident" axioms of any humane society. But, as will also be clear, many of his suggestions are still far from implementation in societies which consider themselves in the forefront of the modern. Here's the list:

- He argued that we should feed, clothe, and house the poor—not just the deserving poor, the limping poor, or the unlucky poor, but *all* the poor. What good are poor people, he asked, to themselves or anyone—their spouses, children, friends, or employers, for instances—if they are hungry, miserable, and unable to function?¹⁸
- If market vagaries threw the able-bodied out of work, we should set up, at public expense, training facilities so that, as quickly as possible, these unlucky souls could resume productive lives. Anticipating by more than eight decades the WPA (Works Progress Administration) formed during America's Great Depression, he argued that, if the skills of the jobless were no longer useful in a system changing rapidly or in crisis, it was government's responsibility to generate projects (the need for which would be endless) where their other abilities could be utilized (rebuilding bridges, for example); both suggestions grounded in his belief that, beyond the practical benefits which accrued from the responsible doing of work, lay the issue of workers' mental well-being,

¹⁸ This beneficence bestowed with one restriction: for these necessities, the able undeserving poor would be *expected* to work, like everyone else. Such exertion could impart only good lessons—making clear the perpetual link between effort and reward; responsibility; independence; more. If someone able refused the charge, the largess would be withdrawn. A modern organization using this approach is New York City's Doe Fund, which houses, clothes, and feeds the formerly homeless in exchange for participation in various forms of work which benefit the city. Notably, when compared to other New York agencies which provide these essentials *without* a work requirement, Doe has been considerably more successful at helping its clients become functioning members of society.

that sense only rising from a knowledge that one was not merely maintaining oneself and one's dependents, but was doing something "which mattered."

- For young people from the lower end of the economic spectrum, there should be special training facilities dedicated to discovering their talents and powers (resources much too valuable to squander). After such determination, these agencies would do whatever was necessary to get these young into lines of work where their abilities would be beneficially used for themselves and others. Those receiving such training would learn other vital things: for instance, how to create and maintain good health and the importance of fostering habits of gentle and just dealings with all those with whom they might interact over their course. (For years, he contributed, both monetarily and in the teaching of art, at the—then "radical"—Workingmen's College in London.)
- He called for the eradication of all slums, the existence of such places being instances prime of a culture of callousness, inimical to all forced to live in them—inimical to body, mind, emotions, spirit. To speed the transformation, he purchased housing for the poor in London and insisted that only fair rents, geared to tenants' ability to pay, be charged.
- Everyone working deserved an adequate wage, where "adequate" was defined as the remuneration required to allow one to support, at a decent (*not* opulent) level, the worker and all those dependent on him or her for their well-being. Even allowing that necessary expenditures varied by occupation (brain surgeons have different needs than office workers), suitable levels of pay would not be hard to determine as everyone would need so much for food, housing, clothing, transportation, for their children's later education, etc., with a small amount "left over" for entertainment, home improvements, charity giving, and the like.
- Everyone should have a work day and week which did not sap their strength, a work year which afforded enough "break time" to relax and rejuvenate (what we now call "vacations" or "holidays"), and, in due course, sabbatical leaves giving *all* employees an opportunity to improve their skills in some way.
- Because mechanized labor debased and deadened workers by reducing their mental and physical powers to rote, employers needed to find ways of regularly exercising their employees' intrinsic creativity.
- It was each employer's responsibility to treat all workers as just described; treat them, in short, as though they were his or her own daughters and sons; anything less being cruel or profiteering, or both.
- We (indeed, *any* nation) should support, with adequate pension, not only our halt, lame, and blind (what kind of a society would not do that?), but our old. After all, hadn't they given us the best years of their lives?
- There should be adequate health care for all. Like the poor, he asked, what good are sick people to themselves, to those they love and are responsible for,

to society in general? Besides, how could any humane, healthy person deny such care to anyone else?

- There should be a national educational system which would be devoted to teaching *all* children the things they needed to know to live fulfilling lives. (This proposal becomes more remarkable when we recall that, when Ruskin wrote, public education in the sense that we know it now simply did not exist; a quality education was only available for purchase, a condition which ensured that it would only be acquired by the children of the rich, near-rich, or titled.)
- So that people could continue to educate themselves throughout life, there should be public libraries in every city and town, staffed by librarians whose task it was to help anyone find the information needed to become healthy and capable. It was also such libraries' responsibility to educate their patrons in the appreciation of those great works of art and literature (Titian and Turner in the former category; Plato, Dante, or Shakespeare in the latter) which were known to engender deep reflection on life's most critical matters. If this were not done, he predicted that, before the next century (the twentieth) was out, careful reading would be all but anathema for most and, when it occurred at all, people would read slight works written in slight words, books which, for sensations' (and sales') sake, would present immoral and harmful behaviors (lying, stealing, greed, revenge, adultery) as normal.
- Women should be educated the same as men.¹⁹ (To put the recommendation into practice, he invested financially and materially—this latter usually in the guise of great books and art—in women's colleges in London and Cork, Ireland.)
- Women should have the vote and be able to run for office.
- Adulteration of any product from its pure state (adding water to milk; inserting lesser quality fiber into "all wool" sweaters) was reprehensible, being not only a degradation which would harm a customer (in healthy calories not digested, in cold suffered unnecessarily), but a type of theft, a way of tricking unsuspecting customers into paying for quality undelivered. [That our common practice of adding chemicals to food to make them more attractive or create longer shelf life (Ruskin might call it "shelf death") would be abhorrent to him should be evident.]
- In order to restrain any impulse to chicanery, the account books of all businesses should be open to anyone, so that, should we be so inclined, by

¹⁹ With one caveat: Ruskin thought women not well-suited for deep religious thought. This blind-spot arose from life experience—his love for a young woman (Rose La Touche) who became a religious fanatic. It should be noted too that, as was characteristic of almost all thought on the subject in the nineteenth century (John Stuart Mill being an exception), Ruskin subscribed to the idea of "separate spheres," with women, generally, assuming responsibility for hearth and home as men assumed responsibility for "the wider world." The "generally" is important, as, throughout his life, Ruskin encouraged, and supported financially, some women living non-traditional lives—the artists Kate Greenaway and Francesca Alexander and the tireless advocate of England's poor, Octavia Hill, are examples.

consulting these ledgers, we could easily see why we had been asked to pay the amount a seller was asking for any item or service. (If prices had been fairly determined, what was there to hide?)

- Because incomes and riches vary, we should have a graduated income tax for individuals and a similar tax for businesses—first, because the need for public works would be endless, and, second, because—it was patently obvious—the more fortunate had a much greater moral responsibility for the well-being of the less so and for society as a whole.
- He said (perhaps a tad facetiously) that the rich, particularly the Captains of Industry, should be required to wear trousers outfitted with glass pockets—so we could easily see how much was in them.
- There should be a commonly recognized limit to income and profit. Obviously, each individual required, as noted, enough to live decently, and each business required enough to produce its products at the highest quality. But, if these amounts were exceeded, it would only be right that the excess be given, voluntarily, to organizations specializing in some aspect of the public good.
- "Sales" and "discounts" should be banned because (wasn't it obvious?) they were only created so that one seller might gain advantage over or destroy another. Anyone running any kind of business needed a certain number of paying customers to pay their expenses and maintain their families. Hence, markdowns of any sort were, by definition, always harmful, whether that harm was overt (putting competitors out of business) or covert (forcing companies harmed by others' discounts to lay off perfectly good and needy workers).
- All *essential* items (milk, for instance, or, in winter, warm coats), wherever sold, should be offered at a *fixed* price because, other things being equal, it cost more or less the same to produce them (so much for raw materials, so much for the work done to make them, so much for overhead, etc.). Such policy in place there would no longer be any need for buyers to heed one of *laissez-faire's* central, time-wasting, anxiety-producing tenets: *caveat emptor* (this aphorism itself proof positive of the anti-social nature of that system). Indeed, the watch phrase of all forms of trade should be *sit emptor securus* ("let the buyer be secure").
- To avoid emotional upset and any temptation to shirk or decrease the quality of work, *within* any given line of work everyone should be paid the same.²⁰ The point of work was to produce goods and services of highest quality. If some got more for doing the same job, those denied the advantage would, more than likely, be resentful, might slack off, or seek to undermine the more fortunate. Motivation under such a policy would be what it *should* be: to do

²⁰ Ruskin did *not* argue, as did the communists, that everyone should be paid the same *irrespective* of work type. Practically, it costs more to live as president of a university than as a sanitation worker. As well, paying *everyone* the same would decrease motivation in those whose work was *more* exacting. Various experiments in communism (the former USSR, contemporary Vietnam and China) would seem to evidence the correctness of his view.

the work so well that one could take pride in the one's efforts and be chosen, subsequently, on the basis of one's fine reputation, by others hiring. Those infrequently or never chosen would be—as also should be the case—encouraged to find other employ.

- Advertising was both unfair, advantaging those able to pay for it at the expense of those who could not (particularly problematic when poorer sellers had better products), and created the temptation to produce items we did not *need*. Most of us, for instance, need transportation and, *sans* prodding, will figure out a way to get it, but whether any of us *needs* to drive about in a Ferrari is seriously debatable.
- The trait which should dominate the consciousness of all leaders—whether these were CEOs, politicians or priests—was magnanimity, a word which, at its root, means one "mighty of heart, mighty of mind," the idea being that both qualities are essential if leaders were (are) to *better* the lives of those over whom they have power, whether those beneficiaries were customers, workers, constituents, or congregations.
- Regarding inheritances: everyone should die essentially penniless (or, if this proved impossible, the excess of any estate should be given to charity). Having used our money and possessions for good while here, small inheritances ensured that the next generation would have to make its own financial way (this a direct reflection of his belief that creating one's own career and life was the only way to properly develop and feel confident in one's powers, coupled with observations that great cash legacies, as often as not, spoiled their inheritors).²¹

²¹ My students, some of whom come from very financially secure backgrounds, don't care much for this recommendation. On the matter, though, Ruskin proved as good as his counsel. When his father died in 1864, he left his son an inheritance of approximately £200,000 in cash, stocks, and properties, these generated by many years as one of the foremost sherry merchants of England (18: xxix; cf. 29: 99-103; Collingwood: 559-60). Excepting the properties, by today's conversions (again, approximate), that would amount to something like £9,000,000 (\$14,500,000). However, less than a decade after John James' departure, his son had spent the bulk of it, giving much away in donations as well as using substantial amounts for the purchase of great art (*e.g.*, Turner paintings, Medieval illuminated manuscripts), which, in due course, he would also give away. (Ruskin always saw himself as a temporary caretaker of art.) To ease the resulting financial strain, he reissued some of his early books (something long resisted because he regarded these as "tainted" by immature religious ideology). For the rest of his life, he lived on this income, dispensing whatever he could to charitable organizations, struggling friends, or pensioners for whom he felt responsible. (A brief, but typical, story—courtesy of R. Dyke Benjamin—related by Nellie Wilkinson, the daughter of one of Ruskin's gardeners, illustrates. One day, when she was a little girl, as she was playing on Brantwood's lawn, Nellie saw Ruskin coming down the path. Before him a stoneworker was mending a wall. Seeing that the mason was wearing a very thin pair of shoes, Ruskin immediately released him from his assignment and gave him enough money to go into town to buy a sound pair of protective boots.) By the time he died in 1900, all but a fraction of Ruskin's art and manuscripts had been sent to museums or universities for safekeeping and posterity, leaving only his home, Brantwood, a few of his most joy-producing Turner watercolors (soon sold by his inheritors), and whatever income might be generated by posthumous sale of his books.

- We should create a national agency to support the arts, the wellsprings of our national imagination.
- Thinking of those who would come after us, we should have another agency devoted to the preservation of our cultural heritage; if the links with our past were lost, we would forfeit not only our history but the lessons which could be learned only by study of that history.

Not an insignificant list, as I trust you'd agree. And, in all these instances, Ruskin said that we should do these things not because we would benefit monetarily or otherwise by doing so (which, on occasion, we might), but simply because doing them was the *right* thing to do. As members of a humane society, we owed such transparent, life-generating, and life-preserving practices to our fellows because each is a living, feeling, needful, human being like ourselves. Compassion, in short, is the vital principle around which human life should be organized. When we grasped this, and acted on that grasping, we would not merely survive but thrive. "Government and cooperation," he wrote in the last volume of *Modern Painters*, "are, in all things, and eternally, the laws of life; anarchy and competition eternally, and in all things, the laws of death. (7:207)" For all of us, the underlying principle was plain: When that time came, we should be able to face our end secure in the thought that we had chosen to use our powers and days to do all the good we could during the days we had been allotted.

