

## COMMENTARY

*The Two Paths* was published in 1859. It brings together five of Ruskin's lectures on applied art, all of which were composed in response to government policy on manufacture and design. In 1835, a House of Commons Select Committee had recognized that the expansion of manufacturing industry was creating problems of taste which modern artisans were ill-equipped to meet. The committee recommended the creation of a Government School of Design, but the brief given the first such school proved too limited. After a number of false starts, a Department of Science and Art was set up (in 1853) and made responsible for what came to be called Colleges or Schools of Art. These were established in industrial centres all over the country. Ruskin approved in principle of governmental involvement in art education but was critical of the specific policies adopted. He argued that design could not be taught by rule and for strictly limited purposes. He also considered it wrong that the schools were to be confined to artisans and that the design taught was to be seen only in relation to manufacturing industry. What was needed was a programme to educate public taste; the role of the consumer in improving design was quite as important as that of the craftsman. If design was taught only in relation to manufacture, the result would be what Ruskin most despised, the conventionalization of natural forms. He advocated instead the teaching of *drawing*, since drawing compels the student to study nature, and it is in nature that our sense of form and beauty has its origin. These concerns inform every lecture in *The Two Paths*, the title of which refers to the two approaches to design that Ruskin contrasts – conventionalism and truth to nature.

'The Work of Iron, in Nature, Art, and Policy' is less concerned than the other lectures in *The Two Paths* with the specific issue of design. Its main interest lies in the way Ruskin's concern with naturalism brings him to the threshold of *Unto this Last*. The critic Nick Shrimpton has argued that this lecture, more than any other work of Ruskin's, marks the transition from art criticism to social criticism in his writing. It was delivered in Tunbridge Wells in 1858. It begins as a meditation on the health-giving mineral springs for which the town is famous and focuses at the outset on two of Ruskin's earliest preoccupations – colour and geology: in this case, the

'saffron stain' on the well-rims – rust – which is caused by the interaction of iron in the soil and oxygen in water. Throughout nature, he argues, iron is a source of colour. Without it, the world would be like a desert – which he then evokes, in terms which obliquely call to mind the desolating encroachments on nature of modern manufacturing industry. Shrimpton is surely right to suggest that for the symbolic force of these apocalyptic landscapes Ruskin is indebted to the later novels of Dickens, in particular to the descriptive passages in *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*. This Dickensian suggestiveness finds in Ruskin a habit of mind schooled in medieval typology. Along the lines of his medieval discipline, he takes the union of iron and air as a type of the union of body and soul. This leads him on to such apparently diverse themes as truth to material in art, the Victorian fashion for railings, the Crimean War and his first major attack on the selfishness of the capitalist system. In this way it anticipates the works of Ruskin's later life – books like *Fors Clavigera* – which become compendia of all his preoccupations.

## THE WORK OF IRON, IN NATURE, ART, AND POLICY

1. p. 116 *'breath of life'*: Genesis ii.7.

2. p. 117 *There is only one metal . . . trodden under foot*: Another example of Ruskin's ambivalent attitude to gold. The pavement of gold is in the new Jerusalem (Revelation xxi.21).

3. p. 117 *a globe of black, lifeless, excoriated metal*: There is in this sentence a hint of apocalyptic vision. The suggestion of a world overrun by heavy industry, in which there is no room for organic life, anticipates Ruskin's later work and the despair that permeates it.

4. p. 117 *a kind of soul in me . . . helpful in the circles of vitality*: Ruskin is exceptionally oblique in this part of the lecture. I take it that the phrase 'a kind of soul' is meant to evoke the word 'spirit', the Latin root of which means 'breath' - 'breath of life'. Then, Ruskin always took the word 'holy' to mean 'helpful' (cf. *Unto this Last*, p. 192, and my note 57, p. 337). There is thus buried in this nearly pantheistic account of elemental harmony a reference to the Holy Spirit.

5. p. 118 *'Come unto these yellow sands'*: Ariel's song, which leads the shipwrecked Ferdinand to Miranda; *The Tempest*, I.ii.376.

6. p. 118 *that look of warm self-sufficiency . . . among the green fields*: The alternative to the industrial waste-land. The key-word here is 'self-sufficiency', suggesting both contentment and right economy.

7. p. 118 *how a bit of agate . . . was made, or painted*: Ruskin gives a beautiful



explanation of this in *The Ethics of the Dust*, his slightly arch dialogue on crystallography, written for schoolgirls (XVIII, 332–5).

8. p. 120 *But Nature paints . . . poor and rich together*: Here we see the two poles of Ruskin's career coming together. The divinely ordered Nature of *Modern Painters I* is the source of the ideas of value and justice he was shortly to explore in *Unto this Last*.

9. p. 121 *who had profound respect for purple*: Because it was used to signify imperial power or aristocratic descent. Notice, however, that for Ruskin nobility is a moral quality. He insists upon this at the end of the paragraph when he ascribes the purple of porphyry to 'your humble oxide of iron'.

*The Queen of the Air* (1869), Ruskin's study of classical mythology, contains the following passage on purple:

As far as I can trace the colour perception of the Greeks, I find it all founded primarily on the degree of connection between colour and light; the most important fact to them in the colour of red being its connection with fire and sunshine; so that 'purple' is, in its original sense, 'fire-colour', and the scarlet, or orange, of dawn, more than any other, fire-colour. I was long puzzled by Homer's calling the sea purple; and misled into thinking he meant the colour of cloud shadows on green sea; whereas he really means the gleaming blaze of the waves under wide light. Aristotle's idea (partly true) is that light, subdued by blackness, becomes red; and blackness heated or lighted, also becomes red. Thus, a colour may be called purple because it is light subdued (and so death is called 'purple' or 'shadowy' death); or else it may be called purple as being shade kindled with fire, and thus said of the lighted sea; or even of the sun itself, when it is thought of as a red luminary opposed to the whiteness of the moon: 'purpureos inter soles, et candida lunæ sidera;' or of golden hair: 'pro purpureo poenam solvens scelerata capillo;' while both ideas are modified by the influence of an earlier form of the word, which has nothing to do with fire at all, but only with mixing or staining; and then, to make the whole group of thoughts inextricably complex, yet rich and subtle in proportion to their intricacy, the various rose and crimson colours of the murex-dye, – the crimson and purple of the poppy, and fruit of the palm – and the association of all these with the hue of blood; – partly direct, partly through a confusion between the word signifying 'slaughter' and 'palm-fruit colour', mingle themselves in, and renew the whole nature of the old word; so that, in later literature, it means a different colour, or emotion of colour, in almost every place where it occurs: and casts around for ever the reflection of all that has been dipped in its dyes.

(XIX, 379–80)

As can be seen from this passage, it would be hard to over-estimate the significance of colour in Ruskin's work. Beauty in Nature makes manifest the indwelling presence of God. Colour is vital to our sense of visual beauty. In both *The Stones of Venice II* and *Modern Painters III*, Ruskin contends 'that colour is the most sacred element of all visible things' and in the latter volume he associates sensitivity to

colour with love – 'love, I mean, in its infinite and holy functions'. (See V, 281 and 142–3.)

10. p. 121 *the noblest colour ever seen on this earth*: Ruskin anticipates the theme of the second essay of *Unto this Last*, which is punningly entitled 'The Veins of Wealth': 'it may be discovered that the true veins of wealth are purple – and not in Rock, but in Flesh . . .' (For the idea that blood is purple, see the previous note.)

11. p. 122 *the type which has been thus given . . . has noble antitype*: Ruskin was immersed in medieval typology, i.e. 'the study of symbolic representation' (O.E.D.), according to which a 'type' is a symbol, figure or emblem and the 'antitype' that which the type shadows forth. Thus, for example, in medieval Biblical exegesis, the story of Jonah, with his three days in the whale's belly, is a type of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ.

12. p. 122 *On the other side . . . using their fancy or sensibility*: A reference to the new government Schools of Design. (See my Commentary, p. 113.)

13. p. 122 *no art is possible*: In the original text, a footnote refers the reader to an earlier lecture in *The Two Paths*. There Fine Art is defined as 'that in which the hand, the head, and the heart of man go together' ('The Unity of Art', XVI, 294).

14. p. 123 *whatever the material . . . qualities of that material*: Another instance of Ruskin's doctrine of truth to material (cf. 'The Nature of Gothic', p. 103). He despised mere imitation in art and contrasted it with his highest virtue, *truth*. Thus, in his *Mornings in Florence* (1875–7), for instance, he criticizes the fifteenth-century sculptor Desiderio da Settignano, whose technique was so refined that he could make marble look like real drapery. For Ruskin this was no more than a cheap conjuring trick, the aim of which was empty display. Good sculpture expresses both the nature of the subject (in this case, drapery) and the character of the stone.

15. p. 123 *a window look like an opaque picture*: Ruskin is thinking of the stained glass in Gothic Revival churches. Modern craftsmen in this field tended to apply techniques of pictorial naturalism to what is essentially a two-dimensional medium.

16. p. 124 *Mr Munro*: Alexander Munro (1825–71) was a Gothic Revival sculptor loosely connected with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and Ruskin was the Pre-Raphaelites' most notable champion. Munro sculpted a number of statues for the Oxford Museum of Natural History, a building in 'Veronese Gothic' inspired by Ruskin's architectural ideas. The building was designed by Benjamin Woodward, but Ruskin was deeply involved in the planning and was personally responsible for the schemes of decorative sculpture. It was built between 1855 and 1859, the period in which *The Two Paths* was written.

17. p. 125 *pleasances*: A Middle English word meaning enclosed gardens 'laid out with shady walks, trees and shrubs, statuary, and ornamental water' (O.E.D.).

18. p. 126 *seneschal*: Another medieval word: a steward.

19. p. 126 *not one of my special subjects of study*: 'But he had studied ironwork with some care . . . The lecture was illustrated with several sketches of foreign ironwork, too rough, however, for engraving . . .' (Cook and Wedderburn, XVI, 392).



20. p. 127 *some good trellis-work enclosing the Scala tombs*: The Scaligeri or lords of la Scala were the rulers of Verona in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the period of Veronese Gothic art. The greatest of them, Can Grande della Scala, is mainly remembered as a patron and protector of Dante during the latter's period of exile. The tombs of the family are near the centre of Verona inside a wrought-iron enclosure and decorated with some magnificent Gothic sculpture, praised by Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice* and elsewhere.

21. p. 127 *Here, for example, are two balconies*: An engraving of these balconies, derived from a daguerreotype of Ruskin's, is the frontispiece to some editions of *The Two Paths*.

22. p. 129 *this everlasting law of life*: Ruskin is thinking of God's commandment to Adam: 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground . . .' (Genesis iii. 19). For Ruskin, as for Dante (who influenced him deeply on this subject), the practice of *usury* is in defiance of this commandment. Usury means making money *not out of work* but out of other money – money-lending, in effect. The practice was condemned by the medieval church and also by most of the early Protestants. Dante considers it a form of unnatural vice. With the rise of capitalism, dependent as that system is on lending at interest, the prohibition gradually disappeared. By the time he wrote *Fors Clavigera* in the 1870s, Ruskin had decided that *all gain by means of interest was vicious*.

23. p. 129 *In the dream of Nebuchadnezzar . . . part of clay*: See Daniel ii. 33.

24. p. 130 *'He doth ravish the poor . . . your hands in the earth'*: All these quotations are from the Psalms. It is clear from the order in which they are given, which is not consecutive, and from the inaccuracy of quotation here and there, that Ruskin was quoting from memory. Moreover, some verses are quoted from the Authorized Version, others from the Book of Common Prayer. The exact references are to *Psalms* x. 9, 8, 2, 3, 7, 8; xiv. 4; xxxvii. 14; lxxiii. 8, 6; lviii. 4, 2.

25. p. 130 *but to weigh them . . . anything but that*: Cf. *Unto this Last*, p. 203.

26. p. 131 *Nabal or Dives*: Nabal is the rich farmer in 1 Samuel xxv who refuses hospitality to King David's soldiers, although they have protected his land. Dives (Latin for 'rich') is from Christ's parable of Dives and Lazarus – the rich glutton and the beggar at his gate (Luke xvi. 19–31).

27. p. 131 *passing by on the other side, and binding up no wounds*: An allusion to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke x. 31, 33).

28. p. 131 *the pest-house*: i.e. the plague house.

29. p. 132 *Epaminondas*: Theban commander responsible for the defeat of Sparta in 371 B.C. An example of heroism against the odds, he was renowned for his nobility of character.

30. p. 133 *Whenever we buy such goods . . . somebody's labour*: Cf. *Unto this Last*, pp. 187–8, 202.

31. p. 133 *Front de Bœuf, or Dick Turpin*: The former is the rapacious Norman baron, oppressor of the Saxon underdog, in Scott's *Ivanhoe*; the latter, the legendary highwayman who rode from London to York to establish an alibi.

32. p. 134 *Vanity Fair: From Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress*.

33. p. 134 *strike open the private doors of their chambers*: Ruskin was obsessed with this idea. Compare the following passage from his pamphlet *The Opening of the Crystal Palace* (1854):

. . . it is one of the strange characters of the human mind, necessary indeed to its peace, but infinitely destructive of its power, that we never thoroughly feel the evils which are not actually set before our eyes. If, suddenly, in the midst of the enjoyments of the palate and lightnesses of heart of a London dinner-party, the walls of the chamber were parted, and through their gap, the nearest human beings who were famishing, and in misery, were borne into the midst of the company – feasting and fancy-free – if, pale with sickness, horrible in destitution, broken by despair, body by body, they were laid upon the soft carpet, one beside the chair of every guest, would only the crumbs of the dainties be cast to them – would only a passing glance, a passing thought be vouchsafed to them? Yet the actual facts, the real relations of each Dives and Lazarus, are not altered by the intervention of the house wall between the table and the sick-bed – by the few feet of ground (how few!) which are indeed all that separate the merriment from the misery.

A similar preoccupation – with *seeing* the misery of the poor – occurs in the last paragraph of *Unto this Last* (p. 228).

In the present lecture, notice the reiteration of the verb to *look*. It is in Ruskin's verbs of seeing and looking that the connection between art critic and social critic is revealed.

34. p. 135 *a Borgia or a Tophana*: 'The cruel lady of Ferrara' is of course the notorious Lucrezia Borgia (1480–1519), daughter of Pope Alexander VI and sister of Cesare Borgia. The Borgias pursued their interests with utter ruthlessness, and many murders were attributed to them. Lucrezia, as Duchess of Ferrara, became an important patron of the arts and learning.

Tofana, a woman of Naples, who died 1730; immortalised by her invention of an insidious poison, called by her "Manna of St Nicolas of Bari," but more commonly "Aqua Tofana" (Cook and Wedderburn, VI, 403).

35. p. 135 *The poison of asps . . . swift to shed blood*: Romans iii. 13, 15.

36. p. 136 *No human being . . . so free as a fish*: Ruskin's contempt for liberty, like his emphasis on the value of sight, begins in his writings on art and continues into his social criticism. Cook and Wedderburn compare this sentence with a passage from *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* where he remarks that 'the majesty of things in the scale of being' is proportional to their obedience (VIII, 250).

37. p. 137 *How wantonly we have wasted . . . science might have prevented*: A reference to the notorious problems of disease among soldiers fighting in the Crimean War.

38. p. 138 *in the present state of political events*: Ruskin is thinking of the Indian Mutiny (1857–8) and possibly also of the recently concluded Crimean War (1854–6).



39. p. 158 *I have personally seen its effects*: A reference to the uprising of 1848. In that year the Austrians were driven out of Venice. By August 1849, however, they had returned and crushed the rebellion. Shortly afterwards, in October, Ruskin began the first of his longer stays in Venice and witnessed many effects of the recently concluded struggle.

40. p. 138 *Gideon sought it . . . in the days of Gideon*: Gideon is the Israelite general who subdued the Midianites because the Lord was with him. In Judges vi. 21-4, he has a vision of the angel of the Lord: 'And the Lord said unto him, Peace be unto thee; fear not; thou shalt not die. Then Gideon built an altar there unto the Lord, and called it Jehovah-shalom: unto this day it is yet in Ophrah of the Abi-ezrites.' (Ruskin's 'God send peace' is an approximate translation of the Hebrew 'Jehovah-shalom'.) Gideon then goes on to subdue the Midianites, after which 'the country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon' (Judges viii. 28).

41. p. 138 *as Menahem sought it . . . 'his hand might be with him'*: 2 Kings xv. 19.

42. p. 138 *'Peace, peace,' when there is No peace*: Jeremiah viii. 11 and vi. 14.

43. p. 139 *shall beat their swords . . . war any more*: Isaiah ii. 4.

## THE TWO BOYHOODS

1. p. 144 *Giorgione*: The nickname of the Venetian painter, Giorgio da Castelfranco (c. 1477-1510), means literally 'Big George'. Vasari in the *Lives of the Painters* says of him: 'Because of his physical appearance and his moral and intellectual stature he later came to be known as Giorgione; and although he was of humble origin, throughout his life he was nothing if not gentle and courteous'. Ruskin's 'Brave Castle' translates Castelfranco.

2. p. 144 *the marble city*: i.e. Venice. Castelfranco fell within the Venetian empire, and it was in Venice that Giorgione pursued his brief career.

3. p. 145 *a respectable barber's shop*: Cook and Wedderburn, writing in 1905, note that 'The region described by Ruskin has been cleared and rebuilt since he wrote' (VII, 376). Turner's father was a barber.

4. p. 145 *'Bello ovile dov' io dormii agnello'*: 'The fair sheepfold wherein I used to sleep, a lamb' - Dante's allusion to Florence, his birthplace, in *Paradiso*, xxv, 5.

5. p. 145 *Enchanted oranges . . . chests of them on the waves*: The paintings alluded to are *The Garden of the Hesperides* and *The Meuse: Orange Merchantmen going to pieces on the Bar*. Both are in the Tate Gallery, London.

6. p. 145 *by Thames' shore we will die*: Joseph Mallord William Turner was born in Covent Garden in 1775 on St George's Day (23 April) and died in Chelsea, in a house overlooking the Thames, in 1851.

7. p. 146 *about his St Gothard*: Turner's drawing of *The Pass of Faido*. Plate 21 in *Modern Painters IV* is an engraving after this drawing. It illustrates one of Ruskin's most brilliant passages of detailed critical analysis.

8. p. 147 *poissardes*: fishwives.

9. p. 147 *Which, accordingly . . . to that order of things*: 'The pictures referred to are: (1) "The Battle of Trafalgar, as seen from the mizen starboard shrouds of the Victory," exhibited in 1808, and usually called "The Death of Nelson," . . . ; (2) "The Battle of Trafalgar," painted for George IV, and by him presented to Greenwich Hospital in 1829 . . . ; the "Téméraire," exhibited in 1839 . . .' (Cook and Wedderburn, VII, 379). The full title of the third painting is *The Fighting Téméraire, towed to her last berth*: it is now in the National Gallery, London.

10. p. 148 *devouring widows' houses*: Matthew xxiii. 14: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a defence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.'

11. p. 149 *of our Lady of Safety*: i.e. of Santa Maria della Salute, the great seventeenth-century basilica that stands at the entrance to the Grand Canal. It was built in thanksgiving when Venice was delivered from the plague. Literally translated, *salute* means 'health', but Ruskin, who was fond of exploring the roots of words, translates it variously as 'safety', 'salvation' and 'saving' (cf. *Unto this Last*, p. 209). The church was not built until after Giorgione's death.

12. p. 149 *shaping the whisper of death*: In *The Stones of Venice I* Ruskin writes that 'the most curious phenomenon in all Venetian history is the vitality of religion in private life, and its deadness in public policy' (IX, 24); and he goes on to praise 'the magnificent and successful struggle which she maintained against the temporal authority of the Church of Rome' (IX, 27). It is hard not to find this view of Venice eccentric, and there can be little doubt that the young Ruskin, as an ardent Evangelical, was eager to make the Republic's Erastian policy look like incipient Protestantism. That was in 1851. By the time he wrote 'The Two Boyhoods', Ruskin had lost the simple certainties of his youthful faith, and the account he gives here is, though similar, more critical and less sectarian. In *St Mark's Rest* (1877) and the abridged Traveller's Edition of *The Stones* (1879), he abandons this view altogether (cf. 'The Nature of Gothic', pp. 107-8).

13. p. 149 *Liber Studiorum*: A series of Turner's prints which illustrates the different branches of landscape painting as he practised and understood them. The *Liber* was published between 1807 and 1819.

14. p. 150 *I cannot ascertain in what year*: 'It was in 1785, when he was ten years old . . .' (Cook and Wedderburn, VII, 383).

15. p. 151 *deep-scented from the meadow thyme*: Turner's sketch of Kirkstall Abbey in Yorkshire, from which his *Liber Studiorum* print is derived, is now in the British Museum, London. Ruskin dates it as 'about 1795' (XIII, 254), which is probably a few years too early.

16. p. 151 *happy to work upon the walls of it*: Many of the great Venetian painters are known to have frescoed the external façades of palaces on the Grand Canal. This apparent waste of artistic effort - all of them have decayed - seemed to Ruskin the ultimate proof of their devotion both to their art and to the city. Later in *Modern Painters V* he tells of having seen 'the last traces of the greatest works of Giorgione yet glowing like a scarlet cloud, on the Fondaco de' Tedeschi' (VII, 438-9). These last traces have now vanished.