

Kurt Espersen-Peters

# Ruskin's Decay: Architecture, Geology, and Wisdom

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Lancaster University, UK

Department of English Literature & Creative Writing

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## Abstract

John Ruskin had a life-long love of architecture, especially old buildings. He valued them for their age and longevity in the face of decay. As much as he loved old buildings, he loved mountains even more. Mountains were the closest thing Ruskin had to tangible evidence of God's intention. But mountains were also falling apart before his eyes, prompting him to ask if we were witnesses to the "earth's prime" or the "wreck of Paradise." In a world Ruskin saw as being divinely ordained, the question was not about how mountains eroded but why they were permitted to do so. His dilemma was reconciling the splendour and beauty of mountain and architectural form with the material and symbolic process of erasure and degradation. The question emerged: how was decay to be understood?

This thesis identifies the material and spirito-theological connections between architecture, mountain form, and wisdom through the concept of decay in the works of John Ruskin. It establishes a running cross-dialogue with existing aesthetic, architectural, and wisdom scholarship by Rosenberg, Landow, Hewison, Fitch, Birch, Wheeler, and O'Gorman, and argues a contiguous perspective on decay that is often overlooked. The thesis traces Ruskin's awareness of decay across his long creative life of observing aging buildings, unsculptured mountain peaks, and personified natural forces, demonstrating a predilection towards organic decay that is creative and beautiful. Ruskin's aesthetic and geological investigations reveal how divine wisdom governs decay and emerges as a common link in shaping architectural and mountain forms. Wisdom unites the ruling intention of the creative act, a physical force impacting the degradation of material form, and prudential guidance in the activities of humanity. Ruskin visualizes decay not as a destructive act but a creative one—a becoming ordained by the divine mind, affirming that mountains, like buildings, are designed to decay.

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## Acknowledgements

My Ruskin journey began over 25 years ago during my graduate studies in architecture. I had a vague inkling that I might want to pursue teaching and would need a doctorate. When I mentioned my ambitions in passing to a visiting lecturer, he said, ‘Have you thought about Ruskin?’ I hadn’t. But since that day, there has yet to be a moment when I do not think of the venerable Victorian polymath. Over two decades of rummaging through his collected works, pouring over his diagrams, drawings, and sketches, and delving into his diaries and letters, his visions of art, architecture, geology and wisdom have ingrained themselves deep in my mind. He has become so much a part of my consciousness that I struggle now to remember a time when I did not think of him. Some days, I wonder if it’s a curse or a blessing, but my life is substantially richer and my thinking more tolerant because of his influence. In a way, this thesis is an offering to Ruskin’s legacy—a contribution to existing scholarship and another way in which to keep his spirit alive and flourishing.

First, I must express my deepest gratitude to Dr Andrew Tate and Dr Christopher Donaldson from Lancaster University for their unswerving dedication, encouragement, and assistance. I would also like to thank my review committee members, Dr Knight, Dr Schad, and Dr Bainbridge whose insights, comments, and suggestions have encouraged me to develop my argument further. Without their support, my thesis would not have been possible. I must also thank Dr Martin Bressani from McGill University, whose early encouragement and guidance inspired me to examine Ruskin more closely. Without his support, I may never have continued my Ruskin studies. It almost goes without saying that I thank my family, friends and colleagues, who have given me their love, support, patience, and understanding on this long academic journey.

## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. No part of this thesis has been published in part or in whole. This thesis is the result of my own research and has not been conducted in part or in whole with any other research.

# INTRODUCTION

Ruskin and Decay



## 0.0 Introduction: Ruskin and Decay

[I]n the human architecture the builder did not calculate upon ruin, nor appoint the course of impendent desolation; but that in the hand of the great Architect of the mountains, time and decay are as much the instruments of His purpose as the forces by which He first led forth the troops of hills in leaping flocks:—the lightning and the torrent, and the wasting and weariness of innumerable ages, all bear their part in the working out of one consistent plan; and the Builder of the temple for ever stands beside His work, appointing the stone that is to fall, and the pillar is to be abased, and guiding all the seeming wildness of chance and change, into ordained splendours and foreseen harmonies.

(*Works*, 6:180-1)<sup>1</sup>

The Great Architect creates and destroys. By the time he wrote the passage above in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* (1856), this contradiction confronted Ruskin every time he looked at a mountain. From his introduction to the Alps in J.M.W. Turner's (1775-1851) scenic vignettes in Rogers' *Italy: A Poem* (1821) to the Ruskin family's first continental tour in 1833, the lateral ranges of Switzerland seized the eye, mind, and soul of young Ruskin and never let go.<sup>2</sup> His early poem 'The Alps from Schaffhausen', written during his first trip abroad, confirms this mountain devotion:

But look once on the Alps by the sunset quiver  
And think on the moment thenceforward for ever!

(*Works*, 2:367)

He returned to the Alps throughout his life and made increasingly detailed studies and observations of his favourite mountains—the Mont Blanc massif, the Aiguilles of Chamouni, and Mont Cervin—sketching and documenting their form, composition and degradation (see Figure 1). The forms of the earth were special as they were considered among the Creator's first remaining works. Mountains were the closest thing Ruskin had to tangible evidence of God's intention—the divine will made manifest. But the mountains were also falling apart before his eyes. His developing geological mind could fathom the slow erosion of these splendid forms but failed to fathom the reason for their decay,

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<sup>1</sup> John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition, ed. by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), VI, pp. 180-1. Hereafter, Ruskin's writings will be cited as the quoted text followed by the *Works* title referring to the Library Edition volume and page numbers, separated by a semi-colon and provided in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Rogers, *Italy: A Poem*, 1830. Rogers' poem is based on his own 1814-15 continental tour and first published in 1821. It was later reissued in 1830 with illustrations by J.M.W. Turner, Thomas Stothard, and Samuel Prout. Ruskin received the illustrated edition on his thirteenth in 1832 from his father's business partner Henry Telford.



Figure 1: John Ruskin. *The Aiguille Blaitiere*, c.1856. Drawing with wash.

prompting him to ask his readers if we were witnesses to the ‘earth’s prime’ or the ‘wreck of Paradise’ (*Works*, 6:177). In a world Ruskin saw as being divinely ordained, the question was not about how mountains eroded but why they were permitted to do so at all. In theory, the erosion process should negate the majesty and importance of the Great Architect’s creations, yet Ruskin believed the wrecks of Paradise to be beautiful and profound. He wondered if mountains were mere shadows of their former selves: should we not lament their decline and degradation? Or are mountains glorious because they are disintegrating? The dilemma was how to reconcile the splendour and beauty of mountain form with the material and symbolic process of erasure and degradation. The question emerged: how was decay to be understood?

Ruskin encountered the same confusion regarding decay in architecture. Akin to his devotion to mountains, Ruskin had a life-long love of architecture, especially old buildings. He valued them because of their age and marvelled at their longevity and ability to capture and project the collective social temper of their makers. He would eventually recognize and come to admire these characteristics in the mountains. As Ann Colley

(2009) and Ann Gagné (2019) identify in Ruskin's writings, buildings share many qualities with mountains.<sup>3</sup> They had material and structural commonality; they were designed and built by an earthly architect or divine demiurge and were resistant but not immune to the effects of time. Both were subject to the erosive laws of nature, a shared fate that both abided in synchronicity and through their material and symbolic presence, they stood as evidence of divine intention and somatic expressions of divine will.

Ruskin saw buildings as repositories of intention and meaning: 'those grey heaps of deep-wrought stone' (*Works*, 8:53) were not only forms of shelter or protection but enduring records of human adoration, intention, and achievement. Similar to the revelatory power of painting, poetry, and prose, buildings possess a 'voicefulness' (*Works*, 8:52) and are 'books of history': teachers and missals of what was essential to humanity for future generations (*Works*, 9:60). They are sites of collective memory and moral instruction, and their continued existence and use remained an affirming influence for society. Ruskin believed that through the architect's mind and the craftsman's hands, a society's consolidated character and values were captured in the bones and skin of the building. As such, buildings spoke, reciting humanity's collaborative story for those who could read them. In his three primary works on architecture, *The Poetry of Architecture* (1837-8), *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), Ruskin educated his reader on identifying and interpreting the hidden messages—and warnings—encoded within.<sup>4</sup> This awareness of a building's ability to speak carries over into his understanding of how the decay of mountains spoke of an intrinsic divine agenda. Architecture taught Ruskin how to read mountains, and in turn, mountains taught Ruskin how to understand age and decay. He acknowledges that mountains and buildings are created to be destroyed; 'these details must perish' (*Works*, 8:234), both succumbing to the same erosive forces of nature. Despite this inevitable end, both endure and continue to proclaim the lessons of their creators for as long as they survive. Rather than seeing decay as the degenerative erasure of an ideal form or a paradisiacal state, Ruskin considers the erosion of the material world as beautiful and evidence of divine wisdom.

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<sup>3</sup> Ann C. Colley, 'John Ruskin Climbing and the Vulnerable Eyes', in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 37 (2009), 43-66, and Ann Gagné, 'Architecture and Perception: The Science of Art in Ruskin', in *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature*, no. 136 (Winter 2019), 124-37 (p. 128).

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Poetry*, *Seven Lamps*, and *Stones*, respectively.

In Ruskin's thinking, the tangible forces of erosion—wind, rain, ice, waves—'unsculptured' buildings and mountains and did so according to an omniscient plan. This directive was the indirect will of God enacted on the earth through natural phenomena as secondary causes. In Ruskin's mind, the tenor of decay and ruin lay in wisdom—the prudent intention of the divine mind. Ruskin's wisdom is both sagacious and self-evident, concerned with judgment, ethical responsibility, knowledge, and understanding. Michael Wheeler (1999) contends that wisdom exists across the spectrum of Ruskin's thinking and moral position.<sup>5</sup> Ruskin employed wisdom to evaluate the virtue of human endeavours; he embraced wisdom as a guide in creative and destructive actions, both human and divine, and he envisioned wisdom as the teleological condition for the structure and operation of the world. The cosmos, earth, and humanity were created through wisdom; wisdom underlies all creation and all creative acts. Wisdom was most vital in Ruskin's moralized aesthetics of nature because it guaranteed that the forms and forces of the earth were beautiful and beneficent. By extending the presence of wisdom to nature's operations, Ruskin places decay under the purview of beauty, making aged buildings and crumbling mountains testaments to the divine will in action. Like architecture, Ruskin believed that landscape could be read. However, instead of a statement about human memory, the mountain's manifesto reflected the designs of the divine mind. In his geological studies, Ruskin used his insights from reading architecture to pierce the hidden dimensions of natural form and, in so doing, gain a glimpse of God's mind.

In Scripture, wisdom is God but has a separate identity accessible to humankind and evident in the material world. Unlike the unfathomable mind of God, wisdom is approachable: for example, the book of Proverbs states, 'For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding'.<sup>6</sup> Ruskin expounds this familiarity in his mythopoeic wisdom archetype, the Queen of the Air, who bridges the gap between nature's workings and appearance. Across the breadth of his ruminations, wisdom appears often and in various capacities: Solomon's Sophia governs wise thought; Homer's Athena is responsible for the forces of nature; and the Egyptian's Neith, guides the creative acts of human building, proclaiming, 'what shall they build, if I build not with them' (*Works*, 18:227). This quotation comes from Ruskin's 'The Pyramid Builders' (1866), where he

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Wheeler, *Ruskin's God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), Proverbs 2. 6. All subsequent references to the Bible will refer to this edition and be identified using Chapter and Verse number.

equates a crystal's ordering structure with the assembly of an Egyptian pyramid, linking the form and coherence of mineralogy and architecture together under the governance of wisdom. For Ruskin, wisdom is active and essential in the creative process of marshalling the earth's materials and regulating human architecture. The concept of creation is the final link in Ruskin's understanding of decay. Erosion, the natural process of physical erasure enacted by wisdom, creates new forms in the present instead of degrading the forms of the past. Beauty, as recognition of the divine intention, is not found in an object's original incarnation but in its current and ongoing state, identified by the fulfilment of what Langer calls 'significant form'—the 'leading lines' of natural phenomena.<sup>7</sup> Ruskin visualizes decay not as a destructive act but a creative one—a becoming ordained by the divine mind, affirming that mountains, like buildings, are designed to decay.

## 0.1 Thesis Overview and Structure

This study examines the role of decay in Ruskin's progressive understanding of architecture, mountains, and wisdom. It reads decay as a natural process that brings the forms of the earth, specifically old buildings and crumbling mountains, towards felicitous beauty as an expression of divine wisdom and intent. The importance of decay and wisdom in Ruskin's aesthetic, architectural, and natural history thinking is an underappreciated and unexamined aspect of this thought. To him, decay is not simply degradation and destruction, but a sign of a deific plan enacted on the physical world through the forces of nature that lies within the sovereignty of wisdom. The topos of decay spans various aspects in his thought, ranging from moral, political, social and economic decay that often ends in ruin and destruction to the propitious 'unsculpturing' of material form, both architectural and geological, that ends in the noble and beautiful. To Ruskin, decay is sacrosanct because it is an essential secondary cause of nature—an active wisdom that guaranteed divine purpose and order through the forms and forces of the world. This perspective situates decay in an affirmative light, bringing aspects of the material world into beauty and by extension to glory.

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<sup>7</sup> In her book *Philosophy in a New Key*, Susanne Langer introduces the concept of 'significant form', an arrangement of elements within an artwork that evokes an aesthetic response. See Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957). The reference to the leading lines of nature is taken from Ruskin's descriptions of beautiful form and are explored in later chapters of this thesis.

### 0.1.1 Definitions and Terminology

Before continuing, it is helpful to establish a contextual meaning and reference for some terms used repeatedly in this thesis. The terms ‘form’ and ‘force’ appear consistently when discussing the material phenomena of nature and nature’s laws and actions. Ruskin’s position on form is clear, both in art and nature: it is the most important physical characteristic of any natural species of phenomena, saying ‘form is not only the chief characteristic of species, but the only characteristic of individuals of a species’ (*Works*, 3:160). In Volume 1 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin relies on John Locke’s (1632-1704) explanation of primary qualities for his basic definition of form, which are the ‘bulk, figure, situation, and motion or rest of solid parts’ (*Works*, 3:158-9).<sup>8</sup> Ruskin strongly emphasizes form over all other external characteristics, such as colour or chiaroscuro, which, while important, he identifies as ‘accidental’ (*Works*, 3:162). These qualities comprise what he termed typical beauty. In his understanding of nature, form is sine qua non and theistic, coming into existence by divine decree and now regulated by natural laws. In his geological and aesthetic investigations, the earth’s forms, in both shape and constitution, are direct somatic evidence of divine intention.

Form maybe Ruskin’s material measure, but it cannot come into being without force. Force represents the laws of nature in action and is more than a mechanistic event, combining physical, spiritual, and phenomenological elements through divine actions and intentions. Raymond E. Fitch refers to this combination in his book *The Poison Sky* (1982) as the ‘organic model’, which is a symbolic vision of a paradisaical nature combining purity, unity, and harmony as unified and consistent characteristics of Ruskin’s worldview that act as a model for life in nature, art, and society.<sup>9</sup> It is a vital life energy in nature, as known by its laws. The forces of nature participate in this agenda by becoming examples of proper action, meaning that because they are derived from divine decree, they are always correct and noble. These stand distinct from scientific definitions of force as defined and applied in Newtonian mechanics—an action devoid of intent.

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<sup>8</sup> In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1693), Locke explores the limits of human knowledge and understanding. His argument regarding the difference between objective and subjective qualities led to a distinguish between the physical characteristics of phenomena as being objective and primary and the perception of those qualities as being subjective or secondary. The primary qualities of an object Locke identify are ‘utterly inseparable from the body’. See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1693/1995), p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond E. Fitch, *The Poison Sky: Myth and Apocalypse in Ruskin* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982), p. 49.

I use the term intent in relation to Ruskin's allusions to God's intentions and the capacity of humanity to understand such intentions through their engagement with the world. For intention, I follow G.E.M. Anscombe's (1957) definition, which comprises the three constituent elements of intentions for the future, intentions in action, and the intention with which someone acts.<sup>10</sup> For Anscombe, intentional actions are those in which 'a certain sense of the question "Why?" is given application', distinguishing between those acts that possess a reason and those that do not.<sup>11</sup> For Ruskin, those reasons and causes in nature are of divine origin and are beneficial to humanity.