But there was more: Ruskin's love of nature, as I've said, began in childhood. It was a love never lost. And so it happened that, in the midst of speaking out against the social injustices listed above, Ruskin came to see, with a clarity it would take Western society many more decades to reach on any appreciable scale, that the industrialists, without a care for the world or anyone in it, were befouling and destroying the good air we breathed, the sweet water we drank, the fertile land on which we lived—all for the sake of the shop. It was an effort concerted (whether the despoilers were ignorant of the consequences of their actions or determinedly exploitive made no difference), a series of *crimes* against nature unforgivable, a plundering unparalleled, bringing in its train the annihilation of all things lovely: "Blanched Sun—Blighted Grass—Blinded Man!" (A phrase from his lecture, "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century": 34: 40) was just one scathing characterization of the catastrophes the entrepreneurs were wreaking. Thus Ruskin became one of the first environmentalists.²²

At this juncture, we need to remind ourselves of an earlier theme. Although Ruskin's late writings are replete with rages against the machine, as his years passed, his sense that he had accomplished anything of significance eroded ever further. He became convinced that England simply did not *want* to hear what he was saying. His art and architecture criticism had failed miserably, and his social criticism (as he put it acidly) had been "reprobated in a violent

²² Others who might claim the distinction are Americans. Thoreau's *Walden* was published in 1854 and, in 1892, John Muir became first president of the Sierra Club. Ruskin's environmental writing began in the 1850s and continued through the 1880s. As far as I am aware, no website outlining the history of the environmental movement notes his contributions. Two books, however, do: see Palmer; Wheeler.

manner."²³ The game had not been worth the candle. Thus it happened that, in a last attempt to accomplish "something worthwhile" while he still breathed he determined in the late 1860s that *doing* was more important than *saying*. From this conviction came three remarkable legacies.

Appointed Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford in 1870, to ensure that his important collection would be preserved in the context of his teachings on the history, technique, and significance of art in Western civilization, he gave huge amounts of art—including, in addition to priceless European and British paintings, casts of the greatest sculptures from the greatest cathedrals and churches in Europe, as well as dozens of his own (magnificent) drawings to the university. So that students would be able study these treasures properly, he created an extensive catalogue describing each piece, detailing the steps by which its various segments should be studied so that its artistic lessons could be most effectively learned.²⁴ To assist in the process, Oxford, for its part, established "The Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art." The school exists today.

The second legacy, intended to preserve and advance the central tenets of his social thought, was the founding of The Guild of St. George, a small band of friends and followers who would be devoted to preserving all that was wholesome, gladsome, and healthy in British life.²⁵ While the Guild and its activities would be supported by members' annual tithing, to ensure that his more salubrious world would eventuate and the Guild remain viable after he left the scene, Ruskin purchased a house in the predominantly working class city of Sheffield, dedicating it as a museum where anyone interested could study its precious contents—his gifts of illustrated manuscripts, rare books, significant paintings, sculpture castings from the Ducal Palace in Venice, and more.²⁶ He also bought land, tracts which would be administered by people committed to the principles of natural living—to producing unadulterated foods

²³ 17:17. A sentence inserted in an 1880 reissue of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (first published in 1849), provides an example of this sense of failure: "I admire the simplicity with which all [my] advice was tendered to a body of men [the architects of his day] whose occupation for the next [thirty] years would be the knocking down of every beautiful building they could lay hands on; and building the largest quantities of rotten brick wall they could get contracts for." 8:106.

²⁴ A detailed rendering of this story can be found in LE 21. In 1899, two American graduates of Oxford, Charles Beard and Walter Vrooman, in Ruskin's honor (both averred that his teachings changed their lives), founded Ruskin College in Oxford, an institution dedicated, appropriately, to the artistic and liberal social education of students who were *not* qualified for entry into Oxford proper. (There can be little doubt that the honoree would have been delighted by the establishment of such a school and appreciative of the irony intended by its location.)

²⁵ St. George is the patron saint of England; he is usually represented as killing a fierce dragon, symbol of unbridled greed and selfishness, which, unchecked, would threaten all.

²⁶ The Ruskin Gallery still opens its doors in Sheffield. Recently modernized, many of Ruskin's gifts continue on display, along with interactive computers for investigating into art, architecture, and the environment. Works of modern artists who attempt to actualize Ruskin's ideas are also exhibited.

and living together in the least environmentally intrusive manner possible.²⁷ That these ideals prefigure today's "organic movement" by nearly a century is obvious.

There was another significant consequence of his environmental preservation efforts. Ruskin's writings and reputation, coupled with the efforts of others convinced of the rightness of his arguments, resulted, not long before his death, in the establishment of The National Trust. Dedicated to protecting the natural beauty and architectural heritage of the United Kingdom, it has ever since been a model for all land, water, and air preservation organizations striving to preserve our planet.²⁸

Finally, there was his profound effect on what we now call the "Arts and Crafts" movements in both the UK and North America. Earlier I noted the impact which Ruskin had on the group of painters known as Pre-Raphaelites. At the edge of this group was William Morris, another ardent admirer of the great critic's theories of art and architecture. Swayed by Ruskin's contention that anyone involved in art needed to be given room to create, he resurrected, in their earlier guise, many of the specialty crafts of the Middle Ages, including print-making, woodworking, stained-glass window-making, textile creation, and house building, reviving each in practice with his assistants and workers (all of whom, of course, were paid "adequate wages" as per Ruskin's argument). In 1891, Morris's innovative Kelmscott Press published a chapter from Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, "The Nature of Gothic," with Morris hailing its author's paragraphs as one of the "necessary and essential utterances of the nineteenth century." Not long after (1895), a young American, Elbert Hubbard, visited Ruskin (then impaired) at Brantwood, writing one of his "Little Journeys to the Homes of the Great" as a result of the experience. (He also visited a declining Morris at Kelmscott.) Back in the United States, Hubbard established, in East Aurora, New York (near Buffalo), the Roycroft Community of Craft-makers and Artists, a wellspring of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the United States. As a result of these efforts, Ruskin's revolutionary ideas about the importance of working with one's hands and of being creative while engaged in such work spread on both sides of the Atlantic. Today, the William Morris Society (in England) and the Roycroft Community (in the U.S.) continue their commitment to these ideals.

Despite these salutary effects of his thought and teaching, Ruskin remained convinced to his last breath that his life had been an abject failure, a monumental embarrassment given the intellectual powers with which he had been blessed. As his last working decade, the

²⁷ The story of the Guild's creation and early struggles can be found in LE 30. Regarding his commitments to tithing and open ledgers, in each yearly report Ruskin issued (he was The Guild's first Master), he included detailed accountings of his personal and the Guild's expenditures. The Guild survives and continues to try and make its 140 year-old charge reality. Most members devote their energies to projects intended to salve one or the other of the ills caused by modernity, while a few live, more or less as Ruskin suggested, on farms near Bewdley, southwest of Birmingham.

²⁸ The National Trust was established in 1895 by Sir Robert Hunter and two of Ruskin's friends, Octavia Hill and Canon H. D. Rawnsley. It is currently the largest land-holding organization in the UK. Its website makes no mention of Ruskin's influence on Hill and Rawnsley.

1880s, moved toward what would be for him their desultory conclusion, the disappointments mounted. Few, even among his closest friends and regular supporters (resisting his pleadings), joined the Guild of St. George, even after he rescinded his initial requirement that its members tithe. His later books—on nature, religion, art, and a brilliant, visionary lecture on the environmental disaster wrought on England by the uncaring and avaricious (the earlier mentioned "Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century")—found little favor with what once had been a huge, enthusiastic public, that public now wanting, Ruskin *knew*, "just more fine words" instead of unsettling truths starkly told. No, for him, there would not be, as there should *not* be, forgiveness when the moment came when he would have to give account of himself to the One who had given him life. If one reads his later letters (as I have), one finds iteration after iteration of ever deepening, ever more inconsolable, despair.²⁹

But I hope that, by now, you might be inclined to think, as I do, that our subject's harsh assessment of himself was seriously askew—for, if we look just a little closely, we find almost everywhere evidence of Ruskin's liberating and helpful effects on our modern lives and world. For instance:

Some years ago, at an academic conference on Sri Lanka, that small, beautiful island off the southeast coast of India, a country I have visited often and for whose fate I care much, a colleague with whom I had too long been out of touch and who knew more than passing well of my particular passion, snuck up behind me and announced our reunion by whispering in my ear: "John Ruskin was never in Sri Lanka!" Which, of course, is true, if he meant by that exercise in *sotto voce* Ruskin's physical presence. But in another way he was wrong—because Ruskin's influence on the part of the world we call South Asia is deep, arriving initially, if somewhat surprisingly, by way of South Africa. Thus: while living in that racially segregated country in 1904, a 35-year old lawyer who, for years, had been working hard to improve the civil rights of that nation's minority Indian community, read Ruskin's little book on political economy, *Unto This Last*. "The book," Gandhi recalled in his *Autobiography*, "was impossible to lay aside once I had begun it. Johannesburg to Durban was a twenty-four hour journey...[and, because of it] I could not get any sleep that night. [Finishing,] I determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book...[the most essential of which] I understood to be that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all." (p. 106) In 1915, Gandhi returned to India, committed to finding a way to free his country from its colonial vise. As inspiration for those who would opt to travel with him down his path of non-violent resistance, he had *Unto This Last* translated into Gujarati, his native tongue. A little more than three decades later, in 1947, predominantly as a result of Gandhi and his followers' efforts, India secured its coveted independence from Britain.³⁰ Less than a year later, the British quit "Ceylon," and Sri Lanka—the island's name before colonial mispronunciation,

²⁹ For the reasons why this despondency was so harsh and unyielding, see my articles on Ruskin's life (Bibliography).

³⁰ There is a report, which I have not been able to verify, that, during one of the times when he was imprisoned by the British, Gandhi asked a friend to send him more of Ruskin's writings. Less apocryphal is the Mahatma's visit, in honor of his teacher, to Ruskin College during his brief stay in England in 1931.

characteristically, changed it (cf. "Peking" for "Beijing", "Bombay" for "Mumbai")—was (re)born. Ruskin had been there.

In this section, I have outlined the intellectual path and primary concerns which were quintessentially Ruskin's. In so doing, I hope that I have suggested some reasons why many of his ideas might still be relevant to many of us who continue to tick away our decreasing number of minutes on this wonderful but troubled planet. At the least, I trust I have provided a context for sensing what Sir Kenneth Clark—who, decades later, followed Ruskin as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford and hosted the acclaimed BBC television series, "Civilization"—meant when he wrote in the introduction to *Ruskin Today*, his compilation of some of the Brantwood master's most remarkable passages, that, for "almost fifty years, to read Ruskin was accepted as proof of the possession of a soul (p. xiii)."³¹

Still, save for snippets, I have not yet given much evidence which would allow you to assess the truth of another of Clark's encomiums: Why it was that, throughout "the whole second half of the nineteenth century, [Ruskin] was accepted by all thoughtful people as one of the impregnable figures of English literature (p. xiii)." Now is the time for that provision.

Reading Ruskin

George Harrison was my favorite Beatle. There are a number of reasons for this elevated estimate, but one pertains to our present discussion. Some here will still remember that moment in late 1967 when the Beatles discovered the Indian guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and his practice of Transcendental Meditation. Given the Liverpool Lads' stature in the popular consciousness of that countercultural time, it wasn't long before thousands of youngish others around the globe (I'm tempted to say "Across the Universe"!) began TM—myself, Tracy, and many of our friends proud to be counted among these subscribers. The press, naturally, was skeptical about The Boys' new passion—surely just another Fab Four fad soon to fade away like the would-be lover who, crawling into the tub in the wee hours, missed his moment in "Norwegian Wood." From the first, however, George rejected the aspersions. Not so, he rejoined, this meditation and its philosophy resonates with my soul. Make no mistake, folks, this commitment is for life: for good. And so it proved to be. Within a few months, the acescent critics were shown to have been three-quarters right: one by one, John,

³¹ Given the general direction of these remarks, I do not wish to suggest that there were not elements in Ruskin's thought which many moderns would find worrisome. His relatively conservative thinking on the basic roles of men and women has already been noted; in addition, he believed democracy an inefficient and weak form of government (preferring enlightened monarchies), and "liberty" to be both a delusion and a snare, blinding us, on the one hand, to our never-ceasing responsibility to ensure the collective welfare, and, on the other, leading us down the garden path to ill-considered indulgence(s). Similarly, like the great majority of his contemporaries (the discoveries of modern biology, anthropology, and sociology proving that no fundamental behavioral, intellectual, or emotional differences exist between races and ethnicities at least ten decades in the distance), he thought it right that some racial groups, more favorably endowed by nature, should have authority over others. He was as outspoken in these convictions as he was about any of the others discussed.

