1

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Introduction

John Ruskin (1819–1900), critic of art and society, has a habit of exposing cultural assumptions. Certainly, he allows readers to see some of the commonest assumptions in our own culture – at a popular level – concerning how we view the past and about how to value the work of the mind. Few writers from the nineteenth century prompt contemporary readers to summon up the language of 'relevance' more than he. Ruskin trips the switch on a journalistic habit of requiring historical thinkers and authors to speak directly to the present in order to be worth reading. Ruskin, in these terms, is easy to describe as valuable in the twenty-first century because he is, to use that frustrating word that is seeping into education in the humanities, 'relatable'. He attracts the nouns and adjectives of a man of ideas who was apparently on a higher plane – a 'visionary', a 'prophet', a 'sage' – who still has things to say despite having died more than a century ago. We can apparently value him for being a little like us.

Ruskin is 'relevant' to us for real reasons, to be sure. He cared about the dehumanising effects of modern labour practices; about the damage to human relations that the single-minded pursuit of money can cause. He was bothered by a lack of concern for the aesthetic achievements of history, the natural world, the legacy of good ideas. He 'prophesied' climate change – the quotation marks are there because the category of 'prophesy', like the categories of 'anticipation' or 'prefiguring', needs some substantial conceptual underpinning – and he was pained by the degradation of the environment. Ruskin thought highly of things made by hand rather than by machines. In turn he reminds us to be in touch with the planet, with its materials, and to take responsibility for what is physically around us; to take responsibility for things we have made and others have made for us. Ruskin, in 1948, was the 'prophet of the good life'.[1] He told readers in his own day, as much as now, that there are matters more important – as Ruskin said in his lecture, 'Traffic', in Bradford on 21 April 1864 – than 'getting on'.[2] He informs us that we are too busy merely making money. And we do not

know – to borrow mischievously the title of the United Kingdom's *Financial Times* weekend supplement – how to spend it. Ruskin remains, in these terms, a man with his finger on our feverish pulse, knowing what we have done to ourselves and the world.

Do we need 'authorities', though, to reassure us that it is acceptable to have doubts about *The Way We Live Now*? Ruskin's work – for those readers who care about him – can seem a little like sacred scripture: his texts are easy to believe without inquiring further. And, also, his work can be treated a little as the scriptures sometimes are as a helpful back-up to our own assumptions, values, and prejudices. He lends cultural capital, some long-bearded gravity, to present anxieties about, say, the money markets or the wrecking of the natural world. His words somehow make those worries more legitimate or worth taking seriously because they can claim his posthumous approval. One of the challenges that both energises and dogs the serious study of John Ruskin is that readers can have too much faith in him. And part – but not all – of that problem is that faith can outrun knowledge, or at least that faith can be in a complicated relationship with knowledge. One of the most striking contrasts in this collection is that between Nicholas Shrimpton's account of Ruskin's High Tory politics (Chapter 8) that Ruskin absorbed from his father at the beginning of his life and Stuart Eagles's analysis (Chapter 17) of the inspiration Ruskin's work gave to the Labour movement at the end of it. Eagles considers a history of reading, of drawing inspiration from ideas that changed as they have travelled through time, from ideas that altered from their origins as they entered the thoughts and imaginations of later readers.

Ruskin, for almost everyone, is too capacious to read entirely; a historian of the remaining fragments of the past, he is mostly read in pieces. He is difficult to see steadily and to see whole. And his own capacity for saying things that are, or at least appear to be, contradictory complicates further the business of trying to understand him. Ruskin changes his mind because he thinks hard and long. He endeavours to nuance or refine what he meant earlier, to revise what he had initially thought because now he knows more. The life-long development of his thoughts is so fully documented in his voluminous writing – not least in self-critical footnotes and prefaces that he appends to earlier published work in later editions – that readers can come away bewildered by what appears to be mercurial changefulness. Ruskin, in truth, is rarely mercurial. He is a remarkable commentator on his own continuing education. He persistently revises what he thought he knew, aspiring to understand the revelations amid which he lived. *Modern Painters* (1843–60) is a journey, not a book. Changefulness comes from emotion, too. Ruskin is a writer from the heart. In turn, his words – in

both public and private – are dependent on his mood, which could sometimes enter the foothills of despair and once or twice reached far into darkness. The audacity of the political letters of *Fors Clavigera* (1871–84) derives partly from the candour with which Ruskin permitted his most dismal, angriest, wittiest, or simply strangest states of mind to enter the public world of print.

