

Ruskinian Prose Style: Its Birth, Prime and Ruin*

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Summary

John Ruskin (1819-1900), one of the standard-bearers in the English literary world during the prime period of Pax Britannia, consummated his life almost exactly with Queen Victoria (1819-1901). Ruskin's contribution in enriching the English vocabulary is unfathomable. His prose style based upon his free use of abundant vocabulary is called 'Ruskinian', with its ornate and opulent diction, prophetic rhythm, and extraordinary emotional range. Ruskinian prose style was in full efflorescence between his twenties and forties. It followed the path of birth to maturity, apex, decrepitude and decline. This essay relates the quarry of the characteristics of Ruskinian prose style with his tragic incidents in chronological order. It concludes with several remarks on Ruskin's eye of child, nostalgia, art for art's sake, aristocracy, imperialism, &c.

§ I. Introduction

One lazy winter afternoon, when riffling leisurely through that Frank Harris's notorious autobiography, *My Life and Loves*,¹ I came across the following passage: "It is only the strange or the ineffable that really appeals to me. The Inland Lakes in Japan I

could talk about for hours.....What is the good of word-pictures of places? I have always the feeling it is impossible to give scenery by words.....Japan is the only land in all the East that touched my heart, and its beauties, as I said, are always connected with the charming people. But all that is probably my limitation. I am sure that if Ruskin had seen one tenth part of what I have seen, he would have given wonderful pictures in words....."²

The name of John Ruskin has sprung to me almost thirty years' absence! His *The Political Economy of Art* had been translated and appeared in paperback, which appealed little to a student of orthodox economics. Years later, however, I happened to know that it was Ruskin who bequeathed a rich repository of technical terminology to economists in the following generations, which surely must have been elicited from his scrupulous observation of nature. To name a few: concavity and convexity (in the Theory of Games and Linear Economics), malleability (in the Theory of Capital Measurement), higgledy-piggledy (in the Theory of Profits and Growth of Firms), leverage (in Accounting), liquidity (in Monetary Theory), turnpike (in the Theory of Optimal Economic Growth), &c.

In connection with Ruskin's wide vocabulary, Harris gives an interesting episode.³ During his stay in Athens he chanced to be in the meeting discussing merits and demerits of various European languages. Some of the general conclusions to its entire satisfaction (except Harris) were: German the best instrument for abstract thought, French the best language for diplomacy

because of precision and simplicity, Italian the most musical language. But English was put aside due to its being almost without grammatical construction or any rules of pronunciation. Acknowledging the paucity of verbs in English compared to other European languages, Harris gave a passage of Ruskin's in which he praises Venetian painters:

Venice taught these men to love another style of beauty;
broadchested and level-browed like her horizon;
thighed and shouldered like her billows;
footed like her stealing foam;
bathed in clouds of golden hair like her sunset.

Harris asked the attendants to translate it into other languages; each of them admitted that he could not. Harris summed up as follows: "English had more names of things, was richer in substantives than any other language, the observant habit of the people, the sense of the facts of life being very strong in Englishmen.....English has shed almost all grammatical forms, it seems to me, in the struggle for existence. It is more simple, more logical than any other modern language..... The worst weakness of English in structure was, strange to say, in a people so given to action, its paucity of verbs. But here the poets have come to rescue and have turned the present as participles into verbs, as in the passage I quoted from Ruskin."

Ruskin's contribution in enriching the English vocabulary is unfathomable. His prose style based upon his free use of abundant vocabulary is called 'Ruskinian', with its 'ornate and

opulent diction, prophetic rhythm, and extraordinary emotional range." Furthermore, he was very precocious. "Ruskin's command of words, sense of rhythm, and powers of observation and analysis were, indeed, developed at early age."⁵ Ruskin was "the most extraordinary master of poetic English prose" and "he enriched English literature with passages of magnificent prose and perhaps the finest descriptions of natural beauty in the language."⁶ Ruskinian prose style is a paradigm of the English language. Harris says: "I am not likely to underrate the magic of words, and English writers are apt to be more articulate than Americans of the same mental caliber....I believe the reason is that all English writers love poetry more than Americans do and start their literary career by trying to write verse. This practice soon gives a large vocabulary and a keen sense of the value of the painting epithet and of rhythm."⁷ Ruskin well-mellowed the language which English poet writers had brewed for many years.

§ II. Ruskinian Prose Style⁸

In his late teens, Ruskin had already perfected his own literary style. Impressed by the picture of Turner, "*Mercury and Argus*", he wrote the following at his age of eighteen:⁹

Many-coloured mists are floating above the distant city, but such mists as you might imagine to be aetherial spirits, souls of the mighty dead breathed out of the tombs of Italy into the blue of her bright heaven, and wandering in vague and infinite glory around the earth that they have loved. Instinct with the beauty of uncertain light, they move and mingle among the pale stars, and rise up into the

brightness of the illimitable heaven, whose soft, sad blue eye gazes down into the deep waters of the sea for ever, — that sea whose motionless and silent transparency is beaming with phosphor light, that emanates out of its sapphire serenity like bright dreams breathed into the spirit of a deep sleep. And the spires of the glorious city rise indistinctly bright into those living mists, like pyramids of pale fire from some vast altar; and amidst the glory of the dream, there is as it were the voice of a multitude entering by the eye, — arising from the stillness of the city like the summer wind passing over the leaves of the forest, when a murmur is heard amidst their multitude.