Paul, and Ringo drifted away from TM and Eastern thought and, leaving their meditating mate to his mantra, embraced other, less spiritual pursuits.³² But through all the success yet to come, through (less than two years later) the rancorous, "sue me, sue you" breakup of the world's most creative rock and roll band, through all the decades that followed, George made good his words, meditating daily until that moment arrived when his spirit left us a few years ago. Indeed, so serious was "The Quiet Beatle" about these, his highest pursuits, his wife, Olivia, granting his wish, flew his reduced remains to the Indian city of Varanasi where, at the precise moment of flaming sunrise, she slipped his ashes into the waters of Holy Mother Ganges, that act being petition to the eternal powers that the earth-departing spirit be granted the greatest of all wishes: liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

I still meditate twice daily. That was George's gift to me. But the point of telling this story is other: to let you know that, exactly as George felt about TM and its ability to help us relate to the world more positively and creatively, is how I feel about Ruskin and his work: my great gift from Professor Columbus.

Many feel this way about others, of course. Here at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, for example, Professor Peter Cummings feels this way—our students tell me he does—about Shakespeare; Dean Eugen Baer feels this way—our students tell me he does—about Plato. (I've a pretty strong penchant for that antique Greek too.) Others feel similarly about other giants who left us records of their great wisdom. As they should. But, in these cases, assuming we have read something of these venerables' works and have gained, as a result, some insight into why they are so revered, we can at least intuit why friends and colleagues feel as passionately as they do about their adopted geniuses. But such intuition isn't very likely in Ruskin's case, sunk as he is now, like once-famed Atlantis, leagues below the surface of our cultural awareness.

So, at this point, I'd like to share some passages which I hope, if I have chosen well, will give you, once they have run their course, some sense of why I think Ruskin can claim a place with the esteemed company just mentioned. (Yes, company as august as that.) I want to provide examples which not only place at center stage his prodigious power as a wordsmith—the talent which initially made him famous—but which will also make palpable the great heart which beat beneath the thousands of pages he penned.

When I began, I mentioned Jonathan Kozol and suggested why his is an example of what we might call a *noble* life,³³ his days fueled by a desire to generate empathy for the

³² In recent interviews (2013), Ringo and Paul have reported that, although they did indeed drift away from TM for a time, they still practiced it, both considering it one of the great teachings of their lives.

³³ This word, "noble" is a perfect illustration of Ruskin's argument about the importance of word-sources. Our contemporary usage usually points us toward something we think "illustrious," "out of the ordinary," as, in racing, "a noble horse." Not long ago, however, it indicated those of high birth or status (often with no regard for what these "nobles" did in their vaunted position). Earlier yet, and still (if rarely), it meant someone or something "intrinsically good," a person "free from pettiness," a person possessing "high moral ideals and greatness of character." Kozol. Ruskin. Source: Oxford English Dictionary.

millions of children in American society who, poverty-stricken and poverty-driven, through no fault of their own and much neglective fault of ours, are barely capable of keeping bodies and brains together. The same nobility of purpose was *the* characteristic trait of Ruskin's life and work—for, throughout that life, he guided all his efforts by the principle around which Gandhi saw *Unto This Last* revolving: the conviction that we are here to help each other and that, in the dispersal of such help lies not only the greatest possibility of our mutual happiness, but the true meaning of life.

Study of Ruskin's life shows that, if he had his druthers, he would have never devoted most of his hours to sitting at desks composing hundreds of essays, lectures, and books contending for the signal importance of including art, architecture, regular contact with nature, and a deep commitment to creating a more benign society in our lives. He would rather have been a naturalist, tramping about his beloved Alps, pick and notebook in hands, delving into the wonders and secrets of stones, trees, and flowers. ("My entire delight" in early life, he wrote in his autobiography, *Praeterita*, "was in observing without being myself noticed...The living inhabitation of the world—the grazing and nesting in it—the spiritual power of the air, the rocks, the waters. To be in the midst of it, and rejoice and wonder at it—and help it if I could! Happier if it needed no help of mine! This was the essential love of *Nature* in me, this the root of all that I have usefully become, and the light of all that I have rightly learned." 35:166) But, as we know, that isn't how it turned out. Like Kozol, like myself, Ruskin was surprised by life.

By chance, as a young man, Ruskin discovered Turner's marvelous landscapes. Finding that the artist was being vilified at the time by reviewers for this type of painting, he set out to right the wrong by arguing that the critics had missed the great genius of the painter's works: Turner's ability to paint the world as it really *is*. This choice to write art criticism led to the other books on art and architecture already mentioned, all of which were written because Ruskin *knew* he had *seen* something crucial to our well-faring which others had not. And, so seeing, he believed it fell to him to help others to see as he had. *Not* to write of such vital things, even if, as years passed, a great price might be exacted regarding his personal happiness (it was), even if (as he correctly suspected) such effort might demand as price his mental equanimity, would be an unconscionable shirking. In this light, I think it important that I begin with Ruskin's definition of a "book," a passage taken from one of his most remarkable lectures, "Of Kings' Treasuries," an exegesis on the responsibility all of us who are well-educated share to read *great* literature and of the fateful consequences which follow if we refuse or forget that duty. "A book is written," he said,

not to multiply the voice merely, not to carry it merely, but to perpetuate it. The author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful. So far as he knows, no one has yet said it. He is bound to say it, clearly and melodiously if he can; clearly at all events. In the sum of his life he finds this to be the thing, or group of things, manifest to him—this the piece of true knowledge, or sight, which his share of sunshine and of earth has permitted him to seize. He would fain set it down forever—engrave it on rock, if he could, saying, "This is the best of me. For the

rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved and hated like another. My life was as the vapor, and is not. But this I *saw* and *knew*: this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory." *That* is his "writing"; it is, in his small human way, and with whatever degree of true human inspiration is in him, his inscription, or scripture. That is a "Book."³⁴

Earlier I said that one such Ruskin "book" was *Unto This Last*, that slim volume which, while attacking the ethos of *laissez-faire* capitalism for the inconsistencies and inhumanities which lay at its core, laid out the principles for a new form of economic life. It is one of the sacred books of my life. And so, partly because I am a sociologist and partly because that interest is what drew me to Ruskin, but mostly because I think the coming excerpts are instances of what Dickens called "the true gold" in prose, I have chosen to work through an argument from "The Veins of Wealth," *Unto This Last's* second essay. But before I do, I'd like to share some sentences of George Bernard Shaw's, sentences spoken by the great playwright at a 1919 conference celebrating the centenary of Ruskin's birth. His words describe almost perfectly my own feelings when I put down *Unto This Last*, finished, the first time: "If you read sociology," Shaw said,

you will find that the nineteenth century poets and prophets who denounced the capitalism of their own time are much more exciting to read than the economists and writers on political themes who looked at the economic theory and political requirements of socialism—Ruskin, in particular, leaving all the professed Socialists, even Karl Marx, miles behind in terms of invective. Lenin's criticisms of modern society seem like the platitudes of the rural dean in comparison...

I have met, in my lifetime, some extremely revolutionary characters, and quite a large number of them, when I asked, "Who put you onto this revolutionary line? Was it Karl Marx?" answered, "No, it was Ruskin."...

[What] really puzzled [Ruskin's] readers—and, incidentally, saved his life, because he certainly would have been hanged if they had grasped what he was driving at and *believed* that *he* believed it!—was [his] political message to the cultured society of his day—the class to which he himself belonged!—[which] began and ended in this simple judgment: "You are a parcel of thieves." (pp. 6, 11)

In recasting the theory of political economy, Ruskin directly attacked the flaws he saw lurking in the uncriticized assumptions and logic of the theorists we now call the "classic economists"—Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill among them—writers then in their heyday and hailed in almost all camps as discoverers of "the way that economies really work." At the theory's core (we certainly should never think of that point as "the heart") lay Smith's notion of "the invisible hand," the

³⁴ 18: 61. If I could time-travel and attend but two Ruskin lectures, "Of Kings' Treasuries" would be one. The other would be "Traffic," his excoriation of his fellows for being more interested in making money (their obsession with "the Goddess of Getting-on," as he called it), than in being concerned about the well-being of their workers, customers, and society. Both are in Wilmer's compilation.

hypothesis that, given that humans are, by nature, self-centered, if each seeks to gratify his (few "hers" in those days, I'm afraid) own interests, in due course, the good of all will be served. To which notion Ruskin objected vehemently.

As any careful study would show, history provides us with not a few examples of people who dedicated their lives to acting for the good of others.³⁵ Or consider this case, which Ruskin puts to his readers: imagine a mother without enough food to feed her three children. What would she do? According to the classical economists, being the stronger, she would eat the food herself and let the children go hungry. But *would* she? Ruskin asks, never assuming he knew the answer. She *might* do this, or, out of love, she might divide the food equally between the children, keeping none for herself, even knowing the choice would result in her own end; or, she might add herself into the division, so that she could care for them longer; or, she might give all the food to the two oldest and strongest, telling them to go out and find enough for all of them before it was too late; or... In other words, *a priori*, we *cannot* know what a human being will choose to do. Thus, Ruskin argued, to take as the *basic* tenet of economic behavior an indemonstrable assumption about "the intrinsic selfishness of human nature and action" was dangerous in the extreme, because, abroad in the land as "revealed truth" (as indeed it became as the ideology of *laissez-faire* spread across Europe and America after Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* appeared in 1776), it would elevate the practice of self-seeking not only to the realm of the inevitable but bestow on it the imprimatur of "noble behavior." As for the ultimately beneficent effect of that hidden helping hand, what were we to make of the many millions then (still!) mired in poverty, human beings like ourselves who were forced—because they had no viable alternative (no other jobs available, no training for any work but the most menial and poorly paid)—into living their lives in squalor and desperation?³⁶

I should note that Ruskin was anything but idealistic about history and the lamentable record left by the centuries. Nevertheless, in his view—a view modern sociologists and anthropologists would share—human nature is remarkably flexible. Infinitely high and infinitely low we can go, but such going is always shaped by the social forces surrounding us and the choices each of us makes within that milieu. *Unto This Last* was written to prove this point. If we tell ourselves and teach our children that self-seeking and greed are "natural," then it won't be long before we begin to think of most of our fellows, whatever their visible miens, as clandestine exploiters and coveters. In practice, such a view could not help but consequence in a social order characterized by what the seventeenth century British philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, called "the war of all against all." But another possibility exists. Given human nature's lack of predetermination, given further that we have choice about what kind of human beings we want to become and what kind of society we wish to live in,

³⁵ As examples, Ruskin frequently cited Socrates, Plato, Christ, Dante, and Sir Thomas More. In our day, we might add Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Theresa.

