

# Towards Creative Imagination in Victorian Literature



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in Victorian Literature

By

Aleksandra Piasecka

**CAMBRIDGE  
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P U B L I S H I N G

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by Aleksandra Piasecka

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-5715-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5715-4

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## INTRODUCTION

“I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”  
(Michelangelo)

The words attributed to Michelangelo imply that the Renaissance sculptor must have been gifted with a special insight which enabled him to perceive more than common people did. The statement is also indicative of the widely held belief that artists possess some features differentiating them from common people, such as extraordinary skills or exceptionally vivid imagination, whereby their work markedly varies from an uninspired daily routine. However, the conception of a necessary bond between the artist and the act of creation, now nothing but obvious, was not always deemed so (Tatarkiewicz 294 -295). To be more specific, the ancient Greeks did not even have a term denoting “to create”. Instead, they used the verb *poiein* (meaning “to make”), but only with reference to poets, who were exclusively thought to fashion new worlds. Neither painters nor sculptors deserved to have their pursuits described as the act of “making” something because, in the eyes of their contemporaries, they only imitated nature. Expected to follow rigid rules, and reduced to mere craftsmen, the representatives of the visual arts could not give free rein to their fantasy. The process of raising the status of artists and poets alike, together with discerning and appreciating their unique traits, was slow and laborious.

Taking this gradual development into account, Casey distinguishes three major phases in the manner of treating creative imagination throughout the centuries, namely subordination, mediation and superordination (14-18). The first one concerns the situation in the Greece of antiquity. Plato advances the theory that imagination occupies the lowest position among human mental faculties. Therefore, it is inferior to other forms of knowing and inevitably leads to falsehood because this power gives rise to images which perforce present doubly warped truths, being just copies of the shadows of ideas.

Next, the prolonged stage of mediation follows, commenced by Aristotle and lasting well into the eighteenth century. According to the new doctrine, imagination assumes the middle position between reason and sensation, which entails its advance in the ranks of the epistemological hierarchy. The anthropocentric turn of the Renaissance fosters the study of

the artist's individuality, and draws attention to the fact that his works are not only exact replicas of reality (previously considered a perfect and thus solely worthy model) but reflect the inner vision of their maker. Scaliger puts forth in his *Poetica*: "The poet maketh a new Nature and so maketh himself as it were a new God" (qtd. in Klein 25). Finally, the very term "to create" is applied in the context of poetic activity as late as the seventeenth century, by Kazimierz Maciej Sarbiewski. The theoretician uses it in his treatise *De perfecta poesi*, writing that any verse is a being created anew ("de novo creari") by its author acting in the likeness of God ("instar Dei") (1.1). However, Sarbiewski limits the phrase's application to literature, claiming that other arts are imitative. Joseph Addison, on the other hand, links the notion of creativity with imagination *expressis verbis*, voicing an opinion that it "has something in it like creation" (375). Characteristically, the role of the imaginative faculty tends to be grossly underestimated in the Age of Enlightenment. The most notable stance is that of John Locke, who, in line with the current mechanistic explanations of the universe, questions the obscure interpretations of the functioning of the mind. He postulates that imagination (alternatively called "Fancy") is the product of an idle intellect, and answers only for combining the recorded perceptions into pleasant, albeit deceitful, pictures.

Locke's point of view becomes the target of the Romantics, who polemicize against the empiricist, in this manner initiating the phase of the superordination of imagination, to recall the term coined by Casey (17). In contrast to their antecedents they acknowledge the superiority of this capacity over the intellect, calling it "reason in her most exalted mood" (Wordsworth, "The Prelude" 361). Through spontaneous play of imagination one can discover the transcendental order behind the world of appearances. Consequently, the artist becomes the priest-like intermediary between the human and the divine. For William Blake imagination is "the body of God" and "the imaginative arts ...[are] therefore the greatest of Divine revelations" (Yeats 35). From such an approach it transpires that creation can no longer be perceived as a mere amusement, but is the most essential occupation possible for man. Visions experienced in a flash of sheer inspiration bring mystics closer to God because they understand reality more deeply than others and possess a prophetic gift. Percy Bysshe Shelley puts it in the following manner:

"For he [the poet] not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time." (748)

The Romantics often find their source of inspiration in nature, which in turn furnishes them with the symbols needed to convey the eternal mysteries of the unseen. The assumption that the universe is a visible sign of spiritual reality underpins their attitude towards the outside world. It also lays the foundations for the pantheism of William Wordsworth, who claims that nature, endowed with its own soul, has divine attributes, and thus its imitation may transform and ennoble the artist. Last but not least, Samuel Taylor Coleridge makes a famous distinction between fancy and imagination. He juxtaposes the passive faculty, responsible for the mechanical reconfiguration of impressions, with the vitally creative energy, which transmutes the images into a new entity and reconciles disparate qualities into a harmonious and unified whole. The great recognition of man's creative powers that comes in the Romantic era results in the conviction that imagination conditions the artist's producing masterpieces, while the words "poet" or "painter" take on a meaning synonymous with "creator".

