Goodness, truth, and beauty in the work of John Ruskin and his contemporaries

Friday September 6th, 2019

Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. LAB 106

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Zoë Bennett (Anglia Ruskin) ‘Heart-sight as deep as eyesight’: John Ruskin’s mature biblical hermeneutic of immediacy.

Sarah Hughes (Lancaster), ‘[A] range of suggestiveness […], [nor] a stone, leaf or shadow, nor anything so small, but he will give it meaning and oracular voice’ (Modern Painters, III, 262): The Significance of the Imagined Sacred Space of the Annunciation to Ruskin and Sacred Art’s Ability to Reveal Truth and the Divine

3.45-4:00 Break

4:00-5:00 Keynote 2. Chair: Zoë Bennett

Andrew Tate (Lancaster): On Deceleration: Ruskin, Reflection and Ethics

5:00-5:45 Roundtable Discussion: Chair: Nigel Cooper (Anglia Ruskin)

Can engaging with Ruskin help us protect the natural world?

5.45-6.30 Drinks reception

## Abstracts

### Panel 1. Ruskin and the Victorian Novel

**Ruskin, Dickens and the nature of Realism**

- Valerie Purton (Anglia Ruskin)

‘Dickens was a pure modernist – a leader of the steam-whistle party par excellence’. John Ruskin’s casual dismissal of his contemporary, Charles Dickens after the latter’s death in 1870, like most of his criticism, unwittingly reveals a great deal about his own social and literary attitudes. As always, he is self-contradictory. In Praeterita (1889) he was to suggest a very different level of response to Dickens: ‘Anent The King of the Golden River, I remorsefully bethink me no word has been said of the dawn and sunrise of Dickens on us’ [My italics]. Ruskin’s only foray into fairytale, The King of the Golden River (written 1841, published 1850), was overtly influenced by Dickens – though not in the ways one might expect – and throughout his life his extremely varied responses to each of Dickens’s novels can be used to chart the development of his own thought and especially of his attitude to ‘Realism’.

By examining both writers’ approaches to fairytales and by setting Ruskin’s comments on Dickens over four decades into their critical and literary contexts I hope in this paper to tease out the central importance to both writers of that key term, ‘Realism’. This will involve analysing both writers’ attitudes to caricature and to sentimental writing, as well as to the natural world. My paper will examine not only literary texts but the responses of both writers to the PreRaphaelite painters – responses centred on the question of ‘Truth to Nature’. I hope to show that for both, despite their very different interpretations of the word, ‘Realism’ remained throughout their lives the ultimate touchstone of moral worth.

"Face to face she speaks with God": Charlotte Brontë and the Ruskinian Artist

- Simon Marsden (Lancaster)
‘I feel now as if I had been walking blindfold’, Charlotte Brontë wrote to her publisher after reading the first volume of Ruskin’s Modern Painters in 1848: ‘this book seems to give me eyes’. Brontë credited Ruskin with giving her a new capacity for informed judgment of art, beyond the limited education in the conventions of the picturesque that she had received as a child. Brontë found in Ruskin an approach to art that emphasised the subjective perspective of the artist: the work of the artist was to paint what they saw, rather than merely what was there. For both Ruskin and Brontë, the highest works of art revealed traces of the divine in nature.

Brontë’s letters also suggest that she quickly began to relate Ruskin’s theories of landscape painting to her own artistic medium. ‘Mr. Ruskin’, Brontë wrote, ‘seems to me one of the few genuine writers (as opposed to bookmakers) of this age’. Ruskin’s influence on Brontë is discernible not only in passages of her fiction that employ his language of art criticism directly, but also in their shared understanding of artistic vision as glimpsing the transcendent in nature and of art itself as a sacred vocation. Focusing on Shirley and Villette, the two novels completed after her initial reading of Ruskin, this paper traces the figure of the Ruskinian artist in Brontë’s work and explores the ways in which this figure became integral to Brontë’s understanding of her own literary art.

Panel 2. The Transformation of Man.

Morris & Co. and the Industrial School at 44 Euston Road: Employing Destitute Boys

– Prof Chiaki Yokoyama (Keio University, Japan)

Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. was established in April 1861. In March, the firm had hired George Campfield to be a foreman, and by the year’s end five men and several boys were hired as regular employees. The Working Men’s College, where three of the founding members of the firm (Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Brown) were teaching drawing with John Ruskin, had become a treasure trove introducing talented workmen to the newly-established design firm: Campfield, a glass painter, was a student of Ruskin’s and Rossetti’s, as was Albert Goodwin, an apprentice draper and future watercolour painter who was one of the five men employed by the firm. Still, little is known about the boys who were hired from the Industrial School at 44 Euston Road, which had opened in February 1858 under the Industrial Schools Act of 1857. Industrial schools were crime prevention institutions for non-convicted children, providing them with a home, education and vocational skills. It is commonly said that William Gillum, a patron of the former Pre-Raphaelite artists and a member of the management committee of the Industrial School, introduced this educational facility to the firm. However, there may be other connections linking the firm with the School. First, upon the School’s opening, Frederick Maurice and Thomas Hughes, founders of the Working Men’s College, were appointed as trustees. Also, in 1859, John La Touche, the father of Rose La Touche, was one of the members of the committee under which the industrial schools, including the one at Euston Road, were managed. Ruskin had come to know Rose in 1858 through the acquaintance of John. Thus, the establishment of the Morris & Co. can be situated in the social reform movement of the time. This presentation focuses on the social welfare side of the firm as it relates to Ruskin.
‘Transformed from savageness to manhood, and redeemed from despairing into peace’ – John Ruskin and the Beauty of Imperialism

