

The English Minotaur

The air was perfectly calm, the sunlight pure, and falling on the grass through thickets... of plum and pear trees, in their first showers of fresh silver, looking more like much-broken and far-tossed spray of fountains than trees; and just at the end of my hawthorn walk, one happy nightingale was singing as much as he could in every moment. Meantime, in the still air, the roar of the railroads from Clapham Junction, New Cross, and the Crystal Palace (I am between the three), sounded constantly and heavily, like the surf of a strong sea three or four miles distant; and the whistles of the trains passing nearer mixed with the nightingale's notes...¹

In the Introduction to his 'Educational Series' of prints, photographs and drawings, John Ruskin recalled a precise moment in time for the sake of inspiring students attending his Oxford drawing schools.

Walking in his garden at 6.30 am on 21 April 1870, the writer, critic, and artist contrasted the idyll of the early morning, his fruit trees and hawthorns, and a lone nightingale with the sound of distant steam engines already ferrying commuters from the south London suburbs, now encroaching uncontrollably on him and on the house in which he had spent his early adulthood.

Ruskin was twenty-three years old when his family moved to 163 Denmark Hill in 1842. The three-storey house occupied a seven acre estate, complete with lodge and extensive gardens, perched on a northern outlier of the South Downs and surrounded by meadows. It was a grand neighbourhood, known as 'the Belgravia of the South'.² But in the intervening years the city's borders had begun to creep closer, gradually drawing the semi-rural retreat into the metropolitan orbit. Increasingly concerned by its approach, Ruskin would live there – could bear to live there – for just one more year.

That spring dawn, caught in an iron triangle of train tracks between Clapham Junction, New Cross and Crystal Palace, Ruskin heard the engines' noise 'like the surge of a strong sea three or four miles distant', their whistles rivalling the bird's song.³ As he stood in his garden, the scene stirred Ruskin to characteristic prose, couched in rhetorical flourishes worthy of the sermons of Charles Spurgeon, the celebrated evangelist who held forth to enraptured masses from his chapel in the Elephant and Castle.* Ruskin's audience was ostensibly a secular one, but his sermon was not toned down for their sensibilities. Rather, it was all the more strident, given the urgency of the situation.

Of those who were causing all that murmur, like the sea, round me, and of the myriads imprisoned by the English Minotaur of lust for wealth, and condemned to live, if it is to be called life, in the labyrinth of black walls, and loathsome passages between them, which now fills the valley of the Thames, and is called London, not one could hear, this day, any happy bird sing, or look upon any quiet space of the pure grass that is good for seed.

* Ruskin's diary for Sunday 8 February 1857 reads - '11, 648. Hear Mr Spurgeon on "Cleanse thou me from secret faults" - very wonderful.' ⁴

From his suburban eyrie, his preserved slice of the country made paradoxically and increasingly problematic by his 'self-indulgence' that preserved it, versus the pressure of the city that threatened it and whose rows of aspiring terracotta gothic villas owed much to his own architectural encouragement, Ruskin instead envisaged a garden city. He imagined a London 'full of gardens, and terraced round with hawthorn-walks, with children at play in them, as fair as their blossoms'. It was a utopian vision, of a piece with Ruskin's ambitions which were both reactionary and nostalgic as well as radical and progressive. His biographer Tim Hilton notes that the critic's subsequent projects for his Guild of St George – which ranged from an art gallery in Sheffield to a Marylebone teashop - 'harked back to the utopia of Denmark Hill'.⁵

But this idyllic scene would only come about through a revolution in sensibility and political economy; a revolution beyond art. ‘Gentlemen,’ Ruskin reproved his students, those working men:

I tell you once more, unless you are minded to bring yourselves, and all whom you can help, out of this curse of darkness that has fallen on our hearts and thoughts, you need not try to do any art-work, - it is the vainest of affectations to try to put beauty into shadows, while all the real things that cast them are left in deformity and pain.⁶

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The Elements of Drawing had been written two decades earlier, in the winter of 1856-7. It was inspired by Ruskin’s studies on Turner, and his work as drawing master at the Working Men’s College, where he had begun to teach in 1854, initially in a house in Red Lion Square in central London. It aspired to drawing for its own sake, rather than as a career. ‘My efforts are directed not to making a carpenter an artist, but to making him happier as a carpenter’.⁷

The system that Ruskin devised was based on his established habit of issuing drawing lessons by letter, a kind of correspondence course that was not entirely practical and was sometimes, as Hilton suggests, discouraging for both pupil and tutor. Inevitably, the book, published in 1857, reproduced those errors – for all that it was ‘as near as we know to a Pre-Raphaelite manual’.⁸ Like all Ruskin’s writing, *The Elements of Drawing* is both declamatory and inspirational, in the manner of later works such as *Unto this Last*, *Sesame and Lilies*, and the yet more epistolical *Fors Clavigera*. And in its ambitions, *The Elements of Drawing* even hinted at Ruskin’s utopian Guild of St George in its ordering and recording of society.

Just as the Guild, founded ten years later in 1868 as kind of ‘colony’, was based on principles of just and pure society infused with an overtly Christian spirituality, Ruskin’s intention in the instruction of his remote students in *The Elements of*

Drawing was ‘primarily in order to direct their attention accurately to the beauty of God’s work in the material universe’.⁹ Such high principles may seem fanciful to a modern art student, but art and the active participation in its process was a numinous experience to Ruskin, and so it should be to his pupils. ‘I would rather teach drawing that my pupils may learn to love Nature, than teach the looking at Nature that they may learn to draw’.¹⁰

This most eccentric but urgent of art masters sought to unveil the ‘*innocence of the eye*’, in an almost existential manner, sublimely aware of the entirety of sensual experience.¹¹ There is an immediacy to this tuition. As his putative pupil addresses the page on which she or he intends to make their mark, Ruskin – hovering as a virtual spirit over their shoulder - enjoins them to notice ‘this other thing near you, which by experience you know to be a table, is to your eye only a patch of brown, variously darkened and veined; and so on...’¹²



Lancaster to Euston, 8 October 2010

Reading *The Elements of Drawing* now is to hear Ruskin's voice sternly encouraging, animating the process itself: 'the pen should, as it were, walk slowly over the ground, and you should be able at any moment to stop it, or turn it in any other direction, like a well-managed horse' – an instruction that prefigures Paul Klee's notion of 'taking a line for a walk'.¹³ For a man who had taught himself to look first and only then to record, Ruskin showed his students the essential contradiction of drawing: recreating something in outline which had no outline in nature, encouraging them to see the shapes that light created around an object rather than the shapes the viewer projected on it. We see in three dimensions, not in two, and by looking first, the reward was to regard the world anew. '[W]hen you look up at the beauty of the sky, the sense you will have gained of that beauty is something to be thankful for'.¹⁴

It was this new sense of one's surroundings that Ruskin so urgently conveyed. 'If you desire only to possess a graceful accomplishment, to be able to converse in fluent manner about drawing, or to amuse yourself listlessly in listless hours, I cannot help you', he declared in his first Letter,

but if you wish to learn drawing that you may be able to set down clearly, and usefully, records of such things as cannot be described in words, either to assist your own memory of them, or to convey distinct ideas of them to other people; if you wish to obtain quicker perceptions of the beauty of the natural world, and to preserve something like a true image of beautiful things that pass away, or which you must yourself leave; if, also, you wish to understand the minds of great painters, and to be able to appreciate their work sincerely, seeing it for yourself, and loving it, not merely taking up the thoughts of other people about it; then I *can* help you, or, which is better, show you how to help yourself.¹⁵

And this offer, that pre-echoes Kipling in its phrasing and intensity if not in its intent, was a priceless one to men and women who felt excluded by the onward march of progress. Ruskin was not trying to reach those people who regarded drawing as another aspect of good manners and genteel behaviour. His Working Men's College

was no finishing school, for all his love of all things Swiss. He proposed nothing less than manumission from the ugly, deliverance from ignorance. In his aesthetic utopia, all England would be released from its slavery, to wander the hills and fields, finding rebirth in the hedgerows and the mountains, freedom in a foxglove or a sunrise.