³⁶ I'm reminded here of a remark one of my colleagues, an economist here at Hobart and William Smith, once made about this strange metaphor some years ago during a course we taught together: "Now," he asked our students, "when it comes right down to it, would *you* trust an *invisible* hand?"

wouldn't it be better, Ruskin asks, to select and teach beliefs stressing cooperation and caring as the traits we most prize, as the habits we want to characterize our encounters? And if we did so, wouldn't a very different, much more salubrious, society eventuate?³⁷

With that as backdrop, we turn to the critique of *laissez-faire* mentioned above. In the first essay of *Unto This Last* Ruskin argues that merchants (that is, anyone involved in business or trade) are, as members of society, no different from anyone else practicing one of the great professions,³⁸ all of which we *expect*, by definition, to *serve* us, their "customers," first, before any consideration of self-interest comes into play. Think of it this way: are merchants any different from physicians, whom we expect to dedicate their days and even, as necessary, their nights to keeping us healthy? From lawyers, whom we expect to see to it that first, foremost, and always, the sacred principle of justice is served and preserved? From soldiers, whom we expect to protect us, even at the risk of maiming or the loss of life itself? From ministers, priests, or rabbis, whom we expect to do everything in their power to salve our damaged, grieving, or searching souls? Given such expectations for these other great professions, on what grounds—simply considering the *logic* of the case—can merchants be excused from the expectation that their *primary* task is to provide us with the things we need in order to live our lives with the least amount of difficulty and the maximum amount of happiness? Isn't it the case that we bring all merchants into being so that they can provide something we *need*: so that they can make and sell the shoes we require, the sturdy chairs at which we sit, the healthy food we must eat—and so on with *all* of the things we require to get through our days well? And, if we grant this, doesn't it follow that the premier obligation of merchants is to make us goods of the *highest quality* of which they are capable, goods which they will then, after having met their production expenses, sell at the *cheapest* possible price? (Charging anything more would be stealing, wouldn't it?) That people entering business first surveyed the economy, decided there was a need for a product, and then set about producing

³⁷ A link between the economic practices of *laissez-faire* and evolutionary theory needs to be made clear. *Unto This Last* began appearing serially in *The Cornhill Magazine* in August, 1860. Darwin's great book, *The Origin of Species*, had been published in November, 1859, just months before. For *laissez-faire* theorists, Darwin's portrait of innumerable species struggling to find "niches" in an unsympathetic nature was just the sort of "scientific validation" they needed to undergird their theory's assumption that "selfish human nature," set free in unceasing competition would generate a thriving economy. Shunning or rejecting out of hand alternative arguments—like Ruskin's—as the nineteenth century wore on, it became commonplace for capitalists to assert that, like cheetahs and lions, human beings were (purloining Tennyson's phrase from "In Memoriam") also "red in tooth and claw," that their lives, similar to those of the veld-dwelling beasts, controlled by a "survival of the fittest" instinct. This last phrase, by the way, is Herbert Spencer's, not Darwin's. Not surprisingly, Spencer, a "social evolutionist," and Ruskin did not think much of each other's approach to matters of social life. Finally, although he disagreed strenuously with evolutionary theory's thesis that human beings were "just another species" in a vast, competing spectrum of species (see his rejection of the botanical lecturer's argument below), there was much in the theory Ruskin could allow. Indeed, he and Darwin, contemporaries during their Oxford days, visited amiably on a number of occasions.

³⁸ For Ruskin, a "great profession" was one a complex society could not do without under any imaginable circumstances. That exchange of goods and services qualifies for such status is indisputable.

it, makes no difference. In any rightly understood theory of political economy, the *social obligations* of the role are paramount: businesses exist to *benefit* us. Everyone knows this.

A test of such "knowing" isn't hard to find. Imagine again our doctors, lawyers, soldiers, and priests. If we thought *even for a moment* that the central concern of *any* of these professionals was in filling their coffers, advantaging their careers, or pleasuring themselves *before* providing us with the best services of which they were capable, wouldn't we immediately be angry, denounce them as frauds and apostates, and start the hunt for practitioners who *would* put us first?³⁹ Now reconsider merchants. Isn't it the case that all complaints against them revolve around instances of *not* putting us first? Someone has overcharged us; someone has sold us shoddy product; someone has slacked off on the job. If so, isn't it unquestionably the case that honesty in dealing and delivering, coupled with diligent attentiveness to customers' needs, are the *raisons d'être* for establishing and engaging in *any* form of business? That established, here is Ruskin's definition of "political economy," a definition he would contend is right for any time or place, present, past, or future. (Note that it contains nothing about "profit," no assumption that human beings are intrinsically self-interested, no suggestion that we should "buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest.")

Political economy, the economy of a State, or of citizens, consists simply in the production, preservation, and distribution, at fittest time and place, of useful or pleasurable things. The farmer who cuts his hay at the right time, the shipwright who drives his bolts well home in sound wood, the builder who lays good bricks in well-tempered mortar, the housewife who takes care of her furniture in the parlour and guards against all waste in her kitchen, and the singer who rightly disciplines and never overstrains her voice, are all political economists in the true and final sense—adding continually to the riches and well-being of the nation to which they belong. (17:44)

But, if these are the true reasons for being in business, what of money? Don't merchants have to make enough to keep on producing and employees enough so that they can live decently? Of course, Ruskin responds. Such levels of remuneration are assumed and need to be built into the price of any product or service. But, he says elsewhere, note that "there is a wide difference between being captains or governors of work and taking all the profits of it (18: 454)," between working for money as one's primary goal and treating it as a *necessary* "adjunct" accompanying that work, for, first and foremost, the

merchant's function is *to provide for the nation*. It is no more his function to get profit for himself out of that provision than it is a clergyman's function to get his stipend. That stipend is a due and necessary adjunct, but not the object of his life if he be a true clergyman, any more than his fee...is the object of life to a true physician. Neither

³⁹ Recent outcry over the seemingly legion number of instances where priests have used their sacred appointments to prey on small parishioners sexually demonstrates the argument perfectly, if sadly.

is his fee the object of life to a true merchant. All three...have a work to be done *irrespective* of fee—to be done even at any cost, or for quite the *contrary* of fee...⁴⁰

Even if this be granted, what of the differences in the amounts of money which are generated as people conduct their varying businesses? Isn't it the case that some will inevitably become richer than others? Surely, Ruskin replies. But the salient issue is not whether some have made more than others, but rather *how* any amount of money has been made. And there is a concomitant issue. Once money has been made, on what do we decide to *spend* it? And aren't both issues always *moral* ones? For this reason: that any amount of money-making or spending either *benefits* or *harms* the nation and its citizens. In other words,

the establishment of [inequalities of riches] cannot be shown *in the abstract* to be either advantageous or disadvantageous to the body of the nation. The rash and absurd assumption that such inequalities are necessarily advantageous lies at the root of most of the popular fallacies on the subject of political economy.⁴¹ For the eternal and inevitable *law* in this matter is that the beneficialness of the inequality depends, first, on the methods by which it was accomplished, and, secondly, on the purposes to which it is applied. Inequalities of wealth, unjustly established, have assuredly injured the nation in which they exist during their establishment and, unjustly directed, injure it yet more during their existence. But inequalities of wealth, justly established, benefit the nation in the course of their establishment and, nobly used, aid it yet more by their [spending]. (17:46)

Note the choice of words. By using terms like "unjustly," "injure," "benefit" and "nobly," Ruskin is critiquing the (supposedly) "value neutral" position of *laissez-faire* and its *prima facie* contention that money-making and spending are the concerns of the makers and spenders only. Not so, responds Ruskin. Making and spending are *never* value-neutral issues, because it is simply impossible to

conclude of any given mass of acquired wealth, merely by the fact of its existence, whether it signifies good or evil to the nation in the midst of which it exists.⁴² Its *real* value depends on the *moral* sign attached to it, just as sternly as that of a mathematical quantity depends on the algebraic sign attached to it. Any given accumulation of commercial wealth may be indicative, on the one hand, of faithful industries, progressive energies, and productive ingenuities. Or, on the other, it may be indicative of mortal luxury, merciless tyranny, ruinous chicane. Some treasures are heavy with human tears, as an ill-stored harvest with untimely rain, and some gold is brighter in sunshine than it is in substance. And these are not merely moral or pathetic

⁴⁰ 17: 40. An argument Ruskin has adopted from one of his mentors, Plato. See *The Republic*, Book I.

⁴¹ This being the "invisible hand" assumption.

⁴² This being the communists' argument: people who possess great riches are, by definition, exploiters. For a "living critique" of this position, see the detailed example of Jim Henson immediately following.

attributes of riches which the seeker of riches may, if he chooses, despise; they are, *literally and sternly, material* attributes of riches, depreciating or exalting incalculably the monetary significance of the sum in question. One mass of money is the outcome of action which has created, another of action which has annihilated, ten times as much in the gathering of it—such and such strong hands [have been strengthened or] paralyzed, as if they had been numbed by nightshade... (17: 53)

And if this is so, aren't concerns about whether we help or harm others as we go about our business and buy our things not just moral in nature, but *the central questions* for any theory of economic life to consider?

Such considerations about money matters ring oddly in our ears these days, our usual assumption being that, in one way or another, we make money and having done so, in some other way or other, spend it, most of us assuming further that more coin is always preferable to less. Americans, for example, constantly hear reports of how an index called the Gross National Product (GNP) is doing, the notion being that, if that figure swells, it is good—for us, for the nation. Growth (it is axiomatic) is always better; bigger (it is axiomatic) is always better.⁴³ Conversely, if any detumescence in this base integer occurs, we begin to fret that we are ebbing, starting to slide down the always slippery economic slope. In short, size, not just of the GNP, but of our cash pile, matters. Believing this (having been taught it since we were babes, being taught it daily still), most in this getting and spending world, forsaking many pleasant leas⁴⁴ (or setting them aside until some retiring time), dedicate their hearts, powers, and best years of their lives to accumulating ever-larger piles of heavy metal. Like Hamlet (Act 1, Sc. 2), ruminating on the too hasty, licentious marriage between his mother, Gertrude, and his father's brother, Claudius, so soon after that father's sudden death, Ruskin knows that "it is not, and it cannot come to, good": the whole system of *laissez-faire* is fallacious in conception, often dishonest and deceptive in practice, and regularly disastrous in result.

Let me make this argument more concrete by means of a pair of examples illustrating the "how you make money" side of the equation. Consider cigarettes. These small inhalable rolls are produced by the billions every year. But whether they constitute a "good" or offer a "service" in the true sense of such words (cigarette sales are included, of course, in the calculation of GNP) are debatable points. In favor of their creation, most economists would tell us that cigarette making puts people to work, a considerable number of them. From salaries distributed not an insignificant number of rents or mortgages are paid, dining room tables are saved from being bare, garages are kept from standing empty, and living rooms can be showplaces for the latest in video and audio technology. In addition, assuming dodges are not in play (sometimes a dubious assumption), the taxes paid by tobacco companies and their employees contribute to the repair of roads, the building of court houses and schools, as well as to the creation and upkeep of public swimming pools so that children can cool off during

⁴³ GNP is equal to the total value of everything produced in a year in a national economy.

⁴⁴ Cf. Wordsworth's "The world is too much with us, late and soon."

hot city summers. In short, making cigarettes generates some undeniable economic and social benefits.

Conversely, as we've known for some time, this same product, used as intended, kills many of those who "consume" it. "The white smoke knocked me out," George Harrison sings ruefully on his aptly-titled posthumous album, "Brainwashed." (George was but 59 when lung cancer knocked him out in 2001). And when this white smoke kills, it destines spouses and children (not to mention many loving others) to weeping by graves dug too soon, creates traumas from which these now smaller families often don't recover and frequently *empties* tables, garages, and TV rooms, not to mention depriving us, the survivors, of whatever love and good work these dearly departed might have given us in years that never come; depriving us, recalling our now permanently Quiet Beatle, of many songs, perhaps some of them great.

Or, if this "good" does not kill its users, we know that it weakens them, making many seriously sick with respiratory diseases or debilitating immune systems to the point where other illnesses, finding the window open which affords delivery of the special harm they bear, slip through to do their doubtful "work." Even in such "lesser cases," we need to see that we pay, painfully, for the afflictions attending smoking: in impaired abilities, in lost work weeks, in the expenditure of copious amounts of cash as we try to staunch the tide of destruction—in, for instances: extra doctors', nurses', and hospitals' bills; in, if the cash for these just-mentioned draws from tax coffers, cuts to monies earlier set aside for roads, court houses, schools, and swimming pools for children to cavort in during hot city summers. All *damages*, Ruskin would say, to our personal, public, and moral fabrics: damages *incalculable*.⁴⁵

In other words, in cigarettes we have an instance of a "good" which, in its creation and consumption, whatever benefits it might beget in terms of employment and taxes, actively *undermines* all these benefits by destroying or bruising significantly the human population whose "need" it supposedly "satisfies"—a "production" made more heinous in recent years because now we know that the executives who produce these addictive cylinders *also* know that extensive impairment of their customers and their communities result from the work they have chosen.⁴⁶ Is it not the case, then, Ruskin would have us ask, that the mountains of

⁴⁵ Ruskin did not know, of course, what we now know of the life- and health-threatening effects of smoking. Still, he was an opponent of the practice all his life, believing not only that it was uncouth but a practice which befouled everything it touched: see 17:334 for an example. One of the great ironies of this position is that, after his death, in true *laissez-faire* fashion, an American company, Bayux Inc., using his fame for "sales notoriety" started making "Ruskin Cigars"! (For some: try e-Bay.)

