

## Can there be an Ethical Economics? Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, Then and Now

*Clive Wilmer*

Nearly thirty years ago I edited a popular edition of John Ruskin's *Unto this Last*, his critique of the political economists published in 1862. When the news of the US banking crisis broke in 2009, I received an email from someone in New York who had been reading my edition.<sup>1</sup> He suggested that I write a piece for the *New York Times* to point out what Ruskin had had to say about such matters. For Ruskin had indeed said it all before: 'Some treasures,' he wrote, 'are heavy with human tears, as an ill-stored harvest with untimely rain; and some gold is brighter in sunshine than it is in substance' (17.52).<sup>2</sup> Such language seemed to speak of illusory profits, foreclosed mortgages and a new surge of unemployment: products of the competitive system *Unto this Last* was originally written to criticise. By the mid-nineteenth century, the teaching of Adam Smith, as assembled in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), had acquired something like the status of holy writ and, together with the ideas of his followers, was shaping government economic and social policy, most notoriously in the New Poor Law of 1834. Chief among the 'philosophers', as Charles Dickens satirically called them in *Oliver Twist* (1838), was John Stuart Mill, who in 1848 published his massive systematisation of economic theory, *The Principles of Political Economy*. In the four essays that constitute *Unto this Last*, Ruskin – hitherto known chiefly as an art critic and art historian – sought to damage and dismantle this theoretical edifice, which claimed to show, as nearly scientifically as possible, the means whereby a nation becomes rich.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Ruskin, *Unto this Last and Other Writings*, ed Clive Wilmer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> *The Works of John Ruskin* (Library Edition), eds E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12), 17,52. All further references to Ruskin are to this edition and are included in the text in the form '17.52'.

With exceptional intellectual athleticism, Ruskin impugns much of the economists' reasoning. He is not always entirely fair to them, but it is not often realised how much of the scaffolding of classical theory he impairs, or how many of his alternative positions were adopted by later economists. To take a specific example, John Stuart Mill's advocacy of the 'wages fund' theory. Mill had argued that there was, at any one time, only a finite amount of capital available for the cost of labour. Once that fund had been exhausted there was no further money, so if wages were fixed above the level of the fund, the result would be unemployment.<sup>3</sup> Ruskin rejected this idea, arguing that workers are paid on credit – i.e. out of anticipated profits – which is now, as I understand, the accepted interpretation: with incalculable consequences for wage levels and the possibility of full employment (17.33). This is perhaps a detail, but it suggests a firmer grasp of technical economics than is normally attributed to him. More profoundly original is the emphasis he puts in *Unto This Last* on 'wise consumption' (17.98). This concern was taken up later in the century by professional economists such as J.A. Hobson, who wrote of 'the danger of excessive saving and consequent under-consumption'. Through Hobson and his contemporary J.M. Robertson, it entered the writings of John Maynard Keynes, becoming 'a cardinal point of modern economics'.<sup>4</sup>

But Ruskin's original purpose in writing *Unto This Last* was, first, 'to give an accurate and stable definition of wealth' – something Mill had thought unnecessary – and second, 'to show that the acquisition of wealth was finally possible only under certain moral

---

<sup>3</sup> See *The Principles of Political Economy, with Some of their Applications to Moral Philosophy*, Books 1-2 (1848), in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, gen ed John M. Robson, 33 vols (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1965-81), 2, 335-36.

<sup>4</sup> Prefatory Note to John Ruskin, *Unto this Last: Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy*, ed P.M. Yarker (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1970), 14.

