

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00854-9 - The Works of John Ruskin, Volume 6: Modern Painters IV

John Ruskin

Excerpt

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PART V  
OF MOUNTAIN BEAUTY

## CHAPTER I

## OF THE TURNERIAN PICTURESQUE

§ 1. THE work which we proposed to ourselves, towards the close of the last volume,<sup>1</sup> as first to be undertaken in this, was the examination of those peculiarities of system in which Turner either stood alone, even in the modern school, or was a distinguished representative of modern, as opposed to ancient, practice.

And the most interesting of these subjects of inquiry, with which, therefore, it may be best to begin, is the precise form under which he has admitted into his work the modern feeling of the picturesque, which, so far as it consists in a delight in ruin, is perhaps the most suspicious and questionable of all the characters distinctively belonging to our temper, and art.

It is especially so, because it never appears, even in the slightest measure, until the days of the decline of art in the seventeenth century. The love of neatness and precision, as opposed to all disorder, maintains itself down to Raphael's childhood without the slightest interference of any other feeling; and it is not until Claude's time, and owing in great part to his influence, that the new feeling distinctly establishes itself.

Plate 18 shows the kind of modification which Claude used to make on the towers and backgrounds of Ghirlandajo; the old Florentine giving his idea of Pisa, with its leaning tower, with the utmost neatness and precision, and handsome youths riding over neat bridges on beautiful

<sup>1</sup> [See pp. 409–410 of that volume.]

horses;<sup>1</sup> Claude reducing the delicate towers and walls to unintelligible ruin, the well-built bridge to a rugged stone one, the handsome rider to a weary traveller, and the perfectly drawn leafage to confusion of copsewood or forest.\*

How far he was right in doing this; or how far the moderns are right in carrying the principle to greater excess, and seeking always for poverty-stricken rusticity or pensive ruin, we must now endeavour to ascertain.

The essence of picturesque character has been already defined† to be a sublimity not inherent in the nature of the thing, but caused by something external to it; as the ruggedness of a cottage roof possesses something of a mountain aspect, not belonging to the cottage as such. And this sublimity may be either in mere external ruggedness, and other visible character, or it may lie deeper, in an expression of sorrow and old age, attributes which are both sublime; not a dominant expression, but one mingled with

\* Ghirlandajo is seen to the greatest possible disadvantage in this plate, as I have been forced again to copy from Lasinio, who leaves out all the light and shade, and vulgarizes every form; but the points requiring notice here are sufficiently shown, and I will do Ghirlandajo more justice hereafter.<sup>2</sup>

† *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, chap. vi. § 12. [Vol. VIII. p. 236.]

<sup>1</sup> [In the first draft, this plate and passage were intended for vol. iii. ch. xviii. § 27. After mentioning at that place Claude's reversion to Ghirlandajo's types, the MS. continues:—

“. . . types of form; and taking whatever he [Ghirlandajo] had done childishly enough to fit Claude's capacity away from all the associations which gave it value, dress it up in his newly invented sunshine, and palm it upon the public for his own. Yet so it verily is. Compare the two bits of landscape in the opposite plate. The upper one is Ghirlandajo's, out of the background of his [blank not filled in]; the other, part of this landscape of Moses and the Burning Bush of which we have been speaking, out of Claude's *Liber Veritatis*. Now observe: Ghirlandajo had really gone to nature for most of his materials; his city is Pisa, with its leaning tower; the mountains beyond are bold and not ill-formed, and the leafage above quite well drawn and perfect. But Claude, borrowing this passage, denaturalises Pisa, and turns it into one of his impossible cities, made of nothing but round towers, lowers the mountains, turns the grand and simple leafage above into ignoble and indistinct trees, but has not wit enough to invent another figure, only shifts the horseman and his guide off the bridge to the river shore, and puts ill-built and ridiculous arches of stone for Ghirlandajo's timber.”

The Ghirlandajo is from his fresco (in the Church of Santa Trinità, Florence) of “St. Francis receiving the Stigmata”; the engraving was published in 1824.]

<sup>2</sup> [For Lasinio, see *Modern Painters*, vol. iii. ch. xviii. § 13 (Vol. V. p. 395); no further illustration from Ghirlandajo was given; Ruskin alludes to the want of good engravings from him and other Italian masters in the *Cestus of Aglaia*, § 46.]