The impact of this tradition can be strongly felt throughout the nineteenth century, most evidently in the ultimate treatment of the arts as equal to letters, the privileged status of the artist, and the credit given him for his imaginative potential. Bearing in mind this Romantic heritage, the aim of my study is to follow the meandering thought on the creative imagination in Mid- and Late Victorian England. In these times of transition, as the age of the Industrial Revolution was regarded, with all the cultural and sociological repercussions stemming from rapid technological progress and scientific advancement, aesthetic considerations became involved in the broader debate on the shape of the modern world. Thus, the approach to the artistic imagination was closely connected with the shifting beliefs concerning the essence of beauty and the role of religion, not to mention attitudes towards nature and society. These aspects defined the aims furthered by painters and poets alike, and set the direction for their artistic endeavours. Therefore, the abovementioned issues cannot be passed over if one seeks to get a comprehensive picture of how the Victorians perceived the process of creation.

Five people have been chosen as representatives of their time in the discussion about the artistic imagination. These are: John Ruskin (1819 – 1900), a polymath interested not only in art criticism, but also social problems and science; William Morris (1834 – 1896), a poet, writer and designer associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement; Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828 – 1882), a poet and painter, one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; Walter Pater (1839 – 1894), an art theoretician; and, finally, Arthur Symonds (1865 – 1945), a poet and cultural critic.

Accordingly, the material analysed to recreate the Victorian understanding of the artistic faculties is of different kinds, and embraces not only critical essays (Ruskin, Pater, Symons) but also *belles-lettres*: short stories (Morris) and poems (Rossetti, Symons). In this manner two positions complement each other, i.e. the views of the theoreticians and those of practitioners. The former attempted to discern and extract the quintessence of the artistic powers on the basis of their observations and reflections, whereas the latter relied on their personal experiences in this respect. Interestingly enough, Symons is a person holding both positions at the same time. Furthermore, it is worth noting that, characteristically, all the men referred to in this dissertation were interested in various forms of artistic activity, be it poetry, painting, architecture, dance, theatre or the crafts. Their fascination seemed typical for a century in which the ancient exhortation *ut pictura poesis*, uttered by Horace, enjoyed great popularity, partly owing to the ideal of the picturesque cherished in the preceding century (*The Art of Poetry* 38). The general appreciation of all branches of the arts as equally valuable led to the question of their shared qualities. In consequence, artistic inspiration, due to its lying at the very roots of creation, was recognized as their common denominator (Praz 5). This conviction also justifies the choice of texts on the imagination in the present study because they concern artists and writers alike. The strategy employed is thus that of Ruskin, who admitted to using “the words painter and poet quite indifferently” (*MP III* 221), and it remains consistent with the theory of Philostratus the Younger that “the art of painting has a certain kinship with poetry, and that an element of imagination is common to both” (285).

The first chapter of the volume deals with the concept of imagination as it emerges from the writings of John Ruskin, especially his volumes *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*. First, the importance of being truthful to nature is explored by tracing the grounds for Ruskin’s negative evaluation of the artists of the picturesque, contrasted with his full recognition of the painters from the modern landscape school (represented by William Turner). Through aesthetic contemplation of the world man learns how to venerate his maker, so subsequently the issue of the perception of beauty is discussed (and the role played by the so-called “aesthetic” and “theoretical” faculties in this process). Since the existence of the passive quality to discern and relish the beautiful raises the issue of the active power to generate it, Ruskin’s views on the “the imaginative faculty” are considered. Next, the chapter moves on to explore the role of careful observation in artistic creation, as well as the appreciation of *objets d’art*. Using the examples of the visual descriptions of two paintings (*The*

*Slave Ship* by Turner and *The Massacre of the Innocents* by Tintoretto) the lesson of seeing, as intended by Ruskin, is reconstructed. The study of both excerpts from *Modern Painters* leads to the problem of the literary style of *ekphrasis* adopted by the author, and its sources. The analysis of his language, on the basis of the verbal portrayal of the basilica of St. Mark in Venice, gives an insight into the self-appointed role of preacher assumed by Ruskin. Finally, a closer look is taken at the grotesque, understood as symbolic, often distorted representations fashioned by pious craftsmen when confronted with truths which they could neither fully comprehend nor adequately convey.

At the beginning of the succeeding chapter the history of the relationship between Morris and Ruskin is outlined. The examination of their personal rapport explains the poet's enthralment with the aesthetic writings of the critic and its ramifications, and provides a commentary on both men's gradual transferring of their attention from aesthetics to social issues. Simultaneously, the differences in their involvement in the problems of the age are emphasized. Next, the idea of imagination, as inferred from the two short stories by Morris, "The Story of the Unknown Church" and *The Hollow Land*, is discussed. The features which bring Morris's concept of imagination closer to that enunciated by Ruskin are also enumerated. Likewise, some words are devoted to the elements with which Morris enriched the notions of his older colleague. The final point raised in the chapter is a possible interpretation of the tale "Lindenborg Pool" from the angle of Ruskin's theory of the grotesque. It appears that the narrative explores the issue of evil and sin using this aesthetic category as understood by the Victorian art connoisseur. However, Morris loses the link between man's moral attitude and his creative powers so strongly put forward by Ruskin.