conditions of society' (17.19) – by which he meant that what was justly definable as wealth was only attainable by people who behave as rounded human beings, 'souls' with ordinary 'affections', not economic automata driven by nothing but the profit motive, the 'economic man' widely inferred from Mill's writings. Political economy, Mill had written, 'does not treat the whole of man's nature as modified by the social state, nor of the whole conduct of man in society. It is concerned with him solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end.'<sup>5</sup> For Ruskin, to consider the desire for wealth in isolation from other passions and needs was pointless and, in the widely understood implication that to subordinate all to economic gain was socially beneficent, pernicious. It soon becomes clear that, for Ruskin, 'wealth' is not a synonym for 'riches': that, quite without pedantry, he is asking what we mean by 'rich' and 'wealthy'. For sometimes what is *called* wealth is a cause of anything but well-being and welfare, three words Ruskin explicitly connects. In the mid-nineteenth century, these were pressing questions, for Britain was in Disraeli's phrase 'the workshop of the world' with previously unheard-of levels of income and production. But the profits made were very unevenly spread and, as Ruskin insists, all profit requires its corresponding loss, such that, to borrow some phrases from *Unto This Last*, there are 'pluses' in society, who 'make a very positive and venerable appearance in the world, so that every one is eager to learn the science which produces results so magnificent; whereas the minuses have, on the other hand, a tendency to retire into back streets' (17.91). Ruskin is preoccupied with those streets; elsewhere in the book he talks of those who lose in the great game of chance 'far away among the dark streets' (17.43), and anyone who has read Friedrich Engels on the slums of

---

<sup>5</sup> 'On the Definition of Political Economy, and on the Method of Investigation Proper to it' (1836), *Collected Works*, 4, 327. This convenient philosophical fiction was widely parodied as *homo oeconomicus*, by analogy with *homo sapiens*.

Manchester in *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (first published in German in 1845) or Dickens on the rookeries of St Giles – the Tom-all-Along's of *Bleak House* (1852-3) – will recognise what he is seeking to evoke. His was a society in which, as he says, 'luxury...can only be enjoyed by the ignorant; the cruellest man living could not sit at his feast, unless he sat blindfold' (17.114). The current statistics of the gap between rich and poor do not suggest quite such a gulf between the classes today as that which existed in 1860, but the gap is considerable and growing, and we have become conscious of riches the acquisition of which amounts to a charge on the community and a curb on its prosperity. There is a fascinating paradox here. Ruskin was, in many ways, deeply averse to the direction of modern life – towards secularism, industrialisation and individualism – but he seems to have been acutely attuned to it. He had first attracted attention in 1843 with the first volume of a work called *Modern Painters*, which championed *contemporary* landscape painting, notably J.M.W. Turner's, at the expense of the Old Masters. His alertness to what makes modern life modern, as my American correspondent reminded me, is strikingly a feature of his economic criticism, and many of the questions posed in *Unto This Last* in particular remain unanswered. But as far as the present crisis is concerned, it is not enough to point fingers of blame and disapproval, especially as there is some sense in which the public – ourselves no doubt included – has been complicit in the delusion we have been living through. The fact is that, after a century of experiments with Socialism and with modified capitalism, we appear to have no alternative to the free market, and freedom always includes the freedom to do evil.

Having no capital (so to speak) with the *New York Times*, I did not follow my correspondent's suggestion but I did go back to Ruskin and his first principles. In *Munera Pulveris* (1872), the rather disappointing sequel to *Unto this Last*, he defines money as:

a documentary expression of legal claim. It is not wealth, but a documentary claim to wealth, being the sign of the relative quantities of it, or of the labour producing it, to which, at a given time, persons, or societies, are entitled.

If all the money in the world, notes and gold, were destroyed in an instant, it would leave the world neither richer nor poorer than it was. But it would leave the individual inhabitants of it in different relations (17.157-58).

It is not yet as bad as that, but in a slump, the world is starved of money, which undermines the basis of society – not only the calculable basis, but the moral basis as well. For money provides the only reliable measure of value we have, and the value of money itself is all awry. Moreover, without money, we have no access to the real wealth it symbolically represents.

It was ethical questions of this kind that first drew me to Ruskin. I hope you will forgive me if I stay with personal history a little longer. When I first read him in my early twenties, I was reminded of the world of my grandparents. They had been born in the 1880s, when Ruskin was still alive and writing. They were serious High Church Anglicans and traditional Tories. I remember how, when I was a teenager and beginning to be interested in Socialism, my grandmother set me to rights. ‘There are two kinds of people,’ she said. ‘There are the workers, and there are the people with money.’ This, she seemed to imply, was an immutable arrangement. Ruskin, who was neither a Socialist nor an egalitarian, would not have disagreed with her, but he would have given her thought a different emphasis. He would have insisted on the spread of wealth and the need for all in society to receive their due. He believed in intrinsic justice and, when justice failed, in charity. He also saw that in a complex