Often enough, what looks like inconsistency in Ruskin's work is actually Ruskin thinking aloud. In a far more serious way than Oscar Wilde meant when he described the novelist George Moore, Ruskin conducted his education in public. He can be read as dogmatic and he was once, in the preface to *Modern Painters* III (1856), obliged dogmatically to say 'I am *not* dogmatic' (v.5). But the person Ruskin is often trying to persuade, with the peculiar clarity and determination of his public voice, is himself. If Ruskin can sometimes sound overly sure, almost intolerably certain, he is often rebuking a portion of his own personality. Sometimes, he is imagining something that he desires and never had. Much of his description of the ideal woman in 'Of Queens' Gardens', for instance, a text that made Ruskin peculiarly controversial in the 1970s, is a poignant description of a domestic life that Ruskin did not experience personally. He wonders in *Modern Painters* V (1860) what Turner 'might have done for us, had he received help and love, instead of disdain' (vii.454), and he is partly ruminating on his own reception, the challenge to his sense of purpose from those who read him or, rather, did not read him properly. Ruskin is a man who writes down many of his thoughts and feelings on a daily and often hourly basis, a brain working strenuously to get things right. With him, we have an exceptional archive of the evolution, and collapse, of a generous but tormented mind.

Ruskin was peculiarly bothered about his own 'relevance'. He was troubled by being read only in parts, and by being misread. He was, more specifically and theologically, dismayed about what he had managed to do with his talents, as he remarked in *St Mark's Rest* (1877–84), a volume badly broken by illness. Introducing the chapter on 'The Place of Dragons' (1879) in *St Mark's Rest*, Ruskin said that he had imagined there might be some comfort, towards the end of a man's life, in believing earlier days had been well spent. The 'sorrowfulness of these feelings [of age] must be abated, in the minds of most men,' he said,

> by a pleasant vanity in their hope of being remembered as the discoverers, at least of some important truth, or the founders of some exclusive system called after their own names. But I have never applied myself to discover anything, being content to praise what had already been discovered; and the only doctrine or system peculiar to me is the abhorrence of all that is doctrinal instead of demonstrable, and of all that is systematic instead of useful: so that *no true*

> disciple of mine will ever be a 'Ruskinian'! – he will follow not me, but the instincts of his own soul, and the guidance of its creator. (xxiv.371)

A modern reader might affirm Ruskin's significance by declaring he was 'influential'. But that was exactly what Ruskin did not feel. His significance could not be measured by influence because that influence, he thought, had arisen from misreading or mishearing. We can certainly put our hands on the literal hard stone of Ruskin's achievement. It is impossible to walk around many towns and cities in Great Britain and Ireland, and some in the United States, Canada, India, Australia, and New Zealand, without being able to identify features of nineteenth-century architecture – a Gothic arch, a carved capital, some polychromatic brickwork, a chimney that looks like a *campanile* – which could be traced either to Ruskin or to what the builder thought was Ruskin.

