

John Ruskin,
J.M.W. Turner
and the Art of Water

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Carmen Casaliggi

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NOTE ON TEXT

Quotations from Ruskin's Published Works are taken from the Library Edition, *The Works of John Ruskin*. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. 39 vols. London: George Allen, 1903-12. References are given by volume and page number thus: (XIII. 13).

Turner's works in the Turner Bequest (Tate Britain, London) are referenced by Finberg number thus: TB LXXX and are searchable on the Tate's website: www.tate.org.uk

Quotations from the Bible are taken from the Cambridge University Press Pitt Previer Edition of the Authorized Version of the Bible.

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PREFACE

È faticoso lo studio della pittura e sempre si fa il mare maggiore
—Tintoretto—¹

In the *Times Literary Supplement* of December 1990, Tim Hilton wrote that “the Ruskin–Turner problem is still undefined”,² implying that, despite the advances made in studying both men’s lives and works, their partnership has been analysed only rarely, and usually laconically. Twenty years on, Tim Hilton’s comment that “there has never been a proper study of the relationship between the artist and the writer”³ is still accurate and may be considered as a starting point for thorough examination. The few existing scholarly works about Ruskin and Turner principally insist on the connection between Ruskin’s writings and Turner’s art and this, of course, dictates a particular angle of approach to their relationship, one which this book will address.

The Ruskin–Turner relationship may mainly be defined as an intellectual one. However, it is worth stating at the outset that it will not be possible to engage with all of the two artists’ scholarship, as there is simply so much Ruskin and Turner to read. There are thirty-nine large volumes in the Library Edition of Ruskin’s *Works* and—as John Dixon Hunt has so astutely put it—a “*wider sea*” of letters and diaries and other secondary material concerning both men.⁴ Nevertheless, it is feasible to conduct research at least on one or some aspects of their scholarship, as recent criticism has done. The main intention of this monograph is to relate Ruskin and Turner specifically in relation to their works on water,

¹ In his biographical study on Ruskin, John Dixon Hunt drives the reader into the broad realm of the writer’s works with an imposing title. This was an adaptation of Tintoretto’s saying about the study of painting, which Hunt translated in English as “the study of painting is exhausting, and the sea always gets larger”. See John Dixon Hunt, *The Wider Sea. A Life of John Ruskin* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1982), p. 4.

² Cited from Tim Hilton, “Great Issues in the South London suburbs”, *Times Literary Supplement* No. 4578 (December 28, 1990–January 3, 1991), p. 1402.

³ Cited from Hilton, “Great Issues”, p. 1402.

⁴ See Hunt, *The Wider Sea*, p. 4.

and with a particular focus on *The Harbours of England*, Ruskin's book of 1856 to which are appended Turner's twelve illustrations of the English ports.

My research has established that there exist only six full-length books that consider Ruskin and Turner together, along with a few articles, some of which are of fairly recent publication. None of these works deals, however, with the Ruskin–Turner relationship as it concerns discourses on water and the writing and publication of *The Harbours of England*. The first book researching the connection between the two men is Frederick Wedmore's impressive *Turner and Ruskin* (2 vols., London: George Allen, 1900): its subtitle, "an exposition of the work of Turner from the writings of Ruskin" takes us to the centre of the argument. This is essentially an exhibition catalogue, whose two thick volumes comprise ninety-one illustrations by Turner, accompanied by Ruskin's incomplete—although extensive—commentaries. This publication is the only one that places the emphasis on the painter more than on the writer. Wedmore's Introduction ("A note on Turner") acts as a clear homage to the artist. Although this study does not really endeavour to present the scholarly connection between the two men on equal terms, it offers the first useful insight into Turner's art as seen through Ruskin's eyes.

The second work whose title implies a study of the relationship between the painter and the writer is Luke Herrmann's *Ruskin and Turner* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968). However, its subtitle "a study of Ruskin as a collector of Turner, based on his gifts to the University of Oxford; incorporating a *Catalogue Raisonné* of the Turner drawings in the Ashmolean Museum", reveals the real scope of the book and disappoints our expectations. Of course, an account of Ruskin's activities as a Turner collector can yield interesting information, but it is not necessary for a deep understanding of the intellectual association between the writer and the painter.

Another work, Ann Sumner's exhibition catalogue *Ruskin and the English Watercolour. From Turner to the Pre-Raphaelites* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 1989), particularly highlights, amongst the works of a wide range of nineteenth-century artists, Ruskin's views on Turner's watercolours as prime examples of the painter's mastery, especially in creating dramatic weather effects. Sumner considers motives underlying the two men's connection, and, further, shows that it was at Turner's watercolours which Ruskin often referred to as his greatest works. This catalogue is interesting as far as it goes, but the relationship existing between the two men goes beyond a mutual fascination with an art medium.

