

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-00884-6 - The Works of John Ruskin, Volume 36
 John Ruskin
 Excerpt
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THE LETTERS OF JOHN RUSKIN

1827–1869

*(Except where otherwise stated, the letters are here printed
for the first time)*

EARLY LETTERS, 1827–1843

[Ruskin's first letter (to his father), 1823, is printed in Vol. I. p. xxvi. *n.*; another early letter (December 31, 1828) is given in *facsimile* at Vol. II. p. 264. For the story of these early years, see Vol. I. pp. xxiii.–xxxiii., and *Præterita*, Vol. XXXV. pp. 13–187. The early drawings here introduced (Plates I. and II. pp. 2, 4) belong to his foreign tour of 1835.]

To his FATHER¹

May, 1827.

MY DEAR PAPA,—I have missed you very much especially on sunday for though I do miss you on the evenings yet I miss you more on sunday mamma is always thinking of you for when she fills miss deprey's cup she only puts in the milk and sugar and leaves the rest to miss deprey.² I have changed very much in my lessons for while mary³ was with me I said them very ill every day but now I almost say them very well every day. we are perhaps going to make a balloon to-day perhaps not for a good while. just as I was thinking what to say to you, I turned by chance to your picture, and it came into my

¹ [The MS. of this letter (written at the age of eight) and the subjoined verses (the letter written in pencil, the verses printed neatly in ink) were sent by Ruskin to Professor Norton in a letter of February 1869 (see below, p. 562). They were printed with that letter in the *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1904, vol. 94, p. 164, and in *Letters of John Ruskin to Charles Eliot Norton*, Boston and New York, 1904 (hereafter referred to as *Norton*), vol. i. pp. 196–199.]

² [Perhaps a member of the family referred to in *Præterita*, ii. § 197 (Vol. XXXV. p. 427).]

³ [His cousin, Mary Richardson, who afterwards (1829) came to live with the Ruskins: see *Præterita*, i. § 78 (Vol. XXXV. p. 71).]

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2 LETTERS OF RUSKIN—VOL. I [1827

mind now what can I say to give pleasure to that papa. the weather is at present very beautiful, though cold. I have nothing more to say to you dear papa.—Your affectionate son, JOHN RUSKIN.

Mamma says that I may tell you I have been a very good boy while you have been away.

WALES

That rock with waving willows on its side
 That hill with beauteous forests on its top
 That stream that with its rippling waves doth glide
 And oh what beauties has that mountain got
 That rock stands high against the sky
 Those trees stand firm upon the rock
 and seem as if they all did lock
 Into each other; tall they stand
 Towering above the whitened land.¹

