

John Ruskin: Prophet of the Anthropocene

Paper Titles and Abstracts

John Ruskin and the Green New Deal, Or a Brief History of Zombies, Gothic Architecture, and the Great Recession

Amy Woodson-Boulton, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA

Just before the financial collapse of 2008, thinkers in the United States and Great Britain articulated the idea of a “Green New Deal” that would have used a combination of government investment and carbon trading to lower CO2 emissions. In the wake of the Great Recession, British and American conservatives prevented any substantive legislative progress, first embracing austerity and then an increasingly nationalist populism. In the last several years, however, politicians and economists on the left in both countries have revived the idea, this time with much broader goals of social change. This paper considers this new, ambitious Green New Deal in relation to John Ruskin’s penetrating social critique. I argue that Ruskin’s work clarifies the connection between economics and morality: namely, if we want to create human systems that are ecologically and socially sustainable, we need to first and foremost stop treating human beings as machines. Considering the global environmental history that separated saving “pristine nature” from promoting social justice, I will examine how Ruskin gives us the language and framework to re-unite them.

“The Real Science of Political Economy”: John Ruskin and Economics after Neoliberalism

Eugene McCarragher, Villanova University

The discipline of economics is in crisis. Scholars and politicians have criticized economists for failing to predict the last two major recessions, and some economists themselves are beginning to question the very conceptual foundations of their “science.” At the same time, although neoliberalism remains the predominant wisdom among the political, corporate, and journalistic elites, its abject failure has galvanized intellectuals and popular movements to seek alternatives. As any reader of *Unto This Last* knows, Ruskin was one of the first, most vociferous, and most incisive critics of the economic theory of his day, likening it to “alchemy, astrology, witchcraft, and other such popular creeds.” This paper will examine Ruskin’s critique, and explore his other work for the rudiments of a new science of economics that might guide us both through and out of neoliberal capitalism.

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The Brantwood Parables: John Ruskin's Living Laboratory

Howard Hull

John Ruskin's move to Brantwood in the English Lake District at the age of fifty-three furnished him with a 'living laboratory' which allowed him to research many of his ideas about land management. Here, he was able to explore the two-way consequences of man's interaction with nature. Ruskin's ecological sensibility was coupled with an anthropomorphic reading of nature. The teachings of nature underpinned much of his critique of society and his practical experiments in land management at Brantwood furnished his later writings with a new vocabulary with which to convey his insights about the well being of nature and man respectively and their relationship to one another. This paper will explore Ruskin's configuration of Brantwood as an instrument of perception, a gauge of human and environmental health, and as both an inspiration and a source book for his teaching. It will end with an assessment of the legacy with which Ruskin endowed the house, grounds and wider Lake District, and the manner in which this continues to articulate and respond to environmental concerns.

Ruskin's Bildungsroman and the "Microscopic Pains" of Uncertainty

Jesse Cordes Selbin, University of Maryland, College Park

Late in his career, John Ruskin began a set of major new projects, all of which would remain unfinished. His more well-known endeavors include the creation of the Guild of St. George (1870s); the rambling and heterogeneous *Fors Clavigera* (1871-84); and his own famously unfinished autobiography, *Praeterita* (1885-89). Less well known is the Swiss Bildungsroman *Uli der Knecht*, whose English edition Ruskin produced after commissioning a translation by Guildswoman Julia Firth. Published in 1886 in a "revised and edited" form, *Ulric the Farm Servant* featured Ruskin's own aphoristic quotations interwoven as epigraphs, alongside footnote commentary designed to guide the reading experience. This paper argues that Ruskin's textual interpolations reveal a late-life twist on his longstanding belief in the need to cultivate more nuanced modes of attention. While Ruskin would employ works like *Fors Clavigera* and *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884) to alert popular audiences to new states of uncertainty at home and abroad, his Bildungsroman seeks to equip novel-readers with aesthetic methods of fine-grained scrutiny, framed as a painful yet necessary strategy for responding to social, political, and environmental change in the wider world.