Yet the author of the architectural analyses *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3) did not feel this was what he had wanted. When he turned down the Royal Institute of British Architects Gold medal in 1874, Ruskin listed four representative acts of cultural vandalism:

1. The tomb of the Cardinal Brancacci at Naples, which, so far as my present knowledge extends, is the most important example in Europe of the architectural sculpture of the fifteenth century, is at present used as the lumber-room of the church in which it stands, and I found, last month, the folds of the drapery of its caryatides closed by cobwebs.
2. The church of San Miniato at Florence, the most beautiful example of the twelfth-century architecture in that city, has been turned into a common cemetery.
3. As I was drawing the cross carved on the spandril of the western arch of the church of Santa Maria della Spina at Pisa, in 1872, it was dashed to pieces by a mason before my eyes, and the pieces carried away, that a model might be carved from them and set up in its stead.
4. The railway at Furness is carried so near the Abbey that the ruins vibrate at the passing of every luggage train; and the buildings connected with the station block the window over the altar of the Abbot's Chapel; so that nothing else can be seen through it.

> These four facts are, as the members of the Institute know, only too accurately illustrative of the general agency of the public, and of the builders employed by them, on the existing architecture of Europe; – consisting in the injurious neglect of the most precious works; in the destruction, under the name of restoration, of the most celebrated works, for the sake of emolument; and in the sacrifice of any and all to temporary convenience.

> For the existence of this state of things we, the members, actual and honorary, of the Institute of British Architects, are assuredly answerable, at least in England; and under these circumstances I cannot but feel that it is no time for us to play at adjudging medals to each other. (xxxiv.514)

This list, Ruskin silently acknowledged, was partly the result of the inability of his own books to make much of a difference, just as the sorrowful last years of J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), 'the greatest landscape painter who ever lived' (vii.423), were partly the result of the perceived failure of *Modern Painters* to make anyone pay better attention to his genius.

It is tough to judge Ruskin through what he actually, measurably, achieved. This is because, as he knew more than anyone, the achievement was quite different from the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual revival, conjoined with the reform (but not the throwing-out) of mercantile capitalism for which he had really hoped. Ruskin's ambitions were colossal. They were not merely to decorate capitals of windows in the high street or encourage builders to use polychromic patterns on walls. As Nicholas Shrimpton says,[3] those terms of 'sage' or 'prophet' easily provide us with the excuse for not attending too much to what Ruskin actually meant. And what he meant, what he desired, was the moderation of capitalism by virtue; the confirmation of a class system as determined by God; the reduction or abolition of mechanised production; the recovery of Christianity as a living national faith; the rejection of experimental science and the sidelining of evolutionary biology; the rejection of the ideas of equality and liberty; the return to the perceived virtues of the European Middle Ages; the recovery of authoritarian leadership: a 'most sincere love of kings, and dislike of everybody who attempted to disobey them' (xxvii.168). Ruskin had intended changes that were startling, transformatory, controversial, and mostly unachievable. What we can see in the street, in chimneys, and on window frames is real. But the author of *The Stones*, of the dispute with modern economics published as *Unto This Last* (1860),[4] and *Fors Clavigera*, wanted more.

Who reads Ruskin? There are distinctive difficulties in reading him in English intellectual culture because he does not have a very easy relationship with institutions. And he writes, generally speaking, in a form that does not have a very settled critical vocabulary for interpreting it: in non-fictional prose. Ruskin began his career as a published author with an essay on geology: his 'Enquiries on the Causes of the Colour of the Water of the Rhine' for Loudon's *Magazine of Natural History* in September 1834. His father – John James Ruskin (1785–1864), an exceptionally important figure in Ruskin's life – hoped his son would turn out a poet: like Byron, only pious. John James longed for him to be a clergyman too, preaching sermons as eloquent as Louis XIV's renowned court preacher Jacques-Bénigne

Bossuet's, only Protestant.[5] A High Tory family, the Ruskins would always expect their son to be political and to know about how money worked – or did not work. Ruskin had to reinterpret throughout his life what it meant to be a preacher, a man with a task given by God. He had to interpret what it meant to be a (post-Romantic) poet, too: a man who saw revelation and teaching in the world all around him. He became a preacher in lay orders and a poet in prose. And he became more and more absorbed by politics in the most extended sense: the organisation of a state, the purposes for which human communities are formed and sustained. Ruskin was increasingly thoughtful, too, about the functioning, the blessings and the curses, of money. What he had learned at home stayed with him.

