

Enthusiasts for Ruskin are a motley crew, largely because his legacy is so diverse. Whatever their interests or their politics, they can usually claim that Ruskin was on their side, at least at some point in his long creative life. Selective reading is expected. Even the most committed of Ruskin's followers rarely try to digest his writing in its entirety. He was on their side in this, too. Despite the enormous body of work represented by his books, lectures, essays, letters and articles, he never really believed that literature of any kind could change the world. People who make things – painters, sculptors, builders and craftsmen – meant as much to him as writers. His own drawings and paintings are of distinctive beauty, and if he were not famous for other reasons his reputation as an artist might stand higher. His most sympathetic readers are often of a practical disposition, and find their way to him through a concern for the environment, or buildings, or the teaching of drawing, or through his broader work in education.

For all the richness of his ideas, Ruskin was not a methodical thinker, and he did not trouble himself unduly with any kind of abstraction. This is one reason for the fact that professional academics don't dominate the community of his readers. Though he was an academic pioneer in that he became Oxford's first Slade Professor of Fine Art, he was suspicious of universities. What is chiefly remembered about his unruly years as a professor was his recruitment of students to labour (with pick-axe and wheelbarrow) on the construction of a new road, to relieve local flooding. "He will *never* make a Professor", complained Henry Liddell, one of the greatest Greek lexicographers of his generation. This was not entirely true, for Ruskin's work as a professor influenced a generation of high-minded young men and women at Oxford, and the School of Art that he established in the university continues to flourish. But his relations with scholarly orthodoxy, or any other kind of orthodoxy, were always uneasy.

Ruskin inherited a Romantic and Evangelical confidence in the primacy of the individual. In 1879, he claimed that "the only doctrine or system peculiar to me is the abhorrence of all that is doctrinal instead of demonstrable, and of all that is systematic instead of useful: so that no true disciple of mine will ever be a Ruskinian! – he will follow not me, but the instincts of his own soul, and the guidance of its creator". Whether or not they call themselves Ruskinians, his followers are fond of quoting that passage from *St Mark's Rest* (1877–84). His enduring appeal is in part explained by his fusion of cultural authority with a disarmingly personal voice. He is as learned as any writer could be, and never slow to communicate his knowledge. But the pursuit of information is not the real point of reading Ruskin, though it is often an incidental reward. He provokes an active response, persuading his audience to sympathize with his experiences and recognize his values, and then to act according to their own judgement. Even when he is angrily contemptuous of the behaviour of those who devotedly bought his publications (which were never cheap), he pays his readers the compliment of taking them seriously. Ruskin might be exasperating, or bewildering, but he is never belittling.

In his own lifetime, it was often those who felt themselves to be excluded from power and influence who were most interested in Ruskin. The conventional education of a Victorian gentleman – primarily classical, with a dash of



"Afternoon in Spring, with South Wind, at Neuchâtel" (1869), by John Ruskin

Clarity is poetry

Why Ruskin is more relevant than ever

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theology and mathematics – did not incline the men who ran institutional life in Britain to think much of him. Liddell is a particularly acerbic example of the established figures who considered Ruskin's work to be undisciplined, or emotional, or somewhat vulgar in its roots in the material world. Working men like Thomas Dixon, a cork-cutter of Sunderland, whose correspondence with Ruskin was published under the title *Time and Tide by Weare and Tyne: Twenty-five letters to a working man of Sunderland on the laws of work* (1867), were much more likely to be well disposed. E. M. Forster, who was a careful reader of Ruskin, acknowledged the tail-end of this tradition in the aspirations of the hapless Leonard Bast, alone in his dingy flat: "He drank a little tea, black and silent, that still survived upon an upper shelf. He swallowed some dusty crumbs of a cake. Then he went back to the sitting-room, settled himself anew, and began to read a volume of Ruskin".

Leonard Bast, with his anxious hunger for self-improvement, clings to the vestiges of a tradition that was finished off by the First World War. It had been at its most powerful in what Ruskin had done for rebellious girls from middle-class families, who were seldom given access to the opportunities that followed the classical education commonly provided for their brothers. Because he wrote about the particularities of the natural world, or drawings and watercolours, or the needs of the poor, Ruskin's work was allied with matters that Victorian culture had defined as feminine, and he could lend his authority to the ambitious girls who devoured his books. He insisted that our approach to the history of architecture and of painting, the practice of political economy, or the close observation of mountains, trees, or clouds, must be grounded in ethical responsibility. For many young women, brought up to consider their nurturing duties to be central to the value of their lives, this was a liberation.