modern society personal charity was not enough and that therefore a political equivalent was needed: that equivalent has been provided in modern times by the Welfare State, many of whose provisions he argued for and inspired. To the end of his life he insisted that he was a conservative: one who, believing in an organic society – a kind of complex family – considered that wealth or privilege increased rather than diminished the citizen's responsibility for others. The social welfare he argued for was the public extension of that responsibility. My own guess – and it is little more than that – is that the process of writing *Unto This Last* moved Ruskin substantially to the left. For all the confidence of his tone, it is hard not to notice at times the beginnings of discomfort with traditional Tory hierarchies. To return to my grandparents, it sometimes occurred to me – before I read Ruskin – that they too were uncomfortable with the outlook they had inherited. I recall my grandfather talking about Christianity and pointing out that the Magnificat was 'Socialist': 'He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and hath exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away'. And then there was the Sermon on the Mount: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.'<sup>6</sup> He might have added the quotations from books attributed to King Solomon which open the third essay of *Unto This Last*. The King, represented by Ruskin as a merchant,

says, for instance, in one place: 'The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a vanity tossed to and fro of them that seek death;' adding in another, with the same meaning ... 'Treasures of wickedness profit nothing: but justice delivers from death.' ... If we

---

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1.52-53; Matt 19.24

read, instead of ‘lying tongue,’ ‘lying label, title, pretence, or advertisement,’ we shall more clearly perceive the bearing of the words on modern business...

Again: the merchant says, ‘He that oppreseth the poor to increase his riches, shall surely come to want.’ And again, more strongly: ‘Rob not the poor because he is poor; neither oppress the afflicted in the place of business. For God shall spoil the soul of those that spoiled them’ (17.57-58).

Such passages are what Ruskin has in mind when at the end of that essay, reflecting more broadly on political economy, he writes:

I know no previous instance in history of a nation's establishing a systematic disobedience to the first principles of its professed religion. The writings which we (verbally) esteem as divine, not only denounce the love of money as the source of all evil, and as an idolatry abhorred of the Deity, but declare mammon service to be the accurate and irreconcilable opposite of God's service: and, whenever they speak of riches absolute, and poverty absolute, declare woe to the rich, and blessing to the poor (17.75-76).

Isn't this simply *true*? One does not have to be a Christian to see it. Indeed, when Ruskin wrote this passage, he had lost his faith in Christianity and begun to speak of the ‘*Religion of Humanity*’ (29.88n).<sup>7</sup> He had been brought up to believe in the literal truth of the Bible; when he could no longer accept its narrative truth, he went on taking its moral teaching literally – the exact opposite of those modern fundamentalists, who believe in the literal truth of

---

<sup>7</sup> Ruskin borrows the phrase from his friend, the Positivist Frederic Harrison.

Genesis and ignore the calls to forgiveness and compassion. Ruskin would have had no truck with the notion that, when St Paul calls the love of money the root of all evil, he is merely speaking figuratively. So Ruskin's moral convictions were unchanged by his loss of faith, and many of those convictions, for him Christian in origin, are shared by other religions as also by many secular philosophies. What is more, morality is indivisible. How can behaviour we take to be wrong in our private lives be elevated to the category of 'wealth creation' in the context of a national economy?

In other words, can there be an ethical economics? It is a question I imagine as causing a weary raising of eyebrows among those who, unlike me, live in what they know as 'the real world'. To argue for morality in these matters is regarded as naive and sentimental. Those were certainly the objections to *Unto this Last*, when in 1860 it began appearing in the pages of *The Cornhill* magazine. The moderately Conservative *Saturday Review* was on this occasion rather less than moderate. Ruskin's essays were 'eruptions of windy hysterics' and 'intolerable twaddle'; the world would not (the reviewer assured his readers) 'be preached to death by a mad governess' (17.xxviii). The reviewer was clearly one of those people, still with us today, who know about 'wealth creation' in 'the real world', and I need look no further than the statement of interest earned in my savings account or the difficulty many have at the moment in getting a job, to see how successful *they* have been – and no further than *Unto this Last* to find arguments to explain the flaws in their worldly wisdom.