The creative process as perceived by Dante Gabriel Rossetti is the subject investigated in the third chapter. The initial section relates the ups and downs of the uneasy relationship between the touchy Pre-Raphaelite and John Ruskin, who for some years fulfilled the role of his somewhat overbearing mentor. The aim of the account is to demonstrate that, in spite of Ruskin's support for the novice painter, not only were their characters and expectations divergent, but also, and more importantly in the context of the present study, their artistic tenets. The second part of the chapter concentrates on Rossetti's concept of imagination, framed in his letters and casual remarks. An attempt is made to differentiate between a number of synonymous expressions denoting imagination, and thus to find out how the Pre-Raphaelite saw the poet's or painter's work. Then one aspect of the artistic endeavour, namely the necessity to render truthfully the

circumstances which gave inspiration, is brought to the fore. From this perspective the poem-letter from the journey to Belgium should be read. The introductory sonnet to the cycle *The House of Life*, on the other hand, sheds new light on the character and the role of “monumental moments” in the act of creation. Subsequently, the sonnet “For a Venetian Pastoral”, delving into the operation of the senses in such a significant instance, is interpreted. Besides, the role of memory may be inferred from the symbolism of the painting *Mnemosyne*. As a final point the issue of subjectivity in art is raised. Consequently, the words of the Soul (the personification of the artist’s psyche featured in the story *Hand and Soul*) are referred to. The strand of thought about emotions as a source of creativity leads to the poems “Transfigured Life” and “The Song Throe”. The chapter closes with an attempt to juxtapose Rossetti’s output with the tradition of sonnet writing in Victorian England.

The fourth chapter concerns the views of Walter Pater on aesthetic poetry, critical prose and artistic imagination. First, the issue of his sudden interest in Rossetti’s output is touched upon. It seems that Pater’s text on the Pre-Raphaelite poet owes a great deal to the covert polemics with Ruskin. Therefore, the issue of the supposed discussion between the two Victorian critics, never openly acknowledged, is examined. Since it supports the hypothesis about Pater’s deliberately appropriating Rossetti from Ruskin and presenting him, together with William Morris, as a leading exponent of the new, aesthetic school of poetry, an attempt is made to explain what the author of *Appreciations* understood by this term. The philosophy of life behind the desire for beauty, in conjunction with the imperative to honour the passing moment seems especially important here. After recalling the message of the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, another book by Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, becomes the focus of attention because it supplements the concept of the necessary openness to sensations expounded in the essay, which closes the volume on the art of the cinquecento. Moreover, the role of Matthew Arnold in moulding Pater’s theory about the place of religion is considered. Then, a few words are given to the concept of art criticism, regarded by the Oxford don (again after Arnold) as impossible without a flash of inspiration for its creation. At the same time, the qualifications of the critic, in his work resembling more an artist than a judge, are pointed out. In light of this, the famous critical passage of Pater devoted to Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* is subsequently analysed. Finally, this part also mentions Pater’s characteristics of good style, and puts across his idea of the poetic imagination, articulated in opposition to Coleridge.

So far as chapter five is concerned, it examines the selection of Arthur Symons's poems and critical writings, stressing their debt to Pater and presenting the Decadent author's ideal of beauty and his views on the essence of creative work. To begin with, the history of Symons's contacts with Pater and his infatuation with the critic's essays is traced because it substantiates the view of the poet's overt spiritual discipleship to the author of *The Renaissance*. Afterwards, the literary strategies employed to find permanence among the constant flux by retaining the impression of the passing moment are enumerated, drawing on the poem "At Dieppe" from *London Night*. They are juxtaposed with the techniques of the Impressionist painters, especially Walter Sickert, to whom the lyric was dedicated. This poses the question about Symons's stance towards Impressionism (both in the visual arts and literature), answered by means of the relevant passages from his biography and the article "The Decadent Movement in Literature". Next, the new canon of beauty advocated by the writer is explored, which explains his attitude towards nature (the poem "Proem" the cycle "Lilian") and the concept of the beautiful as necessarily including the particle of strangeness. To elucidate this point the lyrics "For a Picture of Rossetti" and "Modern Beauty" are interpreted. The last section deals with the works of Symons that give utterance to his thoughts on the manner in which the artistic genius operates. With this in mind, the poem "The Loom of Dreams" and the essays on William Blake and the Symbolists are referred to. The dissertation ends with the conclusion, followed by the list of the works consulted, and the appendix, which comprises the poems and essays (or their fragments) analysed in greater depth.

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance, good advice and patience of my supervisors, Prof. Sławomir Wąciór and Prof. Ryszard Kasperowicz. I would like to express my deep and sincere gratitude for their time, help and many constructive comments. Also, I warmly thank my family for their encouragement, especially my husband for his great patience and understanding throughout, and my parents for their never-ending support.



## CHAPTER ONE

# JOHN RUSKIN'S CONCEPT OF ART AS A REFLECTION OF THE MORAL ORDER IN THE WORLD<sup>1</sup>

Even the most cursory reading of *Modern Painters (MP)* or *The Stones of Venice (SoV)* enables the reader to spot the key words, around which the tangle of the ideas mooted in the pages are carefully, albeit sometimes loosely, organized. To these undoubtedly belong: nature, God, morality and imagination, all intrinsically bound up together, as the author of the books asserted. John Ruskin, an influential Victorian art critic, changed his mind at different stages of a long and fruitful career, and thus it may be confusing to compare his thoughts expressed in various treatises, especially as many remarkable insights can be easily lost in some wearisome, long-drawn-out passages. Nevertheless, the foundations of the critic's system of artistic values remained relatively stable, even if it developed with time. The later works do not contradict the essentials from the previous volumes, but help to shed new light on them. This is why only from the perspective of the whole oeuvre of Ruskin does it become clear that the ability to render realistic images was not the artistic quality esteemed by him most highly, as the Pre-Raphaelites believed. Instead, the pivotal role in his theories was occupied by great and vivid imagination. The critic dedicated much time to the exploration of its functioning, yet the basic issue for him remained the direct connection between imagination and the moral attitude of the painter or sculptor. The author of *The Stones of Venice* maintained that only the pious were capable of achieving greatness in art. The problem of imagination, both its lower and nobler types, characteristics of works created under its influence, and a

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<sup>1</sup> An altered version of the chapter was published as: "John Ruskin's Word Paintings in the Context of his Principle of Clear Vision as well as the Biblical and Rhetorical tradition." *The Journal of Education Culture and Society*. 3.1. (2011): 31-49. Print.

peculiar mission assigned to the artist seem to be a complex area of research. However, notwithstanding the point of departure for the study of Ruskin's notion of imagination, after initial wanderings the examination will always come down to the underlying problem of nature in his works.