⁴⁶ A fine film showing the cunning attending the cigarette manufacturing process in the United States is Michael Mann's "The Insider," its main (well-documented) thesis being that manufacturers, realizing their product was becoming ever more tarred in the court of public opinion, and knowing, too, that nicotine-*addiction* was the key to continuing purchases and profits, surreptitiously researched ways to increase the amount of that drug in their product. The film also excels at portraying the corrosive personal and familial effects that being part of a productive process which knowingly harms others has on one executive. Today, negative publicity increasing almost exponentially, many manufacturers have turned to intensive marketing and distribution in the world's poorer nations, places where awareness of the noxious power of smoke is weaker, where buyers (seduced by clever ads and the image of "advanced America") actively

money generated by this mortal trade have to be considered "tainted," a part of the Gross National Product "gross" in the true sense of that word, money made by the *willful* harming of the health, capacities, and life-force of the nation, money made by selling a "good" which is not good, a service which does not serve, money whose moral character can only be described as dark and deadly? (Without an iota of jest, Ruskin said that all such "products" should be called "bads."⁴⁷) And, if all this be granted, would it not also be the case that the extensive, rolled lawns fronting cigarette makers' mansions need to be thought of as being filled, not with helpful "invisible hands" (though that image might have a bit of merit if we imagine the hands bony), but with invisible tombstones?

Now let's take a walk on Sesame Street. I don't know if Jim Henson set out to be rich, but rich he became. He set out, if I remember rightly, like most creative people. A puppeteer, he wanted audiences to like the little creatures of his imagination, wanted them to derive some pleasure by watching his inventions' odd but sweet characters unfold, wanted them to laugh at their predicaments and shenanigans. Puppets then, not cigarettes, were Henson's product. He called them "Muppets" and, as he made and marketed them, it wasn't long before he found that more than a few people, particularly children, not just liked, but *loved* his product; loved the irascible Miss Piggy (kids immediately knew that her hard-edge wasn't very adamant, saw the good heart which lurked just below the defensive, brash surface), loved that witty green froggy fellow, Kermit (for whom Miss Piggy had something of a thing, remember?), who sang songs so cleverly and cavorted about with such infectious exuberance.

After hearing the applause which followed his giving story and voice to his Muppets, Henson went into creative overdrive, generating out of his mind's kindly eye a veritable bevy of adorable "monsters": the not-very-smart-but-oh-so-sweet mammoth, Mr. Snuffleupagus; the contentious and silly Bert and Ernie; the guileless little Elmo; the vampire who couldn't countenance blood, The Count; the odd fellow who lived in the trash can, Oscar the Grouch; and the yellow-feathered fellow who couldn't fit into any trash can, Big Bird (talk about a fine-hearted fowl). The list could (and does) go on. And, as these toothsome creations had their goodly and goofy adventures, Henson made millions of little ones, not to mention those little ones' caretakers, laugh and sing. (One of the Muppets' "greatest hits," you'll recall, was "Letter B," a ditty which must've made George and three other Liverpool Lads smile when first they heard it.) And, sometimes too, he made them cry a bit. But the tears were always of a tender type, coming as they did, from souls softly touched by the most delicate presentations of some of life's hardest truths. And—*quite literally* (Ruskin would say)—everyone was *better*

seek "real American cigarettes" so that they can increase their prestige. As a recent editorial put it: "It is hard—no impossible—to believe claims by [American] companies that they are not trying to addict new smokers but are only trying to convert adults who are using inferior brands! The World Health Organization... [also] reports that [these companies] are targeting teenagers and women..." Add to this the fact that, in many poor nations, governments have become so needful of the taxes generated by cigarette sales, they are loathe to exercise much zeal in curbing these sales, thus becoming complicit in the maiming of their own people: *The New York Times*, 9 February 2008; cf. Wilson.

⁴⁷ 19:405. A close reader of Dante, Ruskin, like the great poet, felt that the deepest recesses of hell, if such existed, would be reserved for such "vendors of death." (17: 371, 383-4)

for such experiences. Along this manikined way, Henson's muppet "industry" put more than a few people to work and distributed vast amounts in salaries, resulting in the placing of bread on many tables, the filling of many garages with automobiles, and (of course!) the outfitting of numerous living rooms with better TVs, not to mention paying out many millions in corporate and personal income taxes. And, as his enticing creations "cornered a large portion of the children's entertainment market," our puppeteer not only made millions delight, but made millions of dollars: got rich, in short; rich from money *gladly* given by those who had been warmed and cheered by these most agreeable children of his invention.

The point is crystalline. At some juncture, like his tobacco-selling analogue, Jim Henson found himself sitting in front of a considerable pile of cash. But the stack in front of Kermit's creator, unlike the one deposited in front of the cylinder-maker, had been differently created, coming into being by giving those who bought his product pure enjoyment, a buying which made them not only happier, but which moved them in the direction of becoming wiser and more compassionate human beings. The same positive assessment applies to all those who played other roles in the muppet-making process, Henson's co-workers. All had engaged in creating a product which generated pleasure in its users and, as a consequence, *their* salaries, bread, cars, and TVs had been earned by making everyone touched by their work *stronger*. As well: knowing they had been involved in affecting such beneficial results, these workers had every right to feel continually proud of how they had used their powers. Nor is there in this creative process any intimation of what we now call (seeking to camouflage the embarrassing or irresponsible reality) "collateral damage." Although Jim Henson died too soon (not from smoking), thereby depriving us of more of his mild monsters, no negative residuals attach to later consumptions of his creations. He left no families weeping unnecessarily, no emphysemas, no missed work weeks, no specially-invented doctors and nurses whose odd job it was to specialize in stemming the tide of disease-damaged lungs. Rather, he left a flock of fond memories and continuing pleasures, for, as we watch Sesame Street reruns on TV or the Muppet movies again, his legacy flows on, like a life-regenerating stream in springtime, causing more laughing-out-loads, warming more hearts.

What we have in this instance, then, do we not, is a *true* good, a truly *helpful* service, a "manufacture" which gives the mountains of money made from that product's creation and distribution a "character" perpetually salutary, a bestowing of "excellent quality, not merely in the Goods...delivered but in the Persons by whom they are...enjoyed" (30:16)? In which light, it probably isn't amiss to offer another image. If Jim Henson had a large lawn (I have no idea if he did), then might we not expect that broad expanse to contain, if we could see the spirits rising from its morning mists, not memorials testifying to misery but, rather, a crowd of fairies dancing delightedly on the grass?⁴⁸

⁴⁸ In a lovely image, Ruskin tells us that the true work of the imagination is to create "fairies in the grass, naiads in the wave." 5:73; *cf.* Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." For more on Henson's and the Muppets' story, see Davis.

A thought about the kind of mentation which accompanies these different production processes. Given the nature of his product, the primary concern of a manufacturer of cigarettes is *not* in creating something that satisfies one of the true needs of his customers (they certainly don't need damaged immune systems and daily doses of white smoke bringing them ever closer to suffering and premature death). Rather, his thought is about how to make as much money as possible. He asks: "How can we get people to buy our cigarettes? How can we make them think they need that which, in truth, they don't? And, once we have gotten them to buy them, how can we make them keep on buying them? The better we answer these questions, the more money we will make, the richer we will become." But the central thoughts in our Muppeteer's mind are not the same. While we should never be so naïve as to think that ruminations about money and how much of it might result from putting out a new Muppet movie never fired synapses in Miss Piggy's creator's head, *by its very nature*, the Muppet franchise could only succeed if Henson asked questions which attended to some of true needs of his audience. Questions such as: "How can I make these children laugh? How can I teach them some important lessons about life gently? How can I find entertaining ways to help them develop their skills?" (To which queries, surely someone around Henson's creative table once said: "Hey, why don't we make up a song based on the Beatles' 'Let it Be'? We can call it 'Letter B.' The kids'd have a great time watching the muppets sing it and, if it was catchy, maybe they'll want to sing along with it, and that'd teach them about the letter!") In short, for muppeting to work, it had to be grounded in thoughts about the positive or negative effects which any new muppet manifestation might have on those "consuming" it.

The longer term consequences of these different thought patterns are critical to note. In time (in truth, not much time), those who offer products where considerations of money are central develop a mental frame where all forms of production come to be viewed within the same "objective," *dehumanized* perspective. Further, given the importance which "making a living" assumes in modern societies, it is hardly unusual for someone who focuses on money-making in the economic arena to transpose that mode of seeing into a "philosophy of life" where almost all issues and relationships come to be viewed through the same calculating lens. ("What's in it for me?") In contrast, those who make their living creating and offering products designed to satisfy the real needs of living, breathing human beings have a tendency to *humanize* not only their economic doings but also are likely to transpose that modality into a general view of the world and their responsibilities in it. The result, Ruskin would say, is that, when we meet people of this last-mentioned type, we can be pretty well assured that they will be helpful, kind, and trustworthy; all traits which quickly put us at ease. When we encounter those who operate primarily within the money-first framework, however, not only are they unlikely to manifest the excellent traits just mentioned, they are also likely to put us into a state where anxiety and worry predominate. While all such effects are incalculable, it should be clear that, in almost all situations we might imagine, folks of the former sort create, as a matter of unconscious course, trust and ease, while those of the latter description generate *disease* and jaundiced glances.

This much clear about the ineluctably moral nature of money-making, we can touch on the other side of the equation: how the money we make is spent. The short of it is this:

every time we buy something we are, in effect, placing an order for more of that item to be made (we create a "demand" in economists' parlance). For this reasons, Ruskin says, it matters absolutely, thinking of the health of ourselves, of those who produce various items, and society as a whole, *what* we decide to purchase. This awareness, in turn, demands that, before we buy, we pretest our purchase with two queries. First, we must be as sure as we can that what we buy will give us some true benefit, will, as we consume or use it, make us stronger or healthier or, better, both. And, second, that, also as far as we can determine, we do not set others, as they make more of what we have bought, to some sort of deadening, demeaning, useless, or harmful task. Examples illustrating the point are not hard to find. We can spend our bills on expensive jewelry or Jaguars, cigarettes or pornography, all of which buyings make the GNP rise. Or, we can spend the same certificates on solar heating apparatus, take our children to a Muppets movie, learn how to make furniture with our own hands, donate to an agency feeding the world's poor, or purchase, with intent of reading, some of Wordsworth poems, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or Jonathan Kozol's *The Shame of the Nation*. All of which, assuming we might be allowed to coin a new index (why not?), one which wouldn't even require us to remember a new initialism, would contribute to a Goods National Product.⁴⁹

A summary: For anyone who engages in trade (given that all occupations offer goods or services, that means, in one way or another, all of us) the enduring objective should be to manifest the root meaning of the Greek term which sources our modern word, "economy": all *true* economy, Ruskin writes, is *oikonomea*, a *living* instance of "the law of the house," where the one producing, selling, buying, or serving performs those activities just as one would perform these activities in one's own home, as a *sacred* doing (30:16), wishing to do only those things which make *everyone* in the house healthier. Note that this "law of the house" analogy can be used for *any* profession: the obligation of the captain of a ship is not merely to transport the cargo in the interests of investors, but to care for the overall well-being of the ship, its crew, and passengers; the obligation of a CEO...etc. (17: 40-2) Strive in all your work, he says, to make that law of the house

strict, simple, and generous. Waste nothing, grudge nothing. Care in nowise to make more of money, but care to make much *of* it; remembering always the great, palpable, inevitable fact—the rule and root of all economy—that what one person has, another cannot have; and that every atom of substance, of whatever kind, used or consumed,

⁴⁹ Money should always be made generating more life, Ruskin argued. However, even when such positive creation has not been the case, one could spend coin problematically made creditably. For instance, inheriting riches deriving from tobacco sales, beneficiaries could turn that cash to healthful use in the ways just mentioned. In effect, this is what Ruskin did with his father's inheritance. Though he never begrudged anyone a glass of fine sherry, he knew well that many of his father's customers had made their money by exploiting their workers, their consumers, or by despoiling the environment. Hence, it became his obligation to spend the money in health-bestowing ways. Redemption is always possible.