“Was ever painter’s dream translated more truly into poet’s language?”¹⁰ When I *saw* for the first time the phrases like ‘souls of the mighty dead breathed out of the tombs of Italy into the blue of her bright heaven’ and ‘a murmur is heard amidst their multitude’, I had an illusion as if I were reading *The Historic Romance of the Taira Clan* and I imagined that Ruskin had read it before his age of eighteen! This passage was considered to be the first chapter of *Modern Painters*, a long project of writing, which took Ruskin seventeen years to complete.

Another example of Ruskinian prose style is from the second volume of *Modern Painters*. This was inspired by one of the works of Tintoret.¹¹

Bat like, out of the holes and caverns and shadows of the earth, the bones gather, and the clay heaps heave, rattling and adhering into half kneaded anatomies, that crawl, and startle, and struggle up among the putrid weeds, with the clay clinging to their clotted hair,

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and their heavy eyes sealed by the earth darkness yet, like his of old who went his way unseeing to the Siloam Pool; shaking of one by one the dreams of the prison-house, hardly hearing the clangour of the trumpets of the armies of God, blinded yet more, as they awake, by the white light of the new Heaven, until the great vortex of the four winds bears up their bodies to the judgment seat; the Firmament is all full of them, a very dust of human souls, that drifts, and floats, and falls in the interminable, inevitable light, the bright clouds are darkened with them as with thick snow, currents of atom life in the arteries of heaven, now soaring up slowly, farther, and higher and higher still, till the eye and the thought can follow no farther, borne up, wingless, by their inward faith and by the angel powers invisible, now hurled in countless drifts of horror before the breath of their condemnation.

In the last volume of *Modern Painters*, the Venice of five hundred years ago is presented to us like this:

Born half-way between the mountains and the sea – that young George of Castelfranco – of the Brave Castle: – Stout George they called him, George of Georges, so goodly a boy he was – Giorgione.

Have you ever thought what a world his eyes opened on – fair, searching eyes of youth? What a world of mighty life, from those mountain roots to the shore; – of loveliest life, when he went down, yet so young, to the marble city – and became himself as a fiery heart to it?

A city of marble, did I say? nay, rather a golden city, paved with emerald. For truly, every pinnacle and turret glanced or glowed,

overlaid with gold, or bossed with jasper. Beneath, the unsullied sea drew in deep breathing, to and fro, its eddies of green wave. Deep-hearted, majestic, terrible as the sea,—the men of Venice moved in sway of power and war; pure as her pillars of alabaster, stood her mothers and maidens; from foot to brow, all noble, walked her knights; the low bronzed gleaming of sea-rusted armour shot angrily under their blood-red mantle-folds. Fearless, faithful, patient, impenetrable, implacable,—every word a fate—sate her senate. In hope and honour, lulled by flowing of wave around their isles of sacred sand, each with his name written and the cross graved at his side, lay her dead. A wonderful piece of world. Rather, itself a world. It lay along the face of the waters, no larger, as its captains saw it from their masts at evening, than a bar of sunset that could not pass away; but for its power, it must have seemed to this a great planet, whose orient edge widened through ether. A world from which all ignoble care and petty thoughts were banished, with all the common and poor elements of life. No foulness, nor tumult, in those tremulous streets, that filled, or fell, beneath the moon; but rippled music of majestic change, or thrilling silence. No weak walls could rise above them; no low-roofed cottage, nor straw-built shed. Only the strength as of rock, and the finished setting of stones most precious. And around them, far as the eye could reach, still the soft moving of stainless waters, proudly pure; as not the flower, so neither the thorn nor the thistle, could grow in the glancing fields. Ethereal strength of Alps, dream-like, vanishing in high procession beyond the Torcellan shore; blue islands of Paduan hills, poised in the golden west. Above, free winds and fiery

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clouds ranging at their will;—brightness out of the north, and balm from the south, and the stars of the evening and morning clear in the limitless light of arched heaven and circling sea.

Such was Giorgione's school—such Titian's home.

Ruskin depicted two-dimensional paintings by words as above.

The Stones of Venice is a treasure house of Ruskinian prose style, which is more architectural, solid and three-dimensional. Any passage could be excerpted randomly:¹²

Seven miles to the north of Venice, the banks of sand, which near the city rise little above low-water mark, attain by degrees a higher level, and knit themselves at last into fields of salt morass, raised here and there into shapeless mounds, and intercepted by narrow creeks of sea. One of the feeblest of these inlets, after winding for some time among buried fragments of masonry, and knots of sunburnt weeds whitened with webs of fucus, stays itself in an utterly stagnant pool beside plot of greener grass covered with ground ivy and violets. On this mound is built a rude brick campanile, of the commonest Lombardic type, which if we ascend towards evening (and there are none to hinder us, the door of its ruinous staircase swinging idly on its hinges), we may command from it one of the most notable scenes in this wide world of ours. Far as the eye can reach, a waste of wild sea moor, of a lurid ashen grey; not like our northern moors with their jet-black pools and purple heath, but lifeless, the colour of sack-cloth, with the corrupted sea-water soaking through the roots of its acrid weeds, and gleaming hither and thither through its snaky channels. No gathering of fantastic mists, nor coursing of clouds across it;

but melancholy clearness of space in the warm sunset, oppressive, reaching to the horizon of its level gloom. To the very horizon, on the north-east; but to the north and west, there is blue line of higher land along the border of it, and above this, but farther back, a misty band of mountains, touched with snow. To the east, the paleness and roar of the Adriatic, louder at momentary intervals as the surf breaks on the bars of sand; to the south, the widening branches of the calm lagoon, alternately purple and pale green, as they reflect the evening clouds or twilight sky; and almost beneath our feet, on the same field which sustains the tower we gaze from, a group of four buildings, two of them little larger than cottages (though built of stone, and one adorned by a quaint belfry), the third an octagonal chapel, of which we can see but little more than the flat red roof with its rayed tiling, the fourth, a considerable church with nave and aisles, but of which, in like manner, we can see little but the long central ridge and lateral slopes of roof, which the sunlight separates in one glowing mass from the green field beneath and grey moor beyond. There are no living creatures near the buildings, nor any vestige of village or city round about them. They lie like a little company of ships becalmed on a far-away sea.

