Ruskin in Perspective
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1. Ruskin and Perspective

The many aspects of Ruskin’s thought can be captured in the recurring motif of perspective. Ruskin writes extensively on the topic, either in the form of short and apparently miscellaneous remarks or as commentaries, such as the following description of aerial perspective in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843). Aerial perspective is defined as

> the expression of space by any means whatsoever, sharpness of edge, vividness of colour, etc. assisted by greater pitch of shadow, and requires only that objects should be detached from each other by degrees of intensity in proportion to their distance, without requiring that the difference between the farthest and nearest should be in positive quantity the same that nature has put. (*Works* 3.260)

The geometry of space is a repeated image in Ruskin’s philosophy since it embodies the vitality of human minds and hands at work, the emblem of active and social life. Ruskin’s consideration of perspective proceeds through examples drawn from everyday life to the importance of the natural world in relation to science and mathematics:

> Aerial perspective is not a matter of paramount importance, because nature infringes its laws herself, and boldly, too, though never in a case like this before us; but there are some laws which nature never violates, her laws of form. (*Works* 3.438)

In fact, it becomes almost impossible to read Ruskin without thinking in terms of perspective. His discursive use of perspective places his readers between the eclectic worlds of art and literature, aesthetics and politics,
Ruskin, however, draws upon a tradition of intellectual study that, as Hubert Damisch has shown, predates the revolutionary methods of the Renaissance. Perspective was already an established concept in classical times. Perspective was already an established concept in classical times. During the Middle Ages, it was seen as fundamental to the early science of optics, since by examining the phenomenon of vision, the laws and theorems of geometry could be deduced. Consequently, Filippo Brunelleschi’s discovery during the early years of the fifteenth century of the proiezioni centrali (central projections), in which the mathematical points of a three-dimensional object could be projected on to a two-dimensional plane around a central point of view, was really the reclamation of earlier insights, most notably, of Euclid. Nevertheless, Renaissance artists such as Brunelleschi, Leon Battista Alberti and Piero della Francesca, author of the treatise De Prospectiva Pingendi (1474-82), revolutionised the use of perspective by bringing to it an incomparable eye, a harmonious vision and an unprecedented ability for describing architectural details. By contrast, the unsophisticated use of perspective in Paleocristian and Byzantium art appears flat and devoid of the third dimension.

Perspective is the key element during the early modern period of painterly and architectural creation. As a system for perceiving and representing space, perspective was linked to a new, philosophical understanding of space in which humanity’s relationship to its environment was radically transformed. Brunelleschi’s theoretical innovations were a necessary step in realising his architectural projects, so that his vision for civic society was founded upon a new aesthetic for humanity and the external world. Martin Jay, for example, has noted how the principle of perspective symbolised “a harmony between the mathematical regularities in optics and God’s will.” In practice, the artistic eye had to be “singular, rather than the two eyes of normal binocular vision”, so that, “static, unblinking and fixated”, it produced “a visual take that was externalised, reduced to one ‘point of view’, and disembodied.” The artist, like God, not only withdrew from his creation but also observed the object of his art with detachment. In so doing, the methodology of perspective consolidated the subjectivity of the artist in relation to the external world. In centring the artistic self as part of the
finished product, the Renaissance use of perspective introduced the later possibility of a Romantic conception of the artist, in which personal vision is equated with clarity and comprehension, for instance, in Ruskin’s claim that “Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion – all in one” (Works 5.333). However, while the work of critics such as Jay is insightful regarding the ideology of Renaissance art, it nevertheless reviews the idea of perspective through twentieth-century European developments in philosophy and art, such as Cubism, where the fixed horizon was annulled in favour of representing the variable and multiple perspectives of time, as well as technological developments, such as the invention of cinema in 1895.6 As critics such as James Elkins have also argued, the emergence of perspective has to be understood in its own historical and intellectual contexts with the result that a more ambiguous image of the concept arises.7