I have found Dinah Birch's book *Ruskin on Turner* (London: Cassell, 1990) to be particularly helpful. This study is similar to Wedmore's above-mentioned work, from which Birch has drawn inspiration. However, Birch's work goes further in that it includes, alongside beautiful colour images (taken from Turner's works) and Ruskin's commentaries of them, many introductory comments on the most disparate themes: the significance of the air, the sea and the earth for the two men, as well as detailed analyses of mythological issues and of Turner's pictorial experiences either in Britain or abroad, which, again, bring together aspects of the interests and ideas of both artist and critic.⁵

The catalogue *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery, 2000), edited by Robert Hewison, offers an account of Ruskin's writings and Turner's art in relation to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Hewison's debts to Dr. Sumner's above-mentioned study are evident, but he engages with a wider subject; he interprets Ruskin and Turner while drawing upon a wider range of works to support his case. Two chapters in particular deserve special mention: Ian Warrell's "Learning from Turner" and Robert Hewison's "Patron and Collector", in which both authors examine Ruskin's increasing interest in Turner's paintings and his intent to become the artist's most estimated collector.⁶ These studies also add to our comprehension of some aspects of the two men's cultural relationship.

The exhibition catalogue *Ruskin–Turner. Dessins et Voyages en Picardie Romantique* (Amiens: Musée de Picardie, 2003) edited by Cynthia Gamble, Matthieu Pinette and Stephen Wildman, revisits both men's interest in the French landscape of the nineteenth century (and not only Picardy). Both artists' drawings are read in relation to other painters' works of the same period. This is certainly a laudable work especially because it focuses on a particularly original subject. It remains the only

⁵ Birch divides her work into seven chapters (plus introduction and conclusion). They are respectively entitled: "Ruskin's Turner", "Painting the Air", "The Multitudinous Sea", "Truth of Earth", "Turner's Myths", "Turner in England" and "Turner Abroad". Birch's and Wedmore's books are also discussed by Hilton in his review. For this latter work Hilton gives the wrong title: *Ruskin and Turner* instead of *Turner and Ruskin*. See Hilton, 'Great Issues', p. 1402.

⁶ See Ian Warrell, "Learning from Turner" in Robert Hewison, ed., *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000), pp. 61-86 and Robert Hewison, "Patron and Collector" in Hewison, ed., *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites*, pp. 127-146. For a specific account of Ruskin as an imitator of Turner see Stephen Wildman, "Ruskin's Drawings" in Hewison, ed., *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites*, pp. 147-202.

study that first examines Ruskin and Turner in a foreign context and then attempts to reassemble the evidence of this “far-off” interest in the light of the nineteenth-century British art world as a whole.

The most recent full-length study is a collection of essays entitled *Ruskin, Turner and the Storm Cloud* (Paul Halberton 2019) and edited by Suzanne Fagence Cooper to accompany a major exhibition at York Art Gallery and Abbot Hall Art Gallery. This collection presents new writing on Ruskin’s vision of art and its relationship with modern society and a changing environment and explores the critic’s lifelong commitment to the painted landscapes of Turner and his own artistic ambitions, as well as his prophetic concerns about the world’s darkening skies, pollution and psychological turbulence.

Furthermore, despite the very specific purpose of their works, I have gained insight into the Ruskin–Turner question by reading two doctoral theses, which examine the two men in conjunction: one by Victoria Andros and the other by David Arthur James.⁷ Andros studies *Modern Painters* I and the criticism of J.M.W. Turner in the contemporary periodical press. For his part, James addresses the development of colour theory; firstly, from Newton to Goethe up to Turner’s technical and symbolic responses to them; secondly, towards Ruskin’s attempted synthesis: the centrality of colour and light in Ruskin’s thought is contrasted with (and challenged by) his fascination with darkness, both literally and in the symbolic shape of the line, or outline. I have found Victoria Andros’s thesis the more helpful of the two to my own research: particularly, because she maintains an even focus upon both Ruskin and Turner.⁸

Other notable and recent scholarly works acknowledge the Ruskin–Turner connection in some way or the other. This is the case with a series of articles published in the last thirty years which investigate

⁷ Victoria Andros, “Ruskin and his Rivals: *Modern Painters* I (1843) and the criticism of J.M.W. Turner in the contemporary periodical press” (unpublished D. Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1994); David A. James, “From Colour to Candlelight. A Study of Light, Line and Colour, with particular reference to Newton, Goethe, Turner and Ruskin” (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1996).