Then look farther to the south. Beyond the widening branches of the lagoon, and rising out of the bright lake into which they gather, there are a multitude of towers, dark, and scattered among square-set shapes of clustered palaces, a long and irregular line fretting the southern sky.

Mother and daughter, you behold them both in their widowhood,—

TORCELLO, AND VENICE.

Thirteen hundred years ago, the grey moorland looked as it does this day, and the purple mountains stood as radiantly in the deep distances of evening; but on the line of the horizon, there were strange fires mixed with the fretting of the waves on their ridges sand. The flames rose from the ruins of Altinum; the lament from the multitude of its people, seeking, like Israel of old, a refuge from the sword in the paths of the sea.

So much for the quotation.

How could we seek for the quarry of such an opulent and ornate style of Ruskin, with fragrance, aroma, splendor and magnificence? It might be found in his Scripture reading during his boyhood, starting at his age of five, under his mother's exclusive guidance, ranging from Genesis to the New Testament. It was well intermingled with his ability of a born connoisseur of words. In fact, looking back upon those days, Ruskin recalled: "I had always an instinct of possessing considerable word-power."¹³ When we hear him say that ".....as it was, though I shall always think those early years might have been better spent, they had their reward. As soon as I had anything really to say, I was able sufficiently to say it",¹⁴ there is not in the least any exaggeration. Ruskin proved it in his writing until at least his early fifties, which is evinced to a full extent in the above-quoted examples.

Ruskinian prose style is most conspicuously revealed in his works between his ages of eighteen and forty-one. His first work, *The Poetry of Architecture*, with author's name of Kata Phusin,

nom de plume of John Ruskin, was written in 1838 when he was an Oxford student. The last volume of *Modern Painters* was finished in 1860. The watershed book of a collection of a series of essays, *Unto this Last*, appeared in 1862. Ruskin himself said in Preface to this book that "not a whit the less, I believe them to be the best, that is to say, the truest, rightest-worded, and most serviceable things I have ever written." During and after this, Ruskin ceased from being a poetic prose writer, and his main concern shifted to social and economic issues. In 1872, he was attacked by a spell of madness which confounded him, intermittently and then incessantly, to the day of his demise, January 20, 1900. One of the standard-bearers in the English literary world during the prime period of Pax Britannia consummated his life almost exactly with Queen Victoria (1819-1901).

§ III. Four Major Incidents

Ruskin had established a cellar of the English language, where innumerable numbers of bottles of the highest quality, distilled for about twenty years, are stored. Just as the wine of the best class tastes better and better as years pass by, Ruskinian prose style nourished in his winery of imagination and inspiration becomes more and more tastable.

Apparently, his poetic prose was in full efflorescence between his twenties and forties; more specifically, culminated in the Volumes I, II and III of *The Stones of Venice* and Volumes III, IV and V of *Modern Painters*. Some drastic change and experiences

must have affected his mental calibre, though they were solely individual and personal; no social matter at all. In spite of his own praises, the failure of his books on a nature of wealth and labour (*Unto this Last, The Political Economy of Art, &c.*¹⁵), most of which came out after *The Stones of Venice* and *Modern Painters*, is explicable to an extent by his lack of involvement in social issues.

A few chronological, quite personal and tragic incidents, at least four, would help understand how Ruskinian prose style has followed the path from birth to maturity, apex, decrepitude and decline.

Ruskin's work of *Modern Painters* originated in indignation at the shallow and false criticism of the periodicals on the works of the great living artist, i.e., Turner.¹⁶ To Ruskin, "his (Turner's) imagination is Shakespearian in its insigtness."¹⁷ Nevertheless, "it naturally happens, that people most admire what they least understand. In the case of this artist (Turner) the rule is reversed; he is admired, because understood, only by a few."¹⁸ His first creative power was evoked by juvenile indignation.

Now let me overview the major tragic incidents of Ruskin.

1. Before undertaking *Modern Painters*, Ruskin's family started a series of tours through Europe in 1835. Young John Ruskin met Adele Domecq in Paris. She was the daughter of his father's Spanish partner, and was then before fifteen. In 1838 John fell in love with Adele. During this period, Ruskin wrote up *The Poetry of Architecture*. But she did not take him seriously. Moreover,

Ruskin's mother would never consent to his love of Adele, for she was a Roman Catholic. Ruskin's family was managed by his mother, four years older than her husband, and John had been an Oedipus complexed boy to a degree, since her imposing Scripture reading on him from childhood. Later, when John was a student of Oxford, she moved to a house near the university and he used to spend weekends with her. (It reminds me of Baudelaire who sent letter after letter to his mother before and after her remarriage, which erroneously led Sartre to write a book on Baudelaire, concluding that Baudelaire was quite a dependent child). Adele Domecq married in 1840. More than five years' love was futile, which affected Ruskin's health seriously, and he was 'delicate' for some years. In 1842 he graduated from Oxford and began the work on *Modern Painters*. The first volume came out in 1843.