### 0.1.2 The Imaginary of Decay

When conceptualizing the presence of decay in Ruskin's thought, it is helpful to consider it an 'imaginary'. Kathleen Lennon (2015) defines an imaginary 'not as a domain of illusion posited in opposition to a "real", but rather as *that by which* the real is made available to us'.<sup>12</sup> Rather than impose an external categorical system on Ruskin's thinking about decay that restricts definition, the understanding of decay emerges from the instances of his investigations. The difficulty in compiling a definition of decay is the topical breadth across which the use of the term exists in Ruskin's thoughts and writings. Addressing the multiple incarnations and implications of the concept of decay is challenging because it is often contextual as well as evolutionary, yet common threads are evident. In writing about the reconceptualization of natural philosophy, Alister McGrath (2023) promotes a 'disciplinary imaginary' as a possible solution to his dilemma, stating that we can:

imagine a domain which extends across present disciplinary boundaries—boundaries that arose for specific historical reasons, yet which can be transcended imaginatively, even if they remain an important means of obtaining and structuring both our knowledge of the natural world, and the academic structures within which this is researched and taught.<sup>13</sup>

McGrath's appeal to natural philosophy's ability to generate a conceptual space that spans the current definitions of disciplinary knowledge encourages broad reimaginings of

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<sup>10</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Lennon, *Imagination and the Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Natural Philosophy: On Retrieving a Lost Disciplinary Imaginary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 138-9.

diverse intellectual territories.<sup>14</sup> His project for reconceptualizing natural philosophy relies on the disciplinary imaginary, harkening back to a pre-institutionalized scientific era where individualized visions of writers such as Kepler, Galileo, and Newton permitted broader connections across intellectual domains. This approach aligns well with Ruskin's expansion and revision of Romantic, picturesque, aesthetic, religious, moral, ethical, political, and economic theories and practices, where their interaction and interconnection suggest a gestalt of his own imaginary. In a similar pursuit, my investigation takes Ruskin whole or not at all.<sup>15</sup> Rather than examine each instance of decay in isolation, they are examined as connected elements, and compatibility across them is generated within a dialectic. My examination traces the instances of decay in Ruskin's thoughts and writings and my argument presents the imaginary of landscape and architecture, linked by decay and governed by wisdom.

### 0.1.3 Situating the Thesis

Ruskin never wrote a summation of his beliefs; however, it could be argued that the *Fors* letters (1871-84) and *Praeterita* (1885-9) attempted such an overview but were ultimately incomplete ventures. Given the depth, variety, and complexity of his intellectual enterprise over a half-century of prodigious production, no such manifesto could ever hope to be written, and no such précis could capture the breadth of his ideas. However, the core tenets of his intellections are articulated throughout his collected works and, when pulled together, form the fabric of his philosophy. However, these are fragmented perspectives as it is difficult to generate a panoptic understanding of the entirety of Ruskin's works due to his diverse fixations that may or may not connect to larger transcendent themes and trajectories. Add to this his confession that 'I am never satisfied that I have handled a subject properly till I have contradicted myself at least three times' and the dilemma widens (*Works*, 16:187). Undaunted by this augury, the Ruskin scholar's Theseus must venture into the labyrinth of his mind, confront the Minotaur of incongruity, and recover the thread of consonance in the form of a coherent theory. Before embarking on my journey, I must acknowledge the clew of exhaustive work and thought in whose shadow I stand and to which I endeavour to add my dissertation.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Furneaux Jordan suggested to his readers that when reading Ruskin, 'one must take him whole or not at all'. Quoted by Kristine O. Garrigan in *Ruskin on Architecture: His Thought and Influence* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), p. xii.



This thesis sits within a tradition of Ruskin scholarship, examining his intertextual thinking in a chronological manner. Such scholarship operates predominantly within the body of Ruskin's literature to establish and explain his thought's development, interconnectedness, or inconsistencies. Ruskin's work is rarely idle: it evolves and develops over time. While he may characterize his shift in positions as contradictory, I see it as evolutionary and the product of a growing and challenging mind that is open to new perspectives and self-correction if it advances his cause. Comparing his thoughts along a linear timeline helps chart the progression of his thinking and the development of his theories; I seek to do the same when investigating decay. By examining the topic of decay in his writings on architecture, landscape, and wisdom, my argument covers the evolution of his thoughts, from their earliest incarnations to their mature suppositions, by highlighting the connections, congruences, and discontinuity of his ideas of decay. Ruskin's interest in architecture and geology is well known, but their connection through wisdom and decay has been largely overlooked despite the prominence of these concepts in his works. The value of illuminating decay in Ruskin's thinking adds another layer of clarity and connection to his architectural and aesthetic theory. In so doing, it integrates the scant investigations of myth and wisdom with the larger discussions of nature while offering new perspectives and approaches to the neglected issues of erosion and geology. An imaginary of decay adds another thread to the fabric of Ruskin's collective thought.

My approach is honed by the long line of exegetic scholarship that spans the topical breadth and evolutionary depth of Ruskin's thought. Works such as John D. Rosenberg's *The Darkening Glass* (1961), George P. Landow's *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (1971), Robert Hewison's *The Argument of the Eye* (1976) and *Ruskin on Venice* (2009), Fitch's *The Poison Sky* (1982), Paul L. Sawyer's *Ruskin's Poetic Argument* (1985), Wheeler's *Ruskin's God* (1999), Stephen Kite's *Building Ruskin's Italy* (2012), Andrew Ballantyne's *John Ruskin* (2015), and the collection of essays published in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin* (2015) stand as testaments to the interconnectedness of Ruskin's thoughts across the evolutionary track of his literary life. While each work has a unique investigative theme or agenda, such as Rosenberg's emphasis on Ruskin's temper and genius, Landow's examination of Ruskin's aesthetic theories, or Wheeler's emphasis on prophetic wisdom, they chart the evolution of Ruskin's thinking. These significant and influential examples of Ruskin scholarship that have remained relevant and insightful, but they leave room for addition and augmentation, especially in the areas of decay related to architecture, geology, and wisdom. While following these works' evolutionary objectives,

this thesis does not seek to supplant or contradict them but rather develop a line of thought concerning decay that, while prominent in Ruskin's thought, is often ignored or rarely engaged.

In the chapter summaries below, I identify topical areas of scholarship that focus predominantly on Ruskin's art and architecture, geology and science, myth and mythography, and wisdom and phronesis as they relate to my discussion of decay. The argument is developed in relation to these existing works but also shows where it diverges from prevailing positions or expands on non-existing ones. In many instances, the threads of decay have not been sufficiently teased out of Ruskin's works before, leaving gaps in knowledge and unexplored themes or trajectories in Ruskin's thought. Therefore, divergent understanding of common positions held by major scholarship occurs frequently, not because of an error in the original assumptions but from an omission based on different investigative goals. Such a situation also demands a corollary review of literature and scholarship outside of the Ruskinian purview which is necessary for developing new lines of argument and thought.

## **0.2 Chapter Summaries**

The structure of my argument is divided into four chapters, tracing the emergence of decay in Ruskin's writings and thoughts on architecture, landscape, and mountains and its development and contextualization through the emergence and governance of wisdom. Chapter 1 examines what decay is and where it appears in Ruskin's thoughts. Chapter 2 examines the emergence of decay in Ruskin's thinking, particularly in association with architectural ruins and aesthetic theory, before developing into a more structured review of his geological investigations. Chapter 3 examines Ruskin's studies of mountain form and geology and the development of his working theory of decay based on the interaction between material form and nature's forces. Chapter 4 ties together architecture and geology through his developing ideas of wisdom, phronesis, and myth that, in turn, bring coherence and purpose to Ruskin's ideas of decay as intentional and creative.

### **0.2.1 Chapter 1: Ruskin and the World of Decay**

Chapter 1 introduces a broad overview defining and identifying decay in nineteenth-century thought and the broader context of Ruskin's collective works. Specifically, the chapter examines the scope of decay in three aspects of Ruskin's thought and its contributing influences: the awareness of decay in Ruskin's early theories,

paintings, and writings; the identification of decay and its conscious explorations; and the inferred significance of decay in Ruskin's thought. As much as decay refers to material artifacts, it also applies to social, political, religious, and economic organizations, institutions, entities, belief structures and moral positions. This condition opens the impact of decay not only to matter but to morality and the spiritual. The chapter establishes four primary topic areas contextualizing decay in Ruskin's thoughts and writings: scriptural, moral, aesthetic, and material expressions of decay.

Scriptural examples emphasize humanity's fall from grace, particularly those events that contributed to material and moral degradation, such as the Fall, the Curse of Cain, and the Flood. This position is drawn from Fitch, Wheeler (1999), and Francis O'Gorman's (2015) exploration and understanding of Scriptural literalism and Evangelical notions of depravity in Ruskin's religious education and beliefs.<sup>16</sup> Moral examples of decay are an extension and perpetuation of humankind's fallen state. In Ruskin's thinking, it is both a renewal and refusal of the social moral covenant to adhere to natural law.<sup>17</sup> For him, evidence of moral decay could be uncovered in Victorian art, society, politics, and economics, which spoke of a perceived steady degradation and disregard of affirmative traditional values, such as those that befell Venetian society.

Opposed to the scriptural and moral aspects of decay, aesthetic examples of decay are valorized in Romantic poetry and the Picturesque tradition in the recurring tropes of the ruin and the fragment. The Picturesque features prominently in Ruskin's thinking as a source of criticism, revision and expansion. A foundational understanding of the Picturesque comes from Christopher Hussey (1967), Malcolm Andrews (1989), Sidney Robinson (1991), and John Macarthur's (2007) understanding of the Picturesque as a multifaceted movement comprised of differing theoretical positions and approaches.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> These positions will be expanded in Chapter 1. See Wheeler (1999), Fitch, and Francis O'Gorman, 'Religion' in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 144-156.

<sup>17</sup> Natural law here refers to God's instructions for humanity. According to Mark Murphy, "the eternal law, for Aquinas, is that rational plan by which all creation is ordered; the natural law is the way that the human being 'participates' in the eternal law". See Mark Murphy, "The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/natural-law-ethics/>.

<sup>18</sup> The complexity of the Picturesque is captured by Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1967), Malcolm Andrews's *The Search for the Picturesque* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), Sidney Robinson's *Inquiry into the Picturesque* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), and John Macarthur's *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust, and Other Irregularities* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

reality that the Picturesque was not a mono-narrative allowed Ruskin to develop extensions and revisions of the Picturesque to reflect his aesthetic agenda. The significance of decay in Romanticism is captured in Anne Janowitz's (1990) and Sophie Thomas' (2008) work on the ruin and the fragment.<sup>19</sup> Their work explores the experiential and psychological meaning of ruin and ruination on the individual and collective mindset, addressing Romantic and Picturesque theories and themes. The philosophical arguments of Romanticism and the Picturesque align with theoretical developments in the British aesthetic tradition. The connections and developments in theoretical areas of aesthetics, taste, and judgment and experiential aspects of the sense, perception, and intellect, as they impact Ruskin's thinking, are defined by Landow (1971).<sup>20</sup> The broader trajectory of the Aesthetic Tradition is refined by James Shelley (2020) and Timothy Costelloe (2013), providing a comprehensive overview of the developments, advances, and conflicts across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>21</sup> In particular, Costelloe's development recognizes the importance of William Wordsworth's (1770-1850) Picturesque theories on Ruskin's development of the 'noble picturesque'. Ruskin's understanding of decay is situated at the nexus of the Romantic, the Picturesque, and the British aesthetic understanding of landscape and architectural ruin. His identification of decay in landscape and ruin led to an investigation of Material decay evident in the erosion of geological and architectural forms.

The awareness of material instances of decay begins in *Poetry*, *Seven Lamps*, and *Stones*, but its understanding emerges from Ruskin's geological studies of mountains and the erosion process. Ruskin's geological and scientific understanding of decay coincides with the larger movements in the profession of geology, where the debates over material and physical causation collide with deistic and theistic positions in explaining the order and function of the earth. His geological thinking contends with the prevailing inductive challenges of Charles Lyell (1797-1875), William Whewell (1794-1866), and Thomas

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<sup>19</sup> See Anne Janowitz, *England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1990) and Sophie Thomas, *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> In his book, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*, Landow identifies the direct theoretical influences on Ruskin's aesthetic theories. This connection indicates Ruskin's awareness, but not mastery, of some prior and current aesthetic thinking. See George P. Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

<sup>21</sup> James Shelley, '18th Century British Aesthetics,' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/aesthetics-18th-british/>> and Timothy M. Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition: From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Henry Huxley (1825-1895), forcing him to consider alternative reasons and rationale for the function and intention of nature and its forms and forces. From this position, Ruskin seeks alternate explanations for causation and ultimately relies on the guidance of wisdom, personified as his Queen of the Air.

These four domains help define the various conceptualizations of decay in Ruskin's thinking but are not mutually exclusive. Ruskin often gave singular attention to one area, but at any given moment in his thoughts, all of these could be at play. As such, the remaining chapters explore the singular and multiple ideas of decay in Ruskin's thinking. It is necessary to separate them to gain a better understanding of the significant aspects of each mode of thought, but also essential to remember them acting in combination throughout Ruskin's approaches to topic areas. Chapter 1 identifies the confluence of these major themes of decay and explains how they will be addressed in detail in the following chapters.

## **0.2.2 Chapter 2: The Emergence of Decay**

The emergence of decay in Ruskin's thinking began at an early age. It evolved across a spectrum of his thinking on literature (poetry and prose), art (Romantic and Picturesque), and the natural and built environments (landscape and architecture). In Chapter 2, I argue that his awareness of decay began in his early immersion into the Romantic and Picturesque traditions, particularly poetry, painting, and architecture. The exposure to art, poetry, and literature was saturated with appeals and inferences to decay, ruin, and degradation. Decay was present in Ruskin's aesthetic and religious education, where moral depravity and the deterioration of the human condition arose from Original Sin. Ruskin learned about the beauty of nature synonymously with the horrors of moral deterioration, a condition that would influence his estimation of the world and humanity's relationship to it.

Ruskin's initial critiques of art and aesthetic theory begin with Wordsworth and Turner, who provide a critical view of the Picturesque tradition advocated by William Gilpin (1724-1804), Uvedale Price (1747-1829) and Richard Payne Knight (1751-1824). This approach brought a deeper experiential component to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. These influences become important as Ruskin sets out to develop his theory of art in *Modern Painters* (1843-60), but his scrutiny of the Picturesque begins with the relevance of decay in landscape and architecture developed in *Poetry*. In his valorization of Turner in *Modern Painters*, Ruskin promotes the theoretical standard from which he would associate

the experience of the material world with the transcendental experiences of the divine through beauty and truth. The importance of a modified Picturesque that included aspects of beauty and truth, gleaned from Wordsworth, led to his argument in *Seven Lamps* on the value of age and endurance in architecture. Here, decay assumes a positive dimension and legibility in tectonic form, something Ruskin believed could be read. Conversely, the moral decay of Venice in *Stones* denotes a pejorative reflection of decay and one associated with human action rather than natural exploits. From this juxtaposition, Ruskin distinguishes the differences in decay's value and how they are tied to intention—divine or otherwise.

The theoretical framework for Ruskin's theory of decay is mixed with the larger strands of the British aesthetic tradition influencing Victorian thinking about art.<sup>22</sup> Costelloe's (2013) connection between theorists and Ruskin's thought on the beautiful highlights a trajectory of the development of Ruskin's thinking.<sup>23</sup> Chapter 2 identifies the major influences on Ruskin's aesthetic theory, as identified by Landow (1971) and Fitch, and how they impacted the development of decay. It prefaces the exploration of the underlying importance of Locke's qualities of objects and the experiential extremes of Edmund Burke's (1729-1797) the beautiful and the sublime. Ruskin's revision of the Picturesque incorporates Wordsworth's challenges to terminology, categorization, and subjective experience to refine aesthetics further and focus on experience and sensation. He also adds the associative value to objective qualities, where the object possesses or points toward some ulterior meaning or significance apart from its somatic reality. In developing his theory of art in *Modern Painters*, Ruskin establishes truth and beauty as fundamental perspectives for understanding nature and its artistic depiction. Truth and beauty become obstacles and opportunities for Ruskin in his assessment of erosion, degradation, and decay.

The lessons learned from the Picturesque and the symbolic reading of architecture would provide Ruskin with a theoretical framework to understand degradation in nature and architecture as a form of divine inspiration, evidenced in the beautiful and divine truth of the world's operations. The ability to read intention in nature's processes and

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<sup>22</sup> A comprehensive account of the British aesthetic tradition is provided by Shelley (Winter 2020 Edition), and Costelloe (2013). The specific interpretation of the theoretical threads of the Aesthetic Tradition as they influence the structure of Ruskin's thinking is comprehensively presented in Landow and Fitch.