is so much human life spent. Which, if it issue in the saving of present life, or gaining more, is well spent. But, if not, is either so much life prevented, or so much slain.⁵⁰

In which context, we can finally understand what "wealth" (as distinct from "riches") truly is. "There is no wealth but *life*," Ruskin wrote at the end of *Unto This Last*: "Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others." (17: 105) "All of which sounds very strange," he notes elsewhere in the same set of essays, "the only real strangeness in the matter being... that it should so sound." (17: 42)

Of course, such views on how to do business met, *still* meet, hard resistance. As the great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, put it in 1898: "The orthodox economists, even the most radical of them...cannot but attack [Ruskin for the simple reason that] he destroys their teaching at its very roots (p. 188)," destroys them because what he envisions is not a capitalism where each seeks his or her own interest, with that self-centered approach rationalized by a vague notion that some even vaguer "hand" will eventually ensure that everything will turn out well for all, but, instead, envisions a *humane* capitalism, a *just* capitalism, a *moral* capitalism (what we call it matters little), a capitalism whose practitioners *understand* to their core that "the final outcome and consumption of all wealth is in the producing [of] as many as possible full-breathed, bright-eyed, happy-hearted human creatures." (17: 56)

Two other points on Ruskin's political economy deserve mention. First, as noted, he was always an opponent of communism,⁵¹ convinced that any system which denied, "for the good of the whole," anyone's motivation to better his or her own life, or which saw the solution to social ills in the *restructuring* of society (Marx: "the revolt of the proletariat," "the withering away of the state") was doomed to failure (which criticisms, though it has taken a century and a half for the international evidence to will out, seem well-proven). As Claudette Columbus put it succinctly during our London course, Ruskin was not interested in the reformation of society; he was interested in the reformation of the human heart. That done, society would take care of itself. Second, recent research suggests that a moral sense may very well be intrinsic to our species; that, at deepest levels, fundamental conceptions of "right and wrong" are universal, and that, while this sense can be "overruled" by cultural pressures and personal decisions, it cannot be eradicated; and, finally, that this sense is *always* aligned with activities which strengthen the life-force of both individuals *and* the groups they live in.

⁵⁰ 17: 113. Note, as did our subject, the parallel between "oikonomea" and the Bible's Golden Rule (cf. Leviticus 19: 18; Matthew 22: 35-40).

⁵¹ In one *Fors Clavigera* essay, Ruskin did say he was a "communist of the old school," an advocate of a kind of communism which the "Baby Communists" (read: Marx, Engels, etc.) did not understand: namely, a society where a true "House" dedicated to the real "Commons" would exist, a society where citizens were devoted to creating a real "commonwealth." (27: 115-31)

That such a moral impulse would be species and socially adaptive in the evolutionist's sense should be evident (Hauser; Keltner).

I turn now to a different sort of selection, chosen because, in comparison to the passages on political economy, it shows why reading Ruskin on *any* subject is rewarding. The passage is a little difficult to characterize because, like many of his writings, it brims with themes, is a veritable cornucopia of ideas spilling onto our mental table. It's about botany and flowers to start, but then turns to a serious discussion of the physical sciences and the problems which attend the teaching of these modes of inquiry, touching, as it does this, on the implications of the new theory of evolution; it ends by considering a major philosophical concern: how we choose to view the world—the resolution of which issue is, for our author, literally, a matter of life and death; it is also, sometimes, if we pay close attention, pretty funny. It is the vibrant intermixing of these concerns which gives the selection its charm and, I believe, its persuasiveness, an instance among hundreds (I am *not* exaggerating) which show Ruskin's genius percolating at its highest levels.

The passage comes from the fifth (of, finally, ninety-six) letters to "the workingmen of England" which Ruskin called *Fors Clavigera*. (This odd title *can* be explained, but it isn't all that easy to do and, having already tried your patience for some time, this is probably *not* the time to attempt it!) The *Fors* letters came into being, you'll recall, because, by 1871, the year this essay was written, Ruskin was convinced that all his earlier writings and recommendations had fallen on deaf ears. And so, his own class patently uninterested, he decided to get the attention of working people.

The excerpt starts with his reaction to what a friend told him at tea one day after returning from a lecture which explained "the true nature of flowers" given by a well-known botanist at London's South Kensington (now, Victoria and Albert) Museum. The botanist, the friend said, had begun by telling his listeners that the petals of flowers were nothing more than "leaves of a different sort." Because that phytological suggestion, to which he had great objection, allowed him to discuss a number of serious issues, Ruskin used it as the entrée to his *Fors* installment. It should be said that his negative reaction was not based on a cavalier rejection of advances in scientific knowledge (he had made his peace, as the passage humorously shows, with evolutionary theory) but, rather, with *how* such "scientific pronouncements" were being communicated—as (in this instance) "verities," as "of course revelations," which *any* thoughtful, educated person would accept, without critique, as "new and better" interpretations of the world. It was an extremely dangerous approach, Ruskin believed, for—as his friend's awed amazement at finding out "the truth about petals at last!" illustrated—it was subtly shifting, as subscription to "the scientific framework" grew, our underlying perceptions of life in a most worrisome direction.

In sociology we pay homage to a theorem which has come down to us from one of our early greats, W. I. Thomas: "If people define situations as real," Thomas said, "they are real in their consequences." That's Ruskin's concern: if we look at the world one way, our

appreciation of and delight in it are enhanced. If we look at it another way, that same appreciation and delight are forfeit. Here's the passage:

And then my friend told me that she had no idea, before [the lecture], that petals were "leaves." On [hearing] which I thought to myself that it would not have been any great harm to her if she had remained under her old impression that petals were *petals*. But I said: "That was very pretty...and what more?" So then my friend told me that the lecturer had said that, "the object of his lectures would be entirely accomplished if he could convince his hearers that there was no such thing as a flower."

Now, in that sentence, you have the most perfect and admirable summary given you of the general temper and purposes of modern science. It gives lectures on Botany of which the object is to show that there is no such thing as a Flower; on Humanity to show that there is no such thing as a Man; and on Theology to show there is no such thing as a God. No such thing as a Man, but only a Mechanism; no such thing as a God, but only a series of forces. The two faiths are essentially one: if you feel yourself to be only a machine, constructed to be a regulator of minor machinery, you will put your statue of such science on your Holborn Viaduct,⁵² and...recognize only major machinery as regulating *you*.

I must explain the real meaning to you, however, of that saying of the Botanical lecturer, for it has a wide bearing. Some fifty years ago the poet Goethe discovered that all the parts of plants had a kind of common nature, and would change into each other. Now, this was a *true* discovery, and a notable one. And you will find that, in fact, all plants are composed of essentially two parts: the leaf and root—the one loving the light, the other darkness; one liking to be clean, the other to be dirty; one liking to grow for the most part up, the other for the most part down; and each having faculties and purposes of its own. But the pure one which loves the light has, above all things, the purpose of being married to another leaf, and having child-leaves, and children's children of leaves, to make the earth fair forever. And when the leaves marry, they put on wedding robes, and are more glorious than Solomon in all his glory, and they have feasts of honey, and we call them "Flowers"! In a certain sense, therefore, you see the lecturer was quite right. There are no such things as Flowers: there are only Gladdened Leaves...

But in the deepest sense of all, the Botanical lecturer was, to the extremity of wrongness, wrong—for leaf, and root, and fruit, exist, all of them, only that there may *be* flowers. He *disregarded* the life and passion of the creature, which were its essence. Had he looked for these, he would have recognized that, in the thought of Nature herself, there is, in a plant, nothing else *but* its flowers.

⁵² A cast-iron bridge built in London in the 1860s at, for the time, immense cost: £2,000,000. Its four sculptures symbolized the importance and power of modern technology: Agriculture, Fine Art, Commerce (a carved key to the City of London at its feet), and Science (this last depicting the Zodiacal signs, a cable leading to a battery, and two balls which, when rotating, represented the speed of a steam engine).

Now: in exactly the sense that...Science declares there is no such thing as a Flower, it has declared there is no such thing as a Man, but only a transitional form of Ascidiens and apes. It may, or may not, be true. It is not of the smallest consequence whether it be or not! The real fact is that, *rightly seen with human eyes*, there is nothing else *but* man, that all animals and beings beside him are only made that they may change into him, that the world only truly exists in the presence of Man, acts only in the presence of Man. The essence of light is in his eyes—the center of force in his soul—the pertinence of all action in his deeds.

And all *true* science...is *savoir vivre*. But all your modern science is the contrary of that: it is *savoir mourir*.⁵³

The issue couldn't be more important. The point of life, Ruskin knows (and here he does disagree with a major contention of the evolutionists) is not reproduction of the seed, but the full flowering of the living thing: a blossom in its most beautiful state, a human being striving and thriving in her or his highest capacity. Ruskin *sees*, as the botanic lecturer does not, as his friend who attended the lecture does not (a frightening prospect given the imprimatur which we continue to bestow almost automatically on scientific interpretations), that to change his listeners' appreciation of flowers from a series of lovely colored petals delighting air and eye by reducing them to "leaves" *harms* our capacity to appreciate their sumptuousness. Whatever rationale botanists put forth for the need for a system of scientific nomenclature for plants, to transform "daisies" into "leucanthemum vulgare" and "roses" into "rosaceae multiflora" *changes our view and appreciation of them, destroys* our ability to see that, in truth, they *are* more glorious than Solomon in all his glory: *savoir mourir*.⁵⁴

Here's another way to think about it. Outside our windows at this moment a host of golden daffodils are swaying gently and gaily in the warm, soft breezes of our Genevan spring. (I'm sure you noticed them on your way in.) What Ruskin is trying to tell us is that these lovely little things can only become all *they* can be when they are seen with *our* eyes, because, when we look at them they become something *more*, something that did not exist before: they become "flowers *enjoyed*." (And I know the flower people in this room know that a flower loved is a flower which flourishes.)

But further still. Apprehending a flower *as* a flower, *we* also become something new, something *more*: the flowers, to use Ruskin's phrase, have "turned into" us and we shift to another, higher level of understanding and feeling, and (here's the point) our "heart with

⁵³ Literally, "knowledge of life" and "knowledge of death": 27: 82-5.

⁵⁴ So concerned was he over the degradation of our appreciation of nature by our thoughtless acceptance of the classification system promoted by "advancing" botanical science, in later years, Ruskin wrote *Proserpina*, the intent of which was to preserve plants and flowers as sources of human delight by keeping their common names (continuing to call a violet a violet, say) and by retelling the myths associated with them. It is worth noting that the titles of Ruskin's books and lectures were always carefully chosen. Proserpina was the goddess of springtime. While collecting flowers one day, she was kidnapped by Pluto, lord of the underworld, and taken to that terrible place to live as his queen; after the abduction, spring withered on earth. (There is more to the myth, but this much tells us why Ruskin chose the title.)

pleasure fills, and dances *with* the daffodils."⁵⁵ Or perhaps better said: *we* dance *with* them, *both* delighting. "Do you dance, Minneloushe, do you dance?" the moon asks the cat in Yeats' poem, "The Cat and the Moon," as that fine feline sidles by, adding: "When two close kindred meet, what *better* than call a dance?" *Savoir Vivre*.

Let me make the point oppositely. Let's imagine what *didn't* happen an hour or so ago when we strolled toward our splendid spring lunch: we walked by the daffodils ("narcissus bulbocodium"; common var., "conspicuous") and didn't notice them. (They, of course, noticed *us*.) In which imagining, I'd like to remind you of a wonderful "Peanuts" Sunday cartoon. (Charles Schulz was another of our great American heroes, don't you think? Especially during those later years when his wisdom and drawing skills peaked: how we miss that fellow!) The one where Lucy, perpetually petulant Lucy, stomps into the first frame cranking (as she always is) about something: it's cold, she's hungry, school stinks, Charlie Brown's an idiot, Schroeder won't pay any attention to her (he's so interested in that darn Beethoven!). As she walks by miffed, Snoopy, that delighting dog, gambols into the second frame, notices her distress, and "says" in his inimitable way: "Hi, Sweetie! Want to dance??" At which point, in the third frame, he cuts a caper, showing her how much fun dancing is. But grouching Lucy will have none of it and, ignoring him, snarls on. He catches up, tries again: "Hi, Sweetie! I'm here, Sweetie!" he says in the next frame: "Want a hug? Want a kiss? *I'll* give you a hug. *I'll* give you a kiss!" After which, he opens his "arms" and tilts toward her, eager to give and get such endearments. But, again, Lucy gruffs off and our poor, unbussed dog falls on his face. You remember how it ends. In the penultimate frame, Lucy disappears into her crotchety cloud, leaving, for the last image, that good dog peering out at *us*, a quizzical, sad look on his face: a chance to dance (and so much more) lost—forever. And much worse: *chosen* to be lost: for the sake of a snit!