⁸ Andros also refers to August Franza’s doctoral thesis: “The Fallen Idol: the relationship between John Ruskin and J.M.W. Turner” (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1981), which also examines Ruskin and Turner’s mutual ties. I acknowledge this approach, but, choose not to follow it, as more recent publications on the two men which take the argument further have since been published.

different issues related to the two men. Richard Read, for example, offers a study of Turner's *Snow Storm—Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making signals in Shallow Water, and going to the Lead. The Author was in the Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich* (exh. 1842) and analyses the way in which Ruskin responded to this painting in *Modern Painters*.⁹ John McCoubrey and Jan Marsh are only two among the many scholars whose aim is to explore the context surrounding Turner's *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhon [sic] Coming on* (exh. 1840): its historic and political issues are described in relation to Ruskin's own criticism and that of the contemporary periodical press.¹⁰ Michael Mack focuses on some significant paintings by Turner (such as *Light and Colour, Goethe's Theory* (exh. 1843), *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (exh. 1812), and *Slavers*) and looks at Ruskin's symbolic and at times spiritual interpretations of them.¹¹

That Ruskin wrote about Turner both vigorously and thoroughly cannot be disputed, and that he often emulated the painter he most admired is beyond question. Alan Davis studies Ruskin's activities as an imitator of Turner and establishes analogies and differences between the two men.¹² Moreover, he attempts an analysis of the writer's engagement with the painter's series of engravings known as the *Liber Studiorum*. That much of Ruskin's works, either literary or artistic, is specifically related to Turner is also beyond question. But where does this passion come from? Dinah

⁹ Richard Read, "A name that Makes it Looked After": Turner, Ruskin and the Visual Verbal sublime", *Word and Image*, vol. 5, no. 4 (October–December 1989), pp. 315-25.

¹⁰ Jan Marsh, "Ruskin and Turner's *Slavers*: patriotic, political and pictorial issues", *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2001), pp. 47-63. John McCoubrey, "Turner's *Slave Ship*: abolition, Ruskin and reception", *Word and Image*, vol. 14, no. 4 (October–December 1998), pp. 319-353.

¹¹ Michael Mack, "Light and Destruction of the Empire: a comparison between the role of prophecy in J.M.W. Turner and John Ruskin", *Literature and Theology*, vol. 12, no. 4 (December 1998), pp. 390-406.

¹² Alan Davis, "Inventing the Truth: Ruskin's etched illustrations after Turner in *Modern Painters V*", *Turner Society News*, no. 79 (September 1998), pp. 13-16; "'All this Showing': Ruskin's 'composite vision' and its influence on his activities as an illustrator of Turner", *Turner Society News*, no. 8 (December 1998), pp. 7-10; "Ruskin, Turner, and the *Pass of Faido*", *Turner Society News*, no. 71 (December 1995), pp. 9-12; "Ruskin, Turner and the Crescent Moon", *Turner Society News*, 72 (March 1996), pp. 10-12; "The Dark Clue and the Law of Help: Ruskin, Turner and the *Liber Studiorum*" in Hewison, ed., *Ruskin's Artists, Studies in Victorian Visual Economy. Papers from the Ruskin Programme, Lancaster University* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 31-51.

Birch and Robert Hewison record how John James Ruskin played a leading role in his son's passion for Turner, and they show how the two went together into the business of collecting the painter's works.¹³ Furthermore, besides these studies, at least another two excellent works on both men have been published in recent years. The first, by Martin A. Danahay, researches the political implications of Turner's "cloudy" paintings by contrasting them with Ruskin's own visions. More significantly, however, the article puts forward an examination of Turner's 'cloudy art' and shows how Ruskin in his prose carries out a procedure similar to Turner's pictorial representations.¹⁴ The second article, by Alexandra Wettlaufer, revisits Ruskin and Turner by offering systematic attention to the world of 'word and image' that the two artists define. Wettlaufer also suggests how both men were profoundly influenced by the philosophical doctrine of the Sublime.¹⁵

All this shows the astonishing range of Ruskin's and Turner's activities which will be closely examined in this book, particularly in Chapters Two and Three.¹⁶ In the last fifteen years, I have carried out extensive research in archives and art galleries in London, Lancaster, Canterbury, Milan, and Paris and have also published articles on Ruskin and Turner that have laid the foundations for this project.¹⁷ This brief

¹³ Dinah Birch, "Fathers and Sons: Ruskin, John James Ruskin and Turner", *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1994), pp. 147-62. Hewison, "Father and Son: the Ruskin family art collection" in Hewison, ed., *Ruskin's Artists*, pp. 1-14.