This dynamic of viewing cultural phenomena as part of their own historical context and in relation to our own time underwrites the following collection of essays. The argument of this anthology is that perspective is an indispensable component of both the external and the internal worlds, and that in Ruskin’s work it offers a vocabulary for wide-ranging exploration. From early on in Ruskin’s spiritual, artistic and scientific imagination, perspective emerges as a key symbol for moral and intellectual vision. Although interest in the study of perspective reached its zenith during the Italian Quattrocento, its critical and artistic legacy offers Ruskin not only an imaginative framework but also a series of discursive possibilities. Broadly, then, the subsequent essays examine the ways in which Ruskin’s perspective was, as he saw it, a “duty” to be learnt “by the measures of everything” (Works 10.133).

2. Perspective in Ruskin

Ruskin’s understanding of perspective is representative of that wider realm of knowledge, which characterised Renaissance consciousness, and from which Ruskin drew inspiration, most notably in his book, The Elements of Perspective (1859). The subtitle, “Arranged for the use of schools and intended to be read in connexion with the first three books of Euclid”, suggests the real purpose of the writing. At this point, a question arises: did Ruskin’s sense of mathematics and geometry include some constituents while excluding others, or did he include everything seen, providing it was intellectually compelling and instructive? Also, something else catches the eye. Ruskin divides his teaching in terms of
Introduction: Ruskin in Perspective

twenty geometrical problems rather than the more standard (and literary) form of chapters. Moreover, there are two appendices, where the author further reiterates his argument. Within the main discussion, the book offers a series of instructions, rules and practical examples to the student-reader. Revisiting a theme that recurs in much of his work, Ruskin’s introduction to The Elements of Perspective exhibits a fascination with the overall practice of technical drawing.

Within the first two sentences, Ruskin defines the keyword of perspective, which he equates with intellectual prowess, and makes clear that this book will be primarily concerned with developing skills for drawing landscapes, and recognising the importance of drawing from reality:

Perspective can, therefore, only be quite right, by being calculated for one fixed position of the eye of the observer; nor will it appear deceptively right unless seen precisely from the point it is calculated for. (Works 15.243)

The way in which Ruskin approaches his subject is typical of his writing in that it reflects the multifarious dimension of his thoughts. In The Elements of Perspective, this stylistic manner relates to both the technical and metaphorical meanings of perspective – an intellectual concept that runs throughout the aesthetic, social, environmental and personal reflections of Ruskin’s oeuvre. The Elements of Perspective is pictured with words and images where the internal world of the mind and the external world of physical observation are in search of an ideal or transcendent reality. In so doing, Ruskin attempts to comprehend the complexity of his subject-matter while, within his own modest style, tries to render it accessible for his readers. This twin approach reveals the eclecticism of Ruskin’s thought: he brings both his reason and his passion to the exploration of human knowledge. Ruskin does not seek to choose between his various interests, to temper and curb the content of his writing, but instead maintains an open eye to all the possibilities of the external world.

The Elements of Perspective, though, expresses a wider interest in the art of technical drawing, which Ruskin had already discussed in his previous book, The Elements of Drawing, written in the winter of 1856-7. Many of the theories and problems set out in the first volume are developed and challenged in the following work. Yet, as their respective titles suggest, technique is regarded as essential to the understanding of the more aesthetic aspects of the discussion. Ruskin grounds intellectual experience within the authenticity of craft, technical skill and artistic
practice. As a result, the explanations that he offers for the student-reader, has the effect of making perspective a more capacious term, both technical and philosophic. It had to be capacious in order to respond to both the sophistication of the material and the needs of the readership. Tim Hilton perceptively comments that *The Elements of Perspective* “was supposed to explain and demonstrate eternal rules.” Ruskin seeks to put into practice what had hitherto only been a theoretical interest by offering an accessible yet multi-faceted description supported by a wide range of explicative drawings.

