John Ruskin, ‘Of the Open Sky’, from *Modern Painters I* (1843).

**Key themes: environment, art, painting, science**

**Key locations: Appenines, Sorrento, Rome, Mt Blanc, Mt Chimborazo, National Gallery, Dulwich Gallery**

**Possible activities: looking up; painting and drawing skies; visiting galleries to look at sky painting.**

**Some notes to assist your reading**

This extract has been chosen as an excellent example of the way that art and landscape intersect in Ruskin’s work, but also because it magnificently showcases Ruskin’s ability to turn his extraordinarily acute vision into urgent, purposeful, and beautiful prose. He has two aims here, both characteristic of *Modern Painters*, the work of art criticism that brought Ruskin enormous fame at a very young age. The first aim is to demonstrate how and why Turner was superior to the Old Masters in truthful landscape art – in this case in the painting of skies. The second (perhaps more fundamental) aim was to urge his readers to *look up*, to notice the sky, and to feel wonder at its majestic splendours. The opening sentences take Ruskin down a path he would re-tread again and again in his career: directing his reader’s attention to an unacknowledged truth in order to expand their vision and sympathies. This is a bravura piece of prose – moving, articulate, and passionate – that is also an early articulation of a despair at humankind that would only intensify as Ruskin aged.

Where does this first volume of *Modern Painters* fit within Ruskin’s career? Before its publication, Ruskin’s only other significant work was *The Poetry of Architecture* (1837), although he had published verse and scientific articles in magazines and periodicals from the age of 13. Its publication under the nom-de-plume, ‘A Graduate of Oxford’, indicated that Ruskin had only recently left those hallowed halls, achieving a lower classification of degree than might have been expected due to a bout of serious ill-health. Despite his deliberate anonymity, his name became very well known. A publishing sensation and something of a celebrity, he became the most important art critic of his day, and this despite the fact that he had no technical schooling in art history or art criticism. His experiences of art came from accompanying his father, a sherry merchant, around the country estates of Britain, visiting the National and Dulwich Galleries in London and some continental galleries on family travels to France and Italy. During that time, his engagement with natural landscapes yet more intensive. *Modern Painters* is, therefore, not simply a staunch defence of Ruskin’s beloved J.M.W. Turner against hostile reviews in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, but also the conjunction of Ruskin’s greatest loves – art and environment. This chapter is a fine example of how Ruskin blends these loves in a purposeful, unique fashion. This is one of a number of selections made from *Modern Painters* for the [reading groups]. All of them exemplify the urgency with which Ruskin communicates his ideas, the importance he places on observing and adoring nature, and the ways in which he is capable of expressing ideas that cannot be found anywhere else in Victorian commentary. Ruskin blends art, science, spirituality, and a passionate desire to educate in a work that shows why so many Victorian readers valued this most talented of ‘word painters’.

The chapter from which this selection has been taken occurs roughly half way through *Modern Painters*, and is the first of a series of chapters devoted to the truth (or otherwise) of representations of skies. If you wish to read on, you can access the whole chapter in [Volume 3](file:///C:\Users\frostm\Documents\Ruskin\CW\CW%2003.pdf) of the *Library Edition of John Ruskin’s Works* (just type 409 into the number box at the top to get straight to the start of the chapter). The [Reading Groups] webpages contain lots of other links and suggestions for further reading if we have whetted your interest. Now it’s time to be transported to the skies of Ruskin’s vision. Enjoy.

**Part 2, ‘Of Truth’**

**Section III, ‘Of Truth of Skies’**

**Chapter 1, ‘Of the Open Sky’**

IT is a strange thing how little in general people know about the sky. It is the part of creation in which nature has done more for the sake of pleasing man, more for the sole and evident purpose of talking to him and teaching him, than in any other of her works, and it is just the part in which we least attend to her. There are not many of her other works in which some more material or essential purpose than the mere pleasing of man is not answered by every part of their organization; but every essential purpose of the sky might, so far as we know, be answered, if once in three days, or thereabouts, a great, ugly, black rain-cloud were brought up over the blue, and everything well watered, and so all left blue again till next time, with perhaps a film of morning and evening mist for dew. And instead of this, there is not a moment of any day of our lives, when nature is not producing scene after scene, picture after

picture, glory after glory, and working still upon such exquisite and constant principles of the most perfect beauty, that it is quite certain it is all done for us, and intended for our perpetual pleasure. And every man, wherever placed, however far from other sources of interest or of beauty, has this doing for him constantly. The noblest scenes of the earth can be seen and known but by few; it is not intended that man should live always in the midst of them; he injures them by his presence, he ceases to feel them if he be always with them: but the sky is for all; bright as it is, it is not