Ruskin's long life sprawled like the city, covering the century through which he lived in his works and opinions. He shaped it as much as he was shaped by it, was heard as much as he was dismissed. His opinions - as my *British Encyclopedia* for 1933, still reeling from their impact three decades after Ruskin's death, notes - were 'betrayed into exaggerations, and not infrequently his propositions are needlessly violent and paradoxical, occasionally even contradictory'.¹⁶ Yet his prolific works - an unstoppable flow - reflected a paradoxical age of aspirations and disasters, as much as his life itself. One year after Ruskin had walked out into his Denmark Hill garden, he received what amounted to an invitation to leave London. It was to be a fateful move.

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It is unnaturally dark in Coniston, a village overshadowed by the fells that rise behind it as a dramatic curtain of grey and brown and green, riven by cataracts like fissures of living quartz. Black-coated Herdwick sheep perch precipitously in the browning bracken; slate scree tumbles as frozen waterfalls of rubble.

But none of this is visible to me, not yet anyway, as I scramble up the hillside in the gloom. My body clock tells me dawn broke some time ago, but only as I lay awake in my hired bed, waiting for the windows to lighten, do I realise that here this autumn morning is artificially delayed by the rocks whose companion slopes I am now attempting to climb.

A hundred feet up and I'm beginning to think I've made a terrible mistake. The ground underneath is spongy and soft from recent rain. I'm having to grab hold of bracken stems to steady my progress as I ascend the steep incline. In my fervour to reach the top, I've forgotten a deep-seated sense of vertigo - of the day when, as a young boy, I climbed to a limestone crag at Malham and suddenly felt, as I looked

down to my parents far below, that there was no way I could descend, short of summoning a helicopter.

Nevertheless, I plough on. The ground is rising even more steeply now, into my face. The bracken brushes my nose, my fingernails are filled with soft mud – its suspiciously green tinge makes me wonder if there's not a little sheep dung mixed in there, too. I rest at the roots of a hawthorn tree twisted and stunted by decades of wind and rain, and directed by its wizened black branches, turn to face the view.

The valley rolls down to the village where I woke hours ago, barely remembering where I was or why I'd come here. Already lights are moving through the streets. The tight-clustered houses seem defensive, self-protective. Somewhere among them is the churchyard where Ruskin's Celtic cross stands, its olive-green stone, which came out of these hills, warm to the touch and now carved with hares, kingfishers, swastikas and the figure of St George battling the dragon.

I climb on, the light rising imperceptibly, as though the darkness was being sucked away. The wind picks up as I ascend the last few stony steps to the summit. But as I do, the land suddenly falls away in front of me. With a sharp intake of breath I realise that I have reached a beginning, rather than the end. Looming up out of the earth, still black in the dawn light, are the successive summits that lie to the north of Conistone.

It is a frankly fearful moment: the immensity of the land seems almost alive, still buckling under the pressure of tectonic plates, subject to a continental coercion of currents; as Ruskin wrote, 'This stone trembles through its every fibre'.¹⁷ The range reaches for mile after mile, a sublime, unknowable extension, beyond human scale. Clouds scud over the wave-like peaks, underlining my vertiginous position. It is too beautiful to watch, so I turn and leave, scrambling back down the slope till I reach the muddy, level path at its feet.

Could you lose your mind in such a place, faced with such shocking beauty, inhaling the cold air, listening to the birds and the running water and the silence running into

the white noise of eternity? What should heal could also break. Perhaps it was a lifetime of terrible witness that eventually broke Ruskin; perhaps he reached his limit. There was just too much to take.

In the summer of 1871, aged fifty-two – as I am now, too - Ruskin was confronted by his physical fragility. Never entirely well, he was taken ill that July with a severe chill that led to life-threatening illness. He retreated to Matlock in Derbyshire, where he had stayed with his parents as a young man, and from where he had first visited Cumbria. He knew the area intimately, albeit at one remove. As a boy, his interest in geology had been sparked off by a collection of minerals his father had bought from a geologist in the Lake District. ‘No subsequent passion had had so much influence on my life,’ Ruskin was to write. Turning over these ‘golden pieces of copper ore from Coniston and garnets from Borrowdale’, he was inspired in his first ambition: to become a geologist, rather than an artist.¹⁸

From the stones of the Lakes to the clouds above the Peak District: it was in Derbyshire that Ruskin discerned a new phenomenon in the sky, a sky that had darkened since that spring morning in Denmark Hill. He wrote about it in his open letter to the working man, *Fors Clavigera*, ‘fate’s nail’.

It is the first of July, and I sit down to write by the dimmest light that I ever yet wrote by; namely, the light of this midsummer morning, in mid-England, (Matlock, Derbyshire), in the year 1871. For the sky is covered with grey cloud; - not rain-cloud, but a dry black veil, which no ray of sunshine can pierce... And it is a new thing to me, and a very dreadful one... I am fifty years old [sic]... and I never saw such as these, till now.

Men of science, ‘busy as ants’, might inform him about the sun, the moon ‘and the seven stars,’ he wrote. ‘But I would care much and give much, if I could be told where this bitter wind comes from, and what *it* is made of... It looks more to me as if it were made of dead men’s souls...’¹⁹ What Ruskin called the storm-cloud of the nineteenth century, borne by a plague wind, was as much a portent of his own mental

state. He told friends he felt he might recover, if only he could lie down in Coniston Water once more. Soon after, his ties with London would be severed by the death of his mother that December, whose coffin he painted sky-blue.

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Like some latterday Ludwigs, we are borne across the lake on the steam yacht *Gondola* that, since 1859, has plied its trade on Coniston Water. Now it sews together these shores for the benefit of autumnal tourists, drawn here by disposable income in these few days of Indian summer after the school holidays. My companion and I feel like schoolboys bunking off as we wait on the wooden pontoon to board the boat. An officious tour guide marches to the head of the queue and waving a piece of paper, ‘advises’ us that we may not be on this trip, since her group has booked most of the seats. The bluff Yorkshireman standing behind us informs her, equally peremptorily, ‘I don’t give a monkeys’, and as the gate is opened urges us, in words akin to those of a sergeant-major, to board the boat.



The steam yacht Gondola

With its burnished gold leaf figurehead in the form of a serpent, the archaic, sleek vessel, its interior upholstered like a first-class railway carriage, slips away from the jetty surprisingly noiselessly, slowly gliding across the grey morning water, the swans and their cygnets parting to allow us to pass. White steam drifts from its funnel. On either side, over the gently rippling surface, the trees grow low to the lake, then rise high to the hills and mountains. It is easy to see the appeal of this place to a man who had fallen in love with Switzerland and who, in his middle-age, had fully intended to make his home there. Instead, he was to escape the city where he was born and where he had grown up for this northwestern corner of England.

