The contradictory legacy of John Ruskin's artistic and social critique

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The centenary of the death of John Ruskin has helped provoke a renewed interest in his works, including several biographies and an exhibition at the Tate Britain art gallery called *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites*. By the time of his death in 1900, Ruskin had become Britain's leading art and social critic. He was also an accomplished artist in own right, maintained a great interest in science and left behind a vast literary output containing some of the best English prose writing. He spent the last quarter of his life suffering long periods of manic depression and hallucinations.

Ruskin was born in 1819, the son of an Evangelical Protestant mother who wanted him to be a Bishop. His father was a successful wine merchant whose art collection gave "an unquestionable tone of liberal-mindedness to [his] suburban villa". Ruskin said his parents treated him "effeminately and luxuriously" by paying for his education, artistic tuition, travels across Europe and studies but "thwarted [him] in all the earnest passion and fire in life".

Ruskin described himself and his father as "violent Tories of the old school". At the time, the rapid development of capitalism had, as Frederick Engels put it, "in a matter of a few years swept away what had been the most venerable, sacrosanct and important classes in society, substituting in their place new, formerly unknown classes whose interests, sympathies, attitudes and way of life were quite incompatible with the institutions of the old English society". These new classes were the industrial bourgeoisie, whose interests were represented in the Whig party, and the working class, who had formed the Chartist movement. In 1838, *The People's Charter* was published containing the demands of the Chartists as a petition to Parliament. It consisted of six points: universal male suffrage, vote by ballot, equal representation, abolition of the property qualification to sit in Parliament and payment of Members of Parliament.

One response to these developments was expressed, according to Engels, by "sentimental Tories, for the most part utopian visionaries, wallowing in reminiscences of the extinct patriarchal cottage-industry exploitation and its concomitant piety, homeliness, hidebound worthiness and its set patterns handed down from generation to generation". In the arts, the Romantic Movement and Gothic Revival saw nature and the religious and feudal order of the Middle Ages as an antidote to the upheavals brought about by capitalism. The Romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote in 1806:

The World is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune...

After the Houses of Parliament burnt down in 1834, the liberals favoured a replacement built in the neo-classical style, whilst the conservatives, who eventually won out, wanted Gothic. The new building resembled a mediaeval cathedral with its pointed arches, ribbed vaulting and flying buttresses. Inside, artists painted frescoes depicting philanthropic values such as Courtesy, Religion and Hospitality and victorious battles against Republican France. The decoration was designed by the Gothic Revivalist Pugin, author of *Contrasts: or a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and Corresponding Buildings of the Modern Day; shewing The Present Decay of Taste.*

Another leading social critic of the day was Thomas Carlyle, who was some 25 years older than Ruskin. In his 1840 book *Chartism*, he said the rebellious working class movement was a symptom of the "diseased condition of England". Lamenting the break-up of the old society and the rise of democracy, he was a violent opponent of the new laissez-faire policies such as free trade. His answer, as he explained in books such as *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, *Cromwell* and *Frederick the Great*, was the need for leaders—"some sort of King, made in the image of God"—who extolled the virtues of obedience, duty, good behaviour and hard work. He believed the loss of these values amongst the aristocracy had caused the French Revolution, and if they could be revived the rest of the population would then accept government by their "Real-Superiors".

Ruskin grew up in this rapidly changing, chaotic period. He described Wordsworth (along with the artist JMW Turner) as his heroes. Carlyle was a life-long friend and a father figure after his own father died.

By the age of 16, Ruskin had published an essay on the geology of his life-long love, the Alps. A year later he defended Turner against charges that his pictures were absurd.

In 1843, after Ruskin left Oxford University, he started on the first of five volumes called *Modern Painters*. They were to take 17 years to complete.

