"THE EARTH-VEIL": RUSKIN AND ENVIRONMENT

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John Ruskin's understanding of the natural world, and of man's place in it, is at the heart of his thinking about the arts. "There is nothing that I tell you with more eager desire that you should believe," he told his Oxford students in 1872, "nothing with wider ground in my experience for requiring you to believe, than this, that you never will love art well, til you love what she mirrors better" (22:153). What she mirrored, for Ruskin, was the world – the virtues of its people and the beauty of nature. Ruskin believed that good architecture in particular – the physical expression of our dwelling on the earth – can only be produced by a culture that reverences and respects the natural world. Without right feeling for nature, architecture will be correspondingly bad, brutal, poorly designed, and poorly built. "Therefore," he urges, "when we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them" (8:233). *The Poetry of Architecture; Or, The Architecture of the Nations of Europe Considered in its Association with Natural Scenery and National Character* is Ruskin's earliest work of criticism, published when he was just eighteen. Using the pseudonym Kata Phusin ["According to Nature"], the young author began by declaring that

> the Science of Architecture, followed out to its full extent, is one of the noblest of those which have reference only to the creations of human minds. It is not merely a science of the rule and compass, it does not consist only in the observation of just rule, or of fair proportion: it is, or ought to be, a science of feeling more than of rule, a ministry to the mind, more than to the eye. If we consider how much less the beauty and majesty of a building depend upon its

> pleasing certain prejudices of the eye, than upon its rousing certain trains of meditation in the mind, it will show in a moment how many intricate questions of feeling are involved in the raising of an edifice; it will convince us of the truth of a proposition, which might at first have appeared startling, that no man can be an architect, who is not a metaphysician. (1:5)

From the beginning, Ruskin recognized that a truly vital architecture was one that grew from and embodied the connections between people and the land, reflecting the character of both. Years later, in 1858, Ruskin would see more deeply into these connections, attributing the "comfortable look" of English country towns to the "rich scarlet ... of the bricks and tiles," a colour derived from the iron that mingled not only in the clay, but in the landscape, and in human blood. Earth, dwelling-place, and body are thus inextricably linked in what Ruskin calls "the circles of vitality" (16:380; 378). He named this interdependence of all things The Law of Help. "The system of the world is entirely one," he declares in *Modern Painters* V; "small things and great are alike part of one mighty whole" (7:452). For Ruskin, things exist in entanglement, and at the core of these relations is the "keenness of sympathy which we feel in the happiness, real or apparent, of all organic beings" (4:147).

Believing thus, Ruskin was particularly sensitive to the damaging disconnection wrought by industrialism and so-called progress. "Whenever I look or travel in England or abroad," he wrote in 1860, "I see that men, wherever they can reach, destroy all beauty" (7:423). He railed against the changes he had witnessed in the landscape – encroaching railways; the extension of cheap and ugly suburbs; the manufacturing waste discharged into streams, rivers, and air; the litter and carelessness of tourists and citizens alike. He vigorously opposed hunting, animal cruelty, and vivisection. He spoke against the construction of railways in the Lake District, and the conversion of Thirlmere into a reservoir.[1] He undertook various projects in land and water management and horticulture on the grounds of his home in Coniston[2] and enlisted his Oxford students in a road improvement scheme. He founded the Guild of St. George as an agricultural community whose aim was to live self-sufficiently by cultivating the land and following principles of wise production and consumption.[3] Many of his judgements might be taken for indictments of our own age, such as this passage emphasizing the dark side of progress:

> In a little while, the discoveries of which we are now so proud will be familiar to all. The marvel of the future will not be that we should have discerned them, but that our predecessors were blind to them. We may be envied, but shall not be praised, for having been allowed first to perceive and proclaim what could be concealed no longer. But the misuse we made of our discoveries will be

> remembered against us, in eternal history; our ingenuity in the vindication, or the denial, of species, will be disregarded in the face of the fact that we destroyed, in civilized Europe, every rare bird[4] and secluded flower; our chemistry of agriculture will be tainted with the memories of irremediable famine; and our mechanical contrivance will only make the age of the mitrailleuse more abhorred than that of the guillotine...; we shall be remembered in history as the most cruel, and therefore the most unwise, generation of men that ever yet troubled earth; – the most cruel in proportion to their sensibility, – the most unwise in proportion to their science. No people, understanding pain, ever inflicted so much; no people, understanding facts, ever acted on them so little. (22:147)

Ruskin's popularity has suffered in recent years for what some perceive to be patriarchal pronouncements. Yet passages like this one strike today's readers as appealingly current, and because, as Ruskin recognized, we like to listen for the echo of our own thoughts, he is often labelled an early or proto-environmentalist.[5] Yet he would have regretted the need to specially designate those who 'care about the earth' and recognize and respect their place in it. After all, the term "environmentalist" implies (what is too often true) the absence of such feeling amongst the majority of people. It announces that a fundamental aspect of life has become a political issue or a cause, a specialized area of interest and effort. What's more, although we tend to use it as a blanket term for anyone who claims to be concerned with the fate of the Earth, environmentalism is not so easily defined. The modern environmental movement began after World War II, in response to the increasing chemical, technological, and industrial despoliation of the land. Historically, the movement has combined issues of social justice with those of ecology, preservation, protection, access, and sustainability. Activists – themselves a diverse lot – have worked to achieve a variety of goals: to preserve wilderness, save the whales, end toxic dumping, oppose industrial agriculture, encourage children to experience nature. They have employed an array of strategies, both peaceful and violent. They have confronted an increasingly complex array of threats and have not always agreed about potential solutions. Some environmentalists have faith in the ameliorative power of technology and human innovation; many look to science for answers; others argue that we ought to learn from nature itself and from the wisdom of the past. What, then, can it even mean to call Ruskin a proto-environmentalist?

