‘The Lie of the Land': Ruskin and the English Landscape Tradition

by

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in the Department
of
ENGLISH

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

November 1994

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'The Lie of the Land': Ruskin and the English Landscape Tradition

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Abstract

Ruskin's political writing has generally been construed as a later pursuit separate from his earlier work in aesthetics. Rather than attributing his radical politics to his deep religious conviction, his fundamentalist upbringing, or the influence of Thomas Carlyle and other social reformers, this thesis is an endeavour to ground the origin and expression of Ruskin's politics in the aesthetics of landscape which he and his readers shared.

The way Ruskin's contemporaries read his commentaries on both art and politics was determined to a great degree by the long tradition of English landscape painting and poetry. Prior to Ruskin's time, the British admiration for European masters and aesthetics became fused with national concepts of property and ownership to produce emblems of felicity and propriety that both rationalized and disguised inequitable social conditions. In turn, this ideology of ownership and the practice of aestheticizing the topography of Britain was disseminated to a much wider population through the popular cult of the picturesque.

Ruskin was an avid follower of the picturesque as a young man, and few of his contemporaries had studied as many paintings as he by the time he started to write *Modern Painters* (1843), an early work in which painting and politics merge. Despite
contemporary critical theory which consistently endorsed the disengagement of art from political criticism, Ruskin took the landscape tradition which he shared with his readers and through it he discovered and articulated his deep disillusion at the state of industrialized Britain.

The landscape Ruskin thus constructed constituted a social commentary that assimilated theology, morality and aesthetics into a powerful rhetoric that infused both the painting and the actual landscape of Britain with political meaning.
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Preface

To avoid a confusion in terms I reserve the actual word “landscape” to denote any form of constructed representation, and endeavour to use words like “countryside,” “scene,” “view,” “land,” “geography,” or a similar term to denote the physical topography itself, which may in turn be transformed into a landscape by a painter, poet, or gardener. This thesis does not directly address issues of landscape gardening or landscape architecture largely because they do not figure prominently in Ruskin's work. They are fascinating areas of study but there is not space here to do them justice, except by allusion to their role in estate planning and in the development of the picturesque. John Dixon Hunt discusses Ruskin and the garden in Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

All footnote references to Ruskin's works are from the Library Edition of E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn The Works of John Ruskin (London: George Allen, 1903-12) unless otherwise indicated. For clarity in each note I have given the name of the specific work (e.g. Modern Painters III), the date of first publication, and abbreviated Cook and Wedderburn to “C & W” followed by the appropriate volume and page number.
Chapter 1

Introduction

One can't help admiring a speaker who can begin a lecture promising to discuss landscape and ichthyology—and never mention fish again. There is something endearing about titles like *The Ethics of Dust: Ten Lectures to Little Housewives on the Elements of Crystallization*. However, there is also something very intimidating about writing on such a prolific and diverse a thinker as John Ruskin. His influence was as great as it was brief. William Morris, Bernard Shaw, Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi all acknowledged Ruskin's great political influence,¹ but by the turn of the century few people were actually reading his work any more. He did more than anyone else to create the reputation of Turner and shape the taste of a century, but the Impressionists may just as well not have existed so far as Ruskin was concerned. What can account for the brevity of Ruskin's reputation? I would suggest that the critical position Ruskin occupied was an uncomfortable one; he was caught in the interregnum between two traditions and could not accept, nor be accepted by, either.

In the chapters that follow I will describe some of the forces and traditions that came together in the middle of the nineteenth century to make Ruskin among the most influential men of his time, and one of the most interesting. In fact, this is an investigation not so much of Ruskin himself as it is of the tradition of English landscape and John Ruskin's unique place within that tradition. Others who have written about Ruskin have shown the effect of Victorian religious morality, early economic theory, the suasive presence of great contemporary social reformers like Thomas Carlyle, and much else besides. I am concerned here with something less apparent at first, but something which helps account for the particular form of Ruskin's social criticism, and for some of the impact it had upon his readers: English landscape. The study of landscape is obviously central to Ruskin's work, but I maintain that it acted as a pre-existent political language which he learned as a child, mastered as a young man, and articulated as a mature writer. I believe that Ruskin's place in the political tradition of landscape representation was shaped by the insatiable English taste for Italianate landscape which coincided with emerging perceptions of property and the nation, which I describe in Chapter 2. His condemnation of this tradition was so vehement in *Modern Painters I* (1843) that it is clear that he was rejecting more than a style of painting. It may come as some surprise, then, to see in chapter 3 how actively the young, pre-*Modern Painters* Ruskin pursued the picturesque, the popular aesthetic which disseminated much of the ideology of the previous landscape tradition. It is more surprising still that it was within the conventions of this picturesque that Ruskin began to clearly articulate a rhetoric of landscape as a form of social
discourse. Ruskin would get no help in the formulation of his politics from the art theorists for, as we see in chapter 4, the aesthetic theory of the time perfectly suited the landscape paintings it described; it militated against political insight through strategies of distraction, denial, and obfuscation. In chapter 5 I trace how the practice of the picturesque and some of the basic tenets of nineteenth-century aesthetics were transformed by Ruskin into a political discourse that derived much of its unique rhetorical power from its apposition with traditional landscape aesthetics. Finally, it is impossible not to wonder how well Ruskin's revisionist landscape aesthetics described the contemporary landscape practice, especially that of Ruskin's esteemed J.M.W. Turner. In fact, Ruskin had to overlook much of Turner's work, especially the estate paintings, in order to unearth the great images of ruin that drive his later criticism.

Ruskin's work was a brief respite in a larger landscape tradition characterized by political complicity under the guise of aesthetic disinterestedness. Painters who celebrated class interests in the property of their patrons preceded him, accompanied by an aesthetics which obscured those allegiances; a train of artists who pursued the socially abstracted "art for art's sake" came after. Ruskin could abide neither.

If there was one historical moment that embodied the difficult paradox in the life of John Ruskin's critical work it was November 25th, 1878, with the Whistler v. Ruskin trial. It must have seemed the end of an era for those who crowded into the overheated courtroom presided over by Lord Huddleston. The plaintiff was a vain young *bon vivant* known in fashionable London society as much for his wit as for his art. The aging
defendant was too ill to even attend the hearings following a bout of the madness which
haunted him the rest of his life. The plaintiff appeared to be the future, the champion of the
aesthetic movement that would claim that a painting was first and foremost "an
arrangement of line, form, and colour." He and his circle asserted that to appreciate art
we "need bring nothing with us from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no
familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world
of aesthetic exaltation." As Whistler's contemporary, Oscar Wilde, put it, "all art is quite
useless." The defendant, Ruskin, was the past, the eminence grise who had shaped
British taste in art for the last four decades with an almost unbroken stream of books,
lectures, and articles. Thirty-five years earlier he had championed the works of Turner
against hostile reviewers, and later he had defended the newly-founded Pre-Raphaelite
brotherhood. At the time of the trial he was the first Slade Professor of Fine Art ever
appointed at Oxford, but he had no patience for Whistler's work or ideas.

The immediate cause of the dispute was Ruskin's review of an exhibition at the
Grosvenor Gallery in June of 1877. In a rambling issue of Fors Clavigera, Ruskin

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5 Merrill, 46.
described with general approbation works by Tissot and Edward Burne-Jones before he launched into the fatal paragraph that sparked Whistler’s suit for libel. Ruskin considered Burne-Jones’ works “simply the only art-work at present produced in England which will be received by the future as ‘classic’ in its kind,—the best that has been, or could be.”

Whistler, in contrast, received the brunt of Ruskin’s indignation:

For Mr. Whistler’s own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay [the gallery owner] ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.

The London papers picked up the review and Whistler, never shy of publicity and constantly in need of money, had Ruskin served with a writ on August 8th claiming damages of £1,000. The hearing itself was as colourful and controversial as Whistler could wish. The proceedings were interrupted by displays of wit, applause and laughter; paintings were handed around the court and Ruskin even provided a Titian for the jury to compare with Whistler’s efforts. Most of the pageantry of the occasion belongs to the

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6 John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera* #79 (18th June, 1877), C & W 29:159.

7 Ibid., C & W 29:160.

8 Merrill, 60.

9 The official transcript of the trial was destroyed as a matter of course when no appeal was lodged. Linda Merrill has done a remarkable job of piecing together much of the testimony from a number of secondary contemporary sources, largely newspapers and instructions to counsel. These reveal some questions about the nature of Ruskin’s defense and Huddleston’s instructions to the jury.
past now, but the trial marked a significant change in the way art was made and how it was viewed.

There are two defences to the charge of making a libellous statement. The first, an absolute defence, is to establish the truth of the statement; no true statement is libellous regardless how much it may ruin the reputation of the person described. The second defense is to prove, and the onus is on the defendant to do so, that the statement was privileged as "fair comment," that is, it was a statement of an honestly held opinion made without malicious intent on a matter of public interest. Moreover, the defence must prove that any honest person might hold the same opinion.  

It seems obvious that Ruskin's review constituted fair comment. The paintings were on public exhibition, therefore a matter of public interest, and he was a critic who had administered stronger medicine in the past; there was no question that he believed what he said, and that many others shared his opinion of Whistler's work. This is, of course, the route his lawyers took, but in his instructions to counsel prior to the trial Ruskin advised them to take the first defence, that "the description given of his [Whistler's] work and character is accurately true."  

At this point Ruskin confuses an objective estimate of the worth of Whistler's work with his own very subjective understanding of what gives art its value. The way he explains this standard to his attorneys shows that, far from not

10 This may not be strictly required legally, but was part of the Judge's instructions to the jury in this case. Merrill, 371.

11 "Ruskin's Instructions to Defense Counsel" in Merrill, 290.
comprehending the "modern school" Whistler represented, he understood the aspirations of aestheticism completely, and rejected them utterly:

The standard which I gave, thirty years ago [in *Modern Painters I*] for estimate of the relative value of pictures, namely, that their preciousness depended ultimately on the clearness and justice of the ideas they contained and conveyed, has never been lost sight of by me since, and has been especially dwelt upon lately, in such resistance as I have been able to offer to the modern schools which conceive the object of art to be ornament rather than edification. . . . It is a critic's first duty in examining designs proposed in public exhibitions to distinguish the artist's work from the upholsterer's; and although it would be unreasonable to expect from the hasty and electric enlightenment of the nineteenth century, any pictorial elucidations of the Dispute of the Sacrament, or the School of Athens, he may yet, without severity of exaction, require of a young painter that he should show the resources of his mind no less than the dexterity of his fingers and without libellous intention may recommend the spectator to value order and ideas above arrangement in tints, and to rank an attentive draughtsman's work above a speedy plasterer's.12

Ruskin renounced aestheticism not because he disliked the beautiful—he had dedicated his whole life to a study of beauty—rather, he felt that art disengaged from life, divorced from truth or morality was an aberration: "nothing but Art is moral: life without Industry is sin, and Industry without Art, brutality."13

The actual trial of *Whistler v. Ruskin* ended inconclusively. The jury decided that there was libel, possibly because the strength of Ruskin's language indicated malice. However, they granted only a farthing in damages, with each party bearing its own court costs.

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12 Ibid., 291-2.

costs, a clear indication to Whistler that the suit should not have been brought to court at all. In the larger picture, however, both Whistler and Ruskin lost. Whistler failed in his immediate rather naive endeavour to unseat a critical establishment which judged art by what he considered irrelevant criteria. If there must be critics let them be artists, Whistler said, and let Ruskin “resign his present professorship, to fill the chair of Ethics at the university. As master of English literature, he has a right to his laurels, while, as the populariser of pictures he remains the Peter Parley of painting.” Ruskin lost in his fight against the rising tide of aestheticism. It would not be long before his influence was eclipsed by the assumption that aesthetics and morality were entirely separate worlds, that it was improper of him to “graft moral or religious issues upon aesthetic.”

The irony of the situation lies in the fact that Ruskin’s criticism would have been no more palatable to the generations before him than it was to those after. If the aesthetic movement claimed that art was disinterested, separate from life and politics, the tradition which preceded Ruskin had constructed an image of the nation and its people that was highly, if not consciously, political. In rejecting Claude and Poussin and embracing Turner,

14 Whistler owed about 260 pounds and Ruskin almost 400. The Fine Art Society raised a subscription to pay Ruskin’s debts, but Whistler’s only added to his impending bankruptcy. Merrill, 272-285.


or in damning the picturesque by describing the misery it depended upon, Ruskin exposed the social function of traditional aesthetics. The cataclysmic changes in Britain that Ruskin witnessed made the perpetuation of the earlier tradition seem immoral and the new aestheticism irresponsible. It is the purpose of this thesis to examine the tradition that preceded Ruskin, to trace his increasing discomfort with its tenets, and to describe his vision of the relation between art and life as it is seen in landscape.

Part of the appeal of Ruskin’s art criticism lies in the fact that we live in similar times and the social function of art is still at issue. Contemporary art seems to be emerging from, rather than going into, an era of disinterestedness but the legacy of aestheticism has been enduring. While there are exceptions, for almost a century after the Ruskin v. Whistler trial mainstream painters were preoccupied with “pure painting” dominated by concerns of arrangement, texture and gesture rather than social commentary. The canon of modernist painting has been constructed as an almost hermetic investigation of the intrinsic qualities of paint on the two dimensional surface. Until recently, overtly political art has either been marginalized, as with the Mexican mural tradition, or esteemed more for its formal innovations than for its political message, as with German expressionism.

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17 This is, of course, a broad generalization and recent scholarship has done much to place the rise of abstract art back in its socio-political context (see Serge Guilbault on Abstract-expressionism, Robert Hughes on Cubism, etc.) However, the criticism of the time confirms that contemporaries perceived the de-objectification of painting as an apolitical evolution (see Clive Bell, William Worringer, Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, etc.)
Whistler’s claim that art should be concerned “only with her own perfection”\textsuperscript{18} echoes clearly 75 years later in Clement Greenberg’s preoccupation with flatness:

Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to [painting] . . . . The enclosing shape of the support [the canvas] was a limiting condition, or norm, that was shared with the art of the theater; color was a norm or means shared with sculpture as well as with the theater. Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.\textsuperscript{19}

Some measure of the disengagement of Modernist art from social issues can be inferred from the use of the term ‘avant-garde’ itself: The word once denoted a commitment to the political left and a socialist agenda—most dramatically among the Russian constructivists—but by mid-century it seemed that avant-garde art was more committed to revolutions in the treatment of paint and canvas than in society.\textsuperscript{20} By Ruskin’s lights, the work of Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock would be as repugnant as Whistler’s.

It is fair to say, however, that art has emerged from the shadow of Modernism in the last two or three decades into an increasingly politicized arena.\textsuperscript{21} In 1964, Kenneth Clark

\textsuperscript{18}Whistler, 135.


\textsuperscript{21}One only need think of the work of John Berger, Janet Wolff, T.J. Clark, Thomas Crow, John Barrell, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Grizelda Pollock and Edward Said among many others.
regretted that "Ruskin’s moralistic theories of art are not Ruskin for today; but they may be Ruskin for tomorrow." Clark was overly optimistic; Ruskin’s theories are too much a part of their 19th century circumstances to completely suit modern needs, but the understanding of art as a moral and political agent is certainly a part of contemporary art making and viewing that Ruskin would have appreciated.

In fact, much of contemporary landscape practice is such a direct indictment of the traditional aesthetic that it helps clarify the underlying assumptions of that tradition and shows a definite Ruskinian consciousness. The British landscape artist Richard Long, for example, rejects the intervention of the artist in the representation of nature. Rather than physically shaping it like a modern Capability Brown, painting an image of it like a Constable or Wilson, or overlaying it with aesthetic assumptions like William Gilpin or Sir Joshua Reynolds, Long leaves no enduring trace of his presence. Often his works consist merely of some record, usually a map or photograph, of a walk he has performed. Their lack of physical presence does not mean the works are without significance, however. *Windmill Hill to Coalbrookdale* (1979), for example, was a 3 day, 113 mile walk which

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conceptually and historically linked Windmill Hill, the site where early Britons first left traces of their presence on the land, with Coalbrookdale, the birthplace of the industrial revolution. In a companion work, *Power Line Walk* (1980), his walk traced the historical progression from one of the first waterwheels that powered the nascent industrial revolution to its modern and apocalyptic incarnation, a nuclear power station. Long’s work reads as a modern politicized comment on the continuum of industrial development and on cultural institutions—insti tutions like Wordsworthian excursions among the lakes and Constable’s fond images of the picturesque water-mills along his native Stour. Although they work in very different ways, Ruskin and Long both use landscape as a language of protest. They also share a concern for the British landscape and a deep apprehension about the consequences of industrialization.

In Ruskin’s time, as now, land and landscape were sites of conflict, both physical and conceptual. Now the arena of contestation is the whole planet, but for Ruskin the landscape was Europe, and especially England. In 1851, almost the mid-point of *Modern Painters*, for the first time in history, more people lived in cities than in the country. This is a simple statistic, but one with enormous significance for the lives of people. The enclosure acts of the preceding hundred years had changed the face of the nation and the


\[26\] Before 1760 probably only about 1% of the English countryside, about 400,000 acres, had been affected, but in the following years between 1761 and 1844 there were 2,500 acts enclosing 4,000,000 acres of open arable fields. In addition, 750,000 acres of
rural poor had little choice but to search for work in London, or in emerging factory
towns like Manchester or Birmingham. Whatever pleasures they afforded the wealthy,
Victorian cities were grim places for the poor. There was no housing legislation;
overcrowding and lack of sanitation were an invitation to the typhus and cholera that
decimated the urban poor.27 There was no labour legislation; children eight or nine years
old commonly worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day in appalling conditions.28 Ruskin
was telling no more than the truth as he described the England around him.

Our cities are a wilderness of spinning wheels . . . yet the people have not clothes. We
have blackened every leaf of English greenwood with ashes, and the people die of cold;
our harbours are a forest of merchant ships, and the people die of hunger.29

This suffering was not invisible to Ruskin’s contemporaries. It is true that Frederich
Engels’ scathing indictment of The Condition of the Working Class in England was not
published in English until 1887, but his sources, the parliamentary reports and news
articles that described the plight of the poor in the early 1840’s, were available to all who

waste land were reclaimed between 1760 and 1801, and another 1,250,000 acres in the
19th century. In counties like Northamptonshire almost half the total land area fell under
the enclosures. W.G. Hoskins, The Making of the English Landscape (London: Hodder
and Stoughton, 1955), 143.


28 Engels, 170.

cared to read them. In fact, there seemed to be an almost morbid desire to record these social conditions in reports, official and otherwise\textsuperscript{30}. One of the most moving and credible accounts is Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851-62) which documents in great detail the myriad of new ways the poor found to eke out an existence in the great metropolis. The rat catchers, the sewer-hunters, even the crippled seller of nutmeg graters are interviewed and their income and their desperate living conditions carefully noted\textsuperscript{31}. For those who preferred novels to reports, books like Disraeli's *Sybil; or The Two Nations* (1845), Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), or Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853) would paint the same picture in broader strokes.

It is not surprising that Ruskin's work became increasingly polemical—all of these reports and novels were published within a dozen years of the first volume of *Modern


Painters. It is surprising, however, that this should be considered a flaw in his art criticism. Would it have been better if he had followed Walter Pater into the refuge of Renaissance aestheticism, despite what he saw of the ravages of industrialism? Should he have embraced Whistler’s doctrine of l’art pour l’art instead of denouncing a group of Bradford businessmen who wanted their exchange house done up in neo-gothic style, or lecturing a group of Manchester parvenues on “The Political Economy of Art”?32

That Ruskin should be accused of a ‘moral fallacy’—infusing natural phenomena with moral significance34—is a measure of the triumph of aestheticism and its pursuit of disinterested beauty. What Ruskin saw about him did have moral significance; the social and physical changes he witnessed were not neutral, but he did not attribute to them a moral sensibility which was all his own. In 1859 he described the outskirts of a mining town in northern England:

Just outside the town I came upon an old English cottage . . . left in unregarded havoc of ruin; the garden gate still swung loose on its latch; the garden, blighted utterly into a field of ashes, not even a weed taking root there; the roof torn into shapeless rents; the shutters hanging about the windows in rags of rotten wood; before its gate, the stream which had gladdened it now soaking slowly by, black as ebony and thick with curdling scum; the bank above it trodden into unctuous, sooty slime: far in front of it, between it and the old hills, the furnaces of the city foaming forth perpetual plague of sulphurous darkness; the volumes of their storm clouds coiling low over a waste of grassless fields,


33 This work was later renamed “‘A Joy Forever’; And Its Price in the Market” (lectures at Manchester, 1857), C & W 16: 5.

34 The term, of course, is analogous with the “pathetic fallacy” which Ruskin describes in Modern Painters III (1856), C & W 5: 200-218.
fenced from each other, not by hedges, but by slabs of square stone, like gravestones, riveted together by iron.\textsuperscript{35}

This is certainly a lament for the passing of a way of life, but it is Ruskin’s lament, not nature’s, couched in the language of landscape.

Ruskin kept returning throughout his career to this language of landscape for a number of reasons. First, he loved it so well. He was an acute observer and recorder of all nature, but was early attracted to landscape and it was there that his politics took shape. Second, the landscape conventions of Britain had become so ingrained in the national consciousness that, although he would later change the way landscape was to be read and understood, it was a means to comprehend and communicate a vision of the world. Finally, landscape was an effective vehicle for his ideas because the changes of the nineteenth century were nowhere etched more deeply and permanently, nor read more clearly, than in the land itself. For these same reasons this thesis will be limited primarily to the consideration of landscape: what it meant to viewers before Ruskin, why he became increasingly uncomfortable with the tradition, and how he forged a social conscience out of a political convenience.

\textsuperscript{35} Ruskin, “Modern Manufacture and Design” (1859), C & W 16: 338-339.
Chapter 2

"Italian Light on English walls"

— I admire
None more admires—the painter’s magic skill
Who shows me that which I shall never see,
Conveys a distant country into mine,
And throws Italian light on English walls.
Cowper, The Task, Bk. I, ll. 421-425. (1785)

To understand Ruskin’s critique of landscape aesthetics, one must understand the
tradition of English landscape which preceded him. Ruskin was born into this tradition and
his first book, The Poetry of Architecture (1837-38), reflects its powerful sway. It is only
in Modern Painters that the originality of Ruskin’s approach emerged. In that sprawling,
five-volume, seventeen-year project Ruskin mounted an iconoclastic assault on the
paragons of traditional landscape: Claude Lorrain, Salvator Rosa, Nicolo Poussin, and
Gaspar Dughet.¹ His criticism was harsh and unrelenting. Early in the first volume (1843),
while acknowledging Claude’s treatment of light, Ruskin found that his “false taste,
forced composition, and ignorant rendering of detail have perhaps been of more detriment

¹ There is sometimes confusion among eighteenth and nineteenth century writers
between Nicolas Poussin and Gaspard Dughet, also an esteemed landscape painter, who
adopted the surname of his more illustrious brother-in-law. Ruskin usually distinguishes
clearly between the two by including their first names. To avoid further confusion I have
followed Ruskin’s spelling for proper names in the text while in footnotes I follow modern
practice.
to art than the gift he gave was of advantage.”2 Salvator Rosa, he wrote, “has done nothing which others have not done better, or which it would not have been better not to have done.”3 Poussin’s landscape fared no better in Ruskin’s opinion: “In finish it is inferior to Leonardo’s, in invention to Giorgione’s, in truth to Titian’s, in grace to Raffaello’s.”4 Gaspar’s landscapes, finally, were “full of the most degraded mannerism”5 but then, what was one to expect of a man who was “base-born and thief-bred.”6 By the second volume he was able to include Carracci, Guido Reni, Guercino, Domenichino and Carravaggio, sparing only the sixteenth-century Renaissance great masters in his general condemnation.

What prompted such an antipathy to the tradition of landscape art that had dominated English taste for generations? Why did the British public so readily accept the critique of an anonymous twenty-four year old who attacked the ‘grand manner’ of the venerated works that lined the walls of the new National Gallery?7 It is true that the ‘ancient

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 186.
6 Ruskin, Modern Painters II (1846), C & W 4:201
7 There were some criticisms of the first volume of Modern Painters, especially in Blackwood’s and the Athenæum, but the book was generally well-received and went through three editions alone before the second volume was printed in 1846 (C & W, 3:xxv-xliv). The National Gallery first opened to the public in its present enlarged premises in 1838.
masters' were not as unassailable as they had been early in the century. Certainly, also, there was more than a little nationalism involved in replacing a decrepit pantheon of foreign painters with a generation of English artists whose work showed "the strong stamp of the native land." Beyond that, however, Ruskin's outrage with the 'old masters' was moral:

No moral end has been answered, no permanent good effected, by any of their works. They may have amused the intellect, or exercised the ingenuity, but they never have spoken to the heart. Landscape art has never taught us one deep or holy lesson; it has not recorded that which is fleeting, nor penetrated that which was hidden, nor interpreted that which was obscure; it has never made us feel the wonder, nor the power, nor the glory, of the universe; it has not prompted to devotion, not touched with awe; its power to move and exalt the heart has been fatally abused, and perished in the abusing.

He proposed, in effect, a whole new set of criteria for reading landscape over the course of writing *Modern Painters*. His critical position evolved over the seventeen years between the first and the last volume but remained consistently a rejection of the tradition which he charged with "not painting nature, but painting over her."
In fact, the significance of Ruskin’s critique only fully makes sense if one understands the tradition he rejects. Modern readers admittedly have difficulty with some aspects of Ruskinian aesthetics. His constant use of Wordsworth and Scott to illustrate aspects of painting, his tendency to see the world as God’s second book which is to be read as a series of moral emblems, even his belief that landscape itself should have a moral function—all these and more Ruskin inherited from the eighteenth century landscapists and theorists.

What, then, was that English tradition that Ruskin was born into? Whose interests did it serve? To establish which was the first landscape painting in Britain, or who the first landscape painter, is a thankless and perhaps a futile task. We know that in the seventeenth century Dutch painters found no scarcity of patrons among the English nobility who wanted themselves and their estates recorded for posterity,\(^\text{12}\) and long before that, illuminated manuscripts like the Luttrell Psalter reveal acute observation of the facts of rural life,\(^\text{13}\) but are these religious works really landscapes in the ordinary sense of the word? The same dilemma confronts attempts to trace early written descriptions of landscape. For example, *Cooper’s Hill* (first version 1642) by John Denham shows some sensitivity to the topography of the Thames valley despite its political agenda. On the


other hand, Milton's description of Eden, probably drafted about the same year, has more theodicy than geography in its "umbrageous grots and caves of cool recess" and groves "whose rich trees wept odorous gums and balm."\textsuperscript{14} Rather than asking \textit{when} landscape emerged and engaging in a genealogical search for lost ancestors, it might be more instructive to ask \textit{why} it did, and what it meant to those who saw it. To answer such questions it is helpful to choose a moment of change, a time of transition, which throws the previous tradition into relief at the same time it reveals a change in the function of landscape evidenced by a demand for new images. That moment, for our purposes, is a long one and is characterized by evolutionary rather than cataclysmic change. It is the period of time between 1640 and about 1740 during which the popularity and influence of Italian landscape increased enormously and the works of Claude, the Poussins and Salvator Rosa became synonymous with beauty for the next century, even determining to a great degree the way the English saw their own countryside. It was this tradition that proved an anathema to Ruskin, a "crying evil which called for instant remedy."\textsuperscript{15}

It is tempting and traditional to describe this growing British appetite for landscape painters of the Roman School as merely a change in 'taste' in an era preoccupied with taste, a product of the Grand Tour, or a companion to cultivated interest in the classical authors. These elements played a role, certainly, but taste is always an expression of a

\textsuperscript{14} Milton, \textit{Paradise Lost}, Bk. IV, ll. 257-8, 248.

culture; aesthetics are never disinterested. A taste for, say, Wedgwood china
bespeaks a cultural attitude toward the past—and thus the present—entirely different than
a preference for modernist Bauhaus tableware. To understand the ‘interests’ behind the
appreciation of Italian landscape it is necessary to understand how it was ‘read’, or
understood, by the public that saw it.

Part of what landscape signified in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century must
be gleaned by reading, in the literal as well as the figurative sense. This was a time when
painting and poetry were most considered the “sister arts”16 and few commentators could
resist some reference to their consanguinity in order to elevate one or the other sibling. It
was an oft repeated and variously attributed maxim that painting is mute poetry, poetry a
speaking picture.17 To call a painter a poet was to recognize greatness of mind, and to call
a poet a painter was to acknowledge great powers of description. The convergence of
these two arts had an especially profound effect on the formulation of landscape because
the traditions of each were used to validate the other. Central to this assumed familial
resemblance between poetry and art was the Horatian philosophy of ut pictura poesis, “as

16 Jean H. Hagstrum, The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and
Bulletin (March 1940), 22:197-269.

17 For example, Plutarch attributes it to Simonides in De gloria Athenienism III
346f-347c and Richardson attributes it to Annibale Caracci in “A Discourse on the
Dignity, Certainty, Pleasure, and Advantage of the Science of a Connoisseur,” The Works
of Jonathan Richardson (London, 1792), 179.
in painting, so in poetry.” The concept has its roots, of course, in the classical and Renaissance works which were familiar to any educated English gentleman and formed a shared body of aesthetic theory that determined how paintings and poetry were understood.