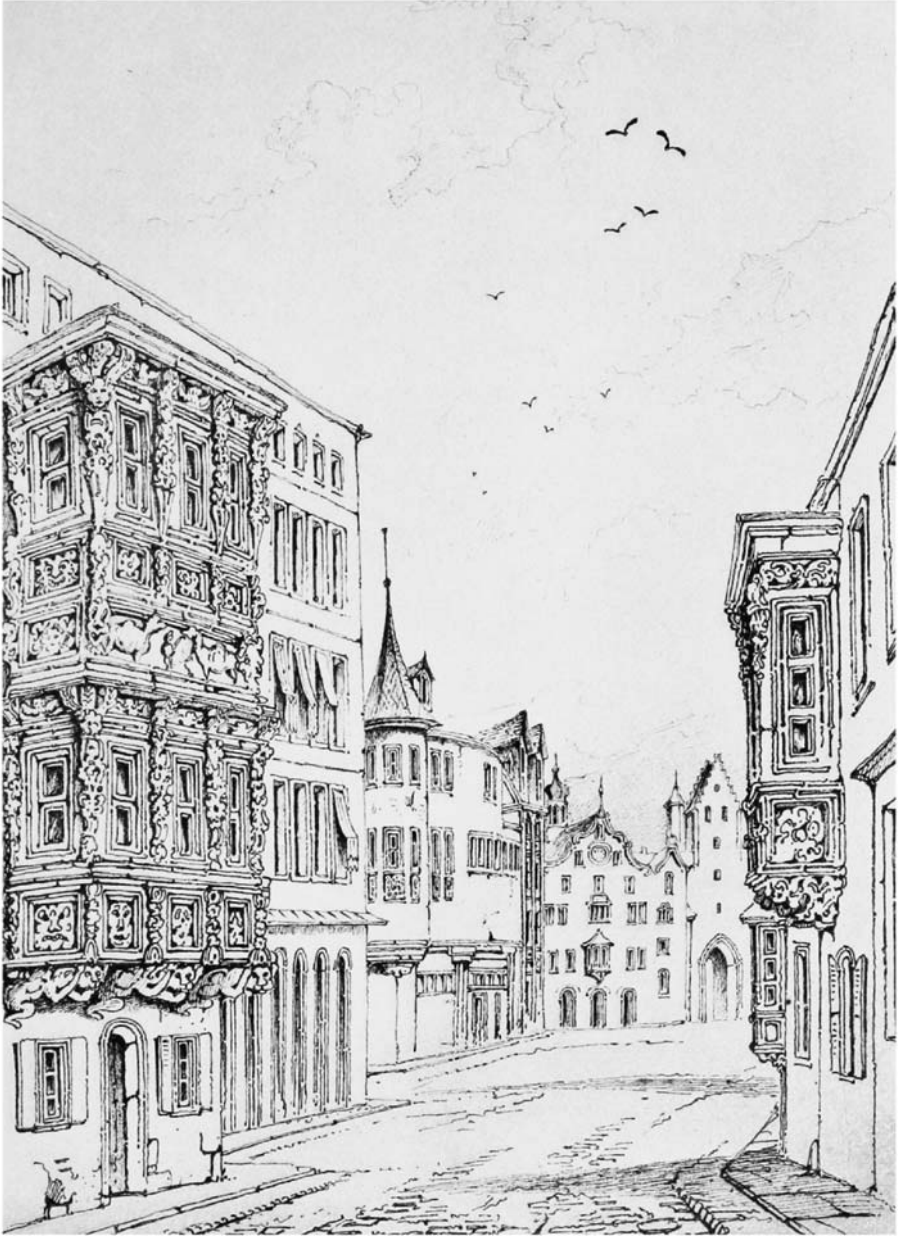
SPRING

What beauties spring thou hast the waving lilac
 and the stiff tall peach with roselike flowers
 with yellow chorchorus and with nectarine blossom
 some with grace wave and some though tall are stiff
 waving is lilac so is yellow chorchorus
 waving is cherry blossom though not so graceful
 as the spiry lilac and the hyacinth
 stiff is the pear and nectarine with the peach
 and apricot all these are stiff but in return
 their flowers are beautiful. so are birds and beasts
 as well as flowers some are wild and cruel
 such are the tiger, panther, lynx and ounce
 so also in return these animals
 are pretty in the other sort
 some dogs are ugly but conceal within
 some good intentions good ideas good thoughts.
 but spring, there is one tree that thou bring'st forth
 that is more beautiful than all the others
 this is the apple blossom o how sweet
 is that fine tree and so I end.

¹ [These lines come from a MS. book (of 1827–1829) called “Poetry Discriptive”; Ruskin refers to them, and explains the epithet “whitened” as “a very artistical observation for a child,” in a letter to his parents of October 23, 1853, printed in Vol. XII. pp. xxi.–xxiii.]

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I



J. Ruskin.

Allen & Co. Sc.

A Street in St. Gallen

1835.

1831]

EARLY LESSONS

3

*To Mrs. MONRO*¹

1829.

Well, papa, seeing how fond I was of the doctor,² and knowing him to be an excellent Latin scholar, got him for me as a tutor, and every lesson I get I like him better and better, for he makes me laugh “almost, if not quite”—to use one of his own expressions—the whole time. He is so funny, comparing Neptune’s lifting up the wrecked ships of Æneas with his trident to my lifting up a potato with a fork, or taking a piece of bread out of a bowl of milk with a spoon! And as he is always saying [things] of that kind, or relating some droll anecdote, or explaining the part of Virgil (the book which I am in) very nicely, I am always delighted when Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are come.