We are preoccupied today with questions of relevance and impact; we demand measurable and demonstrable effects. Yet as Francis O'Gorman observes, this approach "often hides the assumption that [a] thinker from the past needs to speak to the present *in the present's own terms* in order to be 'relevant' or even merely readable. 'Relevance' here means, usually, that the

present has set the agenda and is asking its own questions of history" (6). In order to plot Ruskin's relationship to modern environmentalism, we must understand his ideas in the context of his world-view and of the intellectual and cultural forces that shaped it, drawing out his meaning rather than imposing our own.

Ruskin's understanding of the natural world and our relationship with it is based on a distinct set of values and expressed in very different language. Though Ruskin was prescient in many ways, he ultimately sees the natural world differently than do most of us today. His primary concern is with the deeper moral and spiritual implications of material existence. There is a great deal we might learn from him about the natural world, not because his ideas mirror our own, but because they are, at a fundamental level, so unlike. As Mary Midgley observes, "all human beings need some kind of mental map to show them the structure of the world" (33). The features of Ruskin's map record a conceptual landscape of intersection and connection. Yet "in the modern world ... the splitting of the intellectual scene has made map-making much harder" (Midgley 37), with the result that our mental maps are marked more and more by boundary lines and barriers, each territory's margins clearly defined.

Ruskin's feeling for the natural world was shaped by various influences. His evangelical upbringing taught him to see the Divine in nature, a perception he retained even after he had abandoned the religion of his childhood. His early exposure to romantic art and literature informed his aesthetic response to the natural world;[6] his study and practice of drawing taught him a different way of seeing it; while his interest in natural science, geology and mineralogy in particular, resulted in practical knowledge of scientific processes and developments. As a result, his ideas about nature reflect the "interwoven temper" of his mind (35:56), refusing to slot neatly into established categories. Mark Frost rightly cites the narrowness of readings "that categorise Ruskin as either materialist or anti-materialist, anthropocentric or biocentric, modern or traditional" (14). Ruskin blurs the lines between these neat divisions; as Robert Hewison observes, "he could see the Alps as a poet might, or in terms of the geological outlines in Saussure" (20). In the same way, he could concede the facts of Darwin's theory, while rejecting the cultural and spiritual implications; embrace both the power of myth and the evidence of physical law; employ the language of emblematic tradition and that of contemporary science. For Ruskin, there was nothing odd about describing clouds as "spherical hollow molecules and pure vapour" in one breath and as the Graiae of Greek myth in another (7:138). In *Modern Painters* III he chides Wordsworth for his inability to understand "that to break a rock with a hammer in search of a crystal may sometimes be an act not disgraceful to human nature"

(5:359). At the same time, he writes, it is unjust "to speak of the love of beauty as in all respects unscientific; for there is a science of the aspects of things as well as of their nature; and it is as much a fact to be noted in their constitution, that they produce such and such an effect upon the eye or heart ... as that they are made up of certain atoms or vibrations of matter" (5:387). Resisting a growing tendency towards intellectual compartmentalization, Ruskin sought to forge "an alliance of science, morality, and culture," in which things were to be understood in relation rather than isolation (Frost 12). Ruskin stood for synthesis against separation, intent on the ways in which all things "bind and blend themselves together" (35:561). As his friend Henry Acland wrote in 1893, "the whole nature of Ruskin resists the limited study of Nature which takes a part for the whole, which studies the material structure of Man, forgetting the higher aspirations and properties for which that structure seems to exist on earth – to bring him into communion with the Infinite – and through the Infinite to the love of all things living with man or for him" (qtd in 16:239).

Most essential to Ruskin's understanding of nature were his powers of close observation; vision is central to Ruskin's work, and sight was for him an essentially spiritual faculty, connected with wisdom and understanding. "Reverence," he declared in 1863, "is as instinctive as anger; – both of them instant on true vision: it is sight and understanding that we have to teach, and these *are* reverence" (17:243). Just so, he felt, living things are best seen and understood in their association with the whole of life: a flower, for instance, should be watched as it grows, not torn up and scrutinized under a microscope. Such scrutiny diminishes the vital relationships of life, which make a flower more to us than a mere bundle of fibres, charcoal, and water.

Ruskin believed that rightly caring for the natural world depends on seeing it clearly. We become capable of seeing the natural world "in exact proportion to our desire not to kill it; but to watch it in its life" for only "in the degree in which you delight in the life of any creature, you can see it; no otherwise" (22:242). Seeing clearly, for Ruskin, means seeing things whole, so as to understand their interrelations and connections, a principle expressed in Matthew Arnold's praise of Sophocles as one who "saw life steadily and saw it whole" ("To a Friend" 12). This kind of seeing makes abstraction and separation impossible. Yet at the same time, Ruskin knew that seeing clearly did not mean seeing *everything*. As C.S. Lewis explained, "if you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see" (81). Yet man has nonetheless gone on straining his eyes. "Our goal," Stephen Hawking has ominously declared, "is nothing less than a complete description of the universe we live in" (14). We can hear in this assertion an echo of

Enlightenment ideals, of Descartes's hope that "those who have understood all that has been said in this treatise will, in future, see nothing whose cause they cannot easily understand, nor anything that gives them any reason to marvel" (361). Ruskin believed that "the first level of science ... [is] wonder" (25:318); for us it seems, as for Descartes, wonder is to cease.