Aristotle and Horace would no doubt have been surprised by the extent to which their unassuming remarks about the similarities between the arts pervaded the discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Aristotle’s original comments were simply that poetry and painting were both imitative, and that there was a need for appropriate order in each art. As an example, he says that a tragedy with well delineated characters but no plot is like a painting “with the most beautiful colours laid on without order.” Rather than create confusion between the two media, he is careful to distinguish between the “colour and form” of painting and the “rhythm, language, and harmony” of poetry as different means of imitation. Horace’s insights also appear quite unremarkable on first reading. In one passage he grants painters and poets the same rights of imaginative fancy, so long as they respect nature and common sense. In the other passage where he treats the relationship between painting and poetry, and which contains the famous ut pictura poesis

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19 Ibid., 1461.
20 Ibid., 1455.
phrase, he claims only that some poetry, like some painting, has broader effect, and
some of it is more enduring:

Poems, like pictures, are of diff'ent sorts,
Some better at a distance, others near,
Some love the dark, some choose the clearest light,
And boldly challenge the most piercing eye,
Some please for once, some will forever please.22

This seems precious little to justify the power the concept came to wield in England but
during the Renaissance the insights of Horace and other classical authors were forged into
a doctrine of the sister arts. Lacking a coherent, authoritative treatise on visual art
equivalent to the *Ars Poetica* or the *Poetics*, and wishing to elevate painting to the same
status as a liberal art that poetry enjoyed, Renaissance critics and artists pressed the
ancients into service among their own ranks. In this conscription they appropriated not
only those elements which obviously applied to art, but much that did not. This is certainly
not the only time that literary theory has been imposed on art, and the parallels were
sometimes rather forced, as when Dryden insisted that lights and shadows of a painting are
like the tropes and figures of poetry.23 At its worst, as Gotthold Lessing complained in
1766, in poetry it "engendered a mania for description and in painting a mania for

22 Ibid., 143, ll. 403-407.

23 John Dryden, "De Arte Graphica," *The Works of John Dryden* (Berkeley:
allegory." More often, however, it seems that the sister arts came to share a common vocabulary and, it was assumed, a common goal. Painting adopted a strong literary tradition and literature inherited a unique pictorialism. The depiction of landscape was especially shaped by this collaboration; no picture was without a literary resonance and no poem without a certain pictorial quality.

The emblem was one early and influential manifestation of the collaboration between the sister arts of poetry and painting that had an enduring effect on both. Viewers and readers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not prepared for looking at landscape by a long scientific tradition as we are, nor even by the enthusiastic scientism of Ruskin’s time, nor were their visions then shaped by seeing large numbers of actual or engraved paintings. They were familiar, however, with the mutually enhancing use of image and text and the activity of reading an image. Many of their familiar images were emblematic rather than empirical; they were read as “moral, literary and philosophical texts” rather than as factual records of a visual world. In its usual form an emblem comprised a motto, often extracted from a scriptural or classical source, a printed image, and a commentary which explained to readers the details of both text and image (fig. 1). Perhaps derived from earlier religious imagery like the labours of the months or depictions

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of virtues and vices, the first printed collection of emblems was Alciati’s
_Eemblematum liber_, published in 1531. The earliest English emblem book was Geffrey
Whitney’s _A Choice of Emblemes_ in 1586.26

Inevitably didactic and moralizing, emblem books were immensely popular in
seventeenth century England; the most famous was _Quarle’s Emblems_ (1635)27 with its
charming cupids demonstrating the range of follies—pride, lack of vigilance, and so on—
that flesh is heir to. In a way that most later moral guides are not, emblems were a “mode
of thought”28 of the time and were encountered not just in books but “etched on to glass,
embroidered on to cushions and bed valences, and woven into table carpets and tapestry
wall hangings. The public was further made aware of emblems by the preacher in his
sermon and the parables of the Bible. They saw and heard emblems on the stage, in
pageants, entries, and street processions.”29 It is probably no exaggeration to say that
emblems were “as immediately and graphically present in this period as illustrated
advertising is today.”30

26 Geffrey Whitney, _A Choice of Emblemes_, intro. John Manning (Aldershot:


28 Peter M. Daly, “The Cultural Context of English Emblem Books,” _The English

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.
The role of emblems in literature—Spenser’s poetry or the collaborative masques of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones—is well known, but the role they played in politics has been considered only slightly, and the function of landscape in those politics not at all. That emblems were potential political tools is obvious from the emblematic nature of heraldic devices, but they could be used effectively as a form of propaganda as well. For example, Geffrey Whitney gave a manuscript version of his *Choice of Emblemes* to his patron, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, ten days before Leicester took command of the Protestant English forces against the occupying Spanish in the Low Countries. When the book was revised and published the next year in Leyden the volume itself was dedicated to Leicester, and many of the individual plates were dedicated to members of Leicester’s retinue and to notables at home. The illustrated virtues were associated with the individuals to whom they were dedicated and together they created a composite emblem of the nation:

Whitney’s praise for English martial heroes, explorers, scholars, clergy, judges, landowners, wives, creates an impression of an exemplary society, thoroughly admirable in all its achievements, whether military, moral, cultural, or religious. Whitney sets up before the envious gaze of Europe the image of an England flourishing in peace and prosperity under the auspices of a righteous and merciful sovereign.


32 John Manning, introduction to Whitney, 5-6.
Thus this emblem book was part of a propaganda campaign to make an invasion of Holland more acceptable among the well-read both at home and abroad.

In addition to the political role they may have at a given time, emblems presume a way of reading visual information, a form of literacy that incorporated allegory and metaphor. From a modern point of view one of the most foreign and intriguing aspects of emblems is the manner in which allegorical meaning completely dominated narrative. A winged tongue in flight above the countryside (fig. 2), despite its strongly surreal effect, gives readers the practical advice that they should curb their own tongues, be “slow to Speake, and swift to Heare.”³³ Similarly, what seem to be very ordinary scenes bear significance beyond their appearance. A bird nesting in a tree is an image of proper love for one’s children (Amor in filios) and a reminder of the crimes of Medea and Procne.³⁴ In some cases the emblems were published without verses but it is striking for the modern viewer that, with or without text, images had to be “read” for their full meaning.

This particular collaboration of the sister arts in emblems had a powerful impact on the understanding of landscape. Because emblems are so allegorical there is no necessity for landscape as a credible setting, so what landscape there is is there for a purpose. The plowman (fig. 3), for example, knows that he must prepare the soil well before he will see

³⁴ Whitney, 29.
a fruitful crop. So it is with human nature; it too is a "cloddie field" which must be plowed and harrowed by affliction and adversity before it will bear the fruit of God's intention. Other images of landscape are more significant in the formation of social attitudes. That one should be satisfied with one's station in life is an oft-repeated theme which Wither conveys with a village landscape (Fig. 4):

Here, in a homely Cottage, thatch't with reed,
The Peasant seemes as pleasedly to feed,
As hee, that in his Hall or Parlour dines,
Which Fret-worke Roofes, or costly Cedar Lines

The facing page reiterates the propriety of this social hierarchy in a landscape, this time at the top:

*The King, his pow'r from God receives;*
*For, hee [God] alone the Scepter gives.*

Kings rule by God's will and if God has ordained the social and natural order then all His creatures should be satisfied with their place in the hierarchy and in the natural landscape.

The morality in these little landscapes is very evident in figure 5. The motto is devout enough:

*When prosperous our Affaires doe growe;*
*God's Grace it is, that makes them so.*

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35 Wither, 144.
36 Ibid., 222.
37 Ibid., 223.
38 Ibid., 140.
The verses below repeat the gist of the motto that without God's grace all
endeavour may be in vain, but the image reveals more. In the background just left of the
flower benefitting from the divine rays is a palatial building complete with colonnaded
parterre. It would seem that the affairs of the wealthy benefit from divine grace as much as
those of the gardener. The corollary is also true: if grace is needed for our affairs to
prosper, that they do prosper is evidence of God's grace. The mansion itself is evidence of
the grace of God. Curiously, the facing page provides some reassurance against the
potential fickleness of grace. The image is of a classically-dressed, buskinned woman
industriously digging over the field—is she the careful gardener described in figure 5?—
and, while there is no guarantee of grace in return for hard work,

\textit{If thou thy Duties truely doe,}
\textit{Of thy Reward, be hopefull too.}\textsuperscript{39}

Tending the soil, literally and metaphorically, is depicted as a divine duty that will probably
lead to prosperity and thus the orderly landscape of the country estate is an image of
human endeavours blessed by grace.

There are many more emblems that use landscape to convey a moral message but
perhaps we can conclude with two which demonstrate attitudes toward posterity and the
importance of fealty, attitudes that will be present in later landscape. In the former (Fig. 6)
a man is planting a tree by his cottage in the foreground while two distant figures tend
what looks like an enclosed garden near a villa. The motto declares,

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 141.
He that delights to Plant and Set,
Makes After-Ages in his Debt.\textsuperscript{40}

There are two lessons to be learned from the image and the verses below it. First, readers should know that "Planting is a Debt, they truely owe./ And ought to pay to their Posterity."\textsuperscript{41} This is to be taken both literally and metaphorically. Wither starts this verse lamenting the "Havocke and the Spoyle"\textsuperscript{42} that he sees in every quarter of Britain once so famous for its "Woods and Groves"\textsuperscript{43} and proposes a literal reforestation of the kingdom. Metaphorically, as we see in other emblems, the tree represents the "affaires" one starts but which will only bear fruit for one's heirs. Property, as it is seen here, is something that must be tended and invested in and handed on to succeeding generations. By extension, the whole nation is seen as such property and tending it and handing it on the duty of every Englishman. The second and related lesson to be learned is that poor and rich alike must plant. The peasant in the foreground planting the tree outside his humble cottage is paying the same debt to posterity as is the rich man arranging his garden. The heirs of each will be better for the investment, but not to the same degree, of course. The image is one of social homogeneity and harmony, despite diversity of circumstances.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 35
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
According to the emblem at least, the poor man is reconciled to his condition: "If, After-Ages may my Labours besse; I care not, much, how Little I possesse."\textsuperscript{44}

The final emblem we will consider portrays fealty for the king as part of the natural order (Fig. 7). The image itself is a remarkable one. The king and his retinue emerge from the gate of a large country estate and the sun, which we have seen before as an emblem of divine grace, shines on the carefully rendered flowers in the foreground. The ostensible message is quite clear and more than a little self-serving. All favour flows from the king, just as all grace is from God, and men looking for political favour are as flowers that turn to the sun for warmth. Just in case the point is lost on his influential readers, or not specific enough that they can think of an appropriate object for their benevolence, Wither includes a pun on his own name in his final plea: "Vouchsafe to shine on Mee, my Gracious King, And then my Wither'd Leaves, will freshly spring."\textsuperscript{45} Beyond the author's obvious ambitions, though, there is a more general message. All wealth and power stem from the king, who nourishes the nation just as the sun nurtures the garden; both are natural phenomena. Moreover, the landscape with its country estate and the acutely observed erythronium lilies, crocuses and hyperextended tulips is seen as an image of the "rightness" of a political and social structure.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 159.
I have extended this discussion of emblems because I am not aware that their political function or the role which landscape plays in them has been examined before and because I think the emblematic consciousness that is so clear in these images is a constant presence in English literature and art. Over time many of the specific images from the emblem books were lost, but the consciousness remained. Wordsworth’s leech gatherer, for example, would be quite at home in the earlier books as an emblem of patient perseverance in “life’s pilgrimage”46 with the poem as an extended gloss. Turner often provided his own text for his prophetic paintings, and Ruskin saw in the “slender, pensive, fragile flower” bravely breaking through the Spring alpine snows “an image of moral purpose and achievement.”47 Constable’s bucolic imagery serves as a more general emblem of rural felicity. Closer in time to the emblem books and celebrating many of the same values are poems like “To Penshurst,” a paean to the country seat of the Sidney family. The house itself is apostrophized as the emblem of the hospitality the family extends equally toward both king and beggar. Groves of oak about the great house retain ancient names or have been planted in honour of family births, almost as if the Sidneys, or Jonson, had taken to heart Wither’s emblem about planting for posterity (fig. 6). Further, the reader is reassured that the walls of Penshurst were “reared with no man’s ruin, no man’s groan,”48 a statement that would be unremarkable save for the fact that if Jonson

46 Wordsworth, “Resolution and Independence,” l. 67.
47 Ruskin, Modern Painters II (1846), C & W 4:147.
48 Jonson, “To Penshurst,” l. 46.
felt it necessary to give such a reassurance it is clear that there were many houses built at the cost of much human misery.\textsuperscript{49}

It is this kind of contradiction between representation and reality, as we shall see, that forces a crisis for John Ruskin. The emblems tell of social harmony and public virtue; the social realities tell a very different story. Even in early emblems landscape idealizes relations of power and ownership and edits out undesirable social realities in order to convey an image of cultural harmony and stability sanctioned by God. The tradition is able to assimilate anomalies, and it is in the interest of the landowning classes to do so until the discrepancy between the real and the imaged world becomes too great, as it did during the industrialization of the nineteenth century. The longevity and tenacity of traditional landscape aesthetics is a measure of its ability to assimilate, and thereby negate, contradictions.

As one might expect, the era in which landscape painting arose in England was one of great transition; not since the Norman conquest had there been such a redistribution of lands as happened in the century between 1530 and 1630.\textsuperscript{50} Who held the land, what they did with it, and how it was transferred all changed dramatically. The most important of

\textsuperscript{49} James Turner describes the discrepancy between the poetic ideal and the political reality in the writing of Katherine Philips which excises all reference to the plunder and the judicious marriage by which her husband acquired his fortune. James Turner, \textit{The Politics of Landscape: Rural Scenery and Society in English Poetry 1630-1660} (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 1-4.

\textsuperscript{50} John Martin Robinson, \textit{The English Country Estate} (London: Century in Association with the National Trust, 1988), 42.
these changes occurred with the dissolution of the monasteries. The Acts of Dissolution of the 1530’s transferred as much as a quarter of the total area of England into private hands.\textsuperscript{51} There is no question that much of this land was swallowed up by the great landowners, but much of it also went to augment lesser holdings and establishing new country seats for the increasing numbers of gentry. It is interesting to note that, while the holdings of the great landowners’ share of Britain has remained quite constant at about 25 percent since the fourteenth century, the proportion owned by the gentry increased from about 25 percent in the fourteenth century to 40 percent in the nineteenth.\textsuperscript{52} Many of these new landowners purchased their estates with the profits from the new “manufacturies” in the new urban centres. It is significant that these new, or enriched, landowners chose to perpetuate the ecclesiastical origins of their new estates by retaining names like Woburn Abbey, Fountains Abbey and, of course, Austen’s Northanger Abbey. In doing so owners created the illusion of legitimacy and continuity with their ecclesiastical forebears when, in fact, the estate was created by ruthless political expropriation of church property. By retaining traditional names and embracing traditional landscape aesthetics these new landowners elided conventional class and economic distinctions and created a sense of social hegemony.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
What landowners did with their estates, whether new or old, also changed. The complex manorial rights of demesne, franchises, long term copyholds and so on gave way in a time of rising prices to more profitable short-term leases that could respond to changing economic conditions. In addition to these new efficiencies, many landowners became entrepreneurs. For example, the growth of London made the development of adjacent land lucrative. Covent Garden, originally the kitchen garden to Westminster Abbey when it was granted to the 1st Earl of Bedford in 1553, was transformed into elegant and expensive terraced lease housing by the 4th Earl. More rural estates turned to industry or agriculture for development. Rievaulx, another formerly monastic property, led the iron smelting industry, and, to the south, the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury developed a local knife-making trade into an industry that made Sheffield famous for three centuries. Where no industry was possible, better use of the land was achieved through enclosure and reclamation. Although not nearly as extensive as the enclosures of the eighteenth century, which would alter the countryside still further, the new system of leases which permitted encroachment on the commons and the reclamation of marginal lands added significantly to the wealth of many estates. Most were more modest enterprises than that of Lord Russell who hired Dutch engineers to drain the swampy areas of his estate bordering on the Fens. The project took three generations, but eventually created 55,000

\[53 \text{ Ibid., 56.}\]

\[54 \text{ Ibid., 57.}\]
acres of some of the most fertile land in the country.\textsuperscript{55} These are remarkable examples of entrepreneurship, certainly, but they are also a good indication of the new attitudes among landowners. The tranquil rural landscape paintings which adorned the country houses of these landed entrepreneurs belied the business of improvement and portrayed instead a timeless vision of the natural estate.

Even the way land was transferred from one generation to another changed in the mid-seventeenth century with the new legal practice called “strict settlement.” Before this time land was commonly transferred to the next generation by marriage settlement: the couple would agree to bequeath the estate to their children, usually the first-born male, while retaining some property for the wife should she live longer than her husband. These agreements were able to provide for the widow, but the common law courts refused to curtail the activities of the present occupier of the estate in the interests of the next generation. That is to say, there would be no recourse for the heir who found that his predecessor had sold all the lumber and encumbered the estate with gambling debts. The solution was elegant. Instead of becoming outright owner, the heir became tenant-for-life and the estate proper was held by trustees who ensured that it remained intact for the next generation. The agreement would need to be renewed each generation, but “it offered long-term protection for the practice of primogeniture and the smooth descent of an estate in the male line, by subjugating individual personal interests to family continuity.”\textsuperscript{56} In

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 61-62.
terms of estate building it meant two things: a given landowner could not deplete the estate to the detriment of his successors, and building and improving an estate was an undertaking that could, and often did, take generations. The legal arrangement fostered a sense of posterity, a pride in the knowledge that one’s descendants would own that land for centuries, would walk among the great oak forests and reap the grain on fields reclaimed by their ancestors.

These were the patrons of landscape. They were the landed class in a time of change in the economics of land use and, at the same time, they had an eye to the longevity of their occupation of the land. As we turn to consider the landscape paintings with this background we should not pretend that there were no setbacks to the progress of the estate. There were violent demonstrations against “rack-renting” and unrest among those who had been disenfranchised through loss of their commons rights or tenure. Sometimes affected parties, like the fishermen and fowlers of the Fens, physically hindered the “improvements” that took away their livelihoods, but these forms of dissent tended to be sporadic and localized, especially when compared to the largely urban Chartist movement. On the national level, the Civil War took its toll in expenses even for those who were not, in the final analysis, on the wrong side. However, none of these concerns were enough to seriously impede the growth and consolidation of the estate, and there is certainly no sign of such casualties in the paintings and poetry of the time. Nor should this surprise us, of course, for the poets and painters created images in praise of their patrons and their
property, images which told of the propriety—a word that comes from the same root as
property—of ownership.

Despite setbacks, the rise of the estate contributed to the creation of a comparatively
homogeneous class of landowners which, however much their individual fortunes may
have varied, considered land, its improvement, and its continuity by bequeathal to be of
paramount importance. This attitude is seen very clearly in the British tradition that only
those who owned land could sit in parliament, a principle clearly demonstrated in the
tenacity of the law in former British colonies which stipulated that only property owners
should be eligible to vote at all. It was assumed that those who earned a living in trade or
the ‘mechanical arts’ would pursue their own narrow, occupational interests, whereas
those who owned land—land which would endure into the future the way no amount of
capital or movable property could—would act in the public and permanent interests of the
country. Thus the private interests of landowners were perceived as public interests. Thus,
also, land was power and images of land were expressions of power, and how the land
was envisioned in landscape revealed much about the nature of that power.

In light of this, it is hardly surprising that early landscape painting consists almost
entirely of depictions of country estates where the relationship between property and
ownership is inescapable. The works were commissioned by the owners of the land and
executed by Dutch, or Dutch-inspired, artists, often in a “bird’s-eye view” which
emphasizes the perspective of the buildings and terrain (fig. 8). There is a strong symbolic,
or emblematic, quality in such paintings although they look so literal. The manor is central
and well-tended gardens, orchards and fields surround it. The orderliness of the gardens fades to forest at the edges of the estate and the canvas, demonstrating that pastoral productivity is a part both of ownership and the natural order. A motto and a verse would make the emblem complete. Perhaps more significant even than any of the actual things portrayed in such pictures is the manner in which they are depicted. The expansive perspective of such pictures gives a "commanding view," or prospect, of what appears to be unlimited property on all sides about the great house. This aerial vision was new to England, but the calculations necessary to create perspective in painting were the same as those essential to the surveying and mapping that was changing, and creating, the face of England. It is significant that in painting such a scene the painter imposes the same mathematical order on the canvas that the surveyor at the behest of the landowner imposed on nature itself; both signify ownership. The techniques for both developed in Italy during the renaissance and reflected a political control which the cities came to exercise over the surrounding countryside.

In England by the late sixteenth century an increasing number of professional surveyors were equally engaged in estate plans and topographical surveys of wider areas. These estate plans were a supplement to the traditional written description in a terrier and

57 O.E.D. definition of prospect

once again reinforce the practice of visual and verbal description of landscape in England.\textsuperscript{59} The more general topographical surveys undertaken by men like Christopher Saxton and John Norden resulted in the county maps of the 1570's. These maps were accurate topographical records of the counties of England bound together with a smaller scale map of the whole country as a frontispiece. They were the first images of England as a physical entity and contributed as much to a national pride as they did more obviously to Tudor central control. Later versions of county maps included "sketches of towns and cities, brief historical notes . . . [and] portraits and arms of the leading local families of each county."\textsuperscript{60} It is easy to see that such maps and their close relation to estate plans and early country house portraits would engender both nationalist and regionalist loyalties. A given estate was part of the counterpane of counties in Britain, it is true, but in a period when "men were of a place as of a time"\textsuperscript{61} these images of the county were like an extended estate, a domain where influence and loyalties had been established over generations.

It was the owners of these estates who began to buy Italian landscapes by Claude Lorraine, Salvator Rosa and the Poussins around 1650 and in increasing numbers through

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\textsuperscript{59}For a discussion of the same process in a different context see Ann Roberts, "The Landscape as Legal Document: Jan de Hervy's 'View of the Zwin'," \textit{Burlington Magazine} (February 1991), 133:82-86.
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\textsuperscript{61}Ibid., 148.
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the eighteenth century, in addition to maps and surveys. Italian landscapes seemed irresistible. One of the great attractions of landscape painting lay not in what it was, but in what it was not. Above all, it was not history painting, which stood at the apex of the hierarchy of genres that the eighteenth century had adopted along with the idea of *ut pictura poesis*. As Jonathan Richardson said, echoing Aristotle, in his influential essay addressed to the would-be connoisseur (1719),

A history is preferable to a landscape, sea-piece, animals, fruit, flowers, or any other still-life, pieces of drollery, &c. the reason is, the latter kinds may please . . . but they cannot improve the mind, they excite no noble sentiments.63

This, of course, was Ruskin’s later complaint: “landscapes are all descriptive, not reflective, agreeable and conversational, but not impressive nor didactic.”64 However, rather than acting as an obstacle to its acceptance among landed patrons, the lower status of landscape as a genre allowed a certain freedom of treatment that was unavailable in the historical grand tableaux. A history painting about the Continence of Scipio, or some such popular theme, was an obvious call to political virtue where a landscape conveyed its


message much more subtly. However, some landscapes, especially those of Claude and Poussin, could overcome their provenance because they had such strong classical themes\(^{65}\) that they could be considered hybrid and had some claim "to instruct and improve our minds, and to excite proper sentiments and reflections."\(^{66}\) The mixed nature of these Roman landscapes may have made them more readily accepted by the English steeped in the idea that, despite the relatively humble status of the genre, it was the duty of poetry and art generally, as Sir Philip Sidney put it, "to teach and delight."\(^{67}\) Still, landscape was a much more flexible and sympathetic vehicle for ideology because in it the obligation to instruct was less, and the expectation of delight greater.\(^{68}\) This did not mean that landscape conveyed less to its viewers, but that it did so in a less palpably didactic fashion.

*Ut pictura poesis* also dictated that the artist should idealize the subject, whether in a history painting or a still life. The artist "must raise his ideas beyond what he sees, and form a model of perfection in his own mind which is not to be found in reality."\(^{69}\)

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\(^{65}\) Paintings like Poussin’s “Landscape with the Body of Phocion Being Carried Out of Athens” or Claude’s “The Landing of Cleopatra at Tarsus” reveal their classicism more in their titles than in their appearance, where landscape overpowers history.


\(^{68}\) That painting should both teach and delight is, of course, a legacy of *ut pictura poesis*. Aristotle says it is true of all forms of imitation (Poetics 4:3) and it becomes a basic assumption for almost all later critics.

\(^{69}\) Richardson, “The Theory of Painting,” 73.
acknowledged that the Dutch could copy nature as well or better than the Italians, but that wasn’t enough any more for the eighteenth-century patron.

There is some degree of merit in a picture where nature is exactly copied, though in a low subject . . . . Herein the Dutch or Flemish masters have been equal to the Italians, if not superior to them in general. What gives the Italians and their masters the ancients the preference, is, they have not servilely followed common nature but raised, and improved, or at least have always made the best choice of it. This gives a dignity to a low subject, and is the reason of the esteem we have for the landscapes of Salvator Rosa, Filippo Laura, Claude Lorrain, the Poussins.70

The Dutch artists, it would seem, were too literal for the emerging taste. What they had formerly mapped now had to be transformed into a version of the Roman campagna.71

These two tenets of *ut pictura poesis*, the comparatively modest status of landscape and yet the need to idealize it, made the Italian pictures particularly attractive. They were inspired by nature, but nature beatified by the brush. In addition, the tradition of emblems brought to the reading of these new landscapes an allegorical dimension that would not have been lost on the contemporary viewer. Although it is seldom spoken of in their enthusiasm for “la belle nature,” Italian landscape brought with it a whole new set of emblematic readings, a new iconography that described the landscape in a new way.

The mode of thinking that “reads” landscape as a philosophical or moral entity rather than a natural one was pervasive and persuasive. As simple a thing as aerial perspective could be understood as a moral construct. The bird’s-eye view of the Dutch estate painter

70 Ibid., 72.

was related to map making, and thus to a topographical description, but by 1714 the broad
‘prospect’ had wider implications, as Addison points out in *The Spectator*:

> The Mind of Man naturally hates everything that looks like Restraint upon it, and is apt
to fancy it self under a sort of Confinement, . . . On the contrary, a spacious Horison
[sic] is an Image of Liberty, where the Eye has Room to range abroad, to expatiate at
large in the Immensity of its Views, and to lose it self amidst the Variety of Objects that
offer themselves to its Observation.\(^72\)

Addison seems to have had Claude in mind as he wrote, but what he said was held to be
equally true of gardens where a gentleman might imbue his property with the aesthetics of
painting, and demonstrate his appreciation of liberty, by making “a pretty landskip of his
own Possessions”\(^73\) with prospects as capacious as Claude’s.

The analogy between painterly and political vision went further still. A taste for certain
qualities in landscape became a measure of one’s ability to participate in politics. As we
have seen, those who owned land were deemed to speak for the public and national cause
because they were less swayed by the self interest that drove merchants or ‘mechanics’.
Similarly, among those landowners a taste for panoramic and ideal landscape showed an
proclivity to think in general or abstract terms. The Claudian vista was the image of this
political vision; the occluded Dutch domestic scene filled with the minutiae of life was its
antithesis. In the latter, one saw only the private, the material, the confined. In the
panoramic view lay the “notion of a wider society, and the notion of the ability to grasp

\(^72\) Addison, *Spectator*, No. 412.

\(^73\) Ibid., No. 411.
objects in the form of their relations to each other."\textsuperscript{74} These were the qualities a politician should demonstrate. In the Claudia landscape there was a \textit{concordia discours}, a harmony of diverse elements. In rolling hills and carefully balanced but varied groves, consisting of idealized trees of no particular species, the privileged viewer saw beyond the individual to the relation of individuals to a greater whole. In the same way, his disinterested eye would see beyond individual economic and political interests to the right social ‘composition’ for the country. Lesser men demonstrated their lack of such vision, and the justness of their exclusion from power, by their taste for commonplace realism in painting, the ‘vulgar’ in the original sense of the word.

Beyond the significance of technical considerations like perspective, Italian landscape supplied the British gentry with a symbolic heritage and a moral lesson. The preceding Dutch topographical estate pictures had portrayed the newly apportioned and surveyed land, but their accuracy brought little to the experience of seeing those landscapes but the knowledge of ownership. Italian landscape, in contrast, placed that ownership in a pastoral tradition that extended back to Theocritus and Virgil. If Claude, Poussin and Rosa supplied the images of these emblems, pastoral poetry, old and new, provided the text. Thus Horace’s Epode “In Praise of Country Life,” which a reader might chance upon

while consulting the *Ars Poetica*, matches the bucolic ethos of such paintings as Claude’s “Landscape: The Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca”:

Happy the man, who far from town’s affairs,  
The life of old-world mortals shares;  
With his own oxen tills his forebears’ fields,  
Nor thinks of usury and its yields. (ll. 1-4)

By claiming Italy’s past as Britain’s own and adopting pastoral values, at least in art and poetry, English landowners claimed a legitimacy that only the classical world could confer.  

It was, at the same time, a moral legitimacy. England was considered heir of all that was best in antiquity and it was supposed that paintings were only following a migration pattern set by earlier arts. For the poet Collins, Liberty had migrated from Greece, through Italy and Switzerland to land at last to “Britain’s ravag’d shore.” The muses of poetry, according to Thomas Gray, made the same voyage and “When Latium had her lofty spirit lost, / They sought, oh Albion! next thy sea-encircled coast.” The ruins and ancient buildings that litter the Roman landscape inevitably made the viewer ponder the passing of life and the vanity of greatness: *sic transit gloria mundi*. The ruins emphasized that great empires had existed and now did not, but more than that, their ruins were a reminder that

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they had fallen. Britain, it was emphasized, must not fall to the same forces of
decadence as had Rome:

    Time, capricious parent, gives to all  
    Their Morning and their Eve; and having shewn  
    Mankind, some prosper'd Child, mark'd it for Fame,  
    And raised it to its Noon-tide Hour, delights  
    To pluck its Honours off, and sink it down,  
    To teach an awful Moral in the dust!78

The safeguard against time's ravages is virtue; the virtue which had graced the early days
of Greece and Rome was the way to greatness for Britain. Jonathan Richardson was
confident in the country's pre-eminence and potential to be the next centre of painting, but
only if it maintained its moral stature.

