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A Metaphysics of the Moral Imagination: John Ruskin's Realism, Revisited

Jesse Goodman

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I trust in the nobleness of human nature, in the majesty of its faculties, the fulness of its mercy, and the joy of its love. And I will strive to love my neighbor as myself, and, even when I cannot, will act as if I did.

—John Ruskin, *Oath of the Order of St. George*

Aesthetic moralism is tied strongly in our intellectual discourse with notions of aesthetic realism. In other words, when we see a call for art to be virtuous, we tend to associate it with calls for art to be realistic. In the example which concerns us today, Victorian art critic and philosopher John Ruskin (1819-1900) spent his career arguing for variations on an aesthetic moralism; he called for art to reflect truth. This has been misconstrued by overeager commentators as also an endorsement of aesthetic realism, which it is not. Ruskin's aesthetic moralism is complicated, and often divorced from the standard questions of aesthetics. Central to it is his account of the imagination.

This paper will focus on the discussion of imagination in *Stones of Venice*, to explore Ruskin's idiosyncratic moral and aesthetic realism. I will conclude that because Ruskin's moral realism is not an aesthetic realism, it leaves open new possibilities of understanding the relationship of social class to artistic production. While he remains a realist in the sense of a universal ethical norm, he is not a materialist, nor does he endorse a view of art in which its one-to-one reflection of the natural world is inherently morally charged. Instead, Ruskin's moralization of art is dependent upon the character of the artist—not the content of the work itself, which is always downstream of its creator's ethical status. Thus, for Ruskin, the inborn merit of man, his education, and the work he produces are all tied inextricably together. Inspiration comes from a Christian-Platonic pure moral law outside of the artist, which is then refracted through the artist's own ethical temperament to create a work of varying moral quality.

We must begin by discussing Ruskin's account of the imagination. In *Stones of Venice*, Ruskin refers specifically to the imagination's ungovernableness"; it operates apart from what he calls "reason."[1] Imagination is "incapable of self-governance" and dominates the whole of the person's psyche. In this way dreaming is not a category limited to sleep, but is granted for the artist in waking life:

> The imagination is never governed; it is always the ruling and Divine power: and the rest of the man is to it as an instrument…and thus the *Iliad,* the *Inferno,* the *Pilgrim's Progress,* the *Fairie Queene* are all of them true dreams; only the sleep of the men to whom they came was the deep, living sleep which God sends, with a sacredness in it as of death, the revealer of secrets.[2]

In this passage, the imagination has an inspirational effect comparable to the "divine madness" of Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Ion*. In Ruskin's work, it is often repeated that art functions as a mirror of truth.[3] The passage adds to that understanding by illustrating that imagination is both an independent faculty for Ruskin and the origin point of creative endeavors.

Ruskin goes on to present a metaphor of imagination as "mirror", which he couples with an understanding of human mental limitations rooted in natural theology. Citing 1 Corinthians 13:12, he argues that the majority of people lack the necessary insight to reflect nature. By this theory of mind, the world itself holds and reveals a "sublime" truth, which the human imagination alone apprehends. The fall from grace in Genesis intervenes to prevent the mind from actively grasping the truth. The rest of the mind thus steps in to develop "symbols" of the truth—Ruskin mentions as an example the Christian tradition that the four beasts surrounding Christ's throne in Revelations 4 represent the canonical evangelists.[4] In the language of *Modern Painters* the perceiver cannot "completely reflect nor clearly utter all he has seen."[5]

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[1] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice Volume III: The Fall and Examples of the Architecture of Venice* (London: George Allen, 1904) 178
[2] Ruskin, *Stones of Venice* 180
[3] Michael Sprinker, "Ruskin on the Imagination," *Studies in Romanticism* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 120-121
[4] Ruskin, *Stones of Venice* 183
[5] John Ruskin, *Works Volume 10* cited in Sprinker, "Ruskin on the Imagination," 122

According to scholar Michael Sprinker, these passages make Ruskin's theory of perception far more complicated than the one-to-one representation it is sometimes taken for.[6] In Sprinker's reading, imagination is the site of the interpretation of sublime reality into legible (and so, profane) phenomena. The imagination is able to perceive the revelation of the noumenal, and then "garland" it into thought. "To spin, to weave, to make a garland—all these metaphors for the imagination's creative perception of the natural world suggest the intricate structure of relations between nature and mind."[7] The imagination takes precedent in the determination of worldly truth.