Ruskin's affinity for nature was nurtured by a childhood spent in a still largely rural corner of London and by visits to the Tayside home of his Scottish relations. But his strongest feelings were aroused by the sort of untamed nature experienced during the family's many trips throughout Britain and abroad. In *Praeterita*, he makes it clear that his "pure childish love of nature" was not simply aesthetic, but elemental:

> In myself, it has always been quite exclusively confined to *wild,* that is to say, wholly natural places, and especially to scenery animated by streams, or by the sea. The sense of the freedom, spontaneous, unpolluted power of nature was essential in it. I enjoyed a lawn, a garden, a daisied field, a quiet pond, as other children do; but by the side of Wandel, or on the downs of Sandgate, or by a Yorkshire stream under a cliff, I was different from other children, that ever I have noticed; but the feeling cannot be described by any of us that have it. Wordsworth's "haunted me like a passion" is no description of it, for it is not *like*, but *is*, a passion. (35:219)

Today Ruskin's passion would likely be described as "biophilia," the result of biologically evolved preferences – a term that itself indicates the distance between our conception of man's relation to nature and Ruskin's. From an early period, he engaged with the natural world directly and dynamically. He was an accomplished geologist and no mean naturalist. During travels in Great Britain and Europe he walked the countryside – and up and down the Alps, for which he had a great love. He sketched, collected rocks, and studied the plants and flowers, looking closely at all he saw. He botanized, geologized, and studied the weather, making careful records of his observations. A revelatory experience at Fontainebleau in 1845 illustrates Ruskin's habit of being not merely *in* the landscape, but *of* it. While sketching an aspen tree, he tells us:

> Languidly, but not idly, I began to draw it; and as I drew, the languor passed away: the beautiful lines insisted on being traced, – without weariness. More and more beautiful they became, as each rose out of the rest, and took its place in the air. With wonder increasing every instant, I saw that they "composed" themselves, by finer laws than any known of men. At last, the tree was there, and everything that I had thought before about trees, nowhere. (35:314)

Ruskin's vision of the aspen is intimate and immediate; in drawing the tree,

he discovers its essential qualities and feels intensely the bond between man and nature:

> This was indeed an end to all former thoughts with me, an insight into a new silvan world. Not silvan only. The woods, which I had only looked on as wilderness, fulfilled I then saw, in their beauty, the same laws which guided the clouds, divided the light, and balanced the wave. "He hath made everything beautiful, in his time," became for me thenceforward the interpretation of the bond between the human mind and all visible things. (35:315)

As Frost observes, it is "this biblically-tinted binding of the whole earth that Ruskin wishes his audience not only to see, but to embrace, not only to understand, but to protect" (17).

Ruskin saw the Law of Help manifested in the natural world in the vital energy that animates nature and in the interconnectedness of all life. In 1857 he wrote of "the greater unity of clouds, and waves, and trees, and human souls, each different, each obedient, and each in harmonious service" (15: 176). Three years later, in *Modern Painters* V, he described what he called the "earth-veil":

> The earth in its depths must remain dead and cold, incapable except of slow crystalline change; but at its surface, which human beings look upon and deal with, it ministers to them through a veil of strange intermediate being: which breathes, but has no voice; moves, but cannot leave its appointed place; passes through life without consciousness, to death without bitterness; wears the beauty of youth, without its passion; and declines to the weakness of age, without its regret. And in this mystery of intermediate being, entirely subordinate to us, with which we can deal as we choose ... most of the pleasures which we need from the external world are gathered, and most of the lessons we need are written, all kinds of precious grace and teaching being united in this link between the Earth and Man. (7:14-15)

Ruskin assures us that even minerals are not inert, but in their combination with oxygen – the "breath of life" – are instead "metals with breath put into them," possessing "a kind of soul" (16:37-38). They are intimately connected to human life. "Things are not either wholly alive, or wholly dead," he declares in *The Ethics of the Dust*, "they are less or more alive" (18:346).

The natural-history texts that Ruskin wrote in the 1870s are mythopoetical rather than technical. Frustrated by the exclusively scientific language of contemporary natural-history books and the increasing narrowness of their scope, Ruskin set out, as he explains in his botany book, *Proserpina*, to make the meanings of flowers' names and habits "vital and vivid" to the under-

standing of young readers (25:201). His use of these two words is important, in that they point to what Ruskin valued most – vision and life. As Keith Thomas observes, beginning in the early sixteenth century, the old vocabulary of nature had been eroded by scientific advances, so that "in place of a natural world redolent with human analogy and symbolic meaning, and sensitive to man's behaviour, [naturalists] constructed a detached natural scene to be viewed and studied by the observer from the outside, as if by peering through a window, in the secure knowledge that the objects of contemplation inhabited a separate realm, offering no omens or signs, without human meaning or significance" (89).[7] In both *Proserpina* and *Love's Meinie*, his study of ornithology, Ruskin looks to the symbolism, history, and relationships of plants and animals – emphasizing their connections with one another and with humans and human life. Ruskin's approach is not an exercise in simple nostalgia, but an attempt to reconnect people with things, to reclaim the material world from abstraction and specialization and reinvest it with meaning.[8]

In these and other books, Ruskin opposes what he considered the sterility of modern science – what he called "the glacial cold of selfish science" (19:236) – which was concerned primarily with function and mechanics. He felt that modern science was vulgar in its arrogance and materialism. His rejection of Darwinism was a response to what he considered the dehumanizing tendencies of modern scientific research, which seemed to ignore "the blessed harmonies between the human and the lower nature," reducing life to nothing more than "germ cells" (22:226; 27:380). Ruskin was not anti-science and he never disputed the scientific accuracy of Darwin's theory. His quarrel was not with science, as such, but with a burgeoning faith in the pronouncements of "that new higher theology" of science (34:73) as potentially true and complete – what we today call scientism. As Wendell Berry has warned in our own day, "like materialism, reductionism belongs legitimately to science; as an article of belief, it causes trouble" (38).

