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RUSKIN AT 200: THE ART CRITIC AS WORD-PAINTER

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In 4 days time John Ruskin will be 200 years old. This talk is a birthday tribute to one of England's greatest and most versatile writers.

It is difficult to know where to start in celebrating Ruskin's achievements, because the range and quantity of his writings and interests were phenomenal. I have chosen to concentrate on his art criticism, because it's for that that he's perhaps best known these days. Perversely for a birthday talk, I'm starting at the end of his life.

On 20th January 1900 the 80-year-old John Ruskin died peacefully in his bedroom at Brantwood, his Lake District home overlooking Coniston Water. His beloved Turner paintings hung on the walls around him. Some years before he had said, 'When I die, I hope that they may be the last things my eyes will rest on in this world.' So they were. There are two paintings on these walls that I want to pick out.

They are the starting and finishing points of my talk. The first is a watercolour of Conway Castle in North Wales, painted in the 1790s by Ruskin's father, John James Ruskin. The other is a late Turner watercolour of the Pass of Faiddo in Switzerland.

There is half a century between the Conway Castle and the Faiddo paintings, and they seem to belong to different landscape traditions. Ruskin was brought up in the first, as critic and practitioner, and he helped to prepare the way for the second.

John Ruskin was born in London on 8 February 1819, at 54 Hunter Street, Brunswick Square. Here is the 3-year-old John in a portrait by James Northcote, then in his 70s. The old painter asked his subject what he would like in the background. 'Blue hills', said the child. It turned out to be a prophetic request: Ruskin spent much of his career trying to bring mountain glory into the visually impoverishing environment slowly building up around the Victorians.

His father, John James Ruskin, was a partner in the flourishing wine-importing firm, Ruskin, Telford and Domecq (the latter with vineyards in Spain). When John James died in 1864 he bequeathed to his only child, John, the equivalent in today's money of some £13m. In 1823 the family moved south to Herne Hill, near Dulwich Village, to a much larger house. John lived there with his parents for 20 years. To the end of his life he kept the attic nursery as his bedroom when in London. The Herne Hill garden was, according to Ruskin, 'renowned over all the hill for its pears and apples'.

The garden was Ruskin's first taste of an earthly paradise. 'Taste' has to be qualified, though. Here's Ruskin reminiscing: 'The differences of primal importance which I observed between the nature of this garden, and that of Eden, as I had imagined it, were, that, in this one, *all* the fruit was forbidden; and there were no companionable beasts.' (*Praeterita*, I, Ch.2). These strictures are comically expressed, but their effect resonated sombrely throughout Ruskin's life. His mother had an austere sense of religious discipline. He was allowed few toys and had no playfellows. Here are some of his later reflections on this upbringing:



The law was that I should find my own amusement....I could pass my days contentedly in tracing the squares and comparing the colours of my carpet; -- examining the knots in the wood of the floor, or counting the bricks in the opposite houses...the carpet, and what patterns I could find in bed covers, dresses, or wall-papers to be examined, were my chief resources (*Praeterita*, 1)

I am quite sure that being forced to make all I could out of very little things, and to remain long contented with them, not only in great part formed the power of close analysis in my mind, and the habit of steady contemplation; but rendered the power of greater art over me, when I first saw it, as intense as that of magic, so that it appealed to me like a vision out of another world'. (*The Cestus of Aglaia*, para 80)

Ruskin acknowledged some of the benefits of this regime of deprivation: 'I believe that quiet, and the withdrawal of objects likely to distract by amusing the child, so as to let it fix its attention undisturbed on every least thing in its domain, is essential to the formation of some of the best powers of thought' (E.T.Cook, *The Life of John Ruskin* I, 11). He liked to quote the compliment paid to him by the Italian politician and writer Mazzini – that Ruskin possessed 'the most analytical mind in Europe' (*Praet* I, 2). It was this formidable analytical mind that he brought to bear in the criticism of paintings. These powers were reinforced by his extensive knowledge of geology and botany, and also by his own practice as an artist – particularly in the rendering of fine, delicate detail.