<sup>23</sup> Costelloe identifies the development of theories of the beautiful and the experiential process in the works of the eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetic theorists. In his section on Ruskin, Costelloe identifies their influences on his thinking, specifically Wordsworth. See Costelloe (2013), pp. 167-190, 224-241.

architectural tectonics allowed him to associate meaning with forms and forces, eventually seeing them as expressions of a divine mind. The guarantee of divine meaning in the world and the ability to read somatic material gained from architecture led to examining nature's forms to gain a deeper understanding of erosion and decay. While Ruskin speaks liberally about age, decay, and erosion in relation to architecture and landscape, surprisingly little has been written on it. Only minor references or allusions exist within the broader scholarship and are found in relation to architecture, landscape, and nature. I work towards identifying them where they exist or build arguments for their inclusion where they do not. Significant work by Kristine O. Garrigan (1973), John Unrau (1978), Elizabeth Helsinger (1982), Michael W. Brooks (1987), Stephen Kite (2012), and Geoffrey Tyack (2015) provides a cyclopaedic account of Ruskin's architectural thinking, whereas sympathetic and divergent approaches to architecture are provided by Lars Spuybroek (2016) and Anuradha Chatterjee (2018). I situate my argument within the wake of these established trajectories but chart a nuanced course through age, endurance, and decay in Ruskin's architecture.

The chapter concludes with a brief but essential diversion from the nature argument by examining the aesthetic consequences of the Venetian fall chronicled in *Stones*. To this point, my argument builds Ruskin's growing understanding of decay in nature in a positive light, but he also associates the term with the moral failings of religious devotion in society. The importance of Venice to Ruskin is liberally represented in Ruskin scholarship, particularly by Richard L. Stein (1975) and Robert Hewison (2009), who convey the significance of Venice to Ruskin by framing the city's moral, social, and religious contentions in terms of human decay. In *Stones*, Ruskin brings his burgeoning aesthetic and architectural epistemes to bear on the glory of nature evident in the Gothic moral aesthetic and the decay of socio-religious values and virtues through unchecked individual and civic hubris. The emergent themes of social criticism and political economy will reappear in Chapter 4; however, here it is important to note Ruskin's reading of architectonic form as a prelude to deciphering allegorical and symbolic meaning from somatic objects, an ability that serves him well when he turns his penetrative gaze to mountain form in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, uncovering the reason for natural decay.

### **0.2.3 Chapter 3: The Theories of Decay**

Chapter 3 is a closer examination of how decay operates in nature, particularly how it is understood in generating beautiful mountain forms. Unlike previous studies of

Ruskin's geology that examine his relationship to the discipline and the profession, such as Lacy Gully (1993) and Sdegno (2015), this exploration looks at how Ruskin envisioned the laws of nature operating. My argument focuses on the creation and assembly of the earth proposed in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* and *Deucalion*; however, the threads of decay are also woven through his writings on art and architecture, geology and science, and political economy and social criticism. In his continued vindication of Turner's genius, Ruskin directs his reader to how Turner's knowledge of mountain structure led him to render them correctly, saying he 'is as much of a geologist as he is of a painter' (*Works*, 3:429). To prove this, Ruskin shows how Turner understood mountain form by analyzing mountain form himself.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of his intent, Ruskin turned his penetrative eye to the beautiful forms of the Alps and how they were derived. In so doing, Ruskin was confronted by the spectre of decay and forced to question the role of divine intention in creating and managing the forms of the earth that he had otherwise taken for granted. Everywhere he looked, he saw erosion and degradation, noting that 'death must be upon the hills' (*Works*, 6:118), but also beauty, beneficence, and glory.

Ruskin struggled to reconcile biblical history with the facts of the earth and the governance of science and geology. His need for a numinous world led him to question the role of decay in mountain life: Does it destroy or create? If mountains are beautiful, then why destroy them through erosion? If mountains are deteriorating, then why are they beautiful? Ruskin's approach to the dilemma was to examine geological action within the era of human history, the 'Sculpturing' and 'Unsculpturing' periods he describes in *Deucalion* (*Works*, 26:118). In so doing, it suspends questions of intention to focus on what can be seen in landscape through nature's laws. It also permits him to understand the geological process of decay and how it brings about forms he considers beautiful. This reading produces symbolic and allegorical interpretations, such as endurance, humility, and strength, as well as aesthetic order and structure, such as defining beauty in nature as being composed of 'leading lines'. The laws of nature, including decay, either work towards sculpturing natural forms into these ideal compositions or unsculpturing material and reducing it to these configurations. Both processes, despite being different in that one

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<sup>24</sup> During Ruskin's Continental tours in the late 1830s and early 1840s, his notebooks and diaries combine architectural and geological studies. See especially MS1 (1835), as published by Keith Hanley and Caroline S. Hull, *John Ruskin's Continental Tour 1835: The Written Records and Drawings* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2016).



creates and the other destroys, arrive at the same organic shape. Decay, rather than being truly erosive, can be, in fact, creative.

Constructing an imaginary of decay involves situating Ruskin's geological thoughts with the prevailing attitudes of the time. Specifically, I look at Ruskin's geological writings in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* and *Deucalion*, although geological and scientific references occur in several places throughout his collected works. A relative dearth is written on geology except by Lacy Gully (1993) and Sdegno (2015). Additional work on Ruskin's science by Edward Alexander (1969), Dinah Birch (1981), and Mark Frost (2011) are helpful but not directly relevant to my argument. Many arguments often forego Ruskin's geological studies and focus on the last chapters of Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, 'The Mountain Gloom' and 'The Mountain Glory'.<sup>25</sup> Those that do address Ruskin's geological studies are done cursorily and without addressing the laws of change, decay, and nature. General reviews on science as a discipline include Rhoda Rappaport (2003), Matthew Stanley (2015) and Laura J. Snyder (2006, Winter 2023). General scholarship on the geology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries includes Frank M. Turner (1974, 1978), Martin Guntau (1978), Mott T. Greene (1982), Rachel Laudan (1987), Gabriel Gohau (1991), Simon Knell (2000), Hugh Torrens (2002), and Iwan Rhys Morus (2007). Various authors, including Marjorie Hope Nicolson (1959), Charles C. Gillispie (1996), J.M.I. Klaver (1997), Frederick Gregory (2002), and Peter Harrison (2006) cover geology as it relates to religion. Works on natural philosophy include Edward Grant (2007), Anne DeWitt (2013), and Alister McGrath (2023). The complicated relationship between natural philosophy and natural theology is addressed by Charles Taliaferro (2012), Chignall and Pereboom (2020), and McGrath (2022), with primary sources including Thomas Burnet (1681), John Ray (1691), James Hutton (1788), Horace-Bénédict de Saussure (1797), William Paley (1802), Lyell (1830), Whewell (1832, 1857, 1859), and Huxley (1893, 1894). I use these works to establish the context from which Ruskin's geological thinking permeates. His position is coloured by an aesthetic lens—but the same holds true for his works in general, as he sees the world aesthetically and numinously—and lacks the inductive rigour increasingly demanded by geologists after Whewell. The distinction is essential as it illuminates the discrepancies between prevailing geological thought and Ruskin's vision, identifying the themes of teleology and intention explored in Chapter 4.

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<sup>25</sup> See Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, pp. 385-417 and pp. 418-466.

Most of the developments of decay are found in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*; however, it is in *Deucalion* where Ruskin develops his theoretical positions regarding decay. It is in this later treatise where he establishes his three eras of geological history and he justifies his focus on the unsculpturing period—the age of earthly erosion. While *Deucalion* is an extension of his geological work in *Modern Painters*, it is also part of Ruskin’s post-1858 explorations and the third of his science grammars that examine nature’s laws. I develop this thread further in Chapter 4, but it is important to identify his challenges to the established scientific views of the time. Ruskin doubles down on the teleological condition of the earth and urges that all scientific investigation should endeavour to reveal the divine through nature. His advocacy for nature’s purpose and intention directs his investigations of landscape art and architecture toward their inevitable conclusion: buildings and mountains are designed to decay.

#### **0.2.4 Chapter 4: The Wisdom of Decay**

Chapter 4 traces the physical appearance of decay with nature’s intentions and laws of change, unifying Ruskin’s understanding of architecture and mountain form under the guidance of wisdom. I explain what wisdom is and does in nature, differing from Wheeler’s emphasis on how Ruskin acts with prophetic wisdom. Rather, I examine how wisdom informs and directs intention in nature, where intention in nature is the execution of divine eternal wisdom and leads to a natural phronesis. Ruskin’s move towards this point involves questioning his faith, his growing interest in practical wisdom, his disenfranchisement with society and science, and his growing interest in myth. Wisdom and intention justify the role of decay in nature and how it impacts architecture, mountains, and landscape. Existing scholarship in this area begins with his political economy and social criticism. The works of Alan Lee (1981), Nicholas Shrimpton (2015), and Graham A. MacDonald (2015, 2018) cover the spectrum of Victorian attitudes as Ruskin saw it and his responses to them. Larger affiliations of Ruskin’s critical thought to his personal life are made by Rosenberg (1961), Hewison (1976, 2009), Fitch (1982), Tim Hilton (2003), and Ballantyne (2015). While these works are extensive, they omit references to Ruskin’s understanding of nature and decay. Thus, an argument must be

constructed that examines the influential factors in pre- and post-1858 ‘unconversion’ Ruskin in terms of his validation of the forces of nature, including decay.<sup>26</sup>

Chapter 4 begins with an examination of practical wisdom and an analysis of Aristotle’s consideration of phronesis and wisdom in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Despite being outwardly hostile to the Greek philosopher, Aristotle’s model is a template for Ruskin’s practical wisdom, which combines resonant Classical and Christian perspectives. He creates his version of phronesis that is still pragmatic but more religiously inclined, satisfying his need for spiritual exploration and redefinition. The practical wisdom identified in his work on political economy becomes a model for how nature acts, where he aligns wisdom with the laws of nature and the inclusion of myth as an acting personified force in the world. This composite position comes in response to the growing inductive methodology found in Victorian science that sought to explain the world through positivistic and mechanical means. The scientific positions presented by Whewell, Lyell, Charles Darwin (1809-1882), and Huxley are introduced to provide a contemporaneous backdrop for Ruskin’s critique of the scientific method. In addition to the sources identified in Chapters 2 and 3, Frank M. Turner (1974, 1978), Laura J. Snyder (2006, 2023), and Stanley (2015) provide insightful examinations of the issues confronting Victorian science from within and outside its disciplinary practice. Ruskin’s response to science is cursorily evident in the arguments of Edward Alexander (1969), Birch (1981), and Mark Frost (2011), but does not directly engage in the laws of nature that govern decay. Victorian science’s challenge to Ruskin’s numinous worldview drove him to justify the divine in nature’s operations—a theme pervasive in his thoughts—but now in need of justification and validation if nature was to remain an expression of divine will.

Ruskin’s response to science’s challenge is to emphasize the intention of nature through teleology: the execution of the divine will in the laws of nature. These two aspects, intention and action, form the basis for understanding the purpose of decay. Anscombe’s and Donald Davidson’s (2001) work on intention and action provides a cogent starting point. In Anscombe’s assessment, action and intention operate as a function whose virtue is determined by the rightness of its goals and ends. From Ruskin’s perspective, wisdom

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<sup>26</sup> Ruskin’s infamous ‘unconversion’ in 1858 is often noted by scholars as a tipping point in Ruskin’s life where the transition between his aesthetic investigations on art, architecture, and landscape and his interest in political economy, social criticism, and mythography begin. I address this point in Ruskin’s life in Chapter 4, Section 4.1.

determines rightness, and he takes it upon himself to determine what is wise. Wheeler explores Ruskin's growing desire for wisdom in *Ruskin's God* (1999) but does not address the connection between wisdom and the nature of decay. Ruskin's growing interest in the wisdom myths promotes a personified incarnation of wisdom acts in the world, a vehicle through which decay can act and align with his earlier ideas of Unsculpturing through the existent forces of nature. Aspects of wisdom, both sophia and phronesis, are found in Rosenberg (1961), Wheeler (1999), and Hewison (2009) as well as John Hayman (1978), Fitch, Birch (1988), and Sharon Aronofsky Weltman (1997-9) who examine Ruskin's preoccupation with myth, mythography, and mythopoeisis. My argument offers how Ruskin's turn to a natural phronesis is both a resolution of the laws of nature enacting the divine will and the natural example Ruskin always refers artists and humanity towards to know God's will. A natural phronesis is an active wisdom in the world, emerging as a guide for how humankind should act and understand divine laws. It also demonstrates how wisdom actively brings the forms of the earth and human tectonic creation into beauty through the inevitable changing of its outward appearance, bringing mountains and architecture closer to ideal form through their material decay.

### **0.2.5 Into the Labyrinth of Decay**

The path to an imaginary of Ruskin's decay is indirect; tracing it requires balancing several threads of archetypal concepts with evidence from Ruskin's writings and thoughts and the extensive body of Ruskin scholarship. The closer one looks at decay, the more is revealed at every corner and intersection of Ruskin's thinking, where ideas from one area of exploration inform and drive the next. The direction is not always clear, but it is sequential and evolutionary. There are evocative and tantalizing clues to point the way, giving another view to Ruskin's thinking yet to be rigorously considered. My argument picks up these strands and binds them together, forming a leading line toward an assiduous account of decay's consistent presence in Ruskin's thinking on architecture, landscape and wisdom. The following chapter identifies the unconnected threads of erosion and ruin and weaves together an argument for the importance of decay in Ruskin's revelatory position on the beauty of nature and architecture through the guidance and governance of wisdom.

# CHAPTER I

The World of Decay

## 1.0 'Hey, Ruination and Hey, Desolation:' Identifying the Range of Decay in Ruskin's Thought

Old halls, and old walls,—  
    They are my great delight;  
Rusty swords, and rotten boards,  
    And ivy black as night!  
Hey, ruination and hey, desolation,—  
But created to spoil the creation!

(*Works*, 2:284)

Written when he was eleven, Ruskin's poem 'Haddon Hall' illustrates his initial ideas of decay by adhering to a characteristic Romantic trope: the degradation of architecture. However, hidden within these verses is the implication that decay was created to destroy, thus indicating an intention. The poem also contains a prelude to his later thinking in which creation would become a significant defining characteristic of decay. I return to the concepts of intention and creation in decay later in Chapters 3 and 4, but I begin by looking at the incarnations and understanding of decay in common practice during his formative years. Charting the presence of decay in Ruskin's thinking is challenging because it is largely unmapped. The trajectory of my argument considers architecture and mountain form, where examples of conceptual and material decay in Ruskin's observations and thinking are most evident, and the deviation from the standard definition of decay occurs. However, tangential connections through aesthetics, religion, economics, and politics inform and guide his thinking that I will bring together as an 'imaginary of decay'. In this chapter, I explain Ruskin's growing awareness of decay as a repeating theme in his studies of landscape and architecture before presenting four aspects of decay that encapsulate his broader understanding and establish the perimeter of his imaginary of decay. First, it is important to set the terms for this exploration.

### 1.0.1 Defining Decay

In defining decay, the contemporary meaning has value in establishing a referential datum but should accurately reflect Ruskin's perspective and, generally, that of the nineteenth century. To begin, in standard definition, decay is 'damage, or a state that

becomes gradually worse’,<sup>27</sup> ‘progressive decline’,<sup>28</sup> ‘gradual decline in strength, soundness, or prosperity or in degree of excellence of perfection’ or ‘to fall into ruin’.<sup>29</sup> Decay can be a process or action or a state or condition—the word describes as well as acts. In these definitions, decay possesses a predominantly pejorative connotation: a move away from a once-perfect condition, form, or state. Decay is temporal and irreversible, existing as a linear path that, without intervention, leads from initial formation in the past to complete dissolution in the future. As much as decay is associated with material artifacts, it applies to abstract and conceptual organizations, institutions, entities, belief structures, and moral and existential positions.<sup>30</sup> This condition opens the impact of decay to not only matter but also human and socio-spiritual constructs. Identifying decay in socio-cultural situations added another meaning and intention to Ruskin’s use of the word, one that is predominantly undesirable. I contend that his understanding and use of the term decay exist in two conditions: action and consequence. As an action, the steady erosion of an original form or state, be it material or moral, leads to complete dissolution and disintegration. He understands it as a synchronous trajectory with a beginning and end, where rock records and their inevitable decay point ‘to a creation, when “the earth was without form and void,” and to a close, when it must either be renovated or destroyed’ (*Works*, 6:178). As an end result or consequence, decay is also an existent condition or state, be it material or moral, that he witnessed around him at any given moment. The architectural ruin, the eroding mountain, and the intolerable ethical position are all current incarnations of some *thing* in the process of decay, where the term *thing* can refer to physical entities or intellectual concepts. As much as they are still in motion and incomplete, things in decay possess an immediate, factual, and tangible presence. These testaments of decay speak of the immediate condition at hand and the larger forces at play, participating in a synecdochic relationship between the fragment and the whole.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Cambridge English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘Decay’, accessed December 6, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/>.