Although Ruskin’s engagement with the theme of perspective runs throughout his *Works*, there are surprisingly no references to his watercolour drawings in any of the thirty-nine volumes of the Library Edition, although some plates are mentioned in the General Catalogue of his Drawings (*Works* 38.273). In these watercolours, Ruskin addresses the connection between literary theory and artistic practice, which was essential to his aim in *The Elements of Perspective*. His drawings assemble images taken from everyday life: a profusion of drums, tables, dishes, bowls, tubs, crowns, birds, vases and boats.9 The acknowledgement of Ruskin’s ability as a draughtsman allows us another means of observing his fascination with perspective. His drawings present a fuller understanding of the subject, which Ruskin had only previously discussed in his literary works, by expanding theory into the realms of visual practice and lived reality.

Indeed, if Ruskin is prepared to endorse the imagination as a distinctive human faculty, he must extend the categories of knowledge to include every manifestation of perspective. In what is a Romantic gesture, the aesthetic beauty of Ruskin’s chosen images describes the underlying mood and sensibility of the inspirational artist. Taken together, the drawings depict the assimilated knowledge and physical skill of their creator. In particular, the *Perspective Study of Two Shallow Dishes* (1871) is a detailed act of recognition and application of knowledge; even more so it demonstrates the bold existence, interest and quality of an illustrator and his art.

His interest for more or less related subjects is evident in some other drawings dated 1871 as, for example, the *Perspective Study of a Table*, the *Perspective Study of a gadrooned Boss on a marble Base* as well as the *Perspective Study of an inverted oval Bowl* and the *Perspective Study of a circular Tub with two vertical Lugs*. In these depictions Ruskin showed examples of association between his literary thoughts and his artistic vein. The perspective shown in the watercolour, *Study of Two Shallow Dishes*, emphasises Ruskin’s ability in showing, from different angles, the bulk of
his ideas. He was constructing an imaginary triangle: the two dishes and
the lines of perspective are intensified by his combination of cold and
warm colours which reinforce the physical notion of his study. The lines
contribute to the impulse of perspective, as do the brushstrokes, each
tending in different directions, but both attempting to restore nature,
science and art in an exceptional and distinctive language.

Some emphasis along these lines is necessary if we are to make sense
of Ruskin’s overall interest in this subject. We will need to consider other
texts where he insists on the significance of both aerial and linear
perspective as expressed in *Modern Painters* and in *The Stones of Venice*
(1851-3). For example, while talking of the Roman Renaissance in the
third volume of his Venetian work, Ruskin attentively argues that

aerial perspective, as given by the modern artist, is, in nine cases out of ten,
a gross and ridiculous exaggeration (*Works* 11.59)

as if he had no confidence in the study of perspective in the contemporary
era by comparison with the early modern period. Furthermore, he
reiterates his belief in the *Lectures on Art* (1870) where he declares: “I
hope you will trust the words of the most accomplished draughtsman of
Italy … when he tells you that your first duty is ‘to learn perspective by
the measures of everything’” (*Works* 20.133). It is not difficult, then, to
see that Ruskin equates the artistic and intellectual rigour of perspective
with the revolutionary claims of the Italian *Quattrocento*. Ruskin’s
thoughts concerning perspective tend to alternate and even, on occasion,
appear inconsistent, for instance, when he states in 1865 to Dante Gabriel
Rossetti: “I am now wholly intolerant of what I once forgivingly disliked –
bad perspective and such like – for I look upon them as moral insolences
and iniquities in any painter of average power” (*Works* 36.489-90). Such
apparent inconsistencies, though, reveal Ruskin’s struggle in formulating a
language with which to describe a concept that had not only become
indispensable to his artistic imagination but also his cultural and political
perceptions. Like Ruskin himself, the idea of perspective had become an
ambiguous and multivalent term, which requires further elaboration within
the body of his work.
3. Perspectives on Ruskin