Ruskin distinguishes between wise and foolish science. In *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, he excoriates the self-assurance of scientists, such as John Tyndall (a favourite bête noir), who had declared his wonder "at the extent to which Science has mastered the system of nature. From age to age and from generation to generation, fact has been added to fact and law to law, the true method and order of the Universe being thereby more and more revealed. In doing this Science has encountered and overthrown various forms of superstition and deceit, of credulity and imposture ... [and] debasing beliefs" (34:73; and see O'Gorman). Remarking acidly that "the debasing beliefs meant [are] simply those of Homer, David, and St. John – as against a modern French gamin's" (34:73), Ruskin warns against the "error of supposing that science means systematization or discovery. It is not

the arrangement of new systems, nor the discovery of new facts, which constitutes a man of science; but the submission to an eternal system; and the proper grasp of facts already known" (22:150).

In the Darwinian focus on mechanism and the struggle for existence – what he called "the gospel of dirt" (29:78) – Ruskin saw an unhealthy emphasis on death. Darwinism, he felt, threatened to strip existence of both beauty and mystery: "Science does its duty, not in telling us the causes of spots in the sun; but in explaining to us the laws of our own life, and the consequences of their violation" (22:263). The materialist eye of the scientist, focussing on the physical, failed to see the spiritual meaning – the true essence of life – in his subjects of study, be they flowers, birds, or men and women. Such investigations, no matter how scientifically accurate, were offensive to Ruskin because they isolated material facts from their moral and spiritual implications.[9] He asserted the inability of man to ever fully understand the natural world; the mystery of life, for all our scientific knowledge, would remain "inviolable, inscrutable, and, so far as we know, eternal" (22:246).

Today we have, as a culture, all but lost the language with which to speak of the natural world in Ruskin's terms. There exist individuals and groups who speak this language, but it is not the common tongue and cannot make headway against the corporate-scientific discourse that dominates. The language of environmentalism itself has come more and more to convey a narrowly scientific view of the natural world; we talk, abstractly and objectively, about ecosystems, sustainability, natural resources, and carbon footprints, avoiding words with uncomfortable religious or spiritual associations – reverence, mystery, morality (one reviewer dismissively calls this sort of language "weird, pseudo-Deism" (Koerth-Baker)). As Curtis White points out, we have adopted "the language of 'system' (nature as a kind of complicated machine)" (19), a rationalist rhetoric, shaped by the logic of science and reason, that looks to science and reason for answers.

Ruskin often draws analogies between the natural world and human society. In *The Ethics of the Dust*, the formation of crystals becomes symbolic of both social cooperation and struggle. In *Modern Painters* V, careful descriptions of leaf form, structure, and patterns of growth generate human correspondences, as Ruskin blends classical and medieval emblematic tradition with careful field observation. "Every single leaf-cluster," he writes in the section he calls "Of Leaf Beauty," "presents the general aspect of a little family, entirely at unity among themselves, but obliged to get their living by various shifts, concessions, and infringements of the family rules, in order not to invade the privileges of other people in their neighbourhood" (7:48).

Ruskin's editors observe that "the human interest was never long absent from his thoughts when contemplating scenes of natural beauty or grandeur"

(5:lix). The notion of man's preeminence was a longstanding element of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Thomas observes that the belief that the world had been created for man's sake, and that he was meant to subordinate it and other species to his will, could be justified by reference to both classical philosophers and the Bible (17). Ruskin too declared the centrality of man to nature:

> Therefore it is that all the power of nature depends on subjection to the human soul. Man is the sun of the world, more than the real sun. The fire of his wonderful heart is the only light and heat worth gauge or measure. Where he is, are the tropics; where he is not, the ice-world. (7:262)

Yet Ruskin's understanding of nature as a web of relations, though undoubtedly influenced by Romanticism, was still closer to "the ancient assumption that man and nature were locked into one interacting world" (Thomas 75). He rejects the language of conquest and domination, emphasizing instead man's responsibility to the rest of creation. Man is to know himself

> as the sun of creation, not as *the* creation. In himself, as the light of the world. Not as being the world. Let him stand in his due relation to other creatures, and to inanimate things – know them all and love them, as made for him, and he for them, – and he becomes himself the greatest and holiest of them. But let him cast off this relation, despise and forget the less creation round him, and instead of being the light of the world, he is a sun in space – a fiery ball, spotted with storm.
>
> All the diseases of mind leading to fatalest ruin consist primarily in this isolation. They are the concentration of man upon himself, whether his heavenly interests or his worldly interests matters not; it is the being his own interests which makes the regard of them so mortal. Every form of asceticism on one side, of sensualism on the other, is an isolation of his soul or of his body; the fixing his thoughts upon them alone; while every healthy state of nations and of individual minds consists in the unselfish presence of the human spirit everywhere, energizing over all things; speaking and living through all things. (7:263-64)

Ruskin understands that the very idea of a sacred nature is meaningless without human perception. A number of present-day environmentalists are keen to point out that the natural world could exist – and perhaps in a far better state – without us (some go so far as to call man an "invasive species"). But the mystery and the emotional power of nature exist only in our connection with it. It is we who invest nature with myth, metaphor, and memory (Schama 12). As G.M. Hopkins declares of a glorious late-summer scene:

> These things, these things were here and but the beholder

> Wanting: which two when once they meet,
> The heart rears wings bold and bolder
> And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.
> ("Hurrahing in Harvest" 11-14).