<sup>28</sup> *Dictionary.com*, s.v. ‘Decay’, accessed December 6, 2021, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/>.

<sup>29</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. ‘Decay’, accessed December 6, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>.

<sup>30</sup> In their discussion of ruin, Galviz et. al, note the etymological duality of the meaning of ruin as offering both a physical/bodily and social dimension. See Carlos López Galviz et. al., ‘Reconfiguring Ruins: Beyond Ruinenlust’, in *Geohumanities*, 3:2, 534-5.

<sup>31</sup> This relationship is explained by Stephen Kite’s ‘Building Texts + Reading Fabrics: Metaphor, Memory, and Material in John Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*’ (2012) and evident in Thomas and Janowitz. The examination of the fragment allows one to infer the larger meaning of the whole.

Ruskin sees that decay can apply to materials or concepts, but its contextual value determines its relative meaning. It is important to understand how he values decay and how he envisions form. In a cursory gloss of Ruskin's references to decay, there appear to be discrepancies about its meaning and how it is valued. At times, decay is inimically referenced; in others, it is nobly endowed. The ethos of decay largely depends on what is experiencing decay; deprecatory implications are relatively straightforward, but the noble ideas of decay contain deeper associations within the spectrum of the Ideal. In Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin speaks of the ideal in relation to vital beauty, where the 'impressions of beauty are connected with more or less perfect fulfilment of the *appointed* function by *different individuals* of the same species' and that the 'perfect *idea* of the form and condition in which all the properties of the species are fully developed, is called the Ideal of the species' (*Works*, 4:163-4). Everything in the world, as created by the deity (the 'species'), can achieve its own unique fulfilment (the 'ideal'), which Ruskin calls a 'discharge of function' as a measure of intrinsic potentiality (*Works*, 4:173). Those instances that fulfil this ideal potential thus attain a greater sense of nobility and beauty. There is no restriction as to what is ideally measured; as Ruskin notes, 'there is an ideal of infancy, of youth, of old age, of death, and of decay' (*Works*, 4:174). By his own estimation, Ruskin allows for the possibility that decay, something otherwise considered deleterious, could possess an ideal vital beauty if its inherent function is optimally sated. Ruskin is frustratingly quiet about what this fulfilment could be, but decay's denouement becomes clearer as his ruminations on architecture, landscape, nature, and wisdom evolve and mature. I will return to the topic of ideal form later in this chapter and Chapter 3; however, my task now is to demonstrate how such an ideal fulfilment of decay is possible by examining its emergence in architectural and mountain forms, beginning with Ruskin's early influences and thoughts.

The influences of decay are readily evident in the natural and social world around Ruskin, but finding the presence of decay in his thought is not a straightforward path. It lies nascent in his early interest in the Picturesque, remains nameless in the character of aged buildings, resides in the geological jargon of mountain form, and finds final expression in his mature thoughts and writings on wisdom and myth. Ruskin himself was not completely aware of the parallels drawn in his investigations until his studies and reflections on mountain form and wisdom began to take shape. Sdegno (2015) posits that



despite their beauty, Ruskin saw the Alps as ‘decaying and condemned’.<sup>32</sup> Conversely, Richard L. Stein (1985) notes that Ruskin’s study of mountain form and the causes of its erosion, mixed with his aesthetic appreciation of nature’s forms, led him to consider that decay may not be such a pernicious condition.<sup>33</sup> The resolution lies somewhere in between. The sublimity of the Alps, Ruskin’s spiritual touchstone for the divine presence in the world, is beautiful even though it is falling apart, disintegrating and deforming before his very eyes. This situation becomes Ruskin’s paradox: how can he reconcile the fall from an original form shaped by the hand of the Creator with the sublimity and beauty of its present decaying state? The power of the Swiss landscape was something he could not dismiss or explain away using causal geological theory; the mountains and landscape as he sees them—or as he first saw them—must have meaning beyond picturesque quaintness or Burke’s terrifying emotional response and embrace a singular divine truth and intention that guarantees their enduring beauty. His solution is to envision the process of decay as an intentional part of the divine plan by invoking God’s will through nature’s forms and forces.

Ruin and decay lived synonymously in both visual and textual expression, with their imagery, both conceptually and perceptually, coinciding. His exposure to the aesthetic effects of decay began at an early age and was introduced through art, literature, and science. Ruskin’s early introduction to the Picturesque gave him an understanding of decay as a novelty—the interesting and visually appealing aspect of a pleasing scene. However, this appeal quickly faded as Ruskin’s insights into transcendent Romantic associations with landscape and ruin painting grew. The poetry and prose of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and the Lake Poets, especially Wordsworth, framed his perception of landscape and ruin in relation to individualistic feelings and symbolic beliefs. Exposure to the paintings and watercolours of Samuel Prout (1783-1852) and Turner gave him a visual reference for these inclinations. Ruskin’s exemplar was Turner, who could express Romantic passion and insight in an unkempt, and expressive picturesque style. In Turner’s work, a landscape or ruin’s novelty is replaced with pathos—scenes become statements about the heart and not the eye. In contrast, Prout’s work captured Ruskin’s love of

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<sup>32</sup> Emma Sdegno, ‘The Alps’, in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, ed. by Francis O’Gorman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 40.

<sup>33</sup> Richard L. Stein, ‘Milk, Mud, and Mountain Cottages: Ruskin’s Poetry of Architecture’, in *PMLA* 100, no. 3 (May 1985), p. 336.

facticity in the artist's slavish devotion to detail. Prout did not paint to amuse but rather to record, a trait that Ruskin's favourite Alpine explorers Saussure and James David Forbes (1809-1868) shared. If Turner's work taught Ruskin how to feel landscape, the mountaineers taught him to see it. At the heart of Ruskin's aesthetic appreciation of decay lies the combination of the allegorical message couched in the facticity of the material existence of mountain decay and ruin.

Ruskin was not an armchair critic; he got up close to the subjects of his favourite paintings and poems. He climbed through buildings in the same manner as he scrambled through the Alps: measuring and sketching every stone and every form that caught his discerning eye. He put himself in the position to observe the minute and massive effects of decay on buildings and landscapes—he was a first-hand witness to the effects of erosion. It was obvious very early on that decay was caused by the forces of nature: wind, rain, snow, ice, and waves. Under the persistence of erosion, rocks and stones disintegrate and fall apart; their original outlines, shapes, and forms of buildings or mountains lose their definition. The erosion of *material* and deterioration of *form* came to define Ruskin's understanding of decay in architecture and mountains.

### 1.0.2 Architecture & Mountains in Decay

If there be visible pensiveness in the building, as in a ruined abbey, it becomes, or claims to become, beautiful; but the picturesqueness is in the unconscious suffering,—the look that an old labourer has, not knowing that there is anything pathetic in his grey hair, and withered arms, and sunburnt breast; and thus there are the two extremes, the consciousness of pathos in the confessed ruin, which may or may not be beautiful, according to the kind of it; and the entire denial of all human calamity and care, in the swept properties and neatnesses of English modernism: and, between these, there is the unconscious confession of the facts of distress and decay, in by-words; the world's hard work being gone through all the while, and no pity asked for, nor contempt feared.

(*Works*, 6:14-5)

Ruskin's description of the Calais spire in the opening of Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* is a study in architectural endurance. A later sketch by Ruskin in 1880 from the harbour portrays the tower dominant behind a gaggle of fishing boats (Figure 2). The gestural style characteristic of his old age has none of the careful outlines and delicate details of his early architectural sketches yet still communicates the strength and power of the venerable old buildings. This is not a lapse into picturesque quaintness, but a comment on the enduring character he alludes to in the above quotation. The loss of form or outline



Figure 2: John Ruskin. *Calais Harbour*, 1880. Pencil and bodycolour on grey paper.  
The Ruskin, Lancaster University.

had ramifications in Ruskin's understanding of architecture and mountains. Yet, there was also an allegorical reference to a building or mountain's endurance and character when confronting effacement. In buildings, the Victorian debate concerning the restoration of decaying buildings centred on bringing them back to their original form. Ruskin opposed this, saying that restoration is 'the most total destruction which a building can suffer' (*Works*, 8:242). Such an effort would erase the tell-tale signs of the workman's 'manual sacrifice' and the scars from enduring centuries of exposure to the natural elements. True architecture, Ruskin tells us, is an expression 'of *suffering*, of *poverty*, or *decay*, nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart', which are allegorical examples of English character (*Works*, 6:14). Decay is not a detriment but a visible indication and test of virtuous and humble strength of character. Ruskin liked architecture after 'four or five centuries have passed over it' (*Works*, 8:241). His enjoyment of architecture happens only when 'being partly in decay' (*Works*, 35:350); he loved looking at 'mouldering traceries' but also possessed a 'love of rough stones themselves' (*Works*, 35:350). The aesthetic qualities he admired also possessed a moral value that validated his experience: he could enjoy old buildings and was morally justified to do so.

Old buildings and eroding mountains feature prominently in Ruskin's works, but their connection and explanation have not been sufficiently addressed in the surveys of his writings and thoughts.<sup>34</sup> This exploration of unexamined architectural and geological themes spans the entirety of Ruskin's collected works, beginning with his earliest childhood experiences of northern England and Scotland in 'On Skiddaw and Derwent Water' (1827) and 'Haddon Hall' (1830) to his final published books and letters, such as *The Bible of Amiens* (1880) and *Deucalion* (1883). Exploring why Ruskin loved aged architecture and mountain peaks leads to a more subtle study of form in terms of shape and outline, materiality in terms of substance and its internal order and structure, and intention in terms of a divine plan and natural action. These three concepts are irrevocably intertwined, with one often informing the other, such as in *The Ethics of the Dust*, where the intentional internal ordering of a fluor crystal Ruskin describes to his young students is actually a lesson on moral behaviour embedded in a story centred on wisdom-myth, mineralogy, and architecture.<sup>35</sup> Uncovering the topics of decay, creation, and wisdom opens another intricate connection of themes across the scope of Ruskin's oeuvre. While some of these aspects have been touched upon in Ruskin scholarship, such as Ballantyne (2015), Birch (1988), Wheeler (1999), Landow (1971), and Fitch, a sustained investigation of these themes in concert has yet to be completed.<sup>36</sup>

However, in relation to the decay of mountains and architecture, it is apparent that Ruskin sees it as a positive destiny for noble buildings and mountain peaks. Architecture 'must perish', yet its decay is a 'golden stain of time', reminding us of its endurance and preciousness (*Works*, 8:234). In his mind, Ruskin sees that the divine laws set forth for humanity exist eternally and are unchanging, and transgressions against such a covenant result in a fall from grace. Ruskin uses the architecture of Venice to explain how moral corruption is expressed through material form by correlating the collapse of Venetian morality with the decline in the quality of architectural ornamentation. But Venice's

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<sup>34</sup> Some studies have pointed towards the connection between architecture and geology. Richard L. Stein alludes to the connection between architectural and geological terminology in Ruskin's thinking. Stein (May 1985), 337. Ann Gagné points towards a geological foundation for Ruskin's understanding of architecture. See Gagné, 127-8.

<sup>35</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Ethics*.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Ballantyne, *John Ruskin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), Dinah Birch, *Ruskin's Myths* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), Wheeler (1999), Landow (1971), and Fitch have explored aspects of architectural and geological thought, ruin, and wisdom in their investigations but have not put forth a coherent explanation of their interconnection. Subsequent chapters will expand the connections between their positions and the argument of my thesis.

warning relates to the choices made by humanity; the physical laws of nature abide by a different covenant. Objects in the material world are subject to erosion and degradation; their form and material cannot withstand the forces of nature. Ruskin understands these forces have been put in place and governed by the divine hand. Assuming an all-knowing Deity, Ruskin reasons that decay is as much a part of God's plan as Creation; by creating nature's erosive forces in parallel with nature's forms, God creates intending to uncreate. Understanding that decay and creation are intended, Ruskin sees the decay of the Great Architect's material work as glorious rather than gloomy.<sup>37</sup>

### 1.0.3 Creation, Decay, and Wisdom

To Ruskin, mountains are amongst the first examples of divine craft; they are existent and enduring material proof of God's creative intentions. Whereas the aging of buildings appeared to be self-evident, he struggled with a mountain's deteriorating form. In standing before a peak in the Alps, Ruskin asks:

I can hardly conceive any one standing face to face with one of these towers of central rock, and yet not also asking himself, Is this indeed the actual first work of the Divine Master on which I gaze? Was the great precipice shaped by His finger, as Adam was shaped out of the dust?

(*Works*, 6:209)

If they existed at all, the original mountain's forms and outlines of God's creation have long deteriorated over the unknown millennia of degradation. This left Ruskin believing that the eroding forms, though not original in outline, represented a part of God's greater plan, saying that it is 'not so much what these forms of the earth actually are, as what they are continually becoming, that we have to observe' (*Works*, 6:179). He focused on what he called 'Unsculpturing', or the third period of earth's history, the state of 'steady degradation' where mountains are 'worn or ruined down' (*Works*, 26:118). His geological investigations of landscape and mountains did not indulge in orogeny—or how mountains are built—but in erosion and the natural forces of decay: 'I do not myself care in the least what happened to [mountains] till they were cold' (*Works*, 26:119). The interaction of secondary causes, or the physical laws of nature, and the material remnants of the earth's

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<sup>37</sup> The final two chapters, Chapter XIX "The Mountain Gloom" and Chapter XX "The Mountain Glory" of Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, introduce this perceptual dichotomy and spiritual reality. Nicolson also explores the perceived split between divine intention and human action. See Marjorie Hope Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959).

first form was still evidence of a divine will and a divine hand at play.<sup>38</sup> In the natural forces of decay, Ruskin would find signs of the Divine will as the intentional destruction of the earth's forms.

For Ruskin, the Great Architect set the template for how to build. God made the earth and mountains for the beneficence of humanity and instilled them with a positive value, as Scripture remarks on creation by stating that 'God saw that it was good'.<sup>39</sup> As part of Creation, God not only creates the physical forms but the natural forces of the earth, including the realities of light, water, and air and their operations.<sup>40</sup> These creative and operational actions are governed by wisdom, where 'the Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew'.<sup>41</sup> Wisdom is present in the making of the world alongside God, 'when he established the heavens, I was there',<sup>42</sup> and by extension, its operation, which includes the forces of decay: wind, water, and rain. Wisdom, as Ruskin's Athena, is 'the queen of the air; having supreme power both over its blessings of calm, and wrath of storm' (*Works*, 19:305). Ruskin's understanding and exploration of creation have been addressed in Landow's investigation of Ruskin's aesthetic theories but does not account for the alignment of both creation and decay as a singular intention.<sup>43</sup> Ruskin's explorations of nature's form and material led him to consider how intention governs their inevitable decay, a form of governance he eventually understands as wisdom. Sharon Aronofsky Weltman (1998), Wheeler (1999), and Birch (1988) explore the identity of Ruskin's wisdom and expression through myth but do not account for its connection to governing both creation and decay, especially in architectural ruins and mountain form.<sup>44</sup> Examples of wisdom appear throughout Ruskin's earliest writings and in his more dedicated texts, but their impact on architecture and geology has not been assessed or connected. My argument traces a trajectory of these themes of creation and decay as they impact areas of Ruskin's writings on architecture, geology, and wisdom.

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<sup>38</sup> Secondary causes were at the centre of the debate between natural theology and physico-theology where the former is evidence of revealed theology through rational understanding and the latter is evidence of divine order and intention nature's laws. See Ann Blair and Kaspar von Greyerz, *Physico-Theology: Religion and Science in Europe, 1650-1750* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), pp. 2-3.

<sup>39</sup> Genesis 1. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Genesis 1. 3-31, 2. 1-14.

<sup>41</sup> Proverbs 3. 19-20.

<sup>42</sup> Proverbs 8. 27.

<sup>43</sup> Landow (1971).

<sup>44</sup> Wheeler (1999), Birch (1988), and Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, *Ruskin's Mythic Queen* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998).