“Too bright or good

For human nature’s daily food;”

it is fitted in all its functions for the perpetual comfort and exalting of the heart, for soothing it and purifying it from its dross and dust. Sometimes gentle, sometimes capricious, sometimes awful, never the same for two moments together; almost human in its passions, almost spiritual in its tenderness, almost divine in its infinity, its appeal to what is immortal in us is as distinct, as its ministry of chastisement or of

blessing to what is mortal is essential. And yet we never attend to it, we never make it a subject of thought, but as it has to do with our animal sensations: we look upon all by which it speaks to us more clearly than to brutes, upon all which bears witness to the intention of the Supreme that we are to receive more from the covering vault than the light and the dew which we share with the weed and the worm, only as a succession of meaningless and monotonous accident, too common and too vain to be worthy of a moment of watchfulness, or a glance of admiration. If in our moments of utter idleness and insipidity, we turn to the sky as a last resource, which of its phenomena do we speak of? One says it has been wet; and another, it has been windy; and another, it has been warm. Who, among the whole chattering crowd, can tell me of the forms and the precipices of the chain of tall white mountains that girded the horizon at noon yesterday? Who saw the narrow sunbeam that came out of the south and smote upon their summits until they melted and mouldered away in a dust of blue rain? Who saw the dance of the dead clouds when the sunlight left them last night, and the west wind blew them before it like withered leaves? All has passed, unregretted as unseen; or if the apathy be ever shaken off, even for an instant, it is only by what is gross, or what is extraordinary; and yet it is not in the broad and fierce manifestations of the elemental energies, not in the clash of the hail, nor the drift of the whirlwind, that the highest characters of the sublime are developed. God is not in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the still, small voice. They are but the blunt and the low faculties of our nature, which can only be addressed through lamp-black and lightning. It is in quiet and subdued passages of unobtrusive majesty, the

deep, and the calm, and the perpetual; that which must be sought ere it is seen, and loved ere it is understood; things which the angels work out for us daily, and yet vary eternally: which are never wanting, and never repeated; which are to be found

always, yet each found but once; it is through these that the lesson of devotion is chiefly taught, and the blessing of beauty given. These are what the artist of highest aim must study; it is these, by the combination of which his ideal is to be created; these, of which so little notice is ordinarily taken by common observers, that I fully

believe, little as people in general are concerned with art, more of their ideas of sky are derived from pictures than from reality; and that if we could examine the conception formed in the minds of most educated persons when we talk of clouds, it

would frequently be found composed of fragments of blue and white reminiscences

of the old masters.

I shall enter upon the examination of what is true in sky at greater length, because it is the only part of a picture of which all, if they will, may be competent judges. What I may have to assert respecting the rocks of Salvator, or the boughs of Claude, I can scarcely prove, except to those whom I can immure for a month or two in the fastnesses of the Apennines, or guide in their summer walks again and again through the ravines of Sorrento. But what I say of the sky can be brought to an immediate test by all, and I write the more decisively, in the hope that it may be so.

Let us begin then with the simple open blue of the sky. This is of course the colour of the pure atmospheric air, not the aqueous vapour, but the pure azote and

oxygen, and it is the total colour of the whole mass of that air between us and the void of space. It is modified by the varying quantity of aqueous vapour suspended in it, whose colour, in its most imperfect and therefore most visible state of solution, is pure white (as in steam); which receives, like any other white, the warm hues of the rays of the sun, and, according to its quantity and imperfect solution, makes the sky paler, and at the same time more or less grey, by mixing warm tones with its blue. This grey aqueous vapour, when very decided, becomes mist, and when local, cloud. Hence the sky is to be considered as a transparent blue liquid, in which, at various

elevations, clouds are suspended, those clouds being themselves only particular visible spaces of a substance with which the whole mass of this liquid is more or less impregnated. Now, we all know this perfectly well, and yet we so far forget it in practice, that we little notice the constant connection kept up by nature between her blue and her clouds; and we are not offended by the constant habit of the old masters, of considering the blue sky as totally distinct in its nature, and far separated

from the vapours which float in it. With them, cloud is cloud, and blue is blue, and no kind of connection between them is ever hinted at. The sky is thought of as a clear, high, material dome, the clouds as separate bodies suspended beneath it; and in

consequence, however delicate and exquisitely removed in tone their skies may be, you always look *at* them, not *through* them.