*To his FATHER**Monday, February 28, 1831.*

MY DEAR PAPA,—You cannot imagine how delighted I was to receive your letter. I say you cannot imagine and neither can you. You get letters, letters, letters the whole year round. I get only one or two every year. Oh, it is a delightful sensation the cracking the seal, peeping in before you can get it open to see whether it is a long one, your very soul up at your eyes wondering what it’s all about and whether it’s very funny, very comical, adventurical, steam-boatical, interestical, and all other icals. And then how provoking when you come to the end. How one hates the direction for taking up such a quantity of room, as if it thought itself of such mighty consequence as to turn out all the thoughts which might have blackly rested on the snowy couch of paper. Oh, one could kick it down stairs. . . . Mamma and I have begun our Hebrew and are making some progress in the characters. I was surprised to find that for the short and long sounds of the same vowel, as of *a* in “water” and “rat,” the Hebrews have two different characters, thus saving us all trouble about Prosody, which is a good thing out of the way, I’m sure, by the intricate rules of the Latin Prosody. I am getting some more Greek Chapters ready for our Sundays as fast as I can at an hour a day. Composing gets on too amazingly fast at the same rate with which it was proceeding when I wrote you last. Dash is quite well but as cunning as a fox. . . . A

¹ [From W. G. Collingwood’s *Life and Work of John Ruskin*, 1900, pp. 28–29. For Mrs. Monro, see *Præterita*, i. § 115 (Vol. XXXV. p. 101).]

² [Dr. Andrews: see *Præterita*, i. § 81 (Vol. XXXV. p. 74).]

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LETTERS OF RUSKIN—VOL. I

[1833

great part of the forenoon is taken up with my lessons, then mamma is reading Sturm, Newton's letters, and Rollin;¹ that fills up another great division of the day; then if it's at all fine I have a trot down to the post office (if it's post office day, that is), and if not I always have a gallop somewhere, very often as much for Dash's benefit as my own, and the remainder of the day is taken up with *Iteriad*. Then again on Saturday nights William is so kind as to give me a game of chess,² of which I grow fonder and fonder notwithstanding the regular defeats, but the games are certainly growing longer. . . . I venture humbly to insinuate the hope that past favours will be repeated by another letter. And now, papa, I think nothing remains but to tell you that I am your obedient, humble, and more than affectionate son,

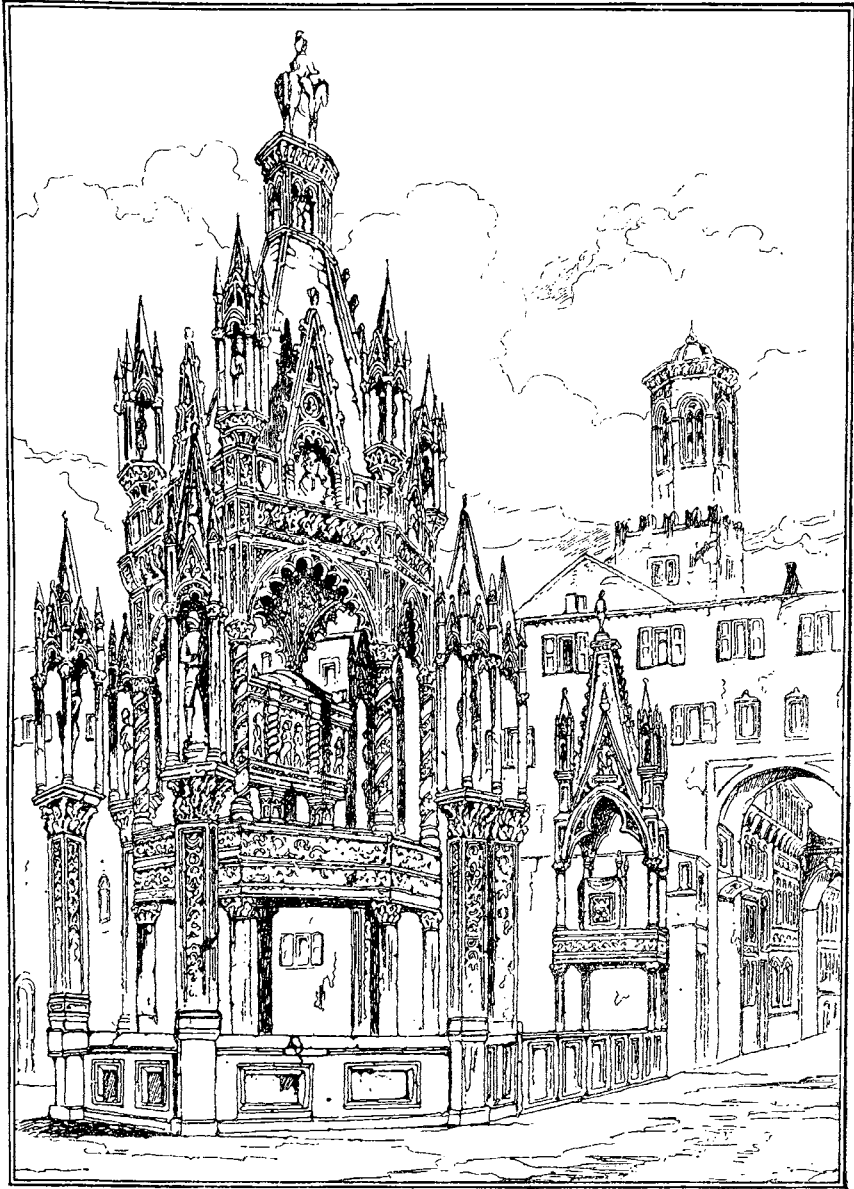
JOHN RUSKIN.