The governance of decay was not directly in God's hands but as intention through secondary causation. These secondary causes are under the dominion of wisdom, which God created 'at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago'.<sup>45</sup> Wisdom stands beside yet distinct from God, an independent hypostatic entity enacting the *ousia* of the Divine will. Wisdom appears in Ruskin's ruminations as the Egyptian's Neith, Homer's Athena, and Solomon's Sophia (*Works*, 18:231) and assumes multiple roles and responsibilities over the breadth of his writings: wisdom directs moral action, is the source of creative inspiration, and is the intrinsic character of natural forces that 'unsculpt' materials and forms of buildings and mountains. Ruskin creates his vision of wisdom, whom he later calls his Queen of the Air, and aligns her power and purpose with the atmospheric forces of the earth. Fitch states that Ruskin:

[H]as identified Athena with two correlative forces in the organic model as it appears to ordinary observation. She is a spirit in the sense of passion (thus far related only to human life), and she is spirit or power by which matter decisively forms itself into particular organizations.<sup>46</sup>

In making wisdom responsible for the natural forces of erosion and degradation, Ruskin finds divine intention, and thus validation, in the decaying material and forms of humanity's and God's material creations.

#### 1.0.4 Four Aspects of Decay

For the purposes of my argument, I identify four primary areas to contextualize decay in Ruskin's thoughts and writings. These include an understanding of scriptural basis of decay as a fall from grace, evidenced in the Deluge, the Fall, and the Curse of Cain narratives;<sup>47</sup> the moral elements of decay evident in Victorian art, society, politics, economics that speak of a perceived steady degradation and disregard of natural law;<sup>48</sup> aesthetic representations of decay celebrated in Romantic poetry<sup>49</sup> and the Picturesque<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Proverbs 8. 22.

<sup>46</sup> Fitch, p. 567.

<sup>47</sup> Landow and Wheeler explain the importance of Scripture to Ruskin's worldview. See George P. Landow, *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows* (Boston: Routledge, 1980) and Wheeler (1999).

<sup>48</sup> For my argument, I engage with various sources discussing Victorian society's decay. Specific examples include Fitch, J.W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), and Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> Decay in Romantic poetry, especially the ruin, is explored in Charles Kostelnick, 'Wordsworth, Ruins, and the Aesthetics of Decay', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 19, no. 1 (Winter, 1988), 20-28, and Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

<sup>50</sup> There are several significant and insightful investigations of the Picturesque that are important to my argument, including Hussey (1967), Andrews (1989), and Robinson (1991).

tradition that focuses on the recurring tropes of ruin and fragment in literature and art;<sup>51</sup> and a material decay evident in the causal erosion of geological and architectural forms.<sup>52</sup> At any given moment in Ruskin's thoughts, all of these could be at play in the service of various intentions. Consider his ruminations on the Vine and Fig-tree ornament of the Ducal Palace in Venice (Figure 3),<sup>53</sup> the profile of the Aiguille Chamois overlooking Chamonix (Figure 4),<sup>54</sup> or the crystallized arrangement of a rose fluor crystal (*Works*, 18:221-232); even when he appears to be speaking of architecture, geology, or mineralogy, Ruskin extends his critique to encompass corollary arguments on the lapse of artistic integrity, the beneficence of Alpine forms for the human soul, or the decline of architectural authenticity. The divergence of Ruskin's thought can make him difficult to follow—when he speaks about architecture, he is not speaking *about* architecture—but this provides greater opportunities to connect themes and ideas in a cross-disciplinary and intertextual manner, bringing greater coherence and unity to his observations of the erosion and degradation he saw in the world around him as an imaginary of decay. This allows for the concept of decay to be explored in a much larger context and, as George Hersey (1982) argues, across non-linear threads of thought not restricted to sequence or time.<sup>55</sup> The sources of decay identified here informed Ruskin's thinking, while others emerged from his investigations, but all contributed to his larger understanding of the meaning and intention of decay.

## 1.1 The Scriptural Basis of Decay

Decay has a presence in the events of the Bible and organized religious thought, especially the Evangelical emphasis on the depravity of humanity caused by Original Sin. Ruskin's religious conviction and struggles with Evangelicalism are well established by

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<sup>51</sup> This can be found in Janowitz (1990), Sophie Thomas, 'The Fragment in Ruins', and Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *The Unfinished Manner* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), and Thomas (2008).

<sup>52</sup> The combination of architecture and geology in my argument draws on a variety of disciplinary sources, such as Gordon L. Davies, *The Earth in Decay* (London: McDonald & Co., 1968), Macarthur (April 1997), Garrigan (1973), and Georg Simmel, 'The Ruin', *The Hudson Review*, 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1958), 379-385.

<sup>53</sup> See *Works*, 10:359-363.

<sup>54</sup> See *Works*, 6:231-240.

<sup>55</sup> George L. Hersey, 'Ruskin as an Optical Thinker', in *The Ruskin Polygon: Essays on the Imagination of John Ruskin*, ed. by John Dixon Hunt and Faith M. Holland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), pp. 46-7.





Figure 3: John Ruskin. 'Plate 19: Leafage of the Vine Angle' from Volume 2, *The Stones of Venice*. 1853.  
Engraving.

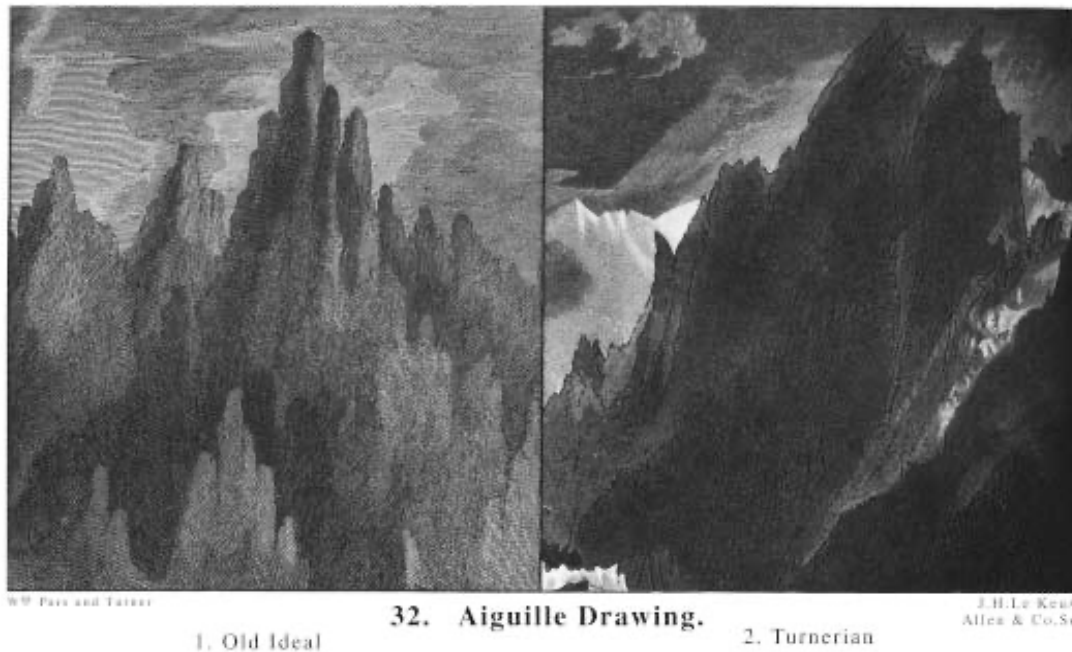


Figure 4: John Ruskin. ‘Plate 32: Aiguille Drawing’ from Volume 4, *Modern Painters*. 1856. Engraving.

Hilton, Fitch, Wheeler (1999), and O’Gorman (2015).<sup>56</sup> Ruskin may have struggled with his mother’s religious indoctrination, but he always remained spiritual even in his most agnostic state and held a lifelong affiliation with Scripture. The Old Testament conveys examples of moral and physical decay through Original Sin, the Curse of Cain, and the Deluge. These events involve humanity and divine intentions or the direct exercise of God’s will. As Daniels (2018) notes, these scriptural events and moral lessons were filtered through the lens of Margaret Ruskin’s nonconformist Evangelicalism.<sup>57</sup> There are many definitions and understandings of what being evangelical means.<sup>58</sup> Ruskin’s exposure to Evangelical teachings in his youth is explained by Wheeler and Hilton, showing how the sermons of Revd Dr Edward Andrews, Henry Melvill, and J.C. Ryle helped shape Ruskin’s understanding of humanity’s existential condition. Hilton notes that Ruskin

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<sup>56</sup> See Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Fitch, Wheeler (1999), and O’Gorman (2015).

<sup>57</sup> Daniels characterizes Margaret Ruskin’s religious position as ‘nonconformist Protestantism’ and a literalist, which would put her in line with the Evangelical positions Ruskin speaks of in *Praeterita* (see *Works*, 35:71, 92, 128, 179, 250). See Anthony Daniels, ‘John Ruskin and Margaret’, in *Writers and Their Mothers*, ed. by Dale Salwak (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 11-20 (pp. 14-5).

<sup>58</sup> Mark A. Noll, ‘What is “Evangelical”?’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. by Gerald R. McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 19-32.

appreciated ‘Evangelicalism’s fervour, its insistence on the authority of the Scriptures, its stress on salvation in the atoning death of Christ, its belief in the importance of preaching and its lack of interest in liturgical worship’.<sup>59</sup> Through Ruskin’s understanding of scriptural events and their impact on the human condition, the breaking of the covenants constitutes a fall from grace and a literal deterioration, degradation, and decay of the world. In this context, decay exists as an existential and physical condition, both consequences and eventualities of human disobedience against divine law.

### 1.1.1 Scriptural Literalism

Decay in Scripture appears to be a consequence of Original Sin and applies to the physical degradation of the earth and human morality. Genesis accounts for the creation of the earth, the forces of nature, and, eventually, humanity’s presence. God called His creations good, but they were neither self-sustaining nor unchanging. It is unclear in Scripture if the laws of nature known to the Earth operated similarly within Eden. If they did, the presence of trees, vegetation, and fruits indicated that growth did occur because they required management. Adam was not only the first tenant of the Garden of Eden, but also charged with tilling the ground and taking care of it.<sup>60</sup> Eden may have existed in an ideal state, but it required horticultural maintenance because of the continuous growth and presumed decay of vegetation. Thus, Paradise was not a static environment but one subject to change; agents of erosion were in place since Creation. Water is a primary agent of physical and material erosion. The presence of water in the form of the four rivers of Eden would be necessary for the growth of life. In his geological theory, Ruskin identifies the effects of steady degradation as incarnations of water, the ‘rain, torrent, and glacier of human days’ (*Works*, 26:112). Aqueous erosion is enacted by the force and will of the air, where Athena, as the goddess of wisdom, ‘is the wind and the rain’ (*Works*, 19:333) and ‘the snow, the vapour, and the stormy wind fulfil His word’ (*Works*, 8:24). There is mention of a recurring ‘evening breeze’ in Eden that coincides with God’s stroll through the garden after Adam and Eve consumed the forbidden fruit.<sup>61</sup> Notably, the presence of a wind coincides with a divine presence, a mingling Ruskin alludes to in the wisdom narratives of *Queen*. Both water and air—Ruskin’s requisite elements for material decay vis-à-vis the

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<sup>59</sup> Hilton, p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> Genesis 2. 15-16.

<sup>61</sup> Genesis 3. 8.

forces of nature—are present in Eden before the Fall and Expulsion but not set in motion because of Original Sin.

The paradisaical condition of Eden is upset by humanity's defiance of God's laws. Adam, Eve, and the serpent are punished for their sins, but not equally. The snake and Eve endure bodily curses, but Adam is not punished directly. Instead, the ground is cursed on his behalf, thus making his and, by extension, humanity's existence difficult.<sup>62</sup> The toil of the Earth replaced the bounty of Paradise, and God's own creation suffers because of humanity's misconduct.<sup>63</sup> It is unclear if the world was intended to decay before Original Sin, but the earth being cursed coincides with human disobedience. Outside of Eden and God's grace, the world and everything in it are destined to age and grow old. The Fall is set up as the beginning of the inevitable decline and decay of humanity and the world until the Resurrection.

The course of events brings into question divine action as active or reactive. God appears to react to humanity's transgressions but, in so doing, undermines His own omniscience—how did God not see this coming? How could humanity's disobedience be explained or condoned if God knows all? It is evident throughout Scripture that God is omniscient. In Romans, Paul confirms God's omnipotence that 'for him and through him and to him are all things'.<sup>64</sup> God also knows all points in time, declaring that 'I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done'.<sup>65</sup> God is all-knowing and all-powerful; there is nothing that God does not know or cannot do. It is reasonable to assume that human sin must be anticipated from such a position. From a larger scriptural narrative, the major themes of paradise, the fall and redemption, form a larger lesson for humanity known only at the end: God will 'bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ'.<sup>66</sup> Rather than appearing as a reaction to events, God's actions could be seen as something that has already been determined and constructed for the education of humanity about God's love and glory. The all-knowing position means everything occurs as God intended—a premeditated act. This position is vital to Ruskin's understanding of the intention of decay.

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<sup>62</sup> Genesis 3. 17.

<sup>63</sup> Genesis 2. 15-16.

<sup>64</sup> Romans 11. 36.

<sup>65</sup> Isaiah 46. 9-10.

<sup>66</sup> Ephesians 1. 10.

Ruskin's careful study of the Bible and its allegories informed much of his worldview. Decay, in the biblical sense, is a fall from the perfect or paradisaical state, both in terms of humanity and the natural world. This consequence is punishment for disobeying God's eternal laws—humanity's actions have set the world of decay into motion as evil entered the world and God denied humanity eternal life. After Expulsion and the collapse of an ideal existence, the human body now succumbs to aging, as does the wreck of Paradise, both withering and decaying. Divine punishment is not without hope, however, as there is redemption for those who embrace the word of God. Presented with a choice, humanity is offered a path towards salvation and reclamation of the city of Paradise. As much as the new Jerusalem was the spiritual terminus of religious devotion, humanity's own buildings and cities of the terrestrial past and present could constitute a third temple, celebrating the covenant and wisdom of the divine word and law. From Ruskin's position, this was the promise of Revelation but complicated by humanity's inherent wickedness, espoused through his Evangelical moral education. Dealing with humanity's depraved state would contextualize Ruskin's attitude toward moral decay.

### 1.1.2 Decay Narratives in Christian Scripture

Evangelical examples of decay centre on humanity's moral failings. Because of Original Sin, humanity is in a fallen and corrupted state. As noted by Noll (2010) and Atherstone and Jones (2019), defining Evangelicalism and its core tenets remain a difficult endeavour, but sources closer to Victorian times can provide a clearer context to the world in which Ruskin lived.<sup>67</sup> In 1867, Ryle published his five features of Evangelicalism, where after the authority of Scripture, the fallen condition is its most important feature.<sup>68</sup> According to Ryle, humanity is not only in a 'miserable, pitiable, and bankrupt condition, but in a state of guilt, imminent danger, and condemnation before God'.<sup>69</sup> Wheeler (1999) speaks of Ruskin's early evangelical indoctrination and the emphasis placed on 'the total depravity of man'<sup>70</sup> and how in his youth, he was attentive to the sermons of Revds Dr

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<sup>67</sup> Noll, pp. 19-32. Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones, 'Evangelicals and Evangelicalisms: Contested Identities', in *The Routledge Research Companion to the History of Evangelicalism*, ed. by Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 1-21.

<sup>68</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Knots Untied* (London: William Hunt and Co., 1885), p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Wheeler (1999), p. 15. In Wheeler's book, Ruskin's early influences point towards a strong exposure to Evangelical sermons and preaching where "fallen Humanity" (p. 16) and "everlasting damnation" (p. 25) were conditions beset humanity.

Andrews, Thomas Dale, Dr John Cumming, Thomas Scott, and Melvill.<sup>71</sup> Wheeler notes Ruskin's exposure to sermons and tracts of Revd Thomas Dale (1797-1870) and Revd Henry Melvill (1798-1871) about themes of decay and degradation, the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 was described as 'the end of the established world order', and Revd Dr John Cumming's sermon on 'Fallen Humanity' and moral depravity.<sup>72</sup> Hewison (1976) emphasizes Ryle's first two points—the literal truth of the Bible and the essential wickedness and corruption of humanity—as early influences on Ruskin.<sup>73</sup> In his youth, Ruskin often heard that humanity's fall from grace is still with us wherever we do not follow God's laws.