And, if this chance to dance comes into being whenever we look at daffodils, why wouldn't it do the same whenever we look at *anything*? At sunsets, for instance, or trees, or long blue lakes in the morning, or mountains, or mosses, or the faces of our friends and family, or, for that matter, at all the lovely faces in this room? One of Ruskin's most justly famous lines is: There "is not a moment of any day of our lives when nature is not producing scene after scene, picture after picture, glory after glory...working [upon all with] such exquisite and constant principles of the most perfect beauty" (3:343). "If only," we might add, "we had eyes to see them." I am reminded here of another bit from Mr. Yeats, from his extraordinary "A Prayer for my Daughter," a poem in which he wishes for his beloved child, sleeping near him in Thoor Ballylee high above the fertile fields of County Galway in Western Ireland on a night when the Atlantic wind is blowing full tilt on their keep's tiny windows, a life shorn of hatred, that most poisonous of emotions. If she could so live,

...all hatred driven hence,
The soul recovers radical innocence
And learns at last that it is self-delighting

⁵⁵ Once again, the image is from Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud."

Self-appeasing, self-afrighting,
And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will. [Note the "sweet."]

But there is a still deeper level to Ruskin's concern. Human beings, he is saying, are not "just a different species": they are different *essentially—higher* beings altogether, beings (the only ones we know of) capable of being in tune with the pulse of the universe. "You do not see *with* the lens of the eye," he writes elsewhere, "You see *through* that. And by means of that, you see with the *soul* of the eye." (22:144) But the eye offered by the botanic lecturer, the eye which attended all the emerging sciences of Ruskin's day (sciences, including economics⁵⁶ and sociology, which continue to dominate in our day) is a *mechanical* eye, an eye which doesn't allow that eyes have souls, a steely eye which, used in any intense, recurring way, *eradicates* that most precious part of our humanity, that inner eye which *imagines* and *delights*. *Literally*, then: life or death.

Hardly an incidental matter then, this one of looking. No wonder Ruskin took issue with his self-congratulating, reclassifying, botanical colleague: how we choose to view the world *creates* that world—in *our* image, twice.⁵⁷

I can honestly say that, when reading Ruskin, this sort of thought-provoking passage surfaces with stunning regularity. Sometimes the great stuff flows out, as we've just seen, in a river of insights, but, as often, it just shows up in the middle of a page. Here's one of those lovely bits from a letter Ruskin sent a dear friend—especially apt when recalling the *Fors* argument above: "I *never* saw anything so wonderful as this narcissus! The perfect accuracy and finish of its lines... [But, I must say] I'm scarcely able to look at one flower because of the two on each side in my garden right now! I want to have bees' eyes—there are so many lovely things!" (37: 245). And another, from a lecture to his Oxford students: "teach...only gentleness and truth. Redeem—by example—from habits which you know to be unhealthy or degrading." (22: 91) And another, an aphorism for life, from a lecture on architecture: "The proof of a thing's being right is that it has power over us: that it excites us; that it wins us, or helps us." (12: 18) And a fourth, from a series of (imaginary) chats he had, in the guise of an "Old Lecturer," with some young girls on crystallography (!): "The law of human life is that we shall live by each other's happiness and life, not by each other's misery or death. Men help

⁵⁶ Ruskin denied that the economics ("political economy") of his time, based as it was on false assumptions (see argument preceding), *was* a science,

⁵⁷ Modern physics now confirms this insight into the consequences of how we regard the world. Called the "observational principle," the finding, which much surprised its discoverers when they discovered it, posits, as Ruskin did, that, when we observe, the thing seen changes into something it was not before; at the same moment, the perceiver changes into something new as well. See: *Science Daily*. One of Ruskin's most important friends in the 1870s and 1880s was Susan ("Susie") Beever, like him, a resident of Coniston. Though they lived only a few miles apart, they regularly exchanged letters when their complexly committed waking hours made visits impossible. One fall day, Susie wrote her friend about the glorious fall colors that surrounded her house amidst the woods. To which delightful rendering, he responded: Dearest Susie: "It is your own light of the eyes that has made the woodland leaves so golden brown." Fleming: 150.

each other by their joy, not by their sorrow. They are not intended to slay themselves for each other, but to strengthen themselves for each other." (18: 286) And one more, from another lecture given to his Oxford students, on the purpose of education: "Education, in its deepest sense, is not the equalizer, but the *discerner* of men. And, so far from being an instrument for the collection of riches, the first lesson of wisdom is to disdain them, and of gentleness, to diffuse." (20:20)

And here's another, longer—which I read just this morning—a passage which would surely touch Jonathan Kozol's heart, from a letter sent to a working man, explaining why, despite all the neglect and trials visited upon them, Ruskin retained hope for the millions of England's impoverished. This "enormous difference in bodily and mental capacity" between the well-off and the millions of poor among us, he wrote,

has been mainly brought about by difference in occupation and by direct maltreatment. And, in a few generations, if the poor were cared for...and sanitary law enforced, a beautiful type of face and form, and a high intelligence would become all but universal in a climate like this of England. Even as it is, the marvel is always to me how the race resists, at least in its childhood, influences of ill-regulated birth, poisoned food, poisoned air, and soul neglect. I often see faces of children as I walk through the black district of St. Giles [one of London's worst slums]...which, through all their pale and corrupt misery, [nevertheless retain] a sweetness of expression, even though signed already with trace and cloud of the coming life...Yes, very solemnly I repeat to you that in those worst treated children of the English race I yet see the making of gentlemen and gentlewomen, not the making of dog-stealers and gin-drinkers... and the child of the average English tradesman or peasant...well-schooled, will show no innate disposition such as must fetter him forever to the clod or the counter. (17: 405-6)

And this, from a "Book" on architecture. The first two sentences should probably be emblazoned in prominent places in all our homes and offices:

God has lent us the earth for our life. It is a great entail. It belongs as much to those who are to come after us, and whose names are already written in the book of creation, as to us. And we have no right, by anything that we do or neglect, to involve them in unnecessary penalties, or deprive them of benefits which it was in our power to bequeath... Every human action gains in honour, in grace, in all true magnificence, by its regard to things that are to come. (8:233)

And this, on human nature—which, note, to gain its apogee, must be *carefully* nurtured:

All human creatures, in all ages and places of the world, who have had warm affections, common sense, and self-command, have been, and are, *naturally* Moral. Human nature in its fullness is necessarily Moral—without Love, it is inhuman—

without sense, inhuman—without discipline, inhuman. In the exact proportion in which men are bred capable of these things, and are educated to love, to think, and to endure, they become *noble*—live happily, die calmly—are remembered with perpetual honor by their race, and for the perpetual good of it. (33:173)

Reminders.

The instances are legion and the effect of routinely coming across them as one reads Ruskin is a bit like having a private prescription for endorphins, knowing that, at any moment, your appreciation of something, or many things (often in many directions at once), may ignite, and suddenly it's the Fourth of July with fireworks bursting in your inner sky.

And now, uncomfortably aware that I have strayed well past the time allotted for these remarks, I *must* bring them to an end. But, before doing so, I would be seriously remiss if I did not give you *one* example of Ruskin's striking ability to make nature, his most beloved subject, come alive. The excerpt is an early one, from the first volume of *Modern Painters*, written in 1843 when he was just twenty-four. All I need say more is that this portrait of a storm and its aftermath is a perfect illustration of what he was trying to communicate, nearly forty years later, when, worried about the effects of the botanist's life-dimming nomenclature on our collective consciousness, he tried to tell his readers how important our choice of world-view is. Vital to notice is how his description literally *creates the event* and, as we allow ourselves to be immersed in his imagination (having been given "human eyes"), we become able not only to *see* but *participate* in the beauty described:

It had been wild weather when I left Rome and, all across the Campagna, the clouds were sweeping in sulphurous blue, with a clap of thunder or two, and breaking gleams of sun along the Claudian aqueduct, lighting up the infinity of its arches like the bridge of chaos. As I climbed the long slope of the Alban Mount, the storm swept finally to the north, and the noble outline of the domes of Albano, and graceful darkness of its ilex grove, rose against pure streaks of alternate blue and amber, the upper sky gradually flushing through the last fragments of rain-cloud in deep palpitating azure, half ether and half dew. The noonday sun came slanting down the rocky slopes of La Riccia and their masses of entangled and tall foliage, whose autumnal tints were mixed with the wet verdure of a thousand evergreens, were penetrated with it as with rain. I cannot call it color: it was conflagration. Purple, and crimson, and scarlet, like the curtains of God's tabernacle, the rejoicing trees sank into the valley in showers of light, every separate leaf quivering with buoyant and burning life; each, as it turned to reflect or to transmit the sunbeam, first a torch and then an emerald. Far up into the recesses of the valley, the green vistas arched like the hollows of mighty waves of some crystalline sea, with the arbutus flowers dashed along their flanks for foam, and silver flakes of orange spray tossed into the air around them, breaking over the grey walls of rock into a thousand separate stars, fading and kindling alternately as the weak wind lifted and let them fall. Every blade of grass burned like the golden floor of heaven, opening in sudden gleams as the foliage broke

and closed above it, as sheet-lightning opens in a cloud at sunset; the motionless masses of dark rock—dark though flushed with scarlet lichen, casting their quiet shadows across its restless radiance, the fountain underneath them filling its marble hollow with blue mist and fitful sound; and over all, the multitudinous bars of amber and rose, the sacred clouds that have no darkness, and only exist to illumine, were seen in fathomless intervals between the solemn and orbbed repose of the stone pines, passing to lose themselves in the last, white, blinding luster of the measureless line where the Campagna melted into the blaze of the sea. (3: 278-80)

Readers in Ruskin's time were awed and transformed by such passages. Virginia Woolf's reaction is typical: "The style in which page after page of *Modern Painters* is written takes our breath away. We find ourselves marveling at the words, as if all the fountains of the English language have been set playing in the sunlight for our pleasure..." (p. 49) His mentor in matters social, Thomas Carlyle, praised similarly a later Ruskin writing: "There is, in singular environment, a ray of Heaven in R[uskin]. Passages of that last book, *The Queen of the Air* [1869], went into my heart like arrows." (19: lviii) The same year Carlyle set down this commendation, Henry James wrote a friend from Italy: "I should extremely like to be able to depict the nature of this enchanting country, but to do so requires the pen of a Ruskin..." (Edel, p. 41) Two years on, James Smetham, an artist and friend of many Pre-Raphaelites, told the recipient of his letter: "I quite envy you your first reading of Ruskin. Ruskin is a revelation of a new world, and it only wants the remove of a century to show him in his colossal proportions..."⁵⁸ Of the good influence of Ruskin's pages on his life, his contemporary, Albert Fleming, said: "To him, I owe the guidance of my life, all its best impulses, all its worthiest efforts."⁵⁹ Tolstoy's applause is even grander: Ruskin, he wrote while his subject was still alive, "is one of the most remarkable men, not only of England and of our time, but also of all countries and times. He is one of those rare men who think with their hearts (*'les grandes pensees viennent du coeur'*). And so he thinks and says what he himself has seen and felt, and what everyone will think and say in the future." (p. 188)

That commitment to our well-being, our *being well*, to helping us see the world ever more clearly, was the aim of all the writing and lecturing he ever did, and the reason why, I suggest, we can consider his life, like Kozol's, a noble one. In every instance, whether we read his sociology, his commentaries on science or religion, or his great works on aesthetics and nature, Ruskin is trying to provide us with a worded path which will lead us, should we choose to follow it as it wends its way through his paragraphs, into higher regions, regions where better versions of our selves wait patiently to be claimed.

