

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12867-4 - Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention

Sheila Emerson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

This book began with a desire to hold in one place a series of recollections about becoming an artist and a series of childhood works in which art itself begins. My impulse to bring these things together did not start with my readings of Ruskin, but was quickened by his eagerness to provoke it. To my questions about the relationship between an artist's reminiscences and juvenilia, or about what this relationship in one artist's life has to say about another's, the well-known works of Ruskin answered with a profusion of evidence that age and youth are always consonant in the greatest careers, and that such consonance is always exemplary. Yet as I tried to move back and forth between Ruskin's conclusions and his own first writings, I was held up by language that registers drastic differences between them. These differences have become the pivot on which my argument turns. It is they, more than any claims of continuity, that have brought me to the conviction that in precise and distinctive ways, Ruskin learned what he later taught – whether or not about himself, whether or not about art – from how he learned to write.

What makes this book unlike others about Ruskin is its concentration not only on how he learned to write but more specifically on the language with which he represents his learning. The course of my chapters is in this sense chronological, cleaving not necessarily to the sequence of his training or to the order in which signal emphases first appeared in his prose, but to the order in which they gained the prominence of self-conscious predilections. The result is a narrative each of whose two parts moves from works that appeared early in Ruskin's life to those that came later. But in the first part my emphasis is on Ruskin's beginnings as a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12867-4 - Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention

Sheila Emerson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

writer; the second part ranges more equally over early, middle, and later works, then concentrates attention near and at the end of Ruskin's career. The first part starts with the prodigiously inventive child who looks ahead to what he will achieve; the second part ends with the adult who looks to his past for proof that he is not and has never been inventive. Far from being a simple about-face, Ruskin's reinvention of his genesis is a culmination and extension of the art that he mastered in youth. His very attempts to prove that his prose is not creative – that it is instead the most uninventively truthful of criticisms – are among the most remarkable acts of creation in all of Victorian prose. And they are as vital to the history of discriminations between critical and creative writing in the twentieth century as they were in the nineteenth.<sup>1</sup>

It is a premise of this book that the forces which made Ruskin a critic have been valuably attended to by others, as have the social and cultural conditions which made it complicated for any Victorian writer of non-fiction to identify him or herself as an artist. In considering the complexities of Ruskin's identity I have given most space to his early writing, because it has not received the attention it deserves for its own merits, or for what it discloses about the formation of prose that is as varied and powerful as any in English. And this formation itself reveals the extent to which it was the very experience of writing which shaped and was the basis of the works by which Ruskin is known. His first prose and poetry provide at least as much information about this experience as survives in the juvenilia of any other nineteenth-century writer – or possibly of anyone in any period – who grew up to write as much about children as Ruskin did. What therefore needs stressing is not only the relationship between Ruskin's accounts of the formation of artists and the accounts that he left of his own, but also the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12867-4 - Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention

Sheila Emerson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

relationship between both of them and what he actually produced as a boy. These cross-references are predictably and unpredictably complicated by the fact that he never outgrew the influence of the ways in which things had mattered to him as a child. The subtlety and self-consciousness of this influence are easily lost in apothegms isolated from his young adulthood. If it is “a fact more universally acknowledged than enforced or acted upon, that all great painters . . . have been great only in their rendering of what they had seen and felt from early childhood” (3.229),<sup>2</sup> that may be because the spectator still imagines too collective or generic a childhood in *Modern Painters* I, or returns to some “fact . . . universally acknowledged” rather than to the child’s painting of it. But the search for Ruskin’s beginnings brings us face to face with renderings of how he learned to render what he saw and felt as a child. Two large volumes in the Library Edition, several more published later – plus boxes of loose and bound sheets of manuscripts at The Ruskin Galleries, Yale, Princeton, The Morgan Library and elsewhere – are extraordinary resources for anyone interested in the acquisition of linguistic skills in the early nineteenth century, and in the development of a child prodigy into an adult with a public career. Ruskin’s letters, diaries, travelogues, poems, plays, and stories tend to corroborate his claims that he was schooled by Rousseau, William Wordsworth, Scott, Byron, and Percy Shelley; they much more pointedly show why and how he recreated that schooling for others. And it is Ruskin’s early works that make most intelligible what will be his own enormously influential ideas about childhood, education, and artistic invention.

It is partly because these ideas appear in works which are familiar that the second part of the book is shorter than the first. I have been able to move more quickly where others have taken their time. But the differences in length are more directly a consequence of my determination to follow a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12867-4 - Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention

Sheila Emerson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

wide-ranging and detailed reading of his early writing with a precise concentration on salient emphases that emerge. Of course it would have been impossible to keep these emphases in focus had I attempted to write about his later works with anything like the continuous attention I give to the dozens of pieces of Ruskin's juvenilia. But the attempt was unnecessary in any case. For a continuous reading of his later works showed me that it is just where the adult Ruskin reflects on elements of the writing process, or on his early experiments with it, that the emphases I pursued were most tellingly involved. It is not that all other passages are immaterial; on the contrary, they are the material out of which Ruskin makes the designs of his writing about writing. It is this interdependency that obviates the risk of losing Ruskin's designs in the details on which I focus in much of this book, or his details in the designs on which I focus in the rest. Design is the composition of details.

Behind my changes in focus are principles – that two objects at different distances cannot be seen distinctly at the same time; that the closest look can no more render everything visible than the longest range can rub traces of anything out; that abstraction is not separation from matter but a seizing upon the essential elements of it – which readers will recognize as Ruskin's. I hope to make them recognize two things in addition. First, that Ruskin's aesthetic principles, which have often been connected to the style of his most familiar works, were developed partly in response to his earliest experiments in writing. And second, that the application of his principles to his prose contradicts his pronouncements as a man but not his achievements as a child.

. . .

Ruskin's intricate response to the child in himself is not typical of nineteenth-century writing about childhood. This

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12867-4 - Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention

Sheila Emerson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

is especially clear where he sounds most indebted to Wordsworth. When Ruskin undertakes to defend, against the authority of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the scrupulous rendering of specific detail in landscape painting, he declares that "There is a singular sense in which the child may peculiarly be said to be father of the man." In this 1844 adaptation, Wordsworth's language is a patrimony which allows Ruskin to grant the authority of patrilineal law to the artist's inheritance of his own past self. Ruskin's detailing of the singularity and peculiarity of this process opens up other differences from Wordsworth as well. First of all, Ruskin's child is not only the father of the artist but is already the artist: "the perfect child" is the beginning of art. He is simultaneously the "infancy" of criticism. Then the "absolute beginner in art" and the "Infants in judgment" of it yield to a "middle age" which loses hold of "a truth . . . which the grasp of manhood cannot retain." Only in "utmost age" will the man regain the "light and careless stroke, which in many points will far more resemble that of his childhood than of his middle age." For

the truth bears so much semblance of error, the last stage of the journey to the first, that every feeling which guides to it is checked in its origin. The rapid and powerful artist necessarily looks with such contempt on those who see minutiae of detail rather than grandeur of impression, that it is almost impossible for him to conceive of the great last step in art by which both become compatible. (3.30-32)

Although writing anonymously, trying to sound older than he is, the twenty-four-year-old Ruskin could no more be mistaken for a man at the end of his career than for a precocious child. The middle years which he occupies are cut out from under him by his argument, whereas the thirty-two-year-old Wordsworth had affirmed his present (as well as his future) by connecting it to his past. The authority that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12867-4 - Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention

Sheila Emerson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Ruskin borrows from “My Heart Leaps Up” is ultimately used to authorize the disowning of his art: writing with prodigious confidence in his mastery, Ruskin denies the master who has just emerged from youth.

Ruskin both exerts and survives this self-denial by redrawing chronological lines. There is a key to his new arrangement in an unpublished passage from the manuscript of *Praeterita*, in which he vilifies a middle period of his own history as a visual artist – and locates it between the ages of seventeen and twenty or twenty-one (35.621–27). When one turns from his scorn for his drawings of these years to the writings he completed during the same period of benighted “conventionalism,” one finds an essay that is surely in his mind when he denigrates the young man of whom Wordsworth’s child is the father. The context of both pieces is a celebration of the mature works of Turner. In “A Reply to ‘Blackwood’s’ Criticism of Turner,” written when he was seventeen, Ruskin has already fixed on the artist in whom “the means employed appear more astonishingly inadequate to the effect produced than in any other master” (3.637), and anticipated what the later passage will define as the single distinction between the work of childhood and utmost age: that “the consummate effect” is “wrought out by . . . apparently inadequate means” (3.31). But in the 1836 essay, Turner’s consummate knowledge of landscape is put into parentheses, to leave more space for his painting “from nature, and pretty far from it, too”: “he rushes through the aetherial dominions of the world of his own mind,” and “changes and combines” what he finds there into images that are seen nowhere else (3.637–39). Ruskin does not quote himself seven years later, when such Shelleyan sentiments have already become alarming to him. But it is partly the memory of his earlier devotion to reflexivity and self-projection which moves him to ridicule those who

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12867-4 - Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention

Sheila Emerson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

believe that things are “‘convertible by the mind into what they are not,’” and those who admire “combinations whose highest praise is that they are impossible” (3.52, 25). What Ruskin is rejecting is his own young manhood.

As we will see in detail later on, this rejection includes not only his romantic reflexivity but also the sexual scenario that went along with it. In the earlier of the pieces I have been comparing, “Maga” (as *Blackwood’s Magazine* was nicknamed) is figured as a female who has grievously surrendered “the magic ring of her authority” to a male reviewer who violates her “maiden[hood]” when he impugns the virgins of the painter Murillo (3.635–36). But Ruskin’s beloved Turner is proof against the defiled and the defiler – in some moments eclipsing them with a self-generated light, in others shining like a moon which will never “bate of her brightness, or aberrate from the majesty of her path” (3.640). Of course Turner is still being figured as a beloved woman long after both this writing and *Modern Painters I*. In *Fors Clavigera*, for example, Ruskin says he relates to Turner as a child does to its “father or mother” (29.539). In 1852, trying to overcome his father’s reluctance to spend very large sums of money, Ruskin sends him a letter whose language implies that his urgency to possess Turner’s pictures is sexual, and that it competes with his feelings for his father.

But do you count for nothing the times out of time you see me looking at them morning and evening, and when I take them up to sleep with? I have fifty pounds’ worth of pleasure out of every picture in my possession *every week* that I have it. . . . if I should outlive you, the pictures will be with me wherever I am.

(36.134)

As is suggested by these passages written before and after, the competitive and homoerotic dimension of Ruskin’s relations to artistic fathering are more fully suppressed when he is

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12867-4 - Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention

Sheila Emerson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

twenty-four, and bent on subordinating the “middle age” of artists to their “manly, broad” and pious achievements (3.32).

What is most remarkable about Ruskin’s suppressions and evasions and denials is their preserving so much of his history intact: his very standoffishness from himself is the bearer of intimate communications. In fact nearly all of his expressions of self-alienation are eventually continuous with self-affirmation. The two come closest on those many occasions when he is introducing or annotating his earlier work. To take the nearest example to hand, his 1844 quotation of Wordsworth’s line about father and child appears in writing that is literally a reassertion of himself, the preface to the second edition of *Modern Painters* I. He was particularly provoked to write this preface by an attack on the first edition of his book in *Blackwood’s Magazine*. In private, his animus is suggestively competitive and phallic: “Put my rod nicely in pickle for *Blackwood*,” Ruskin remarks in his diary while working up his rejoinder.<sup>3</sup> As he rightly guessed, his anonymous adversary was the very man whose previous attack on Turner had provoked his 1836 “Reply to ‘Blackwood’s’ Criticism of Turner” – which was not only the beginning of *Modern Painters*, as his editors point out (3.xviii), but also a record of literary and sexual ambitions during the years that came before. So his 1844 preface is a reading not only of the source of *Modern Painters* but also of its fathering – and mothering. It is a reading that registers, even as it erases, the emotional and physical contests behind inherited images of parenting.

Nineteenth-century pieties about the ties between children and adults, or about their sad severance through time, are revised by the passage of experience from the past into Ruskin’s present text. Not that he never makes use of clichés:



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12867-4 - Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention

Sheila Emerson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

in fact he is so far from concealing the currency of his remarks that he repeatedly reminds his readers that the importance of childhood has been (to use a phrase I have already quoted) “universally acknowledged.” Under cover of this acknowledgment, Ruskin is able to retain the currency while adjusting its value. So the veil of familiarity may purposively cling to his claims that “the whole difference between a man of genius and other men, it has been said a thousand times, and most truly, is that the first remains in great part a child” (11.66) – or that experience and education and industrialization and urbanity all make the survival of genius unlikely. But if we push past Ruskin’s resistance and look closely at what lies behind the histories he has written of artists, including himself, we face an unfamiliarly sharp image of what it is in children’s beginnings that makes for their ending as artists. Or not ending as artists. For Ruskin lays out the stages of an artist’s development and of the progress of art, only to declare himself powerless before the unutterableness and unteachableness of what they have achieved: the glories and the dangers of artistic self-expression.

How are we to cross the breach between these assertions of inadequacy and his own prodigious past? What Ruskin says is that a man’s earliest and latest opinions and works of art will “coincide, though on different grounds” (3.31). Coincidence comes only through difference. Here in the preface to the second edition of *Modern Painters I*, Ruskin makes his case by pointing to the different stages in the artist’s representation of landscape. Forty-two years later, in *Praeterita*, it is discontinuities in the landscape itself that make visible the continuity between youth and age:

But so stubborn and chemically inalterable the laws of the prescription were, that now, looking back from 1886 to that brook shore of 1837, whence I could see the whole of my youth, I find

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12867-4 - Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention

Sheila Emerson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

myself in nothing whatsoever *changed*. Some of me is dead, more of me stronger. I have learned a few things, forgotten many; in the total of me, I am but the same youth, disappointed and rheumatic.

(35.220)

“Different grounds” become the grounds of his recognition of the future of his past. Things he has forgotten are subordinated by his syntax, but without having learned what to forget, he would not see that he is “in nothing whatsoever *changed*”: the middle ground must drop out if extremities are to coincide.

Ruskin’s certainty about what to subordinate lies behind his confidence in putting disparate materials together, whether in describing his own life or the history of art. Invention, he implies, has nothing to do with it. As he claims in the appendix to *Modern Painters IV*, a properly “Logical Education” would free any English youth from “the most pitiable and practically hurtful weakness[ ] of the modern English mind, its usual inability to grasp the connection between any two ideas which have elements of opposition in them, as well as of connection” (6.482). Yet to pursue the relationship among his ideas is to recover what he is silent about when he looks back on his own development: an art that makes connections on the site of opposition.

. . .

If the unevenness of Ruskin’s “grounds” forces his reader across the lines that ordinarily delimit chronology and formal disciplines such as verse and prose, it also allows for a vista on the development of critical methodology itself. What becomes visible is that the very means of reading Ruskin as an artist lead into the argument about how he reads himself. The method partakes of and subsumes the material.

Consider, from this point of view, the method of reading back and forth between Ruskin’s reminiscences and his