Science was not forgotten either. *Modern Painters* is – as Emma Sdegno explores – a devoted analysis, apart from anything else, of the geology of mountains. Ruskin was still writing science books – promoting his own distinctive way of linking the meaning of empirically documented natural forms to moral truths – in the last creative decades of his life. Ruskin's diversity is extraordinary. He made his first major mark in art by championing Turner, whom he described as a painter of Christian fidelity to the meaning of the natural world, a painter who belonged in the same long tradition as the North Italian masters of the Age of Faith. Ruskin hoped the British Pre-Raphaelite painters might be part of that tradition too, though he was variously to be disappointed. In 1860, he finished *Modern Painters* and his work thereafter became yet more diverse. Art was continued – he was elected Oxford University's first Slade Professor of Fine Art in 1869 – but economics and political problems were the topics of, for instance, *Unto This Last* and *Munera Pulveris* (1862/3). He wrote on mythology and crystallography (*The Ethics of the Dust*, 1866); on Greek myths of the air (*The Queen of the Air,* 1869); he lectured on the proper way to read books and on gender roles (*Sesame and Lilies*, 1865); and in the 1870s began his own series of feisty, tangled, and provocative letters on political topics, *Fors Clavigera*. These became in effect the newsletter of the Guild of St George, the name eventually chosen for Ruskin's land-management project that still continues today.

At the end of his life, which was increasingly broken by periods of mental illness, Ruskin was writing an autobiography, *Praeterita* (1885–9), and had multiple incomplete projects on hand: a new history of Venice, a history of monasticism, studies of the myths of flowers and birds, collections of illustrated stories of peasant life, and various plans to discuss Greek philosophy. He had started composing music, not without skill. His corpus of creative work, across his whole career, from the early poetry to the exquisite watercolours to the dark brooding sketches of the mid 1870s, formed a significant

portion of his work. He was an exhaustless writer of letters and a tireless diarist. Often enough both letters and diaries were illustrated with deft, expressive pen-and-ink drawings.

This is almost overpowering, almost alarming, diversity. But it is, in pragmatic terms, hard to find a shelf for. I do not mean that there is simply a lot of Ruskin's writing. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn published their *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin* between 1903 and 1912 in thirty-nine large volumes. Many other editions of further work, including the correspondence, have followed. No scholar has yet taken on the daunting and probably unachievable task of collecting and editing all Ruskin's letters (unachievable because we do not know where all the letters are, and there are *very* many of them). But this capaciousness set to one side, there is still another shelf problem. Into what subject does Ruskin fit? To what discipline does he belong? This matters for how to sell him, even now. But it also matters for how to read him.

Matters 'of any consequence', Ruskin said in 1858 in an inaugural address to the Cambridge School of Art, 'are three-sided, or four-sided, or polygonal' (xvi.187).[6] Part of the consequence of this is that Ruskin does not fit easily into established disciplinary areas. He is outside the institution in this specific sense because he took as his topic the work of God: he spills beyond borders into immensities. Most of the scholars represented in this book, from Great Britain, the United States, and from Italy, work in English (Literature) departments. It is true that the permeable borders of such departments make a reasonably good fit with the permeable borders of Ruskin's mind. 'Interdisciplinarity' suits Ruskin's wide-ranging work, and that is not foreign to most English departments. But no university department owns Ruskin. And no clear-cut division of knowledge anywhere accommodates him easily.

Aptly, here, Geoffrey Tyack is an architectural historian; Stuart Eagles a political historian; Cynthia Gamble a modern linguist. Alan Davis is a scholar of engraving who has written widely on Turner. Invaluable works of Ruskin criticism and biography have been written by literary critics, but also by art critics, sociologists, cultural historians, priests, physicists, businessmen, economists, journalists, and film-makers, both inside and outside the academy. The intellectual backgrounds of those who now write and speak on Ruskin are probably even more diverse than Ruskin's readers were in the 1870s and 1880s. Yet there can be, at the pragmatic level of curricula and course outlines in teaching and research, a problem. Ruskin can slip through disciplinary gaps, the accepted divisions of human knowledge and interpretive paradigms, because he is never simply one thing.