## **1. The problem of fidelity to nature in judgments about artists**

“Ruskin started preaching when he was 22...” (“Ruskin zaczął prorokować mając lat dwadzieścia dwa...”) – thus Maria Niemojowska slightly ironically embarks on her analysis of the ideas expounded in *Modern Painters*, and at the same time aptly describes the prevailing trait of the style adopted by the young critic (137). The works of the English art connoisseur are in fact characterized by a highly rhetorical, authoritative and ornate manner of writing. Moreover, behaving as a genuine preacher, he saw the world as black and white, which resulted in his drawing a sharp distinction between the analysed phenomena and placing them at opposite poles according to the beliefs he subscribed to. Such an unbridgeable gap opens up between two groups of landscape painters: great masters and cunning imitators, the former epitomized by William Turner, and the latter by Nicolas Poussin. To understand the essence of the critic's unqualified approval for some artists, along with his wholesale condemnation of others, it is indispensable to follow through the arguments revolving around the concept of nature which are put forward in the first volume of *Modern Painters*.

The classification conducted by Ruskin was based on his theories of truth to nature, beauty and imagination, which provided him with a conceptual framework and a touchstone for evaluating art. The above-mentioned book, intended to defend Turner against the attacks mounted by the critics from *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Literary Gazette*, bears the full title *The Modern Painters: Their Superiority in the Art of Landscape Painting to the Ancient Masters*, (1843) and its author set himself the aim of presenting Turner as the chief exponent of a new school of landscape painting, together with Copley Fielding, James Duffield Harding, James Pyne, et al. In an attempt to prove their superiority over the artists of the previous generations, Ruskin focused on the advantages of the aforesaid painters. Yet, with the flow of time he extended his knowledge of art and introduced a number of changes in the subsequent edition of *Modern Painters* (1846) by removing numerous remarks about his contemporaries and discussing the oeuvre of an additional 45 individuals. Some of them came under harsh criticism as those who desperately strove after

picturesque qualities in their canvases, “casting all (...) aside to attain those particular truths of tone and chiaroscuro, which may trick the spectator into a belief of reality” (*MP I 74*).

Robert Hewison points out that the accusations levelled at the artists rigidly sticking to the principles of *mimesis* were of two kinds (46-47). First of all, such painters built up a distorted image of nature, concentrating only on its most superficial forms and selecting some of its elements to create a harmonious whole, pleasant to the eye of the beholder. Their vision failed to convey God's ideas hidden behind the visible world, trivializing it and simultaneously manifesting both their ignorance about its laws and a lack of love, which – according to Ruskin – constituted a necessary condition for a profound understanding of nature. Therefore, he frowned upon their landscapes since they were reflections of minds which

“(...) had neither love of nature, nor feeling of her beauty; (...) [which] looked for her coldest and most commonplace effects, because they were easiest to imitate; and for her most vulgar forms, because they were most easily to be recognized by the untaught eyes of those whom alone they could hope to please. (*MP I 75*)”

Thus, contrary to the widespread assumption that manual dexterity for painting lifelike pictures proves an artist's quality, Ruskin perceived keeping absolute fidelity to nature as a sign of taking the easy way out and winning cheap plaudits, tantamount to deliberate deception. This argument was advanced when the critic tried to justify the reasons for the low esteem in which he held Gaspar Poussin, Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa, all highly regarded by the public at that time. He put forward the opinion that their self-centredness resulted in a closed attitude towards nature and an inability to lift the veil on its secrets. Consequently, even though they rendered a realistic picture of the world, comparable to photography, it turned out to be false and valueless:

“(...) there is one thing wanting in all the doing of these men, and that is the very virtue by which the work of human mind chiefly rises above that of the Daguerreotype or Calotype, or any other mechanical means that ever have been or may be invented, Love: There is no evidence of their ever having gone to nature with any thirst, or received from her such emotion as could make them, even for an instant, lose sight of themselves; there is in them neither earnestness nor humility; there is no simple or honest record of any single truth; none of the plain words nor straight efforts that men speak and make when they once feel.” (*MP I 77*)

Ruskin draws heavily on the example of Poussin, who symbolizes for him all the faults of the old school of painting. Even if the critic feels forced to give the painter credit for certain achievements, like being the first to paint sunshine in misty air, it is immediately counterbalanced by a long enumeration of bluntly expressed charges: “His false taste, forced composition, and ignorant rendering of detail have perhaps been of more detriment to art than the gift he gave was of advantage”, “I know of no other instance of a man’s working from nature continually with the desire of being true, and never attaining the power of drawing so much as a bough of a tree rightly” (*MP I 89*), etc. This proves that despite his claims to write an impartial treatise, the author of *Modern Painters* presents highly subjective opinions in his book.