    . . . If ever the ancient great, and beautiful taste in Painting revives it will be in England:
    but not till English painters, conscious of the dignity of their country, and of their
    profession, resolve to do honour to both by piety, virtue, magnanimity, benevolence,
    and industry.79

    It is not difficult in retrospect to see why Italian landscape painting so suited the
needs of the British gentry. These images placed them securely in an historical tradition at
a time when relations of property and the activities that took place on the estates were
changing. Italianate painting gave the concept of the sister arts new relevance as it invoked
the great literary past in the cause of the present. And finally, it could be read as a system

of complex moral emblems; it was able to cast a moral hue on the tints of nature and edify as well as enchant its viewers.

It is equally evident how much this tradition of landscape shaped the thinking of John Ruskin. He shared the belief in the sister arts; he used, he said, the words painter and poet “quite indifferently” for there was a “landscape of literature, as well as that of painting.”

Wordsworth and Scott were the word painters he most admired in his own time and he used them constantly to illustrate points about landscape painting, but he also had no difficulty discussing the classical landscapes of Homer or Dante as if they were canvases. Ruskin, like those before him, had come to despise the prosaic realism of the Dutch school, the “various Van somethings and Back somethings, more especially and malignantly those who have slandered the sea.”

He too assumed that landscape was a shared language that could be read by viewers and readers alike. Finally, and most significantly, he shared with his predecessors a sense of the didactic function of art. However, Ruskin came to very different conclusions about the lessons to be learned from landscape.

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Chapter 3

Ruskin and the Picturesque

The British adoption of Italian landscape and the way in which it served the purposes of private land ownership described in the last chapter is a remarkable historical phenomenon. More remarkable than that, however, is the manner in which the landscape aesthetics which manifestly serve the interests of the few came to be embraced by almost all Britons. It is only in Britain that the propertied elite was able to convince the larger public that the great private estates and art collections were in some way theirs too.1 Ironically, these private acquisitions were, and still are, considered a great national heritage which belongs to every Briton, rather an inventory of the possessions of the class which accumulated and enjoyed such wealth. To attribute this political consensus to the absence of an English revolution like the French or Russian is to beg the question. It is probably more accurate to attribute the lack of revolutionary consciousness in eighteenth-century Britain to the success of the privileged elite in aligning their class interests with

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1 The tradition in other countries is quite different. For an intriguing look at landscape consciousness in France see Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).
perceived national aspirations and identity.² In fact, those class interests shaped, to a great degree, the cultural image and identity of Britain and landscape played a central role in that process.

Land was power and, as we have seen in the last chapter, the Italianate tradition served to legitimate ownership. It is not surprising that the landed classes should see themselves and their estates reflected in the wide prospects of Claude or Poussin, or that they should emulate those canvases as they “improved” their grounds. It is almost incredible, however, that such a vision of landscape should be shared by any wider segment of society. Why should a Manchester shopkeeper revere Gaspar Poussin’s landscapes which, to a modern viewer, would seem to be a pointed reminder of his inability to possess either the picture or the land it portrayed? The education of the wealthy perpetuated a taste for foreign painting and classical learning, but what could engender the same taste in the larger population? No National Gallery existed before 1824³ and no British Museum Library before 1759, and then access was severely limited. As a rule Claude, Poussin and Salvator hung in the halls of the same great houses where Virgil, Theocritus and Horace lined the walls of the study. There was, however, a way that


³A National Gallery was first proposed in the late eighteenth century after Sir Robert Walpole’s collection was sold to Catherine of Russia. Support for the gallery came from artists and the Royal Academy rather than from the landed gentry, many of whom had their own extensive collections. Appropriately, Walpole’s collection is described by William Gilpin on one of his tours, and discussed below in chapter 5.
the aesthetics of landscape reached a wider audience. If the private libraries and collections were the academy of the elite, the less privileged attended the school of the picturesque. There they too learned to appreciate nature "by the rules of painting."  

Certainly the taste for the picturesque began among the more cultivated, like the poet Thomas Gray or the eloquent Dr. Brown, both of whom wrote elegant descriptions in letters, but it was not long before thousands of domestic tourists undertook the pilgrimage to the picturesque sites of Britain. There they dutifully assumed the recommended "station" mentioned in popular guide books, and confidently analyzed and evaluated the scene before them in terms of foreground, texture, and overall composition. Catherine Morland's walk with the Tilneys in *Northanger Abbey* (1818) is typical, despite Austen's tone of gentle mockery. Catherine's companions survey the countryside "with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures". She was so apt a student of Henry Tilney's discourse on "foregrounds, distances, and second distances - side-screens and perspectives - lights and shades" that, before their walk was over, she "voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape."  

It was not, of course, a conscious conspiracy on the part of the landed classes to inculcate and disseminate an ideology of landscape that legitimated their power and place

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4 William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On sketching Landscape* (London: R. Blamire, 1792), 42.

in society. The picturesque also suited the needs of the growing middle class which consumed it. It provided the first populist secular aesthetic response to nature; a landscape could be appreciated without reference to God or arability. It also constructed an image of the nation blessed by the deities of antiquity and nature and allowed Britons to “discover” their own country for the first time. Finally, and most significantly, the picturesque did for the middle class much what it did for the upper: it painted economic change and social conflict out of the landscape of Britain.

It comes as no surprise that Ruskin eventually rejected the picturesque, associated as it was with the Claudian ideal that he so vociferously decries in Modern Painters, but the strategies he used to distance himself are revealing. In the early volumes of Modern Painters he sought to replace picturesque custom with phenomenological “truth” in landscape: “the evil [of false art] lies . . . deep seated in the system of ancient landscape art; it consists, in a word, in the painter’s taking upon him to modify God’s works at his pleasure, casting the shadow of himself on all he sees.”

Later he created a distinction between “high” picturesque, which Turner practiced, and “low” or “surface picturesque”. In the former the painter “has communion of heart with his subject”, in the latter he “only casts his eye upon it feelinglessly.” The ideal of the “low” picturesque, the picturesque

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7 Ruskin, Modern Painters IV (1856), C & W 6: 19.
that enticed his contemporaries to tour the distant reaches of the realm, is, Ruskin says, eminently a heartless one:

the lover of it seems to go forth into the world in a temper as merciless as its rocks. All other men feel some regret at the sight of disorder and ruin. He alone delights in both; it matters not of what. Fallen cottage—desolate villa—deserted village—blasted heath—mouldering castle—to him so that they do but show jagged angles of stone and timber, all are sights equally joyful. Poverty, and darkness, and guilt, bring in their several contributions to his treasure of pleasant thoughts. The shattered window, . . . the dangerous roof, decrepit floor and stair, ragged misery and wasting age of the inhabitants,—all these conduce, each in due measure, to the fulness \[sic\] of his satisfaction. What is it to him that the old man has passed his seventy years in helpless darkness and untaught waste of soul? The old man has at last accomplished his destiny, and filled the corner of a sketch, where something of an unshapely nature was wanting.\(^8\)

It is significant that this passage was inspired by witnessing real suffering in Amiens, recorded in a diary entry of 1854. There, along a small branch of the Somme, he had seen the poverty of the costermongers and dyers in their unwholesome and dilapidated cottages, “all exquisitely picturesque, and no less miserable.” The scene causes him to ponder the human cost of the picturesque:

As I looked to-day at the unhealthy face and melancholy mien of the man in the boat pushing his load of peats along the ditch, and of the people, men as well as women, who sat spinning gloomily at the cottage doors, I could not help feeling how many suffering persons must pay for my picturesque subject and happy walk.\(^9\)

For Ruskin to arrive at this awareness of the social implications of picturesque aesthetics was, however, a long journey. He was an enthusiastic acolyte in the cult of the picturesque

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\(^8\) Ibid., 19-20.

\(^9\) Ibid., 20n.
as a young man—as what young gentleman was not at the time?—and the spell seemed to hold almost until the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843.

In rejecting the picturesque Ruskin was rejecting more than a taste or style of landscape, he was exposing the immorality of a system of aesthetics. To understand that aesthetic, and appreciate the distance Ruskin had to traverse to escape it, there is no better authority than Ruskin’s own early writings. In his diary during a tour of the Lake District (1830) and in *The Poetry of Architecture* (1837-38), written when he was not quite twenty years old, the conventions and the attributes of the picturesque are eloquently expressed, and the seeds for their rejection are sewn.

In some ways Ruskin was a privileged child, despite the stories of an austere and solitary childhood. It is true that the evangelical household afforded few conventional amusements for a young boy, but there were few summers when his father did not take the family for a month or more to see the sights of Britain or the continent. First in a borrowed carriage and later in one especially made for their habits, the family travelled at a leisurely pace\(^\text{10}\) from place to place while the young Ruskin wrote poetry and sketched. They visited all the great houses that were open to the public, viewed the historic sites, and enjoyed the scenic countryside along the way. John James, Ruskin’s father, was a very

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\(^{10}\text{Ruskin’s lifelong habit of travel was formed in these early peregrinations. He recommends travelling by foot, and no more than ten or twelve miles a day; travel by railroad he considered “merely “being sent” to a place, and very little different from becoming a parcel.” Ruskin, *Modern Painters III* (1856), C & W 5: 370.}
successful sherry merchant and from time to time they stopped at the estate of a wealthy client. Often, after business was over, the family toured the house and grounds. It is hard to imagine a more ideal soil for the cultivation of a picturesque sensibility in a young man. John James was indulgent of his precocious son and actively encouraged his literary and artistic endeavours. Father and son were both avid admirers of Scott and Wordsworth and so it is no surprise that, by the time young John wrote his own journal of their tour to the Lakes at age eleven, he had already been to Scotland and the Lake District twice.

In recording his travels, young Ruskin was in good company; it was customary to keep a journal on such a tour and many of the popular guide books were essentially personal journals that were later published. These guide books served as texts in the school of the picturesque. Some, like those of the prolific Reverend William Gilpin, specifically advertised that they were “Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty” while others claimed only to “relieve the traveller from the burthen of those tedious enquiries on the road, or at the inns, which generally embarrass, and often mislead.” In either case, almost all guide books assumed the picturesque to be the real object of the trip. Which guides the Ruskins used on their journey is difficult to say with

11 Most of the titles of Gilpin’s books contain with this phrase which describes so well the objective of the journey.

certainty. The route they took and the sights they describe indicate that they probably used Thomas West’s very popular Guide to the Lakes, which Ruskin is known to have owned later\textsuperscript{13}. It is also unlikely that they would overlook their esteemed Wordworth’s A Guide Through the District of the Lakes.\textsuperscript{14} Whichever guides they used, and there were probably several, Ruskin became immersed in the picturesque vision of landscape such books purveyed and the Lake District was supposed naturally to evoke. His journal contains an unreflective mixture of the elements that would concern him for the rest of his life, assembled in the manner of the precocious eleven year old he was. It is a child’s journal but serves as a measure of the very young Ruskin’s response to landscape, and to the rest of the world around him.

\textsuperscript{13} The views Ruskin describes are often from stations recommended by West, and when he gives information it often echoes West, as with the presence of a Roman fort at Castle Crag, or the dimensions of Bowder Stone, which is almost verbatim. Ruskin, A Tour to the Lakes in Cumberland: John Ruskin’s Diary for 1830, ed. James S. Dearden (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990), 77. There were, however, many guides. In just the last quarter of the eighteenth century fifteen separate accounts of tours had been published as books and many more in periodicals or privately circulated manuscripts. Peter Bicknell, The Picturesque Scenery of the Lake District, 1752-1855: A Bibliographical Study (Winchester: St. Paul’s Bibliographies, 1990), 3.

\textsuperscript{14} Wordworth’s Guide was initially published anonymously in 1810 as an introduction to a set of etchings of lake scenery by the Rev. Joseph Wilkinson, it was published under his own name and without the etchings in 1822. Other similar guides shaped the Ruskins’ travel plans over the next few years; they acquired, among others, Prout’s Facsimilies of Sketches in Flanders and Germany, Rogers’ Italy, A Poem with Turner’s illustrations, William Brockedon’s Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps, Saussure’s Voyages dans Les Alpes, William Rose’s Letters from the North of Italy, and Joseph Forsyth’s Remarks on Antiquities of Italy.
He is, above all, an enthusiastic, youthful tourist who takes in all the sights the guide books recommend. He is quite obviously and naively charmed by the curiosities in Crosthwaite’s museum in Keswick, for example, which included a shrunken head from New Zealand and the huge rib of a man said to be twenty-one feet tall.15 Not surprisingly, in Ruskin’s diary there is no trace of the deep distrust of modern industrialism that characterized his later work. In Liverpool he was intrigued by the construction of a two-mile tunnel for the new railway that would carry goods to Manchester and back in three hours. In Birmingham he and his father visited a pin factory where they “were much pleased with seeing the number of processes the wire has to go through before it becomes the bright smooth pointed pin.”16 He observed clearly, but is not very critical of, the new manufacturing towns they passed through. Birmingham was, admittedly, “almost worse than London itself such smoky dirty narrow streets that two carriages could hardly pass.” He did not dwell on the subject, however, and in the next sentence reports that they “got a most delightful room & very good bedrooms.”17 Manchester, he concludes, like Catherine Morland’s Bath, is unpicturesque and best left quickly behind: it is a “most disagreeable

15 Ruskin, A Tour, 42.

16 Ibid., 31. Ruskin’s attitude is markedly different by 1853 when he published “The Nature of Gothic” in The Stones of Venice. By that time he takes no pleasure in the division of labour for “it is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: — Divided into mere segments of men—broken into small fragments of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail.” “The Nature of Gothic” (1853), C & W 10: 196.

17 Ibid.
town...it is so full of manufactories [sic] that you are enveloped in clouds of smoke & the place is so hot that we could scarcely breath [sic] & were very glad to breathe the fresh air of the country again the next morning.\textsuperscript{18}

It is in this fresh air of the Lake District far from the cities that Ruskin’s education in the picturesque is most evident. There is little point in duplicating the efforts of other writers who have described picturesque aesthetics in some detail.\textsuperscript{19} It is more appropriate here to show how Ruskin was an enthusiastic exponent of the picturesque, and indicate the way that picturesque aesthetics conditioned the way he and others perceived landscape and the world around them.

In later years Ruskin claimed that one of his first memories was of being held by his nurse and looking down from Friar’s Crag into Derwentwater when he was about three or four years old. The “intense joy, mingled with awe”\textsuperscript{20} he felt may have marked him for life, but it is little evident in the 1830 journal. Then he was the conventional tourist in

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 37.


\textsuperscript{20} Ruskin, \textit{Modern Painters III} (1856), C & W 5: 365.
pursuit of the picturesque rather than the Wordsworthian hero touched in infancy by a deep apprehension of nature. Contrasted with the profound experience of the sublime, the picturesque was considered merely an "agreeable amusement,"\textsuperscript{21} a pastime for the traveller of means and sensibility. The picturesque claims a "moral tendency" not for any of its own elevating qualities, but merely because it is a comparatively innocent distraction "in an age teeming with licentious pleasure."\textsuperscript{22} Whether or not this rationale served as any excuse for the austerely evangelical Ruskin family to indulge in the pleasures of landscape is difficult to say, but it contrasts sharply with what Ruskin would later claim for the moral function of landscape. Nature became God's second book for Ruskin, to be read with the same care and reverence as the first, but this reading began with the picturesque as a footnote to painting.

The excesses of the picturesque were the butt of easy humour. One of the earliest, and certainly the most popular, of these satirical attacks was William Combe's \textit{The Tour of Dr. Syntax in Search of the Picturesque} which first appeared in 1809. Thomas Rowlandson's lively illustrations of the peregrinations of the clerical school teacher, Dr. Syntax, and his old nag Grizzle were a direct parody of William Gilpin's immensely popular guides. The picturesque was, however, an aesthetic more easily ridiculed than

\textsuperscript{21} Gilpin, \textit{Three Essays}, 47.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
avoided. It became an almost "universal mode of vision"\textsuperscript{23} between 1730 and 1830, when the Ruskins visited the Lakes, and it echoes through every travel account and tourist advertisement to the present day. More recent apologists have tended to the teleological in their attempt to salvage the picturesque. Whatever other value it may have had, they assert, "it was the encouragement to individuals to cultivate their sensibility and trust their aesthetic judgement. In overturning the aesthetic dogmatism of the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century cult of the picturesque helped prepare the way for the aesthetic liberation of the romantic era."\textsuperscript{24} It may have done, but it was much more than a fond fashion or a prelude to romanticism. For those initiates in the cult of the picturesque, accustomed to appreciate in nature those qualities which are "chiefly pleasing in painting,"\textsuperscript{25} the world became a gallery without walls. To view the works in the gallery of the picturesque it was necessary to become a traveller, a tourist, moving from scene to scene always judging—sometimes admiring, sometimes condemning—according to the rules of art. As with actual paintings, some scenes were deemed masterpieces and some the work of a lesser hand. As previously discussed, pre-eminent among the works of this gallery were those scenes which most resembled the work of Claude Lorrain, Poussin, Gaspar, and Salvator Rosa, who all enjoyed a great reputation among the English in the


\textsuperscript{24}J. R. Watson, \emph{Picturesque Landscape and English Romantic Poetry} (London: Hutchinson Educational, 1970), 278.

\textsuperscript{25}Gilpin, \emph{Three Essays}, 6.
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The picturesque traveller moved effortlessly from the actual gallery to the natural one and celebrated the same values in each. In her Letters from Italy (1792-1798), always intended as a guide despite its title, Mariana Starke used exclamation marks to designate works not to be missed on a gallery visit in the same way Michelin guides use stars and bold type: “A beautiful landscape by Claude Lorain!!! On the other side, an almost equally beautiful one, by Poussin!! above the cabinet a landscape, by Poussin!!! ... Two capital landscapes by Salvator Rosa!!!” Out of doors and in another country the criteria were the same. To describe Keswick, it seems,

would require the united powers of *Claude, Salvator, and Poussin*. The first would throw his delicate sunshine over the cultivated vales, the scattered cots, the groves, the lake, and wooded islands. The second would dash out the horror of the rugged cliffs, the steeps, the hanging woods, and foaming water-falls; while the grand pencil of *Poussin* would crown the whole with the majesty of the impending mountains.


According to Wordsworth's guide, the hills of the Lake District are more worthy than even the scenic Alps by virtue of the fact that they are "better suited to painting."\footnote{Wordsworth, Guide, 224.}

Although on the 1830 excursion the young Ruskin dutifully visited the art collections at Warwick Castle,\footnote{Ruskin, A Tour, 30.} Blenheim\footnote{Ibid., 29.} and Chatsworth,\footnote{Ibid., 35-36.} he showed no more than the usual appreciation for what he saw. His taste was conventional; at Chatsworth he remarked on some sketches by "Carlo Dolce, Claude Lorraine, Rembrandt, Caracci, Urbini &c they were wonderfully done, and every touch shewed the hand of a master, some appeared to be so carelessly thrown off, you could hardly distinguish the outline, but yet such an effect was produced you could easily see, whose hand pencil [sic] had touched the canvas."\footnote{Ibid., 36.}

Similarly, the Ruskins sought out the typical natural highlights of a picturesque tour: the waterfalls, the calm lakes reflecting the steep fells, and, of course, the "astonishing prospect"\footnote{Ibid., 44.} from the peak of Skiddaw all the way to the Isle of Man. These sights were the accepted "masterpieces" in the gallery of nature which were identified and admired from the designated "stations."

\footnotetext[29]{{Wordsworth, Guide, 224.}}
\footnotetext[30]{{Ruskin, A Tour, 30.}}
\footnotetext[31]{{Ibid., 29.}}
\footnotetext[32]{{Ibid., 35-36.}}
\footnotetext[33]{{Ibid., 36.}}
\footnotetext[34]{{Ibid., 44.}}
The picturesque ambition to impose the conventions of painting upon geography went beyond matters of composition. Just as Claude or Poussin diffused their landscapes with an emotional tone by evoking classical myth or story, the picturesque writer transformed the landscape with poetry. The small figures in the foreground of Poussin's *Landscape with Diogenes*, for example, push the painted landscape into a classical timelessness. It is a gentle, pastoral world where the sun shines, bathers swim in the distance, and philosophers drink from clear springs. The tone is different, but the method is the same, when Wordsworth seeks to convey the "stern and wild character" of the rocks in Ennerdale and Devrockwater. He invokes no less a poet than Milton to describe these isolated rocks, "the haunt of cormorants and sea-mew's clang."35

While poetry was often used by the picturesque writer to colour the landscape, this is especially true of the Lake District. In fact, it was poets of the Lake School who did much to create the landscape as it was experienced by travellers like Ruskin. Wordsworth's influence on Ruskin's later life was enormous, but at this early stage he is more a tourist than a thinker. Even the poets are picturesque destinations in their own right. Ruskin writes of making Sunday pilgrimages to churches to see Robert Southey and, a month later, William Wordsworth36. Like the scenery, the poets are judged on their appearance, 


36 They encounter Southey at Crosthwaite Church, and Wordsworth at Rydal Chapel. Ruskin, *A Tour*, 42, 46.
on how much they resemble the romantic type of the poet. Southey has a "very keen eye & looks extremely like—a poet."\textsuperscript{37} Wordsworth was cause for disappointment; he had a "long face and a large nose with a moderate assortment of grey hairs and 2 small grey eyes not filled with fury wrapt inspired with a mouth of moderate dimensions that is quite large enough to let in a sufficient quantity of beef or mutton & let out a sufficient quantity of poetry."\textsuperscript{38} These descriptions are revealing. The poets are as much institutions of the Lake District as the slopes of Helvellyn or the falls at Lodore. It would have been more picturesque if Wordsworth resembled the wandering poet they encountered later the same day; he had a "fine countenance." Unfortunately, "his verses were but so so."\textsuperscript{39} Despite the fact that at this age Ruskin shows more evidence of knowing who these poets were than what they wrote, the very reverence that makes him seek them out is evidence that they were inextricably associated with this landscape. The poetry was part of a process of naturalization of British landscape. As time passed, guide books became more likely to quote Milton, Spenser or Wordsworth than Ovid or Theocritus to capture an effect in the landscape.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 42.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 46.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 47.

\textsuperscript{40} Wordsworth, \textit{A Guide}, Milton 38, Spenser 75, Wordsworth 32, 129.
It was, as we have observed, conventional for picturesque travellers to regard the scene before them as though it were, like a Claude in the gallery, a gently antique subject. It was as if a varnish of classical learning transformed the hills of Cumberland into ancient Arcadia. It seems a harmless enough conceit that in his journal the young Ruskin cannot resist calling an old dog "a sage Nestor of a dog... not wanting in hoary hairs"\textsuperscript{41} or that in other guides Virgil and Ovid are inevitably invoked to create the appropriate bucolic atmosphere\textsuperscript{42}. However, this habitual classicizing was commonly a strategy that created distance between the observer and the observed. For instance, when the Ruskins visit the Peak Cavern they encounter "several poor people who make cord twine &c." living in small cottages sheltered within the outer entrance of the cave. The real poverty of the ropemakers’ lives is lost in the classical mists when Ruskin, caught up by the spirit of the picturesque, translates them into "the shades plying their eternal tasks in the regions of darkness."\textsuperscript{43}

Ruskin’s journal is naturally an ingenuous account of the family’s travels that summer, and it demonstrates how much as a child he was immersed in the picturesque aesthetic popularized by the guide books. We know from the numbers of guides published that he

\textsuperscript{41} Ruskin, \textit{A Tour}, 47.

\textsuperscript{42} For example, West, 246-247; Gilpin, \textit{Lakes I}, 139, 156-157.

\textsuperscript{43} Ruskin, \textit{A Tour}, 51. The ropemakers became a fixture of the Peak Cavern until the last one retired in 1974, evidence of the anachronistic and tenacious nature of the picturesque.
was not alone, but it is an indication of the power of the aesthetic that an eleven year old child would have adopted the conventions so completely. He admired the paintings, he saw the sights, he drew, he classicized and he wrote—all as a tourist in search of the picturesque. There is no trace in this very early work of the discomfort he later felt about the distance the picturesque created between the viewer and the surrounding world.

Ruskin is a young traveller in a gallery of pictures that nature has provided for his delectation. There is no sense of responsibility or concern about the plight of the ropemakers or the pollution of the cities; the picturesque precludes it. Instead there is the sense that Ruskin is participating in, and perpetuating, a vision of British culture. The cities and industrial sights, while not completely expunged as they are in other guides, are barely mentioned on route to the real sights: the art, poetry, and landscape of Britain.

*The Poetry of Architecture*, written eight years later by a comparatively mature Ruskin, is a much more polished work. He was still in the thrall of the picturesque, but there is a nascent morality in the way he sets out to describe the relation between architecture, situation and climate, and the “prevailing turn of mind” of nations. What is remarkable is that Ruskin’s moral awareness grows out of its apparent antithesis, the picturesque. It is often a frustrating book because of this unresolved contradiction between Ruskin’s use of the picturesque and his growing political conscience. However, if we trace the relationship between the two, the outlines of his politics of painting emerge.

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The Poetry of Architecture retains much of the character of a picturesque travel guide. Although there is no actual traveller in this discourse on architecture, Ruskin cannot resist the conventional transition between one site and another. "Let us now cross the channel"45 in search of a picturesque French cottage, he directs his readers, just as if they were real fellow travellers. Ruskin assumes that "the reader who has travelled"46 will have no difficulty following in his mental footsteps. The picturesque is quintessentially a visual experience and Ruskin’s discourse is written for the eye, a significant synecdoche for the whole traveller in picturesque literature. The eye is the active agent; before an exemplary landscape "the glance of the beholder rises . . . it meets, as it ascends . . . till it rests."47 Before a rugged scene in Sicily "the eye passes over . . . it trembles . . . but it finds . . . it climbs."48 He constantly searches for what is "agreeable to the eye"49 and what has "good effect,"50 which is to say what appeals to the gaze of the viewer. What is deemed agreeable in actuality, of course, is what is desirable in painting. Our admiration for the architecture of certain Italian villas is due to their "horizontal lines and simple forms" which have been "used with the greatest dexterity, and the noblest effect, in the

46 Ibid., 31.
47 Ibid., 170.
48 Ibid., 190.
49 Ibid., 165.
50 Ibid., 99.
compositions of Claude, Salvator, and Poussin.” Ruskin even anticipates that his readers will similarly use painting as an authority with which to test his own claims. For example, at one point Ruskin finds the colour of brick with stone quoining particularly offensive to the eye. He acknowledges that Rubens “seems to have sanctioned the barbarism” by including such a building in a painting. He extricates himself from the contradiction, and excuses the painter, on the grounds that it was a measure of Rubens’ affection for the house he painted and a test of his virtuosity with colour. Otherwise such architecture was “fit only for a place whose foundations are mud, and whose inhabitants are partially animated cheeses.”

Often the authority of painting is implicit rather than explicit in Ruskin’s appraisal of architecture. For example, he utilizes a “line of beauty,” a gentle wave-like curve, to determine the best profile for buildings in an Italian landscape. The assumption is that great art is based on a similar line, thus both painting and nature are based on the same

51 Ibid., 193. It is, of course, some measure of the change in Ruskin’s aesthetic and political attitudes that five years later in Modern Painters I these are the painters most despised.

52 Ibid., 256.

53 The painting referred to is probably Landscape with the Chateau of Steen, 1636, The National Gallery, London.

54 Ruskin, The Poetry of Architecture, 257.

principle of beauty; both are picturesque. The same principles have informed "the most perfect imaginations of the old masters, and [are] the true cause of the extreme beauty of the groups formed by Italian villages in general."\textsuperscript{56}

This constant appeal to painting as authority for architectural and landscape aesthetics clearly demonstrates Ruskin’s general obligation to the picturesque tradition. He was, however, more specifically indebted to Wordsworth’s \textit{Guide to the Lakes}, both for some of his descriptions and for the overall premise that scenery and architecture affect, and are affected by, the mind and feelings of people. At times the similarities of the two writers can be amusing. Wordsworth observes briefly that the “singular beauty of the chimneys” of the Lake District should not “escape the eye of the attentive traveller”\textsuperscript{57} sensitive to the harmony between chimney and the “living column of smoke, ascending from it through the still air.”\textsuperscript{58} Ruskin must certainly have been such a traveller for he rhapsodizes rather improbably about the cottage smoke of “England, sweet carbonaceous England”\textsuperscript{59} and devotes a whole chapter—complete with eighteen diagrams—to a discussion of the various chimneys of Europe.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 197.

\textsuperscript{57} Wordsworth, \textit{Guide}, 62.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 63.

\textsuperscript{59} Ruskin, \textit{The Poetry of Architecture}, 94.
Critical consensus is often the product less of original insight on the part of a number of individuals than of the influence of one writer on another. This heritage of unexamined but shared opinion creates an aesthetic homogeneity that becomes authoritative through repetition and reveals the underlying assumptions of the picturesque. Sometimes it appears harmless, as with Ruskin’s antipathy for the colour white in architecture. A white building “if in shade, is sometimes allowable; but, if visible at any point more than 200 yards off, it will spoil the whole landscape.” Ruskin assumes his readers know why white will have such an unhappy result; it is, as Wordsworth makes absolutely clear, a question of compositional effect. The problem is, he says, that “white destroys the gradations of distance; and, therefore, an object of pure white can scarcely ever be managed with good effect in landscape-painting.” Of course, whatever cannot be managed in landscape painting violates the rules of taste in picturesque nature. Wordsworth has seen “a single white house materially impair the majesty of a mountain” and “Five or six white houses, scattered over a valley, by their obtrusiveness, dot the surface, and divide it into triangles, or other mathematical figures, haunting the eye, and disturbing that repose which might otherwise be perfect.” In banishing the colour white Wordsworth cites the authority not

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60 Ibid., 121.