Speaking of flowers in *The Queen of the Air*, Ruskin notes their relation to man:

> In all cases, the presence of life is asserted by characters *in which the human sight takes pleasure*, and which seem prepared with distinct reference to us, or rather, bear, in being delightful, evidence of having been produced by the power of the same spirit as our own. And we are led to feel this still more strongly, because all the distinctions of species, both in plants and animals, appear to have similar connection with human character. Whatever the origin of species may be, or however those species, once formed, may be influenced by external accident, the groups into which birth or accident reduce them have distinct relation to the spirit of man. (19:358; my emphasis)

In his study of landscape and memory, Simon Schama notes that it is the human mind that "makes the difference between raw matter and landscape" (10). Just so, Ruskin set himself to trace changing attitudes to the natural world in *Modern Painters* III. In chapters devoted to the classical, medieval, and modern feeling for landscape, he explores the social and cultural forces that have gradually altered man's response to nature.

According to his analysis, the reverence of the Greek, "who never removed his god out of nature at all" (5:231), was diminished in the medieval period, when the nobility began to disdain agricultural labour and to instead consider nature primarily a source of pleasure and frivolous enjoyment. Yet medieval man still felt the beauty of nature. During the Renaissance, an avid pursuit of beauty led instead to self-absorption and pride, preparing the way for the rejection of beauty and mystery in the "fatal seventeenth century" (5:328). Once the "idea of definite spiritual presence in material nature" was lost, Ruskin writes, the mind was laid open "to all those currents of fallacious, but pensive and pathetic sympathy" that characterize the nineteenth century (5:252).[10] "With us," Ruskin concludes,

> the idea of the Divinity is apt to get separated from the life of nature; and imagining our God upon a cloudy throne, far above the earth, and not in the flowers or waters, we approach those visible things with a theory that they are dead, governed by physical laws, and so forth. But coming to them, we find the theory fail; that they are not dead; that, say what we choose about them, the instinctive sense of their being alive is too strong for us.... And then puzzled, and yet happy; pleased, and yet ashamed of being so; accepting sympathy from

> nature, which we do not believe it gives, and giving sympathy to nature, which we do not believe it receives, – mixing, besides, all manner of purposeful play and conceit with these involuntary fellowships, – we fall necessarily into the curious web of hesitating sentiment, pathetic fallacy, and wandering fancy, which form a great part of our modern view of nature. (5:231)

This sentimental attitude too often resulted in a false sense of nature's benevolence, a sweetness and light version of the natural world – and for all his love of nature, Ruskin knew that it is not always beneficent. Mountain glory was ever balanced by mountain gloom, and fair and foul mingled in nature as in human life – because they are not separate but interdependent, halves of the same whole. Most people who contemplate nature, he writes in *Modern Painters* IV, look only for what is "lovely and kind." "But this I know," he declares " – and this may by all men be known – that no good or lovely thing exists in this world without its correspondent darkness; and that the universe presents itself continually to mankind under the stern aspect of warning, or of choice, the good and the evil set on the right hand and the left" (6:416). The American high priest of nature, John Muir, reading *Modern Painters* in the 1870s, objected to Ruskin's account of darkness in nature: "How cordially I disbelieve him tonight, and were he to dwell awhile amongst the powers of these mountains he would forget all dictionary differences betwixt the clean and the unclean, and he would lose all memory and meaning of the diabolical, sin-begotten term *foulness*" (qtd in Worster 187). Yet Ruskin's insights indeed had come from dwelling amidst the power of mountains.

Muir saw only the "ineffable beauty and harmony" of nature (244); for him, even the most destructive of storms was productive of a "glorious perfection" that renewed one's faith in nature's essential goodness and wisdom (246). Like Ruskin, Muir was a keen observer of the natural world. He shared Ruskin's sense of spiritual power and vital energy in nature, his belief in the bond between man and nature, and his distress at the forces threatening to sever it. One expects that Ruskin, who had protested the expansion of the railway into his beloved Lake District and the conversion of Thirlmere into a reservoir, would have approved Muir's conservation efforts (there are especially close parallels between Ruskin's failed efforts on behalf of Thirlmere and Muir's lost battle for Hetch-Hetchy).

There is likely a cultural influence at work here. Ruskin's ideas, like those of his hero J.M.W. Turner, were "connected by all manner of strange intellectual chords and nerves with the pathos and history of this old English country of ours; and on the other side, with the history of the European mind from earliest mythology down to modern rationalism and *ir*-rationalism" (36:533). The optimism of such figures as Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir was

encouraged by the newness of America; Ruskin's perception of darkness in nature developed gradually from a sense of the death of an entire way of life and vision of the European world. Today, having become even more disconnected from nature, our western view of the natural world is increasingly polarized: it is seen, variously, as either a threatening, destructive force, a balm for modern angst, or a resource to be plundered. Today, Ruskin's organic vision of nature, and of humanity's reciprocal relationship with her, seems harder than ever to achieve.