'He who shoots at beauty': Thoreau on the Wings of Ruskin

Laura Dassow Walls, University of Notre Dame

Thoreau saw few paintings in his life, yet his writings are full of painterly passages that show the trained eye of the artist. From Agassiz, who liked to tell his students that “a pencil is the best of eyes,” Thoreau learned how to develop the bond between the drawing hand and the seeing eye. From William Gilpin he learned to frame his seeing in terms of the “picturesque”; but from John Ruskin, Thoreau learned to see beyond the frame, to perceive form, light, and above all color. During the fall of 1857, he immersed himself in Ruskin’s writings, particularly *Modern Painters* and *Elements of Drawing*; and while he was highly critical of Ruskin’s orientation to art rather than nature, from then on Thoreau infused his writing with Ruskin’s ways of seeing. In his most brilliant essay, “Autumnal Tints”—the only one of his essays to include a drawing—Thoreau details how “he who shoots at beauty” must know its seasons and haunts and the color of its wing; “it must be in your eye when you go forth.” Ruskin taught Thoreau how to see, and describe, beauty. Could there be a finer tribute to Ruskin than this?

Art and Brutality

Morna O'Neill, Wake Forest University

In his "Lectures on Art" delivered at the University of Oxford in 1870, John Ruskin put forth his theory that art is connected to all aspects of life, emphasizing his belief that "the art of any country is the exponent of its social and political virtues." It is in Lecture 3, "The Relation of Art to Morals" that Ruskin touches upon art and industry, taking the latter term in its broadest sense to mean production, the making of things. He concludes with a pithy formulation: "life without industry is guilt, and industry without art is brutality." This pronouncement would be taken up not only by the artists of the Arts and Crafts movement but also by socialists, all of whom asked: If industry without art is brutality, what is the correct relation between art and industry? William Morris and his followers provided one answer to this question: a skepticism towards industrial production and, usually, a rejection of its methods. This talk will connect Ruskin to other, earlier attempts to understand connections between art and industry as a way to measure skill. Rote, habit, and calculation were the basis of mechanized industrial production in the nineteenth century, yet they could also provide a model for the artist to understand the craft or *techne* of technology. New modes of making could transform the art of oil painting, and the artist could create modes of visualization distinctly suited to industrial society.

Ruskin's Media: Technologies of the Gothic

Rachel Teukolsky, Vanderbilt University

"Ruskin's media" might sound like a contradiction in terms. The fiery and prolific art critic is known for his vehement attacks on industrialization, mechanization, even modernity itself. In books like *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin made medieval Gothic style into a symbol for the handmade and the authentic, versus more regularized "Classic" styles. "Media," by contrast, suggests exactly those modern developments that Ruskin dreaded: as new print technologies enabled the ever-greater circulation of images, the media landscape as we have come to know it today was born. Yet despite the apparent contrast between Ruskin's Romanticism and Victorian media culture, this paper will argue that the two need to be seen together. The Gothic revival has usually been studied as a high-art phenomenon in the realm of architecture or literature, but it also had important manifestations in visual mass media. Ruskin's literary Gothic needs to be seen alongside the mass media objects that preceded and developed alongside it. This paper will focus on the stereoview, the most popular and widespread form of photography in the nineteenth century. It will also discuss the Diorama and the daguerreotype. These three were all key technologies of the Gothic: they portrayed illusionistic scenes of cathedrals, ruined abbeys, medieval ornaments, and sculptures, offering spectators feelings of pleasurable melancholy in an aestheticized and undifferentiated History. This discussion will arrive at a rethinking not just of Ruskin but of media itself, whose teleologies have usually been scripted toward the postmodern and the virtual. My history instead sees the technology of the stereoscope looking back toward a Romantic past just as much as toward a postmodern future.