Ruskin’s curious place in modern culture was recently illustrated by the internationally popular *Turner, Whistler, Monet* exhibition (2004-5). The show inevitably recalled Ruskin’s legal dispute with Whistler surrounding the latter’s painting, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1875). In charting the course of aesthetic influences between the three artists, the exhibition also described the impact of modernity upon their art, in particular their mutual attempts to forge an artistic vocabulary with which to represent the growth of the metropolis. Within this movement, Ruskin was configured as one of modernity’s discontents – discontented with the commercial and environmental destruction of city-life; discontented with, what he saw as, the uncritical acceptance of that vandalism by artists such as Whistler: the “pot of paint” thrown “in the public’s face” (*Works* 29.160). Yet, by contextualising the artists’ work within the experience of the modern city, such as the engendering of their astonishing visual effects by London’s notorious pollution, the exhibition also showed that Ruskin’s protest was neither lone nor misguided, but formed part of the cultural response to the complicated history of modernity. Ruskin’s discontent does not run from or counter to the experience of modernity; instead, it is integral to it.

As Toni Cerutti has rightly observed in her introduction to *Ruskin and the Twentieth Century* (2000), this approach to perhaps the most eclectic nineteenth-century English man, where the twists and turns within his thought offer insights into the ambiguities of historical change, is now representative of current Ruskin scholarship. This view of Ruskin is at odds with the version propagated by the early twentieth-century Modern Movement as, in Lytton Strachey’s words, an “eminent Victorian”, whose public writings are a projection of private concerns: a high-minded moralist, a political reactionary and a social conservative. As is made clear by the contributors to Cerutti’s volume, and to its companion-piece, *Ruskin and Modernism* (2001) edited by Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls, Modernism’s response to Ruskin is far less straightforward than this account suggests. Instead, as Cianci and Nicholls argue, Modernism’s reaction against Ruskin is motivated less towards the man and more towards what he had come to represent by the time of his death in 1900: a public monument of Victorian culture. This consecration of Ruskin’s name was further enshrined by the publication between 1903 and 1912 of his complete *Works*, edited by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. Ruskin’s editors aimed for comprehensiveness; the combined effect of all thirty-nine volumes is of overbearing presence, a burden that weighed
heavily upon the minds of Ruskin’s successors. In E.M. Forster’s novel, *Howards End* (1910), this burden is given expression by Leonard Bast’s struggle with the density of Ruskin’s prose. Like the Gothic architecture of Victorian England that modernists, such as Wyndham Lewis, sought to be rid, Ruskin the icon needed to be demolished so that art and cultural criticism could renew themselves.

Yet, what the iconoclasm of Modernism finally revealed was the ambiguity of the man, whose writings not only contradict the posthumous commemoration of the public figure but also increasingly attack the Victorian culture with which he was subsequently identified. As Cerutti precisely notes, it has been the self-appointed function of Ruskin criticism since the 1960s to re-emphasise the intricacy of his thought by retrieving its many-sidedness from the simplistic gloss of iconification and modernist demystification. In retrospect, the pioneering anthologies of Ruskin’s work by, amongst others, Kenneth Clark and John D. Rosenberg exhibit an almost messianic zeal in reclaiming their subject. Ruskin is not simply presented as a great Victorian, indispensable to the study of his time, but a person relevant to our own. He is no longer portrayed as a reactionary but as a progressive thinker, whose moral intellect offers a unified vision that can benefit our own jaded sensibility. In other words, Ruskin is inducted as one of the timeless great men who constitute Clark’s prescriptive notion of civilised culture. The publication, though, of Raymond Williams’ landmark study, *Culture and Society* (1958), with its more relative notion of culture as a way of life as opposed to a standard of moral and intellectual conduct, suggested future ways of considering Ruskin as a participant, rather than a prophet, of debates surrounding the meaning and practice of culture.