Ruskin's move reflected the dynamic of a country caught between the cultural and political force of the south and the economic pull of the north. The new industrial age had seen the opening of the land via the introduction of the railway, which he hated. 'You Enterprised a Railroad through the valley,' he wrote in *Fors Clavigera* in May 1871, ' – you blasted its rocks away, heaped thousands of tons on shale into its lovely stream. The valley is gone, and the Gods with it; and now, every fool in Buxton can be at Bakewell in half an hour, and every fool in Bakewell at Buxton; which you think a lucrative process of exchange – you Fools Everywhere'.²⁰

The Lakes were newly exposed by the railway to the industrialists and tourists of the Midlands and the North, as much as they had been a nexus of the senses to Romantic poets of a previous generation. The subsequent presence of Blackwell, the exquisite yet vaguely suburban Arts and Crafts house at nearby Windermere (designed by Baillie Scott for Sir Edward Holt, owner of a Manchester brewery and twice the city's Lord Mayor) is an extravagantly restrained testament to that encroachment – a contradiction also incarnate in Ruskin's remarkable persona. His mind fed on medieval notions, yet he was a creation of the machine age. He sought to reach the working man, yet despised the methods by which those men might be freed. Capitalism supplied the wealth on which he relied, yet he was the severest critique of that economy and its deleterious effects, apocalyptic signs of which he had discerned in the skies.



Brantwood

Given Ruskin's combined regard for Venice and his dislike of the steam engine, the mode of our arrival is more than a little ironic.* As the *Gondola* turns towards the jetty, Brantwood looms out of the hillside, a Wagnerian vision seen through the trees and wisps of steam. Ruskin's mountain fastness is now accessible to anyone, like Blackwell, and any number of English houses opened up in the wake of the example set by the National Trust, part-founded by Ruskin's friend, Canon Rawnsley.

* 'My Friends,' he addressed his readers from Venice in July 1872. 'You probably thought I had lost my temper, and written inconsiderately, when I call the whistling of the *Lido* steamer "accursed". I never wrote more considerately...' ²¹

It seems fitting that anyone can cross Ruskin's threshold now. Yet this sprawling pile, which maintains its independence as part of the Brantwood Trust, does not represent the house Ruskin knew, or even desired, in that flight from the smog-bound metropolis to this clear-aired Cumbrian valley. When he first saw the house it was a modest 'cottage-villa', lacking the gothic flourishes and extensions it would later

boast. For the artist-critic it promised a spiritual retreat; even the manner by which it came to him was pre-ordained.

Brantwood's previous owner, William James Linton, was a radical politician, a republican and a Chartist who issued subversive pamphlets from his private printing press in an outbuilding at Brantwood, where he and his feminist wife Eliza Lynn entertained her fellow feminist Harriet Martineau, who lived in nearby Ambleside. By 1871, however, Linton had moved out of his eyrie and emigrated to New England. Desirous that Brantwood should pass into equally radical hands, Linton wrote to Ruskin, whom he much admired, offering to sell him the house for £1,500.

Ruskin bought it, sight unseen, although he knew the site well. The Lakes evoked memories of family visits, as well as his love of Switzerland, by one remove. It was as if he didn't need to survey his future home: its physical acquisition, and his connection with it, was as fate intended. 'I perceived that this new portion of my strength had also been spent in vain,' he wrote of his time in London, 'and from amidst streets of iron, and palaces of crystal, shrank back at last to the carving of the mountain and the colour of the flower.'²²

Brantwood sits on a crag, set back from the road. Inside, it has been restocked with Ruskinian treasures -not that these rooms could ever have forgotten their celebrated occupant. Ruskin was extraordinarily famous in his lifetime, in a manner that seems to us almost incredible: a figure celebrated for his art criticism and social conscience, an unlikely combination, to say the least. Yet here in the dining room that Ruskin had built onto his villa, complete with Venetian pillared windows, he entertained Charles Darwin. This inaccessible corner of northwest England was, for a few years, the powerhouse of a mind that influenced the world.

Howard Hull, the curator of Brantwood, guides us around, pointing out its treasures, cabinets and cases filled with shells and seeds and crystals, tributes to a lifetime of collecting. The entire house is a repository of Ruskin's design, from the wallpaper in the Drawing Room (as apt as the phrase from which it contracts, the Withdrawing

Room) to the coal shovel, manufactured by a local blacksmith. Large cartoons decorate a sun room, visual aids from Ruskin's lectures. Blown-up images of natural forms, they resemble in their scale and still vivid colours pop art canvases.

They are magnified versions of Ruskin's watercolours; and just as those minutely observed studies transcend mere record to become something other, so these botanical billposters are emblems of an uncontained imagination. The change in scale, from a tiny painting of a wallflower to an exploding chestnut bud the size of a window, is a measure of his vision, zooming from the microscopic to the macrocosmic. Hull evokes a heady scene of Ruskin, his wife Effie, and John Everett Millais – for whom Effie would leave her husband – working as a trio on similar illustrations during their Scottish tour in 1853, their heads close together as they painted.

The sheer energy of these images encourages me to reconstruct the man's physical presence: tall and thin with a large head, intense blue eyes set off by his characteristic blue necktie (preserved in another nearby case, along with Ruskin's soft grey hat and his blue leather writing case, an accessory which Hull refers to as Ruskin's laptop). Unmediated by his printed words, Ruskin's lectures brought him to life in front of his audience: giant images revealed in sequence by well-rehearsed stagehands, as the master's voice is animated by his gestures. During one lecture, Hull tells me, to illustrate the magpie as a symbolic link between the dark evil represented by a crow and the peace of a dove, Ruskin imitated the bird itself, pulling up a white hood over his black gown and singing the newly popular song, 'Oh for the wings of a dove'. The notion of this great man of art prancing across a stage acting as a bird is a vivid contrast to the way we expect such a venerable figure to behave.

But Ruskin forever confounds us, as much as his era confounded our expectations. He lived in an age in which art had lost its religiosity; symbolism had become secular with the loss of faith. ('Professors Huxley and Tyndall are of opinion that there is no God,' he wrote in Venice on 4 October 1876, 'they have never found one in a bottle.')

²³ The essential dilemma for Ruskin's practice – that which ultimately caused it to falter – was that it was impossible to apply Renaissance notions to modern

industrialism (for all that he bequeathed to William Morris and the Bauhaus).

Ruskin's insistence on a spiritual basis for his theories would equally undermine them in an increasingly atheistic era; that was the permanent tension set up in his self-appointed mission, its inbuilt obsolescence. The service and meaning of art had been overturned, and he was left as a prophet in the wilderness. The perfection he sought was beyond his reach. But that didn't stop him trying.

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In *Unto this Last*, first published in 1860, Ruskin had set out his strident opinions on the political economy in a manner all the more extraordinary for the fact that they were voiced by an art critic. The negative reaction that greeted these essays would physically affect a highly sensitised man who lived on his nerves. Yet his words themselves were violently deployed as salvos of idealism, hand grenades lobbed into the corpus of the status quo. It was as if he shook from the very effort.