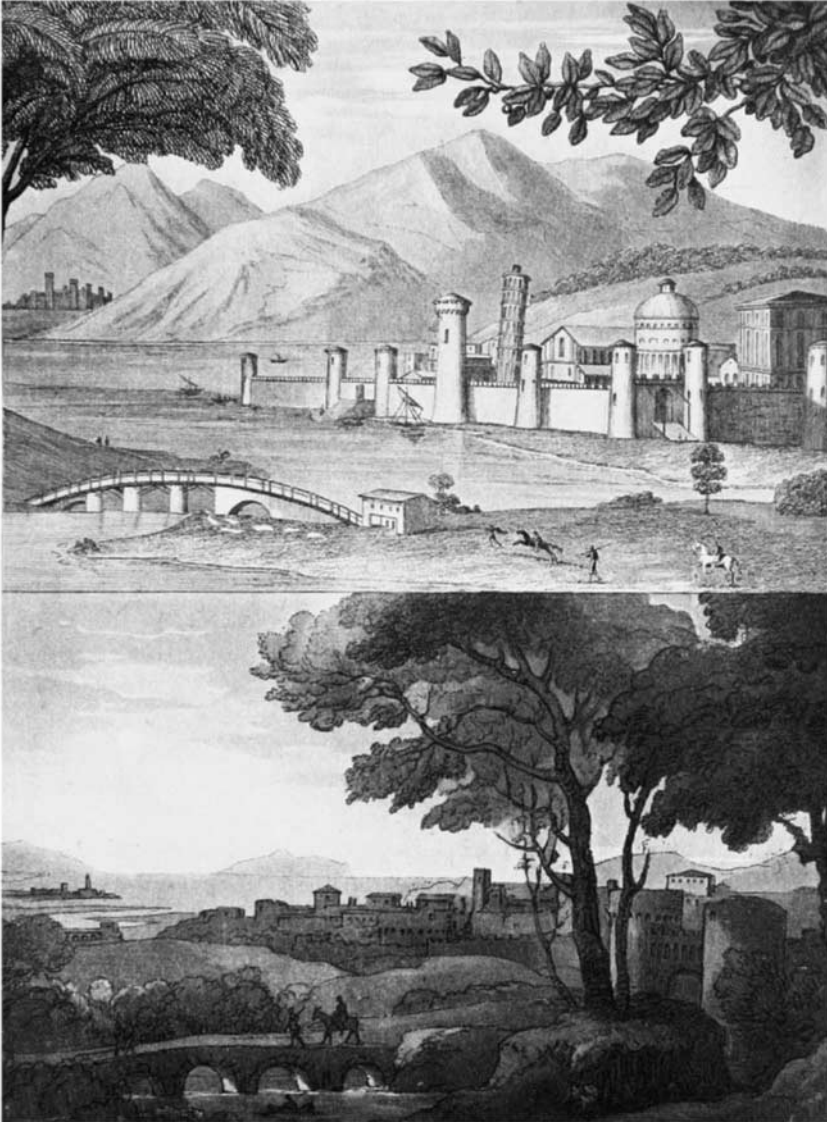
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Lasino and Barlom.

J.H. Le Keux  
Allen & Co. Sc.

18. The Transition from Ghirlandajo to Claude

## CH. I OF THE TURNERIAN PICTURESQUE 11

such familiar and common characters as prevent the object from becoming perfectly pathetic in its sorrow, or perfectly venerable in its age.

§ 2. For instance, I cannot find words to express the intense pleasure I have always in first finding myself, after some prolonged stay in England, at the foot of the old tower of Calais church.<sup>1</sup> The large neglect, the noble unsightliness of it; the record of its years written so visibly, yet without sign of weakness or decay; its stern wasteness and gloom, eaten away by the Channel winds, and overgrown with the bitter sea grasses; its slates and tiles all shaken and rent, and yet not falling; its desert of brickwork full of bolts, and holes, and ugly fissures, and yet strong, like a bare brown rock; its carelessness of what any one thinks or feels about it, putting forth no claim, having no beauty or desirableness, pride, nor grace; yet neither asking for pity; not, as ruins are, useless and piteous, feebly or fondly garrulous of better days; but useful still, going through its own daily work,—as some old fisherman beaten grey by storm, yet drawing his daily nets: so it stands, with no complaint about its past youth, in blanched and meagre massiveness and serviceableness, gathering human souls together underneath it; the sound of its bells for prayer still rolling through its rents; and the grey peak of it seen far across the sea, principal of the three that rise above the waste of surfy sand and hillocked shore,—the lighthouse for life, and the belfry for labour, and this for patience and praise.