Because Ruskin fused thought and feeling, he provided a model for their aspirations.

Ruskin fell out of favour in the early twentieth century, as readers reacted against what came to be seen as his sprawling didacticism. Now that the Victorians have receded further into history, the scale of his associative ambitions seem more closely aligned with our own interests. An analytical interest in emotion, in its relations with intellect and imagination, has become firmly embedded in contemporary scholarship, and so too has the interdisciplinary research that Ruskin pioneered, long before the term was invented. But for those who read Ruskin outside the academy, these movements are beside the point. They are more likely to respond to his direct appeal to our shared moral identity.

As the human cost of the financial crash of 2008 became more apparent, the polemics of *Unto this Last* (1860), Ruskin's work on political economy, with its claim that an ethical dimension cannot be excluded from economic argument, has generated new interest. Many have come to agree with his central premiss. "Among the delusions which at different periods have afflicted mankind, perhaps the greatest – certainly the least creditable – is modern economics based on the idea that an advantageous code of action may be determined irrespective of the influence of social affection." His insistence that Britain's identity must be understood in a European context, its fortunes inseparable from those of Italy, Switzerland, Belgium and France, now looks salutary, as the British struggle to reframe their relations with Continental Europe. Our environmental worries mean that Ruskin's pleas for a thoughtful stewardship of land, air and water no longer seem eccentric. His concept of the Gothic, which is largely distinct from the historical context of Gothic buildings, has attracted the interest of a new generation of architects and designers. The Dutch architect Lars Spuybroek developed a radical theory of digital

design that is grounded in a fresh understanding of the Gothic distilled from Ruskin, arguing in 2011 that "contemporary tools of design and production should be understood in a framework not of modern times but of pre-modern ones".

Spuybroek's tribute to the energy of Ruskinian Gothic, *The Sympathy of Things: John Ruskin and the ecology of design* (second edition, 2016), points to a central reason for the revival of Ruskin's reputation. What most often pleases and rewards Ruskin's readers is the patient attention to the world of things that consistently shapes his writing. His method is primarily visual – the argument of the eye, as Robert Hewison described it in 1976, in his influential book of that name. Defining the "Gothic heart" in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53), Ruskin spoke of its "profound sympathy with the fullness and wealth of the material universe". His work is driven by the impulse to teach his readers to see the world more clearly and completely. Ruskin's moral vision is inseparable from the organic life of the body, and it affirms our responsibility to see the things that constitute our environment for ourselves, and not as others might wish us to see them.

The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion, all in one.

As contemporary culture shifts into a deeper dependence on a mediated world, filtered by the pixelated screens through which we are compelled to manage our lives, Ruskin's insistence on the need for an active connection with what we see with our own eyes has come to feel timely. His major works – *Modern Painters* (1843–60), *The Stones of Venice*, *Fors Clavigera* (1871–84), *Præterita* (1885–89) – rest on the communication of what Ruskin had come to see for himself, and his wish that we should also learn how to see what is in front of us. His intensely personal presence in his writing has encouraged an overly biographical interpretation of his work, recently exemplified by the fatuous depiction of his relations with J. M. W. Turner in Mike Leigh's film *Mr. Turner* (2014). Yet much of Ruskin's continuing power to engage rests on an impulse to remove himself from his teaching, giving readers the capacity to feel and judge as independent agents. This, he reminds us, lies at the heart of his own formation, and what he was "usefully" to become. Just as his insistence that we should see for ourselves resists the passivity that can accompany the digitalization of our lives, so his emphasis on the moral imperatives that arise from individual insight amounts to a challenge to our fragmented and divided society.

My entire delight was in observing without being myself noticed, — if I could have been invisible, all the better. I was absolutely interested in men and their ways, as I was interested in marmots and chamois, in tomtits and trout. If only they would stay still and let me look at them, and not get into their holes and up their heights! The living inhabitation of the world — the grazing and nesting in it, — the spiritual power of the air, the rocks, the waters, to be in the midst of it, and rejoice and wonder at it, and help it if I could, — happier if it needed no help of mine, — this was the essential love of Nature in me, this the root of all that I have usefully become, and the light of all that I have rightly learned.