As the full title suggests— *Modern Painters; Their Superiority in the Area of Landscape Painting to all the Ancient Masters, Proved by Examples of the True, the Beautiful and the Intellectual from the Works of Modern Artists, especially from those of J.M.W. Turner Esq., R.A.*—the series was a defence of Turner and a survey of art from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. In his writings, Ruskin portrays Turner as a misunderstood artist hero. He promoted and patronised the artists in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood hoping they might provide a new and noble British Art. At first sight these two artistic tendencies—Turner's use of whirling patterns of colour and the Pre-Raphaelites' minute attention to detail—might seem opposites. Ruskin, however, said they were both "Living Art, true to Nature". In their distinct ways they both revealed God's work.

For Ruskin, Gothic 15th century Venice was the peak of artistic achievement. Its greatness, he said, arose through the "powers of labouring citizens and warrior kings". Its rise and fall was a lesson for the British Empire. Ruskin blamed the decline of Gothic on the Renaissance—bringing with it the rise of Classicism and rationalism and

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the decline of religion. In typical fashion, he points to a precise moment of decline—Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican (1509 -11) showing Christ (representing Theology) next to the Greek God Apollo (depicting Poetry). By placing the Christian and heathen together, Raphael was promoting man and sensual enjoyment above religion.

In 1849 Ruskin continued his study of art and architecture in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (the lamps refer to the Christian virtues such as truth, beauty and justice) soon after the revolutions that swept Europe. These revolutions were of a republican character. In France, King Louis-Philippe was overthrown and the Second Republic established. In Germany, revolts aimed to unite the country and set up an elected national parliament. Uprisings in several Italian states—Manin declared a Venetian Republic—saw the retreat of the Austrian occupying army and the flight of the Pope. And in Austria itself, the Emperor and Chancellor were deposed and an Assembly formed. In England, the People's Charter had received three million signatures and a mass demonstration was planned (only to be called off at the last minute by the organisers for fear of a repetition of the uprisings in Continental Europe). These events had been anticipated the previous year by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* with its opening words, “A spectre is haunting Europe”.

Ruskin thought the violence of the “vociferous, terrified and mischievous” republicans meant the end of civilisation and looked to an enlightened bourgeoisie to prevent a descent into the abyss.

In his works on art, Ruskin tackles the relationship between the role of consciousness and the unconscious, the individual and society. I would argue he comes close to a dialectical understanding of art. He regards the aesthetic impact of an image as a measure of its truthfulness (“Nothing can be beautiful that is not true”), but sets it within its sociological context (“Every noble form of architecture is in some sort the embodiment of the Polity, Life, History and Religious Faith of nations”). Although the artist should be true to Nature, the “most fiery passion and most original thought” of the individual artist is crucial. It is only when a work “stands forth with its solemn ‘Behold It is I’” that “the work becomes art indeed”.

This is part of Ruskin's description of one of Turner's paintings:

“Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of the night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty ship as it labours amidst the lightning of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, and cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea.”

Perhaps, dear reader, you can go back and read that passage again. But try to conjure up an image—Ruskin called it a word-picture—in your mind before you read further. (By way of assistance, my dictionary defines *incarnadine* as of a pinkish or reddish colour similar to flesh or blood).

The passage—maybe you found it a bit too melodramatic—is a description of *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhoon Coming On* (http://sunsite.org.uk/cgfa/turner/p-turner10.htm). Ruskin's father bought it after Turner had exhibited it in 1840, two years after slavery was officially abolished in the British colonies. However, the trade continued and captains would throw slaves overboard if pursued by the Navy.

In his description, Ruskin does not refer directly to slavery (for which he has often been criticised) but through his own vivid word picture shows how Turner made an unbeautiful subject beautiful. He explained that Turner's “own special gift was that of expressing mystery and the obscurities rather than the definition of form”.

The year 1858 marked a turning point for Ruskin. He dramatically called it the year of his “unconversion,” when he lost his former religious intolerance, becoming more humanistic and now doubted that God infused nature. He says it was sparked off in Turin when he compared the “magnificent animality” and “gorgeousness of life” of the painting *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* by the Renaissance artist Paolo Veronese's (1528-88) with the drab Protestant chapel he attended and the “little squeaking idiot [who] was preaching to an audience of seventeen old women and three louts that they were the only children of God in Turin”.

Although Ruskin portrayed this experience as a sudden revelation, things had been building up. He had just finished *Modern Painters* and realised that great and beautiful works of art were often associated with coarse or unrefined artists. Whilst cataloguing Turner's bequest (of all his works to the nation), Ruskin had seen (and burnt) thousands of erotic sketches by his hero. Conversely, he doubted much art emanated from the religious, saying, “the wonder is always to me, not how much, but how little, the monks have, on the whole, done with all that leisure and all that good-will!” Ruskin was also aware of his own unrefined feelings, for he had just met and was to fall in love with his 10-year-old art pupil Rose La Touche.

The developments in science (Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859) were also undermining his faith. “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 the Bible verses”, he wrote.

The result was a turn to a deeper criticism of society.

In his art studies, such as *On the Nature of Gothic—The Function of the Workman in Art*, Ruskin had come to appreciate the “genius of the unassisted workman”. Now industrialisation was turning men into machines. He wrote, “Men are now left utterly without intellectual power or pursuit and being unhappy in their work they rebel against it; hence one of the worst forms of Unchristian Socialism”. For Ruskin the real sinners, however, were not the rebellious workers but capitalists who kept the working class poor and ignorant. Because they were only interested in the “Goddess of Getting-On,” their architecture should be decorated with friezes of “pendant purses” and columns wide enough to stick on money, he wrote. Ruskin was not against wealth, but said the rich had a moral duty to employ craftsmen as creatively and usefully as possible.

His approach was not simply dictated by moral considerations, but an intellectual attempt to criticise the free market and the Political Economists. His book *Unto This Last*, published in 1860, started as magazine articles but they were stopped after protests. In them he coined one of his most memorable phrases, “There is No Wealth but Life”. He continued, “Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, of admiration. That country is richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.” By adding in his conception of *noble* —the Christian virtues alluded to in the *Seven Lamps of Architecture* —he was directly challenging utilitarian ideas. After all, he argued, the miser with all his gold may be happy but he has never been the subject of songs or stirred the emotions as the girl who has lost her love.

On the Nature of Gothic became a manifesto for the London Working Men's College, founded in 1854 by the Christian Socialist F.D. Maurice, at which Ruskin and some of his Pre-Raphaelite friends taught. Ruskin shared Maurice's response to Chartism—that there should be affection between the classes based on Christian principles. He did not want to elevate the working class socially but enlighten it; not to make the “carpenter an artist, but to make him happier as a craftsman” so that he became respectable, self-restrained, happy and loyal to a benevolent master. In 1871 Ruskin set up the Guild of St George to oppose industrialisation and promote craftwork based around rural communes, each with its own gallery or museum. Ruskin looked to the mediaeval Guilds where the craftsman had some control over his work and wages and maintained high standards and saw St. George as a symbol of nobility, chivalry and self-sacrifice.

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Between 1871-78 he wrote monthly letters, called *Fors Clavigera*, addressed to “the workmen and labourers of Great Britain”. In these he developed his ideas on nationalisation, restriction of competition and other interventionist measures.

Ruskin's social criticism also involved education. He hated to see children forced by “modern education into toil utterly repugnant to their natures” and wanted “to educate for education's sake only” both girls and boys. He criticised middle class parents who only regarded education as a way for their sons “to ring with confidence the visitors' bell at double-belled door; which shall result ultimately in establishment of a double-belled door to his own house,” and not as a means to develop a child's imagination. (There were two bells on grand houses, one bell for the guests and another for the servants and tradesmen).

In 1877, Ruskin criticised the artist James NcNeill Whistler for the unfinished nature of his almost Impressionist *Nocturne* paintings, particularly *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (http://sunsite.org.uk/cgfa/whistler/p-whistler11.htm) He wrote, “I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected a coxcomb to ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face”. Whistler sued for libel, with a plea of practising art for art's sake, the creed of the Aesthetic Movement. He said he “did not ask for two hundred guineas for two day's work; he asked it for the knowledge he had gained in the work of a lifetime.” Whistler won, but was bankrupted after the judge awarded him only one farthing's damages and told him to pay the costs of the trial. No doubt the judge saw this as a rebuke to Whistler, one of the most influential “artists as rebels” against bourgeois tastes and conventions.

