

Ruskin's Dark Night of the Soul

A Reconsideration of his Mental Illness and the Importance of
Accurate Diagnosis for Interpreting his Life Story

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Mad let us grant him then. And now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect,
Or rather, say, the cause of this defect,
For this effect, defective, comes by cause.

Polonius, *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2

¹ The principal arguments made in this essay are basically the same as those advanced when it was first published. In light of the time that has elapsed since then, however, a number of changes have been made to bring that initial presentation up to date, including the interpolation of a considerable amount of new evidence. In addition, a number of photographs have been included. Such alterations mean that the page numbers to follow do not correspond to those in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* version. Because I intend this as the final version of this essay, all references should be to it. See the proper citation form in the Bibliography.

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Introduction



Ruskin in the 1880s (Photograph: H. R. Barraud)

During the last quarter century of his life, John Ruskin suffered repeatedly and severely from what, during his era, were called "brain fevers." The causes and effects of these have been interpreted in various ways, with some writers suggesting that the debilitating attacks compromised all his work after their 1878 commencement, with some suggesting that, if one looked back, it would be obvious that much of his earlier work had been tainted by what could only be regarded as the lamentable effects of the kind of mental instability inherited by many geniuses.

The trouble with such interpretations and classifications is that none of them are ever accompanied by a careful definition of Ruskin's illness or a systematic study of its causes, oversights which reduce them all to speculation. More worrisomely, lacking a methodical analysis of his disturbance and its origins, we run the risk of *mis*interpreting the life story of one of the acknowledged masterminds of the nineteenth century. In other words, such a study remains sorely needed because if Ruskin's illness and its causes prove to be of one sort, they will direct how we should understand the arch of his life in one way, but if they prove to be another variety, a very different interpretation of his life will take precedence.

It is with this critically important missing information in mind that the present study has been undertaken. Its intent will be to report the results of a detailed analysis of Ruskin's mental illness, a study which utilizes, first, the accepted psychiatric diagnostic literature on such disturbances, and, second, introduces, for the first time, a considerable amount of new evidence pertinent to Ruskin's illness that has never before been consulted by his

biographers. These steps will allow me to not only accurately diagnose his disease but, in light of that diagnosis, to propose a new interpretation which will explain why Ruskin's illness developed as and when it did and the consequences it had on his life. I will conclude by discussing the implications these alternative understandings have for future studies of his life and work.

A large proportion of the new evidence just-mentioned will be drawn from a large cache of previously unpublished letters which, taken as a whole, make it possible to illumine, in a radically new way, Ruskin's life in the 1880s, a period that included no fewer than three of his ever more severe "brain fevers," and his last, disastrous, Continental tour of 1888. I begin with a selection of these.

Ruskin and the Alexanders

Tim Hilton, a recent biographer, tells us that, shortly after Ruskin—accompanied by his loyal manservant, Peter Baxter, and an aspiring young architect, Detmar Blow—arrived in Venice on 6 October 1888, "some part of" his "mind ... entirely collapsed" (Hilton, *Later*, 848).² He is quite right about this. However, by the time Ruskin had gained Venice that collapse was already far advanced and the great Victorian who would all but limp out of the floating city ten days later was a man in excruciating despair with thoughts in wild disarray, a genius laid low whose only remaining desire was to find some way to return to his Brantwood home in England's Lake District where he would give over his damaged soul over to the love and care of his beloved cousin, Joan Severn.

If, that is, Joan would have him. For, as a result of his disturbed behavior at Brantwood during the summer of 1887 as he struggled to repair from another of his severe mental attacks of the year before (onslaughts which, at roughly two-year intervals, had plagued him since 1878), Joan had determined that he must live elsewhere. Eventually, she and her husband, the painter Arthur Severn, would deposit him, alone, in September, in Folkestone on England's south coast, where, the miserable Ruskin hoped, addled or well, he would at least be able to see "Turner skies" again.

There, and, later, in nearby Sandgate, excepting a few (but important, as we shall see) excursions to London, letter after letter to various correspondents shows, he lived in fairly deranged mind until he crossed the Channel for the Continent on June 10 of the following year. Fully aware that his mental health was tenuous, and in constant anguish about Joan's steadfast refusal to allow him to return to Brantwood, despite some warming of relations

² When references are easily understood (as here), I include them in the text, with further identification if a given author or source has multiple references. Complete citations for all references will be found in the Bibliography.

between them, Ruskin knew that this trip on his "Old Road"³ would be his last. But with the faithful Baxter by his side, and, after a chance meeting in Beauvais, a worshipful novice architect, Detmar Blow, at his elbow for intellectual companionship, he was ready to brook all so that he might see his most beloved sights one last time. His furthest goals were Venice, a place he regarded as "the Paradise of Cities," about which he had written so much and so insightfully, and a small town about a hundred kilometers to the north, Bassano del Grappa, where he would have a chance to have a proper visit with his adored American ex-patriot friends, Francesca and Lucia Alexander, who were living there in a rented palazzo.

Introduced by a mutual friend, Ruskin had met the Alexanders in Florence in 1882. Immediately taken with each other, it was not long before he was shown, in their commodious flat overlooking the famous Church of Santa Maria Novella, Francesca's hand-made book containing her always-edifying, often heart-rending, stories of the lives of Italian peasants whom she and her mother had known and loved during their three decades of voluntary exile from Boston.⁴ Most of the tales were illustrated by Francesca's accomplished drawings. Instantly realizing that the manuscript communicated in both word and image what he wanted to say to his readers about how it remained possible to live a simple, God-faring life in a world sliding ever deeper into the industrial mire, he not only bought the manuscript at generous price but set to work publishing it as soon as he returned to England.



**Francesca Alexander about
the time Ruskin knew her**

³ From England into France via Calais, then on to Amiens, Abbeville, Beauvais, Paris, Chartres, the Jura, Geneva, the Alps, and, finally, over one of the great passes into Italy.

⁴ They had left Boston when Francesca, born in 1837, was 16. Her father who had been diagnosed with a lung-ailment, was told by his physician that if the family went to live in the clean atmosphere of Italy, he would repair. They chose Florence because of its cultural significance. When, some years later, he died, the mother and daughter, being entrenched and happy, decided not to return to America.



One of the many Illustrated Pages from
 Francesca’s *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*

Roadside Songs of Tuscany,⁵ with its stories introduced or commented on by Ruskin, made Francesca famous. As the book went through the stages of pre-publication, the friendship that had begun in Florence flourished and over a hundred letters were exchanged between the Englishman, Francesca, and her mother. Reading them, we learn that it is not long before the excruciatingly lonely Ruskin, convinced for some time that his life had been an unconscionable failure because his books failed to have the positive transformational effect on society he intended, and desperately in need of sympathetic ears and hearts, adopted an intimate, confessional tone, and, to his “Sorella” or “Sorel” (sister), and her “Mamma” —and to whom he was, respectively, “Fratello,” or “Fratel” (brother), or “Figlio” (son)—he wrote as he had written few others. As the next half decade passed, hundreds of

⁵ The thirty-nine volumes of Cook and Wedderburn’s *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin* remain, by far, the most complete repository of his works. Given that this work will be often cited in what follows, I will use the following system to indicate where a particular reference is to be found: to take the current example, *Roadside Songs of Tuscany* will be found at LE 32: 41-234, where LE signifies “Library Edition,” ; “33” the volume, and “41-234” the specific pages.

other letters would cross the Channel and Alps as a deep and abiding love developed between them (see Swett). Indeed, Ruskin's relationship with the Alexanders, though entirely epistolary except for their first meeting in Florence and the few days they spent together in Bassano in the fall of 1888 are arguably, because of their confessional nature, the most important we possess for understanding—and, as we shall see, diagnosing—his mental struggles.⁶

In many, we find numerous metaphorical references to Biblical passages Ruskin has long known by heart. Steeped in the contents of the sacred text by his Evangelical mother from the moment he could listen attentively, he became one of the great Biblical scholars of his age, daily reading, and, including in his writings, many Bible references, often to chastise some in his audiences—industrialists and capitalists prime among these—for their avaricious and cruel behavior, for being putative Christians and living lives that intentionally and resolutely ignored Christ's injunction to treat others as they would wish to be treated. But, Ruskin knew, too, that the moral framework for living set forth in the great book was a double-edged sword. As a result, as his letters to the Alexanders demonstrate in abundance, he would, with regularity, allow the second stroke of the blade to descend on himself, as he unleashes a skein of rebukes castigating himself for what he saw as his own egregious and unforgivable deviances from the Christian creed. Some examples:⁷

The first four months of 1886 found him in perpetual turmoil, engaging in intensely confrontational arguments with Joan, as well as with some visitors, contentions which, to those possessing some detachment, seemed both unnecessary and unnecessarily forceful. As well, by this time, his relationship with the artist, Kate Greenaway, whose work, like Francesca's, he loved and had tried to promote, had seriously deteriorated. Unexpectedly, Kate had fallen in love with him while he, utterly surprised by her disclosure of this fact, and feeling not a modicum of the same emotion, insisted that she must curtail her feelings so that they could return to the master/student relationship that had characterized their friendship from its beginning in the early 1880s. When Kate demurred, in anger, he started burning her letters.⁸ In addition, although he continued to write beautifully composed and touching installments for his autobiography, *Praeterita*, every day he was tormented by the sense that

⁶ Excepting the letters sent, almost daily, to Joan when he was not at Brantwood: see Dickinson.

⁷ The Ruskin-Alexander Collection (MSS. ACC 2500), containing 309 letters (my count, the library estimate being inaccurate), some including attachments and drawings, is preserved at The Boston Public Library (hereafter, BPL). A highly selective version of these letters, many bowdlerized—hence untrustworthy—was published by Swett in 1931. Other, albeit smaller, collections relevant to the Ruskin-Alexander story can be found at The Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum, New York (hereafter, PML); The Ruskin Library, Lancaster University, UK (hereafter, RL), the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge, MA; the Clapp Library, Wellesley College Special Collections, Wellesley, MA; the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, and Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Unless otherwise indicated, none of the BPL letters or excerpts cited have been previously published.

⁸ For considerably more on this important relationship, see Chapter Two of "Ruskin's Sexuality," the following paper in this series.

he had failed and failed utterly, that he had squandered his genius, and, by so doing, had offended not only his parents, his friends, and his fellow travelers on this earth, but God Himself. Worse still, in July, he would suffer another mental collapse which would include a serious psychotic episode. Although he would repair significantly as time passed, it was a battering from which he would never completely recover.

Not long before the attack, on April 25, he sent an anguish-laden letter to Mrs. Alexander. In it writing: "I don't think I've ever been more dismal than just now, in spring. Not being able to climb or having any great mountains or lovely skies to see. Painting flowers—mere hopeless effort! Writing books—unhealthy sorrow! And all the burdens of Solomon's wisdom on me..."⁹

The reference to Solomon is significant. Ruskin was deeply aware that, like the great king in the Bible, he had gained information about the world and life that others did not possess. All his writings and lectures had been designed to impart such knowledge. The fact that so much of what he had tried to say had been misunderstood or dismissed out-of-hand by many of his readers, was an ever-present goad (as we shall see again) intensifying his anger and depression. What he is telling Mrs. Alexander is that while Solomon had succeeded in going God's work by dispensing his wisdom, he, John Ruskin, had miserably failed.

It was in this same agitated and desolate frame of mind that he had sat down to write Mrs. Alexander another letter, on May 1, 1886. In a letter of hers—which we do not have—she must have comment, in response to another remark detailing his desultory and sinful state, something to the effect that, "well, you know, in one way or another, we are all sinners." Hoping to bring him to accept this observation, she had inserted a remark suggesting that the parting of the Red Sea by God as the Israelites attempted to escape Egypt was a sign of His forgiveness for earlier misbehavior: "Dearest Mammina," Ruskin replied, all that you say is

very fine and pleasant, but would you now, Mammina dear, mind telling me just the least little bit of a real mortal sin that you have ever did and repented of and have got[ten] washed out—or forgotten—or whatever you'd like it to be?

⁹ For letters or excerpts from the Alexander collection used here and below, I cite the BPL call number. Taking this excerpt as example, it will be found at "BPL MSS. ACC 2500: III 37," where "MSS. ACC 2500" is the file reference, "III" is the box number in the file where the letter is housed, and "37" is the number assigned the letter in that box. Although not the case here, when letters have more than one sheet, BPL designates these as "a + b," "c + d," etc. In reproducing material from this collection, I have occasionally changed punctuation for easier reading, *e.g.*, inserting paragraph breaks into long paragraphs or changing some dashes to commas. Excisions are indicated by ellipses, and interpolations are enclosed in brackets. To save space, later citations will be found in the text.

You see, I'm of the race of Esau, and don't understand any of those washings out. My sea is all red—and washes things *in*. Also, I'm like Saul—and Jonah—and have nobody to play on the harp with me... I *am* a little bit better than Jonah, I believe; I don't want Nineveh swallowed up [just] because I said it will be.

I sent two packets [of mail] to Sorel yesterday, which I hope disappointed her in having more of mine in them. But I thought she would like to hear of the little housewives and read what my G.D. [God-Daughter]—says of them. The letter she is so pleased about was in answer to her begging me not to say anything naughty about the housewives. I told her there was no fear as to *them* but that I couldn't set myself up for a St Benedict.¹⁰

I see it is no use talking to you about Joanie. But what are five children for, I want to know, but to take care of *each other*? You and Francesca, of course, had enough to do to keep [you] good you two, but Lily Severn is quite a little governess already—and Violet's another...¹¹

Ever your poor little Edomite & Cannite & Ammonite & Perizzite and Hittite & Ninevite & Moabite, JR (BPL MSS. ACC 2500: III 40)

Some comments about the above will elucidate the strength of Ruskin's self-disgust:

"*I am of the race of Esau.*" A severe castigation, for, as the story is told in *Genesis* 27,¹² Esau, hungry, sold his birthright as the first son of Isaac (Ruskin was an only son) to his brother, Jacob, for a bowl of lentil stew, "a mess of pottage." Ruskin saw himself as having behaved similarly, as having wasted his genius in inconsequential, foolish endeavors that failed to gain their goal. The comment is also significant in his choice of an Old Testament figure to compare himself to, a time before Christ would teach that, if one believed, one's sins would be forgiven. In Ruskin's estimation, his transgressions being so heinous, there would be, as was right, no forgiveness.

"*...I'm like Saul—and Jonah—and have nobody to play on the harp with me...*" Two other Old Testament figures who sinned much. But they, at least, to mitigate their pain and sense of guilt, had someone to play on the harp for them. He—again, justly given his offenses—has no such aides. As well, at the time this letter was written, the love of his life, the young woman he wished to be his wife, Rose La Touche, has been dead for over a decade; had they married, she would have been his constant solace.

¹⁰ That is, as a saint, as the remainder of the letter and the signature line show. In the next paragraph, the "Lily" and "Violet" mentioned are Joan and Arthur Severn's children.

¹¹ In his disturbed condition, Ruskin was often rankled by what he saw as the rude behavior of the Severn children and the lack of a determination in their parents to reign them in.

¹² Although he often read other versions to gain a better understanding of certain stories and concepts in the Bible, throughout his life, Ruskin relied on the King James Version, largely because almost all his contemporaries would have been familiar with it.

Finally, all the people he loves most in the world—the Alexanders among them—either because of distance or other commitments—are not available to sooth him.

"I sent two packets [of mail] to Sorel yesterday, which I hope disappointed her in having more of mine in them." When writing his most intimate correspondents, Ruskin sometimes included the letters, and occasionally the drawings, of others. This sardonic remark is intended as yet more self-reproach: Surely Francesca will enjoy the things written by others which he has included more than she will enjoy his own deficient letter.

"but...I couldn't set myself up for a St. Benedict." A saint of the Catholic Church whose lifetime of commitment and service Ruskin deeply admired. Like most saints, Benedict lived a life of celibacy. Here the ironic allusion is to what Ruskin sees as his own impure and reprehensible sexual impulses.¹³

"Ever your poor little Edomite & Cannite & Ammonite & Perizzite and Hittite & Ninevite & Moabite." A scathing close, for all those mentioned are tribes or kingdoms which, at various times, occupied parts of the Middle East prior to the Christian era. Each worshipped multiple gods, which, from a Judeo-Christian viewpoint, made them "pagans," the etymology of which denotes persons "unenlightened," or "lacking culture or moral principles," a derivation of which Ruskin, one of the great wordsmiths of the English language, would have been acutely aware, the implication being that he, like a pagan, is beyond redemption. In its varying ways, the entire letter expresses this view.



The Hotel in Folkestone where Ruskin first stayed in 1887

¹³ Which, throughout his life, were few and in thought only. See "Ruskin's Sexuality," the next essay in this series.

Another representative letter, this one sent Francesca, arrived at the rooms overlooking the Piazza Santa Maria Novella a year and a half later. Begun on New Year's Eve and finished on the following afternoon (December 31-January 1, 1888), it was written by a Ruskin, still banished from Brantwood, who was now living in Sandgate, a seaside town a few miles from Folkestone. As has the case all along, on this night he is alone in his rooms. His behavior during the daylight hours has become so restless and his mental state so muddled, he has, of late, been a source of humor to some of those who wait on him. If the previous letter to Francesca's mother was a nearly matchless exercise in inner misery, in this one he is inconsolably depressed. In the months that have passed between the letters, he has kept whatever mental equanimity he still possesses in place by means of his ongoing correspondences—with Joan, Kate Greenaway, the Alexanders, and a trickle of others. A handful of trips to London have also eased things a bit. During one of these, by chance, he has met a young girl drawing in the National Gallery, Kathleen Olander. Learning of her intense interest in understanding what makes some art great while other efforts are pedestrian, he has offered to help her learn the distinction. In months that still lie ahead, an emotionally intense epistolary relationship will develop between them. It will be one of the great solaces of his approaching Continental trip, as well as, when their exchange abruptly ends, an additional source of misery.

On this last night of 1887, the entire staff of his lodging house have departed for their homes so that they might ring in the new year with their loved ones. Outside, the streets are empty and dark. As Ruskin sits down to write his adopted sister in his solitary room, the only light comes from a few candles and the dying flames of a nearby fireplace. He begins by putting a good face on things: "Sweetest Sorel,"

The last hour but one of the old year has struck and I am staying up to hear the chimes and say the first word of the New Year to my Sorel.

[There] has been heavy snow, and I have not yet got out since Tuesday,¹⁴ but have not been unhappy in my armchair, nice letters coming [in today's post] from Joanie, and [there are] ships passing on the sea [outside my window]. And I've been sleeping more than usual—and had clear, rather pleasant, dreams about walks in country and seeing nice houses. Meaningless things enough when one thinks what dreams might be! But better than sad or fearful ones.

I enjoyed the story about Giannina...as [I enjoy] all you tell me of her, except that she thinks me too different from what I am, and so much better than ever [I] shall be.

One of my candles burnt to socket. 1/2 past eleven--

I light a new one and stir both fires—sitting room [where he is] and bedroom, which opens out of it. The sea is rising, and gushes heavily and just at the end of the little garden. I haven't even my cat for company.

There—such a grand deep-pointed wave!

¹⁴ New Year's Eve was on Saturday that year.

I've been asleep for a little, but wake up and sip my milk. They give me such good lovely milk and cream here!

Only five minutes to year's end, and it seems just a minute since I heard the owls cry softly on my birthday.

The sea is more cheerful--

The clock has struck—but I hear no chimes. Perhaps the little Sandgate church is too far away. No matter. I will ring them in my heart, for gladness that I have such a Sorel and Mammina—and such a friend as Giannina.

[*Letter continued, next day, 1st January, afternoon*]: Your beautiful letter with stories of Giannina cheered my waking. I have had many pleasures in words from friends.

Too tired to say more today.

Your devoted Fratel (BPL MSS. ACC 2500: IV 26)

As earlier, some contextualizing comments.

"And I've been sleeping more than usual..." When Ruskin is depressed, as he has been now for years running, he sleeps poorly, waking frequently, beset, almost as soon as his consciousness clears, with thoughts that, almost always, point to his many failures. But things do not improve much when he sleeps, for many of his dreams re "sad and fearful." For the moment, he has received a reprieve from these twin torments, for which he is most grateful.

"I enjoyed the story about..." Giannina is one of the servants of the Alexanders but, over the years, they have become dear friends. Francesca has written some stories about her in *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*. Ruskin is keenly aware, to his chagrin, that when they speak of him to her—and indeed to other of their friends—they only tell the good things, stressing his kindness, his eloquence, his commitment to helping others, his love of them. It is an utterly inaccurate view, he says here with pique. He is so much *worse* than what they tell about him; he is not, and will *never* be that commendable person. (This "inaccurate view" of him will reappear with even more virulence in the next letter.)

"...since I heard the owls cry softly on my birthday (his 68th)." Earlier this year, on February 20, his birthday, had written the following to Francesca: "My birthday was very nice, if only the owls hadn't cried at the end of it and frightened me..." To hear the cry of an owl was often thought to be a harbinger of impending doom, of, perhaps, serious illness or death. What frightened Ruskin most about his approaching end was not death itself; it was his conviction that, when the inevitable moment of judgment arrived, he would not only be regarded as having been woefully wanting on the scale of having done useful and good things during his life, he would be judged as having being so monstrous, he would be thrown into the pit for eternity.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this missive—which surely must rank as one of the saddest New Year's letters ever written—is the shroud of sorrow and despair that envelops the whole. It has been written by one of the applauded geniuses of an age, by a mind which has been, repeatedly and enthusiastically, recognized, even by its detractors, for its brilliance and unflagging service to humanity. And yet, the writer of these paragraphs cannot accept even the mildest of accolades for a "job well done." He is like a wretched child peeking fearfully out from his crib in a dark and desolate bedroom, hoping against hope to find one ray of light in the midst of a gloom so pervasive he is petrified he will be condemned to isolation and its attendant terror forever. (We shall return to this letter and the author's inability to ever absolve himself from sins that he has never committed later.)

The third letter (excerpted) was posted to Francesca nearly nine months later, on the 23rd of September 1888. Ruskin is in the last weeks of his final Old Road tour. Still accompanied by Peter Baxter and Detmar Blow, he is in Milan, a sorrow-laden last visit to his favorite place on earth, the Alpine village of Chamouni,¹⁵ just behind him. Ahead lie Bassano and a last visit to Venice, the former bringing to realization his long-promised visit with his Sorella and her (and his) Mammina. It is a visit they are eagerly anticipating while he, in his turn, is nervous and reserved, terrified that, when they see him, they will find him wanting, anything but the great man they believe him to be. En route, he has finished and sent off for publication what will prove to be the last of his planned chapters for *Praeterita*, "L'Esterelle" ("The Star"), about Rose and his unwavering love of her.¹⁶ In previous letters, he has told his American friends much about her and of how her death in 1875 was for him a kind of death knell, a blow from which he knew he would never recover—nor has he. They have also been told how Rose's spirit in one way or another visits him daily, and how, in this incorporeal guise, she soothes his nearly unbearable agony and sense of guilt at having been responsible for her death. Hopefully, he says to Francesca as he arrives the heart of his letter, you

will not think that I am not eager to come to you because I have not rushed [to Bassano] from Simplon foot.¹⁷

First, I needed, & need, rest—the journey from Chamouni has been more fatiguing than ever I thought to put up with again—or to bear in safety—and the pathetic feeling mixed with gladness, [was] in itself more than was safe.

You have never been able to judge completely of me, Sorel, because I never tell you about anything that hurts me—especially anything that is managed ill for me. It is never *overwork* that hurts me... [It sometimes] *may* be pleasant excitement connected with the work, but it is oftentimes [accompanied by] anger and wanting—things I can't get.

¹⁵ The modern spelling is "Chamonix." Although this version is occasionally used by Ruskin, almost always, having no liking the harsher "x," he uses the softer spelling. I will follow his preference.

¹⁶ In the chapter, Ruskin reproduces a letter of Rose's he called "The Star Letter," a missive which he always carried in a small case held next to his heart.

¹⁷ The Simplon is one the principal passes over the Alps into Italy.

We've never had a *real* talk, either Mammina & I or you and I, and either would have been well worth coming to Italy for. But the part of me that neither of you know is so different from what you believe, that often knowing me a little better, I'm afraid you'll think I had better have stayed away.

There is one thing I want to warn Mammina of. She thought she was comforting me in saying [in one of her letters that] Rose could not have lived—and that I did not kill her. Well, that means that she [Rose] never loved me rightly, which is a far greater sorrow to me than my being guilty of her death (which I *am* truly, whether the death was caused by me or not). But if she did not love me rightly here, I do not feel as if she would in heaven...(BPL MSS. ACC 2500: IV 55)

The pathos and angst which pervade these paragraphs are little less than astonishing. Once more, some comments framing some of Ruskin's remarks will prove helpful.

"First...more than was safe." Ever since the devastating attack of 1886, Ruskin has been acutely aware that more of the same, almost surely worse, was lying in wait. One tactic he has adopted for sanity-preservation is not reading the newspapers, for in them, he is repeatedly reminded that his recommendations for salving the world's ills have been resolutely ignored and that the greed and despoliation of the beauties of nature have proceeded apace. As well, the dread of another attack has markedly intensified on this trip, as he has been not only taxing himself physically, but revisiting many places he once venerated for their beauty and purity, places he praised in book after book as among the world's greatest treasures, places which, for humanity's sake, *had* to be preserved at *any* cost. But, everywhere he has visited, his eyes have told him, that nearly the opposite has happened, with many places now but sorry shadows of their earlier magnificent selves. Such sights are doubly-depressing, not merely because they are proof indubitable that his battles have been lost, but as symbols that will point to what will be "considered" when his Day of Judgment arrives.

"You have never been able to judge completely of me..." Another reference to his unworthiness as a decent human being, a fault he has hidden from them for reasons earlier stated.