§ 3. I cannot tell the half of the strange pleasures and thoughts that come about me at the sight of that old tower; for, in some sort, it is the epitome of all that makes the Continent of Europe interesting, as opposed to new countries; and, above all, it completely expresses that agedness in the midst of active life which binds the old and the new into harmony. We, in England, have our

<sup>1</sup> [With this passage compare *Notes on Prout and Hunt* (Prout, No. 2, and see above, Introduction, p. xxiii.) The passage from “The essence of picturesque character” (p. 10) to the end of § 3 was printed as Appendix ii. to the *Notes on Prout and Hunt*.]

new street, our new inn, our green shaven lawn, and our piece of ruin emergent from it,—a mere *specimen* of the Middle Ages put on a bit of velvet carpet to be shown, which, but for its size, might as well be on a museum shelf at once, under cover. But, on the Continent, the links are unbroken between the past and present, and, in such use as they can serve for, the grey-headed wrecks are suffered to stay with men; while, in unbroken line, the generations of spared buildings are seen succeeding each in its place. And thus in its largeness, in its permitted evidence of slow decline, in its poverty, in its absence of all pretence, of all show and care for outside aspect, that Calais tower has an infinite of symbolism in it, all the more striking because usually seen in contrast with English scenes expressive of feelings the exact reverse of these.<sup>1</sup>

§ 4. And I am sorry to say that the opposition is most distinct in that noble carelessness as to what people think of it.<sup>2</sup> Once, on coming from the Continent, almost the first inscription I saw in my native English was this:

“To Let, a Genteel House, up this road.”

And it struck me forcibly, for I had not come across the idea of gentility, among the upper limestones of the Alps, for seven months; nor do I think that the Continental nations in general *have* the idea. They would have advertised a “pretty” house, or a “large” one, or a “convenient” one; but they could not, by any use of the terms afforded by their several languages, have got at the English “genteel.” Consider, a little, all the meanness that there is in that epithet, and then see, when next you cross the Channel, how scornful of it that Calais spire will look.

§ 5. Of which spire the largeness and age are also

<sup>1</sup> [§§ 2 and 3 are § 20 in *Frondees Agrestes* (1875), where, at this point, Ruskin added the following note:—

“My friend won’t write out the reverse! Our book is to be all jelly, and no powder, it seems! Well, I’m very thankful she likes the jelly;—at any rate, it makes me sure that *it* is well made.”

“My friend” was the compiler of *Frondees Agrestes*, Miss Susan Beever.]

<sup>2</sup> [For the first notes of the following passage, see the extract from Ruskin’s diary given in the Introduction to Vol. V. p. xxxv.]

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opposed exactly to the chief appearances of modern England, as one feels them on first returning to it; that marvellous smallness both of houses and scenery, so that a ploughman in the valley has his head on a level with the tops of all the hills in the neighbourhood; and a house is organized into complete establishment,—parlour, kitchen, and all, with a knocker to its door, and a garret window to its roof, and a bow to its second story,\* on a scale of 12 feet wide by 15 high, so that three such at least would go into the granary of an ordinary Swiss cottage: and also our serenity of perfection, our peace of conceit, everything being done that vulgar minds can conceive as wanting to be done; the spirit of well-principled housemaids everywhere, exerting itself for perpetual propriety and renovation, so that nothing is old, but only “old-fashioned,” and contemporary, as it were, in date and impressiveness only with last year’s bonnets. Abroad, a building of the eighth or tenth century stands ruinous in the open street; the children play round it, the peasants heap their corn in it, the buildings of yesterday nestle about it, and fit their new stones into its rents, and tremble in sympathy as it trembles. No one wonders at it, or thinks of it as separate, and of another time; we feel the ancient world to be a real thing, and one with the new: antiquity is no dream; it is rather the children playing about the old stones that are the dream. But all is continuous; and the words, “from generation to generation,” understandable there. Whereas here we have a living present, consisting merely of what is “fashionable” and “old-fashioned”; and a past, of which there are no vestiges; a past which peasant or citizen can no more conceive; all equally far away; Queen Elizabeth as old as Queen Boadicea, and both incredible. At Verona we look out of Can Grande’s window to his tomb;<sup>1</sup> and if he does not stand beside us,

\* The principal street of Canterbury has some curious examples of this *timiness*.

<sup>1</sup> [So in *Verona and its Rivers*, § 18, Ruskin speaks of “side by side, the presence chambers of the living and the dead”; and compare in *Seven Lamps*, the last words of the chapter on “The Lamp of Memory,” Vol. VIII. p. 247.]



we feel only that he is in the grave instead of the chamber,—not that he is *old*, but that he might have been beside us last night. But in England the dead are dead to purpose. One cannot believe they ever were alive, or anything else than what they are now—names in school-books.