Such influence found expression in Ruskin's compilation of moral commentary, called 'Sermons on the Pentateuch' by Viljoen,<sup>74</sup> where he wrote about the 'utter wickedness of the human soul'.<sup>75</sup> Ruskin learned that the world was dark, dead, and depraved, and, as Landow points out, before he knew what depravity was, he knew he was depraved.<sup>76</sup> Humanity, it would seem, was already in a state of decay, much like the world around it. In his book *The Poison Sky* (1982), Fitch argues that these early apocalyptic indoctrinations would shadow Ruskin's life.<sup>77</sup> However, Wheeler argues for Ruskin's proclivity towards wisdom, to learn God's will, as a way out of the depravity and darkness of the world.<sup>78</sup> Ruskin struggled with an orthodox belief throughout his life, but his spiritual commitment rarely waned. It was prevalent throughout his thinking, whether it accurately reflected dogmatic belief. O'Gorman (2015) convincingly claims that Ruskin's thinking 'makes little sense without an understanding of his religious commitments',<sup>79</sup> and

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<sup>71</sup> Wheeler notes the influential reverends and sermons the Ruskin family attended between 1837 and 1841, particularly those who inspired Ruskin's unpublished and published Evangelical commentaries 'Essay on Baptism' (1850-1), *Notes of the Construction of Sheepfolds* (1851), *The Nature and Authority of Miracle* (1873), and *Letters to the Clergy on the Lord's Prayer and the Church* (1879-1880). See Wheeler (1999), pp. 3-26.

<sup>72</sup> Wheeler (1999), pp. 12-16.

<sup>73</sup> Hewison and Landow also references the influence of Ryle's *Evangelical Religion, What It Is, and What It Is Not* on Margaret Ruskin's faith. See Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 24-5 and Landow (1971), pp. 248-9.

<sup>74</sup> According to Van Akin Burd, before her death in 1974, Helen Gill Viljoen had been editing Ruskin's sermons on the Pentateuch he had written when he was 12 or 13. These five booklets were never included in the bibliography of Ruskin's manuscripts. Viljoen believed that these sermons were 'a basis for understanding the growth of his religious thought' (p. 2). See Van Akin Burd, 'Ruskin's Testament of his Boyhood Faith: *Sermons on the Pentateuch*', in *New Approaches to Ruskin: Thirteen Essays*, ed. by Robert Hewison (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 1-2.

<sup>75</sup> Ruskin as quoted by Van Akin Burd. See Burd, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Landow (1971), p. 244.

<sup>77</sup> Fitch, p. 25.

<sup>78</sup> Wheeler (1999), pp. 8-16.

<sup>79</sup> O'Gorman (2015), p. 144.

Wheeler argues for Ruskin's progression towards a Solomon-type figure by examining the entirety of his Christian beliefs, espousing eternal wisdom for a troubled age rather than promoting a singular doctrinal message.<sup>80</sup> The moral elements of decay were present in Ruskin's religious beliefs, but his optimism for the future was also evident in his belief in the beautiful forms of nature and the guarantee of goodness provided by divine wisdom.

Ruskin acknowledges a deficit of religious and spiritual conviction in his day but holds hope for redemption and salvation. His primary interest is to awaken the individual to the glory of God through the natural world and its depiction in art. To achieve this, he felt that a moral re-education was necessary, akin to the Evangelical proclamations and an opening of the heart to the glorious experiences of nature provided by the Romantic aesthetics of Turner, Scott, and Wordsworth. Ruskin's *Poetry*, *Modern Painters*, *Seven Lamps*, and *Stones*, balance moral and aesthetic education in their message. Humanity's atonement can be achieved through religious devotion to overcome the inherent disease of moral decay inflicted by Original Sin. Ruskin's preachings seek to condition the heart and mind to the glory of the divine, which is evident in the forms and forces of the world.

Decay is attributable to humanity's actions, yet the earth bears the scars of this depravity. There emerge two conditions of decay derived from Scripture: the depravity of humanity because Original Sin was a corruption humanity inflicted on itself. The earth exists as a victim of Original Sin, bearing the scars of humanity's actions.<sup>81</sup> In Ruskin's examination of landscape and mountain forms, he does not see the earth as degraded or defiled—it is quite the opposite. His understanding of scriptural decay and degradation is largely conditioned by what he experienced first-hand: the truth and beauty of nature. Despite its tragic scriptural history, the forms of the earth remain exquisite to Ruskin's eye. Rosenberg reminds us that Ruskin attributes 'perfection to all the orders of the natural world', but believes in the 'corruption and depravity of *human* nature (and) man bears the terrible stamp of degradation, his features are lined by sickness, darkened by sensuality, convulsed by passion'.<sup>82</sup> Ruskin does, however, adhere to the Evangelical position of the

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<sup>80</sup> The entire second half of *Ruskin's God*, titled 'Victorian Solomon', is dedicated to Ruskin's prophetic cause. See Wheeler (1999), pp. 155-279.

<sup>81</sup> Byron, following Kugel and Fisk, points out how the earth is complicit in Abel's death by hiding his blood and concealing Cain's deed. Byron highlights the debate over whether the earth or Cain is more cursed. See John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 95.

<sup>82</sup> John D. Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 23.

depravity of humanity, not only from a failed existential position but also from a perceptual deficit where humanity is unable (or unwilling) to witness true beauty in the world. Like the promise of redemption and salvation of the human soul through faith, Ruskin also believes in the redemption of perception by increasing the ability to perceive the noble landscape forms of the world properly. This situation identifies that humanity can recognize beauty in the world and that the world is still beautiful, even after the suffering it has endured because of humanity's pernicious decisions.

## 1.2 The Moral Aspects of Decay

Man's use and function [...] are, to be the witness of the glory of God, and to advance that glory by his reasonable obedience and resultant happiness.

(*Works*, 4:28-9)

Ruskin believed that humanity had a duty to serve and obey God and, through such fealty, find meaning and purpose in God's glory. God's instructions for humanity existed in the Bible as natural laws and the world itself through the laws of nature, 'God's second book'.<sup>83</sup> Ruskin read both books scrupulously. The laws and order of nature were an extension and reflection of scriptural direction, a universal moral authority governed by divine providence.<sup>84</sup> O'Gorman notes Ruskin's early obligation to divine instruction and respect for the 'world that God had fashioned for human instruction, support, and delight', and also noted Ruskin's emphasis on the 'reverent interpretation of nature' depicted through painting was likewise extended to the Gothic architectures of France and northern Italy.<sup>85</sup> Ruskin envisioned delight as a spiritual reward for obedience—the enjoyment of truth and beauty in nature and its representation through painting, where 'truth, as applied to art, signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind or senses, or any fact of nature' (*Works*, 3:104) and that 'any material object which can give us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities without direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful' (*Works*, 3:109). For him, this came through exercising in tandem the 'intellectual lens and moral retina' (*Works*, 4:36) to form moral perception: 'I wholly deny that the impressions of beauty are in any way sensual; they are neither sensual nor intellectual, but moral' (*Works*, 4:42). In isolation, the

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>84</sup> Murphy (Summer 2019 Edition).

<sup>85</sup> O'Gorman (2015), p. 145.



senses and intellect were insufficient in determining beauty, but in providential combination revealed the capacity to perceive divine order. Hewison (1976) notes that ‘the basis of Ruskin’s theory must be that beauty equals God’,<sup>86</sup> and Fitch follows, saying ‘to prove that beauty is essential to man, [Ruskin] relates the beautiful to religion and morality, to principles which are permanent, unchanging, and greater than man’.<sup>87</sup> Scripture provided moral security, nature provided the model, and humanity possessed the capacity to recognize instruction and rightness. The only dilemma humanity faced was the ability to obey, a moral proclivity where Ruskin felt humanity failed.

Ruskin’s moral position originated from his Evangelical teachings, and he was keenly aware of humanity’s failing and potential. Sonstroem (1982) and Fitch identify Ruskin’s growing tendency to envision an apocalyptic fate for humanity yet also hold to artistic and imaginative reverie by delighting in a sense of the divine.<sup>88</sup> Ruskin reflects on how depravity infects humanity’s individual and social actions, a condition he saw as prevalent in the nineteenth century. As Ruskin understands, morality is humanity’s instinctual adherence to natural law and the obligation to follow God’s will. In *Seven Lamps*, he calls this ‘the apprehension of duty’ and ‘the acknowledgement of right’ (*Works*, 8:20). Moral decisions are making the right choice, evidenced when Ruskin states, ‘I do not want marble churches at all for their own sake, but for the sake of the spirit that would build them’ (*Works*, 8:39). Three of the architectural Lamps—Sacrifice, Life, Obedience—enforce the moral charge of directing humanity’s efforts towards the glory of God. He finds moral proclivity in Gluck in *The King of the Golden River* (written 1841, published 1851), in Turner’s faithful representations of nature in *Modern Painters*, and the devotional architecture of the Middle Ages in *Seven Lamps*. He also admonishes the social failings and decline of true Christian faith evident in the preference for Renaissance architecture in *Stones*, the secularization of natural philosophy by modern science in *Deucalion*, *The Eagle’s Nest*, and *Ethics*, and society’s misuse of art and wealth in *The Political Economy of Art* (1857), *Unto This Last* (1862) and *Traffic* (1864). As Ruskin saw it, moral decay is a failure to adhere to and uphold the natural laws given to Moses and a failure to recognize the divine

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<sup>86</sup> Hewison (1976), p. 55.

<sup>87</sup> Landow (1971), p. 107.

<sup>88</sup> Fitch and David Sonstroem, ‘Prophet and Peripatetic in *Modern Painters* III and IV’ in *Studies in Ruskin*, ed. by Robert E. Rhodes and Del Ivan Janik (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982), pp. 85-114.

message inherent in the laws and forms of nature. As his father identified, Ruskin saw it as his duty to enlighten his readers of this decaying moral condition:

You are blessed with a fine Capacity & even Genius & you owe it as a Duty to the author of your Being & the giver of your Talents to cultivate your powers & to use them in his Service & for the benefit of your fellow Creatures.<sup>89</sup>

### 1.2.1 Victorian Instances of Decay

[T]here are many religions, but there is only one morality.

(*Works*, 20:49)

Ruskin made this statement on the relationship between art and religion in his *Lectures on Art* (1864). He continued to explain the eternal nature of morality for humanity:

There are moral and immoral religions, which differ as much in precept as in emotion; but there is only one morality, *which has been, is, and must be for ever, an instinct in the hearts of all civilized men, as certain and unalterable as their outward bodily form, and which receives from religion neither law, nor place; but only hope, and felicity.*

(*Works*, 20:49)

Ruskin's own religious allegiance was tested throughout his life, yet he maintained a moral proclivity strongly tied to his understanding of truth and beauty in nature, art, and architecture. As a product of God's mind and hand, nature was the literal touchstone of law and order. In Chapter 2 of *Deucalion*, Ruskin reflected on the forthcoming revisions to *Modern Painters* and the influence of religious thinking on his own work, saying:

These two Faiths, in the creating Spirit, as the source of Beauty,—in the governing Spirit, as the founder and maintainer of Moral law, are, I have said, *assumed* as the basis of all exposition and of all counsel, which have ever been attempted or offered in my books. I have never held it my duty, never ventured to think of it even as a permitted right, to proclaim or explain these faiths, except only by referring to the writings, properly called inspired, in which the good men of all nations and languages had concurrently—though at far distant and different times—declared them. But it has become now for many reasons [...] necessary for me to define clearly the meaning of the words I have used—the scope of the laws.

(*Works*, 26:334-5)

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<sup>89</sup> *The Ruskin Family Letters: The Correspondence of John James Ruskin, his Wife, and their Son, John, 1801-1843*, ed. by Van Akin Burd, 2 vols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), I, pp. 209-10.

Ruskin's collected works at the point in which he wrote that statement in 1883 expounded a rich investigation of virtues of the moral position across a spectrum of topics, including art, architecture, science, and economics, as well as the tragedies of their respective moral failings. To Ruskin, morality was an instinctual ability inherent in the human condition. Yet much of Victorian England seemed in denial of this reality, and it was his responsibility, as Wheeler (1999) notes, to remind them at every opportunity in his writings.<sup>90</sup>

The concept of decay existed across a broad spectrum of thought during the nineteenth century. As much as the Victorian era can be seen as a proto-modern period on the cusp of progressive human and technological achievement, it was also balanced by the view of an era of loss and decline. This contrast is evident in topics as diverse as society and morality, politics and economics, art and architecture, literature and poetry, and geology and science.<sup>91</sup> The onset of positivism, instrumental science, and industry challenged these areas. The continuity of customs, traditions, and history seemed in jeopardy, creating nostalgia and melancholy for the structure and security of the past. As Shrimpton (2015) asserts, Ruskin was keenly aware of this state, arguing on both sides of the issue for advancement in art, economy, and the environment while also advocating for the protection of traditional values, morals, and ethics, which he perceived to be in decay.<sup>92</sup>

Victorian England was a place and era of contrasts. Progressive industrialization, urbanization, politics and economics pushed the country forward. Continued colonial expansion and the establishment of financial markets led to increased manufacturing, trade, and capital accumulation. Emerging factories in cities, mines in the hills, and farms in the country all demonstrated new methods of production and mechanization. These centres became increasingly interconnected by expanding roads, canals, and railroads, allowing raw materials, manufactured goods, and people to flow throughout the country and beyond. This new age was predicated on entrepreneurial, liberal, and scientific modes of thinking; there was an optimistic faith in technology and mechanization. Britain also emerged as a centre of scientific thought with Michael Faraday (1791-1867) and Maxwell's

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<sup>90</sup> Wheeler (1999), p. 26.

<sup>91</sup> This complex situation is captured by Burrow and Fritzsche. Additional and specific examples of nineteenth-century issues will appear further in the text in relation to the argument's topics and themes.

<sup>92</sup> Nicholas Shrimpton, 'Politics and Economics' in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 118-9.

experiments in electromagnetism, Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, Lyell's geological uniformitarianism, and even Whewell's introduction of the term 'scientist' saw the dawn of a new profession, one based on inductive reasoning and inquiry pioneered in the emerging science of geology.<sup>93</sup> This spirit of the age captured Victorian minds, opening possibilities and opportunities for new areas of investigation and new ways of thinking.

These scientific, social, and industrial revolutions came at a cost. Increased manufacturing and production meant changing the workforce and division of labour. Cities became the dominant centres of industrial production, and the rural population flooded the city streets in search of work as their source of income and ways of life dwindled. Populations expanded rapidly as labour conditions and standards of living fell. The marginally regulated factories spewed toxic smoke and pollution into the air, chemicals, and waste into the water, all in the name of productivity. Increased mechanization devalued a worker's contributions and, combined with poor labour and living conditions, produced a disillusioned city population and did not go unnoticed at the time, captured in the works of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), Dickens, and other critics of the time.<sup>94</sup> This rapid change threw the country into a divisive new era, one of equal parts potential and lament. Those who embraced this new modern reality reaped the economic, social, and political rewards; those sceptical of this strange new world questioned the loss and wilful abandonment of traditional values, beliefs, and norms.

Ruskin was aware of these issues, and he spoke out against what he saw as Victorian society's inability to make the correct moral choices, individually and as a nation. Graham MacDonald (2015) identifies Ruskin's response to the Victorian crisis in political economy, education, and justice by his emphasis on morality derived from religious dispositions.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, Shrimpton emphasized Ruskin's stance on the importance of bringing the religious beliefs of private life to economic and political moral

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<sup>93</sup> Laura J. Snyder, 'William Whewell', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/whewell/>.

<sup>94</sup> Charles Dickens (1812-1870), Thomas Carlyle (1795-1891), and Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) were all prominent critics, novelists, and essayists who wrote about the Victorian period's social, cultural, and ethical issues. Ruskin can be identified as being in sympathy with these critics (Carlyle) although he did not always agree with their positions (Dickens and Arnold).

<sup>95</sup> Graham A. MacDonald, "'Discipline and Interference": Ruskin's Political Economy, Natural Law, and the Moral Disorder of Victorian England', in *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20, no. 1 (2015), 50-64.

practice.<sup>96</sup> Ruskin saw art as a means through which a moral re-education could occur, both on an individual and national level. Ruskin's first foray into social economy, *The Political Economy of Art* (1857), was not concerned with the church-state relationship but rather cultivating the artist, as explained in the chapter 'The Nature of Gothic' from *Stones*, and recognizing artistic genius, as argued in *A Joy For Ever* (1880).<sup>97</sup> Ruskin is arguing for the right way for society and government to function in fecundity by adhering to natural law, saying 'the moment government ceases to be the practical enforcement of Divine Law, it is tyranny' (*Works*, 16:25). In *Unto This Last*, Ruskin discusses the differences between true and false wealth and the importance of administration and stewardship<sup>98</sup> and the value of labour.<sup>99</sup> Ruskin advocates for leadership, governance, and economy based on natural laws because he is aware of results when they are not.