– Sean Lang (Anglia Ruskin)

Ruskin’s inaugural lecture at Oxford in 1870 is a troubling text for his modern admirers. It was an unashamedly imperialist call to the British people to colonise as much of the earth as they could. Cecil Rhodes always claimed it as a major part of the intellectual inspiration for his policy of expansionism in Africa and it appears to line the usually liberal Ruskin alongside the much more authoritarian Carlyle. Although Ruskin expressed his admiration for the manliness of the military and took an active part in the campaign to rehabilitate Governor Eyre of Jamaica, after his notorious suppression of the Morant’s Bay rising of 1865, Ruskin is not normally thought of as pillar of British imperialism. Yet there was no contradiction between his aesthetic ideas and his belief in empire. Concepts of beauty were central to the Victorians’ imperial vision and to their understanding of what their role in Empire was to be. Beauty was a concept closely tied to a western aesthetic: beauty had either to be brought by westerners or else, where it was to be found in the non-western world, it could best be identified and valued by the western ‘colonial’ eye. This paper will consider Ruskin’s Oxford speech and its impact and what it reveals both about Ruskin himself and about the aesthetic of the Victorian imperial vision and the Victorian concept of self.

Panel 3. Sacred Space and Vision

John Ruskin’s ‘great angel of the Apocalypse’ and his unveiling of a truth beyond the clouds

– Madeleine Emerald Thiele (Aberystwyth)

In the first edition of Modern Painters, John Ruskin’s romantic hyperbole ran away with him when he described J.M.W. Turner as ‘like the great angel of the Apocalypse…clad in a cloud with a rainbow over his head and with sun and stars given into his hand’. Ruskin’s interest and custodianship of Turner’s work is well-documented, but the significance of this particular declaration of Ruskin’s has yet to be fully contextualised.

Referencing several works by Turner, e.g. The Angel Standing in the Sun (1846, Tate), this paper examines the figure of the ‘artist-angel’ as that of a truth sayer, someone who ‘unveils’. This painting was produced quite late in Turner’s career and provides evidence for the change in colour and form which Ruskin admired. It is also a presentation of what we may call Ruskin’s aesthetic of truth as found high up in the heavens, between the clouds and the angelic.

Conversely, this paper will also respond to the inevitably blurring that comes with clouds, the softening of truths, the expanding of them, and even the possibility of their diminution. The clouding of truths is placed alongside Ruskin’s shifting faith, his ‘Dark Mirror’, and his ideas about truth, scripturally and / or aesthetically speaking.

‘Heart-sight as deep as eyesight’: John Ruskin’s mature biblical hermeneutic of immediacy.

– Zoë Bennett (Anglia Ruskin)
I would like to offer a short paper based around Ruskin's mature developed use of typology in relation to biblical hermeneutics, which is importantly different from the typical Victorian Christian use of typology which he inherited from his evangelical background, and its secular use in, for example, Carlyle. Robert Hewison and George Landow in different ways, explore Ruskin’s use of this Victorian typology in its relation to goodness, truth and beauty. However, my research on Ruskin’s private marginal annotations on Bible passages, in dialogue with his public use of the Bible in relation to issues of social justice, substantially in Unto this Last and Fors Clavigera, suggest that after his move away from evangelical Christianity he found a rather different way of relating the Bible and its message to contemporary life. This study opens up interesting dimensions of how Ruskin saw ‘truth’ in its relationship to the ‘goodness’ demanded of human beings in their attempts to live responsibly and compassionately.

‘[A] range of suggestiveness […], [nor] a stone, leaf or shadow, nor anything so small, but he will give it meaning and oracular voice’

– Sarah Hughes (Lancaster)

Lucy Hartley identified that Ruskin proposed a ‘transcendent theory of art on the basis that nature revealed the truth of God’s work and was, therefore, the only stimulus for the inventive work of art and the pleasures it offered the perceiver’ (Hartley, 2015). This paper will address how Ruskin in his travels across Italy believed that the differing representations of the sacred space of the Annunciation in Italian art showed how great art could reveal the truth of God’s work and allow us insight into the divine. I will consider the impact of the scene of the annunciation on Ruskin, given its unique importance in the Marian cycles of paintings as a moment when the barriers between the divine and human are bridged, in particular, in the Annunciation scenes painted by Tintoretto, Fra Angelico and Titian. Upon entering the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Ruskin was both spiritually and physically awed by the sheer majesty of Tintoretto’s fifty-two canvases depicting the life of the Virgin and Christ and his crucifixion in which he felt that ‘heaven and earth’ had come together (Modern Painters, III, 38). Ruskin argues that for Tintoretto, ‘whose intensity of imagination’ was such that the ‘commonest subject’ was not attached to a ‘range of suggestiveness […] nor a stone, leaf or shadow, nor anything so small, but he will give it meaning and oracular voice’ (Modern Painters, III, 262). Like the divine ‘helpfulness’ found in nature, Ruskin stresses that in great art all objects within them should have meaning and revelatory significance to the whole painting. I will also look at how, for Ruskin, the presence of Tintoretto’s sacred art in San Rocco converted the secular space of the Scuola into a sacred space where one could access the divine through Tintoretto’s artistic works.