John Ruskin, ‘The Law of Help’, from *Modern Painters V* (1860).

**Key themes: art, geology, natural history, environment, pollution, life and death, religion.**

**Key locations: anywhere where you might observe the Law of Help in action.**

**Possible activities: observing nature and art.**

**Some notes to assist your reading**

This extract has been selected as a signal moment in Ruskin’s career that encapsulates much of his thinking about art, environment, and society, and in particular his belief in the importance of harmony. Beginning with art (the ostensible subject of *Modern Painters*), Ruskin argues that ‘Composition may be best defined as the help of everything in the picture by everything else’. By this he means that every element of a good painting actively ‘helps’ the rest to achieve compositional harmony. Broadening out his discussion of ‘help’, he goes on to argue that ‘a pure or holy state of anything […] is that in which all its parts are helpful or consistent’. In plant and animal life, ‘the highest or organic purities are composed of many elements in an entirely helpful state’, while harmonious societies are also only achievable by following principles of helpfulness. Drawing these ideas together, he declares that ‘the highest and first law of the universe – and the other name of life is, therefore, “help”’, and that ‘Government and co-operation are in all things and eternally the laws of life’, while ‘Anarchy and competition, eternally, and in all things, [are] the laws of death.’ The chapter builds this argument in glorious detail: pay particular attention to the breathtaking example he conjures of the contrast between the creation of crystals and the unhelpful composition of ‘the mud or slime of a damp, over-trodden path, in the outskirts of a manufacturing town’. As well as being a brilliant idea, ‘The Law of Help’ showcases Ruskin’s polymathic desire to connect diverse subjects, and to apply his thoughts on art far beyond the worlds of galleries and exhibitions. This is vivid, thrilling stuff, and worthy of close readin, for it encapsulates Ruskin’s attitudes perhaps better than any other single work.

Where does ‘The Law of Help’ fit within Ruskin’s career? It is part of the final volume of *Modern Painters*, a work of five volumes begun in 1843, but it also signals the change in direction of his subsequent writings towards more directly political and social engagement. 1860 was a busy and significant year for Ruskin, with the publication of *Modern Painters IV and V* and the essays on political economy in the *Cornhill Magazine* that would become *Unto This Last*, the work that definitively announced a political turn in Ruskin’s writings that had been gradually building during the 1850s. This was also the start of a phase that would see him establish the St George’s Company in 1871. An extract from *Modern Painters IV* and two from *Unto This Last* have also been created for you. It is worth noting Ruskin’s opinion that ‘my principles of Political Economy were all summed’ in ‘The Law of Help’ before being given fuller articulation in *Unto This Last* and subsequent works like *The Crown of Wild Olive* (see further extracts from this important work).

The extract is taken from the first half of ‘The Law of Help’. If you wish to read the whole chapter, you can access it in [Volume 7](file:///D:\Ruskin\CW\CW%2007.pdf) of the *Library Edition of John Ruskin’s Works* (just type 305 into the number box at the top to get straight to the start of this extract). The [Local Groups] webpages contain lots of other links and suggestions for further reading if we have whetted your interest. For now, however, delve into Ruskin’s transformative thoughts on the importance of help – in art, in nature, and in everyday life. May your days be more helpful as a result.

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**CHAPTER I, THE LAW OF HELP**

§ 1. WE have now reached the last and the most important part of our subject. We have seen in the first division of this book, how far art may be, and has been, consistent with physical or material facts. In its second division, we examined how far it may be and has been obedient to the laws of physical beauty. In this last division we have to consider the relations of art to God and man: its work in the help of human beings, and service of their Creator.

We have to inquire into the various Powers, Conditions, and Aims of mind involved in the conception or creation of pictures; in the choice of subject, and the mode and order of its history;– the choice of forms, and the modes of their arrangement.

And these phases of mind being concerned, partly with choice and arrangement of incidents, partly with choice and arrangement of forms and colours, the whole subject will fall into two main divisions, namely, expressional or spiritual invention; and material or formal invention.

They are of course connected;– all good formal invention being expressional also; but as a matter of convenience it is best to say what may be ascertained of the nature of formal invention, before attempting to illustrate the faculty in its higher field.

§ 2. First, then, of INVENTION FORMAL, otherwise and most commonly called technical composition; that is to say, the arrangement of lines, forms, or colours, so as to produce the best possible effect.

I have often been accused of slighting this quality in pictures; the fact being that I have avoided it only because I considered it too great and wonderful for me to deal with. The longer I thought, the more wonderful it always seemed: and it is, to myself personally, the quality, above all others, which gives me delight in pictures. Many others I admire, or respect; but this one I rejoice in. Expression, sentiment, truth to nature, are essential: but all these are not enough. I never care to look at a picture again, if it be ill composed; and if well composed I can hardly leave off looking at it.

“Well composed.” Does that mean according to rule?

No. Precisely the contrary. Composed as only the man who did it could have done it; composed as no other picture is, or was, or ever can be again. Every great work stands alone.

§ 3. Yet there are certain elementary laws of arrangement traceable a little way; a few of these only I shall note, not caring to pursue the subject far in this work, so intricate it becomes even in its first elements: nor could it be treated with any approach to completeness, unless I were to give many and elaborate outlines of large pictures. I have a vague hope of entering on such a task, some future day. Meantime I shall only indicate the place which technical composition should hold in our scheme.

And, first, let us understand what composition is, and how far it is required.

§ 4. Composition may be best defined as the help of everything in the picture by everything else.

I wish the reader to dwell a little on this word “Help.” It is a grave one.

In substance which we call “inanimate,” as of clouds, or stones, their atoms may cohere to each other, or consist with each other, but they do not help each other. The removal of one part does not injure the rest.

But in a plant, the taking away of any one part does injure the rest. Hurt or remove any portion of the sap, bark, or pith, the rest in injured. If any part enters into a state in which it no more assists the rest, and has thus become “helpless,” we call it also “dead.”

The power which causes the several portions of the plant to help each other, we call life. Much more is this so in an animal. We may take away the branch of a tree without much harm to it; but not the animal’s limb. Thus, intensity of life is also intensity of helpfulness—completeness of depending of each part on all the rest. The ceasing of this help is what we call corruption; and in proportion to the perfectness of the help, is the dreadfulness of the loss. The more intense the life has been, the more terrible is its corruption.

The decomposition of a crystal is not necessarily impure at all. The fermentation of a wholesome liquid begins to admit the idea slightly; the decay of leaves yet more; of flowers, more; of animals, with greater painfulness and terribleness in exact proportion to their original vitality; and the foulest of all corruption is that of the body of man; and, in his body, that which is occasioned by disease, more than that of natural death.

§ 5. I said just now, that though atoms of inanimate substance could not help each other, they could “consist” with each other. “Consistence” is their virtue. Thus the parts of a crystal are consistent, but of dust, inconsistent. Orderly adherence, the best help its atoms can give, constitutes the nobleness of such substance.

When matter is either consistent, or living, we call it pure, or clean; when inconsistent or corrupting (unhelpful), we call it impure, or unclean. The greatest uncleanliness being that which is essentially most opposite to life.

Life and consistency, then, both expressing one character (namely, helpfulness of a higher or lower order), the Maker of all creatures and things, “by whom all creatures live, and all things consist,” is essentially and for ever the Helpful One, or in softer Saxon, the “Holy” One.

The word has no other ultimate meaning: Helpful, harmless, undefiled: “living” or “Lord of life.”

The idea is clear and mighty in the cherubim’s cry: “Helpful, helpful, helpful, Lord God of Hosts”; i.e. of all the hosts, armies, and creatures of the earth.

§ 6. A pure or holy state of anything, therefore, is that in which all its parts are helpful or consistent. They may or may not be homogeneous. The highest or organic purities are composed of many elements in an entirely helpful state. The highest and first law of the universe – and the other name of life is, therefore, “help.” The other name of death is “separation.” Government and co-operation are in all things and eternally the laws of life. Anarchy and competition, eternally, and in all things, the laws of death.

§ 7. Perhaps the best, though the most familiar example we could take of the nature and power of consistence, will be that of the possible changes in the dust we tread on.

Exclusive of animal decay, we can hardly arrive at a more absolute type of impurity than the mud or slime of a damp, over-trodden path, in the outskirts of a manufacturing town. I do not say mud of the road, because that is mixed with animal refuse; but take merely an ounce or two of the blackest slime of a beaten footpath on a rainy day, near a large manufacturing town.

§ 8. That slime we shall find in most cases composed of clay (or brickdust, which is burnt clay) mixed with soot, a little sand, and water. All these elements are at helpless war with each other, and destroy reciprocally each other’s nature and power, competing and fighting for place at every tread of your foot;– sand squeezing out clay, and clay squeezing out water, and soot meddling everywhere and defiling the whole. Let us suppose that this ounce of mud is left in perfect rest, and that its elements gather together, like to like, so that their atoms may get into the closest relations possible.

§ 9. Let the clay begin. Ridding itself of all foreign substance, it gradually becomes a white earth, already very beautiful; and fit, with help of congealing fire, to be made into finest porcelain, and painted on, and be kept in kings’ palaces. But such artificial consistence is not its best. Leave it still quiet to follow its own instinct of unity, and it becomes not only white, but clear; not only clear, but hard; nor only clear and hard, but so set that it can deal with light in a wonderful way, and gather out of it the loveliest blue rays only, refusing the rest. We call it then a sapphire.

Such being the consummation of the clay, we give similar permission of quiet to the sand. It also becomes, first, a white earth, then proceeds to grow clear and hard, and at last arranges itself in mysterious, infinitely fine, parallel lines, which have the power of reflecting not merely the blue rays, but the blue, green, purple, and red rays in the greatest beauty in which they can be seen through any hard material whatsoever. We call it then an opal.

In next order the soot sets to work; it cannot make itself white at first, but instead of being discouraged, tries harder and harder, and comes out clear at last, and the hardest thing in the world; and for the blackness that it had, obtains in exchange the power of reflecting all the rays of the sun at once in the vividest blaze that any solid thing can shoot. We call it then a diamond.

Last of all the water purifies or unites itself, contented enough if it only reach the form of a dew-drop; but if we insist on its proceeding to a more perfect consistence, it crystallizes into the shape of a star.

And for the ounce of slime which we had by political economy of competition, we have by political economy of co-operation, a sapphire, an opal, and a diamond, set in the midst of a star of snow.

§ 10. Now invention in art signifies an arrangement, in which everything in the work

is thus consistent with all things else, and helpful to all else.

It is the greatest and rarest of all the qualities of art. The power by which it is effected is absolutely inexplicable and incommunicable; but exercised with entire facility by those who possess it, in many cases even unconsciously.

In work which is not composed, there may be many beautiful things, but they do not help each other. They at the best only stand beside, and more usually compete with and destroy, each other. They may be connected artificially in many ways, but the test of there being no invention is, that if one of them be taken away, the others are no worse than before. But in true composition, if one be taken away, all the rest are helpless and valueless. Generally, in falsely composed work, if anything be taken away, the rest will look better; because the attention is less distracted. Hence the pleasure of inferior artists in sketching, and their inability to finish: all that they add destroys.

§ 11. Also in true composition, everything not only helps everything else a little, but helps with its utmost power. Every atom is in full energy; and all that energy is kind. Not a line, nor spark of colour, but is doing its very best, and that best is aid. The extent to which this law is carried in truly right and noble work is wholly inconceivable to the ordinary observer, and no true account of it would be believed.

§ 12. True composition being entirely easy to the man who can compose, he is seldom proud of it, though he clearly recognizes it. Also, true composition is inexplicable. No one can explain how the notes of a Mozart melody, of the folds of a piece of Titian’s drapery, produce their essential effects on each other. If you do not feel it, no one can by reasoning make you feel it. And the highest composition is so subtle, that it is apt to become unpopular, and sometimes seem insipid.