In *Unto this Last* Ruskin critiqued the bedrock of Victorian society, the notion of wealth itself. Yet his arguments did not issue from a liberal mind. In the list of proscriptions and prognostications that rattle from the pages like a Gatling gun, he declared that the recalcitrant unemployed

should be set, under compulsion of the strictest nature, to the more painful and degrading forms of necessary toil, especially to that in mines and other places of danger (such danger being, however, diminished to the utmost by careful regulation and discipline), and the due wages of such work be retained, cost of compulsion first abstracted – to be at the workman's command, so soon as he has come to sounder mind respecting the laws of employment.²⁴

Clearly, this utopia was to be by no means an easy one. It is not surprising that Ruskin's words provoked a furore: his imagery is nearer to science fiction at times, surreally extreme. In one passage, he declares that the notion of the human being 'merely as a covetous machine' is as ridiculous to him as

a science of gymnastics which assumed that men had no skeletons. It might be shown, on that supposition, that it would be advantageous to roll the students up into pellets, flatten them into cakes, or stretch them into cables; and that when these results were effected, the re-insertion of the skeletons would be attended with various inconveniences to their constitution.²⁵

It is little wonder that his peers feared for Ruskin's sanity - even if they could follow his reasoning as it melded medieval imagery with pathological ruthlessness.

Modern political economy stands on a precisely similar basis. Assuming, not that the human being has no skeleton, but that it is all skeleton, it founds an ossifany theory of progress on this negation of a soul; and having shown the utmost that may be made of bones, and constructed a number of interesting geometrical figures with death's-head and humeri, successfully proves the inconvenience of the reappearance of a soul among these corpuscular structures.²⁶

Such images leap out of their time zone, as applicable to some distant past as they may be to the near future. Holding his explosive green volume in my hand as I ride from Lancaster to Euston, I wonder who read this book before me. '*Alfred S. Martin 30 May 1892*' says the ink inscription on the fly-leaf. Perhaps Alfred's eyelids fell heavy on his own train journey to town, during which his copy of *Unto this Last* acquired the minute squashed insect on page fourteen, halfway through Ruskin's approving footnote on Dickens's *Hard Times*: 'For truly, the man who does not know when to die, does not know how to live'.²⁷

For wealth to exist at all, Ruskin wrote, someone else must be poor. 'The force of the guinea you have in your pocket depended wholly on the default of a guinea in your neighbour's pocket.' The state of being rich was 'a power like that of electricity, acting only through inequalities or negation of itself... the art of making yourself rich... is therefore equally and necessarily the art of keeping your neighbour poor'.²⁸ Ruskin existed in an age in which men 'rather calculate the value of their horses and

fields by the number of guineas they could get for them, than the value of their guineas by the number of horses and fields they could buy with them'.²⁹

If *Unto this Last*, with its time-defiant phrase THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE, challenged society and what it thought of him, *Sesame and Lilies* made Ruskin famous. Published in 1865 and based on his famous lectures delivered in Bradford, Manchester and London, the book was a bestseller in his lifetime, and even now its voice sings out clearly across the centuries, which Ruskin has continued to influence.

Sesame and Lilies is essentially and ostensibly an exhortation to read books. But it is also a series of intensely felt, aphoristic observations on what one needs to lead a fully developed life, to free oneself from the restraints and temptations of 'this busiest of countries'.³⁰ Ruskin disdains ambition – for learning as the fulfillment of parents' ambition for their children, or of adults for status. 'It never seems to occur to the parents that there may be an education which, in itself, *is* advancement in Life; - that any other than that may perhaps be advancement in Death.'³¹

It is the death of the soul that he addresses. Ruskin was an honourable man, a victim of his own honour; a moral man, prey to his own morality. He sets our desire for title and status and 'the gratification of our thirst for applause' against the ambition of a working man 'in those plainly furnished and narrow ante-rooms'.³² (An image which, as Michael Bracewell notes, conjures up the lower class Leonard Bast in *Howard's End*, attempting to write in the style of Ruskin after his life-altering encounter with the cultured Schlegels at the Wigmore Hall. Forster's novel was published in 1910, a year after the popular edition of *Sesame and Lilies* from which I made these notes).³³

For Ruskin, reading liberated an age constrained by machines and injustice and war and the reductive banalities of popular culture. The book was a refuge as well as a resource – 'you can be hidden behind the cover of the two boards that bind a book'. Yet even here he discerned status and class: 'For all books are divisible into two classes: the books of the hour, and the books of all time'; it was, he said, 'a distinction

of species'.³⁴ 'A book is essentially not a talked thing, but a written thing; and written, not with a view of mere communication, but of permanence'.³⁵

If Ruskin's words were apposite then, they are even more so now that they are both proved and disproved. He warned that 'words, if they are not watched, will do deadly work sometimes', and railed against 'the spread of a shallow, blotching, blundering infectious "information," or rather deformation, everywhere... There are masked words abroad, I say, which nobody understands, but which everybody uses...'³⁶

To read *Sesame and Lilies* in an age of information and deformation is a salutary experience. Ruskin's spirit shines through these pronouncements, turning them from dry lectures into pure theatre. 'Passion, or "sensation",' he cries, virtually, 'I am not afraid of the word: still less of the thing... You have heard many outcries against sensation lately, but, I can tell you, it is not less sensation we want, but more'.³⁷ And passion and sensation were telling words to use, for as Ruskin admitted in the 1871 edition of his book, 'I wrote the "Lilies" to please one girl'.³⁸

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It is difficult to reconcile Ruskin's high point of popularity – such celebrity that one could purchase chinaware with his autograph emblazoned on cups and saucers – with the extremity of his artistic and personal expression. Yet more so to contrast the intimate and even witty tutorials of *The Elements of Drawing* ('it is always dangerous to assert anything as a *rule* in matters of art') – with the radical nature of Ruskin's inner beliefs expressed in *Sesame and Lilies*.³⁹ Yet as he made ready to leave London for the Lake District, Ruskin had begun *Fors Clavigera*, his series of letters to the working men of England which charted, in a kind of stream of consciousness, a literary eruption of personal tics, a veritable Tourette's Syndrome of overt sensation. Part reportage, part polemic, cryptic to the point of obscurity at times, *Fors Clavigera* remains one of the most remarkable texts of its own or any other age.

In retrospect, we may see the traces of its obsessional sensibility in 'Lecture One – Of King's Treasures', in *Sesame and Lilies*, in which the text itself turns from black to

red as Ruskin reprints a coroner's report from Spitalfields, one of the many press cuttings that he stored in his drawers, where they multiplied in their power to accuse. In this extract, he quotes verbatim from the case – convened in a local inn – of a pauper's death due to unnatural yet unidentified causes, a desperate scene of human desolation, almost biblical in its retelling: a man dying of deprivation in what was then the richest city in the world. The family had been living on bread and tea, reduced to near-blindness by their work as 'translators' – not of words, but of old boots into 'good ones'. Their work had dried up, yet they refused to have recourse to the workhouse, even in the harshness of winter.

'They got worse and worse till last Friday week, when they had not even a halfpenny to buy a candle. Deceased then lay down on the straw, and said he would not live till morning. – A juror: "You are dying of starvation yourself, and you ought to go into the house until the summer." – Witness: "If we went in, we should be like people dropped from the sky. No one would know us, and we would not have even a room. I could work now if I had food, for my sight would get better."'40 *

*A similar report, 'SHOCKING DEATH FROM STARVATION', is reprinted in *Fors Clavigera*, Letter LXI, 250-252, Vol III]

We should be like people dropped from the sky. Such an image could not escape a man who had inherited a Blakean sense of the visionary. And here in the Lakes – a place defined and darkened by water as much as it is raised and contained by rock, a place both open to the skies and closed in by the earth - here it was possible to imagine Ruskin falling from the sky, an industrial age Icarus; a sky from which those Spitalfield paupers may have dropped, or from which Ruskin saw ice-clouds form over the Old Man of Conistone; a sky that reflected the cerulean blue of the Virgin's mantle or the sky-blue of his mother's coffin or the same blue of his eyes reflected in his necktie; the blue of belief.

