‘A new road on which the world should travel’:
John Ruskin, ‘The Nature of Gothic’ and William Morris

Clive Wilmer

Master of the Guild of St George

The Guild of St George

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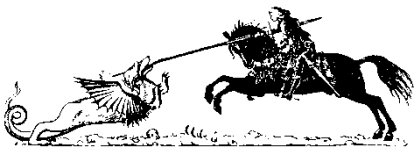

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References

The standard edition of John Ruskin is *The Works of John Ruskin*. Ed. Cook, E.T. and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12). All references to Ruskin's writings in my text are to this edition; they appear in brackets after the quotations in the form '11:378', where 11 is the volume number and 378 the page. In the captions to illustrations from Ruskin's *Works*, the page numbers are followed by a plate number in Roman numerals (e.g. 8:132. Plate VIII).

Cover image

A window of the Oxford Museum (The Sculptor, [James] O'Shea, at Work). Photogravure from a photograph by Hills and Sanders, c. 1858. (16:228. Plate X.)

Foreword

This lecture was commissioned as the annual William Morris Birthday Lecture at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow. It was given on 23 March 2014. I was then asked to rewrite it as the keynote address for a symposium called *Helping in the Work of Creation: John Ruskin and William Morris Today*, which was held on 31 May 2014 at the Hillside Club in Berkeley, California. This was an event associated with North American Companions of the Guild of St George and was part of a programme designed to launch a North American branch of the Guild. The other speakers were (from the US) Sara Atwood, Gray Brechin, Tim Holton, James L. Spates and (from the UK) John Iles, to all of whom the Guild and I are richly indebted. The present text is something like a conflation of the two lectures.

I'd like to express my particular thanks to Roger Huddle of the Friends of the William Morris Gallery, and to Tim Holton of the Hillside Club. Thanks are also due to Stuart Eagles and Peter Miller of the Guild of St George for their excellent work on this booklet.

C.W.

‘A new road on which the world should travel’: John Ruskin, ‘The Nature of Gothic’ and William Morris

On a recent visit to Sheffield I had the occasion to visit the workshop of what local people call a ‘little mester’: that’s to say, a self-employed craftsman who rents space in a factory or works from his own workshop. It was little mesters who made Sheffield cutlery world famous, ‘mester’ being the word for ‘master’ in South Yorkshire dialect – master craftsman, as we might say. It was partly the achievement of the mesters over two or three centuries that led John Ruskin to place an educational art collection, St George’s Museum, in Sheffield in the 1870s, and it was Ruskin’s work for his Guild of St George in Sheffield that had brought me to this master craftsman’s workshop. ‘This manner of manufacture,’ I learn from Wikipedia, ‘peaked in the 19th century and has now virtually died out.’ Yet this seems not any longer to be the case. There are a few traditional mesters left, in fact, but the craftsman I have mentioned is part of a revival in such skilled craftsmanship. His name is Stuart Mitchell, and his workshop is in a fine old Victorian factory called Portland Works, which is currently being restored as a complex of workshops.

In the picture is one of Mitchell’s knives: the sort of general purpose knife which a forester, say, might carry about, or which a back-packer might take on an

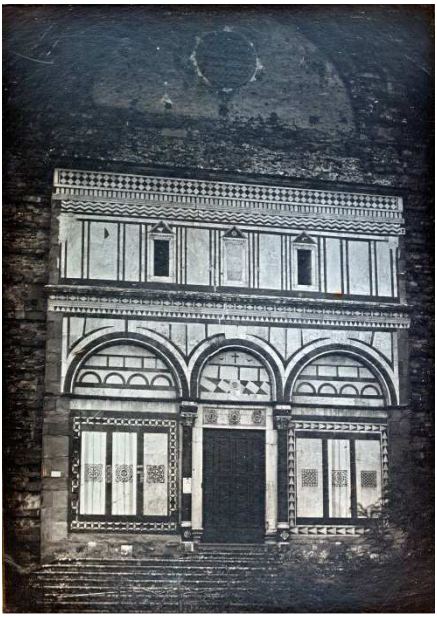
expedition. I have held one in my hand and, I can assure you, it is a thing of beauty. This is not a throwback to a

‘Survival knife’, Stuart Mitchell Knives, Portland Works, Randall Street, Sheffield S2 4SJ; stuart@stuartmitchellknives.com

romantic age of craftsmanship. Mitchell uses all the modern equipment and materials that will serve his purpose. The handle, for instance, is made of a synthetic composite, and the blade is stainless steel. In 2013 the people of Sheffield celebrated a hundred years of stainless steel, invented in their city by Harry Brearley, who thought of himself as a disciple of John Ruskin. Neither Ruskin nor William Morris in purist mode would have been, at first sight, in favour of such work. Nevertheless, in my conversation with Mitchell I was reminded of Ruskin, for though Mitchell uses up-to-date machinery, he eschews mass-production or anything that separates the craftsman from the object he is working on. Each knife is produced by Mitchell working alone and,

for measure and design, he relies on the judgement of hand and eye. He believes that hand and eye achieve better, more sensitive, more efficient and, indeed, more beautiful results than are possible with any mechanical measure and, as a result, no two knives from his workshop are ever identical. 'This means,' he says, 'that no knife I make is perfect. A perfect knife would not be a good knife.'