The past fifteen years or so have seen books published with such titles as *Ruskin and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: The Modernity of Ruskinism*, *Ruskin and Modernism* and *Ruskin and the Modern World*. Less stridently, there have also been books on Ruskin in relation to distinctively topical issues, such as *Ruskin and Gender* and *Ruskin and Environment*, and the Ruskin Centenary Conference at Christ Church, Oxford, in 2000 was called *Prophetic*

*Ruskin*. This is no coincidence, but something more like a consensus: a sense that Ruskin is not only a great thinker from the past, but someone who can speak to us today and speak about the issues that concern us. In that context, I want to focus the second half of this paper on two aspects of Ruskin's theory: his analysis of wealth and his critique of competition. In the first case he may strike the reader as startlingly relevant and practically useful; in the second, as dated and even quaintly unrealistic.

In 1852, eight years before *Unto This Last*, Ruskin wrote three letters intended for publication in *The Times* but, due to his father's intervention, never published. The letters argue for a form of universal suffrage (not a policy normally associated with him), graduated income tax and national education.<sup>8</sup> Their language is Tory in tone – perhaps in the hope of placating his father – but radical in implication. Despite his life-long insistence that he was opposed to equality, the effect of all three policies would have been to create a more equal society. Particularly interesting in relation to *Unto This Last* is the letter on taxation, for the obvious effect of a graduated system is redistribution of wealth. As a rich man himself, he understood how inequalities of wealth could sometimes be productive, but he judged that a healthy society was one in which wealth was spread as widely as possible through the community, so as to be, in his words, 'of widest helpful influence' (17.105).

Essay 2 of *Unto This Last*, 'The Veins of Wealth', includes two parables, the second of which concerns three sailors cast away on an uninhabited coast, two of whom develop plots of land while the third serves as a middleman going between them. The third sailor stands, of course, for the merchant. As Ruskin tells it, the story shows how the merchant may

---

<sup>8</sup> The letters on taxation and election are in 12.593-603. The third letter, on education, is lost, but seems to have contributed to Appendix 7: 'Modern Education' in *The Stones of Venice* 3 (11.258-63). For more on these letters, see the relevant section of the Introduction (12.lxxviii-lxxxv).

take advantage of the farmers' deficiencies or ill fortune to increase his own wealth at their expense, thus becoming more wealthy than those who produce the goods all three sailors need for life and (legitimately) acquiring the means to dominate their common economy – even, in the long term, to take over his shipmates' farms. The parable tells us a number of things about capitalism. First, though Ruskin leaves this largely to implication, it shows how the emergence of a middleman may lead to the fragmentation of society. Instead of collaborating in the cause of the common economy, the middleman goes into competition with his fellows, indirectly causing them to compete with one another. Secondly, it shows that, though the merchant has enriched himself, 'the wealth of the State, or of the three men considered as a society, is collectively less than it would have been had the merchant been content with juster profit' (17.52): that is, that co-operation increases common wealth, where competition reduces or fragments it. If the merchant had refrained from taking advantage of his fellows, he would have been less *rich*, but he and they together would have benefited from a wealthier society. This is the distinction Ruskin goes on to make between *wealth* and *riches*. Wealth has to do with welfare and well-being, riches have to do with money alone. As practically every international measure will tell you, Britain is richer than Sweden, but Sweden is wealthier, for its social provisions are of a higher order.

Now let us not get this wrong: Sweden, quite as much as Britain, is a capitalist society. Despite Ruskin's reputation as an inspiration to Socialists, and though that connection is historically important, his message is neither Socialist nor exclusively directed to Socialist ends. His critique is an ethical one, applicable to any social order. It is an argument about honesty, intrinsic justice and inherent value. What he shows by these means, I think, is that capitalism is fundamentally flawed, and that the flaws present a problem to all of us, regardless of our particular convictions or ideologies. Indeed, he also seems conscious