Ruskin's other gift complemented his analytical brilliance. This was his imagination, his ability to project his mind into other worlds. Ruskin's rich imagination was nourished by his childhood reading of Walter Scott's romances as well as Homer's epics and *Robinson Crusoe*. From his father's reading aloud he also absorbed Byron's Tales and passages from Shakespeare. The child was required to read aloud from the Bible every day, and memorise whole books from the Bible; a habit that influenced the organ music of his own prose. His father was also a gifted storyteller, and Ruskin remembered vividly one particular routine> His father used to shave in the mornings at his dressing table. Beside the dressing table hung his little watercolour of Conway Castle. Child John would stand close by, watching. To entertain his son, John James would invent stories about this picture. Ruskin recalled:

The custom began without any initial purpose of his, in consequence of my troublesome curiosity whether the fisherman lived in the cottage, and where he was going to in the boat. It being settled, for peace' sake, that he *did* live in the cottage, and was going in the boat to fish near the castle, the plot of the drama afterwards gradually thickened; and became, I believe, involved with that of [a couple of popular romantic and Gothic dramas] (*Fors*, letter 54).

Thus Ruskin developed his remarkable combination of imaginative and analytical powers. It was remarkable because people aren't usually highly gifted with both. Ruskin had the imaginative resources to unfold an elaborately dramatic story from simple data in a painting, and he had the ability to observe significant detail, however small, and make it tell. The exercise of these powers, together with a passionate nature and a voluptuously beautiful style of writing, made him the most distinctive and penetrating art critic of the Victorian period.

That passionate nature burned with a religious fervour. Ruskin had a theory that Gothic architecture at its best expressed, in its love of natural forms, the profound and joyous devotional impulses of the medieval craftsmen, for whom the love of nature was the love of God's creation. (It was this idealised belief in the medieval craftsman's spontaneous joy in his work that fired Ruskin's later attacks on nineteenth-century capitalism's forcing the factory worker to become a machine). The Renaissance revival of interest in the art, architecture and culture of the pagan classical period entailed, in Ruskin's view, a relapse into Heathenism, into 'over-sophistication and ignorant classicalism'. Hence partly his championing of the Pre-Raphaelites, painters who tried to revive the art of the *pre*-Renaissance and its celebration of simple nature in luminous detail. So what happened to that religious impulse in old Gothic exaltation in art and architecture? According to Ruskin 'it turned to landscape painting and has worked gradually up into Turner' (letter, 22 February 1852). Landscape art in the modern world became the focus for religious feeling about nature. That is why, for Ruskin, Turner's landscape work comes to have a spiritual force.

But he had to persuade the British art establishment of this, and they were still in thrall to older, classical models of landscape beauty in the paintings of Claude Lorrain, and the Poussins. Ruskin launches his crusade in *Modern Painters* (1843), a work that came out in 5 volumes over 17 years. Ruskin defended Turner's later and more



controversial work by trying to expose the artifice and theatricality of those older masters of landscape. He hoped thereby to persuade the establishment of Turner's revolutionary visions of the natural world. In his Preface to the second edition of Vol. I of *Modern Painters* (1844) he sets about anatomising what he calls 'one of the "ideal" landscape compositions of Claude.' The painting he chose was, and indeed still is, in London's National Gallery. It's known as *The Mill* or *The Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca*. Here is Ruskin's description:

The foreground is a piece of very lovely and perfect forest scenery, with a dance of peasants by a brookside; ... On the other side of the brook, however, we have a piece of pastoral life, a man with some bulls and goats tumbling headforemost into the water, owing to some sudden paralytic affection of all their legs. Even this group is one too many; the shepherd had no business to drive his flock so near the dancers, and the dancers will certainly frighten the cattle. But when we look farther into the picture, our feelings receive a sudden and violent shock, by the unexpected appearance, amidst things pastoral and musical, of the military: a number of Roman soldiers riding in on hobby-horses, with a leader on foot, apparently encouraging them to make an immediate and decisive charge on the musicians. Beyond the soldiers is a circular temple, in exceedingly bad repair, and close beside it, built against its very walls, a neat water-mill in full work. By the mill flows a large river, with a weir all across it. The weir has not been made for the mill, (for that receives its water from the hills by a trough carried over the temple,) but it is particularly ugly and monotonous in its line of fall, and the water below forms a dead-looking pond, on which some people are fishing in punts.... At an inconvenient distance from the water-side stands a city, composed of twenty-five round towers and a pyramid. Beyond the city is a handsome bridge; beyond the bridge, part of the Campagna, with fragments of aqueducts; beyond the Campagna, the chain of the Alps; on the left, the cascades of Tivoli.

This is, I believe, a fair example of what is commonly called an "ideal landscape," *i.e.*, a group of the artist's studies from nature, individually spoiled, selected with such opposition of character as may insure their neutralizing each other's effect, and united with sufficient unnaturalness and violence of association to insure their producing a general sensation of the impossible.

Ruskin's main criticism is that Claude spoils a naturally beautiful landscape not only by some inept figure drawing of animals but by filling the scene with discordant activities and buildings that don't make sense in their relationship with the landscape components. Above all, Claude misrepresents the truth of the Campagna landscape, its extraordinary atmosphere, its desolate natural drama and its site as the graveyard of history. So here instead is *Ruskin's* evocative description of the scene:

Perhaps there is no more impressive scene on earth than the solitary extent of the Campagna of Rome under evening light. Let the reader imagine himself for a moment withdrawn from the sounds and motion of the living world, and sent forth alone into this wild and wasted plain. The earth yields and crumbles beneath his foot, tread he never so lightly, for its substance is white, hollow, and carious, like the dusty wreck of the bones of men. The long knotted grass waves and tosses feebly in the evening wind, and the shadows of its motion shake feverishly along the banks of ruin that lift themselves to the sunlight. Hillocks of mouldering earth heave around him, as if the dead beneath were struggling in their sleep; scattered blocks of black stone, four-square, remnants of mighty edifices, not one left upon another, lie upon them to keep them down.

A dull purple, poisonous haze stretches level along the desert, veiling its spectral wrecks of massy ruins, on whose rents the red light rests like dying fire on defiled altars. The blue ridge of the Alban mount lifts itself against a solemn space of green, clear, quiet sky. Watch-towers of dark clouds stand steadfastly along the promontories, of the Apennines. From the plain to the mountains, the shattered aqueducts, pier beyond pier, melt into the darkness, like shadowy and countless troops of funeral mourners, passing from a nation's grave.

It is a magnificent topographical portrait. But is it one that could ever be adequately rendered in pigment? Thomas Cole's *Roman Campagna* of 1843 comes fairly close.



Ruskin's Campagna is alive with subtle movement: the earth softly crumbling and heaving in mounds, the grasses waving in the evening wind and their shadows playing on the ruins. These effects are enriched in his writing by simile – something that painting cannot do: the earth is *like* the crumbling bones of men; the sunset rests on the massive ruins *like* dying fire on defiled altars. These analogies remind the reader-viewer that this vast landscape is the casual cemetery of a mighty civilisation. How is the painter to infuse a landscape with these readings? Claude, he argues, isn't interested in the true atmosphere of the site, he's interested only in converting some of its features into an idealised stage-set for incongruous human activities. Now comes Ruskin's manifesto for the crusading *Modern Painters*:

My purpose then, in the present work, is to demonstrate the utter falseness both of the facts and principles; the imperfection of material, and error of arrangement, on which works such as these are based; and to insist on the necessity, as well as the dignity, of an earnest, faithful, loving, study of nature as she is, rejecting with abhorrence all that man has done to alter and modify her.