Is Ruskin a thinker or a writer? This question is worth asking because it points to another challenge in reading Ruskin: what do we do with

non-fictional prose? Quoting Ruskin at length is a pleasure. But sometimes it is an evasion. He is best in his own words, and his choice of words is always – as he implied in 'Of Kings' Treasuries' (1865) – purposive. As with all good writing, there is grave loss in paraphrasing him. But sometimes it is hard to know what to say instead. Non-fictional prose tempts one to reach for paraphrase when not simply quoting. Understanding what Ruskin said begins often enough with describing it, retelling it, and there is a temptation, sometimes, to stop there. Perhaps this helps explain the two distinctive strands of Ruskin criticism over the past seventy years, as I see them, and an emerging third. Each has found its own way of responding to the interpretive issues of what to say about non-fictional prose that is full of ideas but is not ideas only.

Ruskin scholarship has been, for many years, deeply empirical. First, there has been the establishment of new hard evidence. This has included the scholarly editing of works not previously published or not previously edited, as well as bibliographical and biographical analysis. John Lewis Bradley, Harold Shapiro, Van Akin Burd, and James S. Dearden are among the most prominent names here. Recently, this research has resulted in further actual full-length biographies: the work of, for instance, John Batchelor, Tim Hilton, and John Dixon Hunt. In tandem with this is a significant strand of more explicitly interpretive criticism that is primarily concerned with Ruskin's work as an expression of that intensely documented life, which sees Ruskin in important ways as writing from and about himself.

Second, there has been a long interest in what could be loosely called Ruskin's contexts – the intellectual, or aesthetic, historical, gendered, or political environments in which his work makes fresh and better sense. This approach puts Ruskin's non-fictional prose back into history. Robert Hewison's account of Ruskin in relation to the Risorgimento in his *Ruskin on Venice: 'The Paradise of Cities'* (2009) and Mark Frost's book on *The Lost Companions and John Ruskin's Guild of St George: A Revisionary History* (2014) are two examples of this strand, the exploration of new historical environments that inform and are informed by Ruskin's thinking. A third strand is emerging, perhaps naturally after the centenary of Ruskin's death in 2000 and the reassessments that followed: a reconsideration of what exactly Ruskin's influence had been, a study of his legacies in politics as well as in culture, of his role in the intellectual formation of Great Britain in the twentieth century, of what he said about the challenges of moderating capitalism, and of caring better for what we would now call the environment.

All of these strands are present in this book. And often or not there is more than one strand in a single essay. *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin* tends towards the empirical, the contextual, the historical rather than the

conceptual as the starting point for criticism. Ruskinians, it is often said, like facts. The essays concern what Ruskin did, what he saw, and where he went: the first portion of this book on 'Places', particularly Keith Hanley's essay,[7] might be thought a composite biography. The chapters also concern where he took his ideas from, how he read, and what he read. The essays consider how his texts make sense in particular historical environments, and address particular cultural conditions, which may not be self-evident now. Examples of historically contextual criticism here include David R. Sorensen's discussion of Ruskin's much misunderstood relationship with Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881),[8] and Nicholas Shrimpton's analysis of Ruskin's High Tory politics that are also revealed to be more historically informed than we have usually thought.[9] The collection as a whole includes assessment of Ruskin's self as the prime source of coherence in understanding his ideas or his literary practices: examples are Martin Dubois's essay on the forms of private meaning in Ruskin's public writing;[10] Dinah Birch's tracing of the legacy of John James' ambitions for his son to preach;[11] and my essay on religion which is also, in a way, about the legacy of parents including that of Ruskin's influential Evangelical mother, Margaret (1781–1871).[12]