While the critical anthologies of the 1960s ran the risk of turning Ruskin “into a monument again”, they were instrumental in ensuring that he received fresh recognition as part of the theoretical innovations that affected the field of Humanities during the next decades. In particular, the questioning of seemingly incontrovertible notions such as ‘the Great Tradition’ (in literature), ‘the Western canon’ (in both literature and art history), and the historical thesis of ‘the Great Man’ resulted in new ways of both contextualising and problematising the writer’s thought. What had been most awkward in Ruskin’s thinking, especially the later writings that had been dismissed as a sign of his mental deterioration, were now redeemed precisely for their incongruities and resistance towards comprehension. Instead of the emphasis upon unity as characteristic of his intellectual vision, attention rested upon the absences – the omissions and elisions – within Ruskin’s writing as indicative of its mediated experience.
of modernity. The author’s significance no longer resided in his ability to unify the world as he saw it, but in his writing’s re-presentation of its ambiguity: Ruskin’s moral commitment underscored by a pressing awareness of the minutiae of details.18

Yet, while the “disorientating illogicality of Ruskin’s positionings”19 has introduced the possibility of reading his work in terms of a postmodern scepticism towards metanarratives, any suggested affinity between Ruskin and postmodernism has to be questioned. For, this critical turn has the potential effect of again glossing him, reifying both the specificity of his writing and the ambiguity of his legacy. Instead, the keynote of recent critical writings upon Ruskin has been to read his work as a form of cultural diagnosis; neither as the unifying vision of a transcendent genius nor as the empty play of competing systems of knowledge, but as the symptom of historical tensions which are played out in the complex and contradictory articulation of his thought. In the 1990s, studies have dwelt upon Ruskin’s mediation of other cultural and political discourses: architectural planning, landscape and religion, sexual politics in relation to aesthetics, and the crisis of liberalism.20 Integral to this historicized approach to the author has been the research project at Lancaster University, whose publications, seminars and conferences have helped set the agenda for revisiting Ruskin.

Nevertheless, the reawakened interest in Ruskin during the 1990s cannot avoid the obvious, yet coincidental, convergence of his centenary with the new millennium in 2000. Just as pre-millennial anxieties provoked speculation about the future of society, so they also encouraged the reassessment of past ideas and beliefs for their possible insight into present unease. The reappraisal of the tensions within Ruskin’s criticism, as they express the contradictions within his historical moment, cannot be disentangled from the tensions associated with the pre-millennium. This retrospective note is sounded by Dinah Birch, in her introduction to Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern (1999), when she writes, “he helped to define the terms of the debates that we have come to take for granted as the foundation of twentieth-century culture.”21 In other words, by retracing Ruskin’s influence upon human areas such as science, education and politics, it is possible to re-evaluate the century passed and prepare for its successor.

This need to learn, via Ruskin, from the past is also signalled by John Batchelor in his centennial biography, John Ruskin: No Wealth but Life (2000), and in Michael Wheeler’s collection of essays on Ruskin and Environment (1995). Yet, Wheeler is quick to guard against the anachronism of conflating Ruskin’s environmental concerns with the
contemporary ecological movement. It is a trap that Judith Stoddart teeters towards in the choice of title for her analysis of Fors Clavigera, Ruskin’s Culture Wars (1998). The potential danger of viewing Ruskin as, in Cerutti’s words, “our contemporary” is of eliding his historical moment with ours, thereby glossing fundamental differences in the name of solidarity. While there remains an imperative to understand our debt to Ruskin, this knowledge cannot come at the expense of his singular achievement – the writing itself. Indeed, it is the heterogeneity of the writing, its astonishing breadth, diversity and constant evolution as opposed to the falsely monolithic appearance of Works, which engenders fresh perspectives upon him. It is really the incompleteness of Ruskin’s critique, its ability to diverge from itself and extend to new possibilities, which periodically renews the critical debates surrounding his thought and legacy. It is in that sense that Ruskin is contemporaneous to our own period, since it means that we are unable to go beyond him without reference to him. Nonetheless, this impasse is not the same as felt by the Modern Movement, since Ruskin no longer embodies the dead hand of the past. Rather, his vitality as a thinker counteracts the homogenising or reifying tendencies within the current state of late capitalism. Ruskin’s multiplicity encourages new critical perspectives but these approaches can only function, in part, through reference to the preceding points of view that have been stimulated by his work. Furthermore, they must also take account of the deep importance that perspective played in Ruskin’s artistic and cultural critique.