This is not a one-to-one correspondence with the world as it is sometimes misrepresented, but a reflection of what Sprinker called "noumenal" truth. In fact, in several locations Ruskin directly criticizes materialistic realism in art, for instance this passage from *Stones of Venice*:

> Of these latter three [types of artists], the last is in nowise of Divine institution. It is entirely human, and the men who have sunk into it by their own faults. They are, so far forth, either useless or harmful men. It is indeed good that evil should be occasionally represented, even in its worst forms, but never that it should be taken delight in…the difference, though less discernable, is in reality greater, between the man who pursues evil for its own sake, and him who bears with it for the sake of truth.[8]

In this section, Ruskin draws a distinction between artists who reflect evil to "revel" in it (such as Murillo) and those who engage with evil to reflect truth (such as Turner). In Murillo's *Boys Eating Grapes and Melon*, for example, Ruskin found that both painter and audience take a perverse joy in the subject's misery, while by contrast Ruskin celebrated Turner's *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* as not solely representation of chaos and violence but as a chief expression of form and moral clarity.[9]

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[6] Sprinker, "Ruskin on the Imagination" 123
[7] Sprinker, "Ruskin on the Imagination" 124
[8] John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter from The Stones of Venice* (London: George Allen, 1899) 38-39
[9] Owen Rogal, "Ruskin Reading Turner's The Slave Ship" *Prose Studies* 15, iss. 1 (1992) 51-52
Rogal's account in this paper is extremely helpful for addressing a common misunderstanding of Ruskin's appreciation of Turner—a misunderstanding often applied to Ruskin's aesthetics in general, which this paper also

It is because the imagination is uniquely capable of accessing supernatural truth that for Ruskin art is such a morally charged endeavor. The artist has a moral duty to display the actual truth, so as not to deceive or mislead the citizen. Just as in Plato's *Republic* (a book cited in Ruskin's writing 22 times),[10] aesthetics and the social realm are linked, and the good society will be one in which artists depict the good and the true. If the "painter (takes) upon him to modify God's works at his pleasure"[11] he has failed to properly fulfill art's function, which is the depiction of spiritual correctness. For Ruskin, "the fineness of the possible art is an index of the moral purity and majesty of the emotion it expresses . . . so that with mathematical precision, subject to no error or exception, the art of a nation, so far as it exists, is an exponent of its ethical state."[12] For Ruskin, moral goodness precedes the art itself, and is determinative of the art's potential quality.

In this, Ruskin appears close to a Christian-Platonic understanding of the world. Sara Atwood notes that "just as Plato elevates the spiritual over the material, so too does Ruskin love things ultimately for the spiritual truths they disclose."[13] Ruskin's so-called materialism, his love of things and the imitation

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seeks to remedy. The section of *Modern Painters* which addresses *The Slave Ship* ("Of Truth of Water") is usually broadly ignored in favor of the two paragraphs addressing *The Slave Ship,* which are among the most quoted and excerpted passages in Ruskin. This leads to the misleading impression that Ruskin was a total realist, to the point of ignoring the demonstrable abolitionist content of the painting in order to focus on its depiction of nature.

What Rogal points out is that by replacing the passages in the full context of the chapter, the focus on nature is clearly not ignorant of the painting's moral argument, but an analysis of how Turner is using the techniques of Romantic painting to underscore it.

> Ruskin suppresses interest in the narrative content of the painting; only in the footnote for the word "guilty" do his readers find out how truly horrifying the scene is: "She is a slaver, throwing her slaves overboard. The near sea is encumbered with corpses" (3, 572, n.). Ruskin is more interested in the difficult question of how Turner expresses through color and form moral condemnation of the ship. (58)
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> He does not see shapelessness in turbulent water, but distinct structure: "nature gives more than foam, she shows beneath it, and through it, a peculiar character of exquisitely studied form". Ruskin notes about Turner's Upper Fall of the Tees that Turner is not distracted by mists and vapors; rather, he closely attends to the "concentric zones and delicate curves" of the powerfully flowing stream and refers to its "constant form". (52)

Ruskin was not so simple as to think beauty and goodness were directly linked, but was instead a firm believer in a chaotic, representational world of sense, which artists of such skill and moral fortitude as Turner are able to shape via the imagination into a controlled representation of form.

[10] Leimer, "Platonism in Ruskin" 13

[11] John Ruskin, *Lectures on Landscape* 19, quoted in Leimer, "Platonism in Ruskin" 19

[12] John Ruskin, *Works Vol. 20*, quoted in Sara Atwood, "Imitation and Imagination: John Ruskin, Plato, and Aesthetics" *Carlyle Studies Annual*, no. 26 (2010), 148

[13] Atwood, "Ruskin, Plato, and Aesthetics" 148

of nature, is only important insofar as those things disclose important, divine truths. The overly realistic artwork, such as Murillo's painting, is condemnable because it inspires us to gaze lower, toward an aestheticized human body, not higher to God. "Do not call this the painting of nature:" Ruskin says, "it is the mere delight in foulness."[14]

William Chase Greene, a 19th Century translator of Plato, argued that "Superficiality, implicit trust in the senses, cheap cynicism and skepticism, these are the real enemies of Platonism."[15] Quoting him in her unpublished M.A thesis, Edna Leimer argued this is a trait that carried over via Plato's influence on Ruskin to form a core trait of Ruskin's aesthetic theory. She writes: "The mere truthful reproduction of nature alone does not constitute art; upon this foundation of realism, declares Ruskin, must be superimposed an idealism."[16] She quotes Ruskin's *Modern Painters* saying: "there is an ideal font of every flower, herb, and tree; it is that fern to which every individual of the species has a tendency to arrive freed from the influence of accident or disease."[17] The aspiration of the artist, on this reading of Ruskin, is the unveiling of divine form via imagination; the imagination, as the "penetrative" capacity into reality, can access and then show the ideal through the medium of art. Mere imitation, much like Plato's account of the degrading mirror in Republic 10, is for Ruskin "contemptible in its smallness of conception and devoid of higher ideas."[18]

This is not to say that Ruskin is an ardent Platonist. His engagement with the Greek philosopher is, in Atwood's words, "characteristically dynamic."[19] Ruskin consistently takes Platonic principles and reinvents them—Ruskin's reverence for the fine arts prevents him from following Plato all the way. While for Plato the morally correct artist can only be conjectured, Ruskin believes the good artist is a here-and-now reality, in the form of figures such as Turner, Tintoretto, and Shakespeare.[20]

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[14] Ruskin, "Nature of Gothic" 43
[15] William Chase Greene, "Introduction" *Republic* (New York: Poni and Liverwright, 1893): XXXV, quoted in Leimer, "Platonism in Ruskin" 21
[16] Leimer "Platonism in Ruskin" 21
[17] Ruskin, *Modern Painters Volume III,* 27, quoted in Leimer, "Platonism in Ruskin" 21
[18] Atwood, "Ruskin, Plato, and Aesthetics" 150
[19] Atwood, "Ruskin, Plato, and Aesthetics" 147
[20] Atwood, "Ruskin, Plato, and Aesthetics" 151

The common account of Ruskin, based primarily upon passages from *Modern Painters,* is that he is a champion of both moral and aesthetic realism; a painted branch should resemble a branch, and this representative quality is what makes art worthy. However, as we can see from his promotion of Turner and the Quattrocento era (neither particularly given to realism), and his aforementioned hatred of Murillo's realist work, Ruskin was not a direct advocate of aesthetic realism, but moral realism; if a coinage for his idiosyncratic opinions existed, we could call it a realism of the imagination, especially the *ethical imagination*.

Ruskin's worldview, in the words of his contemporary William Smart, is a "theory of life," from which his aesthetics cannot be separated.[21] His rejection of materialism is present in his art theorization and criticism, and ultimately in his theory of the imagination. The rejection of materialism helps us understand Ruskin's view of what makes "good" art, which in fact decenters the artwork itself; instead, preference is given to the goodness of the artist. If the artist is endowed at time of creation with both imaginative (interpretive) talent and with moral vision, *then* the artwork is good—it is only to be judged as a second-order product, as a means of seeing the moral capability of the artist. Smart writes of *Stones of Venice*: "Everything in art is brought to a root in human passion or human hope."[22]

In Ruskin's view, the imagination renders the truth into artistic form—in *Stones of Venice*, we see this most prominently in his account of the grotesque, which he names as a "distortion" of truth. The "symbolical Grotesque" for Ruskin, is truth being shattered, instead of dulled, by the human mind; most men's minds are dull mirrors of truth, but some are instead "broken."[23] As the truth is broken up by the active imagination, it is rearranged into visionary presentations; as was noted in the introduction, this includes for Ruskin such writing as Homer and Spencer, but also Biblical prophecies.[24] The most successful art being consistently, for Ruskin, that which "conveys to the mind of the spectator…the

[21] William Smart, *A Disciple of Plato, A Critical Study of John Ruskin* (Glasgow: Wilson & McCormick, 1883) 37
[22] Smart, *Disciple of Plato* 37
[23] Ruskin, *Stones of Venice* 180-183
[24] Ruskin, *Stones of Venice* 182

greatest number of the greatest ideas,"[25] we can see decisively that Ruskin's "realism" is of a spiritual, not aesthetic kind.

The seeming ugliness of both church gargoyles and the prophetic imagery in Revelations being pregnant with Godly knowledge, Ruskin provides a strong argument for imagination to take primacy over imitation. At least in *Stones of Venice*, he makes clear that via the logic of symbol, *any* image can become infused with divine resonance in the mind of the spectator:

> once the symbolic language was familiarized to the mind, and its solemnity felt in all its fullness, there was no likelihood of offence being taken at any repulsive or feeble characters in execution or conception. There was no form so mean, no incident so commonplace, but if regarded in this light it might become sublime;[26]

The artist, he proceeds to note, can take advantage of this by misleading the audience into vulgarity. However, the particular word he deploys for these artists is "wanton," underscoring not an issue with treating imagination as the first faculty but with the moral character of bad artists.[27] He is thus careful to maintain a consistent throughline—good art will look a certain way, and present reality in a certain way, but it is not because these forms are inherently better or participate more in the good than others, but because these are the way that *artists* behave when they are of strong moral character.

This is why Ruskin spends an extended footnote in *Stones of Venice* attacking "The German School," as a stand-in for all that is wrong with the education of his day. The German painter, by privileging philosophy over imagination in the creation of his art, creates works which are to Ruskin "unnatural"—a term loaded with meaning for Ruskin, as the antonym of his preferred, "natural" art. By denying the faculty of the imagination, the artist fails to create a painting accurate to truth. Philosophy and art must come after imagination, which is the interpreter of truth, and virtue, which primes the imagination to do good interpretive work. Thus, paradoxically, a system which prioritizes philosophy as

[25] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters I*, 7-11 quoted in Smart, *Disciple of Plato*, 34
[26] Ruskin, *Stones of Venice* 184
[27] Ruskin, *Stones of Venice* 185

the pursuit of truth in art over the mental faculty of imagination cannot accurately represent truth on the canvas. That would require a trust in the imagination which the Germans, on Ruskin's view, lack.

Without such a trust in the imagination, one cannot create good art; the truly great artist must both be blessed by God with the ability and skill to interpret the imagination, and then be trained into moral character by education. In effect, the artist alone can depict truth. The imagination alone being the faculty which perceives nature, and the artist being the imagination's best interpreter, art becomes for Ruskin what philosophy is in Plato's *Republic*: the skill by which the best intuit what is right and good.

I would like to conclude by turning to Ruskin's theory of the ideal society—sometimes credited as a forerunner of contemporary Christian Socialism.[28] He believed this society had once existed, and across his career he oscillated in believing it might return.[29] His accounts of the medieval period are littered with demonstrations of this theory, set to contrast what he saw as the degrading nature of his own time. Denied self-rule the under the capitalist factory system, the worker was miserable. Contrast this with the medieval workman, operating under direction from a higher authority, but still able to make alterations in hand design. In Ruskin's ideal society, each participant would provide what services they were capable of, and be fulfilled by their participation in a greater whole. This joy and freedom in their labor would make the ideal society, much as the goodness of the artist is what makes the work good.[30]

Consider Ruskin's cathedrals, built by hierarchical teams of designers and workers. The foreman holds a vision of the cathedral in mind. The architectural vision reflects truth, mediated by the imagination into an expression of the virtue of the designer. Then, it is built, each stone and crevice the work of human hands. Those hands, belonging to the lower-class workers, operate each according to their own virtue and imaginative capabilities. It is decorated by their hands, each working freely and

[28] See: Edward R. Norman, "Chapter 7: John Ruskin" in *The Victorian Christian Socialists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 121-143 and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory, 2nd ed.* (Oxford: Blackwood Publishing, 2006)

[29] William Morris, Preface to *The Nature of Gothic*, IX-X

[30] Smart, *Disciple of Plato* 47-48: "On Earth, there is nothing great but man…" to the ending of the essay.

improvising along the theme of the larger structure, until it is complete—a microscale reflection of the many hands that built it, and a macroscale demonstration of the vision of its creator.[31]

The cathedral exists for Ruskin as a demonstration of the goodness of the world that built it, which he felt slipping away.[32] The cathedral holds no virtue of its own; alone, it could not inspire righteous feeling. What it has is a sense of being imbued by its builders with their own moral sensibility. The Gothic grotesque, and its presence in the cathedral, reflects the soul of each individual hand that touched it. Each worker's impact reflects their status in the order of command and vision, from the lowliest bricklayer to the architect himself. Above the architect, God, and between them the imagination, interpreting divine truth into psychical and physical matter.

[31] Ruskin, *Nature of Gothic*, 9-12

[32] For a direct source on the relationship between Ruskin's social philosophy and his conception of architecture, see "The Lamp of Memory" in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*.