that capitalism has virtues. The role of the merchant, as Ruskin argues in the first essay, is ‘to *provide* for [the nation]’ (17.40; my italics), and one would be foolish to deny that capitalism has provided. But has it provided justly? Has it provided well? Has it advanced the well-being and cohesion of society? Has it promoted ‘wise consumption’, or even encouraged something many of us practise today which has its roots in *Unto this Last* – consumer responsibility? Has it discouraged crime and promoted creativity, health, collaboration and charity? Or does it encourage waste, pollution, instability, needless change, inbuilt obsolescence and the crime of adulteration – for Ruskin *the* symptom of the competitive system’s sickness: the merchant who cares more for his profit than the quality of his goods and the dishonour he might incur by adulterating them stands condemned, as does the system that encourages the practice.

Perhaps it would be simplest to say that the positive and negative effects of our system are caused by what Ruskin identifies as two distinct kinds of what is normally called wealth. In the fourth and last essay of *Unto This Last*, he unpacks some important terms, the first of which is ‘value’, from the Latin *valor* – our word ‘valour’ – which in turn derives from the verb

*valere*, to be well or *strong* (...); — strong, *in* life (if a man), or valiant; strong, *for* life (if a thing) or valuable. To be "valuable," therefore, is to "avail towards life." A truly valuable or availing thing is that which leads to life with its whole strength. In proportion as it does not lead to life, or as it leads away from life, it is unvaluable or malignant (17.84).

He goes on to quote a definition of Mill’s – ‘To be wealthy ... is to have a large stock of useful articles’ (17.86) – and to define ‘wealth’ himself as ‘The possession of useful articles, *which we can use*’ (17.87). He then adds that, to be truly useful, they must be in ‘availing

hands' (17.88) – which is to say, in the hands of the *valiant* – persons who can use them to good effect and thereby activate their *value*. Characteristically, he is relating several words – *value*, *valour* and their derivatives. There then follows this extraordinary paragraph:

Wealth, therefore, is 'THE POSSESSION OF THE VALUABLE BY THE VALIANT'; and in considering it as a power existing in a nation, the two elements, the value of the thing, and the valour of its possessor, must be estimated together. Whence it appears that many of the persons commonly considered wealthy, are in reality no more wealthy than the locks of their own strong boxes are, they being inherently and eternally incapable of wealth; and operating for the nation, in an economical point of view, either as pools of dead water, and eddies in a stream ... or else, as dams in a river, of which the ultimate service depends not on the dam, but the miller; or else, as mere accidental stays and impediments, acting not as wealth, but (for we ought to have a correspondent term) as 'illth,' causing various devastation and trouble around them in all directions; or lastly, act not at all, but are merely animated conditions of delay, (no use being possible of anything they have until they are dead) ... (17.88-89).

By now, it will be clear that Ruskin is heading towards his peroration and the book's climactic aphorism: 'THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE' (17.105). It is an attempt to direct the '*soi-disant* science of political economy' (17.25) – the 'science of becoming rich' (17.76) – towards the *use* of riches:

Economists usually speak as if there were no good in consumption absolute. So far from this being so, consumption absolute is the end, crown, and perfection of

production; and wise consumption is a far more difficult art than wise production (17.98).

It should be noticed that Ruskin is not in favour of the abolition of property, still less of an anti-consumerist asceticism: ‘No physical error can be more profound, no moral error more dangerous,’ he writes in *Munera Pulveris*, ‘than that involved in the monkish doctrine of the opposition of the body to the soul’ (17.149). He consistently honours material things, but valuable ones, availing for life and in the hands of the valiant: things which promote, as he says in *Munera Pulveris*, ‘the continuance not only of life, but of healthy and happy life’ (17.149). In his youthful fairy-tale *The King of the Golden River* (written in 1841 and published in 1850), the gold sought by the villains, ‘the Black Brothers’, turns out to be the sun shining on water: material things, the sources of life itself (see 1.347-48).

Over against this ‘wealth’ – whether we mean by that the possession of good things or the potential to purchase them ‘in the hands of the valiant’ – he sets ‘illth’. It is ‘illth’ that damages our common wealth and helps to explain how individuals can become monumentally rich in a nation that cannot maintain its health service, educate its children or properly equip its combat troops.