What this reminded me of, first of all, was Ruskin's essay 'The Nature of Gothic', which is placed near the mid-point of his great three-volume study, *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53). In that essay Ruskin speaks of the necessary imperfection of human constructs and of that imperfection being, paradoxically, their glory. I shall be developing that thought in the course of this lecture, but by way of summary I shall quote from the catalogue of the exhibition *John Ruskin: Artist and Observer* that was recently shown in Ottawa and Edinburgh. Among the daguerreotypes which Ruskin owned was one of the Badia at Fiesole, near Florence, which he may have commissioned himself. This façade is by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), who is normally thought of as the first architect of the Italian Renaissance. Brunelleschi is regarded as a classical architect, a master of symmetry, balance and humanistic proportions. But Ruskin admired precisely those aspects of this façade which are not in the strict sense classical at all: the contrasting features of the design in the blank arcading on either side of the door. Ian Jeffrey, in the catalogue essay on daguerreotypes, succinctly comments:



Filippo Brunelleschi, Façade of the Badia Fiesolana, Fiesole, mid-15th century. Daguerreotype from the collection of John Ruskin, 1846. Ruskin Library, Lancaster University.

> [Ruskin's] idea was that in worthwhile architecture no two modules, panels or carved ornaments should ever be the same. If they are slightly dissimilar it is a sign that they have been made by hand and not by machine, which is a good thing and acknowledges the workman as a creator. Irregularity also implies change, which Ruskin valued above, stasis and perfection destroys expression,

checks exertion and paralyzes vitality.[1]

It was this idea of Ruskin's that seized the nineteen-year-old William Morris, reading 'The Nature of Gothic' soon after its publication, and it set him on the course of his future life. Morris is notoriously the champion of handicraft over machinery – though contrary to the legend, he did use machinery for certain specific processes – so the second thing Stuart Mitchell reminded me of was Morris's aphorism: 'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.' [2]

I have no idea whether Mitchell is aware of such writings – I had no opportunity to ask him – but it is possibly more to my purpose to assume that he isn't aware of them than that he is. Ruskin would certainly not have been surprised to encounter a craftsman who followed his principles without having ever read what he wrote. He did not think of himself as an innovator; he was seeking to account for principles inherent in good workmanship, matters of hand and eye. He believed that such principles could be *read* in the artist's work.

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[1] Ian Jeffrey, 'Fatal Praise: John Ruskin and the Daguerreotype' in Christopher Newall (ed.), *John Ruskin Artist and Observer*, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, and London: Paul Holberton, 2014), 68-69.

[2] 'The Beauty of Life' in *Hopes and Fears for Art* (1882), reprinted in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longman, 1910-15), 22:7. Hereafter referred in the form: 'Morris 22:7'.

To give a quite different example, last summer I had the good fortune to spend an afternoon in one of the loveliest buildings I know. I was attending a seminar about Ruskin at – appropriately enough – the University of Venice, which has its headquarters in one of the finest of the Grand Canal palaces: Ca' Foscari. Ruskin himself describes Ca' Foscari as 'the noblest example in Venice of the fifteenth-century Gothic' (11.378).

Francesco Foscari, who had the house built for his family, went on to become the Doge of Venice and live in an even more beautiful building, the Ducal Palace, which Ruskin called, with characteristic hyperbole, 'the central building of the world' (9:38). If you are travelling by boat in the direction of the Ducal Palace you will see Ca' Foscari on the right-hand side of the canal just at the point where the water makes its most dramatic swerve towards the left, and if you are accustomed to looking for such things, you will notice that, unlike most of its rival palaces, it has not one *piano nobile*, but two. The *piano nobile* is the floor of an Italian palace where the main reception area is located, and it is given prominence by the grand architectural arrangement of its windows, their mouldings and their sculptural ornament. To build a house with two *piani nobili* was presumably to show off in a big way, and Foscari seems to have wanted the world to notice him and his power and property.

He was Doge from 1423 to 1457. His reign , which ended in something of a disaster, is generally regarded by historians as marking the transition in Venice from

the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and from unrivalled greatness to steady decline. Ruskin associated him with the point in history at which Venice fell from grace and the path of virtue, but he did admire his house and the

Ca' Foscari, Venice: the Grand Canal façade. Architect: Bartolommeo Bon, c. 1450. Photograph by Sarah Quill.

work of its architect generally. The architect was almost certainly a man named Bartolommeo Bon. He was born around 1400 and died at some time after 1464. His name ought to carry more resonance than it does, because he also worked on the Ducal Palace itself – he designed the Porta della Carta which links the palace with St Mark's Basilica – and he and his father Giovanni collaborated with the architect Marco Raverti on the most famous of the Grand Canal palaces, the Ca' d'Oro.

That his name is not well-known, except to lovers of Venetian architecture, is probably due to two things. First, before the mid-sixteenth century, Venetian citizens were not expected to attract fame to themselves; their glory was in the fame they brought to Venice.

Secondly, I have called Bartolommeo an architect because that is the obvious modern word for him, but he is probably better described as a master mason. He belonged to a family of masons, which is to say craftsmen who worked in stone, whether as builders, sculptors or designers. It was not unusual for such men to collaborate with others. The Bon family workshop was probably brought in to complete the Ca' d'Oro after Raverti, who was not a Venetian, had started it, and a whole collection of artists worked on the Ducal Palace for several hundred years. It might fall to such a man as Bartolommeo – especially because he must have acquired distinction and respect – that he would draw up plans for the whole of a building, but that did not mean working from an architect's office, as it does today, and drawing the plans which working men then follow on the site. On the one hand, other craftsmen (such as his father) must also have been involved in the design – it would not have been regarded merely as *his* building – while on the other hand, much of the actual stonework may include stones laid by Bartolommeo himself and possibly even carved by him. For a fourteenth-century person, any building of this quality would have been a collaboration between masons, some of whom were in their immediate function ordinary workmen.