Referring to Hewison once again, the second accusation brought against the picturesque painters by Ruskin was their lack of social involvement (47). Namely, what inclined them to depict impoverished people was neither compassion nor sympathy for the misery of the unfortunate models, but fascination with the possible effects produced by portraying such colourful and intriguing figures. Hence, it was their way of dealing with the subject rather than the choice of topics that the English critic objected to. Nevertheless, there were also artists who achieved vividness in their pictures without falling into the trap of superficiality, by imbuing their works with deep understanding of human dramas. To this group belonged William Turner.

The painter often touched on the matter of ruins, the irreversible flow of time, and economic and social deprivation. In this way he managed to reflect in his works a gloomy atmosphere pervading society: the sense of the futility of relentless toil and the pointlessness of existence, together with the awareness of its evanescence. The pessimistic message conveyed by Turner finds its expression in the picture depicting the fight between Apollo and Python, a snake which symbolizes sin and corruption. The victory of the god appears to be illusory, since another snake is noticeable, which comes into being out of the blood of its predecessor. Therefore Turner, an artist rendering the beauty of the world but simultaneously aware of the evil and suffering which lurk beneath its visible surface, was called by the author of *Modern Painters* “Painter of all loveliness of nature, with the worm at its root” (*MP V 422*).

Nonetheless, sensitivity to human suffering was a characteristic more strongly emphasized by Ruskin at a later stage of his career, when radical social ideas pushed many of his initial interests into the background. As a budding critic, however, he was mostly concerned with the problem of truthfulness to nature. This fidelity did not signify for him an accurate

portrayal of the minutest details of reality but a reflection of natural laws observed and comprehended by the artist. He defined truth in art as “the faithful statement, either to the mind or senses, of any fact of nature” (*MP I* 21). The picturesque artists fell short of this ideal, not only due to their lack of knowledge (e.g. Ruskin accuses Claude of incorrect perspective), but also for their trite preconceptions and cheap tricks, which deterred them from the quest for genuineness. Their vision was utterly false, which had far-reaching consequences, since in this way they plunged into confusion and weakened the ties with God: “the truth of nature is a part of the truth of God; to him who does not search it out, darkness, as it is to him who does, infinity” (*MP I* 50). Though, as Hewison notices, the accurate study of the fact merely provides a basis for the creative process, whereas it is the way in which the artist uses his observations that occupies the centre of the Victorian art theoretician's attention (65).

To all intents and purposes, the problem of the truth is intimately related to Ruskin's notion of beauty and its perception. In the critic's opinion things can have two forms of beauty: “Typical Beauty” and “Vital Beauty”. The former refers to external qualities which mirror divine attributes, whereas the latter consists in “the appearance of felicitous fulfilment of function in living things” (*MP II* 29). “Typical Beauty” has six aspects, i.e. infinity, the type of divine incomprehensibility; unity, the type of divine comprehensiveness; repose, the type of divine permanence; symmetry, the type of divine justice; purity, the type of divine energy; and moderation, the type of government by law. Hence, in all its features, “Typical Beauty” manifests the nature of God. “Vital Beauty”, on the other hand, is the beauty of creation obeying divine laws. Accordingly, both types of beauty are indicative of the presence of God's spirit in the world. In this way, Ruskin indissolubly links the beautiful with the spiritual sphere, while “[a]esthetic appreciation becomes...a moral, even a religious exercise” (H. Fraser 115).

It was the contemplation of the stormy Alpine landscape in the valley of Chamonix that gave rise to the theory of beauty as deriving its essence from God and directing the observer's thoughts to his Maker:

“And then I learned — what till then I had not known — the real meaning of the word Beautiful. With all that I had ever seen before — there had come mingled the associations of humanity — the exertion of human power — the action of human mind. The image of self had not been effaced in that of God. . . . It was then that I understood that all which is the type of God's attributes . . . can turn the human soul from gazing upon itself . . . and fix the spirit . . . on the types of that which is to be its food

for eternity; — this and this only is in the pure and right sense of the word beautiful.” (qtd. in Landow, “Ruskin’s Theory of Typical Beauty”)

Ruskin’s belief in a direct connection between God and nature (“her soul is the Deity”, *MP I* 57) raised the status of art as *mimesis*. By a careful observation of nature the painter gets closer to divine mysteries and thus ennobles his mind and soul.

When the author of *Modern Painters* wrote about beauty as a reflection of God, he was still an ardent follower of Protestantism. Even as a little child Ruskin regularly read the Bible and participated in church services. He was influenced by the religious fervour of his parents, which translated into heavily moralistic overtones in his early works. However, the following period of doubt eventually culminated in Ruskin’s loss of faith in 1858. The incident, called in *Fors Clavigera* “unconversion”, was caused by a bad sermon heard in a Waldensian chapel, and a concurrent incentive provided by a moving picture of Paolo Veronese, *The Queen of Sheba*, seen in the art gallery in Turin (10). Ruskin, disheartened by the narrow-mindedness of the preacher, turned towards the “religion of Humanity” for almost twenty years (*Fors Clavigera* 10). His new attitude concentrated on improving the quality of earthly existence led by his contemporaries, instead of looking forward to distant eternal bliss. Still, the most noteworthy of Ruskin’s aesthetic criticism, including the first volumes of *Modern Painters*, was written at the time of his strong Protestant inclination.