¹⁴ See Martin A. Danahay, "A Matter out of Place: the Politics of Pollution in Ruskin and Turner", *Clio*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Fall, 1991), pp. 61-77.

¹⁵ Alexandra Wettlaufer, "The Sublime Rivalry of Word and Image: Turner and Ruskin revisited", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2000), pp. 149-69.

¹⁶ Furthermore, I acknowledge here Simon Schama's study of the impact of landscape in Western culture, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995). This book is divided into four sections respectively titled: "Wood", "Water", "Rock" and "Wood, Water, Rock". The final part brings together all three main themes and reviews notions of natural versus contrived environments. Although Schama's work does not bear directly upon the thesis (he only devotes a few pages to Ruskin and Turner), I have nonetheless drawn benefit from his study in terms of a more general account of the topos of water, especially on what he writes about Turner's paintings of the river Thames (pp. 359-364). I have referred to this book while discussing the *Fighting Téméraire* (see Chapter Three).

¹⁷ See, for example, Carmen Casaliggi, "Lessons of Multiple Perspective: Ruskin, Turner and the Inspiration of Venice" in Carmen Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell (eds.), *Ruskin in Perspective – Contemporary Essays* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 177-198; Carmen Casaliggi,

outline indicates that Ruskin and Turner (although sometimes the painter and the writer are examined as largely distinct entities) do constitute a unique whole and that they are unquestionably related. It is true, of course, that there are only a few works which link their names but most of the time, while writing about Ruskin, one necessarily refers to Turner. Where one stands the other follows; and this is what this thesis seeks to acknowledge. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, Cook and Wedderburn, in their introduction to the thirteenth volume of The Library Edition of Ruskin's *Works*, while significantly referring to *The Harbours of England*, Ruskin's text of 1856, believed that this book "[was] a noble monument alike of the painter and the writer" and that it "link[ed] ... the names of Turner and Ruskin" (XIII. xxii). Likewise, Dinah Birch stated in 1990 that the two men's names were in many ways "indissolubly linked".¹⁸ Contemporary biographers, although briefly, also focus on similar issues. They take into account the most important events which characterised the lives of the two artists as for example Ruskin's early impact on Turner's vignettes in Samuel Rogers's *Italy*, the young critic's unpublished 1836 "Defence" of Turner, the date of the acquisition of the Ruskins' first Turner (1839), the two men's actual meeting in 1840 and the crucial events that led to the publication of the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843.¹⁹ As this book will show, without these essential, although seemingly secondary, occurrences in the two men's lives, no study of the two artists could effectively continue.

In his *Times Literary Supplement* review Tim Hilton was right to draw attention to the fact that the most persistent obstacle to the combined study of Ruskin and Turner lies in a basic division between academic disciplines. Very often, Ruskin scholars tend to work in English literature departments, whereas scholars of Turner operate in those of Art History, albeit with interests which are sometimes at the margins of conventional English or Art studies. Although Hilton believes that these divisions never shall meet, this monograph aims to show the opposite. Certainly, the creation of Comparative Literature departments now offers the possibility

"'Indistinctness is my forte': Turner, Ruskin, and the Climate of Art", in Shun-Liang Chao and John Corrigan (eds.), *Romantic Legacies: Transnational and Transdisciplinary Contexts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 233-248.

¹⁸ Birch, *Ruskin on Turner* (London: Cassell, 1990), p. 9.

¹⁹ See Hunt, *The Wider Sea*; Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years 1819-59* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, rpt. 2000) and *John Ruskin. The Later Years 1859-1900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000); John Batchelor, *John Ruskin: No Wealth But Life* (London: Pimlico, 2001).

of working on combined subjects.²⁰ It is thus possible to state the resulting, three-fold aims of this book: 1. to fill a crucial gap in the field of Ruskin studies and his relationship with Turner by providing the very first historical and artistic analysis of Ruskin's *The Harbours of England*, a very under-researched, important and fascinating work; 2. to develop current Ruskin-Turner scholarship by offering the first substantial account of Ruskin's important engagement with Turner and his marine art; 3. to contribute to define Ruskin's and Turner's attention to wateriness as an essential condition of nineteenth-century thought. More specifically, this book intends to examine in some detail the two men's growing awareness of the water theme and then develop a critique of *The Harbours of England* as the most accurate, in-depth example of the Ruskin-Turner question. Contrary to what recent scholarly opinion has suggested, I would argue that the two men's relationship was a unique whole. Their views and tastes were entirely similar; they shared the same intellectual sensibility. This fact has seldom been properly acknowledged. By outlining their careers and preoccupations I hope to show that the two artists did not stand apart. I wish, that is, to focus on "the Ruskin-Turner problem" as an inevitable phase within the two men's lives. By identifying the similarities and differences as well as the mutual relationship between Ruskin and Turner, I hope, in turn, to offer fresh insights into the procedures and emphases of both writer and painter.

Given the two men's prolific literary and artistic contributions in terms of water studies, I have necessarily had to be selective. The texts to be considered in this work are restricted to *The Harbours of England* and writings either specific to this book or generally pertinent to the subject of water. The works to which this book refers include the following selected texts: those volumes of *Modern Painters* from which the idea of writing *The Harbours* is drawn: volumes IV and V; some references to *Modern Painters III*, where Ruskin's interest in water became more thorough as it explored, from a broader point of view, how it represented a site of interest for the Ancients as well as for the Romantic writers; the sections on water in *Modern Painters I* and their thematic importance not only in physical but also in artistic and spiritual terms; Ruskin's early scientific prose on meteorology and geology and its connection with the aquatic theme. Turner's art will be evaluated by assessing the contemporary periodical press criticism of some particular pictures; Ruskin's caustic response to these reviews, as well as the viewpoints and specific writings of modern scholarly work, will also be taken into account in order to compare and

²⁰ See Hilton, "Great Issues", p. 1401.

contrast them with those of Ruskin and of the previous century's critical heritage.

Together with *The Harbours of England*, other relevant writings are later statements concerned with water, such as *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853), *Academy Notes* (1857), *Giotto and his Works in Padua* (1853-60), studies on *Turner's Works at the National Gallery* (1856), *Unto this Last* (1860), *Lectures on Art* (1870), *Val D'Arno* (1873), *Fors Clavigera* (1871-1884), *On The Old Road* (1878), *Deucalion* (1875-1883), *The Bible of Amiens* (1880-1885) and some of the collected *Letters* (1870-1889). Ruskin's short text "Of Water Beauty" (1856) will also be analysed since it condenses the writer's insights into the subject. Reference is made throughout, where applicable, to diary entries connecting to this theme throughout Ruskin's life; and any other historically or conceptually related material, such as the significance of Venice for both Ruskin and Turner, the importance of nineteenth-century colour theory, of science, and, above all, of Turner's water paintings.

Having defined the general argument of my work, I will now state those areas of research from which my study will depart. First, although I acknowledge the significance of science in relation to both Ruskin's and Turner's works on water (phenomena of reflection, deflection, imperfection of the reflective surface, its changes in colour and the way in which our eye perceives the reflected rays), such an interest is subordinate to a broader concern with the artistic significance of water as such. The main reason for my emphasis is that for Ruskin himself these theoretical principles represented an issue still unresolved.²¹ Second, here I only intend to allude to the range of Turner's diverse media (oil paintings, watercolours and engravings) without offering any in-depth analysis of the technical processes he used; that is, of his painting techniques. This is because, less glamorously, I am here concerned with the effects more than the cause of things, and with a more generous comprehension of *wateriness* than the study of Turner's painting techniques would allow.²² Moreover, limited space in this book permits me to concentrate only on a restricted number of water studies by Turner. These have been chosen conscientiously. Oils and watercolours are mentioned interchangeably in

²¹ For an in-depth study of Ruskin and science see Michael Wheeler, ed., *Time and Tide: Ruskin Studies - Ruskin and Science* (London: Pilkington, 1996).

²² For a detailed study of Turner's painting methods see Joyce Townsend, *Turner's Painting Techniques* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1999). Above all, I have gathered new insights from Paul A. Clark's unpublished doctoral thesis: "J.M.W. Turner's watercolour materials, ideas and techniques" (University of Durham, 2001).

my work, as I wish to give a complete, integrated panorama of Turner's art of water and also because Turner himself adapted watercolour techniques to his oils to allow freedom in painting luminosity and watery effects certainly more definitely than in his much more realistic engraving works.²³ The imperialistic dimension of Ruskin's text of 1856 will only be discussed in relation to Turner's famous "seven oil paintings" (XIII. 47) in order to relate the painter's patriotic thoughts to his persistent representations of the sea. By thus identifying the historical subject of his canvases, as opposed to canonical scenes of water paintings, I believe, in turn, I can shed a new and fascinating light on the artist's involvement in national matters.

²³ Finberg also provides a larger "List of Turner's oil paintings and watercolours exhibited during his Life time", for which see *The Life of J.M.W. Turner*, 2nd ed. revised. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 456-516. For further remarks on selected commissioned and/or exhibited watercolours see Eric Shanes, *Turner's Picturesque Views in England and Wales, 1825-1838* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979), and *Turner's England 1810-38* (London: Cassell, 1990). Both John Gage, *A Wonderful Range of Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 75-96 and Anne Lyles and Diane Perkins, *Colour into Line: Turner and the Art of Engraving*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1989) provide excellent discussions of Turner's engraving work, one of the more neglected areas of study of his art.

INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS THE STUDY OF RUSKIN'S AND TURNER'S WATER

I. Why Water?

The subject of water is a demanding one. Beside Turner, it intrigued numerous *modern painters* and beside Ruskin it inspired many other writers of the nineteenth century, where it appeared, more or less evidently, as a leitmotif, as the only principle capable of giving life to the dead land and to a sterile spirit. Wateriness was seen as a good theme for artistic and literary experimentation, the effects of which are still being felt today in the modern literary and art world, and both Ruskin and Turner use their expertise in terms of water theories to create works of high effect.

The word water comes from the Old English *wæter*, from an Indo-European root shared by Russian *voda*, Latin *unda* (wave) and Greek *hudor*, in the sense of “a colourless, transparent, odourless, tasteless liquid which forms the seas, lakes, rivers, and rain and is the basis of the fluids of living organisms”. The scientific definition of water of the *Oxford English Dictionary* loses something of the *liquidity* of the etymology but reflects nonetheless a sense of the multifarious meanings of the term. It is “a compound of oxygen and hydrogen with highly distinctive physical and chemical properties” and “partially dissociated into hydrogen and hydroxylions”.¹ It appears in solid and liquid forms and has an unusually high viscosity. Water represents what we are: for we are, all of us, formed of water; it is the vital principle of life.

This physics inspired Ruskin's notion that water has to be understood in the light of its multifarious meanings: he writes of “this universal element” which appears to us in forms of “clouds” and “snow”; it lives in “the foam of the torrent” and in “the iris” which traverses it; in “the mist” at daylight as well as in the abysmal and transparent “pools”; in a vast “lake” and in the glittering “river”; to finally complement itself in the

¹ Both entries are from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

“tameless unity of the sea” (III. 494). The language of water leaves us between eclectic worlds: between literature and art, music, science, and philosophy. The study of water greatly contributed to the most influential cultural products of the nineteenth century. Aquatic definitions imply some relation between subjects—it is not only physics but also metaphysics: both lie at the heart of nineteenth-century consciousness, and they also contribute to the development of Ruskin’s aesthetics and Turner’s art.

Entry to the study of water, however, began much earlier. Interest in the phenomenon is foreshadowed by ancient precedents, which Ruskin and Turner knew. There is an awareness of the earth as principally made of water; water figures as life’s incarnation: we find it in *medias res* with the entire world; it also exerted, down the centuries, a great hold over writers and artists alike. In western cultures, numerous myths, legends, and other extraordinary stories relate to the life of water. In the ancient Greek world, for example, it gave birth to the monstrous image of the Hydra, a serpent with seven or nine heads, which can be compared to the deltas of the great rivers. The god Ocean, his wife Tethys, their daughters the Oceanids, the Sea-god Neptune and the nymphs Nereids frequently populate the vast body of watery literature from a very early tradition. Even more significantly, “Alma Venus”, the goddess of love, who had been generated by water, becomes the fecund and vital mother who inspired many literary and artistic works, as Ugo Foscolo writes in the sonnet “A Zacinto” (1806).² Venus is the Spring; the principle of life that dictates the rhythms of the earth and of its seasonal rebirth. It would be enough to look at the marvellous oil painting of *The Birth of Venus* (1485) by Botticelli, in which the painter represents the classical myth of the goddess sprung from the foam of the sea; here water figures as the act of creation not only for its bringing things to life but also for turning into life itself. Water, as a fluid, is thus part of a widespread sensibility. It symbolises a space in which to consider all its various forms

² Lucretius starts his *De Rerum Natura* (c. 50 B.C.) (v. 2) with a hymn to Venus and he addresses her as “Alma Venus”. The Latin adjective ‘alma’ derives from the verb ‘alere’ whose meaning is close to the sense of to generate, to feed, to give life. In this way, Venus becomes a goddess able to infuse Life in nature and Things. The English translation of vv. 1-2 thus reads: “Mother of Aeneas’s sons, joy of men and gods, Venus/ the life-giver [...]”. See Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Cyril Bailey trans. of *De Rerum Natura* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 27. Consider also: “Zacinto mia, che te specchi nell’onde / del greco mar, da cui vergine nacque / Venere, e fea quella isole feconde / col suo primo sorriso...” (“[...] or see you waver in the windy reach / of goddess-bearing sea. / You were the island / Venus made with her first smile, / Zakynthos, the moment she was born”). Ugo Foscolo, *Opere*, ed. Alberto del Monte (Napoli: Fulvio Rossi, 1970), p. 85. (My translation).

and meanings and in which both Ruskin and Turner play the role of interpreters.³

Just as significantly, "The Seafarer" (c. 10th century), the most ancient and perhaps the most original poem on the sea in English (it is kept in the *Exeter Book*) is worth mentioning as a point of departure. Its subject, which has been interpreted in many ways, is narrated by a seafarer who tells his kinsmen his story: his comprehensible fears as well as irresistible attraction for the hazards and uncertainties of a life at sea. Those who subscribed to the old fascination with watery images believed that such a theme was fundamentally a spiritual or metaphorical phenomenon (rather than a purely physical one), and that it was a linking element for a transient life and an ephemeral, fugitive glory, where the exile at sea, for example, which is here personified by the seafarer's adventures, becomes a form of voluntary ascent, a spiritual pilgrimage to God. That translations of the poem (as for example Ezra Pound's of 1911) were being made in the twentieth century, shows that the Anglo-Saxon lyric had a profound impact on the development of wateriness in modern literature.⁴

The significance of wateriness for an island nation is undoubtedly both a fact of life and an element of the imagination, a setting for mythical legends and human dramas. Long before Ruskin started to write, England's maritime hegemony had begun to interest many foremost writers. For example, in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, John of Gaunt, while talking about England, gives voice to this privileged relationship with the sea:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,

³ For Ruskin's debt to Greek mythology see also: "Ancient Representations of Water" in *Works*, IX. 460-469.

⁴ See Piero Boitani, "Il Navigante" (this is an Italian translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem); Edward G. Lynch, "The Seafarer and its Tradition"; Roberto Baronti Marchiò, "Nel labirinto marino: Ezra Pound sailing after knowledge" in Agostino Lombardo, ed., *Giornale di Bordo. Saggi sull'immagine poetica del mare* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 1997), respectively pp. 13-19; 21-32 and 327-354. (Hereafter *Giornale di Bordo*). Pound's "The Seafarer" first appeared in the *New Age* of A. R. Orage on 30 November 1911, as the opening song in a series of twelve articles entitled "I gather the limbs of Osiris", and later in *Ripostes* (1912) and *Cathay* (1915). Moreover, Pound in the opening *Cantos* presents Odysseus and his companions during a sea voyage. It is in this lyric that the Greek hero is compared to the *Seafarer*.

This happy breed of men, this little world,
 This precious stone set in the silver sea,
 Which serves in the office of a wall,
 Or as a moat defensive to a house

Against the envy of less happier lands.

[...]

England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
 Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
 Of watery Neptune, [...].⁵

For all this, the English sea appears to us as the route for commerce, the course of the Empire as well as a mysterious, often unknown domain: an *ailleurs* where to ascertain one's maturity, as famous travellers like Drake or Raleigh did, for example, during their military expeditions in the sixteenth century. Indeed, it was the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 which established the superiority of English ships and sailors. English merchants began to seek distant markets for their goods. During the reign of Elizabeth I, England set up trading companies in Turkey, Russia, and the East Indies, explored the coast of North America, and established colonies there. In the early seventeenth century those colonies were expanded and from this small start, Britain's Indian Empire was to grow.

These earlier depictions of the sea will have a great impact on both Ruskin's and Turner's uses of water. At the start of the nineteenth century its uncontrollable and unpredictable power was seen as an apt metaphor, whether for its valuable historical connotations (the Shakespearian "triumphant sea", for example) or the political instability of Europe. Great Britain was engaged in the struggle against Napoleon to save its own independence and the freedom of the various European states. At the turn of the century, the great victories of Abukir Bay in 1798 and Trafalgar in 1805 witnessed the superiority of the English maritime power. The sea for an Englishman is the reverberation of a historical fact; it represents a natural arena for conflicts and battles, but it also defines and defends the whole nation.

Notwithstanding these historical precedents, it was in the 1850s that English mastery at sea became particularly momentous, at a time when the imperial and commercial expansion of the nation was at its height.

⁵ See William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, ed. Charles R. Forker (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2002). See in particular II. i. 40-49; 62-63, pp. 244-248.

Herein, lies one of the main themes of Ruskin's text of 1856, *The Harbours of England* (which is accompanied by Turner's twelve illustrations of the English ports): the book is not only a representation of shipping in art, but also, and more effectively, a response to England's commercial and military prowess in those years. Furthermore, this short text also suggests a nostalgic escape from a sense of national disgrace, in the years of the Crimean War, for example—mainly a campaign fought on land but one which brought the turning point from sail to steam power—or from the anxieties which were occasioned by the closest European countries, for instance, during the 1848 Revolutions. The forties were also characterised by the backlash of Chartism, a movement which asked for a Charter of social reforms which were soon doomed to failure as founded on politically immature thoughts. All in all, such an imperial ideology was suggesting the shape and form of many literary texts as well as works of art, as we will more closely see. Ruskin, in *The Harbours of England*, consolidated national identity not only through the text, but also while assessing Turner's work. The writer, one of the most outstanding representatives of the nineteenth-century literature of the sea, did much to enhance noteworthy ideals and ideas with *The Harbours of England*.

This monograph argues that wateriness is an indispensable component of the Romantic and the Victorian intellect and imagination. From very early on, in Ruskin's spiritual, artistic and scientific understanding, *The Harbours* emerges as a key symbol, occupying a status and carrying a significance comparable to Turner's own understanding of the subject. Interest in the study of water reached its peak in this epoch and Ruskin's and Turner's fascination with the aquatic topos is thus typical of the sensibility of the age. Wateriness is a theme that offered the two artists not only an imaginative background but also a series of modern possibilities. The following account will construct the ways in which Turner's water was, as Ruskin saw it, "a mighty wonder [...] which will not admit of our whys and hows" (III. 545). This book shows that Romantic and Victorian societies are partly defined by their relationship to water.

Having suggested a much earlier literary and artistic fascination with the phenomenon of wateriness, I will in this Introduction more specifically show that, in its multifarious conformation, water becomes a natural touchstone in the subject of many writers and painters of the nineteenth century. Although I will particularly focus on Ruskin's and Turner's works, I nevertheless claim that the best of subjects is natural to the arts and poetics of the age. Indeed, in this same period, several other artists not only recognised the importance of water, but they also focused

upon related topics such as steam, vapour, rain, and clouds; the effects of which were deeply felt at the time.

II. Water in the Nineteenth Century

Ruskin's and Turner's understanding of wateriness is representative of that wider realm of knowledge which characterised Romantic consciousness and from which both artists drew inspiration. Water is a stimulus to the Romantic writers who influenced Ruskin, notably Wordsworth (who, among the other things wrote guides to the lakes of the mind) and Byron, whose evident interest in watery images is traced throughout the introductory essay to *The Harbours of England*, where Ruskin specifically refers to the watery (and navigable) images in Wordsworth's Prologue to *Peter Bell* and in Byron's *Don Juan*.⁶ Furthermore, Byron's famous "Address to the Ocean", which associates "shores" to "empires" and refers to "yeast of waves, which mar alike the Armada's pride, or spoils of Trafalgar", has often been compared with Ruskin's text on ships and shipping, especially in the theme of nationhood.⁷ Water also stimulated the relationship between Byron and Turner. The poet was a great source of inspiration for the painter, who tried to transfer onto canvas Byron's verses. Ruskin tells us in his *Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House* (1856), while analysing Turner's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1832) that

the richest and sweetest passages of Byron, which usually address themselves most to the imagination of youth, became an inspiration to Turner in his later years: and an inspiration so compelling, that, while he only illustrated here and there a detached passage from other poets, he endeavoured, as far as in him lay, to delineate the whole mind of Byron (XIII. 143).

Water also fascinated Coleridge, whose books Ruskin read from a very early age. The liquid element especially figures in Coleridge's poetry, epitomised in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", whose final version appeared in 1817 and which Ruskin read and commented on extensively in *Works*.⁸ Water is

⁶ See *Works*, XIII. 13 ff.

⁷ "Address to the Ocean" is a section of the fourth canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812). See George Gordon Lord Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-1993), II. 184-6.

⁸ For Ruskin's familiarity with Coleridge's poems see *Works*, II. 124 n.; IV. 391; XXXIV. 605. Specific passages of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in relation to watery imagery are quoted in III. 524, IV. 253, V. 283 and XXV. 247-248.