61 Wordsworth, Guide, 80-81.
only of nature, where he says it never occurs naturally, but of Gilpin himself, who supports the contention that white destroys the "gradation of distance."\textsuperscript{62}

The distaste for white buildings which Ruskin, Wordsworth and Gilpin shared seems an innocuous enough preference, except that each writer contributed to an orthodoxy which clearly assumes the priority of the pictorial over any other consideration. There is no conflict between the two for William Gilpin. It is his object to pursue picturesque beauty through "the scenery of nature; and examine it by the rules of painting."\textsuperscript{63} The whole of nature is subject to the "picturesque eye" and "every form of life, and being has it's \textit{sic} use as a picturesque object.\textsuperscript{64} The situation is somewhat different for Wordsworth. The first sentence of his guide stipulates that it is intended as a companion for "the Minds of Persons of taste, and feeling for Landscape."\textsuperscript{65} There was a tacit assumption in earlier guides that visitors would be improved by their exposure to the scenic beauty of the lakes\textsuperscript{66} but Wordsworth finds it necessary to describe the economy and way of life of the lakers in more detail than is permitted when such things are mere elements of the scenery. Ruskin's \textit{Poetry of Architecture} is similarly ambitious. While it

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. Gilpin concurrs on a number occasions that it is "gradation; which gives a force beyond what a glaring display of light can give." \textit{Three Essays}, 76.

\textsuperscript{63} Gilpin, \textit{Three Essays}, 42.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 45.

\textsuperscript{65} Wordsworth, \textit{Guide}, 1.

\textsuperscript{66} See West, 1.
resembled a guide in many ways, as we have seen, it attempted much more in tracing the
"Architecture of the Nations of Europe considered in its Association with Natural Scenery and National Character." 67 This desire to examine the relationship between scenery, architecture and people is the second similarity between Ruskin’s *Poetry of Architecture* and Wordsworth’s *Guide Through the District of the Lakes*. The ambition, however, to show real people in real geography directly conflicts with the picturesque genre. There is not sufficient room here to discuss Wordsworth’s response to the confrontation in detail, but Ruskin leaves the paradox unresolved. On the one hand he was adamant, and consistent with the picturesque, that in building one should not be “thinking of interior convenience: the architect must establish his mode of beauty first, and then approach it as nearly as he can.” 68 He observes with irony that “John Bull’s comfort perpetually interferes with his good taste.” 69 On the other hand, he adopts a quite modernist approach when he articulates the rule that “what is most adapted to its purpose is most beautiful.” 70 When the purpose of a building and its appearance are no longer congruent, architectural absurdity triumphs:

...we have pinnacles without height, windows without light, columns with nothing to sustain, and buttresses with nothing to support. We have parish paupers smoking their pipes and drinking their beer under Gothic arches

68 Ibid., 120.
69 Ibid., 5.
70 Ibid., 109.
and sculptured niches; and quiet old English gentlemen reclining on crocodile stools, and peeping out of the windows of Swiss chalets.\textsuperscript{71}

These two attitudes toward architecture hardly seem as if they are by the same author, let alone from the same work.

The disjuncture is no less obvious in Gilpin’s treatment of the inhabitants of this landscape. The picturesque eye pays no attention to the “anatomical study of [human] figures.” It is important instead to “regard them merely as the ornament of scenes.”\textsuperscript{72} They exist only to contribute to the pictorial effect, and to this end the facts of their actual lives are of no consequence. If the scene is wild and exotic enough, to people the scene, “far other guests invite,/ Wild as those scenes themselves, banditti fierce,/ And gipsey-tribes, not merely to adorn,/ But to impress that sentiment more strong.”\textsuperscript{73} Even in more temperate climes the principle still holds. It may be true that in “a moral view, the industrious mechanic is a more pleasing object than the loitering peasant. But in the picturesque light, it is otherwise. The arts of industry are rejected; and even idleness adds dignity to a character.”\textsuperscript{74} Where such colourful characters are totally incredible or obviously undesirable, as in Wordsworth’s tourist guide for the Lakes, the landscape is curiously free of people, save those indispensable attendants who serve weary tourists.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{72} Gilpin, \textit{Three Essays}, 44.


\textsuperscript{74} Gilpin, \textit{Lakes}, 2: 44.
milk and oatcake or guide them to the peak of Scafell. Ruskin’s landscape, too, is remarkably empty of actual people, especially in light of his professed desire to write of the relation between people and their architectural environment. Perhaps, however, the ghosts of picturesque banditti and beggars haunt the ludicrous stereotypes he sometimes resorts to, as when he describes the Italian cottage and its inhabitants:

The outer arcade . . . becomes the nightly lounge and daily dormitory of its inhabitant, and the interior is abandoned to filth and decay. Indolence watches the tooth of time with careless eye and nerveless hand. Religion, or its abuse, reduces every individual of the population to utter inactivity three days out of the seven . . . while brutish sloth weakens the will; and the filthy habits of the Italian prevent him from suffering from the state to which he is reduced.

Similarly, the French peasant “has no idea of comfort, and therefore makes no effort to secure it,” so his cottage will certainly be dilapidated enough to qualify as picturesque. Again, however, Ruskin’s objectives clash with the picturesque genre and sometimes compel him to consider people as economic and political entities rather than as elements in a composition. Naturally enough his observations of England are more acute than they are of other countries which are more distant and more traditionally picturesque in their associations with Italian painting. He attributes the lack of venerable buildings in much of England, for example, to economic growth:

75 Wordsworth, Guide, 240ff. It is interesting that the conventions of the picturesque were powerful enough to populate Wordsworth’s early poetry with a troup of gothic characters.

76 Ruskin, The Poetry of Architecture, 44.

77 Ibid., 18.
England is a country of perpetually increasing prosperity and active enterprise; but, for that reason, nothing is allowed to remain till it gets old. Large old trees are cut down for timber; old houses are pulled down for the materials; and old furniture is laughed at and neglected. Everything is perpetually altered and renewed by the activity of invention and improvement.\

He augments this economic analysis of attitudes toward architecture with a political one. In France, he postulates, there are two contrary opinions toward conservation: "that of the old pedigreed population, which preserves unlimitedly; and that of the modern revolutionists, which destroys unmercifully." According to Ruskin, the French Revolution was still being fought on the streets of Paris between the Bourbons of preservation and the sans-culottes of urban renewal.

Ruskin's insight here indicates a revolutionary change in the understanding of the iconography of landscape. These comments occur early in *The Poetry of Architecture* and for the rest of the volume Ruskin vacillates between conventionally picturesque descriptions and a new political vision. The picturesque cottage, which before had inevitably embodied the venerable tradition of Gaspar and Salvator and the allegedly disinterested aesthetics of art, could now speak directly of economic depression and political conservatism. He consciously identified class and economic interests with aesthetics and, in doing so, transformed landscape from a rhetoric of hegemony to a powerful discourse of social criticism.

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78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., 18-19.
This transformation did not happen all at once, of course, and Ruskin wrestled with its implications all his life. However, an example of the dramatic change involved may help to demonstrate Ruskin's new way of reading landscape. It is quite clear from even the earliest accounts that, as Raymond Williams put it, a "working country is hardly ever a landscape."80 As we have discussed above, "the very idea of landscape implies separation and observation."81 This is clearly evident in one of the earliest guides to the north of England, Arthur Young's *A Six Months tour through the North of England* (1770). Young's tour is devoted to minute observations on the state of agriculture in England and remains an invaluable record of innumerable details of the cost of feed, rents, wages, and the like. In this context it is especially surprising to encounter those passages where Young puts aside his agricultural interests and becomes an enthusiast. When he turns his back on the working countryside and decides to describe the scenery, the change is abrupt: "Now, Sir, for the glory of Keswick,—/ its Lake, so famous all over England."82 His whole manner changes with the landscape; the pedantic catalogue of agricultural practices is replaced by fluent and sensitive descriptions of scenes which, Young declares, would demand "admiration from the most tasteless of mortals."83 Typically, the picturesque

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81 Williams, 120.


83 Ibid., 180.
destination is one overlooked by economic progress. There are no trains, no factories, no agricultural improvements, no enclosures—no signs of the changes that were transforming England from a rural to an urban and industrial nation. The population of England and Wales doubled in the first half of the nineteenth century\(^4\) and, by mid-century, for the first time in English history, city dwellers outnumbered their country counterparts.\(^6\) The picturesque landscape became an emblem of traditional England, an England whose virtues were magnified by time and by the uncertainty of the present. Picturesque tourism conflated natural and social order; an understanding of landscape aesthetics created an appreciation for natural beauty and condoned a social system at the same moment.

There are many instances of this symbiotic relationship but the portrayal of the estate in the landscape is particularly apt, and well described by Wordsworth and Ruskin. Established estates are often associated with the ancient forests. In contrast to the conspicuous houses of newcomers to the Lakes, which are surrounded by modern plantings, their “titles are from antiquity”\(^7\) and it is “to their successive proprietors we


\(^6\) Ibid., 76.

chiefly owe whatever ornament is still left to the country of majestic timber.’

The estate and the great oaks are coeval and speak of a tradition which is threatened by modernization. The larch, which Wordsworth vilifies, is a symbol of the new order. Fast growing and tolerant, larches became a popular crop. The choice of trees here is more than nostalgic conservatism. As a result of enclosure and shipbuilding, both of which had accelerated during the agricultural revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, by 1800 England was one of the least wooded of all northern European nations. At this time of national crisis the oak, on the other hand, became a powerful symbol of England’s naval superiority. Out of it were built the ships, her “wooden walls”, manned by her native sons, the “hearts of oak” that protected her at Trafalgar. As a result, planting new oak forests, some even named after Nelson and other British admirals, became a patriotic act. Thus the native wood that grew around the estate and in the picturesque refuges of the country came to symbolize the England of Nelson and of tradition.

Wordsworth transforms this conservative political preference for the oak into an issue of aesthetics. The larch, Wordsworth states,

88 Ibid., 205.


91 Daniels, 47.
can grow up into nothing but deformity . . . while they are suffered to stand, we shall look in vain for any of those appearances which are the chief sources of beauty in a natural wood.92

The English oak, in contrast, is not only aesthetically superior to such nouveau species as the larch, but to any tree of any other nation:

The oak of no country has equal beauty: nor does any tree answer all the purposes of scenery so well. The oak is the noblest ornament of a fore-ground . . . . In a distance also it appears with equal advantage . . . . The pine of Italy has its beauty, hanging over the broken pediment of some ruined temple. The chestnut of Calabria is consecrated by adorning the fore-grounds of Salvator. The elm, the ash, and the beech, have all their respective beauties: but no tree in the forest is adapted to all the purposes of landscape, like the English oak.93

Ruskin reads a similar meaning in this landscape but he seems more conscious of the iconography of landscape. He divides all landscape up into four categories: "the woody, or green, country; the blue country; wild, the grey country; or hilly, the brown country."94 The blue and the grey are either too productive or too bleak to be aesthetically pleasing. The blue country is cultivated land where "all is activity, prosperity, and usefulness: nothing is left to the imagination; there is no poetry, no nonsense"95; the grey country consists of "wide, unenclosed, treeless undulations of land."96 The brown and the green

92 Wordsworth, Guide, 221.


95 Ibid., 122.

96 Ibid., 123.
are the two categories of countryside susceptible to landscape aesthetics. The brown, or hilly, country Ruskin identifies with the Westmoreland lakes where painterly "principles of composition" must dictate the placement of architecture in the landscape. Finally, the green, or woody, country is the property of the great land owners:

[It is] the mixture of park, pasture, and variegated forest, which is only to be seen in temperate climates, and in those parts of a kingdom which have not often changed proprietors, but have remained in unproductive beauty (or at least, furnishing timber only), the garden of the wealthier population.

Such landscape evokes a "reverence for its antiquity," an antiquity which embraces both the natural and the social order. The forest scene "is calculated to excite a conservative feeling," and Ruskin sums it up when he declares the "the man who could remain a radical in a wood country is a disgrace to his species." Ruskin has here taken the picturesque conventions and consciously decoded them into their social meanings. He is not yet critical of their social significance, but he clearly perceives that a taste for landscape is more than a disinterested mark of education or breeding.

The guide book endeavoured, consciously or not, to disseminate among a broad section of the British public a particular way of seeing the landscape of their country. The object was, as Wordsworth said of his guide, "to reconcile a Briton to the scenery of his

97 Ibid., 124.
98 Ibid., 116.
99 Ibid., 119.
own country.”100 This landscape, suffused with history, provided a provenance for the British. At a time when much of the country was experiencing unprecedented change, refuges like the Lake District and great estates provided images of unsullied nature sanctified by ancient tradition and the aesthetics of painting. Thus naturalized by the conventions of landscape, both private property and undeveloped tracts of countryside came to be considered a national heritage. It was, as Wordsworth put it, “a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy.”101 Wordsworth stresses the more conventional picturesque idea that taste and sensitivity are the passport to this realm while Ruskin includes the politics of actual ownership. He concurs that landscape is a “national possession”102 but there is more than a hint of warning when he says that the “nobler scenery of that earth is the inheritance of all her inhabitants: it is not merely for the few to whom it temporarily belongs, to feed from like swine, or to stable upon like horses.”103

For the rest of his life Ruskin attempted to reconcile the aesthetic and the economic, the moral and the monetary, and it is clear that his earliest political statements are couched in the unlikely language of the picturesque. Picturesque conventions generally omitted the


101 Ibid., 225.


103 Ibid., 230.
reality of social change and industrialization by portraying only the timeless landscape far from enclosures and urbanization. They denied social inequity by naturalizing and institutionalizing the very evidence of disproportionate wealth; great estates flourished in the shade of ancient forests and both constituted the nation’s heritage. The rhetoric of landscape created persuasive images of social hegemony, images that were difficult to refute because they appeared so disinterested, so engaged in matters of taste and aesthetics rather than politics. Nevertheless, the process of creating these images provided an iconography of landscape that could be forged into a counter-rhetoric, one that would confront landscape and the social assumptions upon which it was founded.
Chapter 4

Land into Landscape: Aesthetic Theory

I've been working pretty hard, too, to get my book [Modern Painters V] done . . . and have now fallen into the lassitude of surrendered effort and the disappointment of discovered uselessness, having come to see the great fact that great Art is of no real use to anybody but the next great Artist; that it is wholly invisible to people in general—for the present—and that to get anybody to see it, one must begin at the other end, with moral education of the people, and physical, and so I've to turn myself quite upside down, and I'm half broken-backed and can't manage it.¹

Landscape painting, as outlined in Chapter 2, derived from and perpetuated interests in land, and endorsed a political hierarchy based on land ownership. Membership in this hierarchy could be expressed by a cultivated taste for landscape. Chapter 3 described how the young Ruskin absorbed the aesthetics of the picturesque which had effectively enshrined the institution of private property in the mind of the larger public. It was also clear that Ruskin increasingly discerned in the picturesque an iconography of landscape, a language that had been used to elide rural poverty and human misery from the portrait of the nation. In short, in The Poetry of Architecture he began to read landscape as a language, a language in which he recognized the political inflections, and with which he would later speak his despair at what the world had become. That this should become the language of Ruskin's outrage is all the more remarkable because almost everything about contemporary landscape aesthetics militated against such political insight and activism. It is the task of this chapter to outline those aesthetic beliefs and demonstrate how they served to remove art in general and landscape in particular from any political discourse. This attempt to distance art from politics is, of course, its own politics, as we have seen in

Chapter 2 and will see again at the end of this one. The real paradox, however, lies in the fact that those same aesthetics exposed Ruskin to what they generally tried to obscure and gave him a rhetoric that his audience could understand, but that is the subject of the next chapter.

Ruskin’s journey from picturesque to protest was a long and difficult one, and not without drama. It is some indication of the revolutionary nature of his work—an incendiary quality that is often lost on modern readers—that he published anonymously twice in his life. His name appears nowhere in the first volume of *Modern Painters*. When it was first published in 1843, the book appeared as a brave assault on the combined authority of the Royal Academy and British public opinion by an unknown young critic. Rather than give his name on the title page Ruskin preferred to call himself “a graduate of Oxford”, for whatever authority that might add. Ironically, seventeen years later, at the height of his career as an art critic and the year he finished the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters*, he published another work anonymously. This time he sought anonymity because he was too well known, rather than too little. The work, his first general analysis of political economy, originally appeared in 1860 as a series of articles in the newly-established *Cornhill Magazine*, and two years later appeared in book form as *Unto this Last*. He was obliged to sign his articles “J.R.” so the editor, William Makepeace Thackeray, would not be held responsible for “opinions so opposed to Malthus and the *Times* and the City of Manchester.”

Even so, public disapproval ended the series after only the fourth number; the publisher directed Thackeray to discontinue it.

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because it was "too deeply tainted with socialistic heresy to conciliate subscribers." The sales of Unto this Last languished for almost two decades and only gained their greatest momentum near the turn of the century when the social consequences of the economics of Smith, Mill, Malthus and Ricardo were all too clear to a larger public.4

It is conventional to consider this year of 1860 as the watershed in Ruskin's life when, like a latter-day Hercules, he forsook the pleasures of art for the arduous labours of political economy. Scholars rummage in the early work for the seeds of the later political philosophy with obvious success, of course, but Ruskin himself certainly felt that the year marked the end of an epoch. He recounts receiving from the publishers the last "bound volume of Modern Painters in the Valley of St. Martin's in that summer of 1860." Later in the same year, he recounted, "I gave up my art-work and wrote this little book [Unto this Last], the beginning of the days of reprobation."5 The reaction to Unto this Last was immediate and virulent, more intense and more directed at Ruskin himself than one might expect. According to the reviewers the work was "absolute nonsense," "intolerable twaddle." It showed "utter imbecility," and readers were not going to tolerate being

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3 From a memoir by George Smith (C & W 17: xxvii). Ruskin's work was not alone in this reception. Carlyle's "Chartism" (1840) was so controversial it had to be published separately rather than in the customary serial form. The serialization of Kingsley's Yeast in Fraser's Magazine (1848), which described the life of British agricultural workers, ended prematurely because readers threatened to cancel subscriptions. Ruskin's own Munera Pulveris, a continuation of the ideas expressed in Unto the Last, came to an equally premature end in Fraser's Magazine.

4 Even ten years later after publication, the first edition of one thousand copies was still not completely sold. However, after Ruskin republished it in 1877 it sold 2,000 copies a year for the last quarter of the century. C & W 17, Introduction, xxxii.

5 Notes for the lectures called "Readings in 'Modern Painters'" (1877); C & W 22: 512.
“preached to death by a mad governess.” There was, however, a recurring theme in many of the reviews. “Even more repulsive” than Ruskin’s idiocy, according to the *Saturday Review*, was the way in which he “writes of the relations of the rich and poor.” Some people may write of such things, the reviewer implied, but a great art critic like Ruskin should not. “It is no pleasure to see genius *mistaking its power*, and rendering itself ridiculous,” [italics mine] wrote another critic, with apparent regret that Ruskin had strayed so far from his pursuit of art. Ruskin, the writer laments, must have “laboured hard to destroy his reputation.” The spleen with which reviewers attacked *Unto this Last* is particularly notable for the way it contrasted with the extraordinarily warm reception accorded the publication of the last volume of *Modern Painters* earlier that same year. *Modern Painters*, reviewers generally acknowledged, was a great work. It contained in its five volumes “the most valuable contributions to art-literature the language can show.” Its author was undoubtedly “one of the greatest of all writers, living or dead, on the subject of art.” When Ruskin wrote of art, it appears he could do no wrong; when he wrote about economics, according to the critics, he could do no right.

That an artist and critic, especially one as prominent as Ruskin, should enter into the arena of economics and politics was considered a travesty. Ruskin’s father astutely anticipated the reaction to *Unto this Last* when he wrote to a friend that the “wrath of the

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7 H.H. Lancaster, *Essays and Reviews* (1876), 299.

8 A summary of the reviews of *Modern Painters* V is provided in C & W 7: lxvi n.

Manchester School [of economics] will be delivered in worse terms than the anger of certain Schools of Painting." The contrasting reviews of Unto This Last and Modern Painters reveal a great deal about the relation of art and politics at the time. First and foremost, the professions of art critic and political economist were considered incompatible. Ruskin had no business commenting on, let alone condemning, the laissez-faire economic and labour policies that characterized mid-nineteenth century England. Paradoxically, however, at least some members of the "Manchester School" of economics seem to have been genuinely nervous about the interference of this upstart aesthete. Ruskin's desire to reconcile morality and political economy was an anathema to the new science which propounded laws for economics as apparently ineluctable and objective as gravity was for physics. Ruskin was an eloquent and influential adversary and, if he were not stopped, one political economist feared, "his wild words will touch the springs of action in some hearts, and before we are aware a moral floodgate may fly open and drown us all."

The political economists may well have been concerned and annoyed by this assault from such an unexpected quarter, but they could hardly have been surprised. They may have been able to ignore the increasingly polemical tone of the later volumes of Modern Painters. They could perhaps have overlooked the implications of his chapter on "The Nature of Gothic" in The Stones of Venice. However, the message of the lectures he gave in Manchester—the heartland of the new economics—in July 1857, which he

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provocatively called "The Political Economy of Art," could hardly have been mistaken.12 Ruskin confronted the contemporary social Darwinism and utilitarianism with a curious mixture of socialist and what can only be called feudal visions of the way the world should be. The response to the published lectures was much the same as that accorded Unto this Last three years later. The Manchester Examiner and Times dismissed his ideas for state intervention as "arrant nonsense."13 Even George Eliot, who admired him greatly, wrote a friend that the book contained "some magnificent passages, mixed up with stupendous specimens of arrogant absurdity on some economical points."14 The criticisms are not without foundation. Some parts of the work appear remarkably naive, even for a writer who confessed not to be a political economist. Despite these shortcomings, however, there was then and remains now a deep appeal to Ruskin's criticism. It is not the internecine carping about economics by economists; rather, it is the fundamental rejection of liberalism for its effect on the human condition.

The nature of this radical rejection and its articulation depends much on its origin and evolution within Ruskin himself. Where did his political conscience come from? He was, as we have seen, a privileged child. As an adult he never had to work for wages. The comfortable living he maintained and the large donations he was able to make to charities

12 Volumes 3 and 4 of Modern Painters were published in 1856, volume 5 in 1860; "The Nature of Gothic" is in the second volume of The Stones of Venice, published in 1853. There were other speeches that indicated Ruskin's growing political awareness, but they were usually delivered to small specific groups, like the labourers on the Oxford Museum, and were not as widely available to a larger public. C & W 16: x. The "Political Economy of Art" lectures were delivered on July 10th and 13th, 1857 and published that December. Ruskin reissued the lectures with some additions in 1880 under a different title: 'A Joy Forever' and its Price in the Market. C & W 16: xvii.

13 Manchester Examiner and Times July 14, 1858. C & W 16, xxv.

and museums were the result of his father's success importing sherry from Spain for a
wealthy British clientele. The Ruskin fortune was, in other words, the product of just the
kind of entrepreneurial initiative that the new laissez-faire political economists
rationalized. What was it that made him see, for example, the political reality of the lives
of his father's foreign labourers who were the source of his own wealth? How did Ruskin
come to the position that he could ask himself why

these graceful and gay Andalusians, who played guitars, danced boleros, and fought
bulls, should virtually get no good of their own beautiful country but the bunch of
grapes or stalk of garlic they frugally dined on; that its precious wine was not for them,
still less the money it was sold for; but the one came to crown our Vandalic feasts, and
the other furnished our Danish walls with pictures, our Danish gardens with milk and
honey, and five noble houses in Paris with the means of beautiful dominance in its
Elysian fields.\textsuperscript{15}

His social conscience seems as unlikely to have come from any systematic reading of
political theory as from his family background. Prior to his entry into political matters
Ruskin was an unabashed dilettante. He collected art and geological specimens; he
travelled abroad often. In addition to writing \textit{Modern Painters, Seven Lamps of
Architecture} and \textit{Stones of Venice}, he devoted part of each day to drawing and poetry. He
confessed in the introduction to \textit{The Political Economy of Art} (1857) that he had "never
read any author on Political Economy, except Adam Smith, twenty years ago."\textsuperscript{16} He was
being somewhat disingenuous in this candour, for he mentions John Stuart Mill specifically
later in the same work\textsuperscript{17} and quotes Ricardo and Mill at some length in \textit{Unto This Last}.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15}Ruskin, \textit{Praeterita}, C & W 35: 409. The Danish walls are, of course, those of
Denmark Hill, the Ruskin residence for many years. The five noble houses are those of the
French wine merchants that then dominated the trade and, consequently, the Champs
Elysees.

\textsuperscript{16}Ruskin, Preface to "A Joy Forever" (1857), C & W 16: 10.

\textsuperscript{17}Ruskin, "A Joy Forever" (1857), C & W 16: 131.
However, his confession appears to be not so very far from the mark overall. His diary references to "doing Pol. Econ." in the 1860s refer to Plato's *Laws*, Xenophon's *Economist* or even Jeremiah\(^{19}\) rather than Naussau Senior or Malthus, neither of whom he seems to have been familiar with.\(^{20}\) What he did read of contemporary economic theory, and he often preferred some secondary sources to the originals,\(^{21}\) seems to have been ingested only to be refuted in some lecture or book that he was working on at the time.

Perhaps this criticism of Ruskin defines political economy too narrowly to comprehend his undertaking. While it certainly may have been bewildering for a Ricardo or Mill to be confronted with what Horace said about the proper use of wealth, or with Xenophon's comments on utility and value,\(^{22}\) Ruskin's sense of political economy was not limited to the new science of the Manchester School. For Ruskin the present practice was a "science of darkness; probably a bastard science"\(^{23}\) which he weighed against other

\(^{18}\) Ruskin, "Unto this Last" (1860), C & W 17: 80-83.


\(^{20}\) For a recent discussion of Ruskin's awareness of political economy see Alan Lee, "Ruskin and Political Economy: Unto this Last" and Linda Austin, *The Practical Ruskin: Economics and Audience in the Late Work* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1991) which discusses the work of the 1870s and 1880s.

\(^{21}\) For example, he apparently preferred Fawcett's popularized version of Mill and his references to Bastiat and others after 1860 were taken from Whewell's compilation of *Six lectures on Political Economy* (1862). His refutation of Jevons's *Theory of Political Economy* was based on a review in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. From Lee, 69, 86 n4. C & W 27: 246-7


\(^{23}\) Ruskin, *Unto this Last* (1860), C & W 17: 92.
visions of political economy, and found wanting. For Ruskin these other visions were usually classical or Biblical, and may have had little apparent relevance to emergent capitalism, but they provided the necessary contrast for a scathing critique of contemporary society.

Where the economic status of his family and his basic ignorance of economic theory would make him an unlikely candidate to write a jeremiad against modern capitalism two factors were to change that: Thomas Carlyle and landscape. There is no question that Ruskin was deeply indebted to Thomas Carlyle, as much for his method and style as for the moral nature of his social criticism. The two share an evangelical fervour for reform, a declamatory style that echoes the pulpit, and a deep moral indignation at the condition of modern England. They admired and respected each other’s work and their friendship lasted from when they met around 1847 until Carlyle’s death in 1881.24 Carlyle’s Past and Present (1843) was a seminal work for the young Ruskin. In it, along with Sartor Resartus (1834) and Latter Day Pamphlets (1850) he avowed “all has been said that needs to be said, and far better than I shall ever say it.”25 Reciprocally, Carlyle was one of the few voices of encouragement among the general remonstration at the publication of Unto this Last (1860). His letter of congratulation to Ruskin shows the camaraderie that grew up between them:

You go down thro’ those unfortunate Dismal-science people [the political economists], like a Treble-x of Senna, Glauber and Aloes; like a fit of British Cholera,—threatening to be fatal! . . . more power to yf elbow (tho’ it is cruel in the extreme)! If you chose to stand to that kind of work for the next 7 years, and work out there a result like what you have done in painting: yes, there were a “something to do,”—not easily measurable

24 Clearly Ruskin saw the older Carlyle, the “sage of Chelsea,” as his mentor and an intellectual father. There is something of a fawning tone to Ruskin’s early correspondence, and in the 70s he takes to calling Carlyle “Papa”.

25 Ruskin, Munera Pulveris (1872), C & W 17: 287.
in importance to these sunk ages. Meantime my joy is great to find myself henceforth in a minority of two at any rate!—26

Around the time the two probably met,27 but years before Ruskin systematically turned his mind to social questions, Carlyle told the visiting Emerson that he thought it "the only question for wise men, instead of art and fine fancies and poetry and such things, to address themselves to the problem of society."28 That the young Ruskin, privileged, articulate and accomplished as he was, should turn to social issues must have seemed a fulfillment of Carlyle's fondest dreams.

Too much may be made of Carlyle's obvious influence on Ruskin, however, and too little made of the singular journey Ruskin made to arrive at what is really a unique social criticism. The theory that Carlyle alone transformed Ruskin into a political creature is predicated on the fallacy that after about 1860 Ruskin was a social critic, before that an exegete of art. This is simply not true. Ruskin continued to write about, teach, collect and donate art until insanity kept him from doing anything at all. Reciprocally, as we have seen, his early work raised central political issues. Even Carlyle could not transform Ruskin from aesthete to activist or waken a sleeping social conscience if Ruskin were unwilling or unready. Carlyle may have been an important catalyst, but the origins of Ruskin's social criticism lie in the most unlikely quarter of all: his lifelong study of landscape painting.

26 Carlyle first called political economy the "dismal science" in "The Nigger Question" (1849). Senna, Glauber's salt and aloes were purgatives popular at the time. Letter to Ruskin, October 29, 1860. George Allen Cate, The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 89.