§ 6. Then that spirit of trimness. The smooth paving stones; the scraped, hard, even, rutless roads; the neat gates and plates, and essence of border and order, and spikiness and spruceness.<sup>1</sup> Abroad, a country-house has some confession of human weakness and human fates about it. There are the old grand gates still, which the mob pressed sore against at the Revolution, and the strained hinges have never gone so well since; and the broken greyhound on the pillar—still broken—better so: but the long avenue is gracefully pale with fresh green, and the courtyard bright with orange-trees; the garden is a little run to waste—since Mademoiselle was married nobody cares much about it; and one range of apartments is shut up—nobody goes into them since Madame died. But with us, let who will be married or die, we neglect nothing. All is polished and precise again next morning; and whether people are happy or miserable, poor or prosperous, still we sweep the stairs of a Saturday.\*

§ 7. Now, I have insisted long on this English character, because I want the reader to understand thoroughly the opposite element of the noble picturesque: its expression, namely, of *suffering*, of *poverty*, or *decay*, nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart. Nor only unpretending, but unconscious. If there be visible pensiveness in the building, as in a ruined abbey, it becomes, or claims

\* This, however, is of course true only of insignificant duties, necessary, for appearance' sake. Serious duties, necessary for kindness' sake, must be permitted in any domestic affliction, under pain of shocking the English public.

<sup>1</sup> [With this passage may be compared the description of a typical Cathedral Close in *The Stones of Venice*, vol. ii. (Vol. X. p. 78). In one of his copies of the volume Ruskin here refers on the subject of neatness to the next volume, pt. ix. ch. vii. § 21.]



## CH. I OF THE TURNERIAN PICTURESQUE 15

to become, beautiful; but the picturesqueness is in the unconscious suffering,—the look that an old labourer has, not knowing that there is anything pathetic in his grey hair, and withered arms, and sunburnt breast; and thus there are the two extremes, the consciousness of pathos in the confessed ruin, which may or may not be beautiful, according to the kind of it; and the entire denial of all human calamity and care, in the swept proprieties and neatnesses of English modernism: and, between these, there is the unconscious confession of the facts of distress and decay, in by-words; the world's hard work being gone through all the while, and no pity asked for, nor contempt feared. And this is the expression of that Calais spire, and of all picturesque things, in so far as they have mental or human expression at all.

§ 8. I say, in so far as they have mental expression, because their merely outward delightfulness—that which makes them pleasant in painting, or, in the literal sense, picturesque—is their actual variety of colour and form. A broken stone has necessarily more various forms in it than a whole one; a bent roof has more various curves in it than a straight one; every excrescence or cleft involves some additional complexity of light and shade, and every stain of moss on eaves or wall adds to the delightfulness of colour. Hence, in a completely picturesque object, as an old cottage or mill, there are introduced, by various circumstances not essential to it, but, on the whole, generally somewhat detrimental to it as cottage or mill, such elements of sublimity—complex light and shade, varied colour, undulatory form, and so on—as can generally be found only in noble natural objects, woods, rocks, or mountains. This sublimity, belonging in a parasitical manner to the building, renders it, in the usual sense of the word, “picturesque.”

§ 9. Now, if this outward sublimity be sought for by the painter, without any regard for the real nature of the thing, and without any comprehension of the pathos of character

hidden beneath, it forms the low school of the surface-picturesque; that which fills ordinary drawing-books and scrap-books, and employs, perhaps, the most popular living landscape painters of France, England, and Germany. But if these same outward characters be sought for in subordination to the inner character of the object, every source of pleasurable being refused which is incompatible with that, while perfect sympathy is felt at the same time with the object as to all that it tells of itself in those sorrowful by-words, we have the school of true or noble picturesque; still distinguished from the school of pure beauty and sublimity, because, in its subjects, the pathos and sublimity are all *by the way*, as in Calais old spire, — not inherent, as in a lovely tree or mountain; while it is distinguished still more from the schools of the lower picturesque by its tender sympathy, and its refusal of all sources of pleasure inconsistent with the perfect nature of the thing to be studied.

§ 10. The reader will only be convinced of the broad scope of this law by careful thought, and comparison of picture with picture; but a single example will make the principle of it clear to him.

On the whole, the first master of the lower picturesque, among our living artists, is Clarkson Stanfield; his range of art being, indeed, limited by his pursuit of this character. I take, therefore, a windmill, forming the principal subject in his drawing of Brittany near Dol (engraved in the *Coast Scenery*), Fig. 1, Plate 19, and beside it I place a windmill, which forms also the principal subject in Turner's study of the Lock, in the *Liber Studiorum*.<sup>1</sup> At first sight I dare say the reader may like Stanfield's best; and there is, indeed, a great deal more in it to attract liking. Its roof is nearly as interesting in its ruggedness as a piece of the stony peak of a mountain, with a *châlet* built on its side; and it

<sup>1</sup> [*Stanfield's Coast Scenery, a Series of Views in the British Channel*, 1836. The "Coast of Brittany" is at p. 25. Turner's "Windmill and Lock" was No. 27 in the *Liber*; the mill is said to have been taken from one which formerly existed at Hanwell, not far from the site of the present Lunatic Asylum.]