2. Ruskin married Euphemia (Effie Chalmers Gray) in 1848. This time his mother wanted the marriage. He began to write *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Unfortunately it soon proved that they were an unhappy couple. Ruskin confessed that he had never loved her. Her revenge upon him was commitment of adultery. In 1853 in Scotland, the couple spent a few weeks with Millais (Sir John Everett Millais), the painter. He was to complete an effigy of Ruskin. One day Ruskin found that Millais and Effie were in each other's arms on the sofa in Millais's studio. In 1854, the marriage was annulled and the next year Effie married Millais. During these years *The Stones of Venice* were worked out

and the third and fourth volumes of *Modern Painters* published.

3. Ruskin spent all through the year of 1857 and half through 58 in cataloging and arranging the drawings that Turner bequeathed to the National Gallery. Then came one of the worst blows of his whole life. Ruskin came across a portfolio filled with painting after painting of Turner's of the most shameful sort — the pudenda of women—utterly inexcusable and to him inexplicable. Turner was God and Hero to Ruskin from his early teens, just like Poe and Wagner were Gods to Baudelaire. Ruskin found out that Turner used to leave his house in Chelsea and go down to Wapping on every Friday afternoon and live there until Monday morning with the sailors' women, painting them in every position of abandonment. Ruskin burnt all of them. This was told by him to Frank Harris. And Harris thought it "the most extraordinary confession I had ever heard."¹⁹ Ruskin saw too dirty things against his childish eye. He worked on the last volume of *Modern Painters*.

4. The embryo of the final tragedy attacked Ruskin when he was over forty. He met Rose La Touche in 1858, when she was ten. In Ireland he fell in love with Rose, only the child of twelve, and he was forty-two. Rose was a young and mentally unstable Anglo-Irish girl. At her seventeen, Ruskin told her that he loved her. The great change of his style and interest in 1860, his demarcation year, is to be explained by the relation with Rose. She was religious and very eager and earnest in relieving this world, the purgatory. Ruskin mentioned 'the snowy dome of Our Lady

of Salvation' elsewhere.²⁰ He might expect Rose to be an incarnation of that lady. Having in mind to teach her, Ruskin started to write a series of essays on the nature of wealth and labor. In 1865 *Sesame and Lilies* appeared, which was written solely for Rose. But when she was twenty, she passed him by, without saying any word, without speaking to him, 'as Beatrice once passed Dante.' The incident of Adele occurred again. The true story was this. Rose met Mrs. Millais (Effie) in London, and the latter told the former of Ruskin's abstinence based upon his peculiar aestheticism. In fact in 1854 Effie successfully petitioned to have the marriage annulled, citing Ruskin's impotence. Rose's father did not want to sanction their marriage. In 1872 the spell of madness assaulted him following Rose's refusal of his offer to marry her. In her last illness Ruskin was allowed to go to her and one whole night he held his love in his arms before she died. In 1899, he was caught by his sixth attacks of madness, and was unable to finish his autobiography, *Praeterita*.

Frank Harris met Ruskin for the first time in 1886 when he was writing *Praeterita*. Harris penned down their meeting as follows: "I never met anyone in my life whose personal appearance disappointed me more than Ruskin's. Until I saw him, I had always believed that a man of great ability showed his genius in some feature or other, but I could find nothing in Ruskin's face or figure that suggested abnormal talent....He looked like some old, unhappy bird, nothing in the face or figure impressive or arresting....I was disappointed to his ability. But as soon as he got

excited in speaking his voice carried me away, a thin, high tenor, irresistibly pathetic; it often wailed and sometimes cursed but was always intense; the soul of the man in that singular, musical voice with its noble rhetoric and impassioned moral appeal."²¹ Ruskin dragged the shadow of Rose more than twenty years.

§ IV. The Aesthetics of Ruin and Decay

Ruskin loved, had serious compassion on, and was fascinated by 'ruin', which is the central element of the picturesque and architectural aesthetic. All through the first page of *The Stones of Venice* and the last of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin has been seized and attracted by ruin.

Since first the dominion of men was asserted over the ocean, three thrones, of mark beyond all others, have been set upon its sands: the thrones of Tyre, Venice, and England. Of the First of these great powers only the memory remains; of the Second, the ruin; the Third, which inherits their greatness, if it forget their example, may be led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction.

The exaltation, the sin, and the punishment of Tyre have been recorded for us, in perhaps the most touching words ever uttered by the Prophets of Israel against the cities of the stranger. But we read them as a lovely song; and close our ears to the sternness of their warning: for the very depth the Fall of Tyre has blinded us to its reality, and we forget, as we watch the bleaching of the rocks between the sunshine and the sea, that they were once "as in Eden, the garden of God."

Her successor, like her in perfection of beauty, though less in endurance of dominion, is still left for our beholding in the final period of her decline: a ghost upon the sands of the sea, so weak—so quiet, — so bereft of all but her faint reflection in the mirage of the lagoon, which was the City, and which the Shadow.

I would endeavour to trace the lines of this image before it be forever lost, and to record, as far as I may, the warning which seems to me to be uttered by every one of the fast-gaining waves, that beat, like passing bells, against the STONES OF VENICE.²²

In the last of *Modern Painters*:

....Meantime, I want you to note only the result upon his (Turner's) work;—how, through all the remainder of his life, wherever he looked, he saw ruin.