"...things I can't get." Although "things" is unspecified, other letters inform us that, for starters, they would include not having his work appreciated for its life-sustaining content, his conviction that, had he written more convincingly, he would have succeeded, forgiveness for what he believes is his cruelty to Joan and his parents (often leaving the latter when their need for him was desperate¹⁸), and having Rose back.

¹⁸ For more on this, see the previous paper in this series, "Ruskin in Milan."

"There is one thing I want to warn Mammina of." It is true, he accepts without saying so directly, that Rose was seriously ill both physically and mentally when she died (we know that she died insane and there is modest evidence suggesting that, for at least a decade prior, she was suffering severely from anorexia nervosa). Even so, he continues, countering another of Mammina's attempts at consolation, had he not been on the scene, immensely famous, always importuning her and her parents for her hand, not to mention being ceaselessly *desperate* for her love, she surely would have survived. No, for Ruskin there can be no absolution. There is only the rightly earned punishment that has arisen out of his desire to sate his own selfish interests, of having led Rose into a chasm of stress and sadness from which she could never escape and the torment of bearing the fundamental responsibility of having killed the thing he loved most in life.



Although the Alexander letters have been available to scholars since the mid-1940s, none of Ruskin's biographers seem to have known of them and, as a result, have not known of their unparalleled ability to throw the emotional anguish which accompanied his latter decades into high relief.¹⁹ The result has been, as suggested earlier, that his mental illness has been misdiagnosed, has been seen, almost always, as yet another case of mental instability occasioned by the inheritance of some deficient gene or genes, a condition that ensured that "like so many artists and geniuses," a time would inevitably come when that malevolent imprint, like some merciless tiger lying buried in the grass, would pounce and bring its prey down.²⁰

As a consequence, the portraits of Ruskin these biographies paint that purport to tell the story of his last two and a half decades (roughly 1875-1900) cannot help but be incomplete, being, even in the most detailed case (Hilton's), renderings based on an incomplete holographic record. Making matters worse, and also as earlier suggested, to this point, no Ruskin biographer has yet to make any methodical attempt to diagnose his illness accurately or systematically analyze the specific causes that created his virulent inner conflicts and their accompanying anguish.

What follows is intended to rectify these problems.

¹⁹ For a fuller account of how the Ruskin-Alexander letters came to reside at BPL, see the second chapter of "Ruskin's Sexuality," the following essay in this series.

²⁰ The full-scale biographies published since 1950—as opposed to essays intended to introduce Ruskin to new readerships (*e.g.*, Jackson, O'Gorman), or studies shedding more light on some aspect of his life or work (*e.g.*, Dickinson, Atwood)—are (the pages where these works discuss his mental illness follow each name): Abse, 274-331; Batchelor, 237-333; Evans, 355-423; Hilton, *Later*, 340-596; Hunt, 354-405; Kemp, 393-490; and Rosenberg, 147-225.

Ruskin's Mental Illness: A Reconsideration

Recent Ruskin biographers have accurately reported about when, where, and with whom he interacted during his exile in Folkestone and Sandgate in late 1887 and early 1888 and described the course of his last trip to the Continent later in that second year. Most give some account of his waxing and waning levels of agitation during this time. But, as noted, nowhere in these works do these writers offer anything that could be considered a systematic *analysis* of their subject's mental difficulties, an analysis that could be used as the basis for a sound diagnosis of that illness, and, in that capacity, serve as an entrée to explaining both why and how his illness developed, why it took the agonizing turns it did, and why, in the end, it proved so impervious to amelioration.

Some others, while neither dedicated biographers nor literary specialists, have evinced interest in the "Ruskin problem," and, with that as their guiding impulse, have attempted to shed light by advancing various "psychiatric interpretations" en route to a suggested "diagnosis." Three sub-types of this kind of approach exist: those who rely only on what that they have "heard" about Ruskin's illness, those who know little about him but who are willing to use that modicum of information to come to a "considered judgement" concerning his disturbances, and those who write about him from the point-of-view of some psychiatric specialty they possess. I will consider each category, briefly.

(1) The most common interpretation of Ruskin's illness arrives by way of a long-enduring, and, unfortunately, seemingly intransigent, cultural myth: the assumption that a genetic disposition to mental imbalance often attends great genius. Immediately after this notion is voiced, most people's minds call up famous names whom they believe prove the point: Vincent van Gogh, Richard III, Nikola Tesler, Michelangelo, Virginia Woolf, Hitler, Beethoven, Lord Byron. The trouble with this presumption is that is that it is just that: an uncriticized cultural pre-determination that is devoid of any systematic attempt to secure its verity. And the trouble with the just-noted examples is that to a one they are all "low hanging fruit," chosen without the chooser knowing very much, if anything, about whether the example is really a instance of what they are attempting to prove. Most critically, however, we now know that the assumption positing that there exists a congenital link between madness and genius cannot be supported in the light of the findings of modern psychiatric research. As psychologist Arne Dietrich concludes at the end of a recent essay (2014) which systematically assesses the evidence for and against the biologic supposition: When you look at the available data, the "simple truth in the matter is that the VAST majority of creative people are not mentally ill and, more importantly, the VAST majority of those suffering from psychopathology are not geniuses. Seen in this light, the claim that creativity and insanity go together ...[has to be regarded as] densely ignorant nonsense..."²¹

²¹ cf. Schlesinger, and references cited in both.

(2) Another group of observers seems more sophisticated, supporting their determinations of what mental illness Ruskin had with some "data" of which they are aware. Some of these say that Ruskin's is a clear case of manic depression. Others opine schizophrenia. (A contradiction problematic in itself, given that they are very different diseases.) Two examples are emblems of the pattern and the problems associated with it. (A) In 1950, Clifford Allen maintained that an inborn tendency to develop schizophrenia was the source of Ruskin's imbalance. However, when we look at the "evidence" Allen presents for his claim, we find that he seems to have never read any of Ruskin's works in depth and that he has no familiarity with the plethora of primary documents (letters, diary entries, observations by those who were with Ruskin during or after his attacks) that can provide us (*vide* the Alexander letters) with first-hand accounts of his struggles. (B) In 1969, Robert J. Joseph also diagnosed schizophrenia. But, as in Allen's case, when we examine the evidence he offers in support of his judgment, we find to be thin in the extreme and, like that other author, he apparently knows little about Ruskin, his work, or any of the primary documents mentioned above.

(3) A third group of writers appears to have been more thorough. But, as in the case of the above works, when we look at their studies carefully, we find the same problems emerging: what appear, on the surface, to be more thorough approaches, aren't. Two well-known instances illustrate: (A) In 1933, R.F. Wilenski became the first to present a sustained argument claiming that Ruskin was manic-depressive. But, when we delve into his pages, we quickly find that he had very little background in psychological analysis, no training in how to conduct it and that, in addition, he was an avid promoter of modern art and an unrelenting critic of the medieval art Ruskin applauded. Reading on, we notice that, almost without exception, this author seems determined to ferret out and then present as evidence every bit of the Ruskin story that could be used to build a case to the effect that Ruskin was severely deranged and, for that reason, not only untrustworthy in his views, but unworthy of any of our attention beyond what is obvious: denunciation.²² (B) Six decades later, in 1993, Kay Redfield Jamison would publish her well-written and influential, *Touched by Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. In it, she repeatedly references Ruskin as someone who "clearly" was manic-depressive. But Ruskin is never considered systematically in her pages and, before one goes too far, it becomes evident that this writer, like the less specialized authors mentioned above, has little familiarity with the life and work of the sage she is "diagnosing."

In other words, when we consider these approaches as a group, it becomes evident that, however well-intentioned these writers may have been, they don't really know what they are talking about: having heard something along the way about Ruskin's mental struggles, and thinking, in the wake of such hearings, that what they have heard has embedded in it a characteristic or three of some psychiatric illness they knew something about, *assume*, without taking the time to study the available evidence which might confirm (or not) their supposition, that he must be an instance of that illness. Over the decades, such

²² For more on this criticism of Wilenski method and conclusions, see Mitchell.

haphazard and deficient interpretations have done Ruskin and his once-estimable, indeed enviable, reputation great harm.

To summarize: there has never yet been a disciplined attempt to compare the actual symptoms of Ruskin's disturbances (concerning which we now possess ample evidence) against modern clinical understandings of such imbalances. Such a study is much needed, because, as noted above, if his illness proves to be of one sort, it will suggest that we view the arch of his life one way, while, if it proves to be of another sort, a very different interpretation of his life will gain credence. The coming pages are written with the intent of reporting the undertaking and outcome of such a systematic analysis. In them, I will conduct a detailed analysis of Ruskin's mental illness using, to determine the form of disturbance from which he suffered, the modern psychiatric literature, and, to provide support for that determination, use the evidence (most of it previously unpublished) contained in a plethora of personal documents that are now available to scholars.



Before proceeding, however, some cautions should be mentioned. First, among those who specialize in the study of mental diseases, it is widely agreed that some cases cannot be classified with absolute accuracy; sometimes there is insufficient or unverifiable data and sometimes those who are mentally ill exhibit the symptoms of more than one disorder. A second caution emerges from the first: namely, that in Ruskin's case, despite having an abundance of primary documents which provide evidence about his life, we still are not in possession of everything that might pertain to this discussion.

Three examples: (a) Ruskin frequently referred to an extended "letter of confession" he had sent his friend, Cardinal Henry Manning, near the end of his calamitous Old Road trip in 1888; despite concerted efforts to locate it, it has never been found. (b) Charles Eliot Norton, long Ruskin's close friend and confidant (and, after his death, an executor of his literary estate), burned many of Ruskin's most distress-laden letters to ensure that more about Ruskin's inner life (which frequently appalled Norton) would not become part of the public record. (c) During his last decade—and assiduously after his death—his caretaker cousin, Joan Severn (also an executor of Ruskin's literary estate), working with Brantwood's one-time secretary, Sarah Anderson, and intent on fostering the impression that Ruskin was an essentially faultless great sage, destroyed an unknown amount of material at Brantwood thought too revealing. (Thankfully, these—and other—efforts at hiding Ruskin's rough spots did not completely succeed. For example, and crucially regarding the present effort to analyze Ruskin's mental illness, despite numerous importunings from Severn (working under intense pressure from Norton), Francesca Alexander resisted all her requests to surrender her correspondence with her Fratello.²³) Despite such gaps, it is my belief that we still possess an

²³ The story of the extensive and extended attempts to censor what were thought to be embarrassing or controversial elements in the thousands of letters that remained at Brantwood after Ruskin's death by Severn, Anderson, Norton, and the literary estate's third

abundance of first-hand information pertaining to Ruskin's mental challenges that new information, should it come to light, is unlikely to contradict what will be determined here.

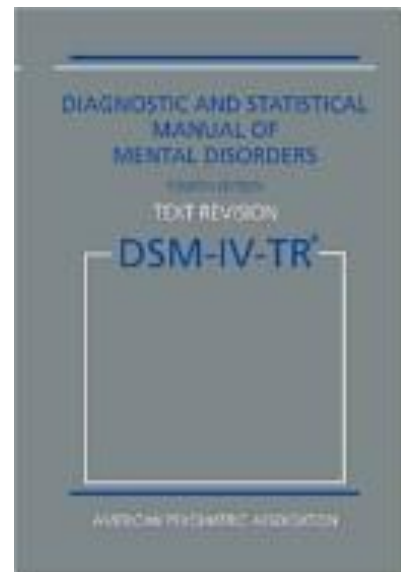
These cautions noted, I begin by examining the clinical definition of the mental illness most often suggested as describing Ruskin's symptoms: *Manic-Depression*, or, as it is now officially designated, *Bipolar Disease*.²⁴

Bipolar Disease: Its Variants

The accepted clinical definition for Bipolar Disease is found in the acknowledged world-authority used by specialists to determine the presence (or absence) of it as well as a plethora of other psychiatric illnesses, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed., Text Revision* (hereafter, DSM-IV).²⁵ The defining characteristic of the illness is that a person affected with it is in the throes of an attack, he or she alternates between two radically divergent "poles," experiencing an extremely intense "high" which is then followed by an equally intense "low."

However, as soon as we start to study the disease's specific details, we learn that it is no simple illness. (A fact unrecognized by any of the previously referenced writers who suggested that Ruskin had it.) There are two principal forms, designated as *Bipolar I* and *Bipolar II*.

Bipolar I is the full-blown version. When an attack comes, the afflicted person alternates, as just noted, between a state of extreme excitement that is followed by a period of great depression. If the condition is untreated by ameliorative drugs (unavailable in Ruskin's time), it is likely that, for someone who has the illness, many such cycles will recur over the course of a lifetime.



member, Alexander Wedderburn, is told in considerably more detail in the second chapter of the next essay in this series, "Ruskin's Sexuality."

²⁴ I omit a discussion of schizophrenia, an illness sometimes proposed, because, when its officially designated characteristics (DSM-IV, 298-328) are considered, it becomes obvious that it does not apply to Ruskin. For the inapplicability of other possible diagnoses, see Footnote 26.

²⁵(2000) For its discussion of Bipolar Disorders, see 382-97. For other definitions of the disease, see the following websites (for full references, see the Bibliography): The Mayo Clinic; NHS Direct (National Health Service, US); depression-guide.com; allpsych.com; medem.com; nimh.nih.com (National Institute of Mental Health, US); dbsalliance.org (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance). Since this essay was first published, a new edition, DSM-V, has appeared (2009). For its description of Bipolar Disorder, see 145-154.

As the "manic" phase begins, there is a rising intensity, an "up," or "high," that outdistances, by a wide margin, all normal experiences of excitement. Sometimes the high is accompanied by euphoria and the sense that one is superhuman. Frequently, the individual is so infused with a sense of magnified self-esteem that he or she creates grandiose plans (palpably delusional in the eyes of others)—for, say, eliminating world poverty by implementing a few brilliant, previously unnoticed, political strokes. Nor is it uncommon for those with Bipolar I to think, during their high, that they have been chosen by God or some other powerful force to undertake some vital mission. Usually the high is accompanied by a decreased need for sleep, a noticeable increase in physical activity, a (varying) tendency toward aggressive and angry behavior, an increased sexual drive, a tendency to be very easily distracted, racing thoughts, increased sociability, a willingness to take risks (some dangerous), and by impulses designed to intensify, maintain, or manage the high by an (often excessive) intake of alcohol or drugs. In the wake of the high, however, comes the inevitable low. If the high was magnificent, the ensuing despair is terrible in the opposite extreme. The individual experiences depths of depression that transcend those felt by the unafflicted by leagues. Delusions of visiting devils are not infrequent, motivation to do productive work often disappears, others, even those much loved, are transformed into enemies or persecutors, and commonly life itself seems not worth living.

After an attack begins, it is not unusual for those afflicted to move between the manic and depressive states within a two-day period. Most who are stricken experience at least one cycle a year, with a typical cycle lasting three to six months. After emergence from the cycle, some, particularly those who have been euphoric, evince little enthusiasm for treatments that might bring the disease under control (prescribed drugs, for instance), being willing to brook the fearful downs for those indescribable moments when they have felt better than ever before. Psychotic episodes—periods where the person loses contact with reality—are rare in the manic and very rare in the depressive state. The median age for onset of the cycles is twenty-five, with some developing the disease in childhood and a few as late as fifty.

Using this description of the characteristics of Bipolar I as a guide, and recalling the letters from the Ruskin-Alexander collection cited earlier, it becomes quickly apparent that, during the period of his exile from Brantwood and his last trip on the Continent in 1887-88, while Ruskin manifested a few of these symptoms, he hardly exhibited them all.

(1) While there is ample evidence that, during his most intense disturbances, he slept considerably less, displayed angry—and sometimes aggressive—behavior, he never became wildly overactive. Indeed, he was, if anything, quieter and more reclusive, showed no interest in becoming more outgoing and social, and exhibited no increased interest in, and certainly did not engage in, sexual activity (his life-long abstention from sexual contact is well-known²⁶), and, finally, he never evinced an interest in obtaining mood-intensifying drugs.²⁷

²⁶ Again, see the extended discussion of this issue in the following essay, "Ruskin's Sexuality."

²⁷ After some attacks, he showed interest in getting more of a "tonic," possibly containing laudanum, that had been prescribed to *lessen* his symptoms. Later, after he improved, his

(2) Nor did he ever evince a desire to return to his abnormal state. Although he often said that he "learned" from his attacks, letters written after the first attack in 1878, when he was 59 (almost a decade beyond the clinically designated age for "late onset"), show that he prayed fervently that his mental storms would never return, and, after his symptoms dissipated, did all he could think of to keep them at bay, such as steadfastly refusing to read newspapers where reports of the systematic despoliation of nature caused by the Industrial Revolution and ongoing economic perfidy of his contemporaries would enrage him. Similarly, his missives to the Alexanders indicate that, as he approached Italy, his desire to get there, waned. It was only in part because he worried that the Alexanders would find him less admirable than he believed he was, it was, as the last of the letters quoted earlier made clear, but Italy itself, and his accelerating fear that he would see that the country he had loved most had been disastrously ravaged by the ignorance, callousness, and cupidity of modernity, a viewing that could very well bring on another attack (which, as we shall later, it did).

(3) While he always had extensive plans for writing more books and doing things that would either salve or save his troubled society, these were hardly delusional or, given adequate investment of time and energy, beyond any hope of success.

(4) The pattern and extent of his major attacks, once they began, fit poorly the model of recycling that characterizes Bipolar I. As examples: (a) it was three years after the first attack of 1878 before the second arrived; a third came a year later, in 1882; the next in 1885; after which attacks came in 1886 and near the end of 1888; (b) typically, each attack lasted a few weeks and revealed no pattern of rapid mood cycling;

(5) No convincing evidence exists which would suggest that he experienced anything resembling Bipolar I's manic traits before the age of twenty-five, the average age of onset.

(6) Finally, his periods of illness possess two other characteristics that do not point to Bipolar I: (a) all the major attacks were attended by periods of identifiable psychosis ("the presence of delusions, hallucinations without insight, or both": National Institute of Mental Health, US), and (b) his psychotic periods were never characterized by euphoria, a higher sense of self-esteem, or a sense that he would achieve some magnificent end; indeed, the opposite: both during and *between* his attacks, Ruskin's sense of himself was always of a creature who had failed, and that miserably, in all the important things of life.

Bipolar II. In place of the almost overwhelming highs of Bipolar I, someone suffering from this variant experiences "hypomania," highs of considerably weaker intensity. The subsequent depressive phases, however, are as disturbing as those of Bipolar I. While cursory examination of Ruskin's case might suggest that this variety is applicable, the key, in my view, is that the *symptoms* of Bipolar II, while lesser, are the *same* as in the case of Bipolar I. Given

physician had discontinued the prescription, he demonstrated no behaviors suggesting that he "had to have it" again. (See later remarks on the possible effects this tonic may have had.)

that (as we have just learned) many of Ruskin's symptoms are *not* congruent with the manic phase of Bipolar I, it is unlikely that this diagnosis is apt.

In light of which we can conclude that, the arguments of earlier authors to the contrary notwithstanding, there exists no convincing evidence that would allow us to conclude that Ruskin was afflicted with Bipolar Disease.²⁸

Major Depressive Disorder

On the other hand, wherever one turns in the original documents that provide direct insight into Ruskin's mental crises, we find that one trait appears again and again, a trait mentioned in a stream of references (many penned, as we have read, by our subject himself) that tell us that, from the late 1850s until the end of his days four decades later, John Ruskin was often and severely depressed.

So striking is this evidence, I will propose that he suffered from a different form of mental illness than any considered thus far. Specifically, I will show that he exhibits almost all the characteristics associated with a disease designated as "Major Depression (Mood-Congruent²⁹) with Psychotic and Melancholic Features" (hereafter, MD).³⁰

The principal symptom of the illness, of course, is the depressive state itself. Someone with the affliction experiences, on an ongoing basis, a level of sadness and despondency far beyond that occasioned by any of the likely losses (death of a parent, child, or spouse) or the normal "ups and downs" of life.

A host of other symptoms attend: (1) onset typically occurs between the ages of 30 and 40; (2) once the disease commences, most of those afflicted experience between four and nine major depressive episodes over the course of the rest of their life; often, the depressions are accompanied by periods when the sufferer is identifiably psychotic; (3) in some cases, the depression and symptoms are chronic; (4) unlike other disorders, such as schizophrenia, between depressive episodes, the person functions well; (5) before, during, and after a major episode, many experience intense agitation, both motor (pacing; inability

²⁸ For reasons of space, analyses of other possible diagnoses are not included. Study of these (including unipolar disorder, cyclothemia, dysthmic depression, dysphoric mania, schizoaffective disorder, and atypical depression), as defined in DSM-IV, shows that none describe Ruskin's symptoms. (The inapplicability of schizophrenia as a possible diagnosis has already been noted, see Footnote 22.)

²⁹ Symptoms are "mood-congruent" when they parallel a sufferer's emotional state, "mood-incongruent" when they do not. In Ruskin's case, almost all his moods were congruent.

³⁰ Like Bipolar Disease, Major Depression comes in more than one form. Some who have it never experience psychotic periods, others do not develop the melancholic version; see DSM-IV, 369-75 for "Major Depression," 411-13 for "Psychotic Features," and 419, "Melancholic Features"; cf. the discussion of "Major Depression" in DSM-V at 160-71.

to sit still) and mental (a nearly constant state of tension and fear; racing or crowding thoughts; a tendency to speak quickly and sharply); (6) when psychotic symptoms surface, they are often accompanied by delusions; (7) the psychotic periods frequently bring to the surface negative feelings long-harbored—feelings the intensity of which, by any objective appraisal, are irrational (*cf.* symptom #17 below); (8) before, during, and after an attack, pronounced feelings of paranoia and persecution appear; and (9) sufferers report that they are being punished for terrible misdeeds and are directly responsible for problems for which, objectively viewed, they could *not* be responsible.

Other observable symptoms are: (10) a despondent or brooding mood most of the day (often many days, weeks, or months in succession); (11) loss of interest in things that used to engage; a diminution not infrequently accompanied by an inability to experience pleasurable things *as* pleasurable; (12) chronic insomnia; (13) an ongoing sense of fatigue; (14) loss of appetite; (15) recurrent thoughts that something is wrong physically, a "something" that will worsen or probably lead to death (a kind of "super-hypochondria"); (16) difficulty in thinking as clearly or intensely as before; (17) and (all the following signaling the intensity of the illness) nearly unremitting feelings of worthlessness, failure, guilt, and hopelessness. Finally, and perhaps not surprisingly, (18) sufferers fix, often obsessively, on death's approach, and (19) often entertain thoughts of suicide (which some commit).

In comparison with the traits of Bipolar disease, which Ruskin's symptoms fit only partially, I submit that this list—excepting only an obsession with suicide³¹—provides an almost perfect, if lamentable, portrait of the traits he revealed when ill, as shown in the following outline of his mental history.

While it is clear that he was much distressed as a teen over the loss of his first love, Adele Domecq (daughter of his father's partner in the sherry trade), and *may* have suffered a second depressive episode during his student years at Oxford, thanks to the biographical work of the late Helen Gill Viljoen, we now know that, in 1857, *when he was 38*, following a discovery of what he regarded as pornographic drawings in the legacy of his "God-on-Earth," the painter, J. M. W. Turner, Ruskin went into a tail-spin of depression from which he did not

³¹ There is little evidence suggesting that Ruskin thought seriously about ending his days, despite his enduring depression, perhaps because a prohibition against suicide had been instilled during his early religious training. However, one comment survives which suggests the idea occurred. For some years, he was friendly with the painter Alfred Hunt and his family. During visits, he frequently had conversations with the Hunts' daughter, Violet. With an eye to writing a memoir in which the famous writer would be featured, Violet made a series of notes about their chats, likely without Ruskin's knowledge. In a file containing the notes, this sentence, in Violet's hand appears: "The reason Mr. Ruskin began to wear a beard [he told me] was that he became very nervous about shaving & was afraid he might be suddenly be tempted to cut his throat." (CU: File 4607, Box 3, Folder 13) Even if the comment does not suggest an obsession with suicide, it underscores, from yet another direction, our subject's profound self-loathing: see coming discussion.

emerge—and then but briefly—until more than a decade later.³² It was a mid-life crisis of astonishing intensity. At it began, as if the Turner erotica were not negative revelations enough, he became convinced that all his previous work as a (highly celebrated) art and architecture critic—work which had taken fifteen nearly relaxationless years to write and which included four volumes of his *Modern Painters* series (a fifth and final volume would appear in 1860), *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, and the three-volume *The Stones of Venice*, not to mention a host of essays and lectures)—had failed utterly to achieve its goals: to make his readers love nature, recognize the importance of art as a means of moral, spiritual, and life teaching, and stop (or at least slow) the unconscionable destruction everywhere being wrought by the Industrial Revolution.³³

During these same years (roughly 1857-1869) as well, he had seen his painstakingly thought-out essays on political economy, including *Unto this Last*, *Munera Pulveris*, and dozens of lectures, "reprobated in a violent manner" (as he called the attacks).³⁴ In 1864, his father, John James, died and, Ruskin, now the inheritor of a considerable fortune (about \$30 million in today's dollars), determined to use it to do all he could to ameliorate the many festering ills he saw about him. The redistribution required an enormous investment of time and effort. By 1870, the money was gone and there was little reason to think that he had made more than a small dent in bettering the lives of the desperate and destitute he wanted to help. To make matters weightier still, these were also the years when he fell deeply in love with the much younger Rose La Touche, an Irish girl who represented to him the purity of life, a purity he saw being destroyed with impunity as "the rage to be rich" (his phrase, cf. LE 17: 35) ignited an impulse to merchandize everything. His unflagging love for Rose, was, if not unrequited, always kept at arm's length, a conundrum which would drive him, like a tattered shuttlecock in an intense lawn game, from hope to despair and back again many times.