But times in the late fifteenth century were already changing and men of marked skill and inventiveness were beginning to rise above their lesser collaborators. A hundred years later, such a man as Andrea Palladio, the architect of (for instance) the Basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore, would be celebrated across the whole of Europe. Today, Palladio is arguably the most famous architect ever to have lived, and such a man as Bartolommeo does not enter the picture. To Ruskin, that only indicated that the world since 1500 had gone to the bad. The glorification of the individual artist was partly responsible for the so-called 'restoration' of anonymous medieval buildings; you could knock down and rebuild parts of the Ca' d'Oro, as indeed happened in Ruskin's presence and to his immense horror, but a building by Palladio was simply sacred. In 1877, both Ruskin and Morris campaigned to save the western façade of St Mark's Basilica – the jewel of Venice itself – from this sort of vandalism. In a letter written in the course of the campaign, Ruskin protested at the detached dictatorial role of the modern architect: 'the modern system of superintendence from a higher social position,' he wrote, 'renders good work impossible', and reminded his correspondent that he had written *The Stones of Venice* 'to show the dependence of its beauty on the happiness and fancy of the workman, and to show also that no architect could claim the title to authority of "magister" unless he himself wrought at the head of his men, Captain of manual skill' and, as he goes on to say, handling the chisel on site (24:406). 'Magister' is, of course, the Latin for 'mester'; and for Ruskin, an architect is a workman, the great sickness of modern

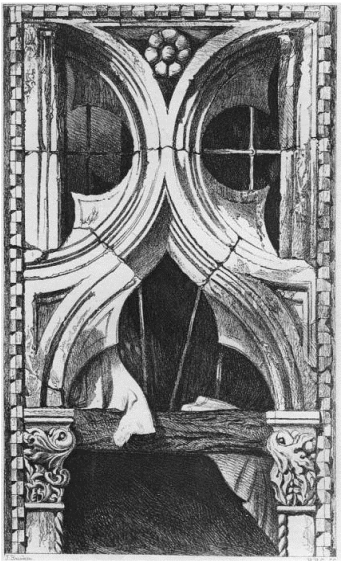
society being the distinction between the cultivated person, who thinks, and the uneducated person, who works with his hands:

> We want one man to be always thinking, and another to be always working, and we call one a gentleman, and the other an operative; whereas the workman ought often to be thinking, and the thinker often to be working, and both should be gentlemen, in the best sense. As it is, we make both ungentle, the one envying, the other despising, his brother; and the mass of society is made up of morbid thinkers and miserable workers. Now it is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labour can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity (10:201).

Ca' Foscari was built at a high point in the story of Venetian art, which was for Ruskin a point from which things could only fall. I want now to return to the afternoon I spent there. The seminar was held on the first *piano nobile*. It was a bright June afternoon and the sun's reflection glared fiercely from the surface of the Grand Canal. To filter the light, there were blinds over the eight windows, but being square, these blinds covered only the rectangular part. The Gothic heads with their gorgeous ogival mouldings were open to the light and, looking up from our table from time to time, I could see the fineness of the carving intensely lit, the line as sharp and sinuous in its sweep as if it had just been cut. It was almost, I reflected, as if the sun were itself the

chisel cutting those curves and doing so as I sat there. How much of this, I wondered, was the work of Bartolommeo's hand, and how much that of his fellow masons?

As it happens, Ruskin does not discuss Ca' Foscari in these terms, though in *The Seven Lamps of*



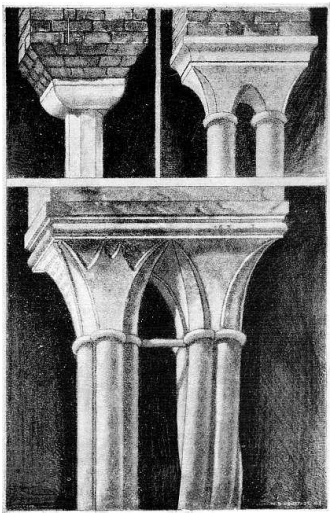
John Ruskin, Window from the Ca' Foscari, Venice. Engraved by R.P. Cuff. In The Seven Lamps of Architecture,1849. (8:132. Plate VIII.)

Architecture (1849), the book he wrote immediately before *The Stones of Venice*, there is a splendid engraving of one of the windows which gives you some idea of his feelings about the workmanship. This is in

Ruskin's youthful style, very Romantic, with a sense of the building's age and frailty. His later work is more closely observant and less self-consciously atmospheric than this, but it's a fine illustration. Since Ruskin's day, the building has been heavily restored, which would have distressed him – he was worried about it when he made this drawing and, though the windows are said to be unchanged, I wonder if this one hasn't been re-cut a little. Nevertheless, the beauty of the curves is still in evidence. They remind me of something Ruskin said about a much earlier building, the twelfth-century Basilica of San Zeno in Verona. In the first volume of *The Stones of Venice* he describes a pair of slim marble shafts with concave capitals, one column straight, the other twisted. The engraved plate he includes in illustration captures, in his words,

> its singularly bold and keen execution [which gives] the impression of its rather having been cloven into its form by the sweeps of a sword, than by the dull travail of a chisel. Its workman was proud of it, as well he might be: he has written his name upon its front (I would that more of his fellows had been as kindly vain), and the goodly stone proclaims for ever, ADAMINUS DE SANCTO GIORGIO ME FECIT [9:379].