By the 1870s, Ruskin's professional achievements were directly counterpointed by the unhappiness of his personal life; for a man of such passions, they could only be irrevocably intertwined. Ruskin's life and work had become dominated by his hopeless love for a woman more than half his age: the 'one girl' for whom he had written *Sesame and Lilies*. Rose La Touche – who as a ten-year-old girl had first wandered 'like a little white statue' through the gardens at Denmark Hill, and whose faerie figure now occupied his dreams - represented the unattainable to the critic. Ironically, she had come to him as prospective student when her mother asked Ruskin to teach her daughter to draw. The result of that first instruction was an unrequited love which echoed Ruskin's overreaching desire for an English utopia.⁴¹



Drawing of Rose La Touche at Brantwood

The grounds of Brantwood are mere managed hills, a vertical series of gardens. Gradually acquiring more and more land, Ruskin extended his estate into these slopes, clearing, digging, planting. Weekend guests were invited to indulge in manual work in the same way as Ruskin's Oxford students – among them, Oscar Wilde - were encouraged to take up road-building. Ascending the 'Hill of Purgatory', they scooped out the earth and stone to create miniature reservoirs. Now, on an October morning,

the clear pools look still and calm; but Ruskin would occasionally instruct a servant to unleash them, flowing in a torrent down to the rocks outside his front door as a kind of watery automaton to entertain his visitors.

In much the same way, Ruskin's thoughts surged through the eccentric pages of his pamphlets. The sheer reach of *Fors Clavigera* reflects the magpie interests of a man fascinated with almost every aspect of his age, and content with none of them. In the four volumes of these published letters, the critic's words turn from dissertations on Italian architecture to the most personal revelations, reflecting his obsessive pursuit of and painful rejection by Rose La Touche. It was as though the editor of a modern tabloid newspaper had suddenly strayed into the library of the Athenaeum ('my literary club here in London,' as Ruskin noted, 'a very comfortable corner house in Pall Mall'.⁴² Random citations from their indices – perhaps the oddest of their own or any other century - give a vague idea of their extraordinary scope, as eclectic as the contents of the cabinets at Brantwood:

- 'Abstinence, is interest its reward? 365'
- 'Alchemy less irrational than modern trade-theories, 317'
- 'Author; his name, Ruskin – Roughskin, 481'
- 'Brutality among lower classes, 19, 31, 120, 303'
- '*Daily Telegraph*, "plays fairer than other papers", 434'
- 'Dinner, the one thing needful, 211'
- 'Dorset butter, 403'
- 'Duckling astray, 24'
- 'Funerals of four kinds, 301-310'
- 'Labour in Utopia, 129-131'
- 'Opium poisoning of infants, 498'
- 'Plague wind (storm cloud of the nineteenth century), 146-148, 234.'
- 'Pyx in a pigsty, 326'
- 'Spiritualism, as a portent or a blasphemy, 234'
- 'Steeple as reversed lightning rods, 47'
- 'Tar and feather punishment, 52, 138'

‘Treachery, not fraud, but cold-heartedness, its crime, 473’

‘Vagabonds, high and low, 142’

‘Vivisection of men, 303’

‘Zoroaster, Magic and Magi, 244, 248, 249’

From faith and belief to art and literature, from politics to natural history and nascent environmentalism, Ruskin railed against everything in equal measure to his positive passions. Expressed in eighty-seven encyclicals, *Fors Clavigera* was both dedicated to stemming the flow of pollution in all its aspects, and to surfing a self-created wave of futurity with the randomness of a modern search engine and the idiosyncratic commentary of an online blog.

Fors Clavigera was a highly personal testament, a declaration of war on all that Ruskin held abhorrent, an exhortation of all he felt pure. But it was also a kind of chemical suspension. This was, after all, a man who modelled glaciers out of egg whites on his hosts’ kitchen table and who saw all nature in his microscopically rendered watercolours of mosses and leaves, yet who looked to the mountains as an unattainable measure of energy. His eclecticism is startlingly modern, almost post-modern, veering from subject to subject with an organic, skittering sensibility.

In one letter – the same one from Matlock in which he first saw the storm cloud, and in which he proposed the buying of land on which to establish his utopian Guild - Ruskin evokes one of the strangest images in nineteenth-century literature, one which remains, even now, unexplained. Discussing the existence of souls 'and if ever any of them haunt places where they have been hurt,' Ruskin declared. 'You may laugh, if you like. I don't believe any one of you would like to live in a room with a murdered man in the cupboard, however well preserved chemically; - even with a sunflower growing out at the top of a head'.^{43*}

* In *Sesame and Lilies*, Ruskin admits to a sympathy, in his ‘enforced and accidental temper, and thoughts of things and people, with Dean Swift’.⁴⁴

Perhaps the Bosch-like horror of this passage shocked the original owner of my edition of *Fors Clavigera*, in which the pages containing that passage remain uncut, emblematic of the impenetrability of their author's mind. (It also occurs to me, as I read those printed pages, how *meant* this text is, how unaccidental, how its mystery survives successive reprintings. What might seem whimsical or even arbitrary was purposefully and continually reproduced throughout Ruskin's life, and beyond.)

Given its unrestrained editorial policy, it was hardly likely that *Fors Clavigera* would be well received by those who traded in an easier sensationalism. On 2 May 1873, the *Daily News* declared that 'Mr Ruskin's *Fors Clavigera* has already become so notorious as a curious magazine of the blunders of a man of genius who has travelled out of his province, that it is perhaps hardly worth while to notice any fresh blunder'.⁴⁵ Characteristically, Ruskin reprinted this comment in *Fors Clavigera*. It was the act of a man intensely self-aware, even self-destructive, reaching out to everything he could see and touch, and much that he could not. Nor is it fanciful to suggest that the violence of Ruskin's expression in *Fors Clavigera*, as in his other projects, was a direct result of and a sublimated displacement of his frustrated love for Rose La Touche.

* * *

More than any other figure, Ruskin represents the implicit contradictions of a High Victorian culture, as a man constrained by a sense of austere duty yet subject to subconscious repression. His disastrous marriage to Effie Gray, which was even then the subject of dark rumour, only underlined the tragedy of his love for Rose La Touche. And as Rose's physical status seemed to evaporate even as he tried to fix upon it, Ruskin turned to his devoted friendship with Georgiana Cowper Temple,* herself a Pre-Raphaelite figure and patron of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. (It was for her and her husband William Cowper Temple, a cabinet minister and illegitimate son of Lord Palmerston, that Rossetti painted *Beata Beatrix*, with all its own overtones of fatal love and psychic suspension.)

* The 1871 edition of *Sesame and Lilies* was dedicated to ‘Phile’ – Ruskin’s pet name for Georgiana.