In June of 1871, the year during which his mother, Margaret, long declining, would die, a time when the likelihood of a life spent with Rose was fast retreating, Ruskin experienced what some biographers believed was the first of the series of mental attacks that would plague him during the last decades of his life. But the evidence of that time suggests that it what actually occurred was a massive intestinal inflammation the high fever from which occasioned time-limited delusions. Nevertheless, the illness was serious enough that, for some days, those who attended him thought they might lose him. His old friend, the

³² Only one volume of Viljoen's huge biography—*Ruskin's Scottish Heritage* (hereafter, RSH)—was published. Her theses about Ruskin's life were revolutionary. I have outlined these in "Dark Star," the first essay in this series and told, in greater detail, the story of why she failed to complete her *magnum opus* in my book, *The Imperfect Round*. For an essay detailing one period of major depression in Ruskin's life, see the second essay in this series, "Ruskin in Milan," an essay which contains a chapter from Viljoen's unpublished biography.

³³ For more on the subjects mentioned in this and the following paragraph, see a later section of this essay: "The Etiology of Ruskin's Depression."

³⁴ *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, Cook and Wedderburn, eds., 39 Volumes. Because this work will be cited often, I will—using this reference as example—abbreviate references in the following manner: LE 17:17.

physician Henry Acland, then at Oxford, was sent for. Some days after his arrival, thorough examination and observation of the patient, Joan Severn would write to Ruskin's mother (July 11th): "Dr. Acland says I am to tell you from him that it is a violent attack of exhausting and long-continued vomiting, the result of which is great prostration, [which,] for several days, will require extreme care and perfect quiet." (Birkenhead, 199)

Some weeks later, now back to full health, Ruskin resumed his many activities. But, henceforth, many letters tell us, these were pursued from within inner clouds of gloom: the weight of his personal worries and professional failures had become almost too great to bear. Any sense of happiness had fled.

In May 1875, Rose, by then mad, died. She was 27. Ruskin would never, as the letters he sent to the Alexanders cited earlier show, get over her loss. Indeed, it is not fanciful to think that, as far as he was concerned, *he* had died with her—as suggested by a usually overlooked outline for *Praeterita*, his autobiography, which indicated not only that his rehearsal of his life was intended as a memorial to her, but that he would end it in 1875. (A few months before his last trip on the Old Road, in January 1888, he wrote to a friend: "My mother's death in 1871—and that of a dear friend in 1875—took away the personal joy I had in anything I wrote or designed." LE 20:13)³⁵ The last months of 1876 found him alone in Venice at Christmastime. Barely keeping a hold on his sanity, for days he rambled the city's empty streets trying to commune with Rose's spirit.³⁶

³⁵ Separately, Columbus and Pendleton have argued that Ruskin's enigmatic title for *Praeterita* was intended to signal that it was written by someone already dead.

³⁶ This sad tale is told in Burd's *Christmas Story*. Although Ruskin was clearly *very* distressed at this time, Burd does not suggest he was out of his mind but was all but overcome by grief. Other letters of this time, as well as comments in the monthly letter-essays Ruskin continued to write as *Fors Clavigera*, suggest this is correct. Hilton (*Later*: 625-633) judges that the Venice visit was the occasion of Ruskin's second mental breakdown. However, it will be remembered that one of *the* defining traits of attacks of Major Depression is its inclusion of an identifiable psychotic period. Venice did not have one.



Ruskin's drawing of Rose La Touche,
"Rose, the Flower of Flowers" (Ruskin Library)

The first attack accompanied by a psychotic episode came in February 1878.³⁷ It lasted some weeks. Though Ruskin would eventually recover and resume his duties as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford and begin to write intensely and extensively once more, this was unambiguously the first of a series of "brain fevers" which, when they arrived, would take him out of his mind for periods of varying length. Similar attacks came in 1881, 1882, 1885, 1886, and 1888. Although, for most intents and purposes, he would, as the symptoms of these attacks retreated, "become himself again," and reinitiate his interests and duties, diary entries and a host of letters written and received during the interregnums tell us that never again would he be *not* depressed.³⁸ The disease had become chronic.

³⁷ The onset of this attack has been well-described by Ruskin himself: see "1878" in Viljoen's BD. During, and for a time after the attack, he was prescribed a "tonic" designed to quiet him. (The same palliative was dispensed during and after some later attacks as well.) We do not know with any certainty what the liquid contained. A not unreasonable hypothesis, if it contained traces of heavy metals (common practice at the time), is that these, building up in his system, may have contributed to the increasing severity of his mental attacks. To test the hypothesis, some years ago, the Ruskin Library loaned me two samples of hair snipped from two different periods of his life—one before the attacks began, the other after their onset. These were analyzed by Professor of Forensic Science Mitchell Holland, Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Pennsylvania State University (a premier forensic analysis facility), once by Environmental Scanning Electron Microscope, and once by Laser Induced Breakdown Spectroscopy. Neither test indicated the presence of any substance known to be harmful to mental functioning. Elimination of the "chemical cause" hypothesis supports, from a different direction, the case to be made here: that Ruskin's mental illness was occasioned by an especially virulent combination of life stresses.

³⁸ Among his principal correspondents of this time: Dr. John Brown, Dr. John and Lady Simon, Lord and Lady Mount-Temple, Charles Eliot Norton, the Alexanders, and Joan Severn.

Examination of Ruskin's diaries and letters written after 1878 reveal that, repeatedly, he openly tells many of his correspondents he is extremely fatigued, that he is physically ill (he wasn't), that he can't concentrate as before, that he can't sit still, that he doesn't sleep well, that people around him are inept, irrational, or persecuting him in some manner (his faithful publisher, George Allen, often, and unjustly, the target of accusations).

Two major themes always appear: first, concerning his work, he reports that, as his constant companion, like a mad dog tethered to his leg, a nearly overwhelming sense of failure and guilt: he *knows* that all his decades of writing, essaying, and speaking have gone for naught—that he has failed miserably in all his attempts to better the world and, all along this unhappy way, he has made one wrong choice, committed one blunder, after another; he has failed not only his parents (who expected him to be savior of his age), he has failed God. Second, he repeatedly declares that his personal life has been an unmitigated disaster, for which catastrophe, as with this work, he alone is answerable. The unceasing guilt that lacerates his thoughts, the loneliness he endures through all the dark nights, his continuing failure to do work that is good enough to show his fellows how to live happier lives, are all just punishments for his reprehensible behavior. One example: a late work, *The Bible of Amiens* (LE 33), was published in installments between 1880 and 1885. He intended it to be his last and best treatise, a book that would show its readers how a decent and Christian life in the midst of a world slipping ever deeper into a morass of chaos and vulgarity. A year after its completion, he would castigate it as one of the most useless things he had written.³⁹

The attacks that came in 1885 (the year he resigned his Slade Professorship), and 1886 were especially damaging. As they retreated, however, it became clear that his recovery was less, a sign that, in all likelihood, some brain damage had occurred. Better, but still bewildered and bad-tempered in the spring of 1887, his behavior became so erratic and obstreperous that Joan and her family fled Brantwood for London. Accusatory letters were exchanged. Responding to his epistolary protestations that he had "really changed," Joan found little alteration in his fiery and muddled behavior when she and the family returned. Exhausted and exasperated, by the time the summer was nearing its end, she decided she had had enough, following which determination, the exile of her cousin to England's south coast earlier described was exacted. Mentally tenuous and by now perpetually dejected, somehow Ruskin survived his exile there until he set out for his last, fateful trip on the Old Road the following June, a trip that would see his mind shatter all but completely in Venice following a truncated visit with the Alexanders in Bassano.

To summarize: between 1878 and 1888, John Ruskin experienced *six* periods of acute depression, each attended by a psychotic episode. Following each, as the attack's principal symptoms withdrew, the intensity of his everyday depression mounted.⁴⁰

³⁹ For more on this critical issue of what he saw as the almost complete failure of his work, see the section, "The Etiology of Ruskin's Depression," following.

⁴⁰ After his return to Brantwood in 1889, there may have been other severe attacks. If so, they have proved difficult to document because, after Venice '88, Ruskin corresponded little and the

That being the overview, considering the years from 1860 on, it is clear that they fairly overflow with evidence pointing to virtually all of the symptoms (listed earlier) that characterize the illness DSM-IV designates as "Major Depression Psychotic and Melancholic Features" (hereafter, MD).⁴¹



In the early pages of this essay, I cited three letters that Ruskin sent the Alexanders, all of which were mailed during the period that stretched between his arrival in Folkestone in September 1887, to just a few days before he would visit them in Bassano almost a year later when his last major mental collapse commenced. However, before we travel with him to that unhappy locale and experience, I wish to present some additional and, for the most part, previously unpublished excerpts from letters of this time, letters from, to, or by the Alexanders, Joan, his manservant, John Baxter, and the young architect who, by chance, accompanied him on this last Old Road tour, Detmar Blow. As these selections multiply, they will make it clear beyond doubt that MD was the illness from which Ruskin suffered. To make this evidencing easier, I will indicate, at the end of each citation, the traits of MD that have been manifested in the citation. As we progress, it is important to keep in mind that what follows is but a sample chosen from many other sources similarly themed.

The first selection comes from a letter Ruskin sent Francesca from Morley's Hotel in London, dated October 27, 1887. Regarding the many questions she has posed in earlier letters he has not answered, he apologizes; he has been unforgivably remiss. What is most notable in his sentences is the intensity of the guilt he expresses and its coupling with an intense reproach of himself for his failings. Darling Sorel,

I am looking over the letters of this year, and find the most sorrowful inattentions on my part to letter requests of yours which might have been saved as Queen's orders. I seem to be the most careless and heartless of Fratels—the idlest of correspondents—the blunderingest [*sic*] of editors—and, to intensify this woeful condition, I find among the 1887 letters one of [yours sent in] 1885—kept, I hope, *to be* attended to—though it never was... (BPL Mss. Acc. 2500 IV 13 a+b) [MD symptoms: 7, 9, 10, 16, 17]

ever-protective Joan was hardly eager to discuss her famous cousin's mental state with anyone outside of a small circle. It may have been the case as well that, during his last decade (when Ruskin was between 70 and 80), his depression was augmented by (advancing?) dementia. (Thanks to Paul Kohn for this suggestion; *cf.* Sato.)

⁴¹ For other accounts of this period, see Hilton (Ch. 48), Birkenhead (Ch. 36), and Ferguson. In my view, all leave much to be desired because each is based on only *some* of the primary documents available. None reference the Ruskin-Alexander correspondence.

The second passage is taken from another letter sent Francesca, this one from Sandgate, five months later (February 19, 1888). Darling Sorel...

More forlorn than your Fratel it would be difficult to find today under the grey sky of England, unbroken since morning. And now it's tea time, snowing, wet snow in shivery thaw, and I can't read and can't think and can't walk about and can't rest in an armchair...

[But] I can give my Sorel the promise she wants: that I'll tell her everything that troubles me. But when I've nothing to trouble me and yet a sackful of troubles, what is my Sorel to do with me? I declare, today, the only way I can amuse myself is by letting the fire go nearly out and then cosseting it in again! (Swett 167) [MD symptoms: 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 16]

A third, longer, excerpt comes from a letter Ruskin posted to Joan, also from Sandgate, on June 5, 1888, just days before his departure for Europe. My dear Doanie [his pet name for her; hers for him was Donie],

The day is cold and the wind howling and I am in a darker than [ever] state of—not so much depression as *fear*—which I think it best to tell you of, as simply as I can.

In the state from which you rescued me at Brantwood last year [when the Severns returned from London], there was distinct aberration of mind... I would not eat because I thought we had not enough in the back for the next day! (But I was thankful for my tea!) I thought I was dying. But though I believed you would be sorry [if I died, I] did not feel as I do now [about] what it would mean...to my Doanie or to the Sorella.

But now it seems to me [that] my mind measures and enters into everything rightly—while the bodily health is far more dangerously broken—and [that] every hour I stay in this place makes me fear being laid up in [its] upper room—[plagued] by the sound of the sea—day & night—and having people rushing up & down from London.

I think Baxter...should take me at once over to Abbeville⁴² while I *am* able to move... This would involve leaving Arfie [Arthur Severn's nickname] & you to clear out [my Sandgate] lodgings...[and] would involve all sorts of trouble & sorrow to—I dare not think how many—those who love me. [But such a trip is the last thing] which my miserable follies have left yet possible.

The actual state of health is—total loss of any care for food, which I attribute chiefly to chagrin (the digestive power itself does not fail); an unconscious heavy sleep, which does not give feeling of refreshment—gradually, but I think steadily, increasing; very slightly feverish but, I should say, definitely feverish; despondency and dislike of everything dislikeable and [a] total inability to employ myself.

⁴² A small city in Norther France he loved.

I can walk for two to three miles without fatigue—but am none the better for it—and all reading of books and letters has but one conclusion—how much wiser and happier other people are than I—& how much wiser and happier I ought to have been...

How miserably all this is written!...

Oh, my Doanie, what a total plague and burden I am to you now. (PML MA 3451) [MD symptoms: 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 17]



"Arthur Severn Reading," drawing by Laurence Hilliard (Ruskin Library)

The next passage was written just short of two months later. In Beauvais, Ruskin, Arthur Severn, and John Baxter have met two young men in their twenties, Sydney Cockerell, who will go on to become curator of The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and Detmar Blow, who will become one of England's most applauded architects. They are in the cathedral town largely because of Ruskin's influence, particularly his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* which both regard as a kind of holy guide to the world's greatest buildings. Encountering their hero in the flesh, they are dazzled. Immediately seeing that Ruskin and these young fellows are copasetic, and himself very

anxious to return to London, Severn asks if they might be interested in traveling accompanying them to Paris, hoping, if they agree, that, once they get there, he will find some way to leave for England. Cockerell, who has other obligations pending in London, declines, but Blow delightedly accepts.⁴³

With this proposed change in personnel, Ruskin is also pleased. He and Arfie have never been the best of friends, and, in young Blow he will have traveling with him who is not just an acolyte, but an eager intellectual companion to whom he can show and teach about the things of beauty he has revered in the places they will visit ever since his first sight of them as a teenager, a half century earlier.

Even before they quit Beauvais, however, Detmar has grasped the complexity of the situation. Genius and intellectual giant of the age that Ruskin is, he is now exceedingly disturbed of mind. Told by Arthur that the person who will be most anxious to hear of his state of mind will be Joan, he writes her the following report during the wee hours of the morning of August 4, beginning with a reference to prior letters (posted to Brantwood by

⁴³ Blow will remain with his hero until Joan arrives to collect Ruskin, also in Paris, some months later. During this time, he will become a hero himself, being nothing less than a lifeline day and night for his ever more mentally challenged companion. He remains a much underappreciated star in the Ruskin story.)

Arthur) that have informed her how tenuous things have been and remain. Dear Mrs. Severn, he writes,

I am so happy that I can send you better news. Dear Mr. Ruskin was much better yesterday, and had a very fair night's rest—though his cough troubled him... [Once during the night,] at his request, I gave him some hot coffee, and read to him for a short while. But, as ill luck or, it may be, good luck, would have it, he [became] fearfully enraged with a photographer whom he had found at [at the cathedral] at 8 o'clock in the morning. He, however, was very sorry for it afterward and said it should be the last of his angry passions. Would that it could be so...for it is too sad to see so great a heart and noble mind cast into discord—love turned into hatred and sense into folly.

Believe me, I will do my best to do all that is in my power [to help him]—and may God grant us assistance. I am so very sorry for you—and can quite feel what a time of worry, anxiety, & sadness you must all have had during former illnesses. I have just now [*i.e.*, this night] been with Mr. Ruskin, giving him some coffee and reading to him. He had slept well until about 1 o'clock, when his cough troubled him. I think he will go to sleep again. He was quiet and seemed better.

With kindest regards, Detmar V. Blow
(RL, File L63) [MD symptoms: 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 16]



Joan Severn at Brantwood in the 1890s
(Photo: J. McClelland; National Portrait Gallery, London)

The next selection, also sent to Joan, was composed a week later (August 11) in Paris. The author is John Baxter. As they have traveled from Calais to Abbeville and Beauvais (where they met Blow and Cockerell), now to and Paris (where Arthur left them), the devoted aide reports that, at first, his master was exceedingly delighted to be again in some of his favorite haunts. But, of late, he has become highly agitated. Madam, he begins,

I hope you will excuse this hurried note, but I wish to let you know how the Master is today. He changed his plans early this morning and is going to stay here another week he says.

Last night, he scarcely slept any and he kept Mr. Blow up the whole night, swearing at him awful sometimes. Poor [young] gentleman feels it very much and he looks so [downhearted] today and is quite nervous and the Master has said some very nasty things to him which I know [he] feels very much...

He sent Mr. Blow for me at 20 to 4 this morning and wanted coffee. Then he swore at me until he had to give up through sheer exhaustion and it hurted [*sic*] his throat so much.

He has had Mr. Blow and I to the Louvre again all morning and he got hold of a French artist there and he has commissioned him to [do] some copying of a part of a picture... He has been buying books and [photo-engravings], but he has done nothing very bad yet [particularly in the sense of spending irresponsibly].

He is going to [write [to ask you to send him] minerals and pictures and dear knows *what*. I have just been thinking if you would say to him that you will ask Mr. Severn [who has already left for England] to bring them to him, perhaps that will cool him a little bit. But he is much better again today.

I fear the night coming. He is perfectly conscious of all he says and does, but everyone sees that he is off a good deal. I hope Mr. Severn will be prepared to start [*i.e.*, return] if it gets very serious. Should it, Mr. Blow or I will telegraph. (RL L63) [MD symptoms: 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 16]



**Ruskin with Peter Baxter, Brantwood, 1895
(National Portrait Gallery, London)**

It is almost a month later, the fifth of September. The threesome has reached Geneva. Ruskin is staying in his favorite place, the Hotel des Berges on the northern side of the lake—largely because of the spectacular view of the Alps it affords from its upper rooms (which he always rents). He is writing Joan, waxing exultantly about his joy at being again in his old haunts. But, then, having said so much, he suddenly turns rageful as he describes the pernicious effects being wrought by one of the omnipresent attendants of modernity, the profuse smoke generated by the new mechanical boats that ply the lake. His fury is doubly sourced, because the exhaust fumes he censures not only come close to obliterating the intrinsic beauty of this charming place, its lake, and vistas, they are like a hot poker, ceaselessly underscoring his failure to save Switzerland, and indeed all Europe, from the despoiling:⁴⁴ My Doanie

⁴⁴ Ruskin's rage at the environmental devastation occasioned by the Industrial Revolution surfaces as early as 1849, the year he published *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (LE 8). It continued unabated to the end of his life, most famously in the pair of lectures he entitled, "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century," delivered in London in 1884 (LE 34).

"...I am *here* again—which I never thought possible... And the Rhone is still clear—and the place unchanged [in any serious way], and the Hotel des Berges entirely delicious to me and the landlord and waiters all as civil as if they were my own servants! And the Mont Blanc and the aiguilles [needle-like peaks near Mont Blanc] were all clear at dawn this morning, and I saw them with clearer and stronger sight than since I was a boy... I suppose this is [because of] the healthy state of stomach (which is entirely new to me), having neither overwork nor chagrin—for I don't let anything vex me, so thankful I am to be able to see the Alps and France again... I was up at six yesterday in *lovely* weather and had drawn a wonderful pine-trunk, high above the village, before ½ past 9 breakfast...

"But although I allow there's nothing to vex me, *one* thing here is *unendurable*, the steamer smoke! It begins at six o'clock, hiding the aiguilles and the morning light and is in such masses—from even the small steamboats, like this [here Ruskin has inserted a rough sketch of a small boat on the lake, the smoke from which obscures a mountain in the background]—that the whole valley and lake of Geneva are now buried in smoke *all day long*! No mountain can ever be seen clear again, any more than if you were looking over [perpetually smoke enshrouded] London. [S]uch idiotism and vileness I never saw—nor could have believed.

"So, I start for Sallanches [a town about two-thirds of the way between Geneva and Chamouni] tomorrow, where it will be comparatively clear... (PML: VP: Year Files 1887-1900) [MD symptoms: 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17]

Considered together, the just-cited previously unpublished selections, make it clear that, as Ruskin and his companions made their irregular way along his Old Road in the late spring and summer of 1888, traveling along with them were a host of the symptoms that characterize the illness known as "Major Depression with Psychotic and Melancholic Features." Depending on the day, even the hour, one—or, more frequently a number—of these unpleasant qualities were constantly present, wreaking havoc in one way or another on Ruskin's distressed consciousness.

That said, while clinical analyses of major mood disorders possess great value because of their ability to provide us with a list of documented traits which, when utilized to classify a



Ruskin's Old View of the Alps from Geneva
(period postcard)

real world case, when it comes to grasping *why* a given individual has developed that particular mental illness in the first place, they help not at all. In other words, now that we have determined what Ruskin's mental disorder was, we still must explain how it came to exist, understand how it came to be that he, one of the most applauded geniuses of his age, descended into such painful and destructive depths? The task of the next section is to answer such questions.

The Causes of Ruskin's Depression

A difficulty that appears immediately when we study major psychological disorders (major depression, bipolar, schizophrenia, others) is that we still are not clear about how two crucial factors—the effects of one's inherited genetic code and environmental stimuli—interact. Although it remains the easiest choice to accept (and the one most often heard in unscientific conversations), the "inherited" explanation, the fact is that no gene or gene complex has *ever* been isolated that would allow us to say with *assurance* that any given individual is at inescapable risk of developing a major mental disorder because of his/her genetic background. This remains the case even when members of the same family, whether concurrently or across generations, are diagnosed with the same disease.⁴⁵

The Approach

Consider his background. Some biographers have suggested that, given that we know that his paternal grandfather, John Thomas Ruskin, committed suicide in Edinburgh in 1817 in a particularly gruesome manner (by cutting his own throat in his own home), it is likely that a susceptibility for aberrant mentation was passed on to his grandson. But such a suggestion cannot be taken seriously, because we have no data (and never will have) which can prove that John Thomas Ruskin committed the act that ended his life because of some genetic "push." On the other hand, we *can* demonstrate that his regrettable act occurred in a context highly influenced by a complex of negative factors grouped at the other—environmental—end of the causal continuum.

We know, for example, that our subject's grandfather had failed, repeatedly and seriously, in business ventures as a result of his poor investments, falling in arrears when it came to repayment of debts, and regularly entering into unsound trading practices. We know, as well, that these missteps tarred John Thomas Ruskin in Edinburgh's court of public opinion.

⁴⁵ For articles discussing the complexities encountered by researchers when trying to isolate the effects of genetic and environmental stimuli in creating mental disease, see *Nature: International Weekly Journal of Science*, 16 October 2008, esp. the articles by Chou and Chouard; Hyman; and Krishnan and Neslter. For an argument warning *against* concluding that there exists a genetic determinant in bipolar, schizophrenia, and other mental and social diseases (*e.g.*, alcoholism), see Horgan.

In her pioneering study of the family's history, *Ruskin's Scottish Heritage* (hereafter, RSH), Helen Viljoen tells us that "extravagant," "untrustworthy," "reckless," "hot-tempered," "unmindful of his family," "impious," and "unstable" were just some of the epithets applied to John Thomas after his fall from grace (146-7). Making matters considerably worse, Viljoen says, was the fact that, having no clear path that he could follow to redress his failures, John Thomas's behavior became increasingly erratic until that fateful day arrived when he silenced his nagging inner demons and censorious outer ones with his dagger.⁴⁶

A sociologist, I frequently teach about one of the pioneering theories in my field—Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide (1895). It was Durkheim's (then new) contention that people, even those who have severe psychological impairments, only *commit* suicide when they are members of one of four *social* categories, categories the frameworks of which are so powerful that, for those who belonging to them, they shift the possibility of taking one's life from the realm of abstract contemplation to the realm of the irresistible.⁴⁷ One of these categories is particularly pertinent here.

"Altruistic suicide" is that form of taking one's own life that occurs when someone has failed to live up to a group's most important ideals or its standards of appropriate behavior. When they are in one or the other (or, more powerfully, both) of these blameworthy situations, such transgressors, almost immediately, start to have difficulty sustaining, as a result of the guilt and anxiety that follow on the heels of what they see as their momentous falling short, to entertain the idea that it will be impossible to go on living as a member of the group. (Think of the mental state of soldiers who, out of cowardice, refuse to enter the fray, or public officials exposed for gross embezzlement.) What Durkheim wants us to see is that before they took their culpable misstep(s), such suicides-to-be were as sane as anyone else. But, once their offense has been exposed and calumny heaped, they begin to exhibit indices of psychic disturbance and to entertain thoughts of taking one's life as a mode of expiation—hence Durkheim's term for this type of suicide, "altruistic"; one takes one's own life as a form of atonement, acknowledging as they do so both the correctness of the group's standards, the unforgivable nature of their offence, and the appropriateness of ending their lives for having so egregiously affronted the status quo. (To demonstrate the validity of his theses

⁴⁶ It would fall to John Thomas's son, John James Ruskin, our Ruskin's father, to undertake the task of paying off his sire's debts. This, over the course of the next nine years, he did, to the farthing. But the shame of his father's failure and coincident shame of having to perform such a duty never left him, remaining a source of his feelings of inadequacy for the remainder of his life and, in that capacity, becoming a critical factor in his need to insist that his son had to become a success that all the world would applaud. See the section, "The Ruinous Struggle" below.

⁴⁷ Durkheim never denied the reality and power of the emotional states experienced by those who commit suicide. But he argued that those emotional states had been *created* in that individual only because they inhabited a particular *social* setting. Instances of social settings causing strong emotional responses are legion: deciding to marry, the couple is happy; if, later, they divorce, they are miserable and angry; if your team wins, you celebrate; if it loses, you are downcast.

about altruistic, and the three other of suicide he identified, Durkheim provided a wealth of empirical data.)