A good example of such illth was provided soon after my New York correspondence by an article in *The Independent*, 26 January 2010. It reported that Tony Blair, recently retired as Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party, ‘was to be paid at least £200,000 ... by the hedge-fund Lansdowne Partners to deliver four presentations to staff about the international political scene.’ This hedge-fund ‘made hundreds of millions of pounds during

the 2008 banking crisis from “short-selling” shares in the financial services industry’. Short-sellers, in the words of the same article, make

money from a declining share price. A trader borrows a stock from a longer-term investor for a fee and immediately sells it. The trader waits for the stock to fall before buying it back and returning it, pocketing the difference.<sup>9</sup>

Lansdowne Partners is the most prominent of the businesses that by this practice brought down Northern Rock: the very bank which Tony Blair’s successor was obliged to nationalise, pouring taxpayers’ money into a sold-off mutual society to secure the homes and savings of the said taxpayers and electors against the depredations of the traders whose profits were to supplement Mr Blair’s personal fortune to the tune of £200,000 for four talks. If you consider that, as we now understand, the recapitalisation of the banks has created the opportunity for still larger bonuses, you have a perfect instance of what Ruskin means by ‘illth’. The hedge-fund is Ruskin’s middleman inflated to grotesque proportions.

Nevertheless, there is one aspect of Ruskin’s economic teaching that most of our contemporaries find it hard to accept, and that is his insistence that society is harmed by competition. This is not just an accidental part of Ruskin’s outlook but something that is central to his view of life: something that surfaces in what he has to say about architecture, for instance, and even botany and geology. Let me give a historical focus to this concern. *Unto this Last* first appeared in serial form in 1860, soon after Ruskin’s completion of the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters*. This was, in other words, a major turning-point in Ruskin’s life – the moment when the brilliantly eloquent critic of art and architecture, author of complex, elaborately argued and superbly illustrated books, became a plainer, briefer and

---

<sup>9</sup> Nigel Morris and Nick Clark, ‘Blair’s £200,000 hedge fund pay-day’, *The Independent* (January 26, 2010), 1.

more troubled author whose primary focus was the condition of his society – a social reformer who occasionally points to works of art as evidence. *Unto this Last* in effect announces that change, but there is an important link between it and the long book on art he had just finished. Towards the end of *Modern Painters*, he sets down what he calls ‘the Law of Help’, in his thought the foundation of all life: ‘Government and co-operation [he says] are in all things and eternally the Laws of Life. Anarchy and competition, eternally and in all things, the Laws of Death’ (7.207). That sentence, central to everything Ruskin wrote, is repeated a few months later in the third essay of *Unto this Last*.<sup>10</sup> It is a sentence peculiarly problematic for the modern reader. It must have been first written in 1859, around the time when *The Origin of Species* appeared, and competition – in Darwin’s language ‘the struggle for life’ – is fundamental to the Darwinian account of nature.<sup>11</sup> We know that account to have been crucially inspired by the second edition of T.R. Malthus’s *Essay on Population* (1803), a key text for Mill and David Ricardo, the economists Ruskin attacks in *Unto This Last*.<sup>12</sup> Malthus had argued – putting it very briefly – that, since population increases at a faster rate than the means of subsistence, the latter will control the growth of the former through the agency of starvation. Ruskin does not mention Malthus, but he does criticise Ricardo’s *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), and Mill’s wages-fund doctrine, which I mentioned at the outset, both of which are rooted in population theory. It is not difficult to see how Malthus provided Darwin with his theory of ‘the struggle for life’ and eventually – in a phrase suggested by Herbert Spencer – ‘the survival of the fittest’. [footnote] The argument about competition, therefore, is more than an argument about the market. It is an

---

<sup>10</sup> Repeated with slight modifications: ‘Government and co-operation are in all things the Laws of Life; Anarchy and competition the Laws of Death’ (17.75).

<sup>11</sup> The full title of Darwin’s 1859 publication is: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, Or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. I am not the first person to have noticed the significance of the sub-title.

<sup>12</sup> <sup>12</sup> T.R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Malthus’s book was published anonymously in 1798. The second edition, published under his name in 1803, is a substantially different book.

argument about the nature of life. To the modern reader, for whom the obvious applicability of Darwin's theory is simply inescapable, this may present a stumbling-block. Moreover, that same reader will be conscious of economic competition as being the engine that has supplied the Western world with its dynamism, its productive variety and the advantage it has had over other economies. Without competition, you might want to say, how much duller, how much less free, productive and abundant our life would be. Moreover, as I heard the economist Donald Winch explain in a paper he delivered in Ruskin's centenary year, the antithesis of competition in Mill's thinking is not co-operation but monopoly.<sup>13</sup>

Now to speak for myself, when I contemplate the deregulated bus companies of modern Britain, or the privatised railways and telecom companies, I wonder if there is not something to be said for monopoly. But I take the point. Ruskin's case against *economic* competition is not all that easy to defend, but what about other kinds of competition? Today, sociologists have started arguing that human co-operation has its roots in animal behaviour, while students of animal behaviour and of ecology are beginning to emphasise the importance of a law of help in the natural world. Co-operation, it seems, is essential to survival. That view, underlined by historians of science, reminds us that Darwin's account of evolution is coloured by the ideology of his time, and that capitalist theory, as filtered through Malthus, provided him with a model of competition that was hardly objective. Moreover, in modern economics itself there is a tendency to move away from the competitive model, notably in the thought of the 'Behavioural Economists', some of whose ideas endorse Ruskin's insistence that the human animal is fuelled by the affections, and suggest that

---

<sup>13</sup> 'Ruskin and Political Economy', a paper given at the conference *Prophetic Ruskin*, Christ Church, Oxford, 6-9 April, 2000.

‘economic man’ was an unhelpful fiction.<sup>14</sup> Some seven years before *Unto This Last*, not long after he wrote the political letters intended for *The Times*, Ruskin had depicted an alternative to competitive society in the image of medieval creativity at the heart of ‘The Nature of Gothic’, the central chapter of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53). There his examination of Gothic cathedrals, their ornament and their structure, leads him to hypothesise a building created by the collaboration of individual artisans: the product of a belief that recognises ‘the individual value of every soul’ (10.190) – not built to an autocratic master-plan, but a work in and for the common good uniting a variety of diverse creative talents, not necessarily equal, but co-operating and sharing responsibility. That is Ruskin’s model of society. It has been thought utopian, and no doubt it is, but it seems to me no more unrealistic than the idea of a society made up of individuals struggling against each another for personal advantage. That, apparently, is the model we have. It seems not to be working.

Ruskin had a troubled and complex personality. We increasingly see him as a man dominated by his parents, in particular by his devoutly Tory father, who reacted badly to the son’s involvement in politics. The American scholar James L. Spates has been arguing that the depression Ruskin suffered from for much of his life and the madness of his later years were consequences in part of the demands his father made on him and the parental control he sought to maintain into his son’s maturity. **[footnote]** In *Unto this Last* he had promised to write a full treatise on political economy. He never did so and probably, with his father’s ghost looking over his shoulder, never began to try. There are striking economic insights in later books – the passage on intrinsic value in *Munera Pulveris*, his ridicule of what we now call ‘the trickle-down effect’ in *Fors Clavigera* – but he never fulfilled the promise of *Unto This Last*. **[footnotes]** So the book remains there, among the most eloquent documents of the

---

<sup>14</sup> The most prominent advocate of Behavioural Economics is Richard H. Thaler. See Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* (London: Penguin, 2009).

nineteenth century, with a unique ability to link our patterns of getting and spending to the integrated wholeness of our lives, and prompting us to further and deeper reflection on the wealth that is life. It is for us to rethink its message in the light of our own society. It has the power to clarify and to generate change. As Mahatma Gandhi, the founder of modern India, said of it: 'it captured me and made me transform my life.'<sup>15</sup>

*This talk was given at a Symposium organised by the Guild of St George and the Ruskin Library and Research Centre, Lancaster University. It was called John Ruskin and the Modern World: Can there be an Ethical Economics? It was held at the Art Workers Guild, Queen Square, London on 6 February 2010.*

---

<sup>15</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Sarvodaya (The Welfare of All)*, ed Bharatan Kumarappa (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1954), 3