For Ruskin, nature is never separate or 'other,' although the perception of a fundamental connection between man and nature faded rapidly during his lifetime. The ground for this shift, and for the mechanistic view of the world that drove it, was cleared by the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, prepared in the eighteenth century with the rise of industry and science, and sown during the nineteenth century, with the frantic growth of both. As Midgley has observed, even at the end of the nineteenth century "scientists still meant by science something much wider than a memory-bank. They included in it a whole myth, a philosophical conception of the world and the forces within it, directly related to the meaning of human life.... Unlike their forebears, however, [they] were beginning to see it also as an entity on its own, something cut off from, and perhaps hostile to, other ways of thinking" (52). This process was intensified by the dominance of laissez-faire economics; as Ruskin recognized in *Unto This Last*, his 1860 repudiation of contemporary political economy, when all relations are those of exchange we forget how to properly value what matters, including the natural world. Ruskin knew that the connection between humanity and nature could not really be severed; but it could be ignored, with disastrous results.

Nature has always been a resource for humanity; from the first we have lived within it and shaped it to our needs, to varying degrees. But in the increasingly abstract, utilitarian view of the nineteenth-century, it came to be seen *primarily* as a repository of resources. Growing urbanization meant that more and more people inhabited a de-natured environment, cut off from the rhythms of the natural world – a circumstance which encouraged the notion, persistent today, of nature as sanctuary or escape, something apart from man's daily experience, and which drove the conservation movement.[11] Even in the wider American expanses, Thoreau complained of man being "early weaned from [Nature's] breast to society – to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man" ("Walking" 15:237). At the same time, technological and scientific advances accompanied a philosophical shift that objectified nature, emptying it of mystery and spirit and recasting it as raw material (it is this ongoing process of objectification that has turned "nature" into the "environment").

In the 1840s Engels and Mayhew documented the lamentable consequences of industrialization. In 1865 Ruskin added his own rebuke (one of many he would deliver), accusing the English public of selfish destructiveness:

> You have despised Nature; that is to say, all the deep and sacred sensations of natural scenery. The French revolutionists made stables of the cathedrals of France; you have made race-courses of the cathedrals of the earth. Your *one* conception of pleasure is to drive in railroad carriages round their aisles, and eat off their altars. You have put a railroad-bridge over the falls of Schaffhausen. You have tunnelled the cliffs of Lucerne by Tell's chapel; you have destroyed the Clarens shore of the Lake of Geneva; there is not a quiet valley in England that you have not filled with bellowing fire; there is no particle left of English land which you have not trampled coal ashes into – nor any foreign city in which the spread of your presence is not marked among its fair old streets and happy gardens by a consuming white leprosy of new hotels and perfumers' shops: the Alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so reverently, you look upon as soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again, with – shrieks of delight. (18:89-90)

Whereas man had been accustomed to working with nature, he was now able to work with little regard for it, or even openly against it, armed with ingenious mechanical contrivances and driven by economic self-interest. Nature, having been objectified, was now to be viewed and valued according to use and profit, the "earth-veil" rent by greed and its pleasures and lessons destroyed. Ruskin cites a kind of perverse syllogism expressed by the chemist Baron Liebig: "'Civilisation' says the Baron, 'is the economy of power, and English power is coal.'" Civilisation, Ruskin counters, is "the making of civil persons," a process dependent upon reverence for the natural world and a right understanding of our place in it (18:485). "The beauty of nature is the blessedest and most necessary of lessons for men," Ruskin declares, and "all other efforts in education are futile till you have taught your people to love fields, birds and flowers" – to perceive the mystery of intermediate being (34:142). It is now the Baron's formulation, rather than Ruskin's admonition, that sounds familiar to our ears.

In 1873 Ruskin wrote indignantly about the neglect of beloved, once-beautiful country towns, indicting the blindness of citizens for whom nature had become little more than a dust-heap. His descriptions of rivers and river-banks defiled by waste at Bolton and Kirkby Lonsdale are a protest against pollution, to be sure, but what distresses him most is something far less tangible: "and this is the saddest part of the business to me. Pollution of rivers! – yes, that is to be considered also; – but pollution of young ladies' minds to the point of never caring to scramble by a riverside.... – *this* is the horrible

thing, in my own wild way of thinking" (28:302). Ruskin mourns the loss of a way of perceiving the natural world, a loss of which the river refuse is both sign and result. Pollution and the destruction of nature, for him, were material symptoms of a cultural and spiritual sickness. Attempts at managing the symptoms were ultimately useless if the *dis*-ease itself went untreated. His 1884 lecture *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth-Century*, with its vision of "Blanched sun, – blighted grass, – blinded man" (34:40), is a characteristic example of his habit of blending scientific observation and spiritual insight. The "plague-cloud" that looks to Ruskin "as if it were made of dead men's souls" (27:133; 34:33) was less a vision produced by incipient madness than an actual meteorological phenomenon; the weather *had* altered, the air *was* stricken. Yet for Ruskin the darkness was evidence of more than mere industrial pollutants. Like the waste at Bolton and Kirkby, the dirty yellow clouds that had gradually obscured the skies signalled a perceptual shift that promoted a new and ominous attitude towards nature. Though Ruskin has little in common with Allen Ginsberg, there is nonetheless a Ruskinian resonance in Ginsberg's declaration of "Earth pollution identical with Mind pollution, consciousness Pollution identical with filthy sky" (142).