Ruin, and twilight. What was the distinctive effect of light which he introduced, such as no man had painted before? Brightness, indeed, he gave, as we have seen, because it was true and right; but in this he only perfected what others had attempted. His own favourite light is not Aegle, but Hesperid Aegle. Fading of the last rays of sunset. Faint breathing of the sorrow of night. And fading of sunset, note also, on ruin.....²³

Ruskin's born love of ruin and decay, enhanced by his tours through Europe in his teens, was oriented towards first the memory (of Tyre), probably induced by his Scripture reading, then towards the ruin and decline of Venice. His touch of description of Venice over fifteen hundred years reminds me of that of vicissitudes of the Taira clan. As an example, compare it with the

pathetic fate and the miserable last days of the Empress Dowager of Kenrei depicted in *The Historic Romance of the Taira Clan*:²⁴

To begin with, the captured alive of the Taira were forced to be taken around the main streets, were cut their heads off, or were exiled to the distant places from their wives and children. Except the Duke of Ike, nobody were alive or stayed in the capital city. Nevertheless, more than forty wives were given no special charges, and they followed their relatives and friends. No quiet, windless houses with bamboo screens were available for the upper class, and no miserable dwellings with dusting brushwood doors were available for the lower class. Their husbands with whom they shared the pillows were gone to Heaven. Parents and children who fostered and were fostered knew nothing of where they had gone. Recollections were limitless, but they spent days only with grief.

Of England during her zenith and pinnacle enjoying the Victorian prosperity, Ruskin warned: "if it forget their example, may be led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction". This conception might lead him to write on the books of social issues.

Did Ruskin see 'ethical' ruin in Turner in his later years after the former found the erotic paintings of the latter? Did it accelerate his love of ruin?

§ V. *Praeterita* and *A la recherche du temps perdu*

The influence of Ruskin on Proust is considerable,²⁵ which is comparable with that of Poe on Baudelaire. The years of birth and death of each are as follows:

Edgar A. Poe: 1809-1849,

John Ruskin: 1819-1900,

Charles Baudelaire: 1821-1867, and

Marcel Proust: 1871-1922.

It is well-known that Baudelaire deified Poe and translated all of his prose works.²⁶ Proust did the similar to Ruskin's, though the quantity of translation was much fewer. Both Baudelaire and Proust had been weak in English. Here come their mothers, who excelled far their sons in English. Word-for-word translation of their mothers gave a tremendous impetus to the sons' literary imagination.

As for Proust, he knew nothing about the English language except Ruskin's. But he understood only Ruskin's English precisely and accurately however subtle and delicate its nuance may be. Therefore, the remarkable similitude of the prose style of Proust in his maturity to that of Ruskin is a natural consequence. It was also Proust who pointed out the organic unity latent in Ruskin's composition which appeared to be disordered, confused and chaotic in semblance.

The following is a paragraph from *A la recherche du temps perdu*, an example of Ruskinian prose in Proust:

But, from the old past, after people died, various things decayed and nothing continued to exist, only scent and taste remain more tenaciously, more shapelessly, though dimly, more indelibly and more faithfully, like our soul, for a long time, and sustain the gigantic architecture of reminiscences upon all the other ruins, upon a little drop

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of dews of scent and taste almost unperceived, with recollections, expectations and hopes without any dalliance.²⁷

Praeterita is Ruskin's autobiography. The implication of 'praeterita' is 'things gone by', or simply 'the past'. The title of Proust's voluminous book may have been given a revelation by *Praeterita*.

While Proust's imagination was inspired by scent and taste, Ruskin was motivated by seeing. Balzac once quoted a poet's murmur in *La Grenadiere*: "To see is to possess, isn't it?" One of the tragedies of Ruskin was that he saw what he ought not to see. He saw under his own eyes the scene of adultery of Effie, his wife, and the inexplicably erotic paintings of Turner, his God. Ruskin could not stand to see what ordinary people would not care about seriously. This is a tragedy. Proust described Sodomites and Gomorrhites to a full extent. If Ruskin had eyewitnessed them, what would he say about his disciple?

In his late teens Ruskin had already found out the power of seeing of Turner. "Turner thinks and feels in colour; he cannot help doing so. Nature has given him a peculiar eye, and a wildly beautiful imagination, and he must obey its dictates...."²⁸ Much later he wrote: "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion all in one."²⁹

Proust and Ruskin were impressionists (and symbolists).

However, there is a difference in their feelings towards the things. Proust is a man of sensing, while Ruskin is a man of seeing; more specifically, Proust is a man of the nostril whereas Ruskin is a man of the optic. How sensitive Proust was to scent and taste is clear in the above-cited paragraph and elsewhere in *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

One of their similarities is their admiration of painters. It is needless to say how Ruskin adored Turner. In the book of Proust, a painter appeared and attracted the narrator for a good while. It is also interesting that Baudelaire saw the incarnation of artist in Delacroix.

Another essay or even book could be written on the relevance of Ruskin to Proust, especially *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

Let me here to mention Poe, who was God to Baudelaire together with Wagner. Poe's power of prose and attractiveness are different of Ruskin's. They are grammatical, highly analytical, accurate, dynamic and sometimes mathematical. How effectively Poe described the scenery as a background of the plot of his story is found anywhere in his works:³⁰

During the whole of dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the

feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the

ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

The desolate, dreary, gloomy scenery and a psychological analysis of its effect upon the narrator depicted at the very outset of the story, one of the best examples showing how articulate, deliberate and calculated Poe was as prose writer, forebodes that Usher and his house must obey the most wretched, miserable destiny.

"Poe wrote in so much an exalted, esoteric, recondite and abstruse style that he was least understood and paid less in America where there are no *noblesses*."³¹ This was indeed a tragedy to Poe. However, this is not a place to discuss Poe.

§ VI. Ruskin's Attitude towards Women

The tragedy of Ruskin was, as mentioned above, due to that which he saw what he ought not to see, e.g., Effie's adultery and Turner's paintings, both of which were in the nature of 'carnal'. Rose once poured out to Ruskin: 'I understand that there are people to whom the body is everything and the soul nothing. Don't talk of it, please; I never want to think of it again!' This sad, poignant cry must have been exactly Ruskin's.