In other words, when people commit altruistic suicide, their decision to do so is *always* heavily influenced by *social* factors that generate great pressure both *on* and *inside* the offending person. And while—the evidence being scanty—I make no claim that being a failed and humiliated member of his community was *the* reason our subject's grandfather, John Thomas Ruskin, committing suicide, we do know from Viljoen's work that, before he erred so egregiously, he was an integrated member of his social milieu, and know as well that, after his faults were exposed, the ignominy piled on him for his transgressions was extensive, intensive, and terribly disturbing. The point should be clear: knowing what we do about the environmental—*i.e.*, social—pressures that weighed on John Thomas Ruskin, it makes no sense to hypothesize that some inherited genetic factor—the existence and causative power of which we can neither isolate nor demonstrate—was the cause for his concluding act.

The case I want to make regarding Ruskin's mental disease is similar. I want to use Durkheim's insights about the social causes of suicide to help us understand Ruskin's mental struggles—because, considering his depression in all of its manifestations as it has been displayed in letters we have read, there exists a plethora of evidence that suggests that many of the social (environmental) forces that surrounded and deeply influenced him were so harsh and harmful that it becomes almost impossible to imagine him *not* losing his wits at some point. Indeed, so intense were these negative forces, particularly as they accumulated, it is testimony to his courage and fortitude that he withstood them as long as he did. To a review of these forces we now turn.

The Ruinous Struggle⁴⁸

Serious conflict and emotionally damaging negativity surfaced first, as is the case for many of us, in Ruskin's family setting. As primary instance, we now know that, from childhood on, he was embroiled in a "ruinous struggle" with his parents, Margaret and John James. Because of their own early deprivations and later slightings, both hungered for a level of respectability which, coming from Britain's "working classes," they had never been accorded, no matter how financially successful John James became (and John James became *very* financially successful as importer and seller of the world's finest sherries).

Moreover, not long after his birth, Ruskin's parents realized that the little fellow who had come to live with them was a prodigy of the highest order: a genius. The recognition triggered a regimen of strict training that both hoped would consequence in great

⁴⁸ Viljoen's term and discovery. For extended documentation of the struggle's existence, see the first two essays in this series, "John Ruskin's Dark Star" and "Ruskin in Milan"; for an explanation of how the evidence for it was minimized or censored altogether by the executors of Ruskin's literary estate (Joan Severn, Charles Eliot Norton, and Alexander Wedderburn), see Chapter Two of "Ruskin's Sexuality," the essay following this one in this series.

accomplishments, accomplishments which would allow them to bask in his prestigious light. Margaret thought her boy would make a fine Archbishop of Canterbury; John James wanted "My Son" (as he always referred to him) to become "the next Byron." Later, when it became clear that his son had small talent for verse, John James' hope of referential praise was sated—but never sufficiently---when Ruskin was touted as the greatest art and architecture critic of the day.

But the son had penchants of his own. From his first ambulatory days, he was always happiest for the chance to be among stones, streams, fields, and flowers, and, given his head, would have, with enthusiasm, been a geologist or botanist. But such a career, however impressively he may have performed in it, was not enough from the parents' point-of-view. Consequently, although they in no way discouraged him from his nature studies, there were constant attempts to push him along paths they wanted him to travel. The not surprising result was that, much more often than not, when the son's and parents' desires conflicted, Ruskin, trained from the first to believe in the literal truth of the Bible and its commandment to honor one's parents, capitulated. When he was very young the frustrating surrender was accepted without question. As his reason developed, however, anger, even to the point of fury, was added to frustration.

As a result, for almost all his life, Ruskin was in a tension-laden double bind *vis-à-vis* his sires. If he obeyed the Biblical prescription and did as they desired, he would be forever frustrated; on the other hand, if he disregarded their desires, he not only brooked their ire and criticism, he reaped a double dose of guilt—for defying them and disobeying one of God's sacred directives. The psychological result was, as time passed, *in his own mind*, Ruskin came to see himself as essentially unlovable, a selfish, insubordinate, son, a *bad* son, the cost of which was an endless sense of culpability and shame. (Normal states for those who are emotionally abused, particularly when the abuse begins before the age of reason.)

A single instance of the enduring and bitter consequences of the struggle (hundreds can be found in Ruskin's works, and are easily identified once one learns to recognize them) will stand for many. It is March 16, 1874, and Ruskin, now 55, is writing his dear friend, Susie Beever (Ruskin, *Hortus*, 1-2). Both parents are dead. He is writing about a myth he knows well from his many readings of Homer's *Odyssey* (11: 583-83): the tale of Tantalus, son of Zeus, who was so disobedient, his father not only banished him to Hades, but decreed that, as punishment for his insubordination, Tantalus' longings would forever remain unsatisfied. And so he places his son in a pool of water that nearly comes up to the chin; but, every time Tantalus tries to drink, the water vanishes. Similarly, over his head the desperate man can see luscious fruits hanging from beautiful trees; but whenever he attempts to take one, the wind makes them fly up into the clouds. It is with this story in mind that Ruskin writes Susie this: "The life of Tantalus doesn't often admit of crying, but I had a real cry—with quite wet tears—yesterday morning over what—to me—is the prettiest bit in all Shakespeare (*Coriolanus*: III, Sc. 2):

Pray be content, Mother.

I am going to the market-place.
Chide me no more."

A ruinous struggle indeed!

The Charge

A *genius*! Their son was a genius! Which designation, John James decided (thinking surely of the magnification of his reputation such a classification would confer) obviously carried with it almost Christ-like responsibility. Which understanding—and expectation—the father revealed to his son in a letter sent from Carlisle, where John James was staying for a few days during one of his sherry-selling trips to the English north. Arriving in the city the evening before, the father found waiting for him a packet sent by his praise-seeking son in London. It included a translation of a difficult Latin passage. After studying it, the following posted to his praise-seeking son, then ten and a half years old: "My Dearest John,"

I must commence this letter by exclaiming wonderful, wonderful, wonderful! Do you ask what is so very wonderful? Your Latin lesson sent to me! If you do all [this] without being told, it is as much a wonder as anything I have ever met with. It is very correct & very long. I do not mean free of error, but nearly so, & the Latin being somewhat difficult, I am astonished at your understanding it so well & writing like a Classic Author.

You are blessed with a fine Capacity & even Genius & you owe it, as a Duty to the author of your Being & giver of your Talents, to cultivate your powers & to use them in his Service for the benefit of your fellow Creatures. You may be doomed to enlighten a People by your Wisdom & to adorn an age by your Learning. It would be sinful in you to let the powers of your mind lie dormant through idleness or want of perseverance when they may, at their maturity, aid the cause of Truth & of Religion, & enable you to become, in many ways, a Benefactor of the Human Race. I am forced to smile when I figure to myself that very little Gentleman to whom I am addressing such language. [Burd, *The Ruskin Family Letters* (hereafter, RFL), 209-10]

It was an adjuration, coming from a still pedestaled parent,⁴⁹ which John James' boy would absorb into the deepest recesses of his being. Henceforth, it would be his Duty to do

⁴⁹ The first evidence of Ruskin's anger at his parents began (semiconsciously) was embedded in a series of "sermons" he wrote as an adolescent. As he grew older and saw the degree of strict control they had exercised over him during his childhood, control which they *still* desired to hold over him in his adulthood, his veneration plummeted. As he neared forty, his long-suppressed resentment exploded, the aftermath of which would be, to the end of his days, a feeling of unappeasable guilt for having been unconscionably cruel. For more on the sermons, see "John Ruskin's Dark Star"; for the explosion, see "Ruskin in Milan," the first two papers in this series.

as he had been Charged: it was his father's command; at a higher level, as his father had made clear, it was also his Heavenly Father's Command. In which context, it needs to be said that every one of the dozens of books Ruskin would write throughout his career (always keeping in mind that he would rather have been rambling among his rocks and flowers) must be seen as attempts to actualize this injunction, be regarded as obligated and ceaseless attempts (few have ever worked as hard over so many decades) to enlighten, help, and show his fellow human beings new and better ways of thinking, acting, and being. A portion of a letter (previously unpublished) and posted more than a quarter century (February 3, 1856) after John James' decree shows how deeply the Charge had been internalized: "My Dear Sir," Ruskin wrote to his unidentified recipient, "Every man, woman, and child is put by God exactly where he is wanted [to be], and the work which God intends him to do he *can* always do... missing no opportunity of doing good, studying, if possible, not to become a burden to others for our livelihood...[and,] if we have strength, and there is room to do this or that thoroughly...[we must do it,] taking care that it is not through ambition [that we do it]. The greatest honor one can, in general, do to God is to show that one is happy in *His* service..."⁵⁰

Rationally regarded, however, John James' Charge is clearly beyond the power of any one individual to accomplish; is, in truth, a Charge pre-programmed for catastrophe, a Charge which, when the shortfall inevitably arrives and a sense of having labored in vain grows as one well-intended project after another fails to gain its restitutive goal, cannot help but deposit increasing measures of guilt into an ever-deepening psychic reservoir which whisper of failure perpetually, the consequence of which could not help but be despondence.

One more thing about the Charge and its power to motivate requires comment. Helpless at birth, human beings must be intensely taken care of if they are to live to maturity. One of the constituent elements of this care is the bestowal and assurance of continuous love. Getting it, in abundance if possible, children will delight in life and grow to strength. Without it, like spring flowers in the wake of a surprise snowstorm, they wilt and, if they survive, will turn desperate to secure the expressions of love they need to validate the security and legitimacy of their lives.

When love is conferred unconditionally, there is little problem. It is like a reservoir of warm water, marvelously soothing whenever one is surrounded by it. But, equally important, is the knowledge in someone needing it, is an awareness that the kindly and gentling reservoir is always there. When, however, love is given conditionally, doled out *only* when the one needing it has done something to please the giver(s) of it, the sureties just mentioned vanish, ensuring that the person who needs this vital emotional support will soon develop a willingness to do almost anything to get, no matter how demanding or demeaning the tasks and strictures may be for securing it.

⁵⁰ Typescript discovered in a file labeled "possible letters for inclusion" in Birkenhead's *Illustrious Friends*. Holograph, RL.

Lastly, when a person deprived of love only gets it conditionally, however much is bestowed, because it is not unconditional, it is never enough. A deprived psyche basks in it for a moment, but only for that moment, as the rule for its acquisition is that one always has to do more if one wants more of it. Its distribution is rather an owner of a horse filling the hungry horse's feed bag with half of what it needs to do its work at full strength, with the reaction in the horse being, when it realizes it hasn't eaten enough, to immediately start thinking about what it needs to do to get the rest of what it needs.⁵¹

By-and-large, conditional love was all that Ruskin received from his parents, While there can be no question that they loved him, even *adored* him, once they realized what he was capable of, they grasped that they could use the leverage of their love to press him to perform as they wished, so that, as he did so, they could salve, vicariously, their own *insatiable* emotional wounds.⁵²

In an unfortunate way, the Charge letter young Ruskin received from his father when he was ten presents us with a nearly perfect example of how conditional love can be used. It is as though, if we read the letter with its sub-rosa message overt rather than submerged between the lines, John James was saying: "You have done very well, my son, very well indeed. Your talents are magnificent to behold. And you deserve much praise for having done so well. But there is so much more that I—indeed, both your mother and I—know that you can do, indeed *should* do. And, if you work diligently to accomplish all that you are capable of accomplishing, we, humanity, even God Himself, will be immensely pleased with you for having doing it. Never think of resting on your laurels whatever you accomplish. You are needed too much by everyone."

That Ruskin understood the sub-rosa message in his father's letter cannot be doubted. If he wanted their love, it was clear that he had to earn it. Today. Again, tomorrow. And again, the day after. If he wanted their love, he had to do not only do what pleased them, he had to give up, or at least set on a secondary shelf, the things he really wanted to do. And, understanding this message perfectly, while he lived with them, he would go on accomplishing marvelous things, things that would make them *all* the talk of the town, while, inwardly, he would spend his days and nights wrapped in frustration and rage, having to suffer, if ever he deigned to disobey them, their opprobrium ("I am going to the market-place, Mother, chide me no more") when they learned of his indiscretion. Later, after they had gone

⁵¹ There exists an extensive literature on love and human beings' need for it. By far the best discussion in my view is to be found in Montagu.

⁵² One exception to the pattern, Viljoen learned from letters other biographers had missed, was in Ruskin's relationship with his other after John James' death in 1864. After which, already in decline, Margaret seems to have abandoned any demands that her son do this or that to please her, telling him, in a number of surviving letters, that he should do as he liked or thought best. Even so, as the Tantalus story related above demonstrates, the earlier scars never disappeared: see "John Ruskin's Dark Star," the first essay in this series.

on to the Land of Leal,⁵³ their demanding ghosts, like Hamlet's father's, would never leave him, hovering about him, almost daily, to tell him that whatever he had done, it wasn't enough, or good enough, and that, given that time was running out, he should get on with it.

There was more.

Loves (Lost)

First, there was, as we have just seen, the oddness of it. Later, and for the rest of his life, excepting only friends, there would be the paucity of it. His was, Ruskin told his readers in *Praeterita* recalling his boyhood years, a house where he was assiduously cared for, trained, fed, clothed, and methodically educated, but it was also a house decidedly *not* brimming over with expressions of love and warmth. First of the "dominant calamities" of his earliest days, he said, was that "I had nothing to love. My parents were—in a sort—visible powers of nature to me, no more loved than the sun and the moon—only I would have been annoyed if either of them had gone out." (LE 35: 44-5)

One result of his "arm's length" upbringing, he continued, was a boy who grew into adolescence and then into adulthood who had never experienced any intense and abiding emotional attachment to anyone; nor had he experienced the sense of security that accompanies such emotions. "The evil consequence," he added, "was not, however, what might perhaps of been expected—that I grew up selfish and unaffectionate—but that, when affection did come, it came with violence, utterly rampant and unmanageable—at least by me—who never before had anything to manage." (LE 35: 45)

The reference is to the intense depression that descended on him after Adele Domecq, daughter of one of his father's partners in the sherry trade, and three years older than himself, arrived with her sisters in London for a visit when he was 17. Instantly, he was like an empty vessel that, for the first time, has been filled to overflowing with life-giving water. Nevertheless, however smitten, shy beyond shy, he could find the courage to express his feelings to the object of his worship, choosing, instead, to watch Adele and fantasize in silence (LE 35: 177f). If he could be with her, one fantasy went, he knew that before them there would stretch a life of romance and bliss. For her (still hoping to be the "next Byron" that John James longed for), he wrote poem after poem awash in adoration (LE 2). But, as soon as Adele became aware of his adulation, she reacted with disdain, seeing in her worshipful suitor a silly boy, a naïf, with whom she would forthwith have as little to do with as possible. Learning of her rejection, Ruskin was crushed, deracinated, and fell, almost immediately a well of despair. From which he would not emerge for years, the pain of the

⁵³ In a poignant passage in the "Preface" of his autobiography, *Praeterita* (quoted as an epigram in the first essay in this series, "John Ruskin's Dark Star"), after praising his parents for encouraging whatever good he has in him, Ruskin expresses a hope that he will soon be with them in the Land of Leal, which, in Scottish lore, is a mythical land characterized by happiness, loyalty, and virtue.

wound symbolized by a single, mournful sentence entered into his diary on the 28th of December 1839 following another visit to Herne Hill by the Domecq daughters: "I have lost her!" (*Diaries*, 73)

The point to notice is that Ruskin's essentially loveless upbringing left him hungering for the real thing throughout his life. "I wonder mightily now," he wrote tellingly almost a half century later in the last chapter of the first volume of *Praeterita*, a chapter he entitled "Roselyn Chapel,"⁵⁴ as he mused over the loss of Adele, "what sort of a creature I should have turned out if, at this time, Love had been with me instead of against me and, instead of the distracting and useless pain, I had had the joy of approved love, and the untellable, incalculable motive of its sympathy and praise. It seems to me that such things are not allowed in this world." (LE 35: 228)



Effie Gray Ruskin
(Sketch by J. E. Millais)

Certainly, his marriage to Effie Gray a dozen years later (1848) would do nothing to alter this gloomy assessment. Although there is every reason to believe that, during their courtship, Ruskin loved his beautiful Scottish wife-to-be and expected he would father their children, for complex reasons, the union went off the rails in its first moments—their wedding night—hours during which, for yet more complex reasons, the couple determined that they were not yet ready to consummate. The ensuing months and, then, years only made things worse, the couple's incompatibility and upset with each other only intensifying. Finally, the union was sundered on the grounds that, since intercourse had never taken place and there was no reason to believe that Effie was incapable of bearing children, the problem had to lie with the husband's "incurable impotence." While technically untrue—in private, Ruskin always maintained he was capable—given that, in England in the mid-nineteenth century there were few paths that couples could follow to terminate miserable marriages, he did not contest the determination. Hardly surprisingly, given Ruskin's fame as one of Britain's greatest minds, a scandal, embedded with spicy tales and innuendo, followed, with none of its attendant gossip being very flattering to the author of *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*. For the rest of his life, Ruskin would never be completely free from the salacious stories and unsubstantiated slanders his ill-fated union had generated.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Another of Viljoen's contributions was her discovery of the constant use of symbolic allegory in Ruskin's writings. It is no accident that he embeds Rose's name in this chapter title and ends it with a rose image anticipating her entry into his story at a later time: see "John Ruskin's Dark Star," the first essay in this series.

⁵⁵ On all this, see Brownell—by far the best and most accurate account of the Ruskins unhappy marriage—and Chapter One of the next paper in this series, "Ruskin's Sexuality."



Four years after his marriage was annulled, in 1858, Ruskin would meet Rose La Touche, the daughter of an upper-class Irish couple who had hoped the renowned writer, who had just published, *The Elements of Drawing*, might instruct her that art. Immediately, he fell deeply in love. Although Rose was almost three decades his junior, as wretchedly lonely as ever, he imagined that, with her, he might at last foster a loving relationship. While it is clear that Rose admired, cared for, and, later, loved him, she felt duty bound to respect the reservations of parents who, increasingly, developed doubts about the wisdom of approving any sustained intimacy developing between them. Ruskin proposed when Rose turned 16. She said she would give him her answer after three years. As he fretted and waited, he began to write all his new works with her readership in mind (LE 35: 533). Finally, she rejected him. Crushed, he refused to accept the decision and courted on. But, as the coming years passed, the strain of their off-again, on-again, relationship took an ever more serious toll on them both. Then, in 1868, on the day he was to deliver a lecture in Dublin, her parents informed him that he could no longer be in touch with her. The edict plunged him into despair.

Their decision to end the relationship was the outgrowth of a series of interchanges which had occurred between Rose's mother, Maria (who had heard the rumors of sexual problems attending the Ruskins' marriage), and Effie, who by this time had been Mrs. John Everett Millais for nearly a decade and a half.⁵⁶ Were, Maria had asked, such problems present and paramount? In answer to which, Effie had informed her that John Ruskin was indeed an "unnatural man." After hearing which, the worried La Touches decided that the faster the relationship between their daughter and this strange man was over, the better.

In a letter written on January 21, 1869, a distraught Ruskin explained to a friend, Tom Richmond what the possibility of life with Rose had meant to him. She was, he wrote, responding to a remark in an earlier Richmond letter, the *one* thing that gave me hope, my chance for redemption from "all that was vain—or imperfect—or mournful in my life." And now that I have lost her, he went on, "the mournfulness returns with doubled darkness, and the unredeemed and unredeemable pain of the past rules, as it has [always] ruled. You can never know how I have failed—unless you knew what I ought to have been—and hoped to have accomplished—nor do I think you can estimate the exhaustion of hope and temper during the disappointment of the deeper affections again & again—during thirty-five years—ending at last with the fairest, *longest* hope—and the most cruel sharpness of its death."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ While still married to Ruskin, Effie had fallen in love with the Pre-Raphaelite painter, John Everett Millais. They married the year after the annulment was granted and eventually had eight children.

⁵⁷ VP (PML): Year File: "1869."

As always with Ruskin, the reference to thirty-five years is significant, because it points us (but certainly not Tom Richmond) back to the moment of the loss of the first love, Adele Domecq. Points us, too (though again not Tom Richmond), to the writer's conviction—he was within a month of fifty—of having failed miserably in his work. (We shall return to this subject.)



Ruskin: Portrait of Rose La Touche (1861, The Brantwood Trust)

It was the strangest of fates: fifteen years after his ill-starred marriage had been sundered, the woman who had once been so enthusiastically approved by his parents to be his mate cruelly sabotaged his chance of happiness with another; it was as if, as a consequence of some sidereal edict, his hope of having an enduring and comforting love during his life had been prohibited by yet another unexpected tendril emerging from the shadows of fate.

Though glimmers of reconciliation would come and go over the course of the next half six years, the die was now cast. In her summary of the tragedy, Viljoen wrote that Rose, herself deeply crippled emotionally, was "unable either to refuse or accept Ruskin as her

husband... Intense love mingled with pity for her kept him waiting, with increasing bitterness against her parents (from whom she herself finally fled), sometimes with ecstatic hope before her protestations of love, [and sometimes in aching despair after enduring her] recriminations... Finally, she, never strong, fell into a lingering illness [epistolary evidence in the Alexander collection suggests it almost surely was anorexia nervosa⁵⁸] and complete insanity. She died in 1875, at twenty-five, leaving Ruskin bereft and, as we have learned from an earlier letter Ruskin sent to Francesca], entertaining the excruciating thought that his love had first tortured and then killed her. During the next three years of brooding remorse, grief, and loneliness, his mind gradually gave way."⁵⁹

Perhaps in no other place is Ruskin so agonizingly honest about his failures in love as in a little-remembered paragraph he included in the "Introduction" to the first publication of his *Proserpina* essays in 1874, where he recalled that, while staying at The Hotel du Mont

⁵⁸ BPL MSS. ACC 2500 III: 23: b+ d; letter from Eva Stuart (Rose's dear friend) to Ruskin, sent to him in the late 1860s while Rose still lived. (As earlier noted, Ruskin was in the habit of enclosing the letters of others when writing still other correspondents. He has enclosed this Stuart letter in one he sent to Mrs. Alexander on March 8, 1886.) The possibility that Rose was severely anorexic was first suggested, to my knowledge, by Burd ("More Letters"). Later scholars have surmised similarly. The letter noticed here is the first to provide some contemporary evidence documenting the likelihood. "I wish you wd [sic] get her not to starve herself," Eva wrote, "She weighed 5 stone 10 pounds & a half yesterday [slightly over 80 pounds, US], & she has grown fat since she has been visiting you! You can imagine what it was before."

⁵⁹ The best account of this complex and heart-wrenching story remains Burd's *Ruskin and Rose*.

Blanc in the hamlet of St. Martin's while en route to Chamouni in the June of 1860, when he came down one morning, he found "a pretty young English lady at the table-d'hôtel...and I wanted to get speech of her, and didn't know how. So, all I could think of was to go half-way up the Aiguille de Varens to gather St. Bruno's lilies. And I made a great cluster of them, and put wild roses all round them as I came down. I never saw anything so lovely. And I thought to present them to her before dinner. But when I got down, she had gone away to Chamouni. My *Fors* always treated me like that, in affairs of the heart."⁶⁰



An emotionally crippling and interminable ruinous struggle inherited from extremely demanding parents, a charge to save the world impossible to achieve, a desperate need for intimacy and an enduring love that would never come to be. Taken together, such burdens and disappointments would seem more than sufficient to bring almost anyone to their mental breaking point. But there was yet another load for bearing, one as debilitating as any of these others, a dis-ease that, after 1857, was never far from his worried mind, a conviction so disconcerting that, as it intermixed with his other circling depressors, would make a descent into madness inevitable.

The Failure of his Work

We have earlier noted that, as the 1850s moved toward their close, Ruskin began to entertain the thought that, however praised his books and essays might have been, they had not achieved the goal he had intended for them ever since the moment in 1843 when the first volume of *Modern Painters* had appeared. Charged as a child with remaking the world for the better, he had expected that his readers, once they grasped the deep truths outlined in his books, they would realize that the natural world in which they had been given the privilege of living was a sacred thing, and, further, understand that it was their unceasing obligation as the world's stewards to preserve and protect it; would understand, as well, that the ever-intensifying Industrial Revolution to which so many ardently subscribed was, in reality, a malevolent force, a force that, as it expanded in the service of an insatiable lust for profit, was destroying all that was beneficent in nature and decent and honest in social life.

And, in his suspicion that he had missed these marks, he was quite right. Such profound and imperative understandings were not what his readers took from his pages. Instead, they loved and applauded the lyrical quality of his paragraphs, the loveliness of his drawings and selected images, the way he showed them, in ways they had never thought about previously, how to look at mountains, paintings and buildings. "No one has ever written about such things as beautifully as Ruskin," they collectively enthused. As for his impassioned pleas for change, well, they had noticed them in a rather lukewarm way, but, in the end, they were not rousing. And so, after they finished each new book, they would place it neatly on

⁶⁰ LE 25: 204. For further the reference to *Fors*, the fate which cuts the chord of life, see the next section.

the shelf behind their reading chairs where his earlier volumes rested, and return to business as usual.

Then, as if to add misery to this injury, Turner fell—or, rather, Ruskin fell after he came to realize that Turner had fallen, and that repeatedly. Raised, as we have seen, by an intensely devout Evangelical mother, from childhood he had accepted the idea that only the truly good would be allowed to see the most glorious aspects of God's creation, and since it was demonstrable—he had demonstrated it in volume after volume of his *Modern Painters* books!—that Turner was the only painter in history who possessed the capacity to render these most glorious things perfectly, *ipso facto*, Turner must be good: steadfastly noble, incorrupt, and incorruptible.⁶¹ It wasn't so.



J. M. W. Turner
(contemporary drawing)

After Turner died in 1851, he was informed that he had been appointed an executor of the great painter's estate. Uninterested in that task, he asked if instead he might be allowed to catalogue Turner's immense gift to the British nation—over 20,000 paintings, sketches, and notebooks. Of course. Following which, with his usual intensity, an intensity made even greater because the work he was taking on would immortalize his hero, he set to work, finding, to his *horror*, not long into the task, that his hero had not been as he had imagined—pure and devout—but had been, instead, frequently salacious both in mind and in his informal art (there were many pictures, many of which had to be seen as lewd, composed over many years which proved the unhappy point!).⁶²

The find shattered the little that was left of his confidence that his early works had told nothing but the truth about art and life. Not only had his first books and lectures been so ill-written that they failed to convince readers that it was their duty to protect and defend the world and its beauties, he now realized that the moral precept on which all those works had rested—that *only* the pure of heart could see and represent the glory of creation—was false. So shattering were the effects of the discovery, he immediately knew that he could no longer hold Turner up as a paragon or use him as an example to convince others "that all great art

⁶¹ This issue is discussed at much greater length in the first essay in this series, "John Ruskin's Dark Star."

⁶² As instances, among the Turner erotica were drawings of female genitalia and couples engaged in intercourse and oral sex.



Ruskin, Self-Portrait, 1861
(Ruskin Library)

depended on nobleness of life."⁶³But it was worse still: he was forced to conclude that all his previous works were gravely flawed, had been pervaded with lies and half-truths which misled his audiences, that the entirety of his work, work of which he had been intensely proud, work which the world acknowledged as the outpouring of indisputable genius, "had been in vain." (cf. LE 22: 512; LE 19: 131-2) In short, the discovery of Turner's erotica plunged Ruskin into a tailspin of despair and convinced him that, to this point, he had wasted his life, had failed grievously and unforgivably in his attempts to fulfill his charge to help save the world. It was an inner desolation from which, no matter what and how much he did, he would never fully emerge, as his troubled self-portrait of the time intimates.

But, concerning the failure of his work, still more needed to be said. It may have been the case that I failed to write convincingly enough to change my readers' ways, he thought, but there was another reason for the failure—the fact that these same readers are surrounded by, indeed are profoundly immersed in, the personal and general corruption fostered by the deceitful promise contained in the works of those who expostulated the so-called modern "science" of political economy: to wit, that if each sought only their own interests in trade, the interests of all, even the poorest, would eventually be served. It was a lie, an excuse that, in the guise of what these writers took as a principle of nature, legitimated and released all the forces of greed and shunted into the background the principal teaching of the man they all professed to be their spiritual guide, that human beings had been enjoined by God himself to treat others as they themselves wished to be treated.⁶⁴

⁶³ Later reassessment of all he had written until 1857 convinced Ruskin that the bulk of what he had set down regarding the enduring principles which underlay the beautiful, the noble, art, and architecture, was sound. However, given that these truths had been embedded in paragraphs praising the principles of his insufficiently analyzed Evangelical training, until 1880 he refused re-issue of any of these books; his change of mind then only occasioned by his belief that the books held more truth than falsehood, and his own economic necessity. Even then, the re-issues were never simple reproductions of the originals. In all, to warn his audience of his earlier mistakes, he would include prefaces and footnotes pointing to his earlier misstatements and inaccuracies. For an example, see the reissue of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* of 1880: LE 8. Similar reflections led him to conclude that, about Turner's incomparable genius as a painter of the truths of nature, he had been right; he had just been too naïve at that earlier time to realize that the truths of life were much more complex than he had assumed.

⁶⁴ The vast majority of Ruskin's readers, indeed the vast majority of those living in the UK at the time, would have identified as Christians.

And so began a decade during which, shunning almost any new work on art and architecture, Ruskin concentrated on advancing an alternate theory of political economy, one that specified that all *true* business had to be based on mutual honest and trust between the parties and grounded in an unremitting vow to serve others by providing them with the goods and services they most needed to live better lives, directives which relegated profit-seeking to secondary, or even lesser, status. In the wake of this new tact, there flowed a series of brilliant books and lecture collections: *The Political Economy of Art* (1857), *Unto this Last* (1860), *Munera Pulveris* (1863), *Sesame and Lilies* (1864), *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866), *Time and Tide* (1867), and *The Queen of the Air* (1869): cf. LE 15-18.

Hardly surprisingly, those holding the reins of capitalist power quickly came to hate him for having the temerity to say such things, particularly because Ruskin, never one to mince words, had made it crystal clear in all these works that they bore the primary responsibility not only for the greed and corruption rampant in society, but for creating a underclass of millions overflowing with the sick, miserable and destitute. Throughout the decade, his vilification in the press was commonplace, even *de rigueur*, as those who were the objects of his accusation tried to find any means possible to discredit one of his central tenets, that most of those who inhabited the upper classes of the nineteenth century were unconscionable subscribers to a belief in a "carnivorous rapine which they have declared their Baal-God." (LE 28: 152) Put another way, the Ruskin who, not long before, had been the eagerly sought-after new genius of the age, was transformed into a moral pariah, denounced time and again as incompetent to opine about matters of trade in which he had no living expertise, and, all but surely, mad into the bargain, a brilliant mind gone off the tracks. He could not, and would not, be taken seriously. The greed continued, apace. Another failure.

Added to this, there was his lack of ability (another sorry consequence of his having been insufficiently convincing in his works) to stop, or even slow, the destruction or neglect of much the great art of Europe; nor could he find any way to retard the rampant despoliation of his beloved natural world as the unstoppable industrial machine obliterated one beautiful landscape after another.

In 1871, by now convinced that the great majority of the elites of his era, hidebound in their "rage to be rich," were going to do little to nothing to help him, he began writing a series of lengthy letters which he addressed to the "workmen and Laborers of Great Britain." The letters, to which he gave the enigmatic title, *Fors Clavigera* (see LE 27-29), were designed to alert these less educated and generally powerless members of society to the real causes of the misery they were experiencing and motivate them to join with him in creating a series of locales (which he would buy and maintain) where, once again, it would be possible to breathe fresh air, drink clean water, and farm unpolluted land. The organization that would oversee these new places, he would call, in honor of England's patron saint whose perpetual task it was to protect her people against evil, "The Guild of St. George."⁶⁵ Although the bulk

⁶⁵ The original name (1871) was "The St. George's Company"; changed in 1878, to the name it still bears. Cf. *passim*, LE 27-29 and, especially, LE 30.

of the Guild's members (who would be called "Companions") would for the most part come from undereducated class, he fully expected that his richest friends (of whom there were many) would donate generously to help him meet and sustain the Guild's expenses. Almost none of them did. Another failure.



Logo of The Guild of St. George, image based on Ruskin's drawing of Carpaccio's "St. George and the Dragon," Scuola de Schiavoni, Venice

By the time the mid-1870s arrived, Ruskin, as he told a friend at a social gathering one London evening, was "the unhappiest man in Europe."

And so, like the inexorable forces that gather to precipitate a catastrophic collapse in a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, the precursors of Ruskin's mental breakdown assembled. But, unlike the forces at work in these earlier literary renditions, many of which are presumed to be the consequences of foreordained fate, in Ruskin's case there is no question that the mental breakdown which would soon bring him down was caused, not by some unspecifiable inherited genetic code, but by the merger of a series of comprehensible, brutal, this-worldly forces: a grievous, interminable ruinous struggle with his parents over the direction his life should take; the emotional toll exacted by the loss of the two great loves of his life; a failed marriage that left him, for the rest of his life, the subject of gossip and public denigration; an ever more corrosive sense that virtually all his assiduous work of thirty-five years had been either miscast or discounted; the vicious defamation that followed his insistent castigation of the rampant greed of his time; and the reluctance shown by his friends to provide him with even a modicum of the financial support he would require to bring his ceaseless efforts to create a humane social order to fruition.

On the night of the 22 February 1878, all these forces, like a series of virulent acids escaped from their bottles, flowed together in his bedroom at Brantwood with a power which he could no longer keep at bay. And so it happened that, as his beloved Turner watercolors, powerless to protect him longer, looked down on him from their precious places on the wall, the unhappiest man in Europe, deciding that going mad was preferable to enduring any more of these pitiless and incessant tortures, went, as he would later describe it, "crazy with the hares" for a first time.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ LE 35: xxxviii: the best description of this unhappy night as well as the days leading up to and subsequent to it will be found in Viljoen's *BD*.



Ruskin's bedroom at Brantwood⁶⁷

The Darkening Glass⁶⁸

In time, he would get better and become himself again (almost). At which point, he picked up his pen and went back to work.

"Failing!? What business has *anybody* to fail?" Ruskin would write in the 26th letter of *Fors Clavigera* in February 1873 (LE 27: 473). "[M]y real pleasure," he told Katherine Bradley in a missive sent four years later, "as far as any is left to me now in this [world], is not in being loved—though of course it pleases me in a kind of melancholy way [if that eventuates] but in being *useful*, above all in teaching...people who can be easily taught—or greatly comforted", adding, in another letter to the same recipient (April 4, 1877): "I was very grateful for your letter and would fain have written some true answer to its sympathy. But I must not think of what I have lost or may regain. My only duty at present is to keep myself in active work and [constant] thought for the present needs of people round me." (both: Moore, 152-3)

⁶⁷ The Turner watercolors on the wall (now, reproductions) were sold to various bidders following Ruskin's death in 1900.

⁶⁸ The apt title of John Rosenberg's biography. Beautifully written and empathetic, like all biographies except Collingwood's, it suffers from not having to hand the holographs of the letters of Ruskin's later years. (For example, the critical exchanges between Ruskin and the Alexanders excerpted and discussed in this essay. Cf. "John Ruskin's Dark Star," the first essay in this series.) As a result, and also like many other biographies, Rosenberg assumes that his subject's mental illness was a consequence of inherited genetic weakness.

With this intention uppermost, if amidst (as he described it in another *Fors* letter), "the weakness and despair of old age" (LE 28: 146), he forged ahead. In due course, he resumed his position as First Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford and began lecturing again, resumed, despite the lack of any widespread support, his work for The Guild,⁶⁹ resumed publication of the *Fors* series (it would continue until the 96th missive concluded the series in 1884), reassumed work on numerous books left in limbo when his attack arrived, finishing *Love's Meinie* ("Love's Many"), in praise of the beauties of birds (last installment, 1881; LE 25), *St. Mark's Rest*, a brief introduction to the most important art and monuments in Venice (last installment, 1880; LE 24), *Proserpina*, extolling the glories of flowers⁷⁰ (last installment, 1887; LE 25), *Deucalion*, a study of the geologic principles inherent in waves and rocks (last installment, 1883; LE 26), *Bibliotheca Pastorum*, a collection of some of the greatest writings and stories of antiquity that could still serve as ethical guides for life (last installment, 1885; LE 31), and *Fiction, Fair, and Foul*, essays lauding some writers—Walter Scott—while disparaging others—the later Dickens (last installment, 1881; LE 34).

And, as though this prodigious output was insufficient (in his mind, it was *always* insufficient), in the period that stretched from the months following his recovery after the attack in 1878, he wrote or edited a weighty load of new books: *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*, presenting, along with his commentary, Francesca Alexander's exquisite drawings and stories of peasant life in Italy, intended, like the stories in *Bibliotheca Pastorum*, as models of how one might live a good and decent life in a corrupt modern age (1885; LE 32); *The Bible of Amiens*, his last complete work, wherein the great French cathedral literally serves as a symbol making manifest life's most critical spiritual lessons (completed, 1885; LE 33); *The Art of England*, a handful of his last lectures at Oxford, praising the life-affirming efforts of some artists while critiquing the lesser works of others (1884; LE 33); *The Pleasures of England*, other last lectures from Oxford, which, like *The Art of England*, lauds some historical periods and leaders while chastising other periods and leaders (1884; LE 33); and, beginning in 1885, his final masterpiece, his autography, *Praeterita* (LE 35), a project which would fall fallow after his collapse in Venice in 1888.⁷¹

All these later works, to one degree or another, continue to exhibit his brilliance and insight. But—excepting only *Praeterita*—all possess a level of didactic intensity and desperation not found in the great books published before 1878. Three factors can be cited as the cause. First, Ruskin's ever-present sense that his hourglass is quickly emptying and that the time he has left to accomplish *something* of what he originally intended is vanishing; second, his fear (well-founded) that his collapse of 1878 was only the harbinger of more and

⁶⁹ LE 30. For the best telling of The Guild story during Ruskin's time, see Frost.

⁷⁰ With, it should not be missed, his lost love's first name embedded in the title.

⁷¹ After his return to Brantwood, Ruskin would write one last chapter, "Joanna's Care," in praise of the cousin who had loved and taken care of him for more than two decades, and who would, as it happened, care for him until the end came early in 1900. Other chapters planned for *Praeterita* were never completed.

likely worse attacks; and, third, the always lacerating thought that if he is to atone for his past failures, he must do it *now*, before, as one of the thousands of Bible verses Margaret insisted he memorize, put it, that moment arrived when "no man can work."⁷²

Although there is no question that, during the years that followed the attack of 1878, Ruskin did revive, as the plethora of frenetic tasks above mentioned demonstrate, he was never again fully well. It was as if some internal hydraulic valve, its long-suppressed pressures finally so great they could no longer be contained, had burst, an eruption that allowed, in its train, a period of time when more or less normal functioning could resume. But the respite was never long. Soon the pressure would begin to rise again as the old traumata returned to claim their disturbing place in his psyche. The next section shows this most unpleasant process at work.

"Wounded in the House of My Friends"

If there is one interior trait that haunts Ruskin during his later years, it is his realization that, for all his days, he has been the unhappy recipient of Cassandra's Curse: he had been given the gift of seeing and being able to speak truth but had never been accorded the attendant gift of being heard.⁷³

"I must...allow myself a few...words of autobiography, touching" on this point of my work and its lack of reception," he wrote in his *Fors* letter of March, 1880, a passage explaining why he had fallen ill, why he had succumbed to what he called an excruciating "fire in the flesh":

The doctors said that, when I went mad this time two years ago, it was from overwork. I had not been working more than usual, and what was usual with me had become easy. But I went mad because nothing came of my work. People would have understood my falling crazy if they had heard that the manuscripts on which I had spent seven years of...life had all been used to light the fire with... But they could not understand that I should be the least annoyed, far less fall ill in a frantic manner, because, after I got them published, nobody believed a word of them. [T]he first calamity would only have been misfortune; the second—the enduring calamity under which I toil—is humiliation, resisted only by a dangerous and lonely pride.

I spoke just now of the "wounds" [from] which that fire in the flesh came. And, if anyone ask me faithfully what the wounds were, I can faithfully give the answer of Zechariah's silenced messenger, "Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends." (*Zechariah* 13:6) All alike in whom I had most trusted for help, failed me in this main work—some mocked at it, some

⁷² John 9: 4: "I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day; for the night cometh when no man can work."

⁷³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cassandra-Greek-mythology>

pitied, some rebuked—all stopped their ears to the cry; and the solitude at last became too great to be endured. (LE 29: 386-7)⁷⁴

It is a remarkable passage, for, in it, Ruskin not only diagnoses the reason for his collapse (that nothing came of his work), but isolates the ambient forces that, collectively, brought him to that collapse. On first reading, we might think that he is damning the friends who refused to support him in his St. George's work. In part, he is. But, then, we notice, when we re-read the passage, that the category of those who have not helped him is broader. A wordsmith of the highest order, for whom every word that appeared in print had been carefully selected, he has written, when referring to those who have not supported him, "all alike," suggesting that the category includes some unspecified others. Reading even more attentively, we notice something else: that Ruskin has made it a point to tell his readers that Zachariah's messenger was "silenced." Not recollecting our Biblical training very well, we turn to the chapter noted, to find, not without some surprise, that Zechariah's messenger was mute because he had been *killed*, "thrust through" by others who, normally, would have been expected to be his friends—specifically, "thrust through" by the *parents* who begat him: "And it shall come to pass that when any shall yet prophesy, then his father and his mother that begat him, shall say unto him, 'Thou shalt not live—for thou speakest lies in the name of the Lord.' And his father and mother that begat him shall thrust him through when he prophesieth." (*Zechariah* 13: 3)



John James Ruskin, ca. 1862

Meaning that, once we follow the clues out, Ruskin, who, as Helen Viljoen argued decades ago,⁷⁵ was a master *nonpareil* of allegory, is telling us, in this indirect way (it would be unseemly, an instance of intentional disobedience of the Fifth Commandment, to accuse his parents directly), that it was his father and mother who, unhappy with how he had turned out, for their own reasons, had mocked, pitied, and rebuked him (most disapprovingly in John James' case), and by doing so, "killed" him, had done the things that, finally, drove him mad.

As Viljoen repeatedly made clear in the draft chapters of her never-to-be-published biography, in his father's eyes, his son, the remarkable adept he had sired, was a "Beloved Fool," adored, yes, brilliant beyond telling unquestionably; but, finally, never quite *on* target, always writing, particularly during the early years of Ruskin's authorship, about things like art and architecture that, in the final analysis, were not so very important; and later—so very lamentably!—resolutely upbraiding everyone with

⁷⁴ Hilton (53-4, 60), rejecting Ruskin's arguments, argues that overwork was a precipitant of his mental collapses.

⁷⁵ See, for the argument in this and the next paragraph, the first essay in this series, "Ruskin's Dark Star," especially the sections on "The Ruinous Struggle and Ruskin's "symbolic allegory."

power or influence for what he saw as their economic cupidity in those unfortunate works on political economy, works that stirred up hornets' nests of controversy, embarrassing censure, even contempt. Not, as he regularly told his son, quite what he had had in mind.

As for his mother, who, as always, was considerably more reserved in expressing her displeasure, he had not become, as she had hoped when he was born, Archbishop of Canterbury; indeed, he had come to a point when he rejected wholesale the Evangelical faith in which she had so assiduously trained him; regarding it as false, as harmful to anyone taking it seriously; had become in reaction to this rejection, as he often said publicly, a pagan.

For Ruskin, these censures, whether overtly or covertly expressed, were like poisons poured into a well which he had been trying, with all his might, to make pure again.⁷⁶ At Margaret's knee, he had absorbed like few before him and many fewer since, the moral lessons contained in the Bible, the principal one being that it was God's injunction that we do what we can while we are here to make the world a better place. In his eyes that was all he had ever tried to do. That this doing had met, in its public guise, with inattention and, later, downright hostility was not surprising. The same had happened, with also unpleasant result, to the founder of the religion in whose teachings most of his contemporaries professed to believe. Betrayals of the first order which had to be called out.

Add to this parental disenchantment and public chastisement the other major losses and rejections we have detailed in pages above and we uncover a list of real-world sourced wounds that operate as a perfect recipe for unceasing and unresolvable mental turmoil, for days spent in perpetual despair over unsalvable failure, days spent in "chronic fury" (Ruskin's description of his regular mental state during these years: LE 37: 371)—all of which traits are on display in the following excerpts, all taken from correspondences that followed his first attack:

An excerpt from a letter sent to Lady Simon on April 15, 1878, just as he was beginning to recover from that initial spell: "The goodness of all my friends to me—but chiefly John's and yours—through all these willful and foolish years I have so wasted, would need another life to repay...as my own uselessness and selfishness are now brought home to me in pain, which I will not burden you with the bitterness of." (LE 37: 244)

A passage from a letter posted to Reverend J. P. Faunthorpe two days later: the weeks when he was out of his mind, Ruskin recalled, were a "continual vision to me of my selfishness, prides, insolences, [and] failures---written down day by

⁷⁶ Given Ruskin's penchant for symbolism, it is no coincidence that, as a memorial to his mother following her death in 1871, he dedicated a spring famed for its pure waters to her in the village of Carshalton. His inscription reads: "In obedience to the giver of Life/of the brooks and fruits that feed it,/and the peace that ends;/may this well be kept sacred/for the service of men, flocks, and flowers/and be by kindness called/Margaret's well." (LE 22: xxiv)

day, it seemed to me, with reversed interpretation of all I had fondly thought done for others, as the mere foaming out of my own vanity." (LE 37: 244)

In 1880, as earlier noted, he reluctantly agreed to allow *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, first published in 1849, to be reissued. Ever since his "unconversion" of 1858, when he rejected wholly the Evangelical teaching within which he had been raised, he had hated this book, calling it "the most useless I ever wrote"; useless, partially, because the first edition had been infused with his "rabid and utterly false Protestantism" (LE 8: 14); but useless, too, because its teachings had been all but ignored by its chief audience, England's architects. Study of the footnotes inserted into the edition of 1880 reveals, time and again, his rage at his previously inept self. Three represent the pattern. The first focuses on his argument in the first edition that any attempt at restoring deteriorating great architecture would destroy the art, aesthetic, and cultural meanings of the original: "[A]ny more wasted words than mine throughout life, or bread cast on more bitter waters, I never heard of," he seethed, continuing, the "closing paragraph of the sixth chapter is the best...in the book—and the vainest!" (LE 8: 245); earlier, remarking on the suggestion in the first edition that letting free the creative impulses of workers was the key to architectural greatness, he footnoted: "I am glad to see that I had so much sense this early. If only I had just a little more, and stopped talking! How much life—of the vividest [*sic*]—I might have saved from expending itself on useless sputter and kept for careful pencil work. I might have had every bit of St. Mark's and Ravenna drawn by this time. What good this wretched rant of a book can do still—since people ask for it—let them make of it. But I don't see what it's [good for]. The only living art now left in England is bill-sticking." (LE 8: 194; for other self-reproaches in the new edition, see pp. 106, 117, 127, 128, 148, 159)

"[T]he chief final result of that Long Dream [(the attack), he wrote family friend George Richmond in May 1878], was a terrible impression of my failure in duty to my father, and of the pain I had caused him, and my best friends." (LE 37: 246) As if in anticipation of this sad self-evaluation, almost exactly three years earlier (March, 1875), Ruskin had said, in the 51st of his *Fors Clavigera* letters, in another passage "proving" his intrinsic unworthiness and inability to please his father, in a sentence comparing images of his childhood and adult handwriting (both virtually unreadable): "It would be difficult to give more distinct evidence than is furnished by these pieces of manuscript of the incurably desultory character which has brought on me the curse of Reuben, 'Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel'." Turning to the Biblical verse referenced and the one prior, we read (Abraham is speaking, predicting his sons' futures): "Reuben, thou art my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity,

and the excellency of power: unstable as water, thou shalt not excel, because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou it." (*Genesis* 49: 3-4)⁷⁷

"[Mrs. Simon] tells me [he told Dr. John Simon in 1879 on hearing that this dear friend's father was near death] that the dark time when the great Honoring is to be no more possible but in memory, is coming to you—as it came—and remains—for me. Every day darker since you first comforted me through the sudden stress of [my father's death in 1864]. How little then I knew what its long weight would be. But I have a thousand things to reproach and shame myself for, and mourn for, in the pain they gave my father, with a grief far worse than shame, while you have only done duty [to yours], and [as a result, have received] his unhindered and untormented pride in you—for the after-glow of your twilight time." (LE 37: 535; *cf.* for another scathing self-reproach, LE 28: 425-7)

The final extract comes from a letter written on June 19, 1888 during Ruskin's final trip on his Old Road. Some months before, he had met Kathleen Olander, then in her late teens, at the National Gallery. A friendship ensued. As their contacts continued and they discovered that they shared an honest affection for each other, a correspondence started up. As had happened after he had met the Alexanders, when he learned that his expressions of loneliness and psychic pain were met with empathy by Kathleen, his letters became increasingly confessional.⁷⁸ The following excerpt is notable not only for Ruskin's unrelenting chastisement of himself, but because of its reference to the abiding presence of The Charge which had been given to him by his father six decades before. His words also help us understand why he was so terrified of death—because of his failure to actualize The Charge, the Judgment which will be visited on him after his death shall be terrible: My dear Kathleen, he wrote, let me tell you something of the kind of burden I carry with me every day: It "is the sense of having throughout life, 'received the grace of God in vain.' [2 *Corinthians* 6: 1] It is not the sorrow, but the infinite joy and gift that have been lost by me. I have grieved and quenched the Spirit. And, when I think of what I might have been, and see—as I draw nearer Death—what God meant me and would have helped me to be—there seems to me no word of condemnation in all the Bible too dark for my disobedience." (Unwin, 52)

Self-Loathing

One final characteristic of Ruskin's mental illness requires remark. As we have just read, all the excerpts above contain at least one expression of intense self-loathing. Just before reading these, it will be remembered that we considered a particularly trenchant passage from one of his *Fors* letters wherein Ruskin brilliantly deduces the forces in his life which coalesced on that February night in 1878 which caused to lose his right mind, a passage in

⁷⁷ Rosenberg uses the phrase, "unstable as water," as a chapter title in his biography, seeing it as emblematic of Ruskin's congenital mental weakness. Interestingly, however, if one reads the entirety of the *Fors* letter with care, Ruskin's sanity shines forth.

⁷⁸ More details concerning the Ruskin-Olander relationship appear later in this essay.

which he also expressed his anger at all those who betrayed him along his lonely way. Would we not, keeping this passage in mind—a passage that presents us with an author in clear possession of his wits and full command of his exceptional writing skills—expect that, as time passed, these sources of his discontent would be, repeatedly, singled out for more scolding?

But they are not. Indeed, as we study Ruskin's correspondences that follow the attack of 1878, we come across almost no additional accusations of those who had wounded him. Indeed, the opposite: rather than regularly dressing his betrayers down, we find that, recurrently, these primary fonts of his angst are described apologetically, as those *he* has offended, often grievously—his friends, his parents (singly or jointly), God himself. It is he who deserves censure, not them. How to explain this odd transmutation?

Earlier, when outlining the traits which accompany Major Depression Disorder, we found that, among these are intense, irrational, and abiding feelings of *self-loathing* and *guilt*. Such feelings develop, Freud taught us over a century ago, as means for rechanneling an unyielding sense of rage, rage that has developed following early emotional traumata, which, understandably, desires to be visited on those who were (often still are) the perpetrators of the trauma.⁷⁹ The trouble is, much more often than not, such perpetrators continue to play a critically important role in the life and mind of the one traumatized. As a result, to vent that anger directly on those who have done the harm, whether alive or dead, is to chance losing all contact with them, either directly or in *sustaining* memory, a loss, which the traumatized suspects (usually subconsciously) would threaten whatever mental equilibrium he retains.⁸⁰

However, Freud also teaches us that reluctance to visit one's ire on the primary malefactor is no solution. The rage still survives. and, if it is not to consume the person traumatized at some point, it must be released in some way. Knowing that bestowing excessive wrath on others (with whom he is either close or distant) would not be long tolerated, the distressed person intuits that his own self is the only safe object on which he can vent his anger.