27 The general consensus is that "Ruskin first read Carlyle in 1841, first became interested in him between 1843 and 1847, and first met him sometime between 1847 and 1850." Cate, 3.

28 Ibid., 5.
If his socioeconomic background and education made Ruskin an unlikely prospect for political protest, at first glance landscape aesthetics appeared even less likely to breed dissent. In addition, what Ruskin read of aesthetics and what he did with what he read is frustratingly hard to determine. Some writers assume he was comparatively unversed, and that he and his readers are the beneficiaries of his ignorance:

Ruskin was not aware of the variety in aesthetic speculation that marked the century before his; he was not widely read. He was ignorant of Jonathan Richardson who influenced Reynolds, and he seems never to have read Hume, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Gerard, Baillie or Spence. The empirical suggestions of the earlier French writers were unknown to him except as they appeared in Burke's Essay and he had not yet given himself the privilege of losing patience with the confusing subtleties of German idealism. Far from being a handicap, his ignorance left him unembarrassed by too great familiarity with the theoretical chessboard. Locke, Hogarth, Burke, Reynolds and the Academicians he knew, and they inevitably suggested the problems which had been the chief theoretical interests of the eighteenth century. To certain theories he took an aversion, as for instance the literal theory of Imitation supported by Opie and Fuseli; but with other opinions he fell into line.\(^9\)

This estimate of Ruskin's awareness of previous criticism seems a gross oversimplification—one often hears clear echoes of other writers that he is not supposed to have read—but it is fair to say that he seldom felt any obligation to credit his sources or to respect whatever consistency they may have had in their original state. It is not productive to trace here which specific writers he did or did not read at any given point in his career. It is more to the present purpose to delineate these dominant aesthetic assumptions that constituted the critical climate; they provided the context in which Ruskin wrote and within which he was read. They were inescapable and can be traced clearly in the work of a few central writers.

The eighteenth-century British aesthetics which dominated Ruskin's time were, in short, as effective an impediment to political insight as the painting and poetry they described. Aesthetics provided the unassailable critical authority for the abstraction of art from life. As at other times, the relationship of aesthetics to art was tautological: the role of criticism was prescriptive as well as descriptive. In this case what was prescribed was an art—whatever other virtues it may have demonstrated—disengaged from a wide range of social issues. This is not to say that art and criticism had no social consequences. On the contrary, there were eventually enormous repercussions for all levels of British society as a result of the attitudes such aesthetics engendered. Nor is it fair to say that this 'aesthetics of disengagement' was a conscious refusal to confront perceived political concerns. Exponents, whether with brush or pen, were confident that they were addressing the most pressing concerns of their day—concerns that would be anachronisms by Ruskin's time, except for the atavistic shadow they cast on later art and aesthetics.

Eighteenth-century art and connoisseurship assumed a world of clear class distinctions and functions, as outlined in chapter 2. The purpose of art, at least of high art, was didactic. It served as a "conduct-book for rulers" and for "Gentlemen, whose high birth and Fortune call them to the most Important of all Studies; that, of Men, Manners

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30 This is not to discount the work of artists like William Hogarth who exposed bankrupt social mores in works like *Marriage a la Mode*, sermonized in *A Rake's Progress*, and inveighed against contemporary legislation that made alcohol cheap and readily available in *Gin Lane*. However, these were considered work of a much lower genre and, when Hogarth wrote his treatise on aesthetics, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), he forsook politics and reverted to a discussion of the abstract 'serpentine line' as the key to pictorial beauty.

and Things, or Virtue and publick Good.'"\textsuperscript{32} If such were the purpose of painting, an obvious hierarchy of genres emerged: landscape and portraiture, which satisfies only the senses, were low on a scale which history or 'epic' painting dominated. This scale, it was made clear, was not a matter of taste, but of "soundness of judgement." How can "those works which remind us of the poverty and meanness of your nature, be considered as of equal rank with what excites ideas of grandeur, or raises and dignifies humanity; or, in the works of a late poet [Goldsmith], 'which makes the beholder learn to venerate himself as a man?'"\textsuperscript{33} How indeed?

The history of eighteenth-century aesthetics and the way in which they served their particular public is a fascinating study,\textsuperscript{34} but one that serves as a background to the present discussion. A theory of art that began as a call to public virtue and civic humanism became, by Ruskin's time, a means of removing art far from political discourse. Rather than trace the rise and fall of the great eighteenth-century 'republic of taste,' we will focus here on certain common beliefs and assumptions that acted as strategies of distancing: the hierarchy of genres, idealization, authority, and association. Whether or not these practices we call 'strategies' intentionally disenfranchised certain classes or marginalized certain art and readings of art for political control is less important than that they had that effect.

\textsuperscript{32} George Turnbull, \textit{A Treatise on Ancient Painting, containing Observations on the Rise, Progress, and Decline of that Art amongst the Greeks and Romans}, 1740, 15, 134-7 from Barrell, \textit{Political Theory of Painting}, 19.

\textsuperscript{33} Joshua Reynolds, \textit{Discourses on Art} Robert R. Wark, ed. (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1959), 130.

\textsuperscript{34} John Barrell has traced the connections of this "republic of taste" to political practices in \textit{The Political Theory of Painting}. See also, David Solkin's recent books \textit{Richard Wilson: the Landscape of Reaction} (London: Tate Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, 1982) and \textit{Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
Singly and together these assumptions worked to obscure the political significance of painting.

One of the most obvious of these strategies, and one with an obvious cause, is the organization of the various types of painting into a hierarchy of genres with history painting at the top, landscape and portraiture much lower, and the ‘vulgar’ Dutch genre scenes of village life far below that. Clearly, this hierarchy is not one which Dutch patrons of a century earlier would have chosen. It speaks instead to its own public: the landed English Gentleman of the eighteenth century. For him and his class, art embodied a philosophy consistent with social practice. History painting and epic poetry, which consisted largely of classical and Biblical subjects, provided paradigms of public virtue for members of the “republic of taste.” Needless to say, the citizens of this republic were few in number, but their sparse numbers were more than compensated for by their disproportionate wealth and power. These chosen “citizens” esteemed history painting above all:

A history is preferable to a landscape, sea-piece, animals, fruit, flowers, or any other still-life, pieces of drollery, &c. the reason is, the latter kinds may please, and in proportion as they do so they are estimable, . . . but they cannot improve the mind, they excite no noble sentiments.\(^{35}\)

This hierarchy assumed that some paintings ought to have a moral or ethical dimension, but that landscape had no such obligation. History painting, while it marginalized landscape and other genres which merely please the eye, putatively addressed the heart and mind “which gives to painting its true dignity, which entitles it to the name of a Liberal Art, and ranks it as a sister of poetry.”\(^{36}\) An artist of genius, Reynolds declared in his


\(^{36}\) Reynolds, 50.
lectures to the Royal Academy, must "disdain the humbler walks of painting" and embrace "poetical subjects" gleaned from the great authors. A painter who wishes to be renowned is obliged to be well-read for he "can never be a great artist, who is grossly illiterate." More specifically than that, however, he must read the classics and the Bible for they will be the subjects of his great paintings, as they are already of great literature. A painter should therefore read the best books, such as Homer, Milton, Virgil, Spenser, Thucydides, Livy, Plutarch, &c. but chiefly the Holy Scripture; where is to be found an inexhaustible spring, and the greatest variety of the most sublime thoughts, expressed in the Noblest manner in the world.

This hierarchy of genres and the ascendancy of history painting had the effect of eclipsing landscape as a meaningful subject and locating moral significance in a time and place remote from the viewer. The surrounding English countryside faded before a vision of Mediterranean or scriptural heroism conjured by ancient poets and artists, rendered once more by artists steeped in tradition. Indeed, civilization itself depended upon antiquity for its existence; when the ancients "cease to be studied, arts will no longer flourish, and we shall again relapse into barbarism."

According to this hierarchy, landscape could only become great, as much as that is possible, by approximating history painting. Such a landscape eradicates the original topography for a "poetical representation" and such an artist "requires a mind thrown back

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 256. Reynolds uses this term throughout the Discourses to distinguish historical painting from any other genre.
39 Ibid., 117.
40 Richardson, 85.
41 Reynolds, 106.
two thousand years, and as it were naturalized in antiquity, like that of Nicolo Poussin, to achieve [sic] it.\textsuperscript{42} The landscapes that receive praise under such a system are not landscapes at all; they are elaborate dioramas for the re-enactment of scenes like Jacob's dream or the return of the arc from captivity.\textsuperscript{43} The genius of painters who specialized in such scenes—Salvator Rosa, Claude Lorraine, and Gaspar Poussin—was widely acknowledged and they were venerated almost as much as the ancients they emulated.\textsuperscript{44} In a system where landscape aspired to become history painting, it is ironic that the term history painting was itself a euphemism. The subject of such paintings may have been historical, but the spirit was to be poetical:

To paint a history, a man ought to have the main qualities of a good historian, and something more; he must go higher, and have the talents requisite to a good poet, the rules for the conduct of a picture being much the same with those to be observed in writing a poem; and Painting, as well as poetry, requiring an elevation of genius beyond what mere historical narration does.\textsuperscript{45}

As a result, history painting was not simply the painting of historical events, it was the image of history as told by the poet and painted by the equally or even more inspired artist. A great painter like Raphael by this measure "is not only equal, but superior to a

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 256.

\textsuperscript{43} Both are paintings by Salvator Rosa specifically praised by Reynolds, 256.

\textsuperscript{44} Richardson acknowledges that Italy has produced the best modern painting, and specifically acknowledges Salvator Rosa, Claude Lorraine and Gaspar Poussin (Dughet) in the field of landscape. Richardson, 21.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 12.
Virgil, or a Livy, or a Thucydides, or a Homer and "History is made to bend and conform to this great idea of Art."

The taste for art like this, whatever else it may have done, was unlikely to engender an acute awareness of British history or geography. Its function, of course, had nothing to do with understanding either of these things; it had everything to do with consolidating a class of people through shared knowledge and legitimating the status of that class by positing its continuity with an ancient order. The wealthy Briton knew his social peers by their taste in art, and they all belonged to a "republic of taste" which itself rose from the foundations of Athens and Rome. Taste bespoke class and all admired and emulated what they agreed the ancients themselves esteemed. This social function was served admirably by eighteenth-century art and aesthetics, no doubt, but the inevitable effect was to distance viewers of whatever class from the world which pressed around them.

At times British aesthetics exhibited what can only be described as an almost paranoic response to the world. It wasn't always enough to locate the subject and significance of art in a distant land and a remote time. Apparently, the best art portrayed something that never existed anywhere at anytime. According to this dictum, the artist of genius should be no more a slave to appearances than to history or place which constitute "vulgar and strict historical truth." To paint great works it is necessary to transcend mere appearances through a process of idealization:

The great, and chief ends of Painting are to raise, and improve nature; and to communicate ideas. . . . The business of Painting is not only to represent nature, but to make the best choice of it; nay to raise, and improve it from what is commonly, or even

46 Ibid., 18.

47 Reynolds, 244.

48 Ibid., 59.
rarely seen, to what never was, or will be in fact, though we may easily conceive it might be. *(italics mine)*

This process of idealization was assisted by an associated practice of generalization, and often the two are indistinguishable. The particular and individual qualities of any subject must be rigorously suppressed, for "perfect beauty in a species must combine all the characters which are beautiful in that species," *(italics mine)* from which "every deviation is deformity." *(italics mine)* Dr. Johnson applied the theory to all the arts and, as usual, expressed it concisely: "the most useful truths are always universal, and unconnected with accidents and customs." *(italics mine)* The results of this theory for history painting and the other genres do not concern us here as much as the consequences for landscape. In practice, the landscape painter of genius,

sends the imagination back into antiquity; and, like the Poet, he makes the elements sympathize with his subject . . . whether mountains have sudden or bold projections, or are gently sloped; whether the branches of his trees shoot out abruptly in right angles from their trunks, or follow each other with only a gentle inclination. All these circumstances contribute to the general character of the work, whether it be of the elegant, or the more sublime kind . . . a landscape thus conducted, under the influence of a poetical mind, will have the same superiority over the more ordinary and common views, as Milton's *Allegro* and *Penseroso* have over a cold prosaick narration or description; and such a picture would make a more forcible impression on the mind than the real scenes, were they presented before us." *(italics mine)*

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49 Richardson, 176.

50 Reynolds, 47.

51 Ibid., 45.


54 Reynolds, 238.
There it is. Landscape, constructed of select elements cribbed together from many views, set in a foreign land and a distant time, has a greater effect on the viewer than real scenes of one’s own place and time.

The divorce of landscape painting from any actual scene spawned some remarkable techniques which demonstrate how abstract the relationship between nature and the painted landscape had become. Alexander Cozens, drawing master to George III’s sons, published an innovative guide for artists in 1785. Because the actual scene is dispensable in landscape painting, Cozens assumed there was no need to refer to common nature at all:

Composing landscapes by invention, is not the art of imitating individual nature; it is more; it is forming artificial representations of landscape on the general principles of nature . . . concentrating in each individual composition the beauties, which judicious imitation would select from those which are dispersed in nature. (italics mine)\(^{55}\) Instead of nature, Cozens recommends blots as the basis of a good landscape. A blot, after all, has few of the accidents of individual nature about it, and from a distance has much of the spirit of drawing. The process is simple and succinctly described in a set of rules near the end of his treatise. Rule one: prepare the ink. Rule two: prepare the transparent paper for later tracing. The third rule, making the blots, is slightly more involved. Before actually taking up the brush and blotting, Cozens says you must “possess your mind strongly with a subject.” If this should prove difficult, he advises readers that “Descriptions of the Kinds of Landscape Compositions, given hereafter, will be of use in furnishing the mind with an idea of a subject.”\(^{56}\) There are eleven kinds listed at the end in what reads like an abbreviated catalogue raisonné of compositions from Claude and other


\(^{56}\) Cozens, 179.
campagna artists. Then, with the subject firmly in mind, take a large camel’s hair brush, dip it, and “with the swiftest hand make all possible variety of shapes and strokes upon your paper, confining the disposition of the whole to the general subject in your mind.”57 After that, you can “adapt a sky proper to the landscape, from the collection of skies”58 and refine the blot with the appropriate detail, shading and hues. Cozens’ blots replace drawing from nature and the pedestrian pastime of rendering what lies before you. It was a popular method that allowed both the amateur and the professional to achieve the proper distance from any particular subject while still displaying all the qualities of good painting. The essential part of a landscape can exist entirely outside of any subject, place or time. Blotting, we are told, although we are not told precisely how, can provide a “proper choice of the subject, strength of character, taste, picturesqueness, proportion, keeping, expression of parts or objects, harmony, contrast, light and shade, effect, &c.” All that remains for it to become conventional landscape is “only a habit in the draughtsmanship, of imitating what he sees before him, which any one may learn through practice, assisted by some simple method.”59

Cozens’ method, while it appears extreme, clearly illustrates a common assumption of eighteenth-century aesthetics: it is not a matter of the specific scene depicted, but what is evoked by the painting. These thoughts and emotions arise from a series of associations caused by an idealized subject or the composition of the work, or both. Cozens, of course, emphasizes the power of composition itself to elicit that aesthetic response; subject doesn’t enter his discussion except as composition. There is something of automatism or

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57 Ibid., 180.
58 Ibid., 182.
59 Ibid., 174.
the seance in his technique: the artist, like a medium possessed with the spirit of "Nature methodiz'd," moves the brush rapidly across the paper guided by inspiration, not by the eye. Only later in the process do terrestrial objects actually appear, and they are clearly not the source of any aesthetic effect for Cozens.

Cozens' work, however, assumes even more than this in its understanding of how art affects the viewer. His blots are forms subconsciously abstracted from earlier paintings which demonstrate generalized principles of nature. The effect, then, occurs in the response of the viewer; specific nature is removed from the interchange except as a platonic ideal at some distant remove. Cozens' is a psychological theory of art that requires an inherent faith that all people respond similarly to the same thing, that there are, in the words of his influential contemporary Edmund Burke, "principles, on which the imagination is affected, so common to all, so grounded and certain, as to supply the means of reasoning satisfactorily about them." These common principles, which it is in the interest of every artist to master, have surprisingly little to do with subject. True, a scene with antique overtones is expected, but the imagination is stirred by abstract qualities that give a subject its effect. The list of qualities varies over the century, but one of the most thorough investigations of the principle occurs in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful with an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste; and Several Other Additions* (1757). It was an immensely

60 The phrase is from Pope's "An Essay on Criticism," l. 89, but Cozens quotes it to introduce his descriptions of various kinds of landscape that will aid the artist when inspiration fails.

popular and influential work that laid out for the reader the nature of both the sublime and
the beautiful and the means by which they might be achieved. Our feelings of the sublime,
for example, lie in “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger,
that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or
operates in a manner analogous to terror . . . [and] is productive of the strongest emotion
which the mind is capable of feeling.62 What will create the sense of the sublime? Rather
than list natural phenomena—Niagara, Mont Blanc, Etna, Jura—Burke discusses abstract
qualities like obscurity, vastness, privation and suddenness. The objects themselves are not
sublime, instead they have abstract properties which affect us so that we perceive
sublimity. A storm is not itself sublime; it is vast, it is obscure, it is sudden. These qualities
fill us with terror, therefore we consider the storm sublime. The tautological nature of this
argument can be particularly obvious and amusing when Burke discusses beauty.
According to Burke, those things we consider beautiful “excite in us the passion of love,
or some correspondent affection.”63 Things which, apparently, excite this passion are
small, smooth, delicate, and show gradual variation. As an example of especially the last
quality, Burke suggests we

observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about
the neck and breasts; the smoothness, the softness, the easy and insensible swell, the
variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same, the deceitful
maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or
whither it is carried.64

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62 Ibid., 58.

63 Ibid., 210. The “correspondent affection” Burke refers to acquires some
ominous overtones later when Burke concludes that “we submit to what we admire, but
we love what submits to us.” Burke, 212.

64 Ibid., 216.
Burke’s aesthetic appreciation seems not entirely disinterested and his usually controlled prose becomes as giddy as his eye in this “demonstration of that change of surface, continual, and yet hardly perceptible at any point, which forms one of the great constituents of beauty.” Burke’s logic is important and should be absolutely clear. Jagged mountains shrouded in mist and scarred by gorges filled with raging torrents are not themselves sublime, instead they owe their sublimity to vastness, obscurity and the like. Thus, paintings which convey the impression of these qualities are also sublime and have the added advantage that they are safer to admire. According to Burke’s theory, the artist creates the viewer’s response by manipulating abstract qualities. To awe the viewer, effects of magnitude and power are necessary, not mountains. Again, the physical world is set at a distance and replaced with the aesthetic construct.

Archibald Alison, the last of the eighteenth-century aestheticians, allows subject a central place in the viewer’s experience, but the value of a subject lies, again, not in itself. For Alison aesthetic value lies in associations. Alison, like Burke, believed there was a “uniform constitution of the human mind” that was basic to all emotional response. He differed from Burke, however, in his understanding of our encounter with the physical world. Burke said that we respond to abstract qualities, like vastness or obscurity, which the object we encounter just happens to have. Alison goes further: objects are not considered sublime or beautiful in themselves, or even in the abstract qualities they manifest, but only in their ability to set in motion a train of associations. Such a train of

65 Ibid., 216.


67 Ibid., ix.
associations may make us "conscious of a variety of images in our minds, very different from those which the objects themselves can present to the eye." So, Runnymede and Rome are far richer in association than they are in reality. When we are in front of such scenes,

Trains of pleasing or of solemn thought arise spontaneously within our minds, our hearts swell with emotions, of which the objects before us seem to afford no adequate cause; and we are never so satiated with delight, as when, in recalling our attention, we are unable to trace either the progress or the connection of those thoughts, which have passed with so much rapidity through our imagination.

Alison's aesthetics serve as effectively as the others to distance viewers from what lies before them, but some of the implications are very different. The significance of what Alison calls "External Scenery" lies not in what is seen but in what associations are made. Thus, the valley of Vaucluse owes much if not all of its celebrated beauty to the fact that Petrarch dwelt there, just as Runnymede owes its sublimity to the events of 1215. What, then, is the plight of those visitors who have not read their Petrarch, or have forgotten their grade school history lesson about the Magna Carta and bad King John? The landscapes of Vaucluse and Runnymede simply do not exist, or do not exist in anything like the same way, for them as they do for others. For example, sounds only acquire their meaning through association and,

To those who have no associations, or who consider them simply as Sounds, they have no beauty. ... To the peasant, the Curfew is only the mark of the hour of the evening,—the Sheep-bell, the sign of the neighbourhood of the flock,—the sound of a Cascade, the sign of the falling of water, &c. Give them the associations which men of

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68 Ibid., 3.

69 Ibid., 3.

70 Ibid., 16.
cultivated imagination have with such sounds, and they will infallibly feel their beauty.\footnote{153}

The richest associations are reserved for the "cultivated" person, which is to say male and upper class, because associations are a cultural acquisition.

According to Alison, "the generality live in the world, without receiving any kind of delight, from the various scenes of beauty which its order displays"\footnote{44} because they have no associations to be set in motion. Ordinary events remain ordinary until the chain of associations commences. Associations may come from many places but according to Alison one of the richest sources is poetry. Poetry transports viewers to an Arcadia where it is no longer

common nature that appears to surround them. It is nature embellished and made sacred by the memory of Theocritus and Virgil, and Milton and Tasso; their genius seems still to linger among the scenes which inspired it, and to irradiate every object where it dwells; and the creation of their fancy, seem the fit inhabitants of that nature, which their descriptions have clothed with beauty.\footnote{46}

These associations become crucial to any aesthetic response because "Matter in itself is unfitted to produce any kind of emotion."\footnote{126} In a passage eerily prescient of Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, and in almost identical language, Alison explains the common confusion that can occur between the inert material object and our response to it:

the constant connection we discover between the sign and the thing signified, between the material quality and the quality productive of Emotion, renders at last the one expressive to us of the other, and very often disposes us to attribute to the sign, that effect which is produced only by the quality signified.\footnote{128}

\footnote{153}{Ibid., 153.}

\footnote{44}{Ibid., 44.}

\footnote{46}{Ibid., 46.}

\footnote{126}{Ibid., 126.}

\footnote{128}{Ibid., 128. General similarities between the two can be seen in Roland Barthes, \textit{Elements of Semiology} (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), for a remarkable parallel see }
According to Alison, we should not make the mistake of saying that the view of a moor is desolate or a meadow cheerful; they are merely scenes which have some few properties—"established Imagery"—which set in motion a train of associations which in turn arouse our emotions. The meadow is green, green is the colour of earth in spring, spring is a season of promise, Theocritus speak of lambs in meadows in spring—these are cheerful things, as are the host of associations that follow upon them.

This analysis of the work of Richardson, Reynolds, Cozens, Burke and Alison does not pretend to be an exhaustive, nor a comprehensive, overview of their contribution to eighteenth-century aesthetics. Instead the focus has been on the way these thinkers describe the relationship between nature and art, especially as that relationship affects landscape. Whatever their differences, and there are many, all of these men argue that what lies before our eyes is not the stuff of art. Reynolds and Richardson advise the painter to paint a noble subject from the classics or the Bible in an idealized style, which can only be achieved by a study of the ancient masters and the principles of painting. Cozens would suggest the painter not start with a scene at all; a blot will do as nicely. Burke cares nought for what is before the painter, save as it demonstrates those qualities that affect the viewer with feelings of sublimity or beauty. Alison admits that some subject

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Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in Mythologies (London: Granada, 1957), 113. Alison also anticipates Reader-response theory in his discussion of how different individuals will have different associations and even the same individual will respond differently at different times depending on his or her frame of mind at any given moment.

76 Ibid., 208.

77 For an overview of these and other aesthetic philosophers in relation to the picturesque see Walter John Hipple, The Beautiful, the Sublime, & the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957).
is necessary, but the value of it lies in the associations it can evoke in a cultivated viewer. All of these writers espouse aesthetics that distance the viewer from the natural world. The world as we see it, they tell us, is not meaningful; it must be reformed in some way to be made significant. The art of landscape transforms that which lies before us into a world of meaning, but in the process this actual world is drained of all aesthetic value. This is the aesthetic discourse that Ruskin struggled with as he sought to reinvest the material world with significance.
Chapter 5

A Matter of Taste: The Moral Landscape

"Taste is not only a part and an index of morality;—it is the ONLY morality."¹

Ruskin’s ringing proclamation sounds distinctly odd to modern ears. What did he mean by morality and, more specifically, what did he mean when he used the word “taste” in such a context? To our ears it sounds like some effete, fin de siècle hyperbole by Wilde or Baudelaire, a clever inversion of their dictum that the only morality is taste. Not so for Ruskin. It may be a measure of the triumph of modernism that the words morality and taste sound so peculiar in the same sentence, but for Ruskin the goal was to infuse into an earlier aesthetic vocabulary some sense of political morality.

Part of the problem in understanding Ruskin’s declaration lies in the fact that he really seems to have meant it where others did not, or at least he meant it in a way that others did not. He made the statement in a speech delivered on April 21, 1864 in the Bradford town hall to a group of entrepreneurs planning a new exchange building.² Ruskin was the

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¹ John Ruskin, “Traffic” (1864), C & W 18: 434.

² Ruskin had a long and interesting acquaintance with the citizens of Bradford which is thoroughly described in Malcolm Hardman’s Ruskin and Bradford: An Experiment in Victorian Cultural History (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).
undisputed authority on Gothic architecture ever since he published “The Nature of Gothic” in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853), and the burghers of Bradford presumably expected him to speak about the charms of gothic revivalism. Instead, they were told that they ought to dedicate their new building with a statue to the deity of capitalist progress: “Britannia of the Market,” the “Goddess of Getting-on” with a “heart in the shape of a purse, with thirty slits in it, for a piece of money to go in at, on each day of the month.” The new exchange, a temple of capitalism, he suggested, should have a “frieze with pendant purses” and “pillars broad at the base, for the sticking of bills.” He was astonishingly frank with his audience when he told them that “while to one family this deity is indeed the Goddess of Getting-on, to a thousand families she is the Goddess of not Getting-on.” He then proceeded to strip his listeners of any *laissez-faire* smugness they might feel about deserving their prosperity by likening their success to luck in the lottery.

3 In his association of gothic architecture and social morality Ruskin was certainly influenced by Auguste-Charles Pugin’s *Contrasts; or, a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, and Similar Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (1836). Pugin, who collaborated with Charles Barry on the Houses of Parliament, contrasted the integrated architecture and society of an idealized medieval past with the vulgarity of nineteenth-century architecture and its associated social disintegration.


5 Ibid., 451.

6 Ibid., 450.

7 Ibid., 453.
Part of the impact of Ruskin’s lecture comes from the fact that he was reinstating a traditional relationship between taste and morality that had become distinctly and comfortably moribund. The last chapter described how writers of the previous century had established some conventionalized association between a taste for art and morality, usually with some obligatory statement that an appreciation of art will lead to virtue and thence to political power, though specifically how this was to occur beyond a general statement of the ability of art to teach and delight was seldom explained, except by analogy with great literature:

Is it . . . worthy of a gentleman to read Homer, Virgil, Milton, &c.? the works of the most excellent painters have the like beautiful descriptions, the like elevation of thought, and raise and move the passions, instruct and improve the mind as they do. Is it worth of a gentleman to employ, or divert himself by reading Thucydides, Livy, Clarendon, &c.? the works of the most excellent painters have the like beauty of narration, fill the mind with ideas of the like noble events, and inform, instruct and touch the soul alike.8

How precisely the reading of Homer “instructs and improves the mind” goes unexplained so the analogous function of painting is vague at best. However, if it does nothing else, the cultivation of taste was generally conceded to at least distract the wealthy from the active pursuit of vice:

Men of easy, and plentiful fortunes have commonly a great part of their time at their own disposal, and the want of knowing how to pass those hours away in virtuous amusements contributes perhaps as much to the mischievous effects of vice, as covetousness, pride, lust, love of wine, or any other passion whatsoever. If gentlemen therefore found pleasure in pictures, drawings, prints, statues, intaglios, and the like curious works of art; in discovering their beauties, and defects; in making proper observations thereupon; and in all the other parts of the business of a connoisseur, how

many hours of leisure would here be profitably employed, instead of what is criminal, scandalous, and mischievous!\textsuperscript{9}

The most compelling defence of taste, beyond merely deterring vice by distraction or encouraging general moral instruction, lay in its ability to instruct by presenting a paradigm of order and design. Although this claim too had all the faults and virtues of vagueness, simply put, it assumed that taste was the quest for a harmonious ideal of aesthetic beauty, and the attainment of taste released the connoisseur from narrow selfishness. Thus, “contemplation of universal rectitude and harmony which began by Taste, may, as it is exalted and refined, conclude in Virtue.”\textsuperscript{10} In a remarkable articulation of this idea, Reynolds described how taste improves one’s moral being by “disentangling the mind from appetite.”\textsuperscript{11} Appetite is personal and self serving; taste is concerned with truth and beauty in all things: a “man of real taste is always a man of judgment in other respects.”\textsuperscript{12} The less there is of personal appetite, the argument goes, the better one’s discernment in all things from paintings to Poor Laws. It follows that the man of real taste

\textsuperscript{9} Richardson, 191. Gilpin has “scarce ground to hope, that every admirer of picturesque beauty, is an admirer also of the beauty of virtue” and promises only a “rational, and agreeable amusement.” William Gilpin, \textit{Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape} (London: R. Blamire, 1792), 47. Neither Burke nor Alison make any overt mention of the relationship between taste and virtue but both assume a connection between taste and judgement, which has broader applications, in their psychological investigations.