4. Ruskin in Perspective

The following essays, then, are arranged in three sections, each of which explores Ruskin’s legacy according to a particular theme within the overarching framework of perspective. The idea of perspective is deployed in the following senses. First, Ruskin’s consideration of artistic technique in terms of formal development; second, the role of vision in its moral, political and spiritual guises; third, Ruskin’s maintenance of a critical distance from his own times; and fourth, our own need to set Ruskin’s legacy in relation to present concerns – political, philosophical, cultural. Some of the questions that are raised include whether it is possible to see Ruskin’s work as an analogy for current tensions surrounding the aesthetic and the political, and whether we can learn from how the writer’s ideas were disseminated during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whereas previous studies have examined particular aspects of Ruskin’s work, this collection considers the following themes – art and
literature, aesthetics and politics, geography and landscape – as parts in themselves and as constituted in the greater body of Ruskin’s thought. The contributions are international in origin and interdisciplinary in content, reflecting not only the multi-faceted nature of Ruskin’s work but also his debts to contemporary academia. Our hope is to reveal Ruskin’s continuing relevance in the twenty-first century in new and exciting ways.

As Erwin Panofsky once observed, “the history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self.”

According to Panofsky’s concern with both the inner and outer worlds we now need a closer understanding and appreciation of perspective, if we are to move towards a more comprehensive view of Ruskin’s achievement. As the following essays suggest, Ruskin’s work inspires literature, science, philosophy and politics as well as theories of art and landscape. That we continue to be fascinated by his work indicates the profound and long-lasting influence of his cultural legacy.

2 Together with the Pompeii frescoes (especially those belonging to the second style), there is an extraordinary Roman example found in the Villa dei Misteri in 1936. The fresco shows a prospective implant absolutely correct in all its parts and a precise convergence of the parallel lines in the same vanishing point.
3 On Brunelleschi’s re-invention of perspective, see Martin Kemp, The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
5 Jay, 7.
9 Ruskin’s studies of perspective can be seen in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and are also available online at URL: http://ruskin.oucs.ox.ac.uk.
10 The “draughtsman” in question is Leonardo da Vinci.


And not just for the Modern Movement, academics too. Despite a CD Rom version in 1996, there has been no new attempt since Cook and Wedderburn to produce a scholarly edition of Ruskin’s *oeuvre*.


Cerutti, 19.


Part I

Art and Literature
PART I:

ART AND LITERATURE

The essays in this opening section take as their cue the interaction of art and literature in Ruskin’s work, in particular, by examining the functions of modern literary criticism, autobiography, travel writing and the pictorial. The impression that emerges from these accounts is of Ruskin at the meeting-point of both cross-cultural and trans-historical influences.

Toni Cerutti begins by arguing that Ruskin’s crisis of religious faith, during the course of the 1850s, led to his revaluation of the role of the critic. While Ruskin comes to associate cultural and political criticism, his close attention to the making of the literary text prefigures the relationship between implied writers and readers within twentieth-century structuralist discourses. Nevertheless, even while Ruskin praises the concision of other writers, the prolixity of his own style acts as a constant reminder of Ruskin’s critical presence in contrast with the dispersed self-representations of postmodern thought.

