# *John Ruskin: the Aesthete as Oracle*

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I intend to explain my title, but not before the conclusion of this essay since the title occured to me only after I had read Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century, which, with the autobiographical Praeterita, concludes the Ruskin canon. Had I stopped reading earlier, through the later volumes of Modern Painters, say, or even into the more overtly "social" works, my title and subject might have been something like "The Development of Social Consciousness in a Victorian Aesthete." The protagonist of Tennyson's "Palace of Art" might have served as a convenient model to parallel

what would have appeared the attenuation in the maturing Ruskin of an initially lush and apparently self-indulgent aestheticism toward ends more conscious of social responsibilities. But as one progresses through the canon it becomes increasingly clear that "aesthete" is not so much an incorrect description of Ruskin at any stage in his career, as it is a wholly unmeaning one, because through the body of his work there can finally be no distinction made between an "aesthetic" and a "natural," or "social," universe.

The famous statement in Modern Painters -- "that the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way"[1] -- so striking a foreshadow of Joseph Conrad in his preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus"[2] -- would seem the credo of a somewhat arrogantly sensual aesthete: "To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion -- all in one."

To see, yes; but "to see clearly," we find, entails for Ruskin something more than the simple perception and communication of sensual phenomena. In The Stones of Venice ("The Nature of Gothic") Ruskin chides us for merely seeing the artifacts of a culture, rather than "reading" them:

> The idea of reading a building as we would read Milton or Dante, and getting the same kind of delight out of the stones as out of the stanzas, never enters our minds for a moment.[3]

This notion is also earlier adumbrated in "The Nature of Gothic" when Ruskin speaks of "certain mental tendencies of the builders" expressed "legibly" in what they build,[4] or when Gothic architecture is seen as an "index" by which "religious principle" may be measured,[5] or when Ruskin tells us that "read rightly" perfection of workmanship may be a sign of the workman's slavery[6]. An even more direct expression of this vocation of "reading" artifacts is found in Fors Clavigera. In what strikes me as a kind of commentary on his "credo" in Modern Painters, Ruskin explains that he has dedicated his life to the observation of both nature and noble art so that "I might bring others to see what I rejoiced in, and understand what I had deciphered."[7]

This metaphor (though we shall presently find "metaphor" an inadequate -- unmeaning -- description) of "reading" one's surroundings might be traced in part to the Calvinist influence Ruskin, in Praeterita, tells us his mother brought to his

childhood. More to the point, however, are the affinities with the romantics suggested by this mode of perception and paramountly with Wordsworth. For, in The Prelude, in Book V, which Wordsworth so significantly titles "Books," the poet tells of looking upon the "speaking face of earth and heaven" as the book of God, reading thereupon "the sovereign Intellect," that manifestation in sensual nature of the super-sensual spirit of God.

However, at least two important differences between Wordsworth's and Ruskin's "reading" must be noted, the first of which is perhaps the more eminently Victorian. Where Wordsworth reads nature as the book of God, Ruskin, at least in the bulk of his work, does not read nature directly so much as he reads the mediation culture effects upon nature through art and architecture. He reads, that is, paintings and buildings as "books" Man writes from nature. Now because these "books" are the record of what men have chosen to learn from nature, the study of these artifacts is really the study of choice, which Milton defined interchangeably with the moral faculty of Reason and which we can call simply morality. Ruskin can therefore indulge what one comes readily enough to see as a peculiarly Victorian penchant, the tendency to

moralize all aspects of life, but, what is more, he can do so without succumbing to merely empty convention. For, when one sees art and architecture as the evidences of choices made among modes of mediating nature, it becomes possible and even imperative to assert, as Ruskin does in "Traffic," that "Taste . . .is the ONLY morality,"[8] or to call a chapter of Modern Painters "The Moral of Landscapes."

The second point in which Ruskin differs from Wordsworth is that Ruskin's "reading" is so eminently literal, having the air of the close analysis of an actual text, while, with Wordsworth "reading" remains finally more a metaphoric suggestion of a spiritual and poetic inspiration drawn from physical, though symbolic, nature. The collocation, in the pages of Modern Painters, of Ruskin's brand of "naturalism" -- his doctrine of truth, of the necessity of the artist's unflinching faithfulness to both the agreeable and less agreeable aspects of his subject -- and of his definition of poetic truth as truth of the greatest precision, may be seen as the interpretation of romantic doctrine on a level so literal that what was for the romantics primarily a poetics becomes for Ruskin a viable and more soul-satisfying rival to the analysis of nature undertaken by Victorian science.

Though Wordsworth, too, may have intended to oppose an intuitive or inspirational knowledge of nature to a Newtonian science, that science perhaps represented less of a threat to a poetic "reader" of nature than Victorian science was to represent to such "readers" of a later age. Whatever threat Newton's science may have posed, the very fact that it is mathematical, theoretical rather than empirical, exalts Reason and thereby Wordsworth's hero, the mind of man. The empirical tendency of Darwin's science, however, puts man on a continuum with other creatures and other phenomena while, paradoxically, severing his mind from that continuum as well as from himself. I shall touch upon the ramifications this has for the validity of sensual perception when I take up Fors Clavigera shortly.

These differences from Wordsworth, however, serve finally to underscore Ruskin's development of romantic ideas. The literal quality I spoke of is, along the lines of Carlyle's idea of Symbols, a paradoxical affirmation of the metaphoric quality of the most extreme romanticism. Carlyle had seized upon and even intensified the romantic -- particularly the German romantic -- tendency to confound metaphoric, which (speaking now as a philistine) are merely "figurative," relationships

with social or natural -- "literal" -- relationships. A hut, Carlyle tells us, is the work of a man, and therefore, quite literally the symbol of the man whose work it is -- even as the man himself is a symbol of the God who created him. If we want to carry this translucence of the literal in the figurative as far as Carlyle dares us to carry it, we might observe that the hut is a metonymy for man who is a metonymy for God and, furthermore, that this relationship is not merely rhetorical, but, in the universe of symbols, quite literal or natural. For Ruskin, the hut becomes a cathedral or, as in "Traffic," a mercantile exchange, highly complex symbols that will yield their meaning only to a subtle and intensely literal reading. As with Carlyle, this literalness represents an extraordinary leap of faith into the metaphoric, which a Wordsworth, really, can only adumbrate. No, only the most extreme romantics -- Novalis, for example, with his notion of the world-as-poem -- can make the leap without reservation. That Ruskin makes it, collapsing the metaphoric into the literal, necessitates that for him there can be no"aesthetic" or ideational world separate from a social or natural or sensual world; and, so, I reiterate: the label "aesthete" applied to Ruskin is unmeaning.

But it is equally unmeaning to call him a social thinker or cultural critic. Perhaps, provisionally, before we can finally call him an oracle, we had better consider him a poet, and one who is indeed most poetic not when he is concerned with poetry or art, but when he addresses himself most literally to social issues.

To pursue this paradox, then, we observe that by the time Ruskin has come to write Fors Clavigera it would appear that he has lost patience with the special "seeing" of Modern Painters and has forthrightly entered society, not as mere seer, or even thinker, but as actor. Yet in opposing in Fors his poetic view of man and nature to a science rather too redolent of formaldehyde, he shows that the foundation of his social theory remains a concern with man's role as the "reader" of what surrounds him. First Kant, whose disciples Ruskin high-handedly disposes of in his opening remarks on the "pathetic fallacy" in the third volume of Modern Painters, and then nineteenth-century science challenged the validity of human perception. Kant, as Ruskin gives us to understand him, would have us see what we call the world as the mere coinage of our brains while the real world, meanwhile and always, is severed from us and perpetually unknow-

able. Victorian science attempts to overcome the handicap of the senses by abstracting realities beyond the senses and evolving a technology commensurate not with sensation but with abstraction. It is with Victorian science and technology that the world Henry Adams describes, the super-sensual world of the dynamo that has defeated the sensual world of the Virgin, begins in earnest. So "modern Science," we are told in Fors, "declares there is no such thing as a Flower,"[9] but merely what we are accustomed to call a flower, the subjective impression we draw from a particular arrangement of protoplasm. Ruskin opposes this with the aesthetic, romantic notion -- almost peevish in its aggressive assertion of anthropomorphicism -- of perception as creation of the thing itself: "the world truly exists only in the presence of man."[10] Then the world is, after all, a poem, even as the wild Novalis had claimed, and the most apparently "social" or "literal" action in this world is neither more nor less real than what we are used to calling merely "aesthetic" activity. When Ruskin decides late in his career to act in the social world no longer by writing and lecturing alone, but by creating the League of St. George and the fairy-tale utopia associated with it, he is pro-

jecting a poem in the spirit of the very organicism, which is at once medieval and romantic, that had all along been the chief tenet of his aesthetic. The model farm, the projected schools, even the laws are inseparable parts of a whole that is, before all else, aesthetically satisfying.

I said that Ruskin takes his chief interest in mediated nature -- society and culture read through their artifacts -- rather than in nature directly. But in the late series of lectures Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century Ruskin comes to confront nature directly and with a literalness that is bizarre as it is thoroughgoing, so profound, in fact, as to cast him into the role of oracle. Before turning to that work, though, I will pursue a brief indirection in order to provide the further context of a definition of the oracle in my title phrase.

If Tennyson's In Memoriam is the representative long poem of the Victorian epoch's crisis of faith, surely Arnold's "Dover Beach," eloquent testimony of the nineteenth-century intellectual's loss of "certitude," is the representative shorter poem. Yet, frankly, there has always seemed to me a gaping flaw in this great poem. That transition, via the meditation upon Sophocles, from the literal sea that laps the literal shore upon which the

speaker stands to the metaphoric "Sea of Faith" retreating from the metaphoric shore of the earth, has appeared to me a remarkably lame authorial fiat. What, really, can be the basis for such a metaphor, the sea having nothing in common with faith except for the word "sea" that Arnold attached to it? Oddly enough, though, after a survey of Ruskin or Carlyle, it is this very lameness that becomes one of the most poignant features of the poem because it further dramatizes the bifurcation of perception and imagination wrought by materialist and positivist philosophies and by the science that was "new" in Arnold's time and triumphant in our own. The possibility of faith depends upon a kind of negative capability that so many of the Victorians, save Carlyle and Ruskin, had lost or were losing -- the ability to accept metaphoric as literal truth.

Arnold's poem remains a moving document for us even beyond its historical context, of course, because there is really nothing extraordinary in Arnold's situation. His poem and even its artistic flaw reflect quite effectively Arnold's crisis of faith as well as our own. The effect of Storm Cloud, on the other hand, is bizarre not so much because its vision is apocalyptic, but because it is so explicit about the fact of apocalypse. With

metaphors of the apocalypse we can readily identify, but we feel more comfortable (intellectually, I mean) if we can attribute a literal belief in such an event to religious aberration and mental deterioration -- at least when the person professing that belief lacks our own only too literal engines of hydrogen apocalypse.

Ruskin begins his first lecture by denying any "arrière pensée" -- any ulterior, that is allegorical or metaphorical, intentions -- in the title Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century. He is true to his word: the lecture, accompanied by exquisite engravings, is a calm, minutely vivid description of "a series of cloud phenomena . . . peculiar to our own times . . . yet which have not hitherto received any special notice or description from meteorologists."[11] Ruskin calls these new clouds "plague-clouds," and though he somewhat demures initially, the connection with the divinely judgmental plagues of the Old Testament is unavoidable:

> If . . . you ask me for any conceivable cause or meaning of these things -- I can tell you none, according to your modern beliefs; but I can tell you what meaning it would have borne to the men of old time. Remember, for

> the last twenty years, England, and all foreign nations, either tempting her, or following her, have blasphemed the name of God. . .[12]

According to our modern beliefs we may, of course, be content to confirm the "truth" of Ruskin's observations, and find the cause and meaning of the "plague-clouds," by attributing the phenomenon to the air pollution of nineteenth-century Coketowns. Or perhaps this is a figment -- abetted by those polluted Victorian heavens -- of the mental illness of Ruskin's later years. But such corroboration or explanation from our modern selves is irrelevant to the Ruskin who, in denying any "arrière pensée," has precluded the distinction between possible physical causes of the clouds -- that is a job for the scientist's modern pseudo-explanations -- and the metaphoric perception, the "reading," of them. The clouds exist, he says, and because they exist he "reads" them to us. Now though the mode of perception is fundamentally the same as it was in Modern Painters and The Stones of Venice, "reading" and telling, Ruskin is no more the aesthete here than he ever was in the earlier works; for the aesthete must define himself as such by distinguishing an aesthetic from a natural or social

world while Ruskin, on the contrary, defeats that distinction, more or less implicitly here in his assertion of the Storm Cloud's absolute literalness as a fact.

It is this literalness, a poetry of the matter-of-fact, that accounts for the title of this essay. If we continue for a moment to grant Ruskin the provisional vocation of poet, we must continue to specify the kind of poet he is. In his well known elucidation of the "pathetic fallacy" Ruskin distinguishes four classes of men: those who "feel nothing, and therefore see truly" -- so far, that is, as the mere sense of sight goes -- those who "feel strongly, think weakly, and see untruly" -- these constitute the "second order of poets" who commit the "pathetic fallacy" unselfconsciously -- those who "feel strongly, think strongly, and see truly (first order of poets)" and, finally, those

> men who, strong as human creatures can be, are yet submitted to influences stronger than they, and see in a sort untruly, because what they see is inconceivably above them. This last is the usual condition of prophetic inspiration.[13]

So I call Ruskin an oracle, who sees in a sort untruly because he cannot merely "see" but must "read" what he looks upon. As an oracle, he is the apotheosis of the faith other Victorians lost; for an oracle reads phenomena as if they were runes, his faith consisting in the adequacy of what the senses tell the imagination, that the "phenomena" and the "runes," "literal" and "metaphoric" truth, are perfect equivalents.

The necessarily superficial character of this survey tends to militate, I think, against any sense of development in Ruskin's career. I do not, of course, mean to deny that Ruskin developed. He himself provides the psychological clue to his initial development in the account in Praeterita of how the relative sensual deprivation imposed upon his childhood by his Calvinist mother resulted in a chastened and very much heightened sensibility that allowed him to perceive lush detail in even the most mundane objects.[14]
And surely, after all, the early volumes of Modern Painters are more overtly "aesthetic" in orientation and concern than the later volumes or than Ruskin's later work in general. What I do suggest, however, is that the tendency to equate literal with metaphoric truth is at all times present in his

works, and, this being so, the seeds of Storm Cloud's "oracle" are present virtually from the beginning.

## A Chronology of the Works Discussed

Modern Painters 1843-1860 (Vol. III, 1856)

The Stones of Venice 1851

The Crown of Wild Olive ("Traffic") 1866

Fors Clavigera 1871-1884

Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century 1884

Praeterita 1885-1889

## Notes

1 Works (Boston and New York: The Colonial Press, n.d.), V. 2, pp. 330-1 (Ch. SVI, Sec. 28).

2 Simply to refresh the memory: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel -- it is, before all, to make you see. That -- and no more, and it is everything."

3 The Stones of Venice (London: J. M. Dent & Co.; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1907), V. 2, p. 159 (Ch. VI, Sec. 28).

4 Ibid., p. 140 (Ch. VI, Sec. 4.).

5 Ibid., p. 144 (Ch. VI, Sec. 9.).

6 Ibid., p. 148 (Ch. VI, Sec. 13.)

7 E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., Works (London: George Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), V. 28, p. 648 (Fors Clavigera, Letter LXVII, "Companionship").

8 The Crown of Wild Olives in Works (New York: The Publishers Plate Renting Co., n.d.), V. 7, p. 45 (Lecture II, "Traffic").

9 Cook and Wedderburn, V. 27, p. 84 (Fors Clavigera Letter V, "The White-Thorn Blossom).

10 Ibid., loc. cit.

11 Ibid., V. 34 (1908), p. 9 (Lecture 1 (Feb 4, 1884), Secs. 1-2).

12 Ibid., p. 40 (Sec. 38).

13 Works, (Boston and New York: The Colonial Press, n.d.), V. 2, p. 208 (Ch. XII, Sec. 9).

14 It is interesting to speculate on possible parallels between the childhood of Ruskin and that of Jonathan Edwards. One need only examine the youthful composition "Of Insects," written when Edwards was eleven years old, to appreciate the child's keen powers of observation -- very probably not unlike those of young Ruskin. In this power of observation can be found the seeds of Edward's rich and in some ways even proto-romantic brand of the Calvinistic allegorization of nature, a habit, that is, of "reading" reality that may not be all that distant from Ruskin's.