* * *

Ruskin is a highly polemical writer. *Modern Painters* was launched after Ruskin had drafted a long letter in defence of Turner (never actually published). That was in the early 1840s. In the following decade, now with an authoritative reputation, he went to the public defence of other *avant-garde* painters. In 1851 he wrote a letter to *The Times* applauding the 'uncompromising truth' to nature of the new (and much abused) Pre-Raphaelite school.

Then two years later, *The Times* carried yet another Ruskin letter, this time with his explication of Holman Hunt's painting *Awakening Conscience*. This had left many viewers perplexed -- some wondering if it was a portrait of a brother and sister having a quarrel. Here is part of Ruskin's letter, and listen how he deploys those gifts from childhood of acute observation of detail and vivid story-telling:

The poor girl has been singing with her seducer; some chance words of the song "Oft in the stilly night" have struck upon the numbed places of her heart; she has started up in agony; he, not seeing her face, goes on singing, striking the keys carelessly with his gloved hand.... Nothing is more notable than the way in which even the most trivial objects force themselves upon the attention of a mind which has been fevered by violent and distressful excitement. They thrust themselves forward with a ghastly and unendurable distinctness, as if they would compel the sufferer to count, or measure, or learn them by heart. Even to the mere spectator, a strange interest exalts the accessories of a scene in which he bears witness to human sorrow. There is not a single object in all that room, common, modern, vulgar..., but it became tragical, if rightly read.

That furniture, so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rosewood—is there nothing to be learned from that terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become a part of home? ...the torn and dying bird upon the floor [notice how the predator cat's face mirrors his master's in negative]; the gilded tapestry, with the fowls of the air feeding on the ripened corn; the picture above the fireplace with its single drooping figure—the woman taken in adultery; nay, the very hem of the poor girl's dress, which the painter has laboured so closely, thread by thread, has story in it, if we think how soon the pure whiteness may be soiled with dust and rain, her outcast foot failing in the street.

The objects in the room become tragical 'if rightly read'. This is Ruskin's distinctive technique as a spectator-critic. He *reads* the painting as an unfolding narrative, a text. He builds a dynamic story from the static data, from his absorption and analysis of the minute details. He is activating that childhood legacy, the patient, roaming, penetrating eye for detail, and the vitality of the creative imagination; all this in the service of interpreting and championing the shock of the new.

Ruskin was becoming the consummate word-painter. Sometimes he seems to rival even the late Turner in textual equivalents to the gorgeous extravagance of the painter's image-making. One of his most famous descriptive



passages was his rendering of Turner's 1840 sea piece, *The Slave Ship*. The story here is that the slave ship captain has ordered over a 100 slaves to be thrown overboard before the ship drives into the storm, so that he can collect the insurance. Ruskin said of this painting, 'If I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this.' Here is his description in *Modern Painters* volume 1 (1843):

It is a sunset on the Atlantic after prolonged storm; but the storm is partially lulled, and the torn and streaming rain-clouds are moving in scarlet lines to lose themselves in the hollow of the night. The whole surface of sea included in the picture is divided into two ridges of enormous swell, not high, nor local, but a low, broad heaving of the whole ocean, like the lifting of its bosom by deep-drawn breath after the torture of the storm. Between these two ridges, the fire of the sunset falls along the trough of the sea, dyeing it with an awful but glorious light, the intense and lurid splendor which burns like gold and bathes like blood. Along this fiery path and valley, the tossing waves by which the swell of the sea is restlessly divided, lift themselves in dark, indefinite, fantastic forms, each casting a faint and ghastly shadow behind it along the illumined foam. They do not rise everywhere, but three or four together in wild groups, fitfully and furiously, as the under strength of the swell compels or permits them; leaving between them treacherous spaces of level and whirling water, now lighted with green and lamp-like fire, now flashing back the gold of the declining sun, now fearfully dyed from above with the indistinguishable images of the burning clouds, which fall upon them in flakes of crimson and scarlet, and give to the reckless waves the added motion of their own fiery flying..... Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of the night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty ship as it labors amidst the lightning of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight,—and cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea.