The theme of selfhood is explored further in John Coyle’s comparative study of Ruskin and Marcel Proust. In reacting against the view that Proust superseded Ruskin’s influence, and as a consequence was the better writer, Coyle turns to Roland Barthes’ distinction of écrivain and écrivant to distinguish between their literary methods. Ruskin’s refusal to concede the merits of formalism, and to acknowledge language as an object in itself, results in the labyrinthine style of his descriptive prose. Yet, with reference to Viktor Schklovsky, Coyle argues that Ruskin’s style amounts to a second order of formalism in which the protracted use of description defamiliarises narrative structure.

The role of perception, which Coyle sees as essential to the making of Ruskin’s self-image, is the theme of Richard Read’s account of The Stones of Venice, in particular, the use of vivid contrasts. In drawing upon contemporary psychology and the history of perspective in art, Read places Ruskin at the intersection of two contrasting tendencies: one in which the mind opens out to new horizons, the other in which the mind seeks to limit the reception of fresh knowledge. Read locates these twin responses within the literary and artistic histories of travel, including the
representation of Venice, before concluding with a postscript on the contemporary filmmaker, Stan Douglas.

Lastly, Jeremy Scott’s analysis of Ruskin’s only work of fiction, *The King of the Golden River*, pieces together a cogent literary aesthetic from Ruskin’s various writings, including his essay, ‘Fiction, Fair and Foul’. Scott argues that Ruskin’s emphasis upon precision in language equates not only with a visual clarity drawn from the realm of painting but also with a moral insight similar to that of Romantic authors, such as John Keats and Sir Walter Scott. While *The King of the Golden River* may not be great literature, it serves as an excellent dramatisation of Ruskin’s ideas concerning fiction: his hopes for its future development and his aspirations for a culture cleansed of materialism.

Cover: Antonio Canali called Canaletto, *Westminster Bridge from the North with the Lord Mayor’s Procession, 29 October 1746*, oil on canvas, 1746-7, 95.9 x 127.6. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (Fig. 1-5, detail).
The aim of this paper is to discuss the anticipation within Ruskin’s literary discourse of the relationship between writers and readers within twentieth-century critical theory. This inquiry involves assembling a nest of allusions, references, quotations and digressions spread throughout the course of his production. Ruskin was initially educated in terms of literature, which he subsequently abandoned in favour of the visual arts, and his literary criticism is rarely the subject of contemporary analyses. Yet, in a fascinating mixture of cultural intuitions and linguistic notations, spanning theoretical speculations to methodical dissections of significant writing, Ruskin progressed from a Romantic reading of art to the historically and socially determined contextualization of the text as the core of literary experience.

Ruskin’s major contributions concern the reworking of Romantic theories and the role of myth. George Landow and Harold Bloom have admirably explored Ruskin’s consideration of the intellectual processes that govern the making of art. Northrop Frye and, in more recent times, Dinah Birch have revealed the relevance of Ruskin’s anthropological readings into fiction. In between, though, there lies a rich crop of practical annotations that can be fruitfully revisited in the light of contemporary trends.

The most illuminating insights belong to the years when a renewed sense of history and a recently acquired social sensibility provoked the move from the platonic conception of art to a pragmatic, social and historical idea of the genesis of the text. In the first two volumes of *Modern Painters*, in a mixture of religious conviction and aesthetic experiences, Ruskin modelled his voice on the manner of the bard standing like a prophet between the universe and the common reader – a legacy inherited from the first Romantic generation. By the mid-1850s, Ruskin’s *Weltanschauung* began to falter under the profound religious crisis that greatly affected his intellectual outlook. At this time, as Bloom has argued in his study of Ruskin’s literary criticism, an “intense intimation of loss
within the imaginative experience pervaded his life.” Though still longing for a totality of vision, he was unable to regain confidence in the divine harmony of the universe and started to search for tangible evidence in external reality that would give meaning and substance to human existence. In his Lectures on Art (1870), Ruskin upheld the primacy of morality over religion: morality to be read, says Landow, both as “ethical” and as “referring to all mental processes.”