Turning now to the perception of the beautiful, considered to be a moral activity, one should bring up Ruskin’s contention that it is neither mechanical reception nor an abstract concept but a complex, gradual process. Beauty originates from the sensual impression, whereas the faculty of the lower order, the aesthetic one, is responsible for this “mere animal consciousness of the pleasantness” (*MP II* 16). Then, the impression stirs up emotions and subsequently awakens love for the object perceived, along with the desire for identification with it. Finally, this longing leads to the discovery of the higher idea behind the thing, arousing both feeling of gratitude towards God, as its creator, and the need to worship Him. The whole process is called “theoria” (i.e. contemplation) by Ruskin, who, in order to position it in the human mind, coins the term “the theoretic faculty”, meaning the link between the eye and the intellect. The theoretic faculty is concerned with the recognition of truth and beauty.

Apart from the passive ability to recognize the beautiful, the author of *Modern Painters* also distinguished an active power, namely the imaginative faculty, required for the recreation of both values. As far as imagination is concerned, it operates on three separate planes, and may be

divided accordingly into penetrative, associative and contemplative. The penetrative imagination enables the observer to intuitively grasp the external and inner truth of objects and their mutual relations. It is also indispensable to avoid a mistake called by Ruskin "a pathetic fallacy", which consists in projecting human emotions onto the inanimate world. The associative imagination, on the other hand, makes it possible for the artist to combine the discerned elements into a new entirety in the chosen medium, and in this way share his vision with others. Finally, the contemplative imagination determines the coming into existence of metaphors and symbols in the artist's mind as it deals with abstract notions which cannot be seen. All three kinds of imagination are activated in the act of perception, which emphasizes how multifaceted and simultaneously crucial to any artistic creation this process is.

Coming back to Ruskin's judgment on artists, the prerequisite of an acute sense of observation and fidelity to nature served him to single out the school of modern landscape painters as opposed to the school of the picturesque artists. To the writer's mind, the major distinction was to lie in the honest and open approach to nature of the former:

"[They] have looked at nature with totally different eyes, seeking not for what is easiest to imitate, but for what is most important to tell. Rejecting at once all idea of *bona fide* imitation, they think only of conveying the impression of nature into the mind of the spectator." (MP I 76)

The painters highly esteemed by Ruskin did not resort to deft imitation in an attempt to give a spectacular display of their craft. They possessed the rare gift of astute observation which enabled them to reveal the true nature of the visible world, whereas the intended aim was to conjure up this mental picture on the canvas. In spite of their notable achievements in this field the artists from the school of modern landscape did not fully attain the ideal. Young Ruskin, uncritically infatuated with Turner, perceived him as the only person who eventually succeeded in it:

"Turner is the only painter, so far as I know, who has ever drawn the sky, (...) he is the only painter who has ever drawn a mountain, or a stone (...). He is the only painter who ever drew the stem of a tree (...). He is the only painter who has ever represented the surface of calm, or the force of agitated water; who has represented the effects of space on objects, or who has rendered the abstract beauty of natural colour." (MP I 138-139)

Similarly to his lack of moderation in his criticism of Poussin, Ruskin had no limits in praise. It is especially explicit in his controversial vision of Turner as a prophet from the Old Testament, an excerpt which illustrates how the impassioned critic was unstoppable once he got on his hobby horse:

“[Turner is] glorious in conception – unfathomable in knowledge – solitary in power – with the elements waiting upon his will, and the night and the morning obedient to his call, sent as a prophet of God to reveal to men the mysteries of this universe, standing, like the great angel of the Apocalypse, clothed with a cloud, and with a rainbow upon his head, and with the sun and stars given into his hand.” (qtd. in Sawyer 48)

The obvious exaggeration of this scene sparked a wave of strong protests from more reserved countrymen. Consequently, Ruskin prudently removed this fragment from later editions. The commotion did not, however, disconcert the author who, firstly, was fearless, and secondly, had in the meantime found another focus of interest.

Ruskin discovered Tintoretto, as he is the person in question, during his trip to Italy in 1845. Upon seeing the works in the Scuola di San Rocco, the critic enthused about the dash of Tintoretto’s painting, as well as the dynamism and richness of the presented forms. This shift in the focus of attention is readily discernible in the second volume of *Modern Painters* which – unlike the first one, which scarcely mentioned the painter’s name – abounded in references to him. In Ruskin’s eyes, Tintoretto was a man endowed with a vivid imagination, thanks to which he could imbue paintings with suggestiveness and attach significance even to the most common objects. The issue of imagination became the real subject matter of the book, where the example of the Italian painter helped the Victorian writer to prove his thesis about this faculty as an indispensable condition for any valuable artistic work. It was exceptional imagination that enabled Tintoretto to penetrate the essence of reality and subsequently create, on the basis of collected experiences, a new coherent and beautiful whole. Therefore, the example of Turner served Ruskin to express his views on the necessity of a close relationship between the artist and nature, whereas the subsequent analysis of Tintoretto’s paintings already signalled a new direction taken by the critic in his reflections on art. Namely, it emphasized the crucial role of imagination as the faculty which singles out great masters.