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 142.
is inevitably the man of virtue, and the virtuous rather than the vicious, naturally, ought to
exercise power. But how is one to know the virtuous, and therefore the proper leaders, of
society? By the taste they exhibit, presumably, for taste is not only their tutor in the
school of virtue, it is a sign of their matriculation and mastery. The conceit in this
argument for taste as the wet-nurse and muse of virtue is an interesting one: taste in art
makes people virtuous and judicious by eradicating their private self interest; this
disinterestedness qualifies them for public political power.

Ruskin follows this ideology of taste, but only so far. He assumes with his
predecessors that “to teach taste is inevitably to form character” but he is not impressed
by the conceit that taste necessarily bespeaks virtue and rationalizes power. He tells the
merchants of Bradford that they cannot become virtuous, nor their power legitimate, just
because they exhibit a taste for gothic. The claim to virtue lies not in a display of taste but
in the practice of good taste: “taste for any pictures or statues is not a moral quality, but
taste for good ones is.” Ruskin’s confidence that “every nation’s vice, or virtue, was

13 For a discussion of the manner in which a taste for landscape qualifies one for
politics see page 32 above and John Barrell, “The Public Prospect and the Private View,”
in Landscape, natural beauty and the arts, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially 85. See also John Barrell, The
Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt (New Haven: Yale University


15 Ibid.
written in its art”16 allowed him to condemn the Bradford exchange as bad or false taste. And, if good taste had the power to engender virtue, false taste had the same power for vice. The moral failing of the Bradford entrepreneurs, and of English capitalists in general, was materialism, a sin that was only exacerbated by the attempt to disguise it with noble gothic architecture. According to Ruskin’s earlier writing, and the reason the Bradford bourgeoisie invited him to speak, Gothic architecture originally grew out of an integrated Christian society and it spoke of certain moral beliefs and social practices. To make such architecture serve Mammon was a moral travesty, or, rather, it was bad taste which was a symptom of the moral travesty that capitalism was perpetrating upon the disadvantaged, those upon whom Britannia of the market-place had turned her back. In time, the worship of Mammon and the neglect of virtues like faith and charity would lead not just to bad art and false taste, but, according to Ruskin, to no art at all: “Continue to make that forbidden deity your principal one, and soon no more art, no more science, no more pleasure will be possible.”17

This was to be Ruskin’s modus operandi; he and his audience were both aware of the traditional discourse, in this case that taste was an expression of morality, but Ruskin habitually revised the relationship. His Bradford audience hoped, probably unconsciously,  

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16 Ibid., 439-40. This is a recurring motif in Ruskin’s thought which is also specifically addressed in his Lectures on Art given at Oxford in 1870, especially in the third lecture on “The Relation of Art to Morals.” C & W 20: 73-94.
17 Ibid., 458.
to conflate moral virtue with economic success in the "good taste" of their gothic facade. Ruskin read the relationship of art and taste more deeply. If there is such a thing as good taste, there is equally such a thing a bad taste which is, in turn, evidence of immorality. For Ruskin, that immorality lies in the inhumanity of emergent capitalism. The false taste lies in presuming to adopt an architecture that has no connection with the lives of the Bradford businessmen, for they practice none of the virtues that first engendered gothic architecture. The contemporary chaos of English taste in Victorian England was clear evidence for Ruskin "that a nation cannot be affected by any vice, or weakness, without expressing it, legibly, and forever, either in bad art, or want of art."18 In contrast, Gothic art was originally the "language of a people inspired by resolute and common purpose, and rendering resolute and common fidelity to the legible laws of an undoubted God."19 This is not the world the Bradford merchants lived in and gothic should not be their architecture. In fact, they can find no legitimate art at all until they achieve "some conception of a true human state of life to be striven for—life, good for all men, as for yourselves."20 Thus Ruskin transforms aesthetic discourse into politics, as he would again and again.

Before we turn to landscape, one further, brief, example from his speech in Bradford will illustrate Ruskin's re-reading of orthodox aesthetics and the effect of revising that

18 Ibid., 437.
19 Ibid., 444.
20 Ibid., 458.
familiar discourse to engage in new and contentious polemics. Traditional treatises on
taste inevitably address themselves to the educated gentleman and speak of the ‘man of
taste’ throughout. An unquestioned assumption of gender and class pervades the
literature. Ruskin does not confront the issue of gender, but his understanding of the
relationship between class and taste sours the complacency of the tradition. Taste both
indicates and determines social class, he tells his audience. “The man who likes what you
like, belongs to the same class with you.” He illustrates his point by proposing a social
experiment:

You get hold of a scavenger or a costermonger, who enjoyed the Newgate Calendar
for literature, and ‘Pop goes the Weasel’ for music. You think you can make him like
Dante and Beethoven? I wish you joy of your lessons; but if you do, you have made a
gentleman of him:—he won’t like to go back to his costermongering.

There are three important insights in this simple passage: difference in taste is difference in
class. Secondly, taste is not disinterested: the man whose taste is “a pipe and a quatern of
gin” has different understandings and social aspirations than the man who prefers Livy
and a canto of Dante. Finally, to overcome differences in taste would be to obliterate class
distinctions and thus taste could be an agent of social reformation or even revolution

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21 Others certainly have, including Mary Wollstonecraft’s remarkable early reading
of Burke’s gendered aesthetics in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). Much later
Alan Liu describes the picturesque not in terms of the subject-object dialectic but of desire
and violence in *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,
1989).


23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 435.
although its traditional function at the time had been hegemonic. Ruskin posits a much more fluid and fragmented society in his revisionist discourse than those who had preceded him, but he assumes their aesthetic vocabulary to describe his social issues.

When Ruskin turns from architecture to landscape his method is the same. He transforms the highly developed discourse generated around landscape into social criticism. That earlier discourse has been described in previous chapters, along with some of its social implications; it remains here to observe its metamorphosis under Ruskin's hand from painting to radical politics.

Paradoxically, the picturesque is crucial to this transformation of landscape from a pictorial to a political debate. The picturesque has received a great deal of critical attention recently, but in all the discussion there has been little attention paid to the potential of landscape, and especially the picturesque, as a catalyst of political change. To judge the geography of England by the rules of painting superimposes the painted on the actual world. As we have seen in Chapters 2 and 3, when those rules of painting were defined by

25 Ruskin's desire to reform through taste, in the way he understood that word, is clear in projects like the Working Men's College, the Guild of St. George, his donations to museums, and his addresses to the worker in *Time and Tide, by Weare and Tyne* (1867) and *Fors Clavigera* (1871-8).

a few seventeenth-century continental artists and their patrons, the picturesque seems more a formula for political conservatism which ignores changing social conditions than an agent of political awareness. For the contemporary cultural materialist, the picturesque is generally considered "a central instrument in class warfare,"27 "almost an obscene practice," marked by its "notorious superficiality and moral neglect."28 There is, of course, a great deal of truth in this estimation, but it overlooks the fact that the picturesque was as much an actual process as an aesthetic theory. Where other theories claimed the independence of art from the accidents of the natural world, the picturesque placed the real and the ideal side by side. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of this action: Gilpin and his followers took their aesthetics out of the academy to every corner of the kingdom and beyond. Admittedly most of them travelled the same roads and admired the same views from the same "stations" and then validated the actual landscape by the degree to which it resembled the painted one, but the picturesque occurred outside the studio or the library and was not the private preserve of the cultivated man of taste. The picturesque provided for a new public some means of describing and evaluating the


28 Ian MacLaren, review of Alexander M. Ross, *The Imprint of the Picturesque on Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1986) in *English Studies in Canada* 14, No. 1:111. These words are MacLaren's but the attitude toward the picturesque is shared by Ann Bermingham, Raymond Williams, Alun Howkins, Stephen Daniels and most other contemporary writers on landscape.
landscape around them. Under Gilpin’s guidance middle-class men and women could become connoisseurs, connoisseurs of their own country.

Traditional landscape painting in England which imported or followed Italianate models had been, in Alison’s words, an attempt on the part of painters “to imitate what they did not possess; to import, as it were, the beauties which were not of their own growth; and in fact to create . . . the scenery which Nature and Fortune had denied them.” (italics mine) Estate planners imported the same images by constructing foreign scenery around the great houses. The picturesque was different; instead of the wholesale importation of actual paintings or massive sculpting of the land, the picturesque developed a local industry by superimposing painterly expectations upon the native landscape. In fact, the picturesque was not the same kind of import commodity as painting and gardening. It did not come to the viewer as paintings did. Those who wanted to appreciate it as Gilpin prescribed had to actually go somewhere, somewhere where nature and time dwelt together unperturbed by modern life. Any improvement a scene needed occurred


30 I speak principally of that strain of the picturesque which William Gilpin articulated in the 1770s and which is discussed in chapter 3. There is little evidence that Ruskin was much influenced by the later discussion in The Landscape by William Payne Knight and Essays on the Picturesque by Uvedale Price which, in my opinion, attempt to reintegrate Gilpin’s picturesque into the main aesthetic tradition. Gilpin’s importance to the debate is more recently acknowledged in Kim Ian Michasiw’s article “Nine Revisionist Theses on the Picturesque,” Representations, 38 (1992):76-100.

31 There is some irony here as those in search of the picturesque travelled conveniently to their destinations on roads that had been vastly improved for commercial
in the viewer's eye or in the judicious addition of a bush or hillock to a sketch, not through massive earth-moving projects like those of Capability Brown or Humphrey Repton.\textsuperscript{32}

The process of looking at local topography through picturesque aesthetics changed British viewing habits in a number of apparently contradictory ways. First, although the picturesque assumed that indigenous landscape only had value when it resembled a revered paradigm, at least it acknowledged that there was indigenous landscape. Second, it imbued that landscape with value by demonstrating that the qualities which made Claude's visions of the Campagna great exist as well within the British Isles. Where Alison had spoken of creating the scenery which "Nature and Fortune had denied them"\textsuperscript{33} the picturesque was a way "to reconcile a Briton to the scenery of his own country."\textsuperscript{34} Finally, the idea of the picturesque necessarily implied that there was landscape which was

\begin{itemize}
\item There is a fascinating discussion about the important difference between the owner's relation to landscape and that of a mere visitor. See Michasiw, 84 and Carol Fabricant, "The Literature of Domestic Tourism and the Public Consumption of Private Property" in \textit{The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature}. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown, eds. (New York & London: Methuen, 1987).
\item Alison, 328.
\end{itemize}
'unpicturesque,' which did not have the "particular quality, which makes objects chiefly pleasing in painting."\textsuperscript{35}

Each of these is important to the evolution of Ruskin's political insight and should be considered more fully. To acknowledge an English landscape that had value other than in the corn it could produce was to embrace a part of the realm which had been previously quite literally a \textit{terra incognita}. The anonymous traveller who described the Lake district in the 1630s as "nothing but hideous hills"\textsuperscript{36} was not describing the \textit{frisson} that later visitors would seek in the sublime, he was describing the same Westmorland that Defoe a century later similarly called "a country eminent only for being the wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in England, or even in Wales."\textsuperscript{37} The change from regarding landscape like that of the Lake District with fearful distaste to a century later considering it a "national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy"\textsuperscript{38} is a dramatic one in which the pursuit of the picturesque played a major role.

\textsuperscript{35} William Gilpin, \textit{Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape: to Which is Added a Poem, on Landscape Painting.} (London: Printed for R. Blamire, 1792), 6.


\textsuperscript{37} Daniel Defoe, \textit{A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain} (London: Dent, 1962), 270.

\textsuperscript{38} Wordsworth, \textit{Guide}, 225.
An even more dramatic example of the power of the picturesque over local geography and politics occurred in the transformation of Scotland from a dangerous foreign sympathizer harbouring Bonnie Prince Charlie in the rebellion of '45 to a wildly picturesque destination for the English traveller. The domestication of Scotland was achieved by, among other things, improved roads and picturesque images. The roads were built specifically to allow the rapid deployment of English troops, but they also carried battalions of tourists seeking a glimpse of Ben Nevis or Loch Lomond among the mists. The images that transformed Scotland were initially topographical maps of the country executed for military purposes. One of the most talented of these cartographers was Paul Sandby, celebrated for his later paintings as one of the first great landscape water-colourists in Britain. When strictly topographical, his work is very like the Ordinance Survey Maps walking tourists still use; when he depicted more expansive scenes, his style is gently picturesque. Sir Walter Scott provided a text for these images that was equally picturesque. His stories weave a rich tapestry of Scottish folklore and populate the glens and burns with the likes of Rob Roy and Robert the Bruce where Arcadian shepherds would be absurd. This bold company does not threaten the contemporary traveller, however, for all the battles are glories of the past and serve to create evocative associations for the scene, not as a call to arms. Much more could be said about the role of the picturesque in the historical envisioning of Britain as an entity, but it is clear at least
that it served as a way both to annex, and to comfortably acknowledge the otherness of England’s frontiers. There is little doubt that it originally worked well as an imperialist strategy both at home and abroad but few commentators seem to have considered the role of the picturesque in the rise of modern ethnic and nationalist movements. Tales of the great deeds of Fingal or the slaughter of Glencoe enlivened bleak stretches of Scottish landscape with rich associations for the traveller but it is sometimes overlooked that these were not only consumed by but often produced for the itinerant visitor. However, while they satisfied that market, they also fed the nationalistic appetite of the Scots with examples of the connections between their own landscape and culture.

Closely related to this realization that there was estimable landscape within the realm, that it did not have to be imported, was the understanding that the values landscape had elsewhere could obtain in Britain as well. These values are, initially, overwhelmingly

39 It is interesting to observe the differences in this process as it occurs in Scotland, Ireland and the Lake District. Scotland, Ireland and, to a lesser extent, Wales are similar in the picturesque mythologizing which occurred. The Lakes, in contrast, show none of this quality. Was there no indigenous culture to be mythologized? In any case, the great English Lake poets provide their own associations for the traveller in the way Cuchulain or Fingal do elsewhere; they have become the history rather than forging it.

40 *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem, in Six Books* (1762) is an interesting example of this process. These eerie tales of Gaelic Scotland in a remote past were attributed to Ossian by their translator, James Macpherson. They were later discovered to be the work of Macpherson himself, but not before they had become extremely popular in England and on the continent, and spawned dozens of Fingal’s caves to satisfy the appetite of tourists for mysterious destinations. True or false, such stories became a repository for nationalist history and myth which contribute to nationalist politics. It would be interesting to study, for example, the place of the picturesque in the poetry of Yeats, the patterns of readership, and the role of the picturesque in Irish nationalism.
pictorial. In reading picturesque guides there is inevitably some point at which the author
compares continental and British landscape, and the ostensibly geographical comparison is
made in a vocabulary that is more at home in the studio than among any physical
geographers. To describe Keswick, we are told by an early traveller,

would require the united powers of Claude, Salvator, and Poussin. The first would
throw his delicate sunshine over the cultivated vales, the scattered cots, the groves, the
lake, and wooded islands. The second would dash out the horror of the rugged cliffs,
the steeps, the hanging woods, and foaming water-falls; while the grand pencil of
Poussin would crown the whole with the majesty of the impending mountains.41

As the picturesque becomes more established as a way of thinking, the claims about the
value of insular landscape become increasingly confident.42 Later writers, again using the
language of the brush, claim equality for British scenery: “our northern mountains are not
inferior in beauty of line, or variety of summit, number of lakes, and transparency of water,

41 The author, Dr. Brown, made an early visit to the Lake District in 1751 and his
response to the scenery became a pattern for those who followed. Dr. Brown’s letter was
later published as an addendum in Thomas West’s very popular book, A Guide to the
Lakes in Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire. By the Author of The Antiquities of
Furness, 4th ed. (London: Printed for W. Richardson, under the royal Exchange; J.
Robson, New Bond Street; and W. Pennington, Kendal, 1789), 195.

42 The ascendancy of British landscape is closely related to continental events in its
early stages. Between the Battle of Utrecht (1713) and the French Revolution the
continental Grand Tour became increasingly popular. The revolution and the Napoleonic
wars ended the Grand Tour, and domestic tourism increased as a national pastime. Travel
in one’s own country was open to a far larger portion of the population than the
continental tour had been and the vogue did not disappear with the reopening of Europe
with the Battle of Waterloo. Gilpin wrote during the height of continental travel and
discovered the genius of Claude in British scenery; Wordsworth wrote during the
Napoleonic wars and found British landscape decidedly superior. Ruskin wrote long after
and seems to discuss continental and insular landscapes with equal ease.
not in colouring of rock, or softness of turf; but in height and extent only.” Wordsworth and Gilpin in their guides, which the Ruskins referred to on their own tours, claimed superiority for British scenery over anything on the continent. Lake Geneva was too big, the sunshine of southern Europe was “injurious to rural beauty,” and the Alps were too high. Lake Geneva, it appears, lacks the appropriate side-screens for good composition; it is the sunny climate of the promontory of Bellagio that encourages farmers to grow vines and spoil the foreground of Lake Como; and, if the Alps were reduced to the size of Skiddaw, they would be in better proportion to the surrounding scenery. Always these comparisons are made as if the scenes were painted, which is the essence of picturesque. Painted and real, though, the British countryside was revalued. It came to be considered as good as or better than its European counterpart as an embodiment of the principles of painting. If these principles of painting are expressed, and expressed better, in the Cheviots than in the Appenines, then why consult Claude? Whatever is to be learned from nature or painting, the lessons are to be learned as readily from a Turner, or a view of the Cotswolds, as from Claude’s *Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*. Thus the

43 West, 5.
44 William Gilpin, *Observations of Several Parts of the Counties of Cambridge, Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex; Also on Several Parts of North Wales; Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (London: 1809), 158.
45 Wordsworth, 235.
46 Ibid., 234.
picturesque made it more difficult to overlook the local landscape and keep one’s gaze fixed on the ancient and distant one.

Finally, and paradoxically, the concept of the picturesque contributed to the debate its aesthetic antithesis, the unpicturesque. Just as it had invested some sites and regions with value, it devalued others in the eye of the beholder. As we have come to expect, here too artistic choices reveal social attitudes. The picturesque is natural, irregular, semi-wild; the unpicturesque is the cultivated, regular and domesticated. In his quest for some picturesque scene or other, Gilpin traversed a good deal of the country which receives almost no mention in his many books. What is the quality of this scenery which precludes it from consideration? Now and then he indicates its character, as when crossing some fertile valley he describes it “as rich as it is extensive. But it is rich in the farmer’s eye, not in the painter’s. I scarce remember meeting a more unpicturesque tract of country.”

Productive countryside, then, is unpicturesque, and so is any sign of property:

. . . altho the picturesque traveller is seldom disappointed with pure nature, however rude . . . . He is disgusted with the formal separations of property—with houses, and towns, the haunts of men, which have much oftener a bad effect in landscape than a good one. . . . How flat, and insipid is the garden-scene! how puerile, and absurd!

In short, all signs of the “arts of industry are rejected,” agricultural or industrial, by the votary of the picturesque.

We should not make too much of this rejection of cities and rural improvements in itself as a source of potential revolutionary politics for Ruskin because it quite clearly did serve instead to preclude both social change and industrial immiseration from the picture by simply refusing to describe the landscape in which they occur or the people whom they affect. The picturesque, moreover, takes pains to distance itself from any moral expectations: if “it’s [sic] great scenes can inspire . . . with religious awe; or it’s tranquil scenes with that complacency of mind, which is so nearly allied to benevolence, it is certainly the better.”51 The picturesque writer “dare not promise . . . more from picturesque travel, than a rational and agreeable amusement.”52 Still, it did establish an opposition between the picturesque landscape, which was comparatively natural and untrammeled, and the rest, the cultivated and urbanized part of the country which bore the signs of human intervention. If one chose to use the picturesque to describe a moral dilemma, the dichotomy was there, and anyone even remotely familiar with picturesque practice was aware of it.

Perhaps a brief summary of this re-reading of the picturesque aesthetic and the habits of seeing that it fostered is in order. For whatever preconceptions it possessed, the picturesque was a process that encouraged a large number Britons to actually see their homeland, and to compare it with painted paradigms. This activity often incorporated

51 Gilpin, Three Essays, 47.
52 Ibid.
areas of the kingdom that had previously been geographically remote or politically threatening and to some degree it recognized their otherness, although this otherness was often translated into the quaintness of folklore. In any case, Britons discovered that their country was "other" than the European prototypes of pictures. It had landscape, landscape that could be, and was, favourably compared with any in Europe. With this realization came the possibility that if there were anything to be learned from landscape, the lesson might lie in the hills of one's own country, not on the distant shores of Italy. Finally, the idea of the picturesque also created the concept of the unpicturesque; if part of the land was revered, another part was not. The picturesque reversed traditional values: the landscape of recent "improvement" was considered an aesthetic wasteland, while the uncultivated became a significant national heritage.

It is perhaps only in retrospect, after reading Ruskin and understanding how he transformed the discourse around landscape, that the potential of the picturesque for social criticism becomes most apparent. Perhaps the evolution was also difficult for Ruskin because his progress is clearly gradual and uneven as he strives to make his political statements in this language of landscape. The sound of Ruskin's intellectual machinery is nowhere louder than when he reconstructs the picturesque. In order to use the picturesque as an entrée into the discussion of art as a moral discourse he had to distance himself from the picturesque that preys upon the misery of others. The stage had been set in the Poetry of Architecture when he first discovered that architecture and scenery could be a voice for political understanding (see Chapter 3). To continue that investigation and to consider art
as a formative moral influence in Modern Painters he had to jettison some of the picturesque but keep enough of the rhetoric intact to serve his larger purposes. His technique was hardly subtle: he simply divided it into “low” and “high” picturesque. The terms vary; sometimes he describes the high picturesque as “Turnerian,” after its greatest exponent, or “noble,” and the low he refers to as “surface picturesque” or the “parasitical sublime,” but the differentiation is consistent. The low picturesque is the picturesque damned by modern critics; it is the “heartless one” which looks only for certain visual effects wherever they may be found. The follower of this picturesque often finds his subjects for painting among the poor and Ruskin condemns his aesthetic exploitation with a bitter sarcasm:

What is it to him that the people fester in that feverish misery in the low quarter of the town, by the river? Nay, it is much to him. What else were they made for? what could they have done better? The black timbers, and the green water, and the soaking wrecks of boats, and the torn remnants of clothes hung out to dry in the sun;—truly the fever-struck creatures, whose lives have been given for the production of these materials of effect, have not died in vain.

The superficiality of the picturesque was certainly recognized by the time Ruskin wrote about it, but the exploitation that Ruskin so starkly dramatizes shows his greater

54 Ibid. The parasitical sublime is generally used to describe architecture and first appears in Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849).
56 Ibid., 20.
57 The two earliest and most famous commentaries are, of course, William Combe’s The Tour of Dr. Syntax in Search of the Picturesque (1809) and Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey (1818). The account of the exploitation of the tenant-farmer Dagley at
awareness that the amorality of an aesthetic of painting can easily become the immorality of a social practice.

Considering the state of the picturesque in Ruskin’s time—supercilious or invidious, depending on one’s point of view—it seems strange that he would attempt its redemption. Why not develop Alison’s theory of associations to include the world according to Turner? Why not start anew? By the way he dismisses the great tradition and embraces first Turner and later the Pre-Raphaelites it is clear that Ruskin does not lack the nerve to espouse what he acknowledges are “opinions which, to the ordinary connoisseur, will sound heretical.” It is clear also that this splitting of the picturesque is a bit awkward. It occurs at the very beginning of volume *Modern Painters V* (1856), a full thirteen years after the publication of the first volume, and he seemed a bit unsure even what to call his new categories after he has created them. However, it was also clear that Ruskin had to confront the picturesque eventually. It was, after all, the pervasive language of landscape that his audience would comprehend. More than that, Ruskin saw in the picturesque the faults of the great tradition writ large. If the beautiful was a disinterested ideal composed of generalized elements for Reynolds, the picturesque was grotesquely so as the viewer moved through the countryside solely in search of visual effects. It is one thing to quibble

Freeman’s End in Chapter 39 of *Middlemarch* has much of the same bitter irony for which Eliot is likely indebted to Ruskin, whom she greatly admired.

about artistic perfection in the hermetic and airless world of the academy, it is quite another to apply the rules of painting to actual places and people. The picturesque was for Ruskin the soft underbelly of the great tradition of landscape; he could criticize it for its excesses and then reveal those same abuses in a more subtle form in the universally respected masters. If, however, he was going to be able to retain the function of landscape as a moral influence he had to make a clear distinction between the moral landscape he advocated and the rest, the allegedly amoral tradition that revered disinterested beauty and the works of Claude as well as the immoral picturesque that put artistic effect before human well-being. By exorcising landscape of its dark side, the predatory picturesque, Ruskin was able to reclaim a rhetorical language for his own use and speak of the landscape of depravity and the landscape of virtue.

The language of landscape Ruskin constructed was overwhelmingly a moral one. He saw what the tradition of landscape had become and he laments with sorrow, that all hitherto done in landscape, by those commonly conceived to be its masters, has never prompted one holy thought in the minds of nations. It has begun and ended in exhibiting the dexterities of individuals, and conventionalities of systems. Filling the world with the honour of Claude and Salvator, it has never once tended to the honor of God.59

He tells his reader that he knows that “it does sound like wild, like absurd enthusiasm, to expect any definite moral agency in the painters of landscape” and he asks rhetorically,

"ought it to so sound?" Initially he is playing to an audience accustomed to the aesthetics discussed in chapter 4 which distanced art from the world. Presumably, however, the unspoken answer to the question is supposed to be no, it ought not sound absurd to expect moral agency in landscape, and Ruskin will tell us why this is so. In fact, to anyone familiar with the tradition of Shaftesbury, or even with its weak echo in Reynolds described in chapter 4, it did not sound absurd at all, at least in principle. Reynolds, for example, had placed the best landscape painters—those who follow Claude’s example among the great artists who contribute to “the general purpose and perfection of society.” In Shaftesbury’s words, God-created nature was the “source and principle of all beauty and perfection” and art which embodied that principle was conducive to moral virtue. Nature, so the argument goes, is the work of God and displays divine unity and harmony although in an imperfect condition; great art purifies and elevates nature, and thus a love of art is a love of the divine order. Acts of virtue are those which strive to recreate that order in some fashion in the here and now. The flaw of this system, as Ruskin pointed out, lay not in what it said, but in its very tenuous relation to the world. He accepts the aesthetic structure but asks difficult questions that the aesthetic has taken pains to

60 Ibid.

61 See Reynolds, 70 for a discussion of how practitioners of the lesser genres may participate in the noble purposes of art.

62 Ibid., 171.

63 Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, etc., ed. John M. Robertson (London: Grant Richards, 1900), vol. II, 98.
avoid. Where exactly is this unity and harmony? Does it exist in the world or is it some ideal? How does it manifest itself in works of art, and, if so, in which ones? What kinds of acts are virtuous? His readers would be more shocked by these questions than they would by the vaguely familiar expectation of moral agency from landscape painters. We, in turn, are surprised by how successfully the picturesque acted as a fifth column in Ruskin’s siege upon traditional landscape.

Where was this unity and harmony that was to act as the pattern of art, and thence of morality? For the aestheticians like Richardson or Reynolds it existed, as we have seen, in a generalized, ideal nature; it is “Nature methodiz’d.” Not so for Ruskin. For him it exists in the particular rocks and trees about us, and his contempt for Reynolds is clear when he declares that “every attempt to produce that which shall be any rock, ends in the production of that which is no rock.” In Ruskin’s opinion, Reynolds’s theory of

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64 Pope’s line is used as the epigram to Cozen’s *A New Method of Assisting in the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape*. Reprinted in Oppe, A.P. *Alexander and Robert Cozens*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954.

65 Ruskin, “Preface to the second edition” (1844), *Modern Painters I* (1843), C & W 3: 35. Ruskin’s life-long affection for geology can be seen as yet another manifestation of his desire for a particularity that would reveal larger patterns. It is deeply ironic that geology constituted one of the most irrefutable arguments against Ruskin’s belief in God. In a letter to his long-time friend Henry Acland, Ruskin confesses his deep doubt, and its cause: “You [Acland] speak of the Flimsiness of your own faith. Mine, which was never strong, is being beaten into mere gold leaf, and flutters in weak rags from the letter of its old forms; but the only letters it can hold by at all are the old Evangelical formulae. If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of Bible verses.” C & W 36: 115 (letter to Henry Acland, May 24th 1851)
generalization acted merely as "an apology for indolence, and a disguise for incapacity."\textsuperscript{66} In rejecting this concept of an ennobled, ideal nature, however, Ruskin runs the risk of drowning in a sea of meaningless detail and losing the capacity to use nature as a moral guide. Instead, in an interesting manoeuvre, he is able to re-assert the authority of both nature and art. He rejects generalization as "the act of a vulgar, incapable, and unthinking mind"\textsuperscript{67} but he also rejects detail for its own sake as "the lowest and most contemptible art."\textsuperscript{68} The solution to the conundrum lies in his faith that detail is important, but only if "it is detail referred to a great end,—sought for the sake of the inestimable beauty which exists in the slightest and least of God's works."\textsuperscript{69} It is the duty of art, then, not to improve upon nature, but to articulate the order that is immanent in nature. This inverts the authority of art and nature as it had developed during the eighteenth century and refocuses on the natural world. According to Ruskin, the painter who "walks humbly with Nature will seldom be in danger of losing sight of Art."\textsuperscript{70} On the other hand, the painter who imitates the beauties of Claude, who "takes Art as his authority may entirely lose

\textsuperscript{66} Ruskin, "Preface to the second edition" (1844), \textit{Modern Painters I} (1843), C & W 3: 34.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 32.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 45 n.
sight of all that it interprets, and sink at once into the sin of an idolater, and the
degradation of a slave.”

This reorientation of authority and even the terms he uses would sit well with
Ruskin’s fundamentalism, asserting the priority of God’s creation over human endeavour
and relegating the artist to the important but subsidiary role of a preacher in paint. It
also may have originated in Ruskin’s early experience with the picturesque process
mentioned above which, in imposing pictorial values on the world, put the real and the
pictorial in constant juxtaposition. Even if much of it was devalued by picturesque theory,
the real landscape was undeniably there to be traversed or admired, as the prodigious
itineraries common in the guides certainly attest. By rejecting Claudian landscape and
Reynold’s aesthetics but retaining the practices of the picturesque Ruskin opens the
possibility of another way to evaluate landscape and its significance. In his dedication to
the details of landscape and his exegesis of its greater significance Ruskin renews the
practice of the picturesque as an exercise of relating the landscape before one to a greater
truth, God’s landscape.

When Ruskin dissociated the low and high picturesque in order to claim some moral
high ground for landscape painting he also reassessed Gilpin’s explanation of the relation

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 48. Ruskin relinquishes much of his evangelical faith and attitudes after his
famous “unconversion” in Turin in 1858, but many of his fundamentalist assumptions
remain.
of art and nature. Gilpin himself seems to have been of two minds on the issue. It is obvious on the one hand that to search out scenes “which please from some quality, capable of being illustrated in painting”73 assumes the authority of painting. On the other hand, perhaps as a result of his tireless excursions and endless comparisons of places and paintings, a subtext emerges at times that reverses the relationship. On rare occasions Gilpin sees something that “cannot be exactly reduced to the rules of any order,”74 something that has an order “wholly its own.”75 Whatever the reasons, Gilpin assures his readers that “a strong impression of nature will enable us to judge of the works of art. Nature is the archetype. The stronger therefore the impression, the better the judgement.”76 In this paradox Ruskin himself reaches a balance in which both are valuable; nature is the archetype, art is the exegete:

We should use pictures not as authorities, but as comments on nature, just as we use divines, not as authorities, but as comments on the Bible. Constable, in his dread of saint-worship, excommunicates himself from all benefit of the Church, and deprives himself of much instruction from the Scripture to which he holds, because he will not accept aid in the reading of it from the learning of other men. Sir George Beaumont, on the contrary, furnishes . . . a melancholy instance of the degradation into which the human mind may fall, when it suffers human works to interfere between it and its Master. The recommending the color of an old Cremona fiddle for the prevailing tone of everything, and the vapid inquiry of the conventionalist ‘where do you put your brown tree?’ show a prostration of intellect so laughable and lamentable that they are at

75 Ibid.
once . . . a satire and a warning. Art so followed is the most servile indolence in which life can be wasted.77

If art is an interpreter of nature, not an improver, Ruskin can use it as a means to demonstrate, not create, the natural order that will serve as a moral paradigm. He can, once again, maintain the structure of the critical discourse but alter its objectives and its conclusions.

This rearrangement of the relationship of art and nature reflected Ruskin’s evangelical protestantism as much as what he may have found in Gilpin’s work, or rather, his protestant background likely directed his attention to certain elements of Gilpin’s work rather than others. The very way he describes some art as “idolatry,” artists as fearing “saint-worship,” or choosing “excommunication” seems more than metaphorical in the theological conviction it conveys. By describing in this way the tradition he seeks to discredit, Ruskin acts the protestant iconoclast who rejects the papist authority of the Italian tradition which has committed the heresy of placing the idealized works of man above the works of God. It is not just bad taste then that places Claude at the apex of the landscape tradition, it is blasphemy: “The cause of the evil lies . . . deep-seated in the system of ancient landscape art; it consists, in a word, in the painter’s taking upon him to modify God’s works at his pleasure.”78 To “improve” upon nature is an act of desecration,

77 Ruskin, “Preface to the second edition” (1844), Modern Painters I (1843), C & W 3: 45.
78 Ibid., 24-5.
according to Ruskin. In contrast, "the greatest thing a soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way."\footnote{Ruskin, \textit{Modern Painters III} (1856), C \& W 5: 333.} Once more Ruskin reinvents the meaning of taste as an act of moral piety or reverence, and it is clear that when he speaks of a "faithful" rendering of nature he means more than mere empiricism.

William Gilpin’s disarming guides "relative chiefly to picturesque beauty"\footnote{The titles of Gilpin’s tour books inevitably include this phrase as part of their full titles.} provide one more observation that echoes down through Ruskin’s moral landscape: Gilpin and Ruskin both imagine the greater world as a macrocosmic work of art that reconciles any anomalies that appear on a smaller scale. Gilpin sees himself travelling through the landscape as if it were one huge canvas painted by nature and describing some small part which may or may not itself be so well composed. Those scenes which he calls picturesque show the "harmonious combination"\footnote{Gilpin, \textit{Cambridge}, 174.} he assumes is typical of the whole; those which are not picturesque are like the passages of a painting that may serve to unite the larger whole but lack unity in themselves. When a particular scene does not achieve picturesqueness Gilpin tells us we should keep in mind that we cannot comprehend the larger "picture" which the artist Nature has painted:

We speak . . . in this matter like the fly on the column. Her [nature’s] plans are too immense for our confined optics. They include kingdoms, continents, and hemispheres; and may be as elegant, as they are incomprehensible. Could we take in the whole of her landscapes at one cast; could we view the Hyrcanian forest as a grove; the kingdom of
Poland as a lawn; the coast of Norway as a piece of rocky scenery; and the Mediterranean as a lake; we might then discover a plan justly composed.\textsuperscript{82}

Ruskin too sees the natural world as a work of art and speaks of “Nature in all her compositions.”\textsuperscript{83} This world is a landscape filled with “the sculpture of mountains”\textsuperscript{84} created for human pleasure and edification. There are, however, some important differences between these artists. Where Gilpin’s artist is described as a landscape artist with a painter’s eye, Ruskin’s is a sculptor, an architect, and a painter. The natural world is for Ruskin “a great and noble architecture; first giving shelter, comfort and rest; and covered also with mighty sculpture and painted legend.”\textsuperscript{85} The difference between these artists goes beyond their medium, however. Gilpin seldom discusses the cause or the implications of the picturesque quality he discovers on his travels. Instead, the “nature” that he credits with ultimately painting the canvas of the world seems a convenient way to account for the harmony in the scenes he describes, not a serious theological proposition like Ruskin’s. Once again, Ruskin transforms a solution to a typically picturesque problem into a moral imperative.\textsuperscript{86} Gilpin writes of an artist who creates nature along certain principles of harmony that are discoverable in nature and in paintings by the masters.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Ruskin, Modern Painters IV (1856), 190. C&W 6: 243.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 172
\item \textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 118.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Ruskin’s more picturesque version of goddess nature is found in The Poetry of Architecture, 319.
\end{itemize}
Gilpin's artist, however, is only a pale version of the God of Genesis that Ruskin describes as the consummate artist who commanded that "the earth should be *sculptured*"\(^\text{87}\) so that its hills may "fill the thirst of the human heart for the beauty of God's working."\(^\text{88}\)

Thus, the unity and harmony mentioned above which form the pattern of art and foundation of morality are to be found not in the vapid generalized idealism of aesthetic theory, nor the atmospheric renderings of the distant Campagna. Unity and harmony lie instead in the rock beneath our feet, in the leaves above our heads, and in the mountains in the distance—they are literally "sermons in stones"\(^\text{89}\) which Ruskin examines in almost pathologically minute detail.\(^\text{90}\) This remarkable vision of the natural world, formed and informed by an omnipresent deity but expressed in the familiar terms of landscape painting, he owes, as we have seen, to the unlikely combination of his fundamentalist background and the practice of the picturesque.

Having reinvented the picturesque in this way, Ruskin may have travelled together with Gilpin and the landscape tradition long enough. After all, he has redeemed the process of viewing paintings, and even of seeing the world as a painting. Before Ruskin that kind of viewing was a means of avoiding moral action; after Ruskin it was a way of determining it. Thus far, however, his efforts have had little more social consequence than

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 118.  
\(^{89}\) *As You Like It*, II, i, 16-17.  
\(^{90}\) See especially *Modern Painters IV* and *V*. 
those he condemns. How does his theory of landscape lead to moral action and, to repeat an earlier question, what kind of acts are virtuous? The answers to these questions are couched in the language of landscape not just because it had become a convenient vernacular for Ruskin, but because his modified landscape practice exposed public issues and he perceived their remedies to be pictorial as well as social. In short, Ruskin was not finished with the landscape tradition; it had as much to offer in the expression of his social theory as in the formulation of it.

For example, one of the great justifications for the large private collections in England lay in the edifying function of art. According to the tradition, as we have seen, \textsuperscript{91} paintings are a form of education for the privileged. The connoisseur will learn what to admire, and in admiring will come to be a better judge of all matters. A collection of paintings, therefore, is a sign of the individual's and the nation's taste, and taste is the measure of the legitimacy of one's power. Even in an early survey of England's agricultural resources, Arthur Young recognizes as a national asset

houses, paintings, ornamented parks, lakes, &c. I am sensible they have little to do with agriculture, but there is, nevertheless, an utility in their being known. They are proof, and a very important one, of the riches and happiness of this kingdom. . . . Architecture, paintings, sculpture, and the art of adorning grounds, every where exhibit productions that speak of a wealth, a refinement—a taste, which only great and luxurious nations can know.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{91} Above, chapters 2 & 4.

\textsuperscript{92} Arthur Young, \textit{A Six Months Tour}, 1: xi.
Later writers concur with Richardson, that “a much greater treasure of pictures, drawings, and antiques . . . would contribute abundantly to the raising, and meliorating of our taste.”

Gilpin is justly famous for his descriptions of the picturesque scenes he encounters in the countryside, but he spends a significant portion of each book describing his visits to the galleries in private homes where both he and the owner assume the collection has an edifying quasi-public nature. For example, in *Observations on Several Parts of the Counties of Cambridge, Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex. Also on Several Parts of North Wales; Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* he punctuates his travels with descriptions of great houses and their galleries and makes a special detour to see the collection built by Sir Robert Walpole at Houghton-hall. It is clear that this remarkable collection was meant to be viewed by more than Lord Orford and his immediate friends and family—by special arrangement of course—because Horace Walpole himself had printed a catalogue “with remarks,” and Gilpin felt compelled to write his own inventory of the highlights with his own commentary for the numerous readers who would follow in his footsteps.

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93 Richardson, 196. Richardson suggests that there are two ways that art would improve the “common people” as well as their more fortunate betters. Initially, the wealthy would be improved by their possession and appreciation of art and therefore set a better example for them. He also suggests, anticipating Ruskin, that the “common people” be taught to draw, just as they had been taught to write. They would be better for this because, although they could not share the taste of gentlemen, they would “become better mechanics of all kinds.” (192)

94 Gilpin, *Cambridge*, 43.
This nexus of wealth, art, taste, and power is made even clearer by comparison. Walpole’s collection is pre-eminent for its paintings by Rubens, Claude, Rembrandt, Castiglione, Rosa, among others. Robert Walpole, the first earl of Orford, who built much of the collection, was a long-standing Prime Minister (1715-17, 1721-42). His son, Horace, a member of parliament for more than twenty years, was a powerful literary figure and the builder of Strawberry Hill. In very sharp contrast, Gilpin also visited Lord Tilney’s estate at Wansted on his way to Houghton-hall. The house itself “of all the great houses of England, answers best the united purposes of grandeur and convenience.”95 The collection, however, was another matter. There was “the affectation of a large collection,”96 but it was a sham: “some indifferent hand has produced a great variety of copies from Rembrandt, Guido, and other masters.”97 It is significant that having such “tawdry pictures”98 is not merely a faux pas, a lapse of taste in the conventional sense. A lack of taste means much more, for, as with the Bradford exchange, if taste is evidence of legitimacy, poor taste is an indication of the illegitimacy of even the possessors of a great house:

... paltry copies from great masters take from the dignity of a noble mansion. If the ancestry of such a house had been many years in the possession of it, it may be supposed they might have collected a few original pictures. If nothing of that kind is

95 Ibid., 2.
96 Ibid., 3.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
found in it, *the possessors of the house may be supposed to be an upstart race.* (italics mine)\(^99\)

Ruskin applies the same logic to the world around him. Gilpin, of course, initiates the transformation of the natural world into an great outdoor gallery of varied landscapes by applying the same criteria to what he saw outside the great houses as he did to what he saw inside. For Gilpin there was an easy segue from the Claude on the wall, to the grounds outside, and finally to the surrounding countryside because they were all considered in terms of foreground, side curtain, light effects, and so on. For Ruskin, the landscapes both inside and out spoke of political relations. The Claude on the wall told one story:

> The classical landscape, properly so called, is . . . the representative of perfectly trained and civilized human life, associated with perfect natural scenery. . . . Perfectly civilized human life: that is, life freed from the necessity of humiliating labor, from passions inducing bodily disease, and from abusing misfortune. The personages of the classical landscape, therefore, must be virtuous and amiable; if employed in labour, endowed with strength such as may make it not oppressive.\(^{100}\)

Claude does not tell the whole story, Ruskin is aware, for he notes that the creation of this felicitous landscape requires the exploitation of others: "as a practicable ideal, the classical life necessarily implies slavery, and the command, therefore, of a higher order of men over a lower, occupied in servile work."\(^{101}\) If we turn to the outside gallery the same exploitation is evident, even in the harmonious Claude surrogates which Gilpin so

\(^{99}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{100}\) Ruskin, *Modern Painters* *V*(1860), C & W 7: 317.

\(^{101}\) Ibid.
assiduously sought. However, in the gallery of the world the figures are not ancient Greeks in a classical setting, or Italian peasants, however much one would like to imagine it so. The attempt to see them as such creates "tawdry pictures," bad copies by an "indifferent hand" of already compromising images. In trying to imitate the tranquillity of the masters the falsity of these images becomes unavoidable. Their falsity bespeaks their bad taste, which in turn is witness of the illegitimacy of the social system that finds such images collectable.

It is not strange to reflect, that hardly an evening passes in London or Paris, but one of those [rural] cottages is painted [on canvas] for the better amusement of the fair and idle, and . . . good and kind people,—poetically minded,—delight themselves in imagining the happy life led by peasants who dwell by Alpine fountains, and kneel to crosses upon peaks of rock? that nightly we lay down our gold, to fashion forth simulacra of peasants, in gay ribands and white bodices, singing sweet songs, and bowing gracefully to the picturesque crosses. Real peasants bow under a different cross. "For them, there is neither hope nor passion of spirit; for them neither advance nor exultation. Black bread, rude roof, dark night; and life ebbs away."

Like the lord who collects only bad copies of great works of art, the nation which lays down its gold for simulacra can claim no legitimacy. Far better to create real felicity in the real world:

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103 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 388.
The time will come when, as the heavy-folded curtain falls upon our own stage of life, we shall begin to comprehend that the justice we loved was intended to have been done in fact, and not in poetry, and the felicity we sympathized in, to have been bestowed and not feigned. We talk much of money's worth, yet perhaps may one day be surprised to find that what the wise and charitable European public gave to one night's rehearsal of hypocrisy,—to one hour's pleasant warbling of Linda or Lucia,—would have filled a whole Alpine valley with happiness, and would have poured the waves of harvest over the famine of many a Lammermoor.106

To create actual scenes of felicity in the real world would be true taste, to create images of joy where real human misery exists is false taste, it is immoral—as Ruskin put it, taste is the only morality.

This habit of juxtaposing the real with the painted scene and judging both was novel. The painted scene was often a lie that misrepresented the life of those it portrayed and the real scene spoke of human suffering that would never find its way into a painting. Such realities were quite literally unpicturesque; they did not have properties "chiefly pleasing in painting"107 or anywhere else for that matter. As we have seen, it was Gilpin that first acknowledged the unpicturesque, the part of England devoted to production, property and industry.108 He quickly passed by such scenes, however, in his search for its more marketable opposite. Paradoxically once more, Ruskin used the unpicturesque to make some of his strongest social statements.

106 Ibid., 391.
107 Gilpin, Three Essays, 6.
108 See page 15 above and Gilpin, Three Essays, 45, 56-7.
Sometimes he would depose the picturesque simply by exposing the human misery it disguised. Typically his tactic was to describe some conventionally beautiful picturesque scene, a highland stream in autumn, for example, in crisp Pre-Raphaelite detail, then portray the dark side of the same landscape with the same precision. The shift from light to shadow is rapid and dramatic. He begins by describing

... a little valley of soft turf, enclosed in its narrow oval by jutting rocks and broad flakes of nodding fern. From one side of it to the other winds, serpentine, a clear brown stream, drooping into quicker ripple as it reaches the end of the oval field, and then, first islanding a purple and white rock with an amber pool, it dashes away into a narrow fall of foam under a thicket of mountain ash and alder. The autumn sun, low but clear, shines on the scarlet ash-berries and on the golden birch-leaves, which, fallen here and there, when the breeze has not caught them, rest quiet in the crannies of the purple rock. Beside the rock, in the hollow under the thicket, the carcass of a ewe, drowned in the last flood, lies nearly bare to the bone, its white ribs protruding through the skin, raven-torn; and the rags of its wool still flickering from the branches that first stayed it as the stream swept it down. A little lower, the current plunges, roaring, into a circular chasm like a well, surrounded on three sides by a chimney-like hollowness of polished rock, down which the foam slips in detached snow-flakes. Round the edges of the pool beneath, the water circles slowly, like black oil; a little butterfly lies on its back, its wings glued to one of the eddies, its limbs feebly quivering; a fish rises and it is gone. Lower down the stream, I can just see, over a knoll, the green and damp turf roofs of four or five hovels, built at the edge of a morass, which is trodden by the cattle into a black Slough of Despond at their doors, and traversed by a few ill-set stepping stones. ... and at the turn of the brook I see a man fishing, with a boy and a dog—a picturesque scene enough certainly, if they had not been there all day starving.\(^{109}\)

This description clearly demonstrates Ruskin's strategy in constructing the unpicturesque as a form of political protest. The effect of art, including picturesque painting, depends upon a viewer's associations; a river scene like this conventionally sets in motion a train of associations that would include bucolic pastimes, rural tranquillity, simplicity of life,

\(^{109}\text{Ruskin, Modern Painters V (1860), C & W 7: 268-9.}\)
perhaps highland independence of spirit, and much else besides. Archibald Alison analyzes associations much more than others, of course, but the principle applies generally. Ruskin carefully paints the initial scene in a gently picturesque style appropriate to the highlands. The required roughness is supplied by the jutting rocks, variety of texture by the nodding fern, the stream is serpentine, just as Gilpin preferred, and the light picks out the details it would in a painting. All the elements are there and arranged to the right effect. The unity of effect in such scenes depends on a selection of just the right elements, and the exclusion of any that would disturb the train of associations. In fact, it is the duty of the artist "to remove from his landscape whatever is hostile to its effect, or unsuited to its character, and by selecting only such circumstances as accord with the general expression of the scene, to awaken an emotion more full, more simple, and more harmonious than any we receive from Nature itself."110 Ruskin uses what Alison called the "established Imagery in our Minds"111 — colours and objects that start a chain of associations—to set up the idyllic landscape. Then he just as meticulously destroys it. A melancholy air is acceptable; the bloated carcass of a drowned sheep pecked by ravens and hanging in a thicket is not. The objects he uses to describe the dark side of the landscape could, in another setting, be rich with the right associations. Sheep are often fixtures of the pastoral landscape, when they are alive. Butterflies too speak of sylvan beauty, but not when they are the hapless

110 Alison, 85-6.
111 Ibid., 208.
victims of eddies and hungry fish. Cottages too tell of Arcadian charm, but "hovels" surrounded by a cattle-trodden morass of mud like a great black Slough of Despond do not. These passages are some of the most powerful in all of Ruskin's writing because he "paints" the scenes so well and sets in motion the associations that we are so familiar with from the genre of landscape, then he utterly destroys both the scene and the conventions.

Just as he has revised the rest of landscape theory, Ruskin rewrites Alison's theory of association. According to Alison, as outlined in chapter 4, "qualities of matter are in themselves incapable of producing emotion" except by their "association with other qualities . . . fitted by the constitution of our nature to produce Emotion." Thus the blasted oak is not emotionally moving in itself, without its associations with darkness, storm, and gothic literature. The more cultivated the viewer the more associations and, as a consequence, the richer the experience. The pleasure of viewing landscape for Alison comes from its classical associations which, through acculturation, have come to be considered the "standard of Natural Beauty."

Ruskin's revisions to Alison's theory take it beyond the auto-eroticism of an upper class perceiving the world as a menagerie of objects and experiences that serve as raw material for their own cultivated associations and emotions. For Ruskin, "the great use of the associative faculty is not to add beauty to material things, but to add force to the

112 Ibid., 127.
113 Ibid., 127.
114 Ibid., 327.
conscience." Associations link the created world and provide proof of the creator. Thus an avalanche of debris in Chamouni resembles the shape of a bird’s wing, and the structure of rhododendron leaves corresponds with the trefoils of gothic architecture. These associations testify to the harmony of nature, the presence of its author, and the connection with humankind made through such things as architecture and landscape, for “all true landscape . . . depends primarily for its interest on [its] connection with humanity.” Ruskin’s theory of association is probably as solipsistic as Alison’s in that he believes the natural world was created by God solely for the edification of humanity, that the hills were sculpted “as a great and noble architecture; first giving shelter, comfort, and rest” and then to satisfy “the thirst of the human heart for the beauty of God’s working.” However, Ruskin’s associative universe implies a morality that Alison’s does not. The beauty of a landscape for Alison “consists in the purity and harmony of its composition” and it is the artist’s duty “to remove from his landscape whatever is hostile to its effect, or unsuited to its character.” Alison’s artist is obliged to

115 Ruskin, *Modern Painters II* (1846), C & W 4: 73. Ruskin writes specifically of Alison’s theory of association in chapter 4 of this volume.


118 Ibid., 255.


120 Ibid.

121 Alison, 85.

122 Ibid.
excise from the picture the sources of any undesirable associations to assure the viewer a pleasant stream of associations. Ruskin, however, is accustomed to read his landscape more faithfully because he regards it as divine, as God's second book. How, then, is he to read a landscape that shows not only the signs of unpicturesque enclosures and cultivation but also spreading mills, turgid rivers and fuliginous skies? These "Satanic mills" are not just the dark side of the picturesque that Ruskin supplied to the Gilpinesque landscape, like the dead sheep and boggy pasture. These are new phenomena with new associations.123

Traditionally the sight and scent of industry would be discreetly deleted from the painted or verbal landscape, but Ruskin confronts these real changes and uses the methods he formerly used with the mountain peaks to plumb the significance of what he now sees. Given Ruskin's method of rewriting existing traditions for his own end, the problem becomes one of how to use the power of landscape to describe these scenes which have no precursor, and to ascribe to them a moral value. It is more difficult to use landscape to confront industrialization than it was to condemn the predatory nature of the picturesque which was, after all, itself an approach to landscape. The mills that were occupying more and more of England could be omitted completely or they could be decried, but how could they be made a part of Ruskin's moral landscape?

Sometimes Ruskin merely describes in his inimitable style what he sees and what he thinks are its moral implications. "Men," he laments, "wherever they can reach, destroy all beauty. . . . Every perfect and lovely spot which they can touch, they defile."124 This seems a common enough complaint until we remember the function of landscape as a moral presence. Thus, he regrets a new railway bridge on Lake Geneva not out of some conservationist sentiment, but because it "destroyed the power of two pieces of scenery of which nothing can ever supply the place."125 The power this landscape has now lost is the power of a divine work of art created for moral guidance. To destroy the landscape is, for Ruskin, quite literally a desecration. Those who can commit such acts are "covetous men," they are men who cannot admire, "they can but consume."126 Their consumption, in turn, destroys the landscape:

Perhaps, it may be well that this England should become the furnace of the world; so that the smoke of the island, rising out of the sea, should be seen from a hundred leagues away, as if it were a field of fierce volcanoes; and every kind of sordid, foul, or venomous work which in other countries men dreaded or disdained, it should become England's duty to do,—becoming thus the offscourer of the earth, and taking the hyena instead of the lion upon her shield.127

An alternative method of confronting the industrialization of England, and one more congruent with his landscape practice, involved clouds. Clouds had always been important

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125 Ibid.
126 Ibid., 426.
127 Ibid., 425.
to Ruskin; he observed and recorded the sky as no other writer or painter,\textsuperscript{128} and when he came to the fifth volume of \textit{Modern Painters} (1860) he devoted a whole section to an exhaustive and exhausting description of clouds. There he measures, describes, rhapsodizes, and proselytizes about clouds. He describes their scientific qualities as water vapour, counts ranks of clouds in the upper atmosphere, and lends them a place in poetry and myth. Always, however, Ruskin considers them a thin “veil of intermediate being” that mercifully tempers the “unendurable glory [of the divine] to the level of human feebleness.”\textsuperscript{129} Where the heavens themselves show the absolute “glory of God,”\textsuperscript{130} the clouds are “prepared by the hand of God for the help of man, varied in their ministration.”\textsuperscript{131} Thus God’s landscape is painted: the whole terrestrial landscape is created for the edification of humans, but the clouds are especially significant as they are closer to the divine, less subject to the material world. Part of Ruskin’s admiration for Turner lay in the painter’s observation and rendering of clouds; much of his contempt for

\textsuperscript{128} Ruskin was an avid amateur meteorologist. He kept a weather journal of a European journey when he was sixteen, constructed his own cyanometer for measuring the blueness of the sky and gave two papers at the Meteorological Society of London before he was twenty-one. See Denis Cosgrove and John E. Thornes, “Of Truth of Clouds: John Ruskin and the Moral Order in Landscape” in Douglas C.D. Pocock, \textit{Humanistic Geography and Literature: Essays on the Experience of Place} (London: Croom Helm, 1981) and J. Evans and J.H. Whitehouse, \textit{The Diaries of John Ruskin} (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 2.

\textsuperscript{129} Ruskin, \textit{Modern Painters V}(1860), C & W 7: 133.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 196.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
"Claude, Salvator, Ruysdael and Wouvermans"¹³² lay in their decision "never to look for them—never to portray"¹³³ the beauty of clouds. This is rather harsh on the earlier painters but it gives some sense of the criteria by which he judged landscape. Those who obscured the natural world—God's landscape—through ignorance, lies or incapacity were anathema to Ruskin. This divine landscape was endangered not only by those who deceived with the brush, but by those who built railway bridges by Lake Geneva, those who erected mills in the valleys and polluted the streams and skies, and those Bradford builders who raised anachronistic gothic cathedrals to the gods of their own prosperity.

This chapter began with Ruskin's lecture to the Bradford merchants about one of his consuming passions, architecture, and it will end with another lecture about his other passion, landscape, specifically this landscape of clouds. It was not an uplifting lecture he gave at the London Institution in February of 1884, and it was apparently met with some ridicule,¹³⁴ but "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" is a powerful late expression of Ruskin's understanding of landscape, and his despair at its degradation both in art and in life. The particular landscape he chose to discuss in the lecture is the aerial one, the cloudscape of which he was particularly fond. The heavens are changing, he said. There is a "plague-cloud"¹³⁵ moving across Europe increasingly obscuring the landscape and skies

¹³² Ibid., 161.
¹³³ Ibid.
¹³⁴ Introduction to Vol. 34, C & W 34: xxiv.
from the "North of England to Sicily." It is, he is sure, a new phenomenon. He has observed and recorded the skies "during fifty years of a life of solitude and leisure" and there was nothing like it before in his own experience or the writing of the poets from Homer to Byron. Previously, "in the entire system of the Firmament . . . there appeared to be, to all the thinkers of those ages, the incontrovertible and unmistakable evidence of a Divine Power in creation, which had fitted, as the air for human breath, so the clouds for human sight and nourishment." Thus faith was nourished by the marvels of the skies, and the skies were revered in turn as evidence of God's care for humanity. Since 1871, however, Ruskin has observed a "thin, filthy, mangy, miserable cloud" that inundates the heavens and despoils the landscape that was created for the moral guidance of humanity.

Ruskin is rather evasive about the constitution of this plague-cloud. The newspapers apparently considered his observations "imaginary, or insane" and later editors have suggested that he was not fully conscious of the truth of his own descriptions of industrial pollution. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is clear from the lecture and other

136 Ibid., 32.
137 Ibid., 7.
138 Ibid., 10.
139 Ibid., 39.
140 Ruskin, Preface to "Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century," C & W 34:7.
141 Introduction to Vol. 34, C & W, 34:xxiv. Ruskin, it turns out, was quite accurate in his observations of smoke and sulphur dioxide which reached their highest
sources that he was fully aware that the plague-cloud he observed was largely "sulphurous chimney-pot vomit," but he did not want his lecture to be limited to a mere discussion of pollution levels. He aspired to provide his listeners with prophecy, not meteorology. What he describes may be "dense manufacturing mist," but it is not only pollution that preoccupies Ruskin in this apocalyptic lecture. This "unbroken grey-brown winding sheet" of cloud insinuates itself everywhere from the London he surveys from his house on Herne Hill to the Alps that had once afforded him revelations of beauty and divine presence. The rain that falls from this cloud, he cites from an earlier journal entry, spreads its corruption over the earth below:

Raining in foul drizzle, slow and steady; sky pitch-dark, and I just get a little light by sitting in the bow window; diabolic clouds over everything: and looking over my kitchen garden yesterday, I found one miserable mass of weeds gone to seed, the roses in the higher garden putrefied into brown sponges, feeling like dead snails; and the half-ripe strawberries all rotten at the stalks.

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142 In fact, twenty-four years earlier Ruskin had noted that London "loses two out of three sunrises, owing to the environing smoke" (Modern Painters V(1860), C & W 7: 151.) and in a diary entry for August 13, 1879 he described a "loathsome mass of sultry and foul fog" which finally passed off and settled "down again into Manchester's devil's darkness." ("Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century," C & W 34:37.)