Now if there be one characteristic of the sky more valuable or necessary to be rendered than another, it is that which Wordsworth has given in the second1 book of the Excursion:

“The chasm of sky above my head

Is Heaven’s profoundest azure; no domain

For fickle, short-lived clouds, to occupy,

Or to pass through; but rather an *abyss*

In which the everlasting stars abide,

And whose soft gloom, and boundless depth, might tempt

The curious eye to look for them by day.”

And in his American Notes, I remember Dickens notices the same truth, describing himself as lying drowsily on the barge deck, looking not at, but *through* the sky. And if you look intensely at the pure blue of a serene sky, you will see that there is a variety and fulness in its very repose. It is not flat dead colour, but a deep, quivering, transparent body of penetrable air, in which you trace or imagine short falling spots of deceiving light, and dim shades, faint veiled vestiges of dark vapour; and it is this trembling transparency which our great modern master has especially aimed at and given. His blue is never laid on in smooth coats, but in breaking, mingling, melting hues, a quarter of an inch of which, cut off from all the rest of the picture, is still *spacious*, still infinite and immeasurable in depth. It is a painting of the air, something into which you can see, through the parts which are near you, into those which are far off; something which has no surface and through which we can plunge far and farther, and without stay or end, into the profundity of space; whereas, with all the old landscape painters except Claude, you may indeed go a long way before you come to the sky, but you will strike hard against it at last. A perfectly genuine and untouched sky of Claude is indeed most perfect, and beyond praise, in all qualities of air; though even with him, I often feel rather that there is a great deal of pleasant air between me and the firmament, than that the firmament itself is only air. I do not mean, however, to say a word against such skies as that of the Enchanted Castle, or

that marked 30 in the National Gallery, or one or two which I remember at Rome; but how little and by how few these fine passages of Claude are appreciated, is sufficiently proved by the sufferance of such villainous and unpalliated copies as we meet with all over Europe, like the Marriage of Isaac, in our own Gallery, to remain under his name. In fact, I do not remember above ten pictures of Claude’s, in which the skies, whether repainted or altogether copies, or perhaps from Claude’s hand,

but carelessly laid in, like that marked 241, Dulwich Gallery, were not fully as feelingless and false as those of other masters; while, with the Poussins, there are no favourable exceptions. Their skies are systematically wrong; take, for instance, the sky of the Sacrifice of Isaac. It is here high noon, as is shown by the shadow of the figures; and what sort of colour is the sky at the top of the picture? Is it pale and grey with

heat, full of sunshine, and unfathomable in depth? On the contrary, it is of a pitch of darkness which, except on Mont Blanc or Chimborazo, is as purely impossible as colour can be. He might as well have painted it coal black; and it is laid on with a dead coat of flat paint, having no one quality or resemblance of sky about it. It cannot have altered, because the land horizon is as delicate and tender in tone as possible, and is evidently unchanged; and to complete the absurdity of the whole thing, this colour holds its own, without graduation or alteration, to within three or four degrees of the horizon, where it suddenly becomes bold and unmixed yellow. Now the horizon at noon may be yellow when the whole sky is covered with dark clouds, and only *one* open streak of light left in the distance from which the whole light proceeds; but with a clear open sky, and opposite the sun, at noon, such a yellow horizon as this is physically impossible. Even supposing that the upper part of the sky were pale and warm, and that the transition from the one hue to the other were effected imperceptibly and gradually, as is invariably the case in reality, instead of taking place within a space of two or three degrees; even then, this gold yellow would be altogether absurd: but as it is, we have in this sky (and it is a fine picture,

one of the best of Gaspar’s that I know) a notable example of the truth of the old masters, two impossible colours impossibly united! Find such a colour in Turner’s noon-day zenith as the blue at the top, or such a colour at a noon-day horizon as the

yellow at the bottom, or such a connection of any colours whatsoever as that in the centre, and then you may talk about his being false to nature if you will. Nor is this a solitary instance; it is Gaspar Poussin’s favourite and characteristic effect. I remember twenty such, most of them worse than this, in the downright surface and opacity of blue.