You know well how necessary it is, both to the rightness of our own life, and to rightly understanding the lives of others, that we should always keep clearly distinguished our ideas of Religion, as thus defined, and of Morality, as the law of rightness in human conduct. There are many religions, but there is only one morality. There are moral and immoral religions, which differ as much in precept as in emotion; but there is only one morality, which has been, is, and must be for ever, an instinct in the hearts of all civilized men, as certain and unalterable as their outward bodily form, and which receives from religion neither law, nor place; but only hope, and felicity. (Works 20.49)

Ruskin’s new epistemological approach was never elaborated into a coherent system. Religious principles no longer worked as fixed values, while morality founded on instinct was subject to the frailties and fickleness of human nature. When, after 1875, he returned to a mild form of religious belief, his cognitive method retained an open-minded curiosity. While on the surface, his discourse seemed to reflect an indelible faith in the perceived truths of art, life, impression and form, in effect it reinforced trends already latent in the empirical idealism of his youth. As Robert Hewison writes, “whereas for Wordsworth, and ever more Coleridge, the purpose of perception was the emotional fusion between the artist and what he saw, Ruskin followed the scientists in seeking first to establish an object’s individual identity, and then read its meaning.”

Ruskin’s ethical beliefs, however, continued to follow the Christian doctrine. So, when his interest turned to the economic and political situation of the period, his social critique was still rooted in the civil virtues of love of one’s neighbour and respect for the hierarchy in which he had been raised. Apparently little had changed in Ruskin’s discourse, but the balanced interplay between the given and the subjective that characterised his dialectics was eventually trapped in a dramatic tension that gave voice to “his continuous uncertainty about the truth of his opinion.” The prophetic tone, strengthened by his vis polemica, became a rhetorical strategy that could be adapted to the occasion.
Ruskin’s unsolved doubts charged his writings with glimpses of future developments in modern criticism. The awakening of Ruskin’s social consciousness provoked a revision within his evaluation of the arts. One could almost say that, in spite of his dislike of contemporary consumerism and industrialisation, Ruskin took on an urban, capitalistic outlook. The drive to nature remained the keynote in his autobiographical writings, but lost prominence in his appreciation of literature. Marc Shell writes that, in entering the field of economics, Ruskin “attempted to hold in a single vision the theoretic and practical problems of aesthetics and economics.”

*The Political Economy of Art* (1857) explored art and its modes of production as an “unselfish” piece of work whose aim was to satisfy the longing for the beautiful: a view Ruskin had anticipated in *Modern Painters I* (1843), where he wrote that a poet is “a person who puts things together, not as a watchmaker steel or a shoemaker leather, but who puts life into them” (*Works* 7.215), and that he now refined into the image of the poet as a goldsmith. In trying to define “the economic value of art and the relation of aesthetic taste to economic organization”, Ruskin placed the artistic object among the basic commodities of human society, much in line with Marx’s conception of base and superstructure. *The Political Economy of Art* brought to fulfilment a process started earlier in ‘The Nature of Gothic’ (1853), which initiated Ruskin’s reflections on the cultural aspect of objects. In retrospect, Ruskin can be seen as siding with a school of thought that runs from Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold to Raymond Williams and the ‘New Historicians’. As Stefan Collini observes, Ruskin was a cultural scholar of sorts, since he belonged “on the conservative wing of the so-called ‘culture-and-society’ tradition, with its deep yearning for the modern world to go away.” Yet, as Georg Lukács writes, it is often the most conservative of writers who see most deeply into the present, unconsciously foreseeing the future, while their proposed solutions remain the most reactionary and impractical. The function of criticism was extended during the course of the nineteenth century to the study of the human sciences, in particular economics, politics and sociology, the new fields of learning typical of an industrial society. The intrinsic value of literature, which was once attributed to the a-historical categories of sincerity, emotion, truth and beauty, was now dependent upon the prevailing perspective of the time. Accordingly, there grew in Ruskin a sense that, as Edward Said suggests, “texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical movements in which they are located and interpreted.”