Ruskin and the insolence of science

Professor Sandra Kemp is Director of The Ruskin – Library, Museum and Research Centre at Lancaster University and Visiting Professor at Imperial College London. As an academic and curator, she has previously worked at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the Royal College of Art, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, and the Universities of Oxford, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Her publications and exhibitions include 'Ruskin: Museum of the Near Future' (2019), 'Ruskin and "the most marvellous invention of the 21st century"' (2019), and John Lockwood Kipling as curator, journalist and craftsman in 'John Lockwood Kipling: Art, Design and Industry', a research collaboration between the V&A, the Bard Graduate Center (New York) and the Lahore Museum (Pakistan) and exhibition at the V&A. She is currently leading an international research partnership funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, entitled *Universal Histories and Universal Museums*, on the role of the museum in building knowledge about the future.

For Ruskin the world was equally an object of science and of the human imagination. His work bypassed orthodox thinking. It was not just a set of contents but a powerful set of imaginaries, reflecting complex processes of vision and embodiment, the verifiable and the imagined, the objective and the creative. Writing in 1834, Ruskin criticised what he described as 'the insolence of science' in claiming for itself a separate function of the human mind, which he himself regarded as 'indivisible' (Works, 22.263).

This presentation will explore Ruskin's legacy for the 21st century through an investigation of his interdisciplinary working methods. In particular, the focus will be on fundamental questions of world-building and of what it means to be human. Ruskin's emphasis on plural repertoires of knowledge and the interplay of scientific knowledge and social and cultural value seem increasingly relevant today.

Ethics of the Golden Dustman: Ruskin, “crystal life,” and *Our Mutual Friend*

Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, William E. “Bud” Davis Alumni Professor of English, Louisiana State University

Ruskin’s two books written during the publication of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865) seem interlocked with Dickens’s novel in surprising ways; in fact, it may be that *Our Mutual Friend*, and not *Hard Times*, is Dickens’s most Ruskinian novel. What Ruskin calls the “calcareous earth” and its “crystal life” reveals a shared concern with Dickens about gender, pollution, political economy, communities of choice, and what Talia Schaffer has described as relational ethics. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the ingénue Bella learns through the Golden Dustman’s (deceitful) tutelage to be the effective homemaker that readers often assume Ruskin advocates. But Ruskin’s aim is the opposite of creating a bustling middleclass housewife in the Dickensian mode (whose focus is care of her own home and family). Rather, his model expands women’s range of activity beyond the walls of her private house and garden to repair the wider world. It is as though Dickens educates Bella part way in the system Ruskin outlines in “Of Queens’ Gardens” (1865), but not in the key area—an ethics of cooperation and protection of the environment—that matters most to him. Ruskin’s answer is his own foray into writing about dust, *Ethics of the Dust: Ten Lectures to Little Housewives, or the Elements of Crystallisation* (1866). In this mineralogy textbook, girls learn to identify with the earth itself, seeing themselves as molecules that draw together out of the undifferentiated mud into the rows constituting a crystal. The earth’s rocks are alive, the rivers its lifeblood. Working collaboratively, the girls can protect it and its inhabitants.

Ruskin's Trash

Deanna K. Kreisel, University of Mississippi

Ruskin was obsessed with garbage. In the introduction to *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866), he rails against the defilement of the little pools and rivulets near his boyhood home by “street and house foulness; heaps of dust and slime, and broken shreds of old metal” and the use of a nearby pub’s “area” as a “protective receptacle of refuse; cigar ends, and oyster shells.” Nearly 25 years later, in *Fiction, Fair and Foul*, he continues to lament the garbage heaping up near a suburban development outside London in a description that is itself a tour de force of *bricolage*: “Half a dozen handfuls of new cottages, with Doric doors, are dropped about here and there among the gashed ground ... bordered on each side by heaps of — Hades only knows what! ... ashes and rags, beer-bottles and old shoes, battered pans, smashed crockery, shreds of nameless clothes, door-sweepings, floor-sweepings, kitchen garbage, back-garden sewage, old iron, rotten timber jagged with out-torn nails, cigar-ends, pipe-bowls, cinders, bones, and ordure, indescribable.”