And here I need to address a thought which might be lurking, must underscore that Ruskin was no Pollyanna, no Dr. Pangloss, no subscriber to the idea that, in time, everything works out for the best. That, in its essence, the world was glorious, and humanity, given proper care,

⁵⁸ Davies and Smetham, p. 312. Alas, the estimate has proved too short!

⁵⁹ In the "Introduction" to *Hortus Inclusus*, his edition of some of the correspondence between Ruskin and his great friend in Coniston, Susie Beaver: xii.

good, he had no doubt. But like his mentor, Plato, he was excruciatingly aware of the horrors of history and the perfidies still being visited with impunity on the weaker of many stripes (whether these unfortunates were the poor, employees, or competitors), understood clearly that the only way to mitigate cruelty and callousness was to fight it. "And if, on due and honest thought over these things," he wrote in the last paragraph to *Unto This Last*, trying to move his readers to action,

it seems that the kind of existence to which men are now summoned by every plea of pity and claim of right, may, for some time at least, not be a luxurious one, consider whether, even supposing it guiltless, luxury would be desired by any of us, if we saw clearly at our sides the suffering which accompanies it in the world. Luxury is indeed possible in the future—innocent and exquisite; luxury for all, and by the help of all. But luxury at present can only be enjoyed by the ignorant. The cruelest man living could not sit at his feast unless he sat blindfolded. (17: 114)

Nevertheless, in the end, he also knew that the only fighter one could be sure of conscripting was oneself. "Make then *your* choice," he wrote, looking at his audience at the end of a lecture in 1859, voicing his own thoughts, wrestling with what he regarded as the wretched failure of his teaching on art and architecture to reclaim the world, thinking of how, in the wake of that wasted time and effort, he should spend his remaining days:

Make then *your* choice—boldly and consciously. For one way or other it *must* be made. On the dark and dangerous side are set the pride which delights in self-contemplation—the indolence which rests in unquestioned forms—the ignorance that despises what is fairest among God's creatures, and the dulness that denies what is marvellous in His working. *There* is a life of monotony for your own souls and of misguiding for those of others. And, on the other side, is open to your choice the life of the crowned spirit, moving as a light in creation, discovering always, illuminating always, gaining every hour in strength, yet bowed down every hour into deeper humility; sure of being right in its aim, sure of being irresistible in its progress; happy in what it has securely done, happier in what, day by day, it may as securely hope; happiest at the close of life, when the right hand begins to forget its cunning, to remember that there was never a touch of the chisel or the pencil it wielded but has added to the knowledge and quickened the happiness of mankind. (16:292)

Why Ruskin

By now we have travelled some distance from those heady days of two decades and more ago when, after carting back to our London flat all those verdant editions of Ruskin's works, I realized, as my reading went on, that I had found the sociologist I'd long wanted to find. But it wasn't much later, as I've said, before I realized that his humane social thought was only one wonderful room in a much ampler mansion, a prose storehouse so immense it included delicious food-for-thought on almost every vital issue imaginable. As the result of a completely unexpected karmic twist, then, I had chanced upon one of those Tolstoy called the

"most remarkable of men," someone whose heart-sight was as deep as his eyesight,⁶⁰ had found a mind much deeper, wiser, and warmer than my own, a mind which I soon saw could serve as a cynosure, a prophylactic against the slings and arrows of the frequently outrageous and heartless contemporary world in which we live, a beacon for the days which remained in my sail on life's sea. It felt like coming home, for the first time.

Ruskin often said that he never felt quite ready for the day until he had read his bit of Plato.⁶¹ I feel the same about him. Claudette Columbus warned me long ago: She said: "You know, if you get serious about him, Ruskin will spoil you for almost everybody else—because no one else will come up to him." She was right. What a *privilege* it has been to read a few pages in Ruskin's "Books" every day, to walk a few minutes in the presence of genius across infinitely interesting terrain. "Infinitely" is the right word because, now, all my courses, my students will tell you, are informed, largely or only a little less so, by what I have learned from Ruskin. As is my personal life, as my family and friends will tell you. Ruskin has had the ability to warm parts of my being I didn't know were cold, has taught me to see that which previously I did not, to imagine that which I previously could not, to feel that which I previously could not, has brought me without fail into the presence of the things I *know* to be honest, just, pure, lovely, and, as important as any of these, of good report.⁶²

Still, some frustration remains: I have not been able to share so much more that is of significance about this fellow; have not given an example of one of his incredible descriptions of a Turner painting (what an experience it is to have his analysis of Turner's "Slave Ship" in your hands as you peruse that masterpiece—which Ruskin once owned—in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts), have not shared the paragraphs preserving for all time the glory that was St. Mark's Basilica in Venice—"for beyond those troops of ordered arches," which lead into and frame the piazza, the passage begins, "there arises a vision out of the earth, and all the great square seems to have opened from it in a kind of awe...a multitude of pillars and white domes, clustered into a long low pyramid of colored light; a treasure-heap, it seems, partly of gold, and partly of opal and mother-of-pearl, hollowed beneath into five great vaulted porches, ceiled with fair mosaic, and beset with sculpture of alabaster, clear as amber and delicate as ivory—sculpture fantastic and involved, of palm leaves and lilies, and grapes and pomegranates, and birds clinging and fluttering among the branches, all twined together into an endless network of buds and plumes..." (10:82-3) (You see? I can hardly resist!)—have not shown any of his drawings and watercolors which, like his wonderful words, often just take your breath away.⁶³

Earlier I said that Ruskin had changed me "for good." In saying so I intended to convey something more than that phrase's sense of "permanence." I meant to suggest that I had

⁶⁰ 7: 377. A slight reworking of one of the phrases Ruskin used when speaking of Turner, saying that his beloved painter had "heart-sight deep as eye-sight."

⁶¹ Actually, translated. So important was Plato's thought to Ruskin, he was never sure if the translators had gotten things right. To gain that certainty, he taught himself Greek.

⁶² cf. Philippians 4: 8; a Bible passage he cited frequently.

⁶³ For a superb overview of drawings spanning Ruskin's whole career, see Walton.

been made over in a deeper sense, to suggest that Ruskin has helped me become a better human being: for good.

There is another, more significant, dimension to this estimable effect, some proof positive that, if we admit him, he speaks to us still. As noted, over the years I have found ways to insert some of Ruskin's books, lectures, or best passages into my courses. I do this not just because I believe strongly in the truth of what he is saying but because I want my students to see how a genius says the most essential things. I've learned that I must make these injections gingerly, for my students, even the best of them, are unfamiliar both with the level of erudition which pervades his paragraphs and the arcane (at least to them) allusions he makes to historical, cultural, aesthetic, or Biblical sources. At least at the beginning, then, a little Ruskin goes a long way. Nor are my charges eager to embrace the sort of moral arguments which are either front-and-center or lurking right under his surface. Children of an amoral age when each new catchword seems to be just another iteration of "me first," they listen to arguments about right and wrong with heavily waxed ears, are chary of any claims suggesting the intrinsically moral nature of human life. However, if I take such reticences as given, I have discovered that, if I introduce a little Ruskin in proper course context without direct critique of *their* lives or life-styles, they start, slowly, to take notice. A little later in the semester, I'll insert another Ruskin bit, and, later still, yet another. Usually, I read such passages with care and trust that his wonderful words and arguments will do the rest. The result is that, by semester's end, many of my charges begin to be won over. How could it *not* be the case (I watch them thinking it through) that the earth is a great entail and that we who live on it now are responsible for bequeathing that gift in full vitality to *our* children? How could one *not* conclude, on the basis of what we now know, that cigarette manufacturers *choose* to deliver death and damage for their gain (and our pain) only, while the affable monsters created by the Muppeteers provide us with delight and wisdom, true gains on any scale, in exchange for whatever money we pay for this good service? And lastly: How is it possible *not* to see that the second selling is laudable while the first is noxious?

It is hard to overestimate the importance of such "graspings," for it seems to me that, all their lives, these young ones have been wanting and waiting, indeed hungering, to hear the sorts of things, the truths, which invariably attach to Ruskin's words, truths which, before, seem not to have entered their minds seriously because of the powerful sway which the relativistic ethos of our era has over them.⁶⁴ The transformation is quite marvelous to watch.

⁶⁴ I do not wish to suggest that these young people have been brought up in homes or in religious traditions where a moral component is absent or lax. Nevertheless, as I frequently say in my courses: "We should *never* underestimate the power of the culture in ourselves," intending in that remark to suggest that the wider culture's influence, coming as it does from so many directions at once (friends, films, television, the internet), is immensely powerful and has, as a result, the ability to weaken or minimize impressions earlier made by familial and sacred sources. As an example: each semester in my Introduction to Sociology course I ask my students, almost all of whom have been brought up in some version of the Judeo-Christian tradition, on the first day of classes—without suggesting why I might be interested in their responses—to list the Ten Commandments. For two decades the average number of commandments known is slightly under four (over 1500 students responding). Almost always—and thankfully!—most of

First, there is a slight raising of the eyebrows, as if they were waking up from a long sleep. Later, as other passages are read, ears start to attune, and I begin to sense an eagerness (albeit a controlled one because none of these young wish to appear "uncool" before their peers) to hear a few more of these antique sentences, sentences which resonate with their long-neglected, undernourished intellectual and emotional centers. I have seen it happen hundreds of times. Ruskin has the ability to bring us home still: for good.⁶⁵



Not far from his Brantwood home and the churchyard in Coniston where he lies buried next to those who loved him most in this life—under a magnificent Celtic cross symbolizing his life story in bas-relief—among the reliefs: a Rose, a bunny, a sunrise, a (now) nearly-forgotten King dispensing justice, an equestrian St. George driving his lance into that always-lurking, always-disquieting dragon⁶⁶—is the Ruskin Library at Lancaster University. It opened in 1998, two years before the centenary of its subject's death. There, for the use of present and future generations of scholars and admirers, the majority of Ruskin's manuscripts and letters are carefully housed. As one might expect, the University, in recognition of its illustrious "tenant," has created a Ruskin Research Centre. In its turn, the Centre sponsors, annually, a series of talks where people interested in this fellow who means so much to me are invited to speak on some aspect of his life or work. I've given some talks there. For some time, it's been a tradition, once the formal presentation and questions and answers are finished, for the assembled to stroll over to the nearby Bowland Bar for some chat. After the pints are pulled, there's a query put to those who have not yet had the chance to answer publicly. "And so," someone asks a new arrival: "Why, for you, Ruskin?" Various answers are given, of course. It is quite marvelous to hear the differences.

them recall the prohibition against killing. The ban on adultery is second but the percentage remembering it is much lower. After that, the other commandments (having only one god, keeping the Sabbath day holy, worshipping no graven images, honoring parents, no swearing, stealing, lying, or coveting) appear haphazardly, if at all. Indeed, a number of students know no commandments. Twice I asked a national student sample to generate the same list (1200 respondents). The results were identical.

⁶⁵ I do not want to leave the impression that Ruskin's significance has gone completely unnoticed in the modern era. For two important recognitions, see Sara Atwood on Ruskin's impact on education, and Stuart Eagles on Ruskin's influence on the social policies not only of his time but well into our own. I do wish to say, however, that thoughtful appreciations such as these are far too few in number.

⁶⁶ William G. Collingwood was Ruskin's student at Oxford, later his amanuensis and traveling companion, later still his first biographer. His *Life and Works of John Ruskin* published in various editions in the 1890s and early 1900s, remains one of the best in the genre, notwithstanding the efforts of a not insignificant number of later writers, not merely because Collingwood knew his subject personally, but because, unlike many who wrote "lives" later, he understood what Ruskin was trying so hard to communicate. When Ruskin died in 1900, Collingwood was asked to design the memorial under which his teacher would lie. When his own time arrived, his remains were placed a few feet away from his master's.

But when I heard that question the first time, these thoughts sprang immediately to mind. I thought: "Well, it's because he tells me the truth, the truth I should have known long ago; it's because he inspires⁶⁷ me; it's because he gives me more life."

And that is why, for me, still: Ruskin.

⁶⁷ < Middle English, "inspiron" < Old French, "inspirie" < Latin, "Spiritus" —lit: to "in spirit"; put vital breath into; give courage, vigor, soul. (Derivation, Ruskin's.)

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