His love of Adele and Rose was not consummated at all. Though Ruskin's abstinence is a chicken-or-egg question, it reminds me of an episode told by Harris of Carlyle. Ruskin was a fervent admirer of Carlyle. According to the physician of Mrs. Carlyle, she was a *virgo intacta* (an untouched virgin) in twenty five years of marriage. On the marriage night, Carlyle was silent

and "the man lay there jiggling, jiggling.....he never came back to my bed."³²

I wonder whether Ruskin behaved like a man of subterfuge towards women ever since his adolescence. Ruskin himself portrayed Adele as follows: "But though extremely lovely at fifteen, Adele was not prettier than French girls in general at eighteen..... My love was much too high and fantastic to be diminished by her loss of beauty; but I perfectly well saw and admitted it, having never at any time been in the slightest degree blinded by love, as I perceive other men are, out of my critic nature."³³ Another example was right after the end of the incident of Adele in 1839. His parents managed him to meet Miss Wardell, an extremely accomplished, intelligent, and faultless maid of seventeen; fragile and delicate to a degree enhancing her beauty. Ruskin very heartily and reverently admired the pretty creature. But "though I extremely admired Miss Wardell, she was not my sort of beauty."³⁴ Soon she fell into nervous fever and faded away. In these cases, Ruskin appears to prepare an evasive answer to himself. Effie could not put up with it, could she? He was a born connoisseur of words, which would make him more difficult to express his genuine feelings. Stendhal said: "The words have been given to man to conceal his thought."

Ruskin did not mention Effie in *Praeterita*. In this sense it is incomplete and fragmentary as an autobiography. He touched upon the romance and tragedy in the last chapter but one of *Praeterita*, i.e., that of Rose La Touche. Ruskin first saw Rose, then a girl of

ten, in 1858. In Rose he began to see in imagination the perfect flower of womanly culture. When Rosie was thirteen, he sent her little rhymes:—

Rosie, Rosie—Rosie rare,
Rocks and woods and clouds and air
Are all the colour of my pet,
And yet, and yet, and yet, and yet
She is not here, but where?

From Reuss, Lucerne to Rosie in Liffey:—

Rosie, pet, and Rosie, puss,

.....

.....

.....

'Good night, Liffey; bad night, Reuss—

Good night, Rosie, Posie, Puss.'

To Ruskin, Rose was a pet at first. Then *Sesame and Lilies* was written, he said, for one girl; it was she from whom in real life he drew his ideal. In 1866 he told his love, and acquainted her parents with his hope to make her his wife. He was to wait three years. Rosie's uncertain health and mental development tended, however, to interpose fresh difficulties. Miss Rose La Touche died in 1875. A letter from Rose to him, which he specially valued, he used to carry in his breast-pocket between plates of fine gold. After her death, he kept all the love-letters—his to her and hers to him in a rosewood box. But Ruskin's literary executors felt that these letters, though perhaps the most beautiful things that he ever wrote, were too sacred for publicity. They gave these

letters to the flames. "A wind was blowing, and one letter fluttered away from the pyre. It was written from Brantwood, when Ruskin was first settling in his new home, and in it he wonders whether Rosie will ever give him the happiness of welcoming her there. But she never came to Brantwood."³⁵

Were Adele, Effie and Rose the very type of the independent English women? In a work of Jane Austen, a pre-Victorian authoress, the heroine said to her adorer: "Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart."³⁶ It had been written well before Ruskin was born. Adele and Rose were not *echt* English. They might be independent all the more. Why did Ruskin keep distance from them? I try to give some tentative and indecisive clues in the next section.

§ VII. Some Concluding Remarks

Several remarks relevant to Ruskin's prose style, aestheticism, abstinence, &c. are given here.

1. The Eye of Child

Ruskin remained all through his life just as if he were a child. He always looked back to the days of childhood as of greatest happiness. It is a fountain of greatest wonder, greatest simplicity, and most vigorous imagination. He defined a man of genius as the one 'remaining in great part a child, seeing with the large eyes of children, in perpetual wonder, not conscious of much knowledge, — conscious, rather, of infinite ignorance, and yet

infinite power; a fountain of eternal admiration, delight, and creative force within him, meeting the ocean of visible and governable things around him.' Even at the age of sixty seven, Ruskin declared: ".....looking back from 1886 to that brook shore of 1837, whence I could see the whole of my youth, I find myself in nothing whatsoever changed. Some of me is dead, more of me stronger. I learned a few things, forgotten many; in the total of me, I am but the same youth, disappointed and rheumatic".³⁷

His upset before the dirty paintings of Turner was abnormal from the standpoint of adult people. To immaculate John it was the justifiable and right thing to burn them all. As a pure child he could not admit any small blemish in women however attractive and beautiful they may be. At the outset of acquaintanceship, he prepared evasive excuses. This is abstinence in the broad sense.

2. Nostalgia and Art-for-Art's Sake

For instance, I cannot find words to express the intense pleasure I have always in first finding myself, after some prolonged stay in England, at the foot of the old tower of Calais church.....