In that expression, 'by the sweeps of a sword', Ruskin captures exactly what I felt about the bravura craftsmanship still visible from the *piano nobile*. It is interesting that, here too, the identity of the artist seems to have broken through the custom of anonymity. Ruskin is naturally curious about the identity of so accomplished



John Ruskin, *Capitals. Concave Group.* Engraved by Thomas Shotter Boys. In *The Stones of Venice*, vol. I, 1851. (9:377. Plate XVII.) The largest of the three images represents paired capitals in the crypt of San Zeno at Verona.

a master, but he also admires a culture that cares so little for personal fame – admires it because, oddly enough, as he read the history in the art, the relative insignificance of the artist was the necessary precondition for what he called 'the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone' (10: 193-94).

More of that in a minute. I have just said that Ruskin *read* a building – read the history in the art – and what I was doing as I sat there looking at the window arches was reading too: something that Ruskin taught me to do. We can read buildings, Ruskin argues, just as we might read Milton or Dante, 'getting the same kind of

delight out of the stones as out of the stanzas' (10:206). Once you have learnt to do such things, and to read other things apart from buildings as well – pictures and even landscapes, for instance – life is never quite the same again. As Morris was one of the first to testify, an encounter with Ruskin can change one's whole life. Reflecting on his conversion to Socialism he wrote: 'It was through him that I learned to give form to my discontent…'[3] We might compare the novelist Charlotte Brontë, who, on reading the first volume of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, said she felt 'as if I had been walking blindfold — this book seems to give me eyes.'[4] Many others have said similar things: Gandhi, for instance, Proust, Bernard Shaw and Clement Attlee. You will notice that, of the two citations I have given, one is concerned with art and the other with politics. A sound understanding of Ruskin would explore not only this ability to change lives but the connections between the many interests he brings together. Why, for instance, should an interest in architecture lead as inexorably as it does in Ruskin to social and economic concerns?

Ruskin had argued in *The Seven Lamps*, the book he wrote directly before *The Stones*, that buildings could be categorised by the quality of labour that went into them. It is mainly labour that I have so far been talking about: the Sheffield mester's knives and the carving of

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[3] 'How I became a Socialist', in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longman, 1910-15), 23:279.

[4] *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, with a selection of letters by family and friends*, ed. Margaret Smith, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995-2004), 94.

those Venetian windows. Ruskin and Morris make almost no distinction between art and labour – 'the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us,' says Morris in his Preface to the Kelmscott Press edition of *The Nature of Gothic*, 'is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour…'[5] Art is the apotheosis of work. Making things, and taking pleasure in doing so, seems to be a distinctively human characteristic, and art is the talent for making things at its most refined and elevated level. It is noteworthy that even people who have never given a thought to these issues nonetheless talk about *works* of art; the idea, as a matter of fact, is there in our language. But it is in *The Stones of Venice*, and most particularly in 'The Nature of Gothic', that Ruskin seriously begins to apply his mind to the matter. You will notice that something comparable to his use of the word 'work' occurs in the title of his book: not buildings or architecture, but the *stones* of Venice. Ruskin's first great intellectual interest as an adolescent was in the science of geology, particularly the geology of the Alps, and throughout his life he studied and collected stones. So for him, just as all art begins in work, so architecture is first of all a matter of *materials*.

I stress the word *materials*, because at first hearing it may come as a surprise. Ruskin was a Christian and not at all a superficial one, but there is something in his thought that comes quite close to materialism in a Marxist sense. He distrusts pious language and likes to translate religious words into

[5] 'Preface' to John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter from 'The Stones of Venice'* (London: George Allen, 1899), vii.

practical ones. He can't abide the word 'holy', so when he quotes from the Bible he changes it to 'helpful',[6] and the Parable of the Talents in St Matthew's gospel becomes a story about 'plain money' (16:99). When he writes about landscape painting, he likes to talk about the natural phenomena represented in the picture, and devotes most of the fourth volume of *Modern Painters* to what he calls (from a geological perspective) the 'materials' of Creation. This is not in fact contrary to Christianity, a religion whose central rite involves a meal of bread and wine, but it is rather at odds with those rarefied and sentimental versions of it that gained ground in Ruskin's lifetime. What it means in practice is that Ruskin is not prepared to think of art as a distinct category separate from the issues of life and society. Architects are stone masons, art is work. Aesthetic achievement is not separable from conditions of labour. Labour has a price in the market-place. And so on. You gradually come to see how natural it was that Ruskin in 1860, having just completed a five-volume book about art, which had occupied him for a great part of two decades – *Modern Painters* – should almost immediately settle down to write about economics. The outcome of this change of emphasis was his masterpiece, *Unto this Last*.

But of course we tend not to think of architecture as art in quite the way we think of painting or literature. Ruskin is aware of this. 'A picture or a poem,' he writes in 'The Nature of Gothic', 'is often little more than a

[6] See, for example, 'The Law of Help' in *Modern Painters* V, 7: 203-16.

feeble utterance of man's admiration of something out of himself; but architecture approaches more nearly to a creation of his own, born of his necessities and expressive of his nature' (10:213). That is to say, first, that our buildings tell us something about ourselves and our society: something that can be *read* in them. And second, that we may read in the finished building something about the life of the workman. We might usefully ask ourselves what the buildings we see going up around us today say about *our* society and about the lives of the people who are building them.

'The Nature of Gothic' is a substantial digression from the main course of *The Stones of Venice* – a necessary one, as it turns out, but such digressiveness is characteristic of Ruskin: for those who admire him, the mark of his profundity, but a source of irritation for those who do not. What is more, included within it is a still more extraordinary digression: one which converts a work of art history into one of social philosophy. It is the combination of the two, I would argue, that gives the book its greatness. 'The Nature of Gothic' comes between the chapter on Byzantine buildings and the chapter on Gothic ones in the middle volume of *The Stones of Venice*. Venetian Gothic developed, to a large extent, from the Byzantine style that preceded it, and some would argue that it is hardly Gothic at all. It is an eclectic style which unites the Byzantine style with elements of Gothic and Islamic architecture, Gothic being a style that grows from the harsher conditions of life in northern Europe, inappropriate in its pure form to the gentler ecology of the Mediterranean. For Ruskin,

Venetian Gothic *is* Gothic because it exhibits not only the fundamental principles of Gothic design and construction – most notably the pointed arch – but the outlook of the Gothic craftsman and his attitude to life. The outlook and attitude find expression in the building through the conditions of labour that enabled its construction. Or to put it another way, the workman's assumptions about life, enacted through his workmanship, find their expression in the building. Ruskin is not talking about some sort of philosophical expression; he is talking about something assumed in the building's configuration and detail.

Since the Renaissance, Ruskin argues, the conditions of labour have altered and the change has altered our buildings. The machine production of modern industrial Britain was only the latest stage in a long process of dehumanisation, not merely of relying on machines but of turning human beings into them. This leads him into the digression I referred to earlier, his denunciation of the factory system:

> Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanise them….
>
> Men may be beaten, chained, tormented, yoked like cattle, slaughtered like summer flies, and yet remain in one sense, and the best sense, free. But to smother their

> souls with them … to make the flesh and skin which, after the worm's work on it, is to see God, into leathern thongs to yoke machinery with, – this is to be slave-masters indeed; and there might be more freedom in England, though her feudal lords' lightest words were worth men's lives, and though the blood of the vexed husbandman dropped in the furrow of her fields, than there is while the animation of her multitudes is sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke, and the strength of them is given daily to be wasted into the fineness of a web, or racked into the exactness of a line (10:192-93).

Such work is literally *soul-destroying*. If you read about the conditions endured, for instance by metalworkers in the Sheffield factories of Ruskin's time, you will find no hint of exaggeration in that phrase 'sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke'. But Ruskin is not saying, as many have imagined, that employers in the Middle Ages were wonderfully kind to their workers and encouraged them to take up the arts and crafts. He readily admits that it was often a brutal time, careless of much ordinary human suffering and habituated to casual death, but the modern form of compassion, rooted in a system of production that, before it does anything else, deprives us of our humanity, is powerless to rectify the depth of the injustice:

> Never had the upper classes so much sympathy with the lower, or charity for them, as they have at this day, and yet never were they so much hated by them: for, of old, the

> separation between the noble and the poor was simply a wall built by law; now it is a veritable difference in level of standing, a precipice between upper and lower grounds in the field of humanity, and there is pestilential air at the bottom of it (10:194).

The evil for Ruskin is simple. Workmen in the industrial age are like those who built the Egyptian pyramids – at any rate as imagined by most Victorians. In his categorisation of architectural ornament according to the labour that went into it, Egyptian art is classified as 'Servile'; and the glossy mechanical perfections of the nineteenth-century drawing-room – the 'accurate mouldings, and perfect polishings, and unerring adjustments of the seasoned wood and tempered steel' – are Servile, too (10:193). Bluntly put, the workers who make them are slaves.

In Gothic, though, says Ruskin, it was quite otherwise:

> [I]n the mediaeval, or especially Christian, system of ornament, this slavery is done away with altogether; Christianity having recognised, in small things as well as great, the individual value of every soul. But it not only recognizes its value; it confesses its imperfection, in only bestowing dignity upon the acknowledgement of unworthiness … And it is, perhaps, the principal admirableness of the Gothic schools of architecture, that they thus receive the results of the labour of inferior minds; and out of fragments full of imperfection, and betraying

> that imperfection in every touch, indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole (10:189-90).

It is easy to misread this. Ruskin is not praising individualism or self-expression in the bourgeois liberal sense, nor is he encouraging slapdash approximations of craftsmanship. He is thinking in terms of the traditional Christian account of human nature, as St Augustine or Dante would have understood it. Our work *must* be imperfect because we are fallen. But it is one of the great paradoxes of Christian teaching that this fallenness becomes in effect our greatest glory. It is what theologians call the *felix culpa* or Fortunate Fall, since it makes salvation possible. If you know your *Paradise Lost*, for instance, you will recognise this teaching in Milton's closing lines when Adam and Eve, mourning the loss of Eden, realise that 'The world [is] all before them'.[7] For in falling, they walk into the condition of being human: imperfect, sinful, and therefore driven to greatness. It is a very dynamic view of human nature and creation and, in evoking it, Ruskin captures the fierce energy of Gothic. He recalls the façade of a great cathedral with its teeming decoration:

> those ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues, anatomiless and rigid … are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in the scale of being … which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children (10:193-94).

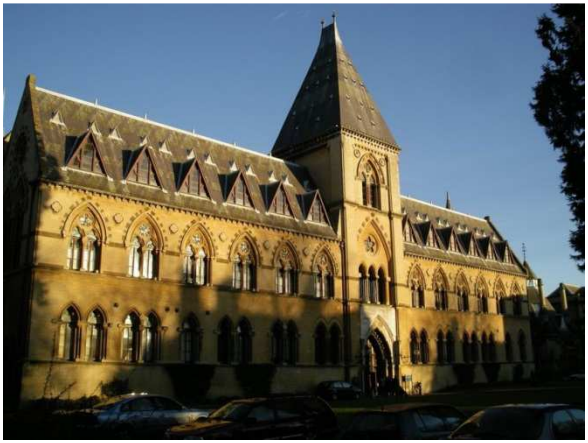
[7] John Milton, *Paradise Lost* XII, 646.

We may notice in that last sentence a subtle change of tone. Entirely consistent with what he has been saying, the rhetoric now begins to sound less like St Augustine and more like a modern revolutionary. This is the Ruskin who can speak of himself in one and the same book as a Tory and a Communist. The individual value of every soul is to be understood in a social context. If the Gothic architect is in fact a mason, *primus inter pares*, the building is to be read as a social construct – as a collaboration, as the coming together of individual imaginations. And it is here we must grant entry to William Morris. Readers familiar with Morris's work will already be calling to mind his fictional stone masons: the brother and sister in the early prose tale 'The Story of an Unknown Church',[8] and the female stone masons known as 'the Obstinate Refusers' in his utopian romance, *News from Nowhere*.[9] They, you will remember, are so absorbed in their work that they refuse to join in the haymaking festival, the joy they take in their work providing sufficient satisfaction for them. In 1858, when Morris and his Pre-Raphaelite friends, in a similar spirit of carnival, were frescoing the walls of the newly-built Oxford Union, designed by the Irish architect Benjamin Woodward, they cannot have failed to wander up Parks Road to watch the construction of a still more ambitious building by the same architect: the Oxford Museum of Natural History – a project of Ruskin's, inspired by him and built according to his scheme. The building was to have been the most intellectually rich and complex of all neo-Gothic

[8] Morris, 1:149-58.
[9] Morris, 16:172-76.

buildings, with an elaborate portal like a cathedral's, the multitudinousness of nature expressed in teeming sculptural decoration. Sadly, it was never completed, though it survives as a fully functioning museum of considerable beauty. Morris would almost certainly have watched with fascination the reappearance in modern England of Gothic stonemasons as Ruskin had described them, cutting directly into the stone on site. For it had been in 'The Nature of Gothic', when he read it as an undergraduate in 1853, that Morris discovered the purpose of his life, and the craftsman engaging directly with his material had become Morris's model of human labour, redeemed by the exercise of skill and imagination.

The story is well-known. Morris had gone up to Oxford in 1853 and soon met his lifelong



The Oxford Museum [of Natural History]. Architect: Benjamin Woodward [of Deane and Woodward], 1859.

friend, the painter Edward Burne-Jones. The two young men, both destined for the Church, were already passionate medievalists. Reading ‘The Nature of Gothic’ gave practical substance and intellectual rigour to their dreams and, after a tour of the French Cathedrals, they abandoned their original vocations, resolving to become, in Burne-Jones’s case, a painter and, in Morris’s, an architect. Architecture was quickly to prove the wrong choice, but it remained the discipline on which most of his future work was to be based. On the way, it led him into a friendship with the architect Philip Webb, who was able to turn Morris’s dream of a Gothic home into reality.

Red House was designed in 1859, just as the Oxford Museum went into service, and like that

Red House, near Bexleyheath, Kent. Architect: Philip Webb, 1859.

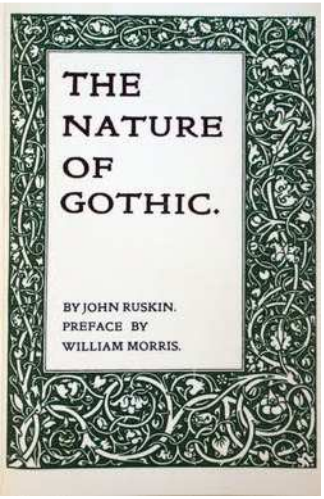
Museum, it is at once Gothic and ultra-modern. The story goes that, unable to find furniture to suit the house, Morris, Webb and Burne-Jones, their wives and their friends, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Ford Madox Brown among them, decided to make their own. Thus, in 1861, the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company was born.[10]

Morris was astonishingly fertile and prolific. It is possible to isolate some thirteen or fourteen crafts that he mastered in less than forty years of creative work – but happy as he was to be engaged in such work, and profitable as he found it, he was also frustrated. At the Oxford Museum Ruskin had discovered that you couldn't create a truly Gothic building without a Gothic society. To take one simple example: he would have liked Rossetti and other artists he knew to decorate the Museum with ambitious works, as if they had been Giotto or the sculptors of Rouen or Chartres. But Rossetti had to earn a living and he could only do that by painting easel pictures which successful people could afford to buy; he was too poor to give up a couple of years to work on such a project. So the artists Woodward used were mostly less able than those he would have wanted and the large projects had to be forgotten. The issue was an economic one and the most important effect of it for Ruskin was that it led him away from his main focus on art and turned him into a social critic, most notably of course in his attack on the political

[10] It became simply Morris and Company in 1875, when Morris decided to buy his partners out.

economists, *Unto this Last*, written in the year after work on the Museum came to an end.

Morris's disenchantment took longer and was more complex. He was led away from his social concerns through association with non-political artists, and it was partly an effect of the breakdown of his friendship with Rossetti that he turned to politics in the late 1870s. When in 1883 he joined what was soon to become the Social Democratic Federation, he wrote to Ruskin inviting him to do the same. Ruskin refused – he was not a joiner anyway, and never a democrat or a Socialist – but Morris was conscious that in taking this step he was continuing on a path that Ruskin had opened up for him. Nine years later, he published an edition of *The Nature of Gothic* at the Kelmscott Press.



William Morris, title-page to John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic*. Kelmscott Press, 1892.

It is a beautiful volume, in the Golden type, Morris's straightforward roman font, and the Preface he wrote for it is one of his most moving writings. 'When I first read [the essay], now many years ago,' he wrote,

> it seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel. And in spite of all the disappointments of forty years, and although some of us, John Ruskin amongst others, have since learned what the equipment for that journey must be, and how many things must be changed before we are equipped, yet we can still see no other way out of the folly and degradation of Civilization.
>
> For the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour; that it is possible for man to rejoice in his work, for, strange as it may seem to us to-day, there have been many times when he did rejoice in it; and lastly, that unless man's work once again becomes a pleasure to him, the token of which will be that beauty is once again a natural and necessary accompaniment of productive labour, all but the worthless must toil in pain, and therefore live in pain.[11]

I can see little in that passage with which Ruskin would not have, in principle, concurred, but I am not sure he would have agreed that the 'road on which the world should travel' was entirely a new one. Ruskin told Sydney Cockerell that Morris was 'beaten gold' and later

[11] Morris, 'Preface', vii.

'declared him to be "the ablest man of his time"',[12] while Morris regarded Ruskin as the chief inspiration of his life, yet the two men never seem to have achieved an intimate friendship. This must have been partly because their aims and tastes were not identical. Morris was suspicious of the Italian art and architecture which Ruskin loved, and preferred the uneventful landscapes of southern England to the Alpine and Lakeland landscapes that inspired Ruskin. Ruskin, moreover, was at root an ethical Tory, even if at times that made him sound like a Marxist.[13] Morris *was* a Marxist, at any rate in the last years of his life, and perhaps imagined Ruskin as more left-wing than he actually was. At any rate, the new road that Ruskin had pointed out led, in Morris's view, to revolution and Socialism. The image of the medieval artisans labouring joyfully on their building-site is for Morris an image of solidarity or, as he might have put it, 'fellowship'; and it was by sinking the self in such collaborative endeavour that human beings might discover a purpose in life in the absence of supernatural consolations. His medieval Socialist hero, John Ball,

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[12] Sir Sydney Cockerell, Introduction to J.W. MacKail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols. in one (London: OUP, 1950), 1:6

[13] The poet Sir Geoffrey Hill has said in a recent interview: 'I would describe myself as a sort of Ruskinian Tory. It is only Ruskinian Tories these days who … sound like old-fashioned Marxists… I am in profound agreement with William Morris's "Art under Plutocracy".' In that lecture, Morris characterises the modern capitalist state as 'anarchical Plutocracy', and Hill, following Ruskin, endorses that expression. Christy Rush, Interview with Geoffrey Hill, *The Oxford Student*, 25 May 2011, http://oxfordstudent.com/2011/05/26/interview-geoffrey-hill-oxford-professor-of-poetry/

gives expression to Morris's outlook in these words: 'Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from the earth shall wane.'[14]

Ruskin's denunciation of the factory system, as many have noticed, anticipates the account of alienation given by Marx in the twelfth chapter of *Capital*, and he shared Morris's view of man as a social animal whose genius functioned in acts of collaboration. But his conception of human beings working together in creative delight to raise up what he calls an 'unassailable whole' also has a religious significance. It is fallen humanity, imperfect but made in the image of the Creator, restoring the primal unity of things through a human act of creation. There is a paradox of which Ruskin is intensely aware: that it is in our imperfection that we come closest to the basic pattern of creation. In an important chapter from *Modern Painters* V (1860), he speaks of 'The Law of Help', which he regards as the fundamental law of nature.[15] The leaves on a tree, for instance, far from struggling for survival as in the Darwinian theory, collaborate with one another in the interests of the whole tree. Moreover, though all the leaves of, say, a chestnut tree are recognisable as chestnut leaves, no two of them are ever identical, and therefore, in an Aristotelian

[14] *A Dream of John Ball*, in Morris, Morris 16:230.
[15] See note 6 above.

understanding, each of them is imperfect. As each of these different leaves contributes to the whole life of the tree, so each individual soul with its individual value contributes to a larger human entity, which the Gothic cathedral, for Ruskin, comes to symbolise.

From a social perspective, both Morris and Ruskin are Utopians.[16] For Morris, as a lover of medieval art and culture, the past can provide a model for the future we may labour to create: an alternative, that is, to the way we live now. But Morris is not proposing that we seek to replicate the Middle Ages or imagine that past eras can be relived, nor does he mean to idealise medieval life, even if on occasion he seems to do so. Consider his work as a craftsman and designer. He learned the technique of tapestry-making from medieval primers and particular medieval examples, and there is much in his designs that recalls medieval work. But there is never any risk of mistaking a Morris tapestry for a medieval one. The same is true of his stained glass, which grew from his love of the thirteenth-century work in Merton College, Oxford. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner,

[16] The editors of Ruskin's *Works* are more precise. 'The forms into which Ruskin threw his reconstruction of society,' they write, 'belong to the sphere of Utopian suggestion' (27:lxi). In his Edinburgh lectures delivered in 1853, Ruskin warned against the word 'Utopian': 'Whenever you hear a man dissuading you from attempting to do well, on the ground that perfection is "Utopian", beware of that man. Cast the word out of your dictionary altogether' (12:56). In the 1870s, however, fresh from reading Sir Thomas More, Ruskin was happier to talk of Utopia, and it is probably fair to say that the Guild of St George, publisher of this booklet, was conceived as a Utopian body.

writing in praise of it, observed acutely that 'Morris looked on the Middle Ages rather for guidance than for actual paradigms'.[17] So the difference of the past from the present becomes a way of conceiving a better future.

Ruskin's utopianism is qualitatively different. His medieval Venice is an ideal society, which helps to account for the gorgeous artefacts that survive from its great era. But this idealisation helps Ruskin to understand how the art a society produces must be a reflection of its values. The equation is not altogether accurate – the reading is slightly skewed – but the contemplation of a past utopia (if that is not a contradiction in terms) helps him to imagine how our society might be a better one. The image of Gothic creativity he gives in his great essay has been much criticised. We are told that the medieval building site was intensely hierarchical and that the craftsmen Ruskin praised as if they were modern artisans were the aristocrats of their profession, that the ordinary labourers were miserably paid and suffered from respiratory diseases caused by dust, that anyway the work on a cathedral (of all things) cannot be taken as a model of medieval labour. No doubt this is all true in some degree. But as one of the most trenchant of such critics, John Unrau, has observed: Ruskin begins to see 'what work could be if all were united in a fellowship of free artistic

[17] *The Buildings of England: Cambridgeshire*, 2nd edn. rev. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 86.

endeavour'. 'The Nature of Gothic' shows 'what all human work could be'.[18]

I reflect that these matters have preoccupied me for nearly fifty years, but it was only last year, as I sat in that seminar by the Grand Canal, that I began to grasp inwardly – or so I think – what Ruskin had done. An able but unimaginative craftsman may produce adequate work on a functional building of nugatory aesthetic merit. The work of such a craftsman earns a living. Equally, a computer can measure and plan with an accuracy unknown to the human hand or eye. Operated by such a designer as the Italian architect Renzo Piano, it may produce a building like the Shard, near London Bridge, which is with its 87 storeys the tallest building in the European Union. Piano is the most environmentally conscious of architects and a master of high tech. Seen, as I saw it recently, at sunset and reflecting the light of an early moon, it can be hauntingly beautiful. At the same time, it seems to have been untouched by human hand. One should be grateful for such beauty, but what about the aesthetic merits of the buildings it overshadows, most of them dismal? Moreover, a spire-like construction soaring above a great financial centre cannot help but be read as a cathedral to capital, affirming the triumph of high finance and high technology over the 'individual souls' – to use Ruskin's phrase – in the streets below. What Ruskin sees in good

[18] John Unrau, 'Ruskin, the Workman and the Savageness of Gothic' in Robert Hewison (ed.), *New Approaches to Ruskin; Thirteen Essays* (London: Routledge, 1981), 48.

The Shard, London Bridge Street, London.
Architect: Renzo Piano, 2012.

architecture is a bond between the human spirit and the natural world, and the human presence can be read in the cut stone. We need to rediscover the simple lesson about hand and eye taught me by the Sheffield mester I began this lecture with. The political future of our planet is more puzzling today, it seems to me, than at any time since the French Revolution. It is hard for us to talk, as Morris could, about the road the world should be travelling on. We could do worse, however, than do what he did in 1853 and ask what it means for a chisel to carry a human intention into a slab of marble, itself a thing of unreachable beauty, and what such a cut may tell us of civilisation, and work, and human happiness.

Clive Wilmer has been Master of the Guild of St George since 2009. He is also Emeritus Fellow in English at Sidney Sussex College Cambridge, an Honorary Fellow of Anglia Ruskin University, and an Honorary Patron of the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow. He edited *Unto this Last and Other Writings* by John Ruskin for Penguin Classics and is the author of several books of poetry, including *New and Collected Poems* (Carcanet, 2012).

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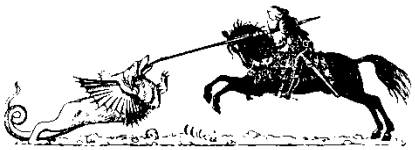
The Guild of St George was formally established by John Ruskin in 1878. Through the Guild, Ruskin strove to make Britain a pleasanter and happier place in which to live. His aims and aspirations for the Guild are contained in the ninety six “Letters” of his *Fors Clavigera*.

Today the Guild is a charitable Education Trust which tries to put Ruskin’s hopes into practice through its collection at the Ruskin Gallery in Sheffield and its other activities. It can offer scholarships and awards across a range of subjects close to Ruskin’s heart, including the practice of crafts and scholarly work in agricultural science and economics, education, industry and the social sciences.

The first of the Ruskin Triennial Exhibitions, themed on the Environment and Sustainability was staged at Sheffield between October 2009 and January 2010. A second exhibition, with the theme Landscape and Creativity, took place in 2013 and a third is planned on the theme of Craft to open in the Millennium Galleries Sheffield in 2016. Also, the Guild is supporting work on the regeneration of old orchards and hay meadows in the Wyre Forest.



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