And so, a series of self-derisions begins. The traumatized person regards himself as worthless, as incapable of any truly useful act, as morally despicable; he reproaches, even vilifies himself, expects always to be cast out and/or chastised, demeans himself first and savagely before others (who know, have known, the terrible truth about him all along) do the same; and, finally, and most significantly, *refuses* to take seriously any suggestions from well-

⁷⁹ For Freud's theses, see the summary in Reiff. What Freud called "melancholia" is what we now call "Major Depression." Freud's insights into the intense link between self-hatred and serious depression have been confirmed by numerous empirical studies: see, as instances, van Praag, de Kloet, and van Os: 43-5.

⁸⁰ The willingness (sometimes even eagerness) of those who have been traumatized to return resume their lives with those who have severely harmed them (women to abusive male partners, children to cruel parents, etc.) is well-documented; *cf.* Malkin. Because our subject is Ruskin, I will use the pronoun, "he," in the remainder of this discussion.

meaning and more clear-eyed others who may suggest that he isn't as evil or culpable as he believes and *needs* himself to be (Reiff, 167). In other words, by regularly exercising self-castigation, the traumatized person is "rewarded": he temporarily relieves himself of his all-but-unbearable choler, keeps the horrifying experience of the original trauma at bay, and (this being the ultimate reason for the transference) "escapes annihilation." (Reiff, 176, 178)

Other "rewards" attend this regrettable choice. Because, in many situations (an abusive spouse, abusive parents and their children), the hurtful others have harmed the traumatized person over a long period of time—have bestowed on him "the punishment he deserves" for his alleged short-comings—such self-belittling "proves" the original critic "right," thereby *strengthening* the negative symbiosis that forever ties the maimed to his maimers mentally.⁸¹ In addition, the sufferer takes a strange sense of satisfaction from his self-chastisement, for, at a subconscious level, he *knows* he "deserves" severe reproach for never having had the courage to confront his oppressor and free himself from domination. In his heart of hearts, he knows himself to be a coward and for that weakness he must be, and justly, punished.

Nevertheless, whatever ameliorative effects self-castigation bestows, it also exacts a high price, because, as psychiatrists from Freud onward have informed us, the projection of fury onto *secondary* objects, even when the secondary object is one's self, can never be fully satisfying. To put it slightly differently, however quickly or slowly it happens, projection always fails, with the result being, when self-belittlement is involved, that the anger rises again, and, in time, demands that the stress, like the mounting pressure in a damaged hydraulic pump, must be released again. And if the wrath is—as was the case with Ruskin--directed at an already damaged and weakened ego, it damages and weakens that ego further. Finally, if the traumatized person—Ruskin—never gains a clear understanding of how the denigrating pattern works and has some sort of confrontation with the punitive other who set it in motion, no way out of the malignant cycle exists.

What distinguishes the debilitating depression we find in Ruskin from the normal process of mourning, is that, in time, those who grieve over the loss of a loved other (parent, spouse, child, lover), will come to accept that the other *is* gone and grasp that, if they are to *live*, they must find a way to go on. But, for those who suffer from grave depression, as we have just seen, the cathexis with the hurtful other has been too deeply internalized, is too much a part of the depressive's mental composition to allow him to cognize the steps that might be taken to lead to the depression's alleviation—because such alleviation, the depressive intuits, would all but surely *destabilize* their delicately balanced psyche. For them, it is clearly better to bear the terrible ills they have than fly to others they know not of.

Lastly in this regard, we now possess considerable evidence linking massive and recurrent "environmental stress" to destructive alterations in the chemical structure of the

⁸¹ As we have seen, in some letters and writings, Ruskin states clearly that his illnesses and ceaseless misery were "just repayment" for his transgressions against his parents' wishes.

brain, changes that not infrequently culminate in Major Depressive Disorders.⁸² In Ruskin's case, his environmental stressors proved so numerous, relentless, and remorseless that inevitably the moment arrived when all the defenses he had mustered to protect himself were breeched, and he went out of his mind. Although, after he recovered from his attack of 1878, he regained most of his earlier acumen and genius, he was never *completely* himself again. There was another attack in 1881, another in 1882, with these followed by still others in 1885, 1886, and, the most powerful of all in 1888. After each, he would repair, but always somewhat less than the time before, darkening ever further the image he saw in the glass in front of him.

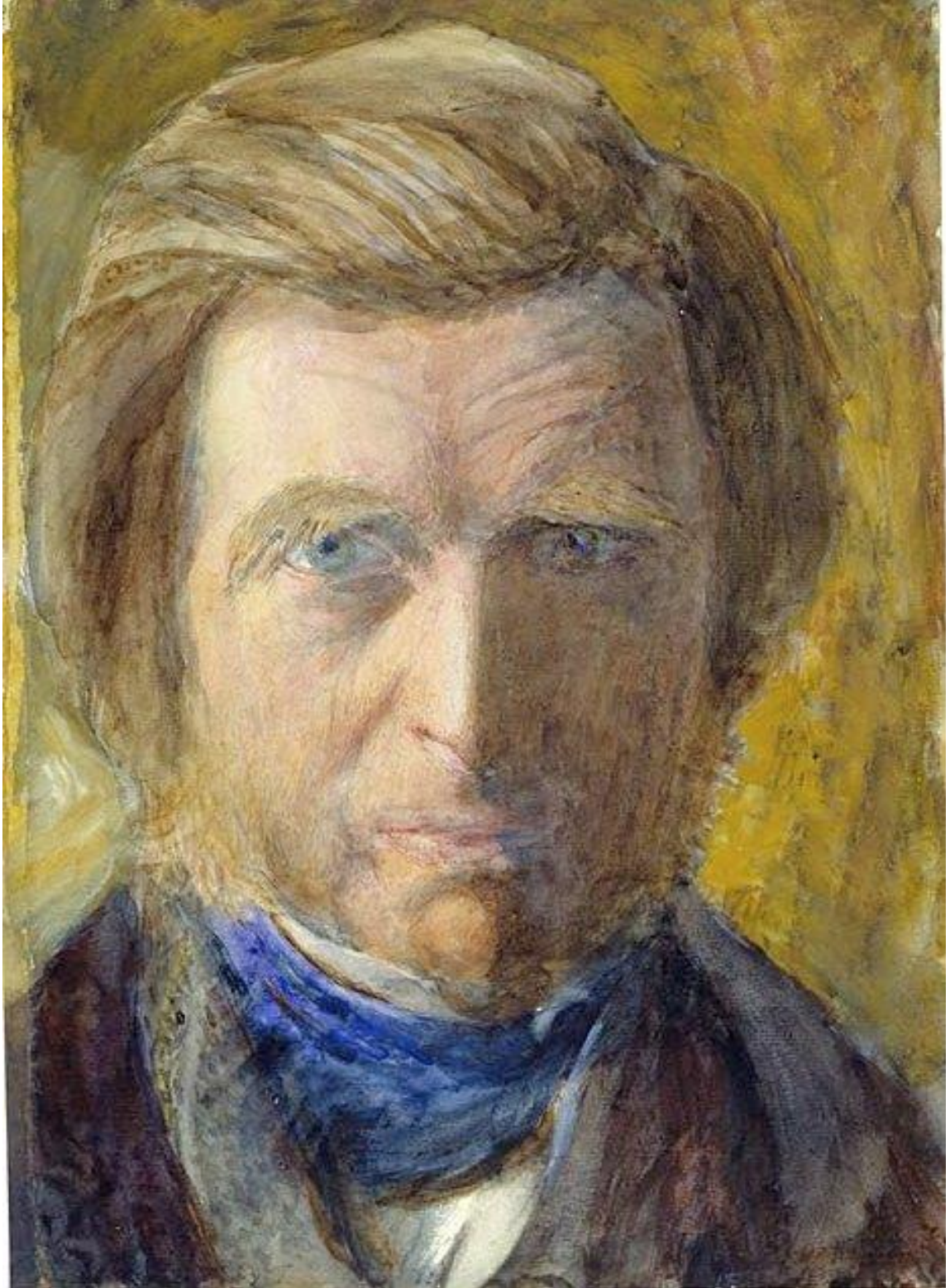
The Face of Depression

In 1872, Charles Eliot Norton was once more in England. Close friends with Ruskin ever since a chance encounter in Geneva sixteen years before, it is likely that, during their time together, the Harvard professor reminded his Oxford counterpart that he was derelict in a promise: at some earlier moment, Ruskin promised him he would paint a self-portrait for him and his wife. There was reason for the oversight. For decades, Ruskin had much disliked what images of himself revealed. Exceptionally famous, he often received pictures of himself in the post, the pictures' admiring senders hoping he would autograph them and return.

A year before this meeting with Norton, for example, a photo accompanied by such a request had arrived at Brantwood, sent by a Samuel Putnam in America. Ruskin sent it back with the following explanation: "I never sign any of the photographs of me, being vain enough to think they show only what is worst in a face which can ill bear such selection. I hope this confession of weakness may content you, [along with my enclosed] signature saying that I am very faithfully yours..." (PML MA 3873) But now, saddled with the guilt of a promise unfulfilled that his chat with Norton generated, on January 28, 1872 he set his aversion aside and, placing a mirror behind his easel, took up his watercolor brushes to redress the slight. The effort took months. Then, unnerved by his finished product revealed, he decided not to send his image to Boston but, instead, presented it to Joan Severn, as a gift from her "Di Pa."⁸³

⁸² See, again, van Praag, de Kloet, and van Os.

⁸³ Dearden 91; cf. Plate 117. Ruskin would send a less self-revealing self-portrait to Norton (Dearden, 93), perhaps because he feared the first one expressed too much. "Di Pa" stood for "Dear Papa," Ruskin's nickname for himself when addressing Joan (he called her "Di Ma"). My thanks to the late Van Akin Burd for suggesting that Ruskin's picture was as unsettling as it was because it exposed too much of his dark side.



Ruskin, "Self-Portrait in Blue Neckcloth," watercolor, 1873;
Gift of Helen Gill Viljoen
(Pierpont Morgan Library, New York)

It is universally agreed that "Self-Portrait in Blue Neckcloth, 1873" is not only the most striking and accomplished picture Ruskin made of himself, it is the most honest, a portrait of a soul divided, with one side of the face presenting the viewer with an image full of light and purpose, while the other side presents a countenance almost monstrous, a distorted visage peering out from a terrifying darkness, a darkness that terrifies the artist himself.

Specifically: the artist has rendered the right side of his face (the left side in the portrait) in warm flesh tones, its soft-blue, intentioned eye staring straight ahead, its forehead only slightly lined, the hair and sideburns full and robust, the mouth set and resolute, the subject's characteristic neckcloth perfectly arranged and brilliantly blue: the public face of one of the most celebrated authors of an age. But, if we look closely, we see that some disturbing things lurk in the bright: the bushy eyebrow obscures, more than slightly and more than naturally, the purposed eye, the darkened area below the eye looks as if it has been recently filled with tears, tears that have been shed because of things seen which the eye never wished to see, tears which, clearly having overflowed their pool, have drained into and discolored an area near the mouth and chin: remnants, portents of sorrow.

The opposite side of the face startles in contrast: dim to begin with, it immediately gets dimmer as the face fades further ever away from the viewer. Here, in contrast to the side in light, we find that the face on this dark side is suffused with red, as if it has been too long in the sun or has an unseen fire burning inside. Where only one line creases the subject's forehead on the left side, here the painter has quadrupled that number, gouging them considerably deeper into the flesh. The first line, immediately above the eye, seems almost stitched, as if it could only be kept from erupting by incredible internal effort; the second, at a strange angle to those above it, is lined in red, giving the impression of an open wound; together, the lines suggest a mind besieged by worry.

Carrying the wounded effect further, a half dozen, black, vertical furrows (none of which appear on the face's light side) have been inserted. Two extend *above* the eyebrow, crisscrossing the first of the worry lines, and all *slice* downward toward the chin, as if created by scratches of marked force, making the dark side's eye extremely disquieting, unsettlingly *unfocused*. Together, these effects seem to suggest that, behind the face, there lives, ready to pounce, a dreadful beast.

The healthy hair and sideburns on the face's bright side are executed on the dark side as almost black, flat, and insubstantial. The mouth, set and intent on the bright side, has been rendered here with a ghostly gouache; scumbling into confusion as though whatever it had said or might say was of dubious value. The blue neckcloth, on this side, is *stained* by drippings from the mouth's gouache, showing the foolish effects of all the ill-chosen words the mouth has uttered), as it shrinks off before disappearing into the gloom.

All in all, it is a self-created image of the *private* face of the man who has been the subject of these pages, a portrait of a soul in which, although that soul is only in middle age, abiding misery is already deeply entrenched, a man who has failed in his life's work and who

lives on without hope of redemption, a portrait painted a half decade *before* its despondent subject would go insane for the first time, a portrait of a tortured, mourning soul that knows perfectly well that even more appalling horrors lie ahead, a portrait, finally, of a man suffering from "Major Depressive Disorder with Psychotic and Melancholic Features," features which will be on ample, if disheartening, display, as Ruskin's last sorrow-laden weeks on his Old Road unfolded.⁸⁴

The End of the Old Road

Bassano

On the afternoon of September 26, 1888, despondent, anxious, and confused, Ruskin, with Peter Baxter and Detmar Blow with him, turned his carriage into the semi-circular drive at Palazzo Rezzonico, situated on the outskirts of the small foothill town of Bassano del Grappa, nearly sixty miles north of Venice. Eagerly awaiting him were his beloved Sorella and her Mammina—Francesca and Lucia Alexander. Their Fratello and Figlio, they immediately said as he got down was the most honored of all the honored guests that had visited them over the course of their summer. Aware from letters of his enduring distress, in the days of his visit that would follow, they would do everything in their power to make him comfortable and happy. They had prepared diligently for this visit: had arranged sumptuous evening meals, mini-concerts in the parlor, relaxing afternoon teas. They would bring him to local art galleries, and reserve ample time for leisurely walks and talks on the lavish lawn and gardens at the rear of the palazzo; to the friends they would invite (who were also eagerly waiting to meet this master of the age) they would introduce him as their cherished friend.

It didn't work out very well. Nine days later, Ruskin and his companions vanished. No word being left to explain their departure, his hosts were dumfounded and frantic. A day later (October 6), a letter arrived. Their missing guest explained that, suddenly, he had felt it *imperative* that he go to Venice. He was so very, very sorry. It was unforgivably rude of him not to excuse himself properly. He loved them beyond telling. They were and had been the kindest of the world's kindest. Could they (he didn't deserve it) ever pardon him? Although the writer gave no hint of such in his missive, when he penned it, he was almost completely out of his mind.



Near the end of his long life, Freud was asked whether he could describe the mental elements that ensured mental health. He replied immediately and briefly: *lieben und arbeiten*—the ability to love and to work (Erikson, 265). If one or the other of these pillars

⁸⁴ The definition and features coincident with our diagnosis of "Major Depression Disorder with Psychotic and Melancholic Features" can be found at pp. 23-24; the subsequent pages, 24-26, were intended to demonstrate how these features appeared and reappeared in Ruskin's letters, daily life, and work. The interested reader will find them again abundant in the pages to follow.

cracks—or, worse, collapses altogether—a person's sense of self becomes quickly precarious. If both pillars crumbled at the same time, it would be impossible to stay sane. Such a dual collapse was what happened to Ruskin in Bassano. Both of these essential psychic buttresses, already fissured and barely capable of supporting his tettering mind, shattered.

Work. The first to fall was the little that remained of his sense of professional accomplishment, of having made some difference for good in the world. For reasons that no one could have predicted, least of all the good Alexanders, their rented summer palazzo in Bassano would be the straw that broke the camel's back.

The Stones of Venice (1851-53) had been written as a warning to England, which a worried Ruskin saw as already well down the road to economic and cultural corruption as result of what he called the "rage to be rich" fostered by the rampaging Industrial Revolution. Basing his case on the abundance of evidence that his study of the floating city's architecture provided, with his usual brilliance, he showed that, during the late medieval and early Renaissance eras—when the city-state was still an honest, God-faring, beauty-loving state—it reached a pinnacle of civilization never before gained, and had accrued, as an outgrowth of this moral vision, not only great wealth and power, but had become awash in art and architecture of breathtaking beauty and human significance. But then, tempted by the personal possibilities its success made possible, over the course of a century, the most powerful of its citizens allowed themselves to be seduced by the indulgent and egoistic values that had risen to the fore during the High and Late Renaissance periods. As this transpired, all that had been previously glorious, the city's world-renowned political power, its immense wealth, its learned eminence, its ability to generate—almost at will—a bevy of artistic geniuses, ebbed away, leaving the city but a shadow of its former self, a series of distorted and deteriorating images refracted to insubstantiality in its famed canals.



**Santa Maria Formosa
(Renaissance Restoration)**

The last phase of this downward spiral Ruskin called "The Grotesque," and much of the final volume of *The Stones* is given over to a discussion of its rise and consequences. A horrific (and, alas, typical) example from this lamentable period, he told his readers, could still be seen in a solitary sculpted face which had been placed on a wall of a small parish church, Santa Maria Formosa, not more than five minutes' walk from Piazza San Marco. The church had first been built in the seventh century after the Virgin, appearing in a vision to San Magno, instructed him to erect a church at the place where her "white cloud" had touched the ground. Obedient to his charge, Magno erected "St. Mary the Beautiful." For generations thereafter, it would perform its sacred function as a lovely and vibrant parish church. However, as decades passed and some of its most generous patrons died, it started to deteriorate. By the time the

last decade of the fifteenth century arrived, it was clear that if the building was to survive, it would have to be rebuilt.

Despite the fact that it retained its lovely name, to Ruskin the reconstruction was a disaster, a sham. No longer was St. Mary's a site where, in joy and honor, the lovely daughters of Venice had once knelt with their noble lords in reverence to offer praise and petition to the Virgin.⁸⁵ For, in place of the blessed original, its "restorers" had constructed an edifice "destitute of every religious symbol, sculpture, or inscription," a church that was a church in name only, a building that, in reality, was a monument to one man, its principal donor, Admiral Vincent Cappello (sculpted life-size in Roman armor over its principal entrance).

But there was worse: as if to symbolize its rejection of all the humane and humanizing values that had found expression in Venetian architecture during its golden ages, the designer of the new Saint Mary's, in keeping with the dominant fashion of the egocentric donor's era, had placed at eye level on the church's south wall, a head—a head Ruskin describes as "huge, inhuman, and monstrous," "leering in bestial degradation, too foul to be either pictured or described, or be beheld for more than an instant."

⁸⁵ For these citations and those pertaining to Santa Maria Formosa, see LE 11: 144-5.



Sculpted Renaissance Face, South Wall, Santa Maria Formosa, Venice

Although he refused to include an image of the head in his book, saying that to do so would have spoiled his work's spirit, if any reader of *The Stones* had made it a point to seek out Santa Maria Formosa, the following is what they would have read as they continued on with Ruskin's description: "[I]n that head is embodied the type of the evil spirit to which Venice was abandoned in the [years] of her decline. And it is well that we should see and feel the full horror of it on this spot and know what pestilence it was that came and breathed upon [this great city's] beauty, until it melted away like the white cloud from the ancient field of Santa Maria Formosa. This head is one of many hundreds which disgrace the...buildings of today's Venice],⁸⁶ all more or less agreeing in their expression of sneering mockery, in most cases enhanced by thrusting out the tongue...evidences of a delight in the contemplation of bestial vice and the expression of low sarcasm—which is, I believe, the most hopeless state into which the

human mind can fall. This spirit of idiotic mockery is...the most striking characteristic of the last period of the Renaissance, the period I call 'The Grotesque...'"

From the beginning of this last trip on his Old Road, as many letters already cited have shown, Ruskin was worried about its Italian aspect. Italy was where he had done his most concentrated work. Collectively, its painting, sculpture, and architecture of its pre-Renaissance centuries were demonstrably (*he* had made the demonstration!) the most magnificent the world had ever seen. Do as Italy once did, he had enjoined his readers. Cultivate in your modern days the values that ordered Venetian lives during those noble centuries. Worship the wonder that is nature. Foster the cardinal virtues. Follow the Ten Commandments. In your art and architecture represent only that which is beautiful, noble,

⁸⁶ Literally true, as other images could easily demonstrate. In the interest of saving space however, the image taken from Palazzo Rezzonico—see following—will serve; their collective tenor demonstrating the point Ruskin is here making.

and inspiring. To prove that I am right in making such recommendations, all we need do is compare the monstrous head on Santa Maria Formosa with one of the greatest paintings of its great time, Giovanni Bellini's "The Sacred Conversation," housed in another parish church just a few steps from Piazza San Marco, San Zachariah.



Giovanni Bellini, "The Sacred Conversation," Church of Saint Zachariah, Venice

To do this, suspend for a few moments any consideration of the picture's religious intentions.⁸⁷ Look at it as a secular painting only. Does it not celebrate the birth, possibility, and importance of all new human life? Look at how the central figure, the mother, holds her hand just beneath the baby's foot—so gently, as if to protect him from a false first step! See how loving she is—the model, the essence, if you will, of all mothers. Look at how sweetly the baby is rendered. Note that he is not some abstraction; he is a *real* baby, innocent, eagerly waiting for his life to begin. Now glance at the attendant adults, at the reverence in the

⁸⁷ Ruskin did not directly compare this painting with the head at Santa Maria Formosa. Had he, however, I believe he would have argued as I have here: *cf.* LE 4, 146-7. It was during a delightful half hour in front of this masterpiece some years ago, that Clive Wilmer pointed out the delicacy and importance of the Madonna's hand beneath the baby's feet.

women's faces, the seriousness in the men's, each wholly aware that they have been *charged* to be stewards of this new life. See how gently the small girl in the foreground readies to play her tune (surely a sweet one!) in honor of the arrival of this precious child. Are not *all* these faces *beautiful*? Bellini has used every ounce of his talent to make them so, so that they will impress upon anyone studying his canvas how glorious and serious our human life is. Note too how, without much noticing each other, all the figures are aware of each other and, in that awareness, are intent on the different supportive roles each is expected and *wants* to play. In silence they converse! Are having what we must regard as a sacred conversation.

Now look at the final face in the picture, the strange one above *and behind* the mother. It appears to be a king's head. It is dark of mien and somewhat frightening, a symbol, don't you think, alerting us to how life, unwisely tended, can become enmeshed in the foolishnesses and harmfulnesses of the world? But note as well how the artist has chosen to render that face! It is not a *living* countenance like the others, but a cast one, a face drained of vitality, a visage angry and ghostly, a face *intended* to worry us and, in our reaction to that disquiet, *bring us back* to the other faces and their lovelinesses, immediately helping us to grasp their *superiority* as adaptations to life and remind us of the great responsibility we all bear for the support and enhancement of life. And there is another point we should not miss: Bellini, master artist and great thinker that he was, would *never*—like the thoughtless and vile sculptor who placed that sordid, *isolated* head on the wall of Santa Maria Formosa—think of including such a frightening face in his picture *without* the other, lovelier, faces to counter it, faces that force for us to compare them all and think about the grave—but at the same time, joyous—roles they, and we, perform in the human drama.

In which context, now consider the painting as a whole. Doesn't it tell us in no uncertain terms—if only in its representation of the things to which it gives prominent place—what is most important in life, and tell us, too, that, if we follow that good path, on which all the main figures are vital emblems, along it will lie our greatest chance of peace and happiness? In other words, this is not only a painting with a noble subject, it is a painting that, once we take the time to study it, *ennobles* us, a painting which fulfills, exquisitely, the great office of all art: to teach us by the use of beautiful images and the representation of critical topics, how to live more delightfully in this world?⁸⁸ And now, lastly, bring to mind for (only!) a moment that horrible head and its "celebration" of ugliness and derision, and you will see instantly the *devolution* of the Venetian spirit that occurred as the city's centuries "advanced": "advanced" to where, no longer, did its "modern" artists think it important to represent "saintly persons...[or] angels in attitudes of admiration," when, as a matter of thoughtless course, they could shock and gain notoriety by representing "personages...with expressions of anything rather than affection or respect for...[anything truly] good in earth or heaven." (LE 24: 251)

So he had argued and advised, not only in *The Stones*, but in all his writings on Italy, sure that his carefully wrought paragraphs, buttressed by years of intense study and copiously

⁸⁸ For two places where he makes this argument, see LE 20: 95-7 and LE 19: 392-5.

illustrated by architectural drawings and art reproductions that his readers could examine, would carry, with the glad result that, before long, his contemporaries would curb "the fury of avaricious commerce" gripping his civilization (LE 19: 30). And, while you are at that good and vital work, he had added, do what is necessary to *save* threatened Italy: save her greatest buildings, save her greatest art, for not only are all these priceless world treasures, they are the paragons we must study if we are to find our route back to cultural greatness.

But, as so many of the letters we have cited have shown, little of what Ruskin counseled came to pass. In the three and a half decades that had come and gone since *The Stones* appeared, few in Britain or the Continent took his warnings seriously. Italy—he knew from his own post-*Stones* visits and reports of many friends—had *not* been saved. And so, as he approached closer and closer during the fading summer days of 1888, "Italy" began to loom ever larger in his mind as a terrifying, coupled symbol: of the terrible mistake he had made by becoming a cultural critic and, in its crippled condition, with which he must come face-to-face with in just a few days, of the humiliating failure of all his efforts to save it.