I cannot tell the half of the strange pleasures and thoughts that come about me at the sight of that old tower; for, in some sort, it is the epitome of all that makes the Continent of Europe interesting, as opposed to new countries; and, above all, it completely expresses that agedness in the midst of active life which binds the old and the new into harmony. We, in England, have our new street, our new inn, our green shaven lawn, and our piece of ruin emergent from it,—a mere

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specimen of the middle ages put on a bit of velvet carpet to be shown, which, but for its size, might as well be on the museum shelf at once, under cover. But, on the Continent, the links are unbroken between the past and present, and in such use as they can serve for, the grey-headed wrecks are suffered to stay with men; while, in unbroken line, the generations of spared buildings are seen succeeding each in its place. And thus in its largeness, in its permitted evidence of slow decline, in its poverty, in its absence of all pretense, of all show and care for outside aspect, that Calais tower has an infinite of symbolism in it, all the more striking because usually seen in contrast with English scenes expressive of feelings the exact reverse of these".³⁸

Ruskin was disappointed with England enjoying her prosperity after Industrial Revolution. He sought his relief in mind for the Continent of Europe. There he found the large neglect, the noble unsightliness, the stern wasteness and gloom, &c. to a full extent; yet there in the Continent was a harmony between the old and the new. It enhanced his nostalgia for the past and ruin. Ruskin was an escapist. He was not a Marx in the least who could contemplate the miserable situation of then English laborers. He was not an Alfred Marshall at all who would ask the Cantabrigians to go to the slum quarters of London and to study Economics with 'warm heart and cool head'.

Ruskin was a Don Quixote in a sense. One of the best-known words of Ruskin is: "Life without Industry is sin, and Industry without Art brutality.....There is no wealth but life—Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country

is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy beings."³⁹ He intended to pit his pen against a windmill. That windmill was too real and too gigantic for him to fight with bare hands. Ruskin lived as an idealist believing in art-for-art's sake.

3. Aristocracy and Imperialism

In his late years Ruskin said: "And at this day, though I have kind invitations enough to visit America, I could not, even for a couple of months, live in a country so miserable as to possess no castles."⁴⁰ He was an aristocrat, almost the same as Baudelaire was, who hated and despised America possessing no *noblesses* and unable to duly appreciate and reward the genius of Poe.

Ruskin was a born Tory and his being an aristocrat, imperialist and colonist was typically shown in his inaugurate lecture at Oxford: "There is a destiny now possible to us, the highest ever set before a nation to be accepted or refused. We are still undegenerate in race; a race mingled of the best northern blood.... Will you youths of England make your country again a royal throne of kings; a sceptred isle, for all the world a source of light, a centre of peace; mistress of learning and of Arts, faithful guardian of time-tried principles, under temptation from fond experiments and licentious desires; and amidst the cruel and clamorous jealousies of the nations, worshipped in her valour, of goodwill towards men? This is what England must do, or perish; she must found colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of her most energetic and worthiest men; seizing every piece of

fruitful waste ground she can set her foot on, and there teaching these her colonists that their chief virtue is fidelity to their country, and that their first aim is to advance the power of England by land and sea....You think that an impossible idea. Be it so; refuse to accept it, if you will; but see that you form your own ideal in its stead. All that I ask of you is to have a fixed purpose of some kind for your country and for yourselves, no matter how restricted, so that it be fixed and unselfish."⁴¹ Ruskin's gorgeous rhetoric fascinated the young students tremendously. Among them was Cecil Rhodes. Harris quoted what Cecil Rhodes told of Ruskin: "Ruskin had the most extraordinary influence in the university.....I knew that everyone, even old professors, went to Ruskin's lectures, and knew that all the younger men were profoundly moved by his passionate idealism and patriotic fervor."⁴²

It was Ruskin more than any other man who created the empire builder and gave form and purpose to Rhodes's ambition. He selected Ruskin's words as the most important. Later, Lawrence of Arabia named the title⁴³ of his autobiographical book after Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Ruskin produced many men of idealism, colonialism and imperialism from Oxford.

Ruskin loved Oxford greatly and a 'beau' and a star of Oxonians.

4. Oxonians

In the semi-autobiographical novel of Poe, the hero prescribed Oxford in the early nineteenth century 'the most dissolute university in Europe'.⁴⁴ Anybody will not take it at face value. In fact

there were many men of letters in Oxford when Ruskin was the first Slade Professor of Fine Art.

Matthew Arnold (1822—1888) was a contemporary of Ruskin, who laid the foundation of modern criticism in England and was the first Professor of Criticism at Oxford.

Let me give here some excerpts from him: ".....creative literary genius does not principally show itself in discovering new ideas, that is rather the business of the philosopher. The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them; of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations,—making beautiful works with them, in short."⁴⁵ Ruskin's genius was shown in synthesis and ornate exposition indeed, whereas Poe was a man of analysis and discovery, though the inspiration of both of them was of intellect and spiritual atmosphere.

Matthew Arnold's comparison of Goethe (1749—1832) and Byron (1788—1824) is interesting: ".....life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it; else it must be a comparatively poor, barren, and short-lived affair. This is why Byron's poetry had so little endurance in it, and Goethe's so much; both Byron and Goethe had a great productive power, but Goethe's was nourished by a great critical effort

providing the true materials for it, and Byron's was not; Goethe knew life and the world, the poet's necessary subjects, much more comprehensively and thoroughly than Byron. He knew a great deal more of them, and he knew them much more as they really are."⁴⁶ Goethe was more realistic, more worldly and, most importantly, more critical than Byron was. To which of them is Ruskin akin?

Arnold pointed out the relevance of curiosity in criticism: ".....It is noticeable that the word curiosity, which in other languages is used in a good sense, to mean, as a high and fine quality of man's nature, just this disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake,—it is noticeable, I say, that this word has in our language no sense of the kind, no sense but a rather bad and disparaging one. But criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of this very quality. It obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever."⁴⁷ Is the precept of Lot's wife in Genesis still influential in England? Ruskin was full of curiosity with the eye of child. How critical Ruskin was apparent in his own word of 'critic nature' used in the incident of Adele. His being 'critical' was in such a degree at the most.

Now a century later than Ruskin and Arnold, two Oxonian novelists attract me, i.e., Graham Greene and John Fowles.