It seems strange that Ruskin, who 40 years earlier had championed Turner's lack of “definition of form,” should attack Whistler in this way. It seems even stranger, since Ruskin had encouraged artists in the Aesthetic Movement with its characteristic pictures of beautiful women doing nothing. However, Ruskin always insisted on a moral purpose to a painting and thought Whistler's did not possess such qualities.

Ruskin's first mental breakdown occurred in February 1878, nine months before the libel trial began. He says he went “crazy about young lady saints”—a reference to St Ursula, the virgin who delays her marriage to a heathen English prince and then dies. In his mind she represented Rose la Touche who had agreed to marry him when she reached the age of 18, but who then rejected him and died aged 26, probably from anorexia. Sexual relationships were a problem for Ruskin—his marriage to Effie Gray in 1848 was annulled six years later because of impotence.

However, events in society at large must have played a part in his breakdowns. The inexorable rise of capitalism, the many wars and civil wars during the late 19th century, and a revival of socialist tendencies and trade union militancy refuted his ideas of social harmony. The philanthropic businessmen he hoped would finance the Guild of St George did not materialise. He saw nature being destroyed by urbanisation and pollution. There is a sense of fatalism in his writings—Britain was set on this course and he could not do much about it. Instead he predicts a future of “Blanched sun - blighted grass - blinded man”. And in his mind “storm clouds” and “plague clouds” hung over Britain.

Ruskin continued to write and encourage others, although the breakdowns continued. One experiences great sadness in his ability to feel and record their effect on him. The last ten years he spent secluded in Brantwood, his house in Britain's Lake District. In 1900 he died surrounded by his Turners. The last portrait of him shows a world-weary grey-bearded man seated next to a vase of roses—symbolic, perhaps, of his disastrous love affair.

Ruskin's life epitomises the nineteenth century paternalistic, romantic Tory who looked back to the Middle Ages and its religious certitudes. In was in this religion, Frederick Engels once wrote, that “man has lost his own substance, has alienated his humanity, and now that religion, through the progress of history has begun to dissolve, he notices his emptiness and instability”. Few can beat Ruskin at depicting these sentiments.

The Romantic Movement drew into its orbit all those who were repelled by capitalism, but a divergence took place of an artistic, social and ultimately political character. Ruskin took one route. With the collapse of the Chartist movement after the aborted demonstration in 1848, some benefits were given to the working class because of Britain's dominant economic position in the world. The material base was laid for the reformist labour tradition that echoed aspects of Ruskin's social outlook. The first intake of Labour Party Members of Parliament in 1906 claimed that he was by far their biggest influence.

However, Ruskin was a complex and contradictory figure who must always be viewed in context. I believe his works are worth reading today in the spirit of his pupil, the socialist William Morris, who was able to draw the necessary political conclusions from an abhorrence of capitalist society that Ruskin proved incapable. Crediting Ruskin for giving “form to my discontent,” Morris said, “I have got to understand thoroughly the manner of work under which the art of the Middle Ages was done, and that is the only manner of work which can turn out popular art, only to discover that it is impossible to work in that manner in this profit-grinding Society. So on all sides, I am driven towards revolution as the only hope.”

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Further Reading

Some of Ruskin's works still in print include:

Unto This Last & other writings, Penguin Classics, 1997

Selected Writings, Penguin Classics, 1991

The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from his writings, University Press of Virginia, 1997

Biographies:

John Ruskin: The Late Years, Tim Hilton, Yale, 2000

John Ruskin: No Wealth But Life, John Batchelor, Chatto & Windus, 2000

Web sites:

The Tate has a large collection of works by Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites that can be viewed online at:
http://www.tate.org.uk

The website http://www.lancs.ac.uk.depts/ruskinlib/ has information on all aspects of Ruskin's life and contains many links

Most of the paintings and all the artists referred to can be found on http://sunsite.org.uk/cgfa/

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