Thinking of this catastrophic mistake and his failures not long before, he had surprised not a few of *Praeterita's* readers by informing them that Rouen, Geneva, Pisa, and Verona had been the true centers of his work, adding that, if he had been wiser, he would have written *The Stones of Chamouni* instead of *The Stones of Venice*. Venice, he wrote, had been a "by-work," "a vain temptation," indulged. Yes, he admitted, he had recorded the truth of the city's rise and fall well enough and, by analogy, had pointed to what would surely be the eventual collapse of his money-mad contemporary era; nevertheless, the city on the Adriatic had never been "my own proper work." (cf. LE 35: 296, 371-2)

As early as the days on this trip when he was still in Switzerland, as some letters told us, he had started to drag his feet regarding the prospect of his descent into Italy, offering one excuse after another to the Alexanders eagerly anticipating him in Bassano. Oh, but you *must* come, they had written back. We love you so very much and there are so many here who admire you and your work and want to meet you. "I really [must] go to Italy to see Mammina and [my Sorella]," he told Joan in a letter of September 12 posted just before he arrived in Chamouni, but I "wouldn't, but for them." (UIC; Ferguson, 530) Less than a week later, he came to the realization that he could put it off no longer, and the little party of three, its principal member petrified, left his beloved Union Inn on the bank of Arve in Chamouni and began its trek over the Alps.

As they entered the Piedmont, Ruskin's depression intensified. A few days in a much altered—*destroyed!* he thought—Milan darkened the gloom further; Verona, next—still, happily quite unspoiled!—provided a brief respite. But by then, he was only sixty miles from Bassano: "I find myself so [sad] in Italy," he told Joan in a letter sent from Milan on September 23, with "a languor on me such as I have not had since [we left] Abbeville [in northern France]... I'm in for it now, and must go on, come of it what will..." (UIC; Ferguson, 531)

The above we know from letters posted *en route*. After he arrived at Bassano, however, the few missives we have—almost all of which were written to Joan or Kathleen Olander—tell us little about Palazzo Rezzonico and its furnishings. What we do know is that, while there, Ruskin's mind fragmented. We also know (from later letters and brief diary entries) that a significant portion of that fragmentation centered around his agonizing sense that everything he had done had come to failure, and that, knowing this, to be surrounded by his adoring Sorella and Mammina and their worshipful friends, he was nothing other than a ludicrous pretender. So all-pervading was the inner pain of this feeling—and one other laceration we shall soon discuss—he decided that, if he didn't leave Bassano rapidly, he would go mad in front of them all.

Just before they surreptitiously quit Palazzo Rezzonico on the morning of October 5, Ruskin sent the following, desperation-laden, letter to Joan at Brantwood: "My Darling own Doanie," he wrote,⁸⁹

I felt it absolutely necessary to come to some close of the sort of life I was leading here [at Bassano]—receiving all sorts of polite and kind attention from people of whom I knew nothing, and to whom I could not say a word in return—and Mammina is so excitable that I am terrified she'll telegram or do something to frighten my own Di Wee Ma [Joan]! Heaven knows how I should love to have her here, but I must come home to her—and there shall be no more wanderings from under her wing.

I go to Venice today and will wait there till I have a line from my Doanie in answer to this and, by that time, shall be ready to start for home...

Ever mine own Doanie, Your Loving and evermore thankful, Di Pa

What I wish to propose is that, in large measure, Ruskin's escalating crisis over the failure of his work came to a head in Bassano because of the pernicious effect Palazzo Rezzonico itself had on his tottering psyche. To do this, I lift a page from Ruskin's own theory of architecture—namely, that the buildings we create are always embedded with some iteration of our cultural values and, in that capacity, whether we are conscious of the fact or not, transmit those values *back* to us whenever we are looking at, living, or working in it.⁹⁰

During an excursion to Venice some years ago, I made it a point to find Palazzo Rezzonico. There, I learned from the caretaker that its decorations and furnishings had not changed in substantial manner since the end of the 18th century. This meant that, for all intents and purposes, Ruskin and the Alexanders not only lived in the main building but, on a daily basis, would have experienced the presence of all the artifacts I also saw there.

⁸⁹ Letter previously unpublished: BC; holograph: John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

⁹⁰ See, for one place this argument is made, LE 19: 388-93.

The Alexanders had learned of the palazzo from the owner of Ca' Rezzonico, one of the great palazzos on the Grand Canal, a place where they often stayed when in Venice. In search of cooler quarters for the summer, they were informed that the Bassano holding was available. Cooler because of its closeness to the foothills of the Alps, they were told that it would suit their needs very nicely. Happily, the mother and daughter accepted the offer. Once they took up residence, they were delighted for another reason: compared to their apartment in Florence, the building was, as its name told, palatial, fully furnished, with art and sculpture in every corner.



Palazzo Rezzonico, Bassano del Grappa

But *to Ruskin*, as he glanced up from the warm embraces of his Sorella and her mother in the drive, the palazzo was something else entirely: an unspeakably dull, concrete Late Renaissance building surrounded and (he would soon learn) interioered with an almost bottomless supply of the fulsome faces, overwrought pieces of furniture, sensationalistic paintings, and the kind of sensuous sculptures he despised most in the world. In his works, he had railed against such for nearly four decades as iterations of the same debased spirit that had possessed the sculptor of the ugly head on Santa Maria Formosa. All were vile, corrupt, and corrupting, embodiments of life's most tenebrous forces.

Those who study life's most serious mental diseases explain how, even when the most pernicious effects of a disease are for a moment quiescent, they remain resident in their victim like dozing dragons in a cave, always keeping one eye half open and one ear cocked to catch a sight or sound from outside which return them to their disagreeable duty. When such signals—often called a "triggers"—reach them (a firecracker suddenly exploding near a victim of an earlier vicious bombing, a sense of being trapped in a place like the one where a former

abuser beat them mercilessly), they are alert in an instant, immediately muster their goading forces, and re-emerge, often driving their victim to the edge of sanity, or over it.

Such is what happened to Ruskin in Bassano. Everywhere his beloved and kindly friends brought him, he found himself face-to-face with his most harrowing demons. They leered at them from the staircases, watched over them as they sipped tea in the salon, lurked in the corners when they retired to the drawing room for chat and coffee, hid in the shadows when he slept (such as he did: not much): vulgar sculptures, terrible paintings, repellant faces, all staring at him, sneering at him, mocking him for the failure he was, making it indubitable, without neither pity nor surcease, that he had not only lost all the battles he had waged with them with his pen, he had lost the war—and that absolutely: the Late Renaissance, Baroque, and Rococo had won, *not* Ruskin!. His father (his critical face refracted in sculpted face after sculpted face) had been right: his son had lived his life on a fool's errand. None of it had ever mattered a whit. "ALL MY WORK IN VAIN!!" No other conclusion was possible. Even more terribly, the frightening faces untied the little that remained of his flimsy inner controls which, on his best days, contained them, allowing the darker side of his soul, the disquieting side he had painted for Norton fifteen years before, to begin sliding through his brain like a ravening snake. The first pillar of sanity gave way.

The Art and Furnishings of Palazzo Rezzonico, Bassano del Grapa

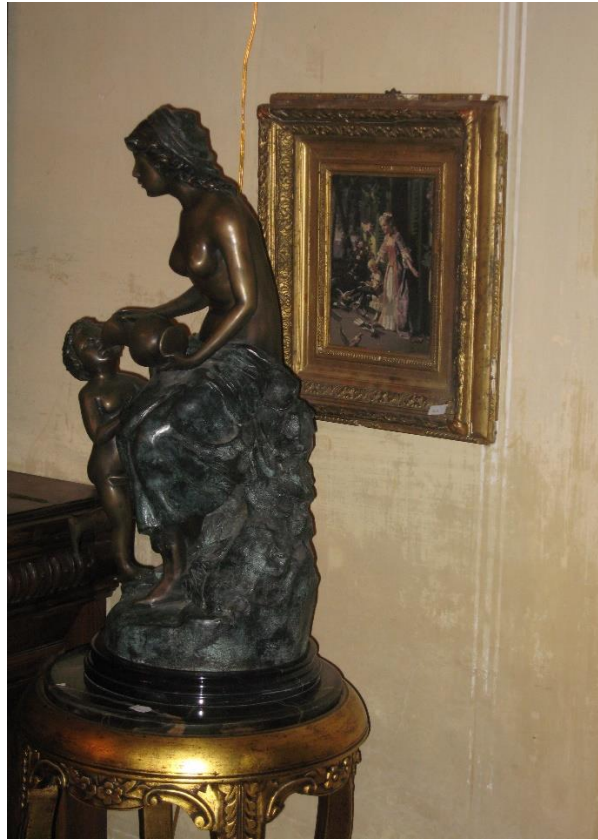
The Garden





The Interior









Love. The second pillar which supports a healthy psyche, Freud teaches, is love, or, in Ruskin's case during his exile at Folkestone and Sandgate and on this last trip on the Old Road, the hope, however fragile, of it. Because, however fragile or fanciful it may have been, almost fifteen years after his loss of Rose, the fates had apparently relented and brought into his orbit a younger other, someone who requited his love, someone with whom it just might be possible that he could spend the remainder of what he knew would be ever-more darkening days in a modicum of comfort and companionship: Kathleen Olander.



**Kathleen Olander in 1892
(Photographer unknown)**

As mentioned earlier, he had met Olander by chance in 1887 at the National Gallery during one of the visits he had made to London while staying in Sandgate. Then in her late teens, she had been sitting and drawing. Delighted to see what was clearly an interest in fine art in someone so young and beautiful, as was his usual wont, he immediately had set about helping her with her effort. Meeting a second time, he found her winning, obviously interested in him and, more importantly, empathetic. They began to correspond.⁹¹ Like Rose, Kathleen was innocent, pure, and exuded an essential goodness. Desperately lonely and having been met with great disappointment in his serious relationships in earlier decades--with rejection (Adele), with disdain (Effie), and with death (Rose)—he began to fantasize that with Kathleen there just might exist a

prospect of a new and intimate companionship. As he traveled further south across Europe in 1888, ever more intimate letters between them came and went with regularity, with his becoming increasingly amorous.

In Milan, his hopes high despite his unrelenting depression, he sent Kathleen a letter in which he used the word "wife." Sent on September 25th, it read in part: My own Kathleen,

That little postscript [in your last] letter, [of] the 22nd, sent me quite wild with joy—for now, because you can be to me all I need, so I can be to you...

⁹¹ What survives of the correspondence was published a half century after Ruskin's death by Rayner Unwin. Retained by Olander, who would marry and become Kathleen Pryne, the letters preserve most of Ruskin's side of the correspondence. What remained of her letters to him were destroyed by Joan Severn at Brantwood after her cousin's death. No reference to Olander appears in LE or in Cook's authorized biography of Ruskin, another instance of the concerted efforts made by the executors of Ruskin's literary estate—Joan, Norton, and Alexander Wedderburn—to keep anything that might prove "embarrassing" from exposure. For a detailed account of the extent of and machinations used in this process of censoring, see Chapter Two of "Ruskin's Sexuality," the next essay in this series.

Rosie...was always furious with me for loving *her* better than God (and I didn't, but I loved God better for the gift of her—as of you—whom, the moment I saw, I thought He had sent to me, literally to save me when nothing else could, but Love [his capitalization])... I was getting ill again, [but] the two letters [of yours I received] this morning are new life.

And you *will* be happy with me while yet I live—for it was only love that I wanted to keep me sane— In all things—I am as pure—except in thought—as you are—but it is *terrible* for any creature of my temperament to have no *wife* [my italics]—one cannot but go mad...

Then, in quick succession, two more letters arrived from Milan, each as intimate as the one just cited. Shocked, the naïve Kathleen felt duty bound to tell her mother. Immediately, her parents, having heard the still-circulating stories about Ruskin's disastrous marriage and supposed impotency, wrote, informing Ruskin that his relationship with their daughter was over. If he did not abide by their directive, they would make the matter public. Ruskin received the letter in Bassano on the 3rd of October. The following day, another arrived from Kathleen whose parents had relented and allowed her to send him one last. Although she loved him, she explained, she had no choice but to accede to their wishes.⁹²

It had happened again. With that perspicacity the human subconscious has for ferreting out ways to refashion earlier traumas—a process psychiatrists call “repetition compulsion”—in Kathleen Ruskin had encountered yet another young woman whose parents, when the serious nature of their relationship was discovered, would forbid, as Rose's parents had twenty years before, his suit for their daughter's hand going further.

In a trice, Ruskin's reveries of a future filled with love and intimacy at Brantwood dissolved and the wounds that had followed the death of Rose reopened with new virulence. It was true—seemingly ordained, yet another instance of his “dark star” at work—that whenever a new love entered his life, its consummation was forbidden. Kathleen, he knew, had been his last chance. It was—how could it even be doubted?—another agonizing sign of his fundamentally selfishness nature.

The next day he wrote back: “My Kathleen, I have your grievous letter of the 1st. I will be to you always what you bid—and love you always as you choose—my vain thoughts of what might have been shall be put far away—forgive me the deeper sorrow they have caused

⁹² For the details and letters associated with this sad story, see Unwin. Seven decades later, Olander affirmed her love for Ruskin in letters she sent to Elizabeth Davison: My married family, she said in one (July 29, 1963), “have not shared any of my knowledge of him I loved so much”; “My one crust of pride and consolation,” she said in another (January 12, 1964), “was in a last letter [my parents] allowed...me, [which I wrote so] that he knew I *loved him*” (her emphasis): RL: L 98.

you... I doubt not that you have judged rightly—the sin would be in my letting you—or in your consent [to]—sacrifice your youth to my sick old age..."⁹³

After which writing, whatever remained of his hold on sanity crumbled. The second pillar, his hope of love, lay at his feet in ruins. The next day, without notice, at his direction, he, Baxter, and Blow fled Palazzo Rezzonico for that place he had once called the "Paradise of Cities." He would never see his Sorella or her Mammina again.

Venice

Again in the fabled city by the Adriatic, Ruskin found it no longer possessed any meaning. All the buildings he had written about so lyrically were now dead walls deteriorating before his eyes. The few tourists who came to gaze at them had no idea how to appreciate them. The vaporetta, the new little steamboats that ferried people up and down the canals and out to the islands were, like their polluting counterparts in Geneva, loathsome, motorized markers of his failures. Bellini's masterpiece, "The Sacred Conversation," an old painting by some forgotten painter gathering dust in the gloom of an out-of-the-way parish church, was visited by no one.

In Bassano, a week before, on September 30, he had written what would be the penultimate line in his decades-long series of diaries: "I don't know what is to become of me." Picking up the same chronicle in Venice's Europa Hotel two days later, he re-read that remark and, as if to finish the thought, wrote: "And still less here..." (*Diaries*, 1150)

"I don't know what is to become of me." The truth was that, by the time Ruskin got to Venice, no coherent sense of "me" remained. From adolescence, he had been centered—*driven*—by a mighty inner gyroscope, duty-bound every day to work toward the actualization of his Charge to use his considerable powers in the service of his fellow human beings and God. During which working, he had always thought that he would be encouraged sustained by a loving other. But now that gyroscope had departed, and with it all hope of a companion, leaving, in place of the magnificent visionary who once had plied the city's canals with such determination, an incapacitated vacant, an old man guided by a mind nearly as hollow as the thousands of shells that washed up daily on the Lido shore. He found that he could not focus his thoughts, learned that accomplishing *anything* was impossible. The night foretold in *John* 4: 9, the night when no man can work, had come.⁹⁴

The depression was unrelenting: "I have come to Venice," Ruskin wrote to Francesca in a note composed on the day of their arrival (October 6), "not for my own pleasure.... [I]t has no charm for me. The sense of infirmity weighs on me here terribly." (BPL Mss Acc 2500)

⁹³ Unwin, 81-2; *cf.* the letter explaining his collapse to Kathleen posted on September 27 from Fluelen: Unwin, 83-4.

⁹⁴ There would be one exception. See the next section.

IV 58 a+b) The next day he told Joan: "I can only write you from here the sort of sighs and whines I used to send from Abbeville... I was an infinite fool not to [stop] at Beauvais where I was so well and happy... Had I turned off at Chamouni, it had still been well." (UIC)

Purposefully, he saw few. Reviewing the few observations from this time we have, we find that all reiterate the unhappy themes we have been discussing. Mr. Ruskin "took some small rooms on the highest floor of the Hotel Europa," his friend, Count Alvise Zorzi, reported. "He was ill and, during the first days of his stay, he did not even go out. Later he visited the Ducal Palace, St. Mark's, and other churches, but never on foot. He always went out now in a gondola." (377) He met a few times with the minister of the Scotch church there, a Reverend Alexander Robertson, who reported the following conversation: "When I had occasion to refer to the marvelous influence of his work and, in particular, mentioned something said of it by the late Professor Drummond who had been in Venice shortly before, Mr. Ruskin said: 'I am astonished; I feel as if I only led a selfish, useless life.'" (Zorzi, 378)

His friends, the poets, Robert and Elizabeth Browning and their family were there, and somehow learned that he was too. Would he join them for tea? They would be so very delighted! Reluctantly, he agreed: "Although intensely interesting," Fannie Browning would later recall, "it depressed me terribly to see Ruskin in such a shattered state of health. It was after one of his bad illnesses..."⁹⁵ Once, [when] speaking of [London's] Dulwich Gallery and trying to remember the name of a picture or artist, he exclaimed: 'Oh! This poor old brain of mine, it's of no use anymore!' And, in a flash, [my father-in-law, Robert] replied: 'Ah! But think of all that has gone out of it into other people's!'" (Browning, 17-18)

He had bolted from Bassano hoping for some respite from his sense of failure and loss of Kathleen. Instead of consolation, Venice had added hauntings of its own into his unhappy mix. Since his last visit, his great friend, the ex-patriot Rawdon Brown, had died; entering the Piazza San Marco, he had no choice but to face the reality that his intense efforts (with which Zorzi had been involved) to save the façade of the great basilica from "idiotic restorers" had been only minimally successful; and, always, wherever he was, there was the memory of his missing Rose, of his despairing search for her vanished spirit during the Christmastime of 1876 when he—as always, alone—had come within a hair's breadth of going over the edge.

It proved impossible to stay. "I am in more pain at going away than I can tell you," he told Alessandro Allessandri in a letter, "but there have been symptoms of illness threatening me now for some time which I cannot conquer but by getting away from the elements of imagination which haunt me here." (Cook, 527) "I *cannot* stay here longer, nor in Italy," he reported to Francesca on October 16: "I am going to cross the St. Gotthard [Pass] in shortest time to Alpine air. Write to [me in Switzerland at Fluelen] and give me a thorough sister's scolding. I am too sorrowful and too much ashamed of myself in every sort of way to send a word of message... [signed] Your Poor Fratello" (BPL Mss Acc 2500 IV 60 a+b).

⁹⁵ It was *during* another of his illnesses.

The Road to Paris

Two days later, again in Milan, he confessed to Joan: "I got away from Venice yesterday—much ashamed of myself—without saying a word to anybody; left a note or two behind. Poor Pierro, my gondolier, in bitter sorrow—and others will be—and I am as unhappy at all I've seen as anybody can well be... Oh my Doanie, my Doanie! If only I can see your sweet face again, and yet be the source of some happiness to you! I hate sending this, but I *am* in one of my low fits—that's a fact—and with too much cause—and it's no use trying to hide it..." (UIC)

It took the beleaguered little company six weeks to make its way back to Paris. Still having received no word of permission allowing him to come home from Joan and deep in numbing depression, he wrote few letters, all but one or two of these laden with sorrow and all evincing degrees of incoherence. Without an integrated self to anchor his thoughts, he had become, all but literally, a lost child. In letters sent as little "Donie," he would tell Joan—his most frequent correspondent—in this petrified child's voice again and again of his undying love and desperate need for her and Brantwood if he were to survive.

Their escape route out of Italy to Switzerland was over the pass about which, three and a half decades before in *Modern Painters IV*, having discovered the place where Turner painted his celebrated "Pass of Faido," he had written *five* dazzling chapters on the nature of the artistic imagination (LE 6, 9-105). "We had a beautiful day to pass the St. Gotthard," he told his cousin on October 18 in a post sent Fluelen, "but all the beauty of the old scenes [now] merely *mock* me—unless I could have my Joanie to show it to!—and I don't in the least know what to do now." (UIC; Ferguson, 535) "It is a radiant day, and I never saw the mountains more lovely," he said in another letter sent from the same place two days later, but "it is all of no use to me—and how much less the telling of it to you when you are anxy [anxious], as you must be now, about your poor foolish Donie." (UIC; Ferguson 535) On 26 October, still in Fluelen, he informed Joan once more about his scattered mental condition: "I am trying to make up my mind this afternoon to start for the north, but it is such a puzzled and sad, sapless little mind." (Birkenhead, 341)

By early November, they had made their way to Merlingen on the shore of the beautiful Lake of Thun. There, on the 11th, he had one of his few good days, a day when his love of nature and of the simple life led by the Swiss of old, surfaced. "The gentians I sent you a day or two ago were gathered by Detmar—[from a spot] higher than I can climb now. But I got up a good way this afternoon, and found two bluebells, which I love better for my Joanie's sake than all the Swiss flowers that ever grew. This is a perfect village of Swiss cottages..." (Cook, 527-8). But most days were filled with tortures of various kinds. He was flummoxed and anxious, aware that he could no longer care for himself, and utterly incapable of designing any coherent plan for going forward: "My darling, my darling," he told his cousin in his letter of November 3, "as I have said in my last letters, the way in which everything I used to find good in, is now useless, [and I am] from day-to-day irresolute. The one pleasure of this day is my [receipt of my] Doanie's letter]—and imagined look—and yet I don't know how to

tell you where to write or when to look for me. But the rain has come—and the snow is low on the hill... I am you lovingest, gratefulest, devotedest, Di Pa."

Finally, in mid-November, they gained Paris. Ruskin was at one of his lowest ebbs ever. Hearing, in his letters of his desperation, knowing that his agony and desperation were now almost beyond bearing, she realized that she no longer had any ability to resist. She sent word that she would come and bring him back to Brantwood. She would collect him at his usual hotel, the Maurice. But when she got there, she found him barely able to verbalize. Some days later, her presence having revived him a little, she determined that they would make the crossing to England. Just before they departed, however, on December 3, Ruskin managed to start—but not finish—a letter to his Sorella. Its sentences make poignantly clear that his desperate need for love and his conviction that he has wasted his life had not dissipated. "My Sorella," he wrote,

I have ...your lovely letters, [brought] from Merlingen... I wrote some dreadful words to you in a sort of dream the other day. I write now something which, it seems to me, I must, of a long time of fearful thought that was on me this morning in the dark. I was thinking how Joanie and you and I...were all three of us such loving people, and, if our lives were quenched, how much power of Loving would be quenched. As I pass the average crowd here, I notice more specially than in England the noble faces of the "Legion of Honor" gentlemen, [each] indicating all that is best in training and intellectual character of the upper classes. Still, one feels that when these pass away, others like them will come.

But if your face and Joanie's were taken away... [BPL Mss Acc 2500 IV 36 a+c]⁹⁶

A Last Letter from Brantwood

They crossed the Channel a day or so later. In London, as was appropriate given her cousin's regressed state, they stayed for some days at his childhood home in South London, Herne Hill (earlier, Ruskin had gifted the property to Joan and her family). During the pause, also appropriately, he would sleep in his childhood bedroom. Then, true to her word, she brought him back to Brantwood. Save for one brief outing, he would never leave its confines again.

As the months passed, some bettering occurred. At one point, he even entertained the idea that he might finish *Praeterita*. As soon as he began work, however, he found himself

⁹⁶ We do not have the Francesca letters mentioned. According to BPL's description of the Alexander collection, this fragment, found among Ruskin's effects after his return to Brantwood, was returned to Francesca in 1892 by W. G. Collingwood. Previously, it was thought that the last letter Ruskin wrote on this 1888 trip was composed on November 27 (*cf.* Hilton 849).

incapable of pulling together all the threads that would be needed to complete its unwritten chapters. Still, whatever the difficulty, one last chapter *had* to be written. And so it happened that, with great effort, he composed "Joanna's Care," his tribute to Joan and all she had done to sustain him over the course of their three decades together (LE 35: 535-62). When it was finished, it proved a joy to read, overflowing with the brilliance, erudition, rhetorical skill, and concern for human well-being that had inhabited all of the thousands of pages which had been the sources of his fame. Of the chapter, J. A. Froude, a close friend, told Joan, "I thought it not only absolutely true as regards you, but in itself the most beautiful thing of the series which have yet appeared—calm, mellow, charming, without a trace of excitement, with all sorts of lovely thoughts flitting about like the blue moths of a summer evening." (Birkenhead, 344) But after "Joanna's Care," there would be nothing more.

In the eleven years that followed his collapse in Venice there would be better and worse days. Throughout that time, Joan was ever-present, as confidante, helper, transcriber, and dogged protector. No visitors were admitted without her permission. And of those who were allowed to see her cousin, they would not be allowed to stay long. Sydney Cockerell, who, with Detmar Blow, had met Ruskin in Beauvais in 1888 just as the great writer was starting out on his calamitous last tour on the Old Road, was one who got through the door. With Joan's blessing, as he later recalled it, he had been ushered into Ruskin's study, where he found Ruskin sitting, gazing out, rather vacantly Cockerell thought, on the lake known as Coniston Water. He had, Cockerell said,

a little book on his knee, his hands [were] encased in fur mittens. He [Cockerell] was not sure that he was recognized. Did [Mr. Ruskin] remember Detmar Blow? No. He looked tranquil, rather wistful, shrunken, but [otherwise] very little changed. In fact, since I had last seen him...his hair [was] still dark and very thick...his beard still [kept] a trace of brown. It was like interviewing a ghost, but very wonderful. (Birkenhead, 355)

In the early 1890s, Kathleen Olander, who still loved him, who had been traveling with her mother in the Lake District, tried to see him, but found herself not as lucky as Cockerell. She recalled the experience many years later:

I was exceedingly nervous of meeting Mrs. Severn, and went 'round to the back door where I handed my card to a butler, asking him to give it to Mr. Ruskin and requesting that he see me. I do not believe the card reached Ruskin, for the butler returned with the answer. "Not today."