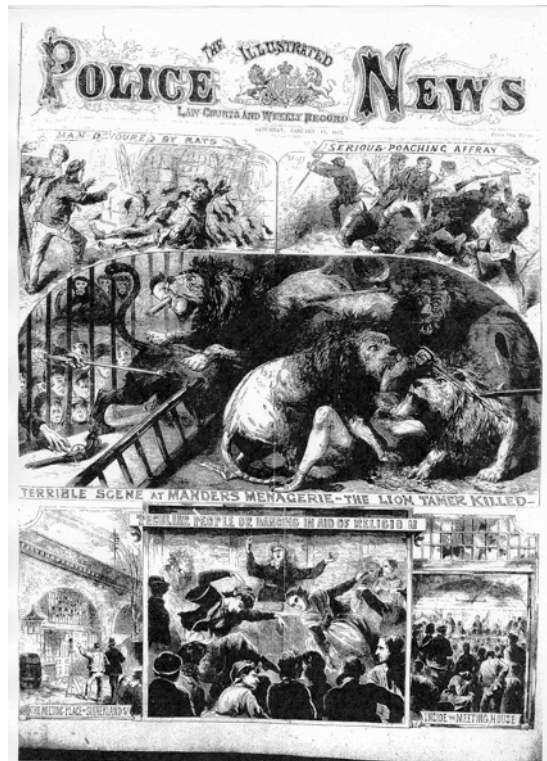
Georgiana attempted to act as go-between in the affair, without success. Matters between Ruskin and his beloved worsened, complicated by Rose’s inability to address her own emotions, and the vehement opposition of her parents to the proposed match; and certainly compromised by the way he chased her around London, then declared, in a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, that she had become insane. The long-anticipated climax came on 25 May 1875 when Rose La Touche died, possibly the result of tuberculosis, anorexia, heart failure or even, in Victorian terms, hysteria. It was another moment of crisis for a man who lived so delicately on his nerves – who some may have diagnosed as hysterical, if not insane himself.

In an age which believed in new energies in the ether, in the animal magnetism of mesmerism, in spirit photography and clairvoyance – where even William Gladstone declared spiritualism to be the greatest scientific advance of the century – Ruskin was inevitably drawn to what became known as Borderland. His reaction to loss was to reclaim Rose – whom he now associated with St Ursula, an early British saint named for her transformative bear-like beginnings* - through the mediums he met at Broadlands, the Cowpers’ gracious eighteenth-century mansion on the edge of the New Forest. Here, in the same place in which he had imagined he and Rose might live in a kind of rural utopia, he was now told by one of those suburban seers of a ‘fair, very tall and graceful’ figure who stooped unseen over his shoulder, ‘as if she were trying to say something’.⁴⁶

* ‘She came into the world wrapped in a hairy mantle,’ as Ruskin tells Ursula’s myth in *Fors Clavigera*, ‘and all men wondered greatly what this might mean.’⁴⁷

At precisely this time, on the other side of the same forest, another remarkable experiment in utopian living was under way. It was a sensational narrative of which Ruskin must have been all too well aware – not least because this group, the New Forest Shakers, formerly known as the Walworth Jumpers, had begun their

metropolitan incarnation in a south London railway arch at the Elephant and Castle, just down the road from Denmark Hill.



Cover of Illustrated Police News

The Shakers had chosen to await the coming of the Millennium at Hordle Grange, on the fringes of the Hampshire forest. They had arrived there in January 1873, one hundred and fifty commutarian celibates led by Mary Ann Girling, an illiterate farm labourer's daughter from Suffolk who claimed to be the female Christ.*

* I explore this story and its strange connections in my book *England's Lost Eden*.⁴⁸

After a series of visions in which she had experienced the appearance of Jesus in the form of a dove in her Ipswich bedroom, Girling became an itinerant preacher, espousing a kind of communistic doctrine to a rural constituency. To become one of her Children of God, her followers were required to forswear sexual relations with their partners, hand over care of their children to the community, yield all their savings to its general use (paid employment was forbidden), and live in expectation of

the imminence of the Second Coming – which their leader represented in her person in the form of bleeding stigmata hidden in her bandaged hands.

Mrs Girling was a kind of bastardised industrial age version of the saints whom Ruskin discussed in *Fors Clavigera*. Her gospel was as rhetorical as Ruskin's; her promise to her followers an extreme version of the utopia he proposed. At the same time as she was gathering support, and publicity, for her millenarian beliefs – preaching to men and women left behind in the irresistible draw of the cities from the countryside, and left insecure by the faltering of faith in an age of Darwin and scientific discoveries - Ruskin was proposing his Guild of St George.

While Mary Ann Girling looked forward to an apocalyptic near future, Ruskin's reactionary utopia looked back to the distant past; the same rural certainties in which Girling's followers had their roots. Discussing the foundation of the Guild in a letter to William Cowper Temple in August 1871, he noted: 'It is *not* to be *Communism*: quite the contrary. The old Feudal system applied to do good instead of evil - to save life, instead of destroy... as the system gets power, I hope to see it alter *laws* all over England...' ⁴⁹

A month earlier in *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin had outlined his ambitions in a precise accountancy. He promised an initial installment of £14,000, part of which would fund 'a Mastership of Drawing under the Art Professorship at Oxford, which I can't do rightly for less than £5,000', with the remainder reserved for the establishment of 'our society'.

The money is not to be spent in feeding Woolwich infants with gunpowder. It is to be spent in dressing the earth and keeping it, - in feeding human lips, - in clothing human bodies, - in kindling human souls... the Trustees shall buy with it any kind of land offered them at just price in Britain. Rock, moor, marsh, or sea-shore – it matters not what, so be it British ground, and secured to us. ⁵⁰

In the light of Ruskin's 'colony' – proposing to buy land for that purpose even as the New Forest Shakers' tenure on their millenarian commune was severed - it is a shame that we do not have his reaction to their story, which ran in every national newspaper, from *The Times* to the *Manchester Guardian*. However, we do know that three of Ruskin's close friends – William and Georgiana Cowper Temple and Auberon Herbert – were actively involved in the sect's predicament, and instrumental in its resolution; or rather, the lack of it.

In December 1874, the Shakers were evicted by bailiffs after they had defaulted on the mortgage payments for Hordle Grange. In protest, led by Mrs Girling, they refused to leave the area, initially setting up a roadside encampment, then moving to a nearby field where they erected a series of huts. Lurid images of these scenes appeared in the *Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic*. Some of these engravings were based on sketches made on the spot; others appear to have been made from photographs.



THE SHAKERS' ENCAMPMENT AT HORDLE, NEAR LYMPINGTON, HAMPSHIRE: SCENE IN VASE LANE.



THE SHAKERS' ENCAMPMENT AT HORDLE, NEAR LYMPINGTON, HAMPSHIRE: DWELLINGS OF THE FAMILIES.

Images from the Illustrated London News and The Graphic

Neither was an art of which Ruskin could approve. 'These illustrated papers do you definite mischief,' he told his readers, 'and the more you look at them, the worse for you.'⁵¹ In *The Elements of Drawing* he lamented 'the cheap publications of the day' and 'common woodcuts' so hurriedly prepared .[26] And in *Fors Clavigera*, he lambasted popular art: 'lower forms of modern literature and art - Gustave Doré's paintings for instance, - are the corruption, in national decrepitude, of this pessimistic method of thought... they are neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill.'⁵² He also disagreed with Charles Dodgson that the camera was capable of producing works of art, directing Dodgson to a back issue of *Fors Clavigera* (although the latter said he couldn't afford the tenpence to buy it):

You think it a great triumph to make the sun draw brown landscapes for you. That was also a discovery, and some day may be useful. But the sun had drawn landscapes before for you, not in brown, but in green, and blue, and all imaginable colours, here in England. Not one of you ever looked at them then; not one of you cares for the loss of them now, when you have shut out the sun with smoke, so that he can draw nothing more, except brown blots through a hole in a box.⁵³

Ruskin's storm cloud draws over these scenes; he may have recollected Turner's last words, 'The sun is God'. Yet he believed in the value of photographs as architectural records and regarded himself as a pioneer in that respect. In his autobiography, *Praeterita*, he wrote that 'the plates sent to me in Oxford were certainly the first examples of the sun's drawing that were ever seen in Oxford, and, I believe, the first sent to England'.⁵⁴



John Ruskin by Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson)
© National Portrait Gallery, London

What would Ruskin have made of a world in which everyone is a photographer and the ubiquity of the instant image is all, just as every scrap of personal experience is mediated and immediately available? For his part, he created his own virtual media, re-presenting the social issues of his age in a magic lantern show of his own devising: a series of vivid, almost manic evocations which have the air of unfettered response to self-declared agenda, breathlessly delivered and immaculately performed:

Nor are we without great and terrible signs of supernatural calamity, no less in grievous changes and deterioration of climate, than in forms of mental disease, claiming distinctly to be necromantic, and, as far as I have examined the evidence relating to them, actually manifesting themselves as such. For observe you, my friends, countrymen, and brothers - *Either*, at this actual moment of your merry Christmas-time, that has truly come to pass, in falling London, which your greatest Englishman wrote of falling Rome, 'the sheeted dead do squeak and gibber in your English streets,' *Or*, such a system of loathsome imposture and cretinous blasphemy is current among all classes of

England and America, as makes the superstition of all past ages divine truth in comparison.⁵⁵

Ruskin was speaking of spiritualism - an art, or a deception, of which Mary Ann Girling herself stood accused. It was, coincidentally, Christmas when the New Forest Shakers were evicted. The sentiment of the season lent their plight, in the eyes of the press and public alike, a greater poignancy. Vociferous protests were made at their treatment. The Cowper Temples and Auberon Herbert lent material and financial support to Mrs Girling; questions were asked in Parliament. Critics and newspaper leaders concluded these men and women may have been deluded, but that religious freedom was a right to be upheld in a modern Britain. (It was no coincidence that, during her sojourn in south London, Girling had been threatened with tarring and feathering by local women who suspected her, if not of witchcraft, then of mesmerising their men folk into joining her heretical crusade.)

It is hard to believe that such newspaper cuttings did not find their way into Ruskin's drawer. Even in the remote fastness of Brantwood, to which he had retreated, he would have read this story, pondered its reverberations and, perhaps, taken offence at these images. They are truly untruthful, for they blur the boundaries between the recording eye of the camera and precision vision of the artist. They are neither one thing nor another, and as such are infected with the impurity of modern media. They do their mischief, 'and the more you look at them, the worse for you'.



In contrast, four newly found photographs have, for me, a capacity to shock, a documentary time-delay ready to explode our conception of that time, that place, those people. Taken by a local photographer, Richard Henry Hughes, they show the Shaker encampment in October 1886. Prints were lodged by Hughes for copyright reasons at the Stationers' Hall, hence their remarkable survival in the Public Record Office, where they have lain unseen until now.

Their absence for more than a century lends them a powerful charge. These are highly evocative, oddly innocent images. The fact that they are almost, but not quite empty of human figures – of the one hundred and fifty souls who had followed Mrs Girling – only reinforces the tragedy behind them, of the acolytes absent from the confining, selecting frame.

Many of those disciples ailed under their putative messiah's command. At least a dozen died of consumption and other conditions brought on by the parlous situation forced on them by Girling's stubborn insistence. She promised them immortality, to be achieved via their dancing rituals, which some claimed were conducted naked or 'sky-clad', like a latterday coven, and during which they would spin into semi-consciousness out of which they would emerge re-born, never to die again. Mrs Girling explained those followers who had died as lacking faith. But on 18 September 1886, shortly before these images were made, she herself succumbed to cancer of the womb, for which she declined to accept medical treatment.



Shakers' Camp, Hordle, Lymington 1886



Mrs Girling's House, Shakers' Camp, Hordle, Lymington 1886



Shakers' Camp, Hordle, Lymington 1886



Shakers' Camp, Hordle, Lymington 1886

This story haunts these photographs. Their bright but ancient light fades even as I look at them, the ‘sun’s drawing’ indeed. The bare, unyielding earth looks hardly ‘good for seed’, either. The plain wooden huts have an institutional air, contrary to the freedom their inhabitants were promised (although the pre-fabricated look of the structures, reminiscent of the self-assembly ‘tin churches’ of the period, indicates that they may have been donated by a benefactor). They seem to echo other camps, which would be put to lethal effect in coming decades. These Shakers (the word itself seems to acknowledge their frailty, both physical and mental, the symptom of their religious agitation) were kept in human barns, people to be processed on the path to the paradise their leader had promised them. Instead they died of disease and starvation.

Caught in his own rhetoric and frustrated by his own inadequacy, Ruskin’s polemic was potent and impotent. ‘Whose fault is it, you bronzed husbandmen, that through all your furrowed England, children are dying of famine?’ he declared.⁵⁶ His obsessions speak of another unresolved story. Destitution, death and destruction haunted him. He seemed to foresee the mushroom cloud of the twentieth century, and the conflicted climate of the twenty-first. He predicted the compromised integrity of the natural world with which we live today, just as he campaigned against vivisection in the same city in which similar protests would be voiced a century later, and wrote of a ‘dominion in love over the lower creatures’.⁵⁷ It was all one to him.

I thought of Ruskin earlier this year, when a cloud of volcanic ash, invisible here in the south of England, had the paradoxical effect of clearing the skies of their airplane contrails - modern versions of the steam trains that conducted fools from Buxton and Brixton. For those few days, the birds were heard over Heathrow, distant echoes of the nightingale in that Denmark Hill dawn. It was a false dawn, of course, as those deluded birds would discover when the air traffic returned, making the temporary peace seem all the more cruel.

* * *



Ruskin's bedroom at Brantwood

In the winter of 1878, Ruskin was forced to move out of his bedroom at Brantwood, through whose latticed lantern window he had watched the waters of the Lake, a human camera obscura concentrating all vision and light through that glass aperture. In what must have been a terrifying episode, over the night of 22-23 February, he had begun to see demons in the damp patches on the ceiling and demons on his bedpost as he lay there, overhung by his gilt framed Turners.

‘It was wonderful to me that I should go so heartily and headingly mad,’ he told Thomas Carlyle, his great hero and mentor, ‘for you know I had been priding myself on my peculiar sanity!’ He was convinced that the devil had come for him, and ‘the only way to meet him was to remain awake waiting for him all through the night, and combat him in a naked condition. I therefore threw off all my clothing, although it was a bitterly cold February night, and there awaited the Evil One...’ He marched up and down the room and at dawn – a desperate dawn to mirror that witnessed eight years before – went to the window, only to find a large black cat springing out at him

from behind the mirror. ‘Persuaded that the foul fiend was here at last in his own person... I grappled with it in both my hands, and gathering all the strength that was in me, I flung it with all my might and main against the floor...’⁵⁸ Later that morning Ruskin was found, naked and deranged, by his valet.



Spider at Brantwood

‘And it was all the more wonderful yet to find the madness made up of things so dreadful, out of things so trivial,’ he told Carlyle. It was as though reality had photographed these fantasies in his physical surroundings.

One of the most provoking and disagreeable of the spectres was developed out of the firelight on my mahogany bed-post; and my fate, for all futurity, seemed continually to turn on the humour of dark personages who were materialy nothing more than the stains of damp on the ceiling. But the sorrowfulest part of the matter was, and is, that while my illness at Matlock encouraged me by all its dreams in after work, this one had done nothing but humiliate me and terrify me; and leaves me nearly unable to speak any more except of the natures of stones and flowers.⁵⁹

Ruskin never slept in that room again. He had escaped the labyrinth of London, only to find a new maze closing around him in Brantwood; a world inhabited, not by a half-man, half-bull bellowing in its hunger for human flesh, but a nightmare of his own making, like the pages of *Fors Clavigera*, with demons and gargoyles in its margins as on a gothic cathedral or in a medieval manuscript. Ruskin wrote of Theseus as ‘the first true Ruler of beasts: for his mystic contest with the Minotaur is the fable through which the Greeks taught what they knew of the more terrible and mysterious relations between the lower creatures and man’.⁶⁰ As a boy he had been afraid of nothing, ‘either ghosts, thunder, or beasts; and one of the nearest approaches to insubordination which I was ever tempted into as a child, was in a passionate effort to get leave to play with the lion’s cubs in Wombwell’s menagerie’.⁶¹ Yet now his courage failed him – confronted by a cat.

Down at the jetty, we wait for the boat to return. As we push out onto the open water, I think of Ruskin in his boat, *Jumping Jenny*, designed by himself of course, with his dog, Bramble, lying down in the middle of the lake to look up at the sky.



Moss and branches in the garden at Brantwood

The nervous energy that fuelled Ruskin’s life had finally faltered. Yet for all that, he had been freed by his urge to create, to attempt an immortal marking. Unconstrained as an ivy’s tendril or an eroding mountain, his powerful vision was incarnate in the rocks and plants he studied as much as his sense of art or architecture. Here in Coniston were the stones he had known since infancy; as if their talismanic power had drawn him here. And for all his dark thoughts, his determination continued to the end, an optimistic belief in the human spirit - his most enduring legacy.

...We are still industrious to the last hour of the day, though we add the gambler's fury to the labourer's patience; we are still brave to the death, though incapable of discerning true cause for battle, and are still true in affliction to our own flesh, to the death, as the sea monsters are, and the rock-eagles. And there is hope for a nation while this can still be said of it.

Sesame and Lilies⁶²

Philip Hoare, Southampton, 2010

With thanks to Howard Hull, Stephen Wildman and Rupert Shepherd for their comments, and to Sarah Newman for discovering the photographs of the New Forest Shakers' encampment.

Notes

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- ² Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, 70
- ³ and following, Ruskin, Introduction, 'Educational Series', op cit
- ⁴ *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, edited by Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse, Vol II, Oxford at Clarendon Press, 1959, 526
- ⁵ Hilton, op cit, 571-2
- ⁶ JR, Introduction, 'Educational Series', op cit
- ⁷ Hilton, op cit, 204
- ⁸ ibid, 236
- ⁹ JR to Charles Eliot Norton, quoted *The Elements of Drawing: Illustrated Edition*, ed Bernard Dunstan, A&C Black, London, 1991, 18
- ¹⁰ ibid, 14
- ¹¹ ibid, 18
- ¹² ibid, 19
- ¹³ ibid, 22
- ¹⁴ ibid, 24
- ¹⁵ JR, *The Elements of Drawing*, Letter I, Smith, Elder, & Co, London 1857, Google Books, [accessed 11 Oct 2010], 1-2
- ¹⁶ J. M. Parrish, John R. Crossland, Angelo S. Rappoport (editors), *The British Encyclopaedia*, Odhams Press, 1933, Vol 9, 158
- ¹⁷ JR, *Modern Painters IV*, quoted Howard Hull *Living Waves* exhibition text, Brantwood, 2010
- ¹⁸ Hilton, op cit, 17
- ¹⁹ JR, *Fors Clavigera*, Vol I, George Allen, London, 1902, 146-7
- ²⁰ ibid, 92
- ²¹ ibid, 385
- ²² JR, *Sesame and Lilies*, George Allen, London, 1902, 153
- ²³ JR, *Fors Clavigera*, op cit, Vol III, 431
- ²⁴ JR, Preface, *Unto this Last*, George Allen, London, 1890, xviii-xix
- ²⁵ ibid, 2-3
- ²⁶ ibid, 4
- ²⁷ ibid, 32
- ²⁸ ibid, 40-41
- ²⁹ ibid, 42-43
- ³⁰ JR, *Sesame and Lilies*, op cit, 12

- ³¹ *ibid*
- ³² *ibid*, 13 & 16
- ³³ Michael Bracewell to the author, in conversation, 7 October 2010
- ³⁴ JR, *Sesame and Lilies*, *op cit*, 17
- ³⁵ *ibid*, 18
- ³⁶ *ibid*, 24
- ³⁷ *ibid*, 36
- ³⁸ *ibid*, Preface, xxxiii
- ³⁹ *The Elements of Drawing: Illustrated Edition*, *op cit*, 43
- ⁴⁰ JR, *Sesame and Lilies*, *op cit*, 50
- ⁴¹ JR, *Praeterita*, George Allen, London, 1900, 104
- ⁴² JR, *Fors Clavigera*, *op cit*, Vol 1, 457
- ⁴³ *ibid*, 144
- ⁴⁴ JR, Preface, *Sesame and Lilies*, *op cit*, xxxv
- ⁴⁵ JR, Letter 30 June 1873, The Library Edition, ed. E.T.Cook and Alexander Wedderburn The Works of John Ruskin, 39 vols, London, 1903-12 Vol 27, 560
- ⁴⁶ JR, Diary, 21 December 1875, The Diaries of John Ruskin, Vol I, Oxford at Clarendon Press, 1959
- ⁴⁷ JR, *Fors Clavigera*, *op cit*, Vol III, 437
- ⁴⁸ Philip Hoare, *England's Lost Eden: Adventures in a Victorian Utopia*, Fourth Estate, London, 2005
- ⁴⁹ JR, Letter 175, 4 August 1871, John Lewis Bradley, ed. The Letters of John Ruskin to Lord and Lady Mount-Temple, Ohio State University Press, Ohio, 1964, 314
- ⁵⁰ JR, *Fors Clavigera*, *op cit*, Vol 1, 157
- ⁵¹ *ibid*, Vol II, 83
- ⁵² JR, Letter 34 Oct 1873, II, *Fors Clavigera*, Vol III, *Works XXVII*, 235
- ⁵³ Hilton, *op cit*, 478-9
- ⁵⁴ *ibid*, 479
- ⁵⁵ JR, Letter 34 Oct 1873, *Fors Clavigera*, Vol III, *Works XXVII*, 488
- ⁵⁶ JR, Letter 89 Sept 1880, *Fors Clavigera*, *Works XXIX*, 408-9
- ⁵⁷ JR, *Fors Clavigera*, (1902), *op cit*, Vol IV, 41
- ⁵⁸ Hilton, *op cit*, 667
- ⁵⁹ JR to Thomas Carlyle, 23 July 1878, Brantwood display
- ⁶⁰ JR, *Fors Clavigera*, (1902), *op cit*, Vol I, 446-7
- ⁶¹ *ibid*, Vol III, 110
- ⁶² JR, *Sesame and Lilies*, *op cit*, 42