Ruskin associated the proliferation of waste with the mass production attendant on the growth of suburbia, and hence with the despoliation of the countryside and increased alienation of labor. Ruskin’s horror of rubbish can also be viewed from another perspective: as a nascent sustainability critique. In this paper I will consider more fully the relationship between the environmentalist and the aesthetic strains in Ruskin’s thinking, focusing particularly on his hatred of – and simultaneously lavish descriptions of – household waste. The relationship between aesthetic pleasure and environmentalist critique in general is a fraught one: the romanticization of “Nature” has long been reviled as integral to an instrumentalist orientation toward the other-than-human world. The work of Ruskin, shaped by simultaneous commitments to aesthetic beauty and a proto-ecological sensibility, is an ideal place to examine the longstanding entanglement (and mutual hostility) of these two critical modes. Is there a way in which an ecological aestheticism can be harnessed, rather than simply reviled, in our own historical moment? Can Ruskin furnish a model for such a productive merger?

Ruskin for Whitechapel

Professor Lucy Hartley, Dept. of English Language & Literature, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

This paper offers an account of the Whitechapel Fine Art Loan Exhibitions (also known as the St. Jude's Picture Exhibitions), which were established by the Reverend Samuel and Henrietta Barnett in 1881 and inspired by the teachings of John Ruskin. It will trace the influence of Ruskin on the Exhibitions from two directions. First, through the work of Octavia Hill and the Marylebone branch of the Charity Organization Society, for which she received early financial support from Ruskin in 1865 and at which Henrietta Octavia Rowland met Samuel Augustus Barnett in 1870. Second, through the paintings of Pre-Raphaelite artists (and artists associated with Pre-Raphaelitism) displayed in the rooms of St. Jude's School in Whitechapel from 1881 to 1898 and described in catalogues edited by E. T. Cook with axioms from Ruskin on the covers.

That the Barnetts presented "pictures for the people" in a locale infamously described as "outcast London" was borne out of a belief that art could serve moral and social purposes by offering relief from poverty, but, in turn, revealed a tension between tradition and social change. Drawing on the catalogues as well as reports of the Exhibitions, my paper will examine the extent to which the Barnetts adapted Ruskin's principles of art into a practicable socialism intended to reshape the lives of the poor. How were artworks, primarily paintings by contemporary artists, used to teach the poor? Upon what basis were pictures selected for display? What kind of knowledge was disseminated from the pictures, and by whom? And which pictures proved the most popular, and why? These are the questions I will address.

Ruskin's Guild of St George, Yesterday and To-Day

Clive Wilmer, Emeritus Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, University of Cambridge; Master of the Guild of St George, 2009-19

Short description

The Guild of St George, founded in 1871, was born of Ruskin's despair with modern society and, partly because of his own psychological frailty in the 1870s and 80s, was not in any obvious way a success. But the Guild has survived in good health and is active in many countries at the present day, not an antiquarian body but a movement fully engaged in modern life. This lecture will seek to explore the continuities with reference to Ruskin's writings.

Synopsis

In 1869, Ruskin was elected to the first-ever Chair of Fine Art at an English University. This left him in a quandary. He had argued for the recognition of art as an academic discipline, but in his own life he had moved away from pure art criticism to campaigning for social and economic justice. He now needed a new way of dealing with 'the condition of England' while teaching art history at Oxford and, soon after his first series of lectures, he began publishing monthly letters to the working men of England, which dealt with contemporary issues. In the first of these letters in 1871, he announced the foundation of what was to become the Guild of St George, a more or less utopian society, originally intended as a means of rural regeneration and a challenge to industrialisation. In 1875 he extended the Guild's commitments by founding St George's Museum in the industrial city of Sheffield, designed to attract artisans in the metal-working industry. The following year the Guild acquired its first land: twenty acres of woodland, orchard and farmland in the Wyre Forest in Worcestershire. The Guild acquired other properties in Ruskin's time, but of those only these two remain. The Guild was born of Ruskin's despair with modern society and, partly because of his own psychological frailty in the 1870s and 80s, was not in any obvious way a success. But the Guild has survived in good health and is active in many countries at the present day, not an antiquarian body but a movement fully engaged in modern life. This lecture will seek to explore the continuities with reference to Ruskin's writings.

Ruskin in Energy History

Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, The University of Chicago

This talk situates Ruskin in the social and political history of Victorian energy use. William Stanley Jevons famously predicted the end of the British fossil fuel economy in 1865. Leading political figures John Stuart Mill and William Gladstone shared his alarm. Yet, the conviction that the age of coal was coming to an end also stimulated new kinds of argument about the power of substitution and innovation. In the circle around the Newcastle engineer William Armstrong, electricity was seen as the obvious alternative to coal. Lord Kelvin predicted that a new age of hydropower was at hand. The rising star of political economy William Marshall, one of the central thinkers of the Marginalist Revolution, gave the argument for substitution a central place in his popular lectures and economics textbook. Already in 1879, he suggested that petroleum and hydroelectricity promised an alternative to coal.

John Ruskin and his allies responded to the coal panic by pioneering a post-carbon community oriented towards material simplicity and rural industries. The experiment was galvanized by precocious anxieties about anthropogenic climate change. Ruskin convinced his supporters to reject coal and steam in favor of renewable energy and labor-intensive handicraft production. By creating a new culture of sufficiency, Ruskin and his followers sought to demonstrate that a simple material life was still compatible with a great measure of cultural creativity and intellectual freedom. A precocious critic of cornucopian ideology and fossil addiction, Ruskin grasped the essential fragility of the planet and the need for a circular economy embedded in physical processes. My talk explores the closely intertwined themes of earth, energy, and growth in Ruskin's thought and practice.

The Limits of Ruskin's Geological Imagination: Deep Time in *Deucalion*

Benjamin Morgan

In asking whether Ruskin is a “prophet of the Anthropocene,” we must grapple with his vexed relation with secular, scientific materialism. Ruskin’s aversion to materialism and Darwinism has been studied extensively, but equally important from our present perspective is his intervention into an 1870s geological controversy about the movement of glaciers. Ruskin’s attack on John Tyndall’s theory that glaciers move by melting and refreezing led to a more general attack on geologists’ inhuman materialism and godless speculation about the age of the Earth. This paper focuses on *Deucalion*, Ruskin’s collection of writings about geology, in order to ask why Ruskin eschewed the sweeping, speculative narratives of deep time in favor of practices of direct observation and small time scales. Given that geological time gripped the literary imagination of so many nineteenth century writers, why was it anathema to Ruskin’s own literary approach to scientific inquiry? Ruskin sounded a powerful alarm about anthropogenic environmental impacts, but he also refused to think at the geological scale that defines the Anthropocene and rejected the developing norms of professional science in favor of a spiritual response to nature. This dissonance raises the broader question of how nineteenth-century negotiations of literary and scientific approaches to nature can be understood as a genealogy of the Anthropocene as an multidisciplinary concept.

Are Carbon Taxes Impious?

David Craig, IUPUI

Economists support taxing carbon emissions as a policy response to anthropogenic climate change. Ruskin's criticisms of economic theory and monetary exchange would seem to place him among critics who argue for moral transformation over technical tools in addressing the Anthropocene. Yet his appeals to nature's intrinsic value and calls for natural piety evolve with his growing recognition of the inevitability and power of human making. Ruskin summoned moral imagination to guide the science of natural history and a politics of wise consumption in his day. Properly applied, a carbon tax can spur a re-imagination of current consumer practices and culture toward natural and communal piety.

Ruskin, Wordsworth, and the Pathetic Fallacy

Henry Weinfield, University of Notre Dame

This paper will argue that Ruskin formulated his concept of the pathetic fallacy partly as an outgrowth of his reading of Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1800) and Wordsworth's sonnet "The world is too much with us" (1802-04), a poem that Ruskin mentions in *Modern Painters* III. The paper will demonstrate that for Ruskin as well as for Wordsworth, religious and aesthetic issues are inseparable.

Ruskin and the Disposition of Clouds

Siobhan Carroll, University of Delaware

Ruskin's Touch

Jeremy Melius, Rutgers University

Reading Ruskin's "Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century"

Sara Maurer, University of Notre Dame