I then went 'round to the other side of the house and saw Ruskin at the first French window, sitting alone. But I was too alarmed to stay, for I was in full view of the next French window where people were apparently dining.

I kissed my hand to him, but he never saw me. Nor did we ever meet again. (Unwin, 88)



**Alexander Macdonald, "Brantwood, 1880," watercolor
(Ruskin Museum, Coniston, UK)**

One final assessment sums many of this time. From his Oxford days when he had met him, William Gershom Collingwood had been, first, Ruskin's student, then someone who, at his professor's invitation, worked with him on various authorial projects, later (for a time), became his secretary, then his companion on Ruskin's penultimate trip on the Old Road in 1882, and, always, his devoted admirer and friend. After Joan brought his master back to Brantwood in late 1888, now living with his family only a half mile down the road, Collingwood would never be far away, doing whatever was necessary to ease the path of the failing genius whom he revered as one the greatest sages in the history of Western civilization. Throughout it all, however, Collie, as he was called by all at Brantwood, was clear-eyed, and, in a later edition of his biography (the first) of Ruskin, included this following overview of Ruskin's last years: Almost always during this time, he wrote, Ruskin "seemed lost among the papers scattered on his table. He could not fix his mind upon them, and turned from one subject to another in despair—and yet [he was] patient and kind to those with whose help he could no longer use, and who dared not show...how heart-breaking it was." (Collingwood, Vol. II, 243)





Ruskin in his study at Brantwood, 1894
(Photograph: Frederick Hollyer)

beloved sister in Florence had yet to grasp the deepest aspects and meaning of his never-ending love.

In earlier letters, he had explained to both Alexanders that there was never a day when Rose's spirit was not with him. It was Rose who selected the Bible passages he would read on that day. It was Rose to whom he turned for advice about how to proceed with personal and authorial matters. It was Rose on his arm during his daily walks, Rose who kept him company during the agonizingly lonely nights. The Alexanders, of course, had been much worried by this confession, thinking it a sign of real madness. It was not, he replied when Francesca had plucked up her courage and asked him directly about it. No, he had explained, it was not madness. He just needed—wasn't this often the case with those who grieved deeply?—Rose with him for solace, as a balance wheel for his frequently unbalanced days.⁹⁷ But he had never been sure that this response convinced them.

Once, a few years before, in 1886, he had tried to explain to Francesca what Rose meant by use of some poems she had sent him for possible insertion in her second book of stories about the good lives that were lived by Italy's peasantry, *Christ's Folk in the Apennine*. As with her earlier book, *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*, he had been the project editor. Bringing her last story to its conclusion, he decided that the book would end marvelously and poignantly if he ended it with a pair of *rispetti*—"little songs"—songs that Francesca had

⁹⁷ For numerous passages noting the presence of Rose's spirit in Ruskin's later days, see his letters to Olander; Unwin, *passim*.

enclosed with her manuscript (LE 32: 333). Both, he said, as he wrote the book's concluding words, were so lovely that they might be sung by Dante's Beatrice in heaven. In order to make it obvious to Francesca (but not to anyone else) that he was writing about Rose, the *rispetto* he first used had Rose's name embedded in the principal's name.⁹⁸ But the prime reason he had chosen the *rispetti* was because they expressed flawlessly how he continued to feel about Rose. For greatest effect, he first reproduced the song in Italian, following that with an English translation of his own (that translation only reproduced below):

Oh, Rosellino, blossom of the spring!
 At least, if thou wilt leave me, set me free;
 I loved thee, when thou wast a little thing;
 The months and years I've past in loving thee!
 The months and hours! And now, do we thus part?
 Oh, Rosellino, give me back my heart!

The second *rispetto* was printed *only* in Italian, ensuring that its deepest meaning would be accessible only to those who, like Francesca, were fluent in the language and who were willing to take the time to translate it. In this way, he had been able to say symbolically what he most wanted to tell his Sorella of his tortured feelings without fear that many others would glean what his true meaning was. Here, translated, is the second *rispetto*.⁹⁹

The other evening at sunset,
 I thought of you who are so far away.
 And it seemed to me I could hear your words,
 But they were sorrowful—like crying.
 And I felt people were sighing submissively, their faces torn.

Ah, the hour of sunset is a sad hour.
 What does all this say about you, my dear friend?
 Ah, the hour of sunset is a sad hour,
 And you, my dear friend, still don't return.

But Francesca had missed his meaning then, as she did still. It was, he supposed, her good and kind nature that was the problem. Always her letters attempted to ease his chronic distress by trying to put the best gloss on things, always she was trying to cajole him into accepting, if not a happier perspective (*that* she knew would be impossible!), at least a less tortured one. But the fact was that his pain could not—and, in *this* case, his guilty and

⁹⁸ A well-thought out use of his symbolic allegory. See, for comparison, his mention of the memor*osas* plant in the letter following. For a deeper understanding of this process of writing in allegory, see the longer description in "John Ruskin's Dark Star," the first essay in this series.

⁹⁹ I am indebted to my colleague at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Professor Elena Ciletti, for this translation. To make the case made here even more obvious, compare another *rispetto* Ruskin included at LE 33: 330.

reprehensible case, *should* not—be avoided. He had devoted his whole life to the veridical, had even put that pledge, for all the world to see, on his father's sarcophagus, carving there, "He was an entirely honest merchant... His son, whom he loved to the uttermost, and taught to speak truth, says this of him."

As the sun started to disappear behind the mountain locally known as "The Old Man of Coniston" on the western side of the lake and the light began to fade, Ruskin picked up his pen. What he would set down in the next few minutes would be the last letter he would ever post to Francesca.¹⁰⁰ It would also be one of the most personally revealing letters he would ever write, its substance refracting every theme that has been a subject of discussion in this essay: Darling Sorel,

All is still going on well—as far as I can judge of myself—and indeed I am thankful to see Joanie for a time released from the anxiety and—worse than anxiety—the torture of seeing me...in dreams or passions which are in almost everything the contrary of myself.

But Sorel dear, *that* one dream—that Rose guides me when I *most* need it—is a deliberately believed part of my life—which neither you nor Joanie can understand, because—with all her trials, remember, Joanie *has* her husband and her five sweet children—*besides* what good is left to her in me.

And you have your mother, your companions—friends (and remember women who love each other can be ever so much more to each other than men can—unless they are like David & Jonathan or Achilles & Patroclus¹⁰¹). And you have your [dear companion] Edwige—and your Fratello, who is really, in his reverence for you and sympathy, when he is himself, a great possession. And, then, you have your Christ—and again remember—to women of your virginal temperament, Christ is as much a Bridegroom as for St. Catherine—or St. Agnes, St. Barbara, or St. Mary (Lazarus' sister)—as God is your Father.

But to men of my temperament—whether Burns, Byron, Horace, or Benedict de Saussure!—Christ is at the *best*—but a *brother*—in the highest [sense]—a Master, or a Judge—we *need* the Wife as the best part of ourselves—and Rosie **was** [Ruskin's double-emphasis] my wife, never possessed, but waited for—to the Grave. Think of her as an angel conscious of the past—watchful of the future—and of me as feeling myself answerable for her death, and—well, I won't write more like this today—for I have to tell you that the violets & anemones, our memorosas¹⁰²--are in their prime, and the hyacinths and gentians coming. And I'm able to get out and I'm sleeping long & well—and idle—nearly all day and don't in the least try to carry mattresses

¹⁰⁰ If others exist, I haven't been able to locate them.

¹⁰¹ The first pair are devoted friends in the Old Testament, the second principal personages in Homer's *Iliad*.

¹⁰² As usual, it is no accident that Ruskin mentions this plant in his list. Like *Proserpina* and *Rosellino*, it has, "hidden" within it, his love's name.

about like the Patriarch,¹⁰³ and I'm Mammina's good for nothing Figlio, and your [loving Fratello]—perhaps a little good for something at last.¹⁰⁴

The rest was silence.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I suggested that, beyond the always essential issue of accuracy, it matters considerably how Ruskin's mental illness is classified, primarily because different diagnoses will lead to different ways of comprehending his life. Considering the genre as an entirety, most biographers *assume* that his breakdowns were triggered by the ascendance of a hostile genetic predisposition and, consequently, have argued or implied that his was yet one more regrettable instance of great genius laid low by inherited instability.¹⁰⁵ A few have gone further and suggested that, as a result of his mental instabilities, some, perhaps all, of his writings were tainted by them, thereby throwing the question of the value of his immense output into question.¹⁰⁶ Such interpretations have had (still have) a powerful—and negative—effect: to undermine or at least call into serious question the validity of all the accolades that celebrated Ruskin's works and genius during his own lifetime and the decade that followed his passing. All of these interpretations, as these pages have shown, were wrong.

¹⁰³ An obscure reference which, perhaps, Ruskin thought Francesca would grasp. I have not been able to track it down.

¹⁰⁴ BPL Mss Acc 2500 IV 58 a+b and BPL Mss Acc 2500 IV 62 a+b. Previously unpublished; holograph in Ruskin's hand. Although he would send no more letters to Florence, Francesca and her mother learned of his condition from their regular correspondence with Joan.

¹⁰⁵ There are two exceptions to this pattern: Collingwood and Leon, both of whom are fully aware of the pernicious real world forces that severely damaged Ruskin's life. Had she published her biography, Helen Viljoen would have argued similarly (see "John Ruskin's Dark Star," the first essay in this series).

¹⁰⁶ An argument which careful study cannot sustain. Taking the most common focus of this contention—the works of Ruskin's later years—consider three examples composed when his despair and/or "brain fevers" were at their apex: *Fors Clavigera*, his 96 letters (essays, really) sent to the "workmen and laborers of Great Britain," composed between 1871-84, a work lauded by Hilton (*Later*, xxxvi) and others as a masterpiece of commentary on the age; his 1884 lecture, "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century," one of the first carefully argued critiques focused on industrialism's despoliation of the natural environment, which Bradley calls a "a sunset masterpiece" (116); and *Praeterita*, written in the mid- to late-1880s, a work almost universally praised as one of the greatest autobiographies ever put to paper (Hilton, *Later*, xlv). For a study showing how Ruskin (when not incapacitated by it) *used* his understanding of his illness as a model for dissecting the general madness of his time, see Fitch; for one arguing that his early works were colored by his illness, see Hilton, *Later*, esp., 366-8.

After introducing Ruskin's critically important correspondence with Francesca and Lucia Alexander during the 1880s—a collection missed or ignored by all previous biographers—I proceeded to show that this assembly, when combined with a significant number of other letter archives (most of which were not, or not carefully, studied by these same earlier biographers), provides a wealth of evidence demonstrating that Ruskin's illness had been occasioned by a peculiar, albeit most unfortunate, assembly of destabilizing life events. Next, turning to the scientific literature on mental illness, I was able to show that the malady from which he suffered was not Bipolar Disease, previously the most commonly assumed affliction (his behavior evinced only a few of the traits associated with it), but was, instead, an instance of "Major Depression accompanied by Psychotic and Melancholic Features," the traits of which he exhibited in abundance and repeatedly, as shown by multiple citations of letters, commentaries, or recollections penned either by Ruskin himself or by those who knew him at first hand.¹⁰⁷

Given this diagnosis, it became possible to conclude that Ruskin's mental illness was not an instance of genius inexorably maddening but, instead, of genius inexorably maddened, maddened by the confluence of a series of traumatic events, that, in conjunction with certain historical and social forces dominant in the unsettled times in which he lived, repeatedly carried him to and then over the edge of sanity numerous times.

To briefly remind, these forces were: *first*, a never-ending "ruinous struggle" with his parents, particularly his father, over the direction his life should take (a struggle that continued in his psyche long after his sires were dead); *second*, a direct Charge given to him by his father when he was ten which made it clear that, given his genius, he was expected to become a savior of his people, a charge which, in reality, was impossible for anyone to fulfill; *third*, in the wake his acceptance of this Charge, it became obvious by the time Ruskin reached middle life, that he had failed, whether he considered his much applauded works on art and architecture singly or jointly, to achieve his world-bettering goal; *fourth*, a determination which occasioned a transformation of himself into an indefatigable and uncompromising social critic, advancing arguments which, from their first appearance, garnered severe, often vicious, reaction, the cumulative effect of which was another major indicator of failure, as he was demoted from his earlier status as an iconic author into one which viewed him as a threat to the established social order, and likely mad into the bargain; *fifth*, in response to which chastisements, over the course of the next two decades—the 1870s and 1880s (until his total collapse in Italy in late 1888)—he redoubled his efforts to effect change for the good, none of which, as he saw it, producing any notable positive effect; to which gathering disappointments must be added, *sixth*, the ever-accruing disasters of his emotional life: most especially, his inability, excepting only close friends like the Alexanders and some few others, to ever find a partner with whom he could share a requited love and with whom he could share the burdens of his life.

¹⁰⁷ Almost none of this evidence was cited by other biographers.

As they accumulated, these factors became nothing less than a recipe for personal catastrophe. Serious episodes of depression, largely in reaction to the stresses of the ruinous struggle and the loss of his first love, began in Ruskin's adolescence and, as the decades passed, only became more frequent and profound, as he became, as he told a friend one night at an evening party, "the saddest mad in Europe." It was as if his once-so-hopeful, so-promising life had been swallowed up by an unexpected and inescapable Alpine avalanche, which, as it roared valleyward, only increased in vehemence and fury, finally dropping him by the wayside as it passed off, a wounded and irreparable relic of what had once been the sturdiest of trees.



But the greatest element in Ruskin's tragedy—to which these paragraphs, because of their other intent, have paid scant attention—is not that his genius was truncated and later markedly derailed, but that, throughout his life, as he dedicated his energies to manifesting the Charge that had been bestowed by his father, he had ceaselessly tried to discover ways for making the world a better place, ways which would ease and make happier the days of his fellow human beings. Because, for Ruskin, his Charge, however impossible it may have been to fulfill, was considerably more than a father's exhortation or a God's expectation: it was a perfectly reasonable statement of what we owe each other as human beings. Leaving aside his own evaluation that his works were but a congeries of miserable failures, whenever one takes the time to read any of Ruskin's works with care, whatever their subject may be, one finds them all to be rooted in a remarkable and sincere magnanimity of spirit.

Two instances (among hundreds) illustrate: The "will of God respecting us," Ruskin told his (imaginary) students in *The Ethics of the Dust* (1865), "is that we shall live by each other's happiness and life, not by each other's misery and death... Men help each other by their joy not their sorrow. They are not intended to slay themselves for each other, but to strengthen themselves for each other." (LE 18: 286) A few years earlier, in 1858, as he struggled to find a new direction for himself after coming to the conclusion that all his works on art and architecture had miscarried, he told his audience (which had arrived to hear him talk on "The Unity of Art"!) that every human being, throughout life, carried a responsibility to increase the welfare—the "faring-well"—of the world in which we had been given the privilege of living. Make, then, *your* choice, he said that night as he brought his remarks to their conclusion,

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 dullness that denies what is marvelous 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 [Psalm 137: 5], 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. (LE 16: 292)

In other words, if we reverse the lens and put the pathos of his personal story behind us, we quickly find that another Ruskin comes into view, a Ruskin lionized by thousands in his own time, a Ruskin we have all but completely lost sight of in our own—and this is the great tragedy mentioned above—neither a heart-breaking figure nor a deranged one but, rather, a truly noble human being, a caring and decent person who, accepting the idea that he should use his gifts for good, dedicated his brief hour upon the stage to doing not what *he* most wanted to do but to doing what he thought would result in the greatest benefit to others. It was a conviction that, whatever his trials and tribulations would turn out to be, would remain with him to the very end of his days on his Old Road.

Epilogue

[W]hatever I have been to you in books, both I, and wiser and better men than I, may always be, whether we live or die."

--Ruskin to Katherine Bradley, September 1878, as he recovered from his first attack

Just before his final, fateful descent into Italy, Ruskin was in his old hotel, The Union Inn, in Chamouni. As usual, he had not slept well, having been plagued through the dark hours by thoughts that he had wasted his life, that he did not want to go to Bassano, that, if he did go there, his Sorella and Mammina would not find him the great, wise man they imagined; instead, they would be shocked to discover a confused and extremely culpable soul. In fact, he did not want to go to Italy at all. Of all the places in his world, it was the one that most accused him for his failures. If he could just go home to Brantwood and Joan, he might find a modicum of rest and peace. But Joan had not sent any sign she would end his exile.

Just a day or two before, while at his hotel in Sallanches, he had met a couple who had come, oddly, but gratifyingly enough, to the Alps so that they might visit a village he had warmly and flatteringly described in one of his periodically appearing installments of *Praeterita*. They had seemed genuinely delighted to meet him. Their conversations had been pleasant, but he had made what he now realized was a massive mistake; he had succumbed to an impulse to pronounce his views on the desultory state of the world. For which folly, he was now paying the price: the excruciating depression had returned full force (LE 34: 373-6).

As always when in Chamouni, he had reserved the room which had been his favorite for over a half century, the one that provided the best panorama of his favorite sight on earth—the chain of Alps which, at its apogee, revealed the greatest of them all: Mont Blanc. The one saving grace of the night hours had been that there had been a full moon, and its light had been good enough to allow him to forsake his bed and sit at his writing desk—the desk on which he had written the first three of *Unto this Last's* four essays in the summer of 1860, nearly three decades before. Then, about six, a special blessing had arrived: "I saw rosy dawn," he wrote in his diary, "and...the 'white mountain' above, long-laid [with] calm morning mist—as clearly with my old eyes as when I was twenty-one." (*Diaries*, 1149)

The day continuing dazzlingly clear, immediately after breakfast, knowing that Baxter and Detmar (he was such a lovely, helpful young man! he didn't know how he could have coped without him on this troubled trip) would still be asleep, he left the hotel and started up the steep trail to "his rock," a huge glacial erratic, about a third of the way up the Brévant, the mountain that formed the north side of the valley. In years past, whenever he arrived in Chamouni, he had all but sprinted up to the erratic as soon as his valises were deposited at the Inn. He was like a gazelle then! But now, after finally gaining the copse in which his rock, protected by dozens of tall pines, rested, once he had taken a moment to catch his breath, he turned, leaned his back on the great stone and gazed south, where, the day being inordinately beautiful, he beheld what he regarded as a gift from God.



View of the Mont Blanc Massif from Ruskin's Rock, Chamouni (Photo: author)

Throughout the tour, he had been planning—had been instructed, really, by his publisher, George Allen—to write an epilogue to his five *Modern Painters* books, scheduled soon to appear in a new edition (he didn't understand why anyone would want to read them, they were so imperfectly written). Because of his disturbances *en route*, however, he had never made the effort. But, today, as he gazed out on the aiguilles and his beloved mountain,

he knew that his inner clouds had, for the moment, sufficiently cleared and that he would be able to write.

As he mounted the few steps to the Inn an hour and a half later, he was immediately accosted by his distressed, ever-watchful-of their-charge, companions. Where had he been? They had been much worried by his absence. He said that he was fine, explained that, because the day was so fine and their time in the valley now fading fast, he had had no choice but to go to his rock. Would he like some lunch? No. He was going to his room. He had something he needed to write.

Less than five minutes later, he is found at his desk. After indulging in one more upward glance at the great mountain hovering over all, he sets to work on his Epilogue, finishing it just in time for an early dinner, after which he knows that he and Detmar will take a pleasant evening stroll in the nearby woods skirting the Arveyron, the roaring stream that brings the melt from the great Mer du Glace glacier above down into the valley. As it turned out, what he wrote that afternoon, given the unhappy events which would begin after their arrival in Bassano a few days later, would be the last pages he would ever write in service to the Charge which he had been given by his father so long ago. He ended the Epilogue with these words:

All that is involved in these passionate utterances of my youth [the *Modern Painters* books] was first expanded and then concentrated into the aphorism given twenty years afterwards in my inaugural Oxford lectures—that "All great art is praise." And, on that aphorism, was founded the yet bolder saying... "So far from Art's being immoral, in the ultimate power of it, nothing but Art *is* moral. Life without Industry is sin, and Industry without Art, brutality..."

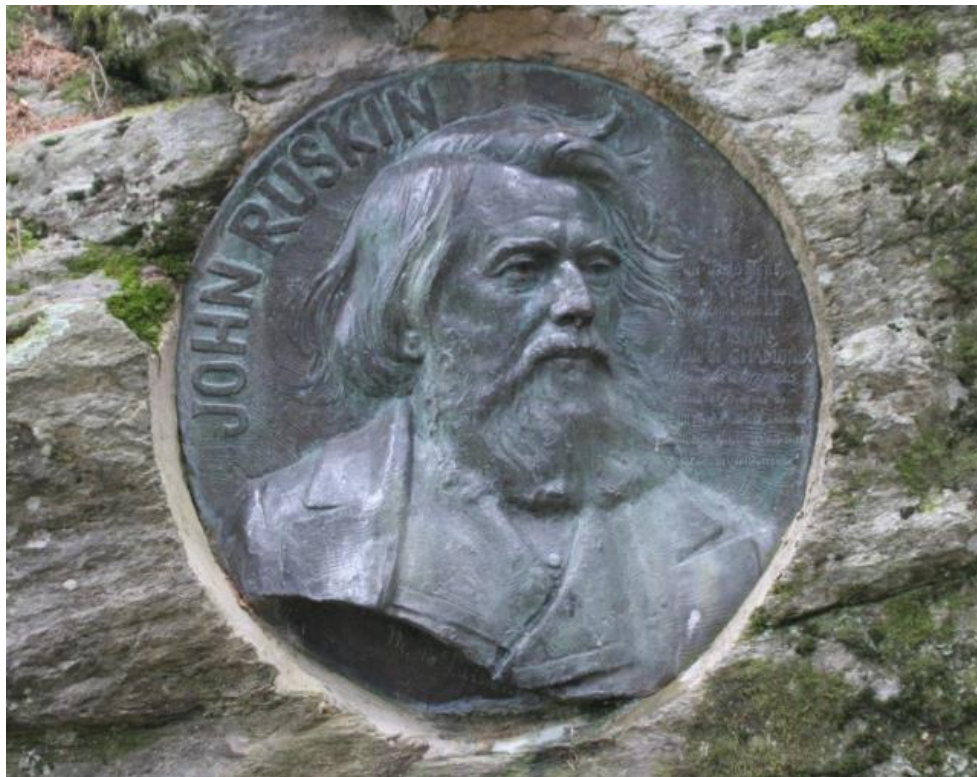
And now, in writing beneath the cloudless peace of the snows of Chamouni what must be the really final words of the book which their beauty inspired and their strength guided, I am able, with yet happier and calmer heart than ever heretofore, to enforce its simplest assurance of Faith—that the knowledge of what is beautiful leads on and is the first step to the knowledge of the things which are lovely and of good report, and that the laws, the life, and the joy of beauty in the material world of God are as eternal and sacred parts of His creation as, in the world of spirits, virtue and, in the world of angels, praise. (LE 7: 463-4)

The pages, which were dispensed to Allen the following morning, inspired him. Two days later, although he remained achingly distraught and daunted by fantasies of the awful things that occur in Italy, they were in Milan. It was the 26th of September. As nearly always the case, he wrote some lines to his beloved cousin at Brantwood: "And now," he told Joan, having finished my Epilogue, "I have only to think of managing [*Praeterita*] with common prudence and sense, and [work out how to go] on writing what will at once do people good and please them—which I can..." (UIC)

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A little more than three decades later the leaders of the Commune of Chamouni, wishing to applaud the great contributions Ruskin had made to their valley's welfare in his many and rapturous celebrations of its beauties, inset, in the rock on the Brévant he loved so well, a memorial plaque. To create the accolade, they commissioned a French sculptor of Polish descent, Michel de Tarnowsky. By now, the veils of time having done their appointed work, I still have not learned much about him, save for the fact that, during his life, he was well-known and greatly respected. But one thing is certain—that, however he had come by his knowledge, this sculptor *knew* his Ruskin, and, employing the most heartfelt elements of that familiarity, he created an image which, among the many of our subject which survive, must always rank as one of the most accurate and revealing.

If by some miracle, at some later date, Ruskin, having come back to his valley and, in the process of making another happy climb up to his rock, chanced to glance at his implanted tribute, he might be forced to entertain the thought that, if the fine folk of Chamouni had gone to so much trouble to applaud him and his work, he just might have been good for a little something, after all.



Bas-relief image of Ruskin at his Rock on the Brévant, Chamouni, French Alps
by M. de Tarnowsky (Photo: author)

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- BC Birkenhead Collection (private); Newbottle, UK; Folder: "Letters for possible inclusion in (Birkenhead) *Illustrious Friends* (this book is referenced below).
BPL Boston Public Library, Boston, MA
CU Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Violet Hunt Collection, Olin Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
PML Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum, New York City, NY
VP The Helen Gill Viljoen Papers, Pierpont Library and Museum, New York, NY
RL Ruskin Library (now, The Ruskin), Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK
Yale Beinecke Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
UIC Rare Book Room, University of Illinois at Champagne-Urbana, Illinois

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Complete details will be found in "Works Cited")

- BD *The Brantwood Diary of John Ruskin* (Viljoen, ed.)
Diaries *The Diaries of John Ruskin* (Evans and Whitehouse, eds.)
DSM-IV *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed., Text Revision*
RFL *The Ruskin Family Letters* (Burd, ed.)
RSH *Ruskin's Scottish Heritage* (Viljoen)
LE *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin* (E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds.)

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(1) "John Ruskin's Dark Star: New Lights on his Life based on the Unpublished Biographic Materials and Research of Helen Gill

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- (2) "Ruskin in Milan, 1862: A Chapter from 'Dark Star,' Helen Gill Viljoen's Unpublished Biography," with Van Akin Burd: Updated Version: 2020.
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