143 Ruskin, "Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century," C & W 34: 36.

144 Ibid., 71.

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid., 38.
The landscape of the world had become a landscape tinged with pestilent “dun-coloured mist,”—just as the traditional paintings Ruskin despised were tinted with brown varnish—like a “dry black veil, which no ray of sunshine can pierce.” Once “over a great portion of the world’s surface the air and the earth were fitted to the education of the spirit of man”; now young painters, the exegetes of the divine order in nature, “have never in their lives seen a clean sky.”

Ruskin’s revisions to landscape traditions allowed him, or forced him, to see the “plague-wind” as a moral and political problem. The cloud itself he perceives as a turbid mixture of industrial smoke and human suffering:

It looks partly as if it were made of poisonous smoke; very probably it may be: there are at least two hundred furnace chimneys in a square of two miles on every side of me. But mere smoke would not blow to and fro in that wild way. It looks more to me as if it were made of dead men’s souls—such of them as are not gone yet where they have to go, and may be flitting hither and thither, doubting, themselves, of the fittest place for them.

You know, if there are such things as souls, and if ever any of them haunt places where they have been hurt, there must be many above us, just now, displeased enough!

It is a terrifying world Ruskin describes. If he could tell the Bradford bourgeoisie that taste is the only morality and condemn them for their desire to disguise usury with architecture,
what of the taste and morality which obliterates the natural landscape and then claims to find it meaningless? He saw humanity defiling the very landscape that might have provided some of the spiritual truths he felt they so desperately needed; the fumes of industrial progress and human suffering obscured the once lucid cloudscapes and caused "the distemper of their observers." It is, finally, a world of "Blanched Sun,—blighted grass,—blinded man."
Chapter 6

Conclusion: "a goodly landscape"

As a young student, A.E. Housman described one of Ruskin’s unconventional lectures as the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford:

This afternoon Ruskin gave us a great outburst against modern times. He had got a picture of Turner’s, framed and glassed, representing Leicester and the Abbey in the distance at sunset, over a river. He read the account of Wolsey’s death out of Henry VIII. Then he pointed to the picture as representing Leicester when Turner had drawn it. Then he said, “You, if you like, may go to Leicester to see what it is like now. I never shall. But I can make a pretty good guess.” Then he caught up a paintbrush.

“These stepping-stones of course have been done away with, and are replaced by a beau-ti-ful iron bridge.” Then he dashed in the iron bridge on the glass of the picture.

“The colour of the stream is supplied on the one side by the indigo factory.” Forthwith one side of the stream became indigo. “On the other side by the soap factory.” Soap dashed in. “They mix in the middle—like curds,” he said, working them together with a sort of malicious deliberation.” This field, over which you see the sun setting behind the abbey, is now occupied in a proper manner.” Then there went a flame of scarlet across the picture, which developed itself into windows and roofs and red brick, and rushed up into a chimney. “The atmosphere is supplied—thus!” A puff and cloud of smoke all over Turner’s sky: and then the brush thrown down, and Ruskin confronting modern civilization amidst a tempest of applause.¹

Not every lecturer has an authentic Turner to use in such a dramatic fashion, but Ruskin was merely doing in the lecture hall what he understood capitalism to be doing to the British landscape outside it, except that he had a sheet of glass to protect his painting

while the actual Leicester was not so fortunate. His lecture perfectly illustrates how he understood political and economic matters as issues of landscape; the applause of his audience demonstrates that he could use this rhetoric and his message would be understood. His criticism of industrialism is obvious in this theatrical gesture, but at the same time he condemned the practice of landscape painting by literally painting in what had been painted out by the tradition.\(^2\)

In all this it is impossible not to wonder about Ruskin’s admiration for Turner. Was Turner the “greatest of all landscape painters”\(^3\) who “is like nature, and paints more of nature than any man who ever lived,”\(^4\) who alone redeemed both nature and painting, as Ruskin claimed? Some insight into Turner’s landscape practice would clarify Ruskin’s process of politicizing painting.

Even at first glance Ruskin seems guilty of the same kind of hagiography he despises in those who venerated the traditional pantheon of Claude, Poussin and Rosa. In the first

\(^2\) For readers familiar with Gilpin there is something almost eerie about Housman’s story which nonetheless clearly demonstrates how much the picturesque was still a way of seeing for Ruskin the social critic. In one of his tour books Gilpin describes Leicester and naturally enough moves quickly to the picturesque focus, the Abbey. Both Turner and Ruskin follow this lead. Gilpin immediately evokes the rich association of the Abbey with the death of Wolsey which would, he says, “make a fine moral picture.” The parallels become uncanny when Ruskin echoes the same associations and quotes the same scene from Henry VIII (we can only hope that he did so with more accuracy than Gilpin). Was he conscious of the reference to Gilpin, was his audience aware, or was it an ingrained habit of seeing? Despite the parallels, the “fine moral picture” Ruskin paints goes well beyond these origins in the picturesque. Gilpin, *Lakes*, 1: 248.


\(^4\) Ibid., 3: 52.
volume of *Modern Painters* (1843) Ruskin considered Turner the English master uncorrupted by the "classical poison" of the Italian school, the "only painter . . . who has ever drawn the sky"—or earth, water, or vegetation for that matter—with the empirical truth Ruskin endorsed at the time. Seventeen years later, in *Modern Painters V* (1860), Ruskin still considered Turner the greatest of all painters, but an artist less concerned with visual accuracy and more concerned with social issues as he painted "the labour of men, their sorrow, and their death."

Turner’s actual practice, however, seems much more like that of other painters of his time than it resembles Ruskin’s deity of a new British painting. To consider Turner’s work in relation to historical practice is not to negate the undeniable originality and significance of Turner’s accomplishments but to realign it with the tradition he himself acknowledged. The painter’s own feelings about his elevation at the hands of the young scholar Ruskin are unknown. He was a laconic and taciturn man at the best of times but it took him over a year after the publication of *Modern Painters I* to thank the young man who had championed his work and was a major purchaser of his art. He may even have been

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6 Ibid., 3: 252.
confused by the very nature of Ruskin’s partisanship which distanced him so much from the tradition he considered his own. Turner, it should be remembered, made part of his living from illustrating picturesque tours throughout his career and he painted estate landscape as artists had for generations. Ruskin’s opinion of Claude’s “false taste, forced composition, and ignorant rendering” does not seem to have been shared by Turner who based many paintings on Claude’s compositions. Rather than rejecting it, Turner considered himself very much a part of the tradition. So much so that in his bequest to the National Gallery he stipulated that two of his paintings, *Dido Building Carthage* and *The

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9 Turner’s career as an illustrator is often overlooked, but titles like *Picturesque Views of England and Wales* (1827-28), *Landscape--Historical Illustrations of Scotland and the Waverly Novels* (1836-38) reveal the content. Samuel Rogers’ *Italy, a Poem* (1830) with Turner’s illustrations was a gift to thirteen-year-old Ruskin; it introduced him to Turner, to Italy, and to art that combined word and image. For more detail on Turner as an illustrator see Gerald Finley, *Landscapes of Memory: Turner as Illustrator to Scott* (London: Scolar Press, 1980) and Eric Shanes, *Turner’s Picturesque Views in England and Wales* (New York, 1979). Recently, Elizabeth Helsinger has suggested that the class and activity of the figures in some of Turner’s picturesque engravings subvert the landscape genre and express the political instability in England. “Turner and the Representation of England,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 103-125.


11 There is a telling example of partisan reading in Ruskin’s treatment of Turner’s *Liber Studiorum*, a book of 71 landscape studies modeled after Claude’s *Liber Veritatis*. For Ruskin it was a disclosure or the “hard conditions of life.” *Modern Painters V* (1860), C & W 7: 432; for Constable it was so derivative of earlier masters that he dubbed it *Liber Stupidorum*. Ronald Paulson, *Literary Landscape: Turner and Constable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 74.
Decline of the Carthaginian Empire, must be hung “by the side of Claude’s ‘Seaport’ and ‘Mill’ that is to hang on the same line same height from the ground.”

Turner’s debt to Claude was immense; the pellucid skies of the earlier artist were transformed into the suffused colours that became both the subject and style of the English painter. Turner’s paintings, however, were not only about skies, dear as they might be both to him and Ruskin. In fact, much of Turner’s work can be read in much the same way the early estate paintings were in chapter 2, as expressions of property. Petworth: Sunset, Fighting Bucks (fig. 9), for example, is a variation on earlier landscape (fig. 8) as a display of wealth and power. The painting is one of a group done in the late 1820s portraying the interior and grounds at Petworth, Sussex, part of the extensive holdings of George Wyndham, 3rd Earl of Egremont. The glorious sunset suffuses everything with a gentle, golden light that unifies the various elements—the cricket match on the left, the sheep on the right, the lake in the distance, and the fighting bucks in the foreground—into one pictorial whole. Instead of seeing the house itself from above surrounded by its grounds as in the earlier painting (fig. 8), Turner took a different ‘point of view.’ The prospect is that of the owner, a proprietal gaze out from the house over the lands and activities Egremont

12 He later substituted Sun Rising Through Vapour for the Decline of the Carthaginian Empire. The Claude paintings referred to are Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba and Landscape with dancing figures, both in the National Gallery at the time. Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll, The Paintings of J.M.W. Turner rev. ed. (London: Yale University Press, 1984), 96. According to a revision of the will in 1848 Ruskin was named an executor and spent years sorting and cataloguing drawings and watercolours.
controlled. There is a pleasing sense of *concordia discours*, a harmony constituted of diverse parts, in the scene where the presence of humans and animals, trees and lawn, light and shade create an overall balance or harmony that would be familiar to classical painters like Claude and their viewers.

The commanding and unified view, despite the diversity of its parts, forms a macrocosmic image of orderliness and power that is reiterated on the grounds. The park itself was created by Capability Brown in the later eighteenth century under the second Earl. Its vast expanses, and the deer that graze upon it, were an open display of wealth and power. The transformation of large tracts of productive land into vistas that resembled paintings by Claude, and the keeping of deer—one of the most prestigious and least efficient of stock animals—were clear signs of the conspicuous consumption that only the very wealthy could afford.

The third earl was quite different than his predecessor, and this too is evident in the painting. He was a leader in the agricultural reform movement, hence the Southdown sheep and the pigs which he bred, to the right of the painting. He was also a progressive

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landlord who improved both lands and housing. As part of his social improvement plan he opened his park to his tenants for an annual fete and cricket match, for cricket was a game thought to transcend class borders. Turner has integrated the novel elements of the third earl’s career into the grand tradition of estate painting and Claudian landscape thereby creating an image of social stability and legitimacy that would have been reassuring for his patron, much as its Italianate predecessors had been for his forebears. The painting acknowledges improvement as a part of an historical continuity and reiterates the propriety of the hierarchical social system which creates such a felicitous world. Cricketeers play and new breeds of sheep browse alongside noble stags in Brownian meadows in the crepuscular light beneath Claudian trees—all under the gaze of the 3rd Earl of Egremont.

It is an enchanting picture, and one that would probably appeal to the benevolent paternalism that Ruskin advocated as an antidote to modern ills. Why, however, would Ruskin overlook in Turner the deceit he articulately condemned in classical landscape or the picturesque? He clearly understood that classical paintings disguise or deny an


16 In May 1834 6,000 people were present at Petworth. Howkins, 249. Howkins suggests this is a painting that celebrates agricultural and social reform; I see it as an integration of reforms into traditional landscape treatment and thereby into traditional social values.

17 See chapter 2.

18 See especially *The Political Economy of Art* (1857) and *Unto This Last* (1860).
uncomfortable reality, but he did not apply the same analysis to Turner's paintings. If he had, he might have been more skeptical of paintings like this. Egremont was a man who took pleasure in his improvements and moving on horseback among his guests at the annual fete, but used emigration and the distribution of charity as a means of social control, and paid his workers 3s a week less than the neighbouring small farms.19

Ruskin seems to have overlooked these great estate pictures and their implications, just as he ignored some of the early urban paintings which patriotically celebrate the industrialization that made Britain pre-eminent among world powers.20 What Ruskin saw in Turner varied over the course of *Modern Painters* as his needs changed. In the beginning Turner was the champion of a new art dedicated to an empirical truth and superseding the European landscape tradition. By the end he was the seer of divine order in nature, a prophet of doom akin to Ruskin himself. Turner himself probably felt more comfortable with the latter assessment as he painted the great apocalyptic canvases of the 1840s like *Shade and Darkness—the Evening of the Deluge* (1843) and its pendant *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory)—the Morning after the Deluge—Moses writing the Book of Genesis* (1843).

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19 Charity went only to the industrious poor and deferential; many were excluded and by the 1840s Egremont had assisted in the emigration of 1,000 of the unemployed poor. Roberts, 117-128.

The Turner who painted such works created just what Ruskin needed. This Turner painted emblems, emblems of ruin to illustrate Ruskin’s moral landscape of despair. These paintings resembled traditional emblems as they have been described in chapter 2 in their design as well in the sense that they were to be read as “moral, literary and philosophical texts.” His titles were more mottoes than names—sometimes very long ones—and many of these apocalyptic paintings were accompanied by extracts of poetry, including Turner’s own interminable and aptly-named *Fallacies of Hope*. Turner sought to give painting the power of poetry, *ut pictura poesis*, and to enlist the sister arts in the cause of a moral prophecy. The combination could be quite impressive. For example, one landscape painting which owes much to Claude for composition and colour, and enjoys the dubious distinction of having the longest title of any of Turner’s works, can be read as a nineteenth-century emblematic omen for England (fig. 10). *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*—Rome being determined on the Overthrow of her Hated Rival, 

demanded from her such Terms as might either force her into War, or ruin her by Compliance: the Enervated Carthaginians, in their Anxiety for Peace, consented to give up even their Arms and their Children. As if a title like this were not enough, Turner has appended verses like those of more traditional emblems:

At Hope’s delusive smile  
The chieftain’s safety and the mother’s pride,  
Were to th’insidious conqu’ror’s grasp resign’d;

While o’er the western wave th’ensanguin’d sun,
In gathering haze a stormy signal spread,
And set portentous.

The genealogy of ruin was a favourite image for Ruskin and, it seems, for Turner. Turner uses the fate of Carthage, Rome and Venice as a warning to England; Ruskin begins the Stones of Venice (1851) with a slightly different lineage, but the same moral conclusion:

Since first the dominion of men was asserted over the ocean, three thrones, of mark beyond all others, have been set upon its sands: the thrones of Tyre, Venice, and England. Of the First of these great powers only the memory remains; of the Second, the ruin; the Third, which inherits their greatness, if it forget their example, may be led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction.²²

The lesson of the emblem is writ in ruin, the ruins of great civilizations, the ruins of humanity. “Turner,” Ruskin says in words that would equally describe himself, “only momentarily dwells on anything else than ruin.”²³ Ruskin once owned Turner’s Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhon coming on (1840)—as intense a condemnation of man’s inhumanity to man as is to be found in painting—but had to sell it as he found the subject too painful to live with.²⁴

It is this ruin that reveals the lie of the land. Not the make-believe ruins of early painters which are “shattered artificially, like models”²⁵ and strewn about for decoration,

²³ Ruskin, Modern Painters V (1860), C & W 7: 432.
²⁵ Ruskin, Modern Painters V (1860), C & W 7: 432.
but actual ruin with all its "feeling of decay and humiliation."26 No other age, according to Ruskin, could know this kind of ruination. It did not exist when Giorgione was a boy as it did for Turner, for example. Ruskin relates in "The Two Boyhoods,"27 which was written to contrast the two ages as much as the two artists, that young Giorgione "saw only strength and immortality" in a world where "brighter and brighter the cities of Italy had been rising and broadening on hill and plain, for three hundred years."28 The opposite was true of Turner. Around him he saw either ruins of a better past, the debased present which was "despicable, or decayed," or nature where no man was. Turner's course as an artist was clear to Ruskin:

He must be a painter of the strength of nature, there was no beauty elsewhere than in that; he must paint also the labour and sorrow and passing away of men; this was the great human truth visible to him.29

In this world even death was different than it had been for Giorgione or any of the classical painters. After the apocalyptic Napoleonic wars, the "European Death of the nineteenth century"30 as Ruskin called it, and the casualties of industrialization there were no more heroic deaths, nor decorous deaths, nor devout deaths. There was just life trampled out in the slime of the street, crushed to dust amidst the roaring of the wheel, tossed Countlessly away into howling winter wind along five hundred leagues of rock-fanged shore. Or, worst of all, rotted down to forgotten graves through years of

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 7: 374-88.
28 Ibid., 7: 385.
29 Ibid., 7: 386.
30 Ibid.
ignorant patience, and vain seeking of help from man, for hope in God—infirm, imperfect yearning, as of motherless infants starving at dawn

Ruskin provides one final image in *Modern Painters* of the world that he forecasts Turner is to paint; it is a landscape that could have been taken from St. John’s *Revelations*:

A goodly landscape this, for the lad to paint, and under a goodly light. Wide enough the light was, and clear; no more Salvator’s lurid chasm on jagged horizon, nor Durer’s spotted rest of sunny gleam on hedgerow and field; but light over all the world. Full shone now its awful globe, one pallid charnel-house,—a ball strewn bright with human ashes, glaring in poised sway beneath the sun, all blinding-white with death from pole to pole,—death, not of myriads of poor bodies only, but of will, and mercy, and conscience; death, not once inflicted on the flesh, but daily, fastening on the spirit; death, not silent or patient, waiting his appointed hour, but voiceful, venomous; death with the taunting word, and burning grasp, and infixed sting.

Prepared with this vision of Armageddon, Ruskin says Turner must take up his brush to paint, “with cautious toil, the rocks, and fields, and trickling brooks, and soft, white clouds of heaven.” And if those fields are, as Ruskin laments twenty years later, “blighted grass,” those brooks “black as ebony and thick with curdling scum,” and those clouds borne by the infected “plague-wind of the eighth decade of years in the nineteenth century,” what will the artist paint then?

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31 Ibid., 7: 387.
32 Ibid., 7: 387-8.
33 Ibid., 7: 388.
34 Ruskin, “Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” (1884), C & W 34: 40.
36 Ruskin, “Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” (1884), C & W 34: 31.
And what of contemporary landscape practice? Can the discourse of landscape provide a rhetoric for powerful social criticism in a time when the planet, not just Britain, is the contested field? Ruskin forged his invective against the industrialization of England when the myth of its “green and pleasant hills” still breathed. By first seeing through the lie of the land that Claude and others originated, and that “taste” perpetuated, Ruskin was able to use the assumptions of that tradition to disabuse his readers of their illusions about both the politics of landscape and the world they lived in. He fought just as strenuously against those who, like Whistler, sought to remove art from the political arena. Now there are clearcuts on the earth’s surface so large they are visible from space. Ancient forests are burned to create grasslands to raise cattle for restaurants in the disproportionately wealthy parts of the planet, and smoke from these fires travels around the world. Radioactive fallout from a small town in the Ukraine reaches the high atmospheric winds and poisons reindeer herds thousands of miles away, and a people in Finland who have never heard of Chernobyl face starvation. Refrigeration and spray deodorants so necessary to the industrialized western world eat away an eggshell thin layer in the upper atmosphere and visit a plague of cancer on their creators.

There is no lack of catastrophe that deserves the damnation of a modern Ruskin and there are artists like Richard Long who, by changing our conceptions of the countryside without physically changing it, continue to expose the lie of the land and use the rhetoric

37 Blake, “Milton” l. 16.
of landscape as a way to articulate political dissent. There are also those who fight to retain old-growth forests, migratory marshlands, or endangered habitat. One wonders, however, whether a landscape and a landscape tradition so ravaged since Ruskin’s time can still have the depth of meaning it had for Ruskin and his readers. Once it was redolent with a moral significance that has long since fled into scientific terms like “biodiversity,” or “sustainable growth.” Concepts like “taste” have been limited to the merely personal. Ruskin himself exposed the relation between personal or class interest and landscape values; now the debate has become one of simply determining which interests will prevail. The effect of the rhetoric can now be compromised or even appropriated without the defining presence of the tradition that formed the habits of seeing which constituted landscape for Ruskin and his readers. There is an inherent irony in the fact that the expression and power of Ruskin’s moral landscape depended on the tradition it rejected, and one wonders if, without a Claude, there could be a Ruskin.

In the pages above we have traced that tradition of English landscape which gave Ruskin both a language and a cause. His political vision is couched in the discourse of the studio rather than the public meeting-hall or the house of commons. It was, however, in the studio, and outside in the countryside itself, that he discovered a mission and a public. Ruskin’s political rhetoric is inseparable from that moment in the middle of the nineteenth century that he came to dominate. He exposed the ‘lie of the land’ at a time when the dissonance between the representation and the reality of landscape was especially acute, when the legacy of Claude had faded but before painting retreated entirely into fin de
sécle aestheticism. He forged the aesthetics of landscape into a moral conscience, and taught people to read landscape in a new way at a time when industrialization and capitalism inscribed the text of his jeremiad onto the face of the land itself.
ENVY

Many adventures and long-lasting dangers were in the life of Joseph, man of prophecy, but also great glory.

The personification of Envy is an aged and very ugly woman sitting half nude, before a cave. Her shriveled breasts are exposed; she is livid in color and has snakes instead of hair. She eats a human heart, while resting her hand on a hydra, and a lean and hungry-looking dog watches nearby.

Her livid color is due to the absence of envy of all warmth and charity, so that she is very cold. She is old and ugly, for envy is the ancient enemy of all virtue (which is beautiful). The snakes on her head are the evil thoughts of Envy, who is always spreading poison. Her continual envy of others causes her heart eternal disquiet, and she literally consumes herself in the envy of others—in other words, she “eats her heart out.” The hydra with its many heads has a poisonous breath, killing all who inhale it, and is thus a suitable symbol for envy, which poisons its own life and that of all around it. When one of the hydra’s heads is cut off, another immediately grows in its place; this is like removing the cause of enviousness, only to see another reason for it spring up in its place. Being furnished with so many heads, the hydra, like envy, never sleeps. The lean dog is an old symbol for envious selfishness, for he wishes to keep everything for himself. Pliny says (Natural History, Book 25, chap. 8) that the dog, when bitten by a serpent, eats of a certain herb as an antidote, but out of selfish fear that someone might learn of this, always eats it out of sight. The old story of the dog in the manger is another version of the same idea.

The fact: Young Joseph, weeping bitterly, is being sold by his envious elder brothers to the traveling merchants. One of the brothers points down into the well into which they had first cast him.

[Genesis 37: 25-28]

ENVY

Joseph, through his brothers’ hatred cold,
A slave into far Egyptland was sold.

Figure 1
No Heart can think, to what strange ends,
The Tongues unruly motion tends.

Ill-serv'd of our better heeding were,
That holy Pen-man's lesson, who hath said,
We should be slow to speak, and swift to heart;
If, well, the nature of the Tongue we weigh'd.

For, if we let it loose, it geteth wings,
And flies with wanton carelessness, about;
It prepaid in all places, of all things;
Tells truth and lies, and babbleth secrets out.

To speak, of things unknowne, it taketh leave,
As if it had all knowledge in possession;
And, mysteries (which no man can conceive)
Are thought fit objects for the tongue expression.

With truth it mixeth errors; fayes, unfaies;
And, is the preacher of all heresies.

That heart, which gives it motion, it betrays;
And, uttereth curses, oaths, and blasphemies.
It spreads all slander, which base envie raileth;
It moveth anger, and begeth hates;
It blameth perjured; filthy deeds it praises;
And, causeth vapors, murthers, and debates.

Yea, 'tis the chiefest faller for the devill;
And, yet, with speeches feignedly sincere,
It otherwise reproveth what is evill,
And, will in lowly words, a saint appeare.

Now this is knowne, we, next of all, should learn,
How we may shunne the mischief being knowne;
How, we bad tongues, in others, may discern;
And, how to guide and moderate our own.
And, reason good; for, none can apprehend,
What mischief doth the evill tongue attend.
Ere thou a fruitfull Crop p[all seer.
Thy ground must plough'd and harrow'd be.

For the Plowe man hopefull can be made,
His untill'd earth good Hay or Corne will yeeld,
He breaks the hillocks downe, with Plough or Spade;
And, harrowes over, all the cloddie Field.
Then, from the leave'd ground, at last, he mowes
That Crop of graffe, which he had hope to gaine;
Or, there, doth reap the fruit of what he sowe's,
With profit, which contents him for his paine.

Our craggie Nature must be tilled, thus,
Before it will, for Herbes of Grace, be fit.
Our high conceit, must downe be broke in us;
Our heart is proud, and God must humble it.
Before good Seed, in us will rooting take,
Afflictions ploughes and harrowes, must prepare us;
And, that the truer level, he may make,
When we are [an] too low, God hand must reare us.
Then, neither stormings of Adversities,
Shall drown the Seeds of Hope, which we have sowne;
Nor shall the Sunne-beames of Prosperitie,
Dr e e'up their moisture, ere they ripe are growne.
Oh Lord, thou know'st the nature of my minde;
Thou know'st my bodies tempers what they are;
And, by what meanes, they shall be best inclin'd
Such Fruits to yeeld, as they were made to bear.
My barren Soule, therefore, man with doe so;
So, harrow it; so empsiue, and so fill,
So raise it up, and bring it downe, so low
As best may lay it level to thy Will.
In this Desire, the worke is well begunne;
Say thou the Word, and all is fully done.
Hey are not Houses builded large and high.
Sect'd all with Gold, and pav'd with Porphyrice,
Hung round with Armes, glaz'd with Christall-glaZe,
And cover'd o're with plates of shining Brass,
Which are the best; but, rather, those where wee
In safety, health, and bet content, may bee;
And, where wee finde, though in a mean Estate,
That portion, which maintains a quiet Fate.
Here, in a homely Cottage, thatch't with reed,
The Pheasants seemes as pleas'dly to feed,
As hee, that in his Hall or Parlour dines,
Which Fret-worke Rooses, or costly Cedar Lines:
And, with the very same affections too,
Both to, and from it, hee doth come and goe.
The Tortoise, doubltlesse, doth no house-roome lack,
Although his House will cover but his back;
And, of his Tub, the Cinickes seem'd as glad,
As Alexander was of all hec had.
When I am settled in a place I love,
A Shubby Hedge-row, seemes a goodly Grove.
My liking maketh Palaces of Sheeds,
And, of plain Coaches, carved Ivory Beds:
Yea, evry path, and pathlesse walke, which lies
Contemn'd, as rude, or wilde, in others eyes,
To mee is pleasant; not alone in show,
But, truly such: For, liking makes them so.
As pleasant in theirs, the Smelles, and Coaches dwell,
As doth a Scallop in his pearly shell:
For, that commends the House, which makes it fit,
To serve their turnes, who should have use of it.
When prosperous our Affairs doe grow;  
God's Grace it is, that makes them so.
He that delighteth to Plant and Set,  
Makes After-Ages in his Debt.

ILLUSTR. XXXV.  
Book. I.

Hence I behold the Havocke and the Spoyle,  
Which (even within the compass of my Days)  
Is made through every quarter of this Isle,  
In Woods and Groves (which were this Kingdomes praise)  
And, when I mind with how much greediness,  
We seek the present Gaine, in every thing;  
Not caring (so our Lush we may possesse)  
What Dammage to Poverty we bring:  
They doe, me-thinkes, as if they did foresee,  
That, some of those, whom they have cause to hate,  
Should come in Future-times, their Heires to be:  
Or else, why should they such things perpetrate?  
For, if they thinke their Children shall succed;  
Or, can believe, that they begot their Heires;  
They could not, freely, doe so foule a Deed,  
As to deface the Land, that should be theirs.  
What our Forefathers planted, we destroy:  
Nay, all Mens labours, living heretofore,  
And all our owne, we lavishly imployc  
To serve our present Lush; and, for no more.  
But, let these carelesse Weaters learne to know,  
That, as Paine-Spoyle is open Injury;  
So, Planting is a Debt, they truly owe,  
And ought to pay to their Poverty.  
Selfe love, for none, but for it selfe, doth care;  
And, onely, for the present, taketh paine:  
But, Charity for others doth prepare;  
And, joyes in that, which Future-Time shall gaine.  
If, After-Ages may my Labours blesse;  
I care not, much, how Little I possesse.
Our outward Hopes will take effect,
According to the King's affect.

Hen Phoebus with a cheerfull eye, beholds
The Flower's-embroidred earth, and freely spreads
His beams abroad; behold, the Marigolds
Begin to rear their low-dejected heads:
The Tulip, Daisy, and the Heliotrops
Of every kind, their closed Leaves display;
And (as it were) with new-recover'd hopes,
Attend upon the Ruler of the Day.
Again, when either in the West he throw'd
His Rays below this Horizon, or hides
His Face behind the Curtaines of the Cloudes;
They lose their beauties, and abate their prides.
Thus fares it with a Nation, and their King,
Twixt whom there is a native Sympathy.
His Presence, and his Favour, like the Spring,
Do make them sweetly thrive, and fructify:
Yea (like fresh Grapes, or Flowers of pleasing hue)
Themselves in all their jollity they shoue;
But, they, if with displeasure, them he view,
Soone loose their Glory, and contemned growe.

All, are not Heliotrops that favour'd growe,
In Princes Courts; nor Marigolds, that beare
The golden blossomes; but some spring below,
Like Daisy flow'res, that in the Pathwayes are:
Yet all shall feele it, when their Sovereigns eye
Doth frowne, or smile, regard, or else neglect:
Yea, it will finde them in Obscurity,
By some Diana-like, or some sweet Effect.
Vouchsafe to shine on Me, my Gracious King,
And then my Witheld Leaves, will freely spring.

Figure 7
Figure 10
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