Chapters pursuing more literal contexts are rooted in material histories, too, considering concrete things and tangible places in Ruskin's life: the engraver's steel is discussed in Alan Davis's essay;[13] what he literally made is analysed in Clive Wilmer's essay;[14] journeys to France and Belgium in Cynthia Gamble's;[15] to the Alps in Emma Sdegno's.[16] And finally, at the close of this volume, there are two essays – by Stuart Eagles[17] and Marcus Waithe[18] – which pick up the final emerging strand: consequences and inheritances, both political and cultural. These two essays are in different ways histories of reading, of serious efforts to grapple with Ruskin's work and to reinterpret it for new generations and in new cultural and societal locations. This volume of essays is not only a companion to Ruskin but representative of the principal ways he has been and is read. In this respect, it is also *The Cambridge Companion to Ruskin Criticism*.

But why have all these readers turned to Ruskin? What are the reasons for reading him that bear examination and are fair to Ruskin? I have reservations about some of the prominent and journalistic ways in which Ruskin's importance has been expressed recently in terms of 'influence' and 'relevance'. Of course there are complex and historically attentive ways in which we can assess Ruskin's legacies and ongoing significance, as the essays in this collection reveal. But there are other reasons for reading him in his own words too; for thinking about and enjoying his multitudinous writing; for making time to study him seriously.

Ruskin is a writer of praise. Although he is energetic, colourful, and frankly sometimes extreme in his denunciations, the strength of his rejections arises from the depths of his care. And that care is intellectually supported, not merely based on whim. He does not simply 'dislike' the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio (1508–80), for example, as a matter of 'taste', as one might dislike Golden Delicious apples or oysters. He can *argue* about what is wrong. He perceives Palladian Neo-Classicism to be *in principle* objectionable – a form of Renaissance arrogance and cold heartedness, a betrayal of nature and of the historical traditions of Christian Europe. In Palladio he discerns the chilling imposition of mathematical straight lines over the fractals of the world that God has made.

But Ruskin's primary business is celebration, not criticism. In his 'treatise' on the 'elementary principles and practice of drawing and painting as determined by the Tuscan masters' (xv.335), *The Laws of Fésole* (1877–8), Ruskin said that 'All great art is praise' (the title of the first chapter). And in important ways he was talking of his own task as a critic: a champion of what was good in Turner, in the Pre-Raphaelites (or at least what he hoped would be good), in Cimabue and Giotto, in the capitals of Venice's Palazzo Ducale, and in his father's sherry importing business where John James acted as an 'entirely honest merchant'.[19] Ruskin is adept at identifying the gifts, however modest, of individual men and women. And he is good at honouring them. He perceives the depth of intellectual and imaginative achievement supremely in front of those works of art in which he sees nothing less than genius. He enriches the act of looking with the gifts of his own exceptional sight. Here, in the Scuola di San Rocco at Venice, is Ruskin in *Modern Painters* II (1853) speaking of Tintoretto's *The Crucifixion*:

> Perugino fails in his Christ in almost every instance: of other men than these, after them, we need not speak. But Tintoret here, as in all other cases, penetrating into the root and deep places of his subject, despising all outward and bodily appearances of pain, and seeking for some means of expressing, not the rack of nerve or sinew, but the fainting of the deserted Son of God before His Eloi cry, and yet feeling himself utterly unequal to the expression of this by the countenance, has, on the one hand, filled his picture with such various and impetuous muscular exertion, that the body of the Crucified is, by comparison, in perfect repose, and, on the other, has cast the countenance altogether into shade. But the Agony is told by this, and by this only; that, though there yet remains a chasm of light on the mountain horizon where the earthquake darkness closes upon the day, the broad and sunlike glory about the head of the Redeemer has become wan, *and of the colour of ashes*.
>
> But the great painter felt he had something more to do yet. Not only that Agony of the Crucified, but the tumult of the people, that rage which invoked