*To his FATHER**Tuesday, 15 Janry., 1833.*

MY DEAR PAPA,—I would write a short, pithy, laconic, sensible, concentrated, and serious letter, if I could, for I have scarcely time to write a long one. Observe I only say to write, for as to the composition 'tis nothing, positively nothing. I roll on like a ball, with this exception, that contrary to the usual laws of motion I have no friction to contend with in my mind, and of course have some difficulty in stopping myself when there is nothing else to stop me. Mary declined writing to you for a reason which gave me peculiar and particular offence, namely, that I wrote nonsense enough, and she had nothing else to offer, as if my discreet communications merited the cognomen of nonsense. However, I did not quarrel with her, as she surrendered her half sheet to me, which space I was very glad to fill up with my nonsense, as this additional space gave me much greater freedom and play of cogitation, as I had not then to compress my ideas, like the steam of a high-pressure engine, but was enabled to allow them to flow forth in all their native beauty and elegance, without cramping by compressing, or confusing by curtailing. I like elbow room in everything. In a letter it is essential, and in a stage coach I should opine that before these sheets can have reached you, you will

¹ [*Reflections on the Works of God and his Providence, throughout all Nature, for every Day in the Year. Translated first from the German of Christoph Christian Sturm into French, and now from the French into English by a Lady* (Edinburgh, 1788, and numerous later editions). "Newton's letters" may be those either of Sir Isaac Newton or of John Newton, the divine; probably the latter, see Vol. VII. p. 159 n. Charles Rollin's *Ancient History* (French, 1730–1738) had been translated into English (1738–1740).]

² [His cousin, William Richardson: "the best chess-player I have ever known" (Vol. XXXV. p. 412).]



J. Ruskin

The Tombs of the Scaligers at Verona

1835

1833]

THE PEGASUS OF THOUGHT

5

have found the want of it, as Dogberry says, "very tolerable and not to be endured."¹ In time I know the trouble occasioned by the want of it. If the maxim which mamma is always inculcating upon me, that nothing is done well in a hurry, is without exceptions, this letter is fated, for I seldom have been more pressed. Yet letters never thrive on mature consideration. The same impulse continues, or ought to continue, from the "My dear" at the top to the "Your affectionate" at the bottom. The momentum once given and the impetus obtained, the word is forward, and it is enough to guide without restraining the Pegasus of thought. I can sympathise with you on your present situation, as mine is similar in a great degree. You see you are bogged amongst the marshes (horrid things those bogs in this season, horrid, sir, horrid). And I am sadly bogged in my algebra. I can't get over division; it appears to me very long division. It is positively not to be understood, and I don't like to be made a fixture of, not by no means, and I have come to a very unhandsome fix. Mr. Rowbotham will pronounce my head to be — understanding, and I pronounce his lessons to be + difficulty, and yet with all my algebra this minus and plus will not add and make nothing. If they would I should be on my four wheels again progressing onward to fractions, which look as if they would, as the Doctor says, crack anybody's skull and reduce it to fractions. But I will not anticipate difficulty. Really, Sir, I think the drawing room, withdrawing room or room into which I withdraw to draw, owes all its beauty to your presence. We have sat in it two nights, and the vacancy of the throne which you are wont to fill, and from which thou art wont to impart the learning contained in the volumes of literature, enlivening it by your conversation and facilitating its comprehension by your remarks, the vacancy of that chair, I say, made the room appear vacant, and the absence of that conversation made conversation flag. Return, oh return from thy peregrinations, fly from the bosom of the bogs to the bosom of those who wait thee in anxious expectation. As the eagle returns to its eyrie, as the bird that wanders over distant climes returns to its place of rest, so do thou return to us who are sorrowing for thy presence [hole in paper] winder up!!! *Factas meas admiro*. And now *χαίροιτε*, as Anacreon says, pour la presente pro non quantum sufficit temporis ut literam longam scriberem, I remain your most mightily affectionate son,

JOHN RUSKIN.²

¹ [*Much Ado about Nothing*, Act iii. sc. 3 ("most tolerable," etc.).]

² [Ruskin's father, in sending this letter to Mrs. Richard Gray, wrote upon it: "We think him clever, and his masters pronounce his talents great for his age. . . . If the Almighty preserves the Boy to me I am richly blessed, but I always feel as if I *ought* to lose him and all I have."]

To his FATHER

HERNE HILL, 25th March, 1836.

MY DEAREST FATHER,—I sit down to write of I know not what. I intend to commence with our third lecture, English literature.¹ Four lectures on this subject have spoken of four celebrated authors of old time—Sir John Mandeville, Sir John Gower, Chaucer, and Wickliffe. We are made acquainted with their birth, parentage, education, etc.; the character of their writings is spoken of, and extracts are read as examples of their style. These extracts are always interesting, frequently entertaining, sometimes laughable, although the laugh of the hearer is generally at, not with, the author. The writings of the poets before Chaucer are like—Lifting my eyes off the paper in search of a simile, they encounter a piece of the sky seen through one of the very large panes of our drawing-room window. It has been raining, softly and silently, a benevolent rain, and the large red blossoms of the almonds, and the buds of the lilac, and the branches of the firs are all full of that delicate day dew, glittering and glancing and shaking off showers of jewels into the moistened ground, and their vegetable life seems strong in them—I could fancy I saw them growing; they are like the students at college after having heard a lecture, full of the rich dews of instruction; and above them are long lines of grey cloud, broken away into thin white fleeces which are standing still in the heavens, for there is no breeze to move them, and between those grey clouds is seen here and there a piece of excessive value, which is not dark, but deep, pure, far away, which the eye seems to plunge into and go on, on, on, into the stillness of its distance, until the grey cloud closes over it and it is gone. That bit of sky is like one of these old poems, cloudy and grey, uninteresting; but ever and anon through the quaintness of his language or uncouthness of expression breaks the mind of the poet, pure and noble and glorious, and leading you away with it into fascination, and then the cloud closes over him and he is gone. Then after the conclusion of the lecture and a few additional remarks from Mr. Dale on the way to Lincoln's Inn Fields,² I enter the most formidable library in which we receive our lessons.

Books are the souls of the dead in calf-skin. When I enter a library I always feel as if I were in the presence of departed spirits, silent indeed, but only waiting my command to pour forth the experience of

¹ [Lectures given by the Rev. Thomas Dale: see *Præterita*, i. § 205 (Vol. XXXV. p. 177).]

² [Mr. Dale was at this time vicar of St. Bride's, Fleet Street, and he resided in a house in Lincoln's Inn Fields.]