### 1.2.2 Bright Lamps and Fallen Stones

[E]very form of architecture is in some sort the embodiment of the Polity, Life, History, and Religious Faith of nations.

(*Works*, 8:248)

And if I should succeed, as I hope, in making the Stone of Venice touch-stones, and detecting, by the mouldering of her marble, poison more subtle than ever was betrayed by the rending of her crystal; and if thus I am enabled to show the baseness of the schools of architecture and nearly every other art, which have for three centuries been predominant in Europe, I believe the result of the inquiry may be serviceable for proof of a more vital truth than any at which I have hitherto hinted.

(*Works*, 9:57-8)

In art, Ruskin lamented the Victorian inability to appreciate true and beautiful landscapes. In architecture, the situation is more complicated. In Volume 1 of *Stones*, Ruskin states that architecture has two noble duties: to do its 'practical duty well' and 'be graceful and pleasing in doing it' (*Works*, 9:60). A building's duty is to act and speak well, relaying through ornamental decoration at the hands of inspired craftsmen the moral

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<sup>96</sup> Shrimpton, p. 123.

<sup>97</sup> Graham A. MacDonald, *John Ruskin's Politics and Natural Law: An Intellectual Biography* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 90-1.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>99</sup> John T. Fain, *Ruskin and the Economists* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1956), pp. 139-141.

temper of the society that produced them. The pleasing aspect of architecture is how such a message is conveyed, typically through the execution of carving and choice of subject matter which was always preferable if taken from nature. Success in architectural expression depends on the right message being conveyed through the most appropriate means. Failure was sometimes levied at the poor execution of craft, but often, failure in architecture was attributed to poor statesmanship or stewardship. In Ruskin's estimation of poor architecture, it was a failure of human perceptual and intellectual ability and not a deficiency of material form. As a human endeavour, architecture has the potential to embody humanity's ideas, hopes, and aspirations in its ornament and decoration. When executed with reverence to sources of natural inspiration, such architectural statements promote the values and virtues of the noble society that procured them. When such execution strayed from its natural models, the material expression could be deficient. In *Poetry*, Ruskin established the potential of buildings to exist in harmony with the landscape and project the noble character of those who built and used it. In *Seven Lamps*, Ruskin outlined noble principles for proper building that were predicated on establishing a moral society where these buildings would be situated. As an example of such a co-existence, Ruskin looked to the architecture of Venice as a case study of triumph and failure, both in terms of moral position and noble architecture. For him, Venetian Gothic emerged as the epitome of architecture and society's potential, but its Renaissance turn served as a warning of what could happen to built form if that same society became corrupted, descending into pride, avarice, and impiety.

Ruskin wrote about the Venetian fall in *Stones* as a warning for Victorian Britain. Architecture in the nineteenth century emerged from the classically influenced Georgian and Regency periods into a debate over national identity and ongoing experimentation with new industrial materials and building techniques.<sup>100</sup> With the growth of urban centres and the rise of new building typologies, such as factories, railroad stations, and museums, the expressive potential and sheer volume of construction drove architectural design in new directions. The buildings from previous centuries and millennia were lost but not entirely forgotten. Buildings of little to no significance or use were either left to rot and

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<sup>100</sup> The dramatic transition and exploration in nineteenth-century architecture can be found in Barry Bergdoll's *European Architecture 1750-1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Kenneth Clark's *The Gothic Revival* (London: Penguin Books, 1964); and Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* (London: Penguin Books, 1975).

decay or torn down to make room for new construction; buildings with some cultural or historical significance were often restored to their original appearance or modified to meet the prevailing taste. However, national retrospection and introspection were to bring new life and importance to these old and decaying ruins. In Europe, the debate over ‘in what style should we build?’<sup>101</sup> directed architects and their respective nations to reflect on their architectural legacy, searching for a building style that accurately represented their national identity, history, and shared cultural values. In England, choosing the correct architectural style to represent all of Britain became a matter of loud public debate. Interest in the past was driven by investment in the future, and England looked to the Gothic style as its own aesthetic and moral way forward. Gothic architecture and the history associated with its emergence and dominance became the touchstone of Britain’s identity, and its stylistic forms became emblematic of its treasured virtues as Britain charted its way into the modern era.

Architecture in the nineteenth century could be viewed as the development of building processes reflecting and incorporating advancements in technology, materials, and techniques.<sup>102</sup> The vast potential of new building opportunities pushed the profession into new areas of experimentation and advancement. Architecture was also bound to the national identity crisis in the face of industrial modernity. Britain’s ruins, relics, and wrecks spoke of common ancestry and were valued for their historicity and allegory. Their presence cemented a connection of past to present, linking the values and traditions of the old with those of the present era. Ruskin’s relation to architecture is divided by these two conditions. He openly criticized the architectural profession’s new construction methods and materials because they denied the legacy of traditional building techniques and historical styles. He felt their intentions were aligned with the wrong values, focusing on novelty over substance. Ruskin treasured the old buildings and ruins of the Gothic past, not wanting them touched or restored for fear of losing the tangible connection with the individuals of the past who brought ‘those grey heaps of deep-wrought stone’ into

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<sup>101</sup> In Germany, the architect Heinrich Hübsch published a book in 1828 titled *In What Style Should We Build?* in response to the failure of the Greek Neoclassical style to properly address the demands of industrial manufacture and modern German lifestyle. See Heinrich Hübsch, *In What Style Should We Build?* (Santa Monica: The Getty Centre for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1828/1992), pp. 63-102.

<sup>102</sup> The experimentation, development, and proliferation of Victorian engineering, material innovation, and construction techniques impacted the trajectory of modern architecture in the twentieth century. See Leonardo Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 96-124; Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), pp. 29-40; and Bergdoll, pp. 207-238.

existence (*Works*, 8:53). Architecture's 'voicefulness' (*Works*, 8:52) is dependent on the intentions of the people who built it and the natural forces of erosion to give the building its endurance, value, and age. These somatic expressions of human endeavour had to live and continue as beacons of proper building for living. Ruskin implored that Victorian Britain build in the same manner for the benefit of its collective moral future.

### 1.3 The Aesthetics of Decay

There is a general air of *nonchalance* about the French peasant's habitation, which is aided by a perfect want of everything like neatness; and rendered more conspicuous by some points about the building which have a look of neglected beauty, and obliterated ornament. Half of the whitewash is worn off, and the other half coloured by various mosses and wandering lichens, which have been permitted to vegetate upon it, and which, though beautiful, constitute a kind of beauty from which the ideas of age and decay are inseparable.

(*Works*, 1:13)

Decay in the nineteenth century was not always perceived in a negative light. Ruskin's descriptions of the condition of the French cottage in *Poetry* exemplify his awareness of the merits of age and decay in an appropriate context. The moral failings of society may have given decay a baleful connotation, but from this degraded state, Ruskin thought decay was redeemable through aesthetic enlightenment. Decay would assume an affirmative position in art, architecture, and landscape when associated with the laws of nature. But it was not what decay was that was important, but what decay did that distinguished it for him. To this point, Ruskin had to contend with a body of literature and art that prized decay in and of itself. This may have been where his exposure to decay tropes, allegories, symbolisms, and associations began, but it is not where his thinking on decay would end. Decay would come to be identified as a species of the beautiful and a form of creation responsible for some of the grandest aged buildings and crumbling mountains he had ever seen.

The aesthetics of decay exist across a range of artistic expression, such as in Romantic literature, poetry, and the Picturesque, and in or centred around physical things, such as architectural ruin and eroding mountain landscapes. The appeal of ruin, decay, and age is persistent, as Rose Macauley (1953) notes:

[H]ow much is association, historical or literary, what part is played by morbid pleasure in decay, by righteous pleasure in retribution (for so often it is the proud and the bad who have fallen), by mystical pleasure in the destruction of all things mortal and the eternity of God (a common reaction in the Middle Ages), by



egotistic satisfaction in surviving—(where now art thou? Here still am I)—by masochistic joy in a common destruction [...] and by a dozen other entwined threads of pleasurable and melancholy emotion, of which the main strand is, one imagines, the romantic and conscious swimming down the hurrying river of time, whose mysterious reaches, stretching limitlessly behind, glimmer suddenly into view with these wracks washed on to the silted shores.<sup>103</sup>

A Ruinenlust, or interest in ruins as aesthetic things, is a curious ‘blend of pleasure and romantic gloom’.<sup>104</sup> The Tate Britain’s exhibition in 2014, ‘The Art of Decay: Ruin Lust’, exhibited Romantic and Victorian works by Martin, Constable, and Turner alongside contemporary works of modern ruins by Wilson and Dean, demonstrates a prolonged and continued interest in ruins and decay.<sup>105</sup> In the eighteenth century, interest in ruins and decay was gaining momentum. Examples such as the Jealous Wall sham ruin at Belvedere House,<sup>106</sup> Joseph Gandy’s depiction of John Soane’s Bank of England as a ruin,<sup>107</sup> or the continuously collapsing tower of Beckford’s Gothic Revival Fonthill Abbey<sup>108</sup> speak to the appeal of ruins, authentic or not. Even when a ruin is not the subject of direct experience, it could be the site of contemplation, such as Wordsworth’s poetic awakening near the ruins of Tintern Abbey. In Ruskin’s circle of influences, progenitors of ruin, such as Wordsworth, Byron, Scott, Turner, and Prout, provided him with aesthetic reference and perspectives for recognizing the positive aspects of decay.

In the Preface to Volume 1 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin laments that ‘public taste seems plunging deeper and deeper into degradation day by day’ (*Works*, 3:4). Determining what aesthetic expressions should be admired and why became his charge. Directly or by proxy, Ruskin built on the aesthetic theories and philosophies of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, the Picturesque, and the Victorian period. Through his architectural and artistic writings, he sought to show how issues of experience and sensation function

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<sup>103</sup> Rose Macauley, *Pleasure of Ruins*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1953), pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>105</sup> The exhibition includes the works of J.M.W. Turner’s *Tintern Abbey* (1794), John Constable’s *Hadleigh Castle* (1829), John Martin’s *The Destruction of Pompei and Herculaneum* (1821), Jane and Louise Wilson’s *Azeville* (2006), Tacita Dean’s *Kodak* (2006). See <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/ruin-lust>.

<sup>106</sup> The 1st Earl of Belvedere, Robert Rochfort, built a sham ruin as a ruined gothic abbey in 1760 to block the view of his brother George’s Tudenham House. See <https://belvedere-house.ie/the-follies/>.

<sup>107</sup> Sir John Soane (1753-1837) worked on the Bank of England from 1790 to 1827. Soane’s draughtsman and creative partner, Joseph Gandy (1771-1843), produced a rendering of the Bank as a Roman-style ruin in 1830 while the building was still under construction.

<sup>108</sup> William Thomas Beckford (1760-1844) built the Gothic Revival house at Fonthill Gifford between 1796 and 1813 to replace the existing Elizabethan-era house. Due to improper building techniques and a rushed schedule, the central tower continually collapsed during and after construction, eventually destroying most of the west wing in 1825. It remained a ruin until 1845 when it was demolished. See John Wilton-Ely, ‘The Genesis and Evolution of Fonthill Abbey’, *Architectural History*, 23 (1980), 40-51+172-180.

concerning ideas of truth, beauty, and taste.<sup>109</sup> Emerging from the Picturesque and Romantic traditions, Ruskin constructed a theophanic aesthetic understanding of the essential role of decay in the forms and forces of nature and their appeal to aesthetic taste.<sup>110</sup>

### 1.3.1 The Popularity of Decay: The Picturesque

The fascination of landscape scenes captured the imaginations and minds of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century English leisure travellers with their idyllic images, and as Hilton notes, the Ruskin family was not immune.<sup>111</sup> The popularity of the Picturesque lay in its aesthetic idealism, bridging classic and Romantic art traditions and encouraging ‘the aesthetic relation of man to nature’.<sup>112</sup> Gilpin and Price both wrote treatises on the laws and characteristics of the Picturesque, emphasizing a rugged, informal scene, often including dramatic objects of nature and architectural ruins.<sup>113</sup> Similar emphasis can be found in the poetry and prose associated with Romanticism, where landscape and ruins assumed deeper allegorical significance in terms of human emotion, spirit, and meaning.<sup>114</sup> This *ut pictura poiesis* coincided with a rise in the importance of landscape and ruin, particularly in national identity and history. In a survey of eighteenth-century ruin poetry, Janowitz (1990) connects British history and identity through the landscape and the architectural ruin. She states that ruins represented the unified British nation and the connection between the eroding building being subsumed by vegetation ‘binds culture to nature’, thus connecting English identity and unity with the landscape through the architectural ruin.<sup>115</sup> The myth of British origins ‘requires that nature be substituted for culture’.<sup>116</sup> Landscape and architectural ruin had the potential to express deeper existential connections to human identity and purpose because of their decayed form. Thomas describes ruins as ‘highly evocative forms of the fragment, and they operate according to its logic: they suggest an absent whole, and indeed occupy an ambivalent

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<sup>109</sup> The larger trajectory of the British Aesthetic Tradition is explained by Shelley (Winter 2020 Edition) and Costelloe (2013).

<sup>110</sup> Ruskin’s theophanic aesthetic theory is explored and explained in Landow, Rosenberg, Hewison (1976), and Costelloe (2013).

<sup>111</sup> Hilton, pp. 24-7.

<sup>112</sup> Hussey, p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> The components of Picturesque theory are explained diversely in Andrews, Hussey, Macarthur, and Robinson.

<sup>114</sup> Hewison (1976), p. 41.

<sup>115</sup> Janowitz, p. 54.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

space between the part and the past whole, whose presence they affirm and negate (affirm, paradoxically, by negation).<sup>117</sup> The ruin is an ‘object of contemplation’ and a material thing.<sup>118</sup> In Ruskin’s early drawing instruction, he was not only introduced to the picturesque technique by his instructors Charles Runciman (1794-1878) and Andrew Vandyke Copley Fielding (1787-1855) but also schooled in the Romantic poetry and prose of Scott, Wordsworth, and Lord Byron (1788-1824) by his father. This confluence set the tone early in his life for an understanding of the potential of the Picturesque to be more than an aesthetic relationship to the images of decay and ruin and assume deeper, allegorical and existential significance.

Ruskin had yet to articulate a theory of decay when he first saw the red roofs of Croydon’s cottages (*Works*, 35:33) or the Alpine ‘Pyramids of God’ (*Works*, 2:232) from Piedmont; it was built over years of careful observation and reflection on instances of erosion and degradation. His early awareness of decay was linked directly with the character of specific locations, objects, or situations, singular instances of delight or disgust from which he would chart the constellation of decay. These actual, abstract, or literary instances came from architecture, landscape and mountains, and socio-moral situations. Early in Ruskin’s observations, decay is found in the material evidence around him and through literature and art. He had a sympathetic and positive view of the effects of decay in nature and the ruins or aged buildings he admired; he was less positive about the decline of morality in society, economy, and politics. His early paintings, drawings, and poetry are as much examples of his fascination with the effects of nature’s erosive processes as they are of his love of nature’s forms. In his writings, the growing awareness of the importance of decay in determining a building or mountain’s character became increasingly evident; it became an essential element in defining its appeal. However, the innocence of picturesque decay gradually gave way to a greater awareness of the power of decay to represent divine intentions allegorically and literally on a cosmic scale. Decay was no longer a visual novelty; decay represented God’s will enacted on the earth.

### **1.3.2 Landscape, Ruin, and Aged Architecture**

The journey of decay in Ruskin’s thought emerged from his early awareness and appreciation of landscape to his developed theories centred on geological observations. It

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<sup>117</sup> Thomas, p. 42.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

began with the emergence of decay in Ruskin's formative literary and aesthetic education in the form of ruin, the laws of nature, and the recognition of decay as the basis for appreciating architecture and mountain form. Hewison (1976) and Rosenberg emphasize the early influence of Romantic literature, picturesque painting, and scriptural training, covering the larger themes, whereas I seek to add specific detail of the eroded material itself, highlighting what it is versus what it meant.<sup>119</sup> These examples exist as landscape and ruin. While not always the direct expression, the indoctrination Ruskin received in his education could be found in ruin, landscape and decay. There existed in him a nostalgia for times when cherished ideals were formed or earnestly practiced, evident in the tales by Scott, the poems by Byron, and the paintings by Turner. These became his touchstones and guides, connecting moral virtue with aesthetic and material expression.

