Victorian Literature and Culture (2000), 73–86. Printed in the United States of America.
Copyright © 2000 Cambridge University Press. 1060-1503/00 $9.50

VISUAL LABOR: RUSKIN'S RADICAL REALISM

By Caroline Levine

CRITICS HAVE BEEN COMPLAINING about Ruskin's inconsistencies since the 1840s. In 1856, Elizabeth Rigby wrote contemptuously of Ruskin's "crochety contradictions and peevish paradoxes" (187). Marshall Mather lamented in 1897 that the critic's "so-called inconsistencies roused the laughter and sneer of superficial readers" (xi). By 1933, R. H. Wilenski simply affirmed that "Ruskin's art criticism . . . is an appalling muddle" (192). And in our own time, scholars as various as John Rosenberg, Elizabeth Helsinger, and Gary Wihl have pointed not so much to the connections as to the shifts, gaps, and breaks that interrupt the succession of Ruskin's first nine major volumes — *Modern Painters, The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* and *The Stones of Venice.*[1]

But it is worth noticing, surely, that Ruskin's first massive works on art are all interwoven, picking up recurrent themes, cross-referencing one another, and even intersecting chronologically. He wrote the first two volumes of *Modern Painters,* stopped to write *The Seven Lamps,* which, it turned out, was a brief version of the three volumes of *The Stones of Venice,* which then followed; and then, curiously, he returned to *Modern Painters,* to write three more volumes of it, all before 1860. And far from framing the later texts of *Modern Painters* as a new and separate project from the earlier volumes, Ruskin carefully invites readers to see the whole work as a single venture, unfortunately interrupted by a long delay. In the preface to the final volume, he insists on his thoroughgoing and fundamental consistency: "In the main aim and principle of the book, there is no variation from its first syllable to its last" (*Works* 7: 9). At the beginning of the third volume, which is the first to follow his foray into architectural writing, he asks us to try to make sense of the whole: "In taking up the clue of an inquiry, now intermitted for nearly ten years, it may be well to do as a traveller would, who had to recommence an interrupted journey in a guideless country; and, ascending, as it were, some little hill beside our road, note how far we have already advanced, and what pleasantest ways we may choose for farther progress" (*Works* 5: 17). If it seems as if we have been without a guide, and have lost our way in the confusing landscape of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice,* Ruskin assures us that we may discover where we have been and where we are bound — simply by looking around us at the lay of the critical land. That is, we should be able to trace the "progress" we have made from *Modern Painters I,* through *The Stones of Venice,* even so far as to foresee the substance of the later volumes of *Modern*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Painters. If Ruskin is reassuringly there to offer us some helpful hints in the third volume, so much the better, but the implication is that we are capable of making sense of the route all by ourselves.

Taking a cue from the sage Ruskin, we might try to make sense of the journey. It is my contention, here, that it is indeed fruitful to read *The Stones of Venice* as flanked by the five volumes of *Modern Painters,* and to take seriously the fact that within the texts themselves Ruskin works to integrate, rather than to separate, the two projects. Of course, the basic concerns of the two texts do look remarkably different. If *The Stones of Venice* is best remembered for its socialist emphasis on humanizing labor, *Modern Painters* teaches us how to look at nature and evaluate landscape painting. *Stones* is politically radical and sensitive to the forces of historical change, while *Modern Painters* is apparently concerned with the more transcendent — and more dubious — categories of nature, truth, and representation. *Stones* had a lasting impact on nineteenth-century socialist thought; *Modern Painters* participated in a Victorian discussion of realism. Despite these apparently contradictory concerns, however, the works insistently cite one another. As if his readers had unrestrained access to all of his works, and could look easily from one to another, Ruskin refers to volumes from different works as integral parts of his argument, and refuses to relegate such references to the footnotes.[2] *Modern Painters* is woven into the text of *The Stones of Venice,* just as *Stones* makes numerous appearances in the final volumes of its painterly counterpart.[3] The critical connection I aim to make, therefore, is the link between the realism of *Modern Painters* and the socialism of *The Stones of Venice.*

Both realism and socialism are of course vexed terms, loaded with long and complex histories. In the twentieth century, Victorian realism has typically been characterized as a mediating aesthetic — representation which seeks to negotiate between self and society or between mind and material world. Lukacs famously championed bourgeois realism as literature which represented the contradictory relations between individuals and their "social and historical environment" (19).[4] Later scholars of realism have followed Lukacs in attending to realism's mediating role, but rather than understanding realist representations as truthful images of social relationships, they have seen the images themselves as the mediating forces — bridging the gap between the reader or artist and the world. George Levine, John P. McGowan, Katherine Kearns, and Tom Lloyd all characterize Victorian realism as the attempt to use language to get at a world beyond language — whether to a prior, unmediated experience of the world or to materiality itself.

Nancy Armstrong points to a paradox in this model of mediation:

> To mediate, according to the epistemology of realism, fiction has to record the interaction between the individual and his or her social-historical milieu without significantly modifying either one. The logic of the photograph reveals the paradox informing this assumption. It suggests that the immediacy of certain experiences in fiction is a function of mediation: the obtrusive and pervasive substitution of visual forms of objectification for things and people themselves. (40)

To gain immediate access to the real, we rely on particular forms of mediation — forms which must seem to erase themselves in the very moment of their mediating activity. The purpose of the representation's appearance is, it would seem, to disappear. And since the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

realist mediating apparatus never does dissolve, realist art has more often than not been deemed a failure.[5]

But what this paradox overlooks is the keen Victorian interest in the practice itself of mediation. Influential nineteenth-century theorists of realism, knowing full well that representation and the world were at odds, nonetheless wanted to articulate a *process* by which they might judiciously and respectfully approach the "real."[6] Far from seeking to erase the moment of mediation, they claimed social and ethical value for the work of creating the representation — valuing not so much mimetic immediacy as the activity of mediation. In short, Victorian realism's own theorists focused less on the verisimilitude of the product than on the labor that went into its making.[7] George Eliot's famous formulation of realism in *Adam Bede* stresses the hard work of truthful representation: "Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. The pencil is conscious of a delightful facility in drawing a griffin — the longer the claws, and the larger the wings, the better; but that marvellous facility which we mistook for genius is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion" (*Adam Bede* 178; ch. 17). In the opening paragraphs of *Shirley,* Charlotte Brontë addresses us as if reading realist fiction were like everyday labor: "Something real, cool, and solid lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning, when all who have work wake with the consciousness that they must rise and betake themselves thereto" (39; ch. 1). And as G. H. Lewes explained in his *Principles of Success in Literature* in 1865: "when you write in your own person you must be rigidly veracious. . . . This vigilance may render Literature more laborious; but no one ever supposed that success was to be had on easy terms" (105).[8]

It is Ruskin, of all the Victorian theorists, who is most insistent that seeing and representing the world demands serious and significant work. "Two lines are laid on canvas; one is right and another wrong. . . . One person feels it, — another does not; but the feeling or sight of the one can by no words be communicated to the other: it would be unjust if it could, for that feeling and sight have been the reward of years of labor" (*Works* 3: 609–10). To perceive rightly is clearly no facile matter. Even feeling and sight — faculties which we might think of as spontaneous, natural, unmediated — are the fruits of long and arduous work. Ruskin is responding, so he claims, to a culture in which "Brilliancy and rapidity of execution are everywhere sought as the highest good" (*Works* 3: 620). This climate encourages "glitter and claptrap," "rapid and unconsidered work," and painfully discourages "the man of industry," who is capable of great and serious truths when allowed the time to work to achieve them (*Works* 3: 620–21). In the first volume of *Modern Painters,* Ruskin urges young artists, whom he always calls "workmen," to learn their trade by looking carefully at the natural world. He writes: "Their work should be full of failures; for these are the signs of efforts" (*Works* 3: 623). To see and represent the reality of the natural world calls for practice, self-denial, rigorous discipline, "necessary labour." Ruskin's realism, in other words, is a *laboring aesthetic.*

Surprisingly, Ruskin's importance to British realism has not attracted much critical attention. A look at the 1850s suggests that the very beginnings of Victorian realism are closely and significantly associated with his proposal for a new aesthetic in *Modern Painters.* The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the fourth volume of *Modern Painters,* published in April 1856, as the earliest instance of the word "realism" to mean "close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise detail of the real thing or scene."[9] In the very same month, George Eliot reviewed the third volume of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Modern Painters and also used the term: "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 the place of definite, substantial reality" (180). Note that Eliot calls for "humble and faithful study" — not for a style or effect of mimesis, but for the act of attending to the world. In April 1856, then, Ruskin and Eliot not only coined a new term, but declared a common commitment to the labor of representation.

If Ruskin can be traced directly to the birth of "realism," he studiously avoided the use of the word "socialism" to describe his political program, and repudiated the socialists altogether in a footnote to "Unto this Last," first published in 1860 (*Works* 17: n. 107). But the importance of Ruskin's text to socialists like F. J. Furnivall and William Morris and their followers[10] suggests that its emphasis on a radical alternative to factory labor played a crucial role in the socialist aesthetics of the nineteenth century, whatever Ruskin's claims to the contrary.[11] In "How I Became a Socialist," Morris wrote: "It was through [Ruskin] that I learned to give form to my discontent" (35). And he prophesied that the discussion of labor in *The Stones of Venice* would be seen in future years as "one of the few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century" (Preface i). One of Morris's disciples, John Bruce Glasier, member of the Socialist League and later Chairman of the Independent Labour Party, names Ruskin as one of the writers whose work was giving "fitful expression" to nascent socialist thought mid-century. Even before meeting Morris, when Glasier's radical organization were asked how they had come to be socialists, a number of them cited reading Ruskin as one of the crucial factors.[12]

Despite his own refusal of the title of socialism, then, Ruskin's "discontent" with the condition and freedom of workers was seized, used, and disseminated by Victorian friends of socialism. And, according to the chronology of Ruskin's work, his attack on industrial labor in *The Stones of Venice* is both preceded *and* followed by a commitment to laborious "realism." If we can articulate a clear link between the two projects, then Ruskin's visual realism emerges, potentially, as a revolutionary aesthetic. Of course, the long habit of reading Ruskin as a mass of messy contradictions has prevented us from seeking out such links. In this tradition, late twentieth-century readers of Ruskin have largely assumed that he left realism behind in *The Stones of Venice,* which was the turning-point, they say, where Ruskin gained himself a social conscience, an understanding of history, and a "changed direction."[13] But what happens if we see the realism of *Modern Painters* as closely, even integrally, connected to the socialism of *The Stones of Venice*? Does this integration call for a necessary reassessment of realism's political force? Given Ruskin's known influence on writers as crucial to assessments of nineteenth-century realism as George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, Henry James, and even Proust,[14] I want to suggest that the connections among Ruskin's volumes may recast Victorian realism as an *altogether* revolutionary project.

The middle chapter of *The Stones of Venice,* called "The Nature of Gothic," is Ruskin's call for a society based on free, creative, thought-filled labor, a resistance to the stupefying, dehumanizing redundancy of industrial work. The modern demand for factory-perfect precision indicates an enslavement of the worker because it means that "he"[15] is nothing more than a machine, replicating patterns prescribed for him by others and prevented from using his own mind. "Let [the worker] but begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine-turned precision is lost at once" (*Works*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

10: 192). Thought and mechanical perfection cancel one another. And if European societies continue to block laborers from enjoying thoughtful, imaginative work, then, according to Ruskin, will come the frustrated violence of revolution — and it will be an undialectical social upheaval that will ultimately lead nowhere: "It is verily this degradation of the operative into a machine, which, more than any other evil of the times, is leading the mass of nations everywhere into vain, incoherent, destructive struggling for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature to themselves" (*Works* 10: 194). The more constructive solution to the violent degradation of mechanical slavery is to introduce freedom of thought into the work of every laborer. In nonviolent fashion, this will both defeat the repetitions of the machine and humanize the worker.

Architecture is of course the index of a whole culture for Ruskin, and he warns us not to mock the "ugly goblins and formless monsters, and stern statues" on Gothic cathedrals: "for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone" (*Works* 10: 193–94). Ugliness, formlessness, and sternness: these are rough, eccentric qualities, if we take conventional aesthetics as our guide. But for Ruskin they are the proper antidote to the endless duplication of perfect, machine-made form. He sets the playful variation and rough vitality of Gothic art against the deadening repetition of the machine as the model of healthy work. The Gothic worker had the freedom to create objects that were the emerging, irregular, variegated products of his own thought. This freedom is crucial to any just and strong society. Ruskin says: "it is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labor can be made happy" (*Works* 10: 201). In other words, with Gothic art, we find the ideal type of human work: it unites mind and body, intellectual and manual labor, individual freedom and the needs of the community.

But what do ugly goblins and formless monsters have to do with *realism*? More, it seems to me, than we might at first imagine. In "The Nature of Gothic," Ruskin's political call for freedom comes intertwined with an extended discussion of what he calls "naturalism."[16] For example, the Gothic builder inherited conventionalized images of leaves and flowers from his predecessors, but "saw there was no veracity in them, no knowledge, no vitality. Do what he would, he could not help liking the true leaves better; and cautiously, a little at a time, he put more of nature into his work, until at last it was all true" (*Works* 10: 232). The Gothic artist might be politically and intellectually free, but he was *also* committed to the truths of the natural world. So committed was he, in fact, that he began to ignore the other elements of his work, to celebrate his love of nature at the expense of other aesthetic demands. "[T]o the Gothic workman the living foliage became a subject of intense affection, and he struggled to render all its characters with as much accuracy as was compatible with the laws of his design and the nature of his material, not unfrequently tempted in his enthusiasm to transgress the one and disguise the other" (*Works* 10: 236). As ever, Ruskin pays careful attention to the relationship between the artist and the real, rather than to the product, seeing the feeling labor of the craftsman as the important truth which the work of representation reveals.

Of the six moral elements of Gothic, Ruskin gives more attention to naturalism than to any of the others.[17] But late twentieth-century readers have resisted this fact of Ruskin's writing, refusing to acknowledge the interest and value of his insistence on representational fidelity to nature. For example, in the 1985 Penguin edition of Ruskin's work, *Unto this Last, and Other Essays,* editor Clive Wilmer calls Ruskin's discussion of natural-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ism in "The Nature of Gothic" a "digression," "much of it interesting but of more relevance to the argument of *Modern Painters* than to that of the book in hand" (321, n. 25). Wilmer sees the shift to nature as out of place, having little to do with the central problem of *Stones* — the socialist manifesto. He simply cuts it out. And this, I would argue, is to miss the crucial union of socialism and realism. An emphasis on the truth of the natural world as a model for architecture runs throughout *The Stones of Venice,* finding its way into practically every chapter and constantly echoing the central realist concerns of *Modern Painters.* Surely this is not the hallmark of a "digression." We could even re-read the title of the famous essay, "The Nature of Gothic," to shift the emphasis to the word "nature" — to argue that the truths of nature are an integral part of the Gothic. "The Nature of Gothic" gestures, deliberately, to the *nature* of Gothic.

In *The Stones of Venice,* truth to nature comes intertwined with the politics of individual freedom and humanizing work. But what is the link between nature and work? We can begin to frame an answer by turning to *Modern Painters.* There, as we have seen, Ruskin insists that representing nature's reality calls for exertion, toil, imperfection. And the reason he gives is an unsettlingly political one. Conventional ways of seeing dangerously cloud and corrupt our vision, and thus Ruskin exhorts us to work assiduously to counteract their influence. We must seek to cast off the weight of established traditions and received judgments in favor of a more faithful relationship to the world. This is no easy task because the conventions are deeply ingrained, even seductive. In the first volume of *Modern Painters,* Ruskin writes:

> How many people are misled, by what has been said and sung of the serenity of Italian skies, to suppose they must be more *blue* than the skies of the north, and think that they seem them so; whereas the sky of Italy is far more dull and grey in colour than the skies of the north. . . . And what is more strange still, when people see in a painting what they suppose to have been the source of their impressions, they will affirm it to be truthful, though they feel no such impression resulting from it. Thus, though day after day they may have been impressed by the tone and warmth of an Italian sky, yet not having traced the feeling to its source, and supposing themselves to be impressed by its *blueness,* they will affirm a blue sky in a painting to be truthful, and reject the most faithful rendering of all the real attributes of Italy as cold or dull. (*Works* 3: 144)

We have been taught abundant and authoritative falsehoods by centuries of opinion and conventional representation. Indeed, we are now so accustomed to flawed images that we do not really *see* nature unless we work at it. "We are . . . constantly missing the sight of what we do not know beforehand to be visible; and painters, to the last hour of their lives, are apt to fall in some degree into the error of painting what exists, rather than what they can see" (*Works* 3: 145). Nature's truths are so alien to our habits that we must quell our habitual practices of thought in order to recognize and represent nature's reality. This is the hard work of realism.

The reader, like the painter, is expected to labor in the act of looking. From beginning to end in *Modern Painters* we are faced with painting which misrepresents the world and yet convinces its viewers that it is accurate to the real. The potential duplicity of visual representation thus requires a vigilant set of empirical tests. The reader must work to come to a firm knowledge of the world before painting can disclose its truths *as* truths.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

With the laborious accumulation of tested experience, we become familiar with the truth and, more importantly, intolerant of falsehood. "A man accustomed to the grace and infinity of nature's foliage, with every vista a cathedral, and every bough a revelation, can scarcely but be angered when Poussin mocks him with a black round mass of impenetrable paint, diverging into feathers instead of leaves, and supported on a stick instead of a trunk" (*Works* 3: 169). What we readers must learn, most importantly, is to be suspicious, skeptical of even the most venerable images. Tradition is there to be overturned in Ruskin's revolutionary aesthetics.

It was this anti-conventional lesson that most upset Ruskin's contemporaries, who saw *Modern Painters* as a radical attack on tradition. A review in *Blackwood's* had it that Ruskin "has not the slightest respect for the accumulated opinions of the best judges for these two or three hundred years" (Eagles 35). But the radicalism of the book on painting, I would contend, lay in more than its outright rejection of custom. There is a more subtly subversive lesson in *Modern Painters.* Throughout the five volumes we encounter Ruskin's determined insistence on a single crucial fact: nature's infinite variety. Of all of the unconventional aspects of nature, it is its endless variation, its infinite diversity, that is hardest and most important for us to see. Ruskin tells us over and over again in *Modern Painters* that infinite variety is the essential and unfamiliar truth that painters must labor to portray. He writes of the "changefulness" of the natural world (*Works* 3: 494), and shows how nature "contrives never to repeat herself" (*Works* 3: 542). Infinity is the *sine qua non* of Ruskin's realism: "if we wish, without reference to beauty of composition, or any other interfering circumstances, to form a judgment of the truth of painting, perhaps the very first thing we should look for, whether in one thing or another — foliage, or clouds, or waves, — should be the expression of *infinity* always and everywhere, in all parts and divisions of parts" (*Works* 3: 387).

The corrupting conventions of representation that we have inherited have relied on formulaic types and patterns, redundancies and standard rules, and it is for this reason that we have to labor to see nature's absolute resistance to these repetitive conventions.

> Claude has given you the walls below in one dead void of uniform grey. There is nothing to be seen, or felt, or guessed at in it; it is grey paint or grey shade, whichever you may choose to call it, but it is nothing more. Nature would have let you see, nay, would have compelled you to see, thousands of spots and lines, not one to be absolutely understood or accounted for, but yet all characteristic and different from each other. . . . all would have been there; none, indeed, seen as such, none comprehensible or like themselves, but all visible; little shadows and sparkles, and scratches, making that whole space of colour a transparent, palpitating, various infinity. (*Works* 3: 331–32)

Claude, Poussin, Canaletto, and the other Old Masters may be seen as truth-tellers, but they always fail to do justice to nature's extraordinary complexity and diversity — a variety here so overwhelming that it amounts even to unintelligibility. Claude's uniformity is false and dead by contrast. If Claude's work is easily intelligible, it is because he lies to us — giving us deathly repetition and a flat sameness that is both familiar and simple. We take his paintings as true and realistic because we are so accustomed to the facility of repetitive uniformity in painting that we do not recognize the infinite variety of the real. Consequently, Ruskin demands that we go outside to look for ourselves, striving labori-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ously to overcome our comfortable habits and conventional expectations. What we will see when we do this, according to Ruskin, is unending variety: “the old story over and over again — infinity” (*Works* 3: 454).

In short, nature shows us variety, diversity, changefulness. And this is a lesson that we do not learn from other aspects of our experience. Indeed, Ruskin goes so far as to suggest that deadening, unnatural repetition is actually the fundamental quality of the human mind. He writes:

> It is impossible for mortal mind to compose an infinity of any kind for itself, or to form an idea of perpetual variation, and to avoid all repetition, merely by its own combining resources. The moment that we trust to ourselves, we repeat ourselves, and therefore the moment that we see in a work of any kind whatsoever the expression of infinity, we may be certain that the workman has gone to nature for it; while, on the other hand, the moment we see repetition, or want of infinity, we may be certain that the workman has *not* gone to nature for it. (*Works* 3: 387)

To put it simply, we have the infinite variety of nature on the one hand, and the repetitive patterns of the human mind on the other. The human mind, when left to its own devices, opts for repetition rather than variety. And the *only* way to resist this repetition, according to Ruskin, is to go to nature.

At this point, I hope it is becoming obvious that we must return to the concerns of *The Stones of Venice,* with its insistence on the varied, irregular, free labor of thought in place of the slavish repetitions of mechanical routine. Ruskin seems to be telling us in *Modern Painters* that the *human mind itself is precisely like the machine*: it is mechanical — it opts for the redundant patterns of the machine, just like the *dehumanizing labor* of *The Stones of Venice.*

If we bring together the logic of the two texts we find what might seem to be a paradox: on the one hand, in the “Nature of Gothic,” thought is liberating and humanizing when compared to the machine, while in *Modern Painters,* mechanical repetition is the basic tendency of the human mind. In the socialist text, infinite variety is the proof and value of human thought, while in the realist text, infinity is a sign that the workman has suppressed his own inclinations and been faithful to nature.

But let me make the case for you that these two texts are not contradictory. Ruskin says that variety is proof of human thought and that repetition marks the absence of thought, while he also argues that repetition is the natural inclination of the human mind. In other words, *thought is not our natural inclination.* We will fall into habits of repetition when left to ourselves, but this is not thinking. Thinking we do only when we suppress our own inclinations and attend carefully to the world. Our tendency is to passivity, compliance, submissiveness to the repetitive machine, while thought disrupts these established patterns. Thought itself is alien to the human mind, and so it comes only with effort. We learn it, laboriously, by turning to that which is *not ourselves* — to nature. Thus the “real” of Ruskinian realism leads us to practice the anti-conventional act of thinking, an act which both represents *and* fosters a resistance to the repetitions of the machine. Simply to see the truths of nature demands the laborious act of setting aside our habits of mind — centuries of received opinion, repetitive custom, and cultural passivity — in order to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

practice thinking, which leads us to active skepticism, infinite irregularity, and revolutionary freedom.

Always prone to the perilous descent into deathly convention, the human mind must counteract its own inclinations by a strict focus on the truths of the natural world: "nature is so immeasurably superior to all that the human mind can conceive, that every departure from her is a fall beneath her" (*Works* 3: 137). The mind *needs* the real in order to think. And it is clear in *The Stones of Venice* that thought frees us to resist the duplication of the machine. Or to put this another way, nature teaches us to resist industrial society. In this context, realism, which demands our resolute attention to nature's infinite variety, is a revolutionary aesthetic. And the radical nature of the "Nature of Gothic" is no accident.

You might leap to argue, of course, that Ruskin is simply naïve — foolishly imagining that we can get at the unconventional truth of the world simply by straining our eyes to see. But it seems to me that we can translate Ruskin's language into a contemporary theoretical context to suggest that radical thinkers might still find echoes and resonances in *Modern Painters.* In reading Ruskin, we encounter again and again his insistence on self-denial, or self-suppression, in the face of the real. To those critics who have noticed this in the past, it has seemed to be nothing more than a reflection of Ruskin's austere Christianity.[18] But politically-minded literary and cultural critics today are, like Ruskin, concerned with self-suppression. Their efforts at self-denial are about seeking to set aside entrenched habit and vested interest not, like Ruskin, to see nature, but to hear what the Other has to say. They labor to suppress potent cultural inclinations in order to attend to another reality — cultures and subcultures not their own.[19] In "The Economy of Manichean Allegory," Abdul R. JanMohamed begins with the following premise:

> If [the European] assumes that he and the Other are essentially identical, then he would tend to ignore the significant divergences and to judge the Other according to his own cultural values. If, on the other hand, he assumes that the Other is irremediably different, then he would have little incentive to adopt the viewpoint of alterity: he would again tend to turn to the security of his own cultural perspective. Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible *only* if the self can somehow *negate* or at least severely *bracket* the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture. (64–65; emphasis added)

Though this bracketing entails the "virtually impossible task of negating one's very being" (59), it is also the *only* way to produce a responsible picture of the Other. The negation of one's habitual responses paves the way for the possibility of ethical, dynamic, thoughtful representations which refuse both the easy familiarity of sameness and the unyielding, undiscoverable foreignness of absolute alterity. Indeed, though contemporary thinkers recognize the near-impossibility of achieving this self-suppression, it reappears, again and again, as a persistent aim. Gayatri Spivak describes the act of reading politically as follows: "the critic's first task is to attend to the text. So I try, knowing that of course it's impossible to suspend myself, as it were" (52). Self-conscious about the immense, even insuperable, obstacles in the way of suspending the self, both JanMohamed and Spivak insist nonetheless on the necessity of the attempt. Fully aware of the impossibilities of immediacy in representation, they call for imperfection, for struggle — for *labor.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In other words, what I want to suggest is that if we put our own category of the Other side by side with the Victorian category of the real, we discover that we share more with the nineteenth century than we might, perhaps, like to admit. Like Ruskin, late twentieth-century critics and theorists are concerned with the process of representing anti-conventional diversity, the refusal to fall into traditional types and patterns of representation. Homi K. Bhabha explains that the racial stereotype is, like Claude's painting, rigid, familiar, and deadening: "an arrested, fixated form of representation" (203). Sounding remarkably Ruskinian, political critics are keen to shift and subvert the limited number of powerful, authoritative images that we have inherited in favor of a more various, unorthodox, laborious relationship to representation. In his famous essay, "New Ethnicities," Stuart Hall invites readers to resist the politics of the essentialist black subject, which, though it might seem strategically effective, assumes "that all black people are *the same,*" which is fixed and dangerously reductive, like Ruskin's Old Masters, compared to a more complex politics which would recognize the "extraordinary diversity of subject positions," and a "real heterogeneity of interests and identities" (225). This process, for Hall, entails a "struggle," which will "to some degree *displace,* reorganize and reposition the different cultural strategies in relation to one another" (224). The various labor of thought is, as usual, revolutionary. And if Ruskin's influential realism seems uncannily to haunt the language of post-colonial criticism,[20] then surely it is time to reassess the political force and value of nineteenth-century realism. For radical Victorians, the activity of striving to represent the real was far more important than the mimetic immediacy of its products. The nineteenth-century realist aesthetic, at least in Ruskin's use of it, was not about fixing types, about reducing the world to knowable patterns; it was rather an acknowledgment of the urgent, unconventional otherness and extraordinary heterogeneity of the real.

Are we still realists, then, in the Ruskinian sense? The answer is yes, if we agree that, like Ruskin, political critics today want to learn from that which is not ourselves; if we want to labor to set aside our passive, repetitive cultural assumptions in order to learn about the infinitely various worlds of the Other. We are as much post-Victorian as post-modern if we want to be critical of our cultural inclinations — to *think,* as Ruskin puts it, and so to resist the mechanical routines of the *status quo.*

Rutgers University in Camden

NOTES

1. Rosenberg claims that *Modern Painters* "would be less perplexing if Ruskin had known more about art when he began it, or learned less in the course of its composition" (2). Helsinger makes the case that *The Stones of Venice* marks a new direction for Ruskin, "the beginning" of a historical self-consciousness and "social criticism" (*Art of the Beholder* 141). And Wihl begins his book with the assertion that "All of John Ruskin's readers, wherever they begin, soon confront his textual fragmentariness" (xi).
2. In the final volume of *Stones of Venice,* for example, Ruskin inserts the following citation into the text proper: "It was noticed, in the second volume of *Modern Painters,* p. 187, that the principle which had most power in retarding the modern school of portraiture was its constant expression of individual vanity and pride" (*Works* 11: 73–74).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. Examples are too extensive to list. To give a sense of the interweaving, however, consider the famous "Nature of Gothic" chapter of *The Stones of Venice,* where Ruskin briefly introduces the problem of "Sensualist" artists and then forecasts blithely: "I propose to work out this subject fully in the last volume of *Modern Painters.*" The "last volume" turned out to be three volumes, but Ruskin made good on his promise in all three (*Works* 10: 229).
4. Modernism, by contrast, which assumes the ontological solitude of the individual, fails to do justice to the complex political relationship between self and world. "Man, for these writers, is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings" (Lukacs 20).
5. In response to this twentieth-century emphasis on realism as mediation, Russo argues that critics have naively given up on realism only because they have been disappointed in the failures of the "*union mistica,*" the perfect correspondence between language and the world. "Much of the language of negativity we have grown accustomed to in contemporary criticism rests upon the following syllogism: to know is to know directly and without mediation; this is not possible; therefore, the world is unknowable" (13).
6. As George Eliot wrote to Frederic Leighton: "Approximate truth is the only truth attainable, but at least one must strive for that, and not wade off into arbitrary falsehood" (*Letters* 43).
7. There were certainly exceptions to this rule, especially in scientific circles. For the more positivist side of realism, see O'Connor's "Pictures of Health." O'Connor argues that nineteenth-century advocates of medical photography insisted on the perfect immediacy of the camera as an objective means of representation (544–50).
8. Art historian Nochlin argues that realist art was associated with work because the revolutions of 1848 had raised the issue of labor as a central political problem for the first time, but she limits her understanding of realism to the content of representation, affirming that after 1848 "the worker becomes the dominant image in Realist art" (113). Nochlin, like other twentieth-century critics, considers the products of realism and misses the question that these Victorian theorists were most concerned about — the arduous labor of truth-telling.
9. Stang locates the first uses of the word "realist" in 1851 and 1853, followed by "realism" in 1856 (148). More recently, Skilton claims simply that "The word 'realism' entered the language in the late 1850s" (86). The *Oxford English Dictionary* distinguishes between a philosophical realism, the uses of which date as early as the seventeenth century, and representational realism, which catches on in the mid-nineteenth century.
10. Christian Socialist F. J. Furnivall invited Ruskin to teach at his new Working Men's College and asked for permission to reprint "The Nature of Gothic" chapter of *The Stones of Venice* as a pamphlet for working-class readers.
11. A number of critics disagree with this conclusion. Hewison argues *The Stones of Venice* was in fact an "Ultra-Tory" treatise (149). And Stoddart sees Ruskin's refusal to sanction the communal International Working Men's Association as evidence of his faith in "the familial notion of society passed down from father to son" (166).
12. These stories come from Glasier's 1921 memoir (11, 67).
13. These are the words of Rosenberg, who seeks to account for Ruskin's changing concerns by locating a shift in conscience "in the rising cry of the beggars, symbols, possibly, of the burden of guilt Ruskin bore for his wealth, his leisure, his extravagant purchases of art" (45). Helsinger claims that *The Stones of Venice* represents a conceptual, historicizing turning-point for Ruskin, and argues that the last three volumes of *Modern Painters* "takes a very different approach" (*Art of the Beholder* 141). Charting his own career rather differently, Ruskin himself affirmed in 1852 that his architectural works were "merely bye-play," crucial to his education but hindering the progress of the important work on painting. Letter to his father (15 Feb. 1852) (*Works* 36: 132).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

14. We have seen the close links between Ruskin and George Eliot. As for Brontë, after reading the first volume of *Modern Painters,* she wrote: "Hitherto I have only had instinct to guide me in judging 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?" (Wise 2: 240). Brontë also writes glowingly of *The Stones of Venice* (Wise 3: 195–96, 233). In 1868, James paid homage to Ruskin as the "single eminent representative" of art criticism in England, and claimed that it was surprising that Ruskin could have so great an influence on artists, and so little on critics (33–34). And Proust's biographer, Painter, calls Ruskin the novelist's "salvation," describing Proust's Ruskinian education in prose that sounds wonderfully like Ruskin's: "Except that it brought him joy unspoilt by suffering, Proust's passion for Ruskin took precisely the same course as his love-affairs or ardent friendships. There was a prelude of tepid acquaintance; a crystallization and a taking fire; and a falling out of love, from which he emerged free, but changed and permanently enriched" (1: 256).
15. For discussions of the gendering of the audience in Ruskin's work, see Helsinger "Politics of Viewing," especially 134–40, and Marsh.
16. Here, Ruskin's "naturalism" does not belong to the self-conscious movement of literary naturalism that emerged later in the century, best characterized by the scientific, determinist narratives of Emile Zola. Instead, Ruskin's naturalism is, it seems to me, a quintessentially realist posture: "the love of natural objects for their own sake, and the effort to represent them frankly, unconstrained by artistical laws" (*Works* 10: 215). Notice, again, the emphasis on effort.
17. In the Library Edition of Ruskin's works, the attention to naturalism runs to twenty-four pages (*Works* 10: 215–39).
18. Helsinger, for example, explains: "Reading, and the viewing Ruskin models on it, are recommended as forms of spiritual and material self-discipline" ("Politics of Viewing" 129).
19. I do not mean to suggest that the cultural Other should be seen in terms of Ruskin's natural world, but rather that Ruskin's various nature provides an intriguing paradigm of alterity, one which ties Victorian realism to post-colonial criticism.
20. The double emphasis on self-suppression and the variety of alterity, which refuses fixed classifications, is not limited to post-colonial theory. In an intriguing book on cultural otherness as a model for encountering the literary text, Schwab points out that for Luce Irigaray "woman [is] unrepresentable heterogeneity" (34), and for Bakhtin, "to enter in some measure into an alien culture and look at the world through its eyes is a necessary moment in the process of its understanding" (qtd. in Schwab 21).

WORKS CITED

Armstrong, Nancy. "Fiction in the Age of Photography." *Narrative* 7 (Jan. 1999): 37–55.

Benzie, William. *Dr. F. J. Furnivall: Victorian Scholar and Adventurer.* Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1983.

Bhabha, Homi K. "Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism." In *The Politics of Theory.* Ed. Francis Barker, et al. Colchester: U of Essex P, 1983: 194–211.

Bradley, J. L. *Ruskin: The Critical Heritage.* New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Shirley.* Ed. Andrew and Judith Hook. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

Eagles, John. Unsigned review. *Blackwood's Magazine* 54 (Oct. 1843); rpt. in Bradley 34–64.

Eliot, George. *Adam Bede.* Ed. Stephen Gill. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980.

———. *Letters*. Vol. 4 (1862–68). Ed. Gordon S. Haight. London: Oxford UP, 1956.

———. Unsigned review. *Westminster Review* 9 (April 1856); rpt. in Bradley, 179–83.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Glasier, John Bruce. *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement.* Ed. Peter Faulkner. Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994.

Hall, Stuart. "New Ethnicities." In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader.* Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1995: 223–27.

Helsinger, Elizabeth K. *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.

———. "Ruskin and the Politics of Viewing: Constructing National Subjects." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 18 (1994): 125–46.

Hewison, Robert. "Notes on the Construction of *The Stones of Venice.*" In *Studies in Ruskin.* Ed. Robert Rhodes and Del Ivan Janik. Athens: Ohio UP, 1982: 131–52.

James, Henry. *The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts.* Ed. John L. Sweeney. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1956.

JanMohamed, Abdul R. "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 59–87.

Kearns, Katherine. *Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism: Through the Looking Glass.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Levine, George. *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.

Lewes, G. H. *The Principles of Success in Literature.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1891.

Lloyd, Tom. *Crises of Realism: Representing Experience in the British Novel, 1816–1910.* Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1997.

Lukacs, George. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism.* Trans. John and Necke Mander. London: Merlin, 1963.

Marsh, Jan. "'Resolve to be a Great Paintress': Women Artists in Relation to John Ruskin as Critic and Patron." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 18 (1994): 177–85.

Mather, Marshall. *John Ruskin: His Life and Teaching.* London: Frederick Warne, 1897.

McGowan, John P. *Representation and Revelation: Victorian Realism from Carlyle to Yeats.* Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1986.

Morris, William. "How I Became a Socialist." In *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs.* Ed. Asa Briggs. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962: 33–37.

———. Preface. "The Nature of Gothic" by John Ruskin. Hammersmith: Kelmscott P, 1892. i–iv.

Nochlin, Linda. *Realism.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.

O'Connor, Erin. "Pictures of Health: Medical Photography and the Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1995): 535–72.

Painter, George D. *Marcel Proust: A Biography.* 2 vols. New York: Vintage Books, 1959.

Rigby, Elizabeth. Unsigned review. *Quarterly Review* 98 (Mar. 1856); rpt. in Bradley, 184–95.

Rosenberg, John D. *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.

Ruskin, John. *Unto This Last, and Other Writings.* Ed. Clive Wilmer. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

———. *Works*. 39 vols. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1903–07.

Russo, Elena. *Skeptical Selves: Empiricism and Modernity in the French Novel.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996.

Schwab, Gabriele. *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen: Otherness in Literary Language.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996.

Skilton, David, ed. *The Early and Mid-Victorian Novel.* New York: Routledge, 1993.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues.* Ed. Sarah Harasym. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Stang, Richard. *The Theory of the Novel in England: 1850–1870.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Stoddart, Judith. "Conjuring the 'Necromantic Evidence' of History: Ruskin and the Enlightenment Revival of the 1870s." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 18 (1994): 163–76.

Wihl, Gary. *Ruskin and the Rhetoric of Infallibility.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.

Wilenski, R. H. *John Ruskin: An Introduction to Further Study of His Life and Work.* London: Faber and Faber, 1933.

Wise, Thomas James, ed. *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships, and Correspondence.* 4 vols. Philadelphia: The Porcupine P, 1980.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281059 Published online by Cambridge University Press