## 2. A lesson in looking at works of art, and the role of the critic

Tintoretto and Turner shared one feature which set them apart from ordinary people – the unique gift of astute perception. Ruskin expressed his views on the importance of correct observation in the following way:

“The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. 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.” (*MP III* 333)



Fig. 1-1 William Turner, *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhoon Coming On)*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Due to the necessity of developing this ability, both in order to paint and understand a picture, as well as Ruskin's self-conviction about having possessed the capacity for seeing clearly to a remarkable degree, he assigned himself the task to impart the acquired skill and knowledge to his readers. Thus the abundant descriptions of works of art in *Modern Painters* fulfilled not only the function of evoking mental images of the

masterpieces someone might not have seen, but were also intended to teach him how to approach paintings. One such lesson was given while talking about Turner's canvas, *The Slave Ship* (MP I 382-383).

The painting depicts a tragedy happening at sea when, in face of danger, sailors decide to throw overboard the slaves they are in charge of so as to reduce the weight of the vessel and increase their own chances of survival. Ruskin first sketches the general outline of the scene ("It is a sunset on the Atlantic after prolonged storm") and then draws the reader's attention to its successive details: the cloudy sky, the rough sea, and finally, the ship herself. Yet, in no place does he mention drowning people painted in the foreground. If it were not for the footnote ("She is a slaver, throwing her slaves overboard. The near sea is encumbered with corpses."), you would not be aware of the story behind the drama. Ruskin creates, however, the atmosphere of imminent threat and grave crime by highlighting the crucial – in his opinion – element, i.e. the colour, and trying to give an illusion of a constant movement via accumulation of verbs. Concentration on the red hue (epithets: "flakes of crimson and scarlet", "purple shadows", "scarlet lines", metaphors "fire of the sunset", "lurid splendour") and sharp chiaroscuro ("glorious light", "like gold", "lamp-like fire", "illuminated foam", "flaming flood" are juxtaposed with "hollow of the night", "faint and ghastly shadow", "mist of the night", "dark forms") add to the impression of acute anxiety and mindless violence. Occasional references to blood ("masts written upon the sky in lines of blood", "lurid splendour (...) which bathes like blood") may be read, in the context of the committed atrocity, as are an allusion to homicide as well as a harbinger of the doom of the slavers. Moreover, there a number of phrases which evoke the mood of a lurking danger. They either denote a massive size ("enormous swell", "multitudinous sea") to stress the defencelessness of the human being confronted with the elements (apart from water Ruskin often uses the metaphor of fire – "the fire of the sunset", "burns like gold", "lamp-like fire", "burning clouds"), or imply indefinable threat (the described shapes are often blurred – "indistinguishable images", "mist of the night", "faint and ghastly shadow", "indefinite forms", "like the shadow of death") and growing fear (the adjectives employed to portray nature seem to point to the feelings of terror, loneliness and anger which aroused among the people aboard and in the deep – "fiery path", "[waves] rise...fitfully and furiously", "fiery flying", "fearful hue", "fearfully dyed", "desolate heave", "awful... light", "treacherous spaces of level").

In addition, the whole scene is a truly dynamic narrative owing to plentiful verbs and verbal adjectives ("falls", "lift", "tossing", "whirling",

“moving”, to name but a few), the present tense and elaborate sentences. Elisabeth Helsinger claims that this energy is not only ascribed to landscape, but also to the intensity of looking, and puts forward the thesis that “Painting, like poetry, has become not just the occasion for mental process but also the embodiment of it.” (*Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* 189). In her opinion, the interpretation of the picture's meaning is not always instantaneous and sometimes requires a gradual movement of the eye from one detail to another, which leads first to the discovery of formal relations between them and then also metaphorical senses inscribed by the painter. Such a strategy may be called an “associationist train of ideas” (Wihl 36). Ruskin, by directing the reader to the subsequent aspects of *The Slave Ship* and hinting at their possible connotations, reconstructs the act of looking at the work of art and deciphering its meaning. The main theme of the picture is thus the crime committed by the sailors and the severe punishment which will be inflicted upon them by God for that unforgivable sin. According to Richard Stein there are thus two parallel narratives – “the account of a changing scene and a story of a divine judgment passed against a ‘guilty’ ship.”(15).

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to adhere scrupulously to the traditional symbolism of colours, as Gary Wihl notes (38-39). He signals some discrepancies between the canvas and its interpretation (temporal disparity), along with inconsistencies within the picture itself: the incongruity between colours, their meaning and the objects they are ascribed to (e.g. sunlight is linked to blood, even though the sun itself is innocent). In his view the latter was the quality Ruskin must have appreciated as a sign of the artist's fidelity to nature, otherwise his work “would suggest falsehood, an artificial manipulation of waves and colours into either a mimetic or an idealized deception” (39). The English critic invokes his theory of artistic truth whilst justifying his high opinion of *The Slave Ship* (“I believe, if I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this”) and asserts that the whole conception “is based on the purest truth”, which together with “the concentrated knowledge of a life” gives a profound and valuable depiction of the scene, leaving the spectator with the impression of “the power, majesty, and deathfulness of the open, deep, illimitable Sea”. This conclusion makes it clear why the passage on Turner's work was incorporated in the chapter “Of Truth of Water”.

According to Stein, though, the issue of fidelity to nature in Ruskin's writings was inextricably bound with the problem of imagination even at an early stage of the critic's career, when his conception of it had not yet been fully developed (12). Hence, it would not be too far-fetched, Stein

maintains, to say that great imagination was the feature admired by Ruskin equally to the painter's acute sense of observation: "Turner's 'nobility' depends on his mastery of natural phenomena; his art translates physical 'facts' into harmonious expressions of his imagination" (12). However, it was in the second volume of *Modern Painters* that Ruskin started to delve exhaustively into the subject of imagination. The successor of Turner in the author's hierarchy, Tintoretto, was a notable exponent of an artist particularly endowed with this gift.



Fig. 1-2. Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, Scuola di San Rocco, Venice

The extraordinary imagination of the painter comes to the fore in the text on the picture entitled *The Massacre of the Innocents* (MP II 179-181). Ruskin builds the composition of the passage on a series of contrasts. First, he mentions the failed renderings of this biblical topic by those who tried to come to grips with their task by representing emotions too sophisticated, whereas in the stark reality of a mortal danger the feelings become reduced to the simplest and most intense ones: fear and

rage. Not until then does Ruskin juxtapose the efforts of the mistaken painters with the outcome of Tintoretto's work:

...the ordinary representations of this subject are, I think, false and cold: the artist has not heard the shrieks, nor mingled with the fugitives, he has sat down in his study to twist features methodically, and philosophize over insanity. Not so Tintoret. Knowing or feeling, that the expression of the human face was in such circumstances not to be rendered, and that the effort could only end in an ugly falsehood he denies himself all aid from the features, he feels that if he is to place himself or us in the midst of that maddened multitude, there can be no time allowed for watching expression. (*MP II* 180)

Therefore, the difference between Tintoretto and the rest lies in his honesty not to take a short cut and depict the feelings he has not observed and can only clumsily try to envisage. Instead, what Ruskin appreciates is that Tintoretto runs the risk of ignoring the facial expression and conveys the extreme emotions by the use of chiaroscuro (called by the author of *Modern Painters* "an awful substitute of [murder and ghastliness of death]") and adding dynamism to the scene. As in the example discussed above Ruskin reflects the tumult and confusion dominating the picture by a number of verbs denoting rapid movements (to hurl, drag, dash, crush...) and by the fact that the descriptive part almost solely consists of one tremendously long sentence, formed by replacing full stops with semicolons.

It is not blind panic, however, that Ruskin finds most appealing to the spectator. In the final fragment, comparable to the climax of the description, he suddenly slows down the frantic pace, and focuses on the solitary figure in the background, frozen in unbearable suffering over the dead body of her baby: "It is a woman, sitting quiet,—quite quiet—still as any stone, she looks down steadfastly on her dead child, laid along on the floor before her, and her hand is pressed softly upon her brow." (181). The repetition of synonymous phrases ("quiet", "quite quiet", "still as any stone") brings about a gradation of the intensity of silence and lack of movement, which stands in marked contrast to the rest of the picture. As the slaughter has not yet been stopped, quietness reigns obviously only in the mind of the bereaved mother who is shocked by her loss. This figure and her pain epitomize for Ruskin the highest expression of despair conceived in the mind of Tintoretto owing to his fertile imagination.

Such a noble expression of feelings could be, in the eyes of the Victorian critic, a meeting point of painting and literature (Landow, "Ruskin's Versions of ut Pictura Poesis" 523). In the third volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin emphasizes the interconnection between the two

arts, saying that he uses “the words painter and poet quite indifferently” (221). The passage on Tintoretto’s painting illustrates his attempt not only at conveying emotions but also a struggle for vivid language. To the techniques he applies belong, apart from frequent and often symbolic epithets (like “sanguine shadows”), comparisons. Some of them are Homeric ones, e.g. “a lake of life before them, like the burning seen of the doomed Moabite on the water that came by the way of Edom” (*MP II* 180). On the one hand, the reference to the burnt offering made from the king of Moab’s son and to the lake which, according to the scriptural story, assumed the colour of blood (2 Kings 3, 22-27), highlights the pervasive sense of dread, whereas the fall of the Moabites prefigures the imminent death of children. On the other hand, it is one example of the numerous references to the Bible present throughout the pages of Ruskin’s works. Strictly speaking, the writer occasionally cites entire sentences overtly putting quotation marks (e.g. “I am the door; by me if any man enters in, he shall be saved.” *SoV II* 112), but in many cases he simply relies on the reader’s vigilance and sufficient familiarity with the foundations of the Christian faith, both in spotting and recognizing his allusions, as well as finding out the reason for making them (“a desert place, where the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests”; *MP II* 174). Sometimes the whole context allows the drawing of a parallel between the object in question and a given phenomenon of biblical provenance (Wheeler’s reading of St. Mark’s in Venice as the Byzantine version of Solomon’s temple; or Rosenberg’s drawing an analogy between the gambling people under the sculpture of Christ in front of the basilica and the dicing soldiers under the cross - Wheeler 31 and Rosenberg 92 respectively). The protestant upbringing of the critic, with its Sunday ritual of reading the Bible in the family circle, provided him with an extensive knowledge of its contents, a constant reference point for his theories, as well as a mine of proverbs, quotations and comparisons.

Ruskin drew his inspiration not only from the Christian heritage. Equally important to him was the classical tradition, especially rhetoric, which is closely connected with the fact that the practice of describing visual works of art has its origin in antiquity. For vivid verbal representations of paintings or buildings the Greek coined the phrase *ekphrasis* (Latin *descriptio*), stemming from the verb *ekphrazein* which means “to show very clearly, to make completely clear” (Clüver 36-37). Such portrayals served initially as exercises for future orators, but over the course of time became a separate genre (e.g. *Imagines* by Philostratus the Elder) or parts of a larger whole. The primary function that the ekphrastic text has to perform, known by the name *enargeia*, consists in creating a