Today this attitude has become deeply ingrained in our culture and institutions. Unchecked, it has led to environmental disasters on a scale that Ruskin could barely have imagined; to practices that openly violate the land and its inhabitants in the name of profit – widespread use of pesticide and herbicide, extensive deforestation, mountaintop removal, fracking; and to global consequences that threaten the very existence of life on Earth.[12] We are experiencing, in Shakespeare's words, a "distemperature," by which "the seasons alter / ... The spring, the summer, / The chiding autumn, angry winter, change, / Their wonted liveries; and the mazèd world, / By their increase, now knows not which is which" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.i.106-14) – but the cause is nothing so fantastic as fairies. The Land Institute founder Wes Jackson has argued that "the central dogma of the industrial fundamentalist is to impose the extractive industrial economy on the cyclic and renewing economy of nature" (153). The modern environmental movement is the natural response to such widespread and aggressive destruction of nature by commercial businesses and local and federal governments. Its aim has been to raise awareness, initiate action, and stop the damage, ideally by means of legislation. There have been many important struggles and successes and many grave losses as well. Yet despite the movement's diverse influence and the many thousands of nature and environmental groups that exist throughout the world,[13] environmental devastation proceeds apace – perhaps because the perceptual shift that so worried Ruskin has now been normalized. As Curtis White argues,

> The problem for even the best-intentioned environmental activism is that it imagines it can confront a problem external to itself. Confront the bulldozers. Confront the chainsaws. Confront Monsanto. Fight the power. What the environmental movement is not very good at is acknowledging that something in the very fabric of our daily life is deeply anti-nature as well as anti-human. It inhabits not just bad-guy CEOs ... but nearly every working American, environmentalists included. (18)

Philip Shabecoff notes drily that "we still profess our love of the land and its treasures, but our love rarely interferes with our abuse of them" (7).

Ruskin recognized what it is more comfortable to ignore – that the problem is internal and festering, and that summits and protocols and scientific-technological fixes can only ever be stopgaps so long as we deny our essential covenant with nature. He would surely have agreed with Thoreau's observation that "there are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root" (*Walden* 2:84). Writing to the reformer Octavia Hill in 1875, Ruskin explained his refusal to loan her money with which to save Swiss Cottage fields and the meadows below Parliament Hill. It was not, he explained, "as you put it, that I want perfection, while you are content with the immediate possible – but that while your work is only mitigating of mortal pain, mine is radically curative" (qtd in Mallett 42). And so must our own work be.

Ruskin is not without modern heirs. Although not all would identify their ideas as Ruskinian, there are a number of writers, thinkers, and activists who share a similar vision of the natural world. Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, Robert Macfarlane, George Monbiot, Paul Hawken, and others bring a strong moral imagination and cultural knowledge to bear in their thoughtful discussions of humanity and nature. They distrust scientism, reductionism, and industrial and economic fundamentalism. They share Ruskin's reverence for nature, his awareness of the interdependence of all life, and his recognition that, in Berry's Ruskinian phrase, "We are alive within mystery, by miracle" (45). Like Ruskin, they see things whole and, also like Ruskin, they have had to struggle – are struggling still – against a blindness that has only worsened in the years since Ruskin denounced it.

Ruskin's ideas are anchored by his vision of nature as a web of relations, spiritual as well as material, by his reverence for the world in all its richness, and by an understanding of our place in the order of things. It is this vision that we will need to reclaim in order to create meaningful change. Ruskin asks us "to re-evaluate [our] entire relationship with environment and with each other" (Frost 16). He challenges us to think and to live differently; to stop seeing all interactions, with nature as with other people, as exchanges; to

abandon what Wendell Berry has called our "foolish insistence on substituting technology for vision" (6); to reject the linear vision of progress, which seeks rapid, immediate, measurable, and material ends, in favour of the old cyclical vision of connection and cultivation. As Ruskin reminds us, "God has lent us the earth for our life. It is a great entail. It belongs as much to those who are to come after us ... as to us. And we have *no* right, by anything we might do or neglect, to involve them in unnecessary penalties or deprive them of benefits which it was in our power to bequeath" (8:233).[14]

Notes

1. In 1876 Ruskin's "The Extension of Railways in the Lake District" was included as a preface to Robert Somervell's pamphlet *A Protest Against the Extension of Railways in the Lake District*. Ruskin's essay is published in *Works* (34:137-43). See also Jeffrey Richards, "The Role of the Railways" (123-43). For further discussion of Thirlmere, see Harriet Ritvo, *The Dawn of Green*.
2. Ruskin had an abiding love of streams and a lifelong interest in water management. Two of his earliest essays, appearing in Loudon's *Magazine of Natural History*, were "Enquiries on the Causes of the Colour of the Water of the Rhine" (1834) and Observations on the Causes which Occasion the Variation in Temperature between Spring and River Water" (1836). A writer for the *Manchester Examiner* once described Ruskin as an "hydraulic engineer" for his role in devising a scheme to bring clean drinking water to a village in Sussex (34:719). *The King of the Golden River* is as much an account of the blessings of pure water as it is a fairy tale. In an 1871 letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* on "Roman Inundations," Ruskin declared that "the first thing the King of any country has to do is to manage the streams of it" (17:547). Indeed, Ruskin was concerned at the lack of water management in parts of Italy and Switzerland and hoped that he might be of some practical help. In a diary entry made at Brieg on 4 May 1869, he writes: "I have been forming some plans as I came up the valley from Martigny. I never saw it so miserable, and all might be cured if they would only make reservoirs for the snow waters and use them for agriculture, instead of letting them run down into the Rhone, and I think it is in my power to show this" (19:lv). On 22 May he noted that "I know the thing can be done, and all these great monstrous dragons of rivers harnessed, and made fruitful and serviceable in all their waves" (19:lvi). Although he was never able to carry out these schemes, he recalls them in his lecture "Verona and its Rivers" (1870).
3. The Guild, which exists today as a charitable Education Trust, continues to manage the land acquired in Ruskin's time, including over 100 acres of ancient oak woodland in the Wyre Forest. For more information, see http://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk/
4. Such destruction was not limited to Europe. Writing in a 2014 issue of *Orion* magazine, Christopher Cokinos cites the warning delivered by the Smithsonian's R.W. Shufeldt, who conducted the autopsy of the last of the passenger pigeons in autumn 1914. "In due course," Shufeldt declared, in language similar to Ruskin's, "the day will come when practically all of the world's avifauna will have become utterly extinct. Such a fate for

it is coming to pass now, with far greater rapidity than most people realize" (21). See also Mark Avery.

5. I too have used the term "early environmentalist" in previous essays, as a way of indicating Ruskin's insight into our fundamental connection with the natural world. Yet after spending more time researching and thinking about his relation to what we now call environmentalism, I see that the phrase, as applied to Ruskin, is problematic.
6. Describing Turner's pictures in *Modern Painters* I, Ruskin exclaims, "Now this is nature! It is exhaustless living energy with which the universe is filled" (3:383).
7. Thomas argues that it was during the Early Modern period that this mode of anthropomorphic, emblematic perception gradually changed, as the natural world was increasingly studied for its own sake (66). Thomas cites John Ray and Francis Willoughby as the first English naturalists to purposefully abandon the emblematic tradition.
8. George Eliot, reviewing *Modern Painters* III in the April 1856 *Westminster Review*, observed that "the truth of infinite value that [Ruskin] teaches is realism – the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality. The thorough acceptance of this doctrine would remould our life; and he who teaches its application to any one department of human activity with such power as Mr. Ruskin's, is a prophet for his generation" (626-27).
9. Darwin was not himself ignorant of the implications; his awareness of them was among the reasons for the long delay in publishing his theory. As I have written elsewhere, Darwin was initially unnerved by his own conclusions. Writing to Asa Gray in 1860 with regard to his account of the eye in the *Origin*, he confessed that "the eye to this day gives me a cold shudder, but when I think of the fine known gradations, my reason tells me I ought to conquer the cold shudder" (*Autobiography* 405). In a letter to Lyell of the same year he remarks that his friend and former professor John Henslow "also shudders at the eye!" (*Autobiography* 272). Darwin succeeded in conquering the shudder, yet he conceded in the *Origin* that, although he believed that in this matter of the eye a man's reason "ought to conquer his imagination..., I have felt the difficulty far too keenly to be surprised at any degree of hesitation in extending the principles of natural selection to such startling lengths" (153-54). See Atwood, "'The Soul of the Eye'" 127-46. See also Wilmer, "'No Such Thing as a Flower'" 97-108.
10. Compare the following passage from Emerson's *The Conduct of Life* (1860): "If there were good men, there would never be this rapture in nature. If the king is in the palace, nobody looks at the walls. It is when he is gone, and the house is filled with grooms and gazers, that we turn from the people, to find relief in the majestic men that are suggested by the pictures and the architecture. The critics who complain of the sickly separation of the beauty of nature from the thing to be done, must consider that our hunting of the picturesque is inseparable from our protest against false society. Man is fallen; nature is erect, and serves as a differential thermometer, detecting the presence or absence of the divine sentiment in man. By fault of our dulness and selfishness, we are looking up to nature, but when we are convalescent, nature will look up to us. We see the foaming brook with compunction: if our own life flowed with the right energy, we should shame the brook. The stream of zeal sparkles with real fire, and not with reflex rays of sun and moon " (6:178).

   While Emerson comes close to Ruskin in recognizing an element of escapism in much nature worship, his conclusion is antithetical to Ruskin's view of things. Ruskin would argue instead that the presence of good men, far from moderating or diminishing our feeling for nature, instead intensifies it, replacing sentimental rapture with clear-sighted

reverence. For Ruskin, human lives flowing with the right energy will live in harmonious balance with the brook, not shame it.

11. Consider this sentence from Wallace Stegner's 1960 "Wilderness Letter," which reveals a tension between the Ruskinian and modern understanding of the natural world: "Never again can we have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical, and individual in the world, part of the environment of trees and rocks and soil, brother to the other animals, part of the natural world and competent to belong in it." The adjectives Stegner uses in the first part of the sentence – "single," "separate," "vertical," "individual" – are at odds with his subsequent evocation of connection and fellowship. Stegner's letter, important and impressive as it is, nonetheless envisions wilderness as other; his "wilderness idea" is a treatment for modern angst. That preservationists invoke both the need to protect wilderness from man and simultaneously save it for him is an interesting paradox.
12. As Ruskin declares in *The Eagle's Nest*, "It is the curse of so-called civilization to pretend to originality by the wilful invention of new methods of error, while it quenches wherever it has power, the noble originality of nations, rising out of the purity of their race, and the love of their native land" (22:191).
13. Paul Hawken has written insightfully about the number and variety of such groups. See his "To Remake the World" and *Blessed Unrest*.
14. I thank James L. Spates for encouraging me to write this essay, and Van Akin Burd for sharing with me his research notes for "John Ruskin – a Lesser Known Environmentalist," *Taproot*, 12 (Summer 2000): 12-13. I also thank Alan Davis, Stuart Eagles, Clive Wilmer, and Howard and Pamela Hull for insight and support.

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