Greene explains the reason for his writing the novels like this: "Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation."⁴⁸ This may exactly apply to Ruskin. A therapy and a way of escape from the real world was to write magnificent sentences and he indulged himself in it.

In his autobiographical novel, Greene touches upon the inferiority complex of the hero (Bendrix): "I had no idea whatever of falling in love with her. For one thing, she was beautiful, and beautiful women, especially if they are intelligent also, stir some deep feeling of inferiority in me. I don't know whether psychologists have yet named the Cophetua complex, but I have always found it hard to feel sexual desire without some sense of superiority, mental or physical. All I noticed about her that first time was her beauty and her happiness and her way of touching people with her hands, as though she loved them. I can only recall one thing she said to me, apart from that statement with which she began—'You do seem to dislike a lot of people'.⁴⁹ Another reason for Bendrix's inferiority complex is his hatred and dislike of the Victorian Age. Did Ruskin have a Cophetua complex to Adele, Effie and Rose or Miss Wardell, as well as an Oedipus complex to his mother?

John Fowles also wrote an autobiographical novel, in which two Oxonians are the key persons. A lady's comment hits the mark: "How being a perfectionist and being scared are often the

same thing."⁵⁰ Ruskin was a perfectionist. Was his abstinence caused by scare of women?

At the end of the book, the hero, who is Fowles himself, murmured: "Ever since the Greeks all artists have wished to be remembered by name—like the ancient pharaohs.....artists were the only true pharaohs left; so let them be their celebratory masons, and return to the self, abandon all the work or other tombs and monuments."⁵¹ Ruskin is a pharaoh in English poetic prose, by which he will be remembered by name forever.

The eye of child, the love of ruin and nostalgia, the principle of art for art's sake, &c., all in one formed Ruskin.

English dog fanciers say of hunting dogs: "I had tasted blood and could never afterwards forget the scent of it." Was Ruskin narcotized by his own prose style and never liberated from it? He could stop the historical time of fifteen hundred years and depict vividly the destiny and fate of Venice cross-sectionally. Was he in fetters of ornate and opulent diction? Did he never forget the taste of his own magnificent prose style perfected at so early an age? If so, it is a pity.

Notes

*This essay is an overview of Ruskin's prose style, aestheticism, tragic incidents, &c. It is in the nature of exposition of Ruskinian style and somewhat exegetical. Let Ruskin talk himself. Thus, inevitably citations are not a few.

Relevant chronological facts are extracted from *The Works of John Ruskin* (Library Edition) edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, *John Ruskin* edited by Harold Bloom, and Frank Harris's *My Life and Loves*.

1. Frank Harris, *My Life and Loves*, The Complete Grove Press Edition, edited by John F. Gallagher.
2. *Ibid.*, pp.1030-1.
3. *Ibid.*, pp.291-5.
4. Harold Bloom, "Introduction", p.1 in *John Ruskin*, edited by Harold Bloom.
5. "Introduction", Vol. I of *The Works of John Ruskin*, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn.
6. Harris, op. cit., p.437 & p.448.
7. *Ibid.*, p.752.
8. The aim of this section is to expose Ruskinian prose style to the reader.
9. "A Reply to 'Blackwood's' Criticism of Turner", 1836.
10. "Introduction", *Modern Painters*, Vol. I, Everyman's Library Edition, edited by Lionel Cust.
11. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, § 24.
12. *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. II, Ch. 2.
13. *On the Old Road*.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Actually some called *Unto this Last* as written by a madman.
16. The Preface to the First Edition of *Modern Painters*.
17. "A Reply to 'Blackwood's' Criticism of Turner", 1836.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Harris, op. cit., p.440.

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20. *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. II, § 1.
21. Harris, op. cit., p.437. Harris was especially good in portraying. *My Life and Loves* is notorious in a sense. But Hoffmanstahl praised it in its candidness and frankness. Its opprobrium of obscenity is quite a misunderstanding. And as far as the description of Ruskin is concerned, the critical editor Gallagher assured us that it squared well with fact.
22. *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. I, p.1.
23. *Modern Painters*, Vol. V, Ch. X I, § 27-8.
24. My translation.
25. For example, George D. Painter, *Marcel Proust, A Biography*. Vide Ch.14 of Vol. I and Ch. 3 of Vol. II, in particular.
26. The translation of Poe's verses was done by Mallarme.
27. *Towards the House of Swann* (my translation). Cf. Edgar A. Poe, "The taste and the smell were inextricably confounded, and became one sentiment, abnormal and intense." (*The Colloquy of Monos and Una*).
28. "A Reply to "Blackwood's" Criticism of Turner", 1836.
29. *Modern Painters*, Vol. III.
30. *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Poe's beautiful scenic description is found in, e.g., *The Domain of Arnheim*, and *Landor's Cottage*, both of which were written in a more relaxed way of style.
31. Baudelaire, *Several Remarks on the Works of Edgar A. Poe*.
32. Harris, op. cit., pp.232-4.
33. *Praeterita*, Vol. I, § 256.
34. *Ibid.*, § 258.
35. "Introduction", *The Works of John Ruskin*, Volume XXXV.
36. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

37. *Praeterita*, Vol. I, § 246.
38. *Modern Painters*, Vol. IV, Ch. 1, § 2 & 3.
39. *Unto this Last*, p. xiii.
40. *Praeterita*, p. 8.
41. Harris, op. cit., pp. 444-5.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 444.
43. *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.
44. *William Wilson*.
45. *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ways of Escape*. Cf. "Man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep."
(Auden).
49. *The End of the Affair*.
50. *Daniel Martin*.
51. *Ibid.*