You hear what I mean by the organ-music of his prose? Mark Twain was one of those whose eyes were opened to the painting by Ruskin's description. Here he is, writing years later in *A Tramp Abroad* (1880):

What a red rag is to a bull, Turner's "Slave Ship" was to me, before I studied art. Mr. [Ruskin](#) is educated in art up to a point where that picture throws him into as mad an ecstasy of pleasure as it used to throw me into one of rage, last year, when I was ignorant. His cultivation enables him—and me, now—to see water in that glaring yellow mud, and natural effects in those lurid explosions of mixed smoke and flame, and crimson sunset glories; it reconciles him—and me, now—to the floating of iron cable-chains and other unfloatable things; it reconciles us to fishes swimming around on top of the mud—I mean the water. The most of the picture is a manifest impossibility—that is to say, a lie; and only rigid cultivation can enable a man to find truth in a lie. But it enabled Mr. Ruskin to do it, and it has enabled me to do it, and I am thankful for it. A Boston newspaper reporter went and took a look at the Slave Ship floundering about in that fierce conflagration of reds and yellows, and said it reminded him of a tortoise-shell cat having a fit in a platter of tomatoes. In my then uneducated state, that went home to my non-cultivation, and I thought here is a man with an unobstructed eye. Mr. Ruskin would have said: This person is an ass. That is what I would say, now.

There's a lingering, mischievous ambivalence about whether or not Twain is fully won over by the exercise of what he calls Ruskin's 'cultivation'.

By the mid-century Ruskin had become art tutor to the nation -- the Grand Explicator of visual narrative. Let's pause at this bicentenary moment to reflect more generally on the role of an art critic, in relation to Ruskin's sense of his role. What do we expect of the person who is offering to mediate a work of art for us? Among other things we expect him/her to introduce the work, contextualise it, interpret it, perhaps challenge our prejudices, and offer value judgements on it. By and large these days we don't expect that person verbally to reproduce the content of paintings in long descriptive paragraphs, nor to urge radical changes to a society's cultural values and general outlook – and yet that became the character of Ruskin's critical writing. A society's art and architecture was the expression of its culture; so an art critic, for Ruskin, was inevitably a social critic and analyst.



Few people read Ruskin these days, I think. So we might well wonder what use his art criticism is today. Let me suggest one of a number of things we might profit from in returning to Ruskin.

How long do you spend in front of a painting, to let it work on you? According to some museum research surveys we spend on average between 17 and 32.5 seconds looking at a picture in a gallery. Much of that looking is often with a camera rather than the eye. With our dwindling attention spans and increasing compulsion to photograph in galleries, we are in danger of seeing only what the camera sees.

Once the camera clicks it loses interest in its subject; it then moves on and takes its handler with it. When we come to Ruskin's criticism, we spend a long time with a landscape painting, as my lengthy quotations will have shown. With this prolonged attention to the picture, we home in on details we might otherwise have neglected. Objects there slowly acquire an extra glow as a current of understanding starts to circulate throughout the components. A compelling narrative stirs into action, and spreads beyond the frame. The light within the picture starts to bathe the viewer. Ruskin awakens our senses to the life in that two-dimensional rectangle of pigments. 'Sight is spiritual as well as physical', he wrote. It takes time and attention to experience that combination. He also wrote that 'the central idea of the defence of Turner...in "Modern Painters," was that sight depends on the soul.' (R, 'Readings in "Modern Painters"', 1877: *Studies in Ruskin*). A camera doesn't have a soul.

What Ruskin can give us today is much the same as what he gave to his fellow Victorians, for whom the rush of modern life was just beginning. Charlotte Brontë was sent a copy of *Modern Painters* by her publisher. Here is what she wrote, in a letter of 31 July 1848:

Hitherto I have only had instinct to guide me in judging of art; I feel now as if I had been walking blindfold – this book seems to give me eyes. I *do* wish I had pictures within reach by which to test the new sense. Who can read these glowing descriptions of Turner's works without longing to see them? I like this author's style much; there is both energy and beauty in it. I like himself, too, because he is such a hearty admirer. He does not give himself half-measure of praise or vituperation. He eulogizes, he reverences with his whole soul.

The Emotional Truth of Nature: 'Sight depends on the soul'.

In the last part of this lecture I return to that late Turner watercolour that hung in Ruskin's bedroom to the last. What was it that made Turner's landscapes so utterly compelling for Ruskin, and that drove him to reproduce its effects in words in such a captivating manner? I shall come at this slightly obliquely.

John Brett's *Val d'Aosta* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1859. It came in for some harsh criticism. Millais considered the painting, 'a wretched work, like a photograph' [Robert Hewison, Ian Warrell, Stephen Wildman, *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites* (Tate Gallery, 2000), p.223]. Ruskin was somewhat embarrassed by it, since he had encouraged Brett to paint that very subject. Brett had taken to heart Ruskin's call for landscape artists to represent nature with loving truth to the details of God's creation, but he'd been unable to incorporate another kind of truth. Truth in art, Ruskin wrote, 'signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind or senses, of any fact of nature' Truth is different from imitation: 'Imitation can only be of something material, but truth has reference to statements both of the qualities of material things, and of emotions, impressions, and thoughts.... There is a truth of impression as well as of form.' [*Modern Painters* I, Ch.5].

Ruskin confused the truth issue by spending hundreds of pages in *Modern Painters* on detailed descriptions and analyses of the geological anatomy of mountains as well as the physical 'Truth' of water, clouds, vegetation and so on. Brett must have assumed he was carrying out Ruskin's programme, from the meticulously detailed lichen on the foreground rocks, through the valley terraces and different tree species, to the folds and peaks of the mountains. Here is what Ruskin wrote of the painting of *Val d'Aosta*:

Yes, here we have it at last – some close-coming to it at least – historical landscape, properly so-called, - landscape painting with a meaning and a use....standing before this picture is just as good as standing on that spot in Val d'Aosta, *so far as gaining of knowledge is concerned.* (my emphasis)



He goes on to praise at length Brett's scrupulous rendering of detail, his dedication to representing the truth of that particular landscape. But then come the reservations:

It has a strange fault...it seems to me wholly emotionless. I cannot find from it that the painter loved, or feared, anything in all that wonderful piece of the world. There seems to me no awe of the mountains there – no real love of the chestnuts or the vines.... I never saw the mirror so held up to nature: but it is Mirror's work, not Man's.... Historical landscape it is, unquestionably; meteorological also; poetical – by no means. [Ruskin, *Essays and Belles Lettres* Dent, London, 1906, pp.329-331]

Almost in proportion to its fidelity to the objectively observable Alpine valley Brett's landscape lacks expressive emotional force: it is a dehumanised response. It fails by Ruskin's criterion of Truth in art – that a landscape painting should transmit a truth of form, but also a truth of emotional impact. How, though, is the latter to be expressed? This brings us to the picture on the bedroom wall: Turner's 1843 watercolour, *The Pass of Faido*. The subject was a narrow defile below the 7000ft high St Gotthard Pass. Ruskin commissioned this painting, and he referred to it as 'the greatest work he [T] produced in the last period of his art'.

Two years later Ruskin made his own journey to the Alps, in search of the Pass of Faido, to study the site of Turner's watercolour. 'I must see its actual scene,' he wrote, 'that I may know what is composition & what is verity'. He found the site a few miles below the village of Airolo, by the river Ticino, and wrote to his father: 'The Stones, road and bridge are all true, but the mountains, compared with Turner's colossal conception, look pigmy & poor.' [Ibid, p.172] While at the site he made this ink-and-watercolour sketch:

The sketch was designed to record the actual topography, so as to demonstrate what Turner had done to transform the scene. About ten years later Ruskin used one of these sketches as a basis for a drawing etched as an illustration to volume 4 of *Modern Painters* where he undertakes an extended analysis of Turner's treatment of the mountain landscape.

The argument here is essentially that Turner's expressive art has given a different kind of truth to the mountain view, and in Ruskin's mind, a superior truth. And here it is, quoted at length:

There is nothing in this scene, taken by itself, particularly interesting or impressive. The mountains are not elevated, nor particularly fine in form, and the heaps of stones which encumber the Ticino present nothing notable to the ordinary eye. But, in reality, the place is approached through one of the narrowest and most sublime ravines in the Alps, and after the traveller during the early part of the day has been familiarized with the aspect of the highest peaks of the Mont St. Gothard. Hence it speaks quite another language to him from that in which it would address itself to an unprepared spectator: the confused stones, which by themselves would be almost without any claim upon his thoughts, become exponents of the fury of the river by which he has journeyed all day long; the defile beyond, not in itself narrow or terrible, is regarded nevertheless with awe, because it is imagined to resemble the gorge that had just been traversed above; and, although no very elevated mountains immediately overhang it, the scene is felt to belong to, and arise in its essential characters out of, the strength of those mightier mountains in the unseen north.

Any topographical delineation of these facts, therefore, must be wholly incapable of arousing in the mind of the beholder those sensations which would be caused by the facts themselves, seen in their natural relations to others. And the aim of the great inventive landscape painter must be to give the far higher truth of mental vision, rather than that of the physical facts, and to reach a representation which, though it may be totally useless to engineers or geographers, and, when tried by rule and measure, totally unlike the place, shall yet be capable of producing on the far-away beholder's mind precisely the impression which the reality would have produced, and putting his heart into the same state in which it would have been, had he verily descended into the valley from the gorges of Airolo. [MP IV, Ch2, § 11]



Ruskin argues that the mental or emotional truth of this mountain view is one that needs to distort the topography in order to communicate the contextual drama of the larger experience of the whole environment. This is truth to the human experience of the scene, and not just a photographic record of the spot, and Ruskin's art criticism has intervened again and again to register the human experience. The painter has to represent the single scene in such a way that it triggers a more extended emotional narrative. Those huge heaps of huge stones, for instance, lying in the river: Ruskin is telling us that their history is powerfully exciting. They have been torn from the mountain tops by the turbulent river or by winter avalanches, and are temporarily arrested in their passage. So too, of course, is the traveller, who has also arrived after a passage down through the peaks of St Gotthard. The carriage it there to remind us of this. Turner was criticised for introducing it, because it destroyed the majesty of desolation in his picture. Not so, said Ruskin, who returned to the subject and this picture in the mid 1880s, to reiterate what he had written decades before: 'The full essence and soul of the scene, and consummation of all the wonderfulness of the torrents and the Alps, lay in that post-chaise, 'Because without the suggestion of *the human element*, nature loses in the instant its power over the human heart'(Studies in Ruskin, 1890, 291: my italics).

The C20 Cornish painter Peter Lanyon once remarked: 'When the spectator is drawn to the horizon through a vortex of spatial forms in paintings by Turner there is some physical participation, *the subject of the picture begins to be the person looking at it*'. [A Lanyon, *Peter Lanyon* (1993), 288.]. We use the word 'absorbing' casually to mean that our attention is taken by something. But absorbed means literally 'sucked in by' -- and how apt. Turner transforms static, two-dimensional topography into molten movement: this is living nature, constantly changing. And human life ('the human element') is a part of that narrative, swept up in ('absorbed' into) its tumultuous processes. This is one of the most valuable lessons Ruskin's distinctive word-painting mode of art criticism teaches. There is really no critic like him. He stirs up our imaginative engagement with the picture. And this, combined with his extraordinary eye for salient detail and with the evocative power of his language, helps to release the energy caged within the formal frame of the landscape picture.

As Charlotte Brontë said, Ruskin seems to give us new eyes.

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