1836]

THE GREEK WRITERS

7

their lives,¹ the thoughts and imaginations, the feelings and the passions which have long since ceased in reality, but they continue to think and feel to me. Even as I look up to the rows of volumes in my little library, they seem turning into living beings, and the ancients and the moderns seem rekindled into contemporary life. There is an old man lying on a piece of beautiful green turf beside a stream, and the stream is clear and pure and beautiful, and it is singing to him sweetly as it passes by, and he is listening to it drowsily. He looks old, for his long hair is silvered, but there are no wrinkles on his brow, for there is no care there; there is a tall tree hanging over him, and a cicada is singing on one of its green boughs, and the old man is pleased to hear the insect sing so joyfully, and he is conversing in his mind with the stream that flows by him, and with the light breeze that plays among his hair, and with the insect on the bough that is chirping intoxicated with day dew. That is Anacreon.

Close by him stands another, a young man, but there is deep thought in the fire of the dark eye that flashes from beneath the shadow of his high helmet. It is night, and he is standing by the light of a watchfire leaning on his lance, and the light flashes on the arms of his sleeping friends, while round on every eminence, through the gloom of the midnight, blaze the beacon fires of their enemies; but he sees them not, for his mind is far away in his beloved Greece, and high hope beams upon his brow that he shall see his native shore once again. It is Xenophon.

There is another, but he is in such a crowd that I cannot see him well; he is conversing with every one, and putting down what they say in his own deep memory; there is a veil over his face, and it has been woven partly by truth and partly by falsehood, and that part which has been woven by truth is very transparent and I can see the face of the old man through it, but the other part is dark, and shadows of the crowd round about him are thrown upon it; and yet from the whole veil there is a magic lustre emanating, which is given by the brightness of the old man's mind. It is Herodotus.

Is that a criminal standing before his judges? It cannot be. It is a most aged man; his limbs are feeble, and his hand quivers, and his voice trembles as he reads; but what is he reading? All are silent, all eager in attention; the judge bends forward from his high seat, the very accuser is listening astonished, and the crowd round lean forward intently to catch the sounds of the old man's feeble voice. How his eye kindles as he reads. It is Sophocles.

¹ [The idea is precisely that of the well-known passage in *Sesame and Lilies*: see Vol. XVIII. pp. 53, 59.]

The next is leaning against a rock under tall cypresses, and before him flashes down a mighty cataract; on his other side is deep, blue, bright water, spreading away into far distances, and woody promontories, and mighty crags rise above them, and distant Alps glitter in the blue of the sky, and to him there is a voice in nature, and his eye is on the birds that wing their way through the air, and on the fishes that glitter through the sapphire blue of the waters, on rock and tree, herb and flower, and they are his companions. It is Pliny.

Beneath the low door of a small cottage stands another moralizing; high on the opposite hill stands the gorgeous villa of his patron, or rather friend, but he envies it not; from his low dwelling he looks out on the doings of the world, and instructs and amuses, flatters and satirises as he sees occasion. [It is Horace.]

Then come a troop of moderns; too numerous to be particularised. One is standing alone on the shore of a rushing sea, an ocean of a river, the dark forest closed around him, birds of jewelled dyes flying over his head; from the recesses of the wood comes the melancholy cry of the leopard, and the billows before him are lashed by the bulk of the crocodile. Another is on a point of pure snow; mountains on mountains are tossed about him like a sea, but all far below him, the sun is careering through a sky which is dark, very dark, and filled with undistinguishable glimmering of many stars. Another is beneath the burning sun of an African desert, thinking of the green fields of England, and the only sound which falls on his wearied ear is the howl of the hyena, or shrill cry of the ostrich. My characters are now, however, becoming too numerous for enumeration, even in my small library; what should I do, then, if I attempted to describe those of Mr. Dale's gigantic assembly of books, in the midst of which Matson¹ and I receive our lessons, amused now and then by the egregious blunders of Tom-ass, as Matson divides his name?

“Then perchance when home returning, you the story hearing,
With a smile may cry, ‘Poor Tom.’”

You were wont now and then, Papa, in former times, to give me a great deal of pleasure by writing me one or two letters in the course of your journey. Now, if you had a little spare scrap of time, (Mamma says you do not write because I do not ask you) you know, my dearest Father, it would infinitely delight your most affectionate Son,

JOHN RUSKIN.

¹ [For Ruskin's schoolfellow, Edward Matson, see *Præterita*, i. § 91, ii. § 151 (Vol. XXXV. pp. 82, 381).]