Like decay, ruin has several incarnations. As a thing, a ruin is the end or current result of some form of physical destruction or disintegration. As a situation, ruin is a state or condition of destruction or depredation. Taken separately, ruin is either a thing or a desolate state, but taken together, the ruin becomes allegorical, where the physical representation is synonymous with a state of conditional decline. As proposed by Janowitz and Thomas, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ruin assumed a mythic position in the British imagination representing fragments of collective history, ancient heritage, and national identity.<sup>120</sup> As a thing or a situation, the ruin is literal and symbolic and connects humanity's endeavours to the natural world. As Thomas argues, the ruin connects the building—the physical expression of humanity's words and deeds—to the landscape.<sup>121</sup> The decay process erodes the building, and the landscape, in turn, consumes it, melding the two into a singular expression where one can no longer think of them as separate entities. This destiny is irrevocable, and all human work must eventually conform to the laws of nature and the inevitability of time. As living architecture, the medieval castle or abbey may stand as a sign of human achievement, but as a ruin, the disintegrating building becomes a decaying memory of lives past, of deeds done, of passions spent. As Simmel (1958) says, we think of the ruin as past and at peace.<sup>122</sup> The

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<sup>119</sup> Hewison (1976) and Rosenberg provide a compelling overview of Ruskin's influence and interest in the Picturesque.

<sup>120</sup> See Janowitz (1990), Thomas (2007), and Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *The Unfinished Manner* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994).

<sup>121</sup> Thomas, p. 52.

<sup>122</sup> Simmel, p. 384.

ruin is evidence of these lives and endeavours, and despite their decrepitude, they still speak about those who built them.

The appeal of ruins did not escape a young Ruskin. Ironically, he could not escape ruin as it was forever present in his nightly novel or poetry readings, the recurring focal point of his favourite paintings, or the hidden subtext in his daily readings from Scripture. The ruin as an object or conditional state became a locus around which Ruskin filtered his indoctrination to British history, Romantic expression and morality, and Evangelical spirituality. Ruskin absorbed these influences at a young age with his exposure to Romantic poetry, prose, and picturesque theory, particularly Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Prout, and Turner, whose works were ever-present with ruins and decay. In his eyes, these masters established the baseline from which he would understand and come to love ruin and decay. The predominance of the architectural ruin and landscape in these masters' works was balanced by narratives of national, moral, and spiritual standards and warnings about what would happen if one strayed from them. In tracing the emergence of decay in Ruskin's thought, identifying the original sources and topics transitions into emulation, where his expressions begin as imitations of his heroes. His early picturesque treatise *Poetry* features decay and erosion as common themes. In these expressions, Ruskin comes to terms with decay and ruin, understanding them in a literary and aesthetic sense. Eventually, these emulations developed into a more mature understanding and appreciation of decay beyond visual novelty and the ruin as more than the disintegration of material and form.

At the same time as his theory of landscape painting was developing, he was also moving towards a clearer understanding of decay and ruin in *Seven Lamps*, his treatise on proper building. In the book, Ruskin examines the character of decay in ruins and aged buildings, particularly Medieval and Gothic examples. Part of his argument is to convince his Protestant audience of the superiority of the Gothic style, but the other part is a justification for preferring old buildings beyond their picturesque taint. In *Poetry*, Ruskin naively endorsed what he would later call the 'surface picturesque'. He rebukes it in favour of the 'distinctive picturesque' in *Seven Lamps* (*Works*, 8:237) or the 'noble picturesque' in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* (*Works*, 6:14), emphasizing architecture as a repository for human memory and a record of human achievement. Gilpin's picturesque saw ruins as visually interesting fragments or pieces, but Ruskin saw something else: ruins were testaments, tributes to endurance and a noble existence. We should prefer old buildings because they speak about the best of us, what humanity is capable of, and what we should

aspire towards. These goals for architecture were derived from his Evangelical moral studies with emphasis on humility, piety, and service, his analysis of his favourite story characters and settings that promoted kingship, duty and obedience, and wise judgment, and the tone of his favourite poems and paintings that expounded beauty, nostalgia, and truth. In noble works of architecture, decay does not degrade but instead enhances. Through architecture, Ruskin's concept of decay assumed a new meaning.

If *Seven Lamps* was his book of architectural laws, then *Stones* is his case study of how to get it right and what happens when you don't. Having established some of the positive aspects of decay, Ruskin examines what happens with the decay of morality, which he believes is evident in a society's architecture and ornamentation. If positive moral actions produce a noble architecture, the inverse can create an ignoble one. This charge is levied squarely at Venice's Renaissance architecture and the corruption of Venetian moral character. Ruskin studiously provides physical examples of how one's moral temper can be communicated through the stones of Venice's buildings. *Stones* shows that Ruskin, and by extension, his dedicated reader, can read the intention of the craftsman in the stones they carve. How material is shaped and designed speaks of the craftsman's state of mind and the ability to read stones.<sup>123</sup> This exegetic ability extends into his geological investigations in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* as Ruskin moves closer to uncovering the divine meaning and message hidden in the erosion of mountain form.

### 1.3.3 Truth, Beauty, and Decay

Ruskin did not concoct his aesthetic theory in isolation; it formed from his critique and reconfiguration of themes of the British aesthetic tradition, specifically the constellation of taste, beauty, and art.<sup>124</sup> For Costelloe (2013), Ruskin sits in this Aesthetic Tradition as the 'last great Romantic'.<sup>125</sup> He traces the development of Ruskin's aesthetic theory from its Evangelical foundations to Wordsworth's poetic influences to his theophanic naturalism and moral picturesque. Costelloe connects Ruskin's thinking to the aesthetic explorations of the senses and the intellect that aestheticists, theorists and philosophers developed in the previous century. Landow (1971) likewise posits Ruskin's dependence and eventual separation from earlier thinkers such as David Hume (1711-

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<sup>123</sup> Anuradha Chatterjee's *John Ruskin and the Fabric of Architecture* (2018), John Unrau's *Looking at Architecture with John Ruskin* (1978), Garrigan (1973), and Kite (2012) explore Ruskin's textual readings of architecture.

<sup>124</sup> Shelley (Winter 2020 Edition).

<sup>125</sup> Costelloe (2013), p. 224.

1776), Adam Smith (1723-1790), Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), Archibald Alison (1757-1839), Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), and Burke in developing his aesthetic theory of beauty.<sup>126</sup> Ruskin's development of the concept of beauty, particularly in Volumes 1 and 2 of *Modern Painters*, is necessary for his defence of Turner's landscape art. In his argument, Ruskin extols the artist's superior ability to convey the 'truths of nature' (*Works*, 3:141). These truths are the expression of the divine will in and through nature: through 'external creation', God gave humanity 'subjects of reflection and admiration' (*Works*, 4:51*n*). Truth is the way things exist in accordance with the laws of nature and in recognition and adherence to natural law. Ruskin states that '[t]he word Truth, as applied to art, signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind or senses, or any fact of nature' (*Works*, 3:104) and later continues 'nothing can be beautiful which is not true' (*Works*, 3:108). As Hewison (1976) rightly summarizes, for Ruskin, 'beauty equals God'.<sup>127</sup> Contrary to most eighteenth-century aesthetic positions on the beautiful, Ruskin believed beauty was not derived through custom, taste, or utility. Beauty exists independently of these deliberations: it is eternal and unchanging, guaranteed by the presence of the divine. Landow (1971) states that this concept of beauty divorced from utility was the 'most important idea in *Modern Painters*'.<sup>128</sup> Ruskin's primary critique is the determination that what is beautiful resides in the power of human imagination, and he challenges Hume's relative nature of beauty, Adam's utility use of beauty and Burke's dismissal of it, Reynolds' promotion that beauty is custom and ideal, and similarly, Alison's assertion that beauty is dependent on association. For Ruskin, beauty is the sensation we receive when correctly understanding natural law or the laws of nature, existing as the 'signature of God upon His works' (*Works*, 4:75).

It is important not to underestimate the role of the beautiful in Ruskin's thinking on decay. In my argument for Ruskin's decay, beauty plays an essential role for two reasons: it is the experiential guarantee of divine intention, and it is identifiable in material form when it fulfils its inherent potential, becoming an 'ideal of its species' as explained in Volume 2 of *Modern Painters* in his discussion of vital beauty.<sup>129</sup> The crux of the condition

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<sup>126</sup> Landow (1971), pp. 92-110.

<sup>127</sup> Hewison (1976), p. 55.

<sup>128</sup> Landow (1971), p. 99.

<sup>129</sup> Ruskin writes about the fulfilment of creatures' or species' inherent function and potential in Chapter XIII: II. Of Generic Vital Beauty. The discussion of Ruskin's 'ideal of species' is also explained in Chapter 1, Section 1.0.1.

lies at the intersection of where decay and beauty collide in Ruskin's examination of aged architecture and crumbling mountains. For Ruskin, it was not decay that was the focal point of beauty, but rather the forms decay created. Romantic and picturesque tropes of ruin and decay lament the deterioration of a once beautiful building or mountain, but Ruskin saw erosion and decay as bringing the forms of the earth into their ideal state. The closer to this ideal state, the more noble and beautiful they became. It is what decay is in service for: creating beautiful forms. In Ruskin's material aesthetics, form is king. The fulfilment of ideal form was a determinant of beauty. This is why Ruskin abhorred the Picturesque's haphazard approach to ruggedness and roughness; this was decay in service of itself. The noble decay Ruskin held in high value was that which helped form reach its fullest inherent potential, reaching the ideal.

The relationship between truth, beauty, and decay is important because it elevates erosion and degradation to become a 'kind of beauty from which the ideas of age and decay are inseparable' (*Works*, 1:13). Decay is a part of the laws of nature, put in place by the divine mind and governed by the wisdom of divine intention. By linking the laws of nature with truth and beauty, Ruskin links decay as a force of nature with the somatic result of such natural forces enacted on worldly material. Instead of seeing the earth as cursed, it becomes beautiful even in its current state of implied deterioration. The further Ruskin examines the causal actions of erosion, the more he understands its beneficent intentions.

## 1.4 Material Instances of Decay

Having established decay as a force of nature, the result of the erosive forces of nature, and as a species of the beautiful, Ruskin looks to explain decay's intention by looking at mountain form. When Ruskin wrote *Poetry*, he intuited that decay had a special relationship with beauty through nature. Decay was not a mutation of perfect form, as promoted by an Evangelical understanding of the impact of Original Sin. Even if it were a type of the grotesque, by conveying a sense of beauty, decay spoke of an intention other than punishment. Ruskin found this expression clearest in mountain form. Nature is the domain of God; mountains were His works and direct evidence of His creation. There is no filter between the mind of God and humanity except the one He imposes. Taken whole, nature and mountains—deformed or not—are expressions of God.



Ruskin's amateur studies of the earth coincided with the emergence of geology from a gentlemanly pursuit to a rigorous professional science. This collision of ideologies and practices spurred Ruskin to question and re-evaluate his approach and understanding of landscape and mountain form. His early responses to the physical world around him were passive observations that turned to rigorous factual documentation and eventually morphed into self-reflective mythopoeic expression that was critical of science's self-referential and positivistic methodology. Charting this transformative journey involves establishing the changing geological climate in which Ruskin found himself and his own personal perspective on the role of mountains in both art and science as he came to terms with how decay played an important role in the formation and operations of the earth.

Ruskin's interest in Turner's landscapes and Prout's architectural renderings were formative influences from an early age. As much as they were moral presentations, they were also demonstrations of natural fact. Turner's picturesque and sublime paintings were factual expressions of the artist's inner moral eye, whereas Prout's detailed representations captured the facts of nature as seen by the artist's perceiving eye. Prout's fidelity to observable features was also shared by alpinists, such as de Saussure and Forbes, whose mountaineering adventures were coupled with accurate documentation in writing and diagrams. Infatuated with either their adventures or their documentary efforts, Ruskin sought to emulate his heroes during his own expeditions into the mountains, keeping scrupulous notes and making faithful visual records of the most prominent and striking Alpine peaks. He set out to document these places and their mountains, recording accurately what he saw without picturesque embellishment or novelty. However, the strain of being completely objective took its toll on Ruskin, who often drifted into theophanic pontification. Mountains were the first, best-remaining evidence of the divine hand on the forms of the earth, and thus, to better understand them was to move one step closer to understanding the mind of God. Before arriving at Ruskin's conclusions regarding mountain form and decay, the state of geology in the nineteenth century needs to be established as it directed Ruskin in new reflective and expressive directions.

#### **1.4.1 The Geological Study of Decay**

Situating decay in the study of mountains and landscape requires understanding how the earth's forms have been generated and subsequently eroded. Before the nineteenth century, this investigation was largely the domain of natural history and philosophy. Laudan (1987) identifies these two approaches as historical, which describes

the development of the earth's forms, and causal, which seeks to uncover the causes of these forms.<sup>130</sup> In both instances, decay is historical evidence of an erosive causal process. Both historical and causal approaches would play an important role in shaping Ruskin's geological theory. In nature, evidence of decay was everywhere: it could be found in the wreckage at the foot of a mountain or uncovered in the stratigraphic layers of the earth's surface, and these locations came to dominate the emerging practice of geology in the nineteenth century.

England saw incredible advancement in geological studies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, the study of the earth struggled through the transition from divine speculation to geological explanation. This evolution was, as Burrow (2000) illustrates, a move away from Romantic idealism towards scientific reductionism.<sup>131</sup> The practice of the scientific study of the earth led to the establishment of the Geological Society of London in 1807 with the desire to bring geologists together, adopt one nomenclature, and share new facts about the study of the earth.<sup>132</sup> As geology was reconciling its self-identity efforts, it assumed a practical and timely impact on Victorian society, where stratigraphic studies of the landscape by William Smith (1769-1839) helped identify the location of natural resources for the fires of industry. Work on the stratigraphic column and other endeavours of historical investigation occupied one aspect of the study of the earth, whereas geologists such as Hutton and Lyell led explorations into the causal operations of the earth.<sup>133</sup> Lyell's uniformitarian theory dominated geological thought in the first half of the eighteenth century and directed theory away from the catastrophic origins of the earth's forms, usually derived from scriptural authority, towards a steady-state deep-time theory dependent on the systematic observance of rock records. Scriptural geology was directly challenged by this inductive

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<sup>130</sup> Rachel Laudan, *From Mineralogy to Geology: The Foundations of a Science 1650-1830* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 2.

<sup>131</sup> Burrow, p. 42.

<sup>132</sup> James A. Secord, 'The Making of the Geological Society of London', in *GSL*, Special Publication 317, ed. by C.L.E. Lewis and S.J. Knell (London: The Geological Society, 2009).

<sup>133</sup> James Hutton (1726-1797) and Charles Lyell (1797-1875) were Scottish geologists who promoted and uniformitarian approach to geological formations. Hutton's initial hypothesis that the forms of the earth were generated by the forces currently in action was further developed by Lyell in his *The Principles of Geology*, published in three Volumes in 1830, 1832, and 1833. Uniformitarianism had a significant impact on casual and historical geological studies.

approach calling into question the verity of biblical history and causal operations.<sup>134</sup> The erosion of the earth's forms, once thought to be the result of the divine hand or intention, was now placed firmly in the grip of an impartial causal force.

These causal forces were of particular interest to Alpine geologists. Mountain study was divided into orogeny, the formation of mountains, and erosion, the deterioration of mountains. The centuries-old orogenic theories attributed mountain building as either being volcanic or diluvial and found little resolution during the Victorian period, prompting geologists to document the current state of rock formations and not speculate about their origins.<sup>135</sup> While making mountains was still under debate, their erosion was self-evident. The theory of denudation, the wearing away of the earth's features by moving water, ice, wind and waves, came to explain an important aspect of the gradual erosion of mountain forms.<sup>136</sup> Investigations into glaciers by eighteenth-century naturalists, such as Jean-André Deluc (1727-1817) and Saussure, had, as Davies (1968) points out, a significant impact on geomorphology in general and Britain's own geological history in particular.<sup>137</sup> Glaciers, as expressions of natural forces and laws, were found to have contributed to the erosion of the British landscape and mountain form and emerged as a primary agent of decay. Ruskin found himself embroiled in the debate about how glaciers were formed and moved, an argument that was less about the mechanics of moving ice and more about the respectful practice of 'mountain-watching' represented by Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) and Forbes against the reductive theories of Tyndall and Huxley. In Ruskin's mind, the denudation and glacial theories of decay represented animated natural forces imbued with intention and meaning, something the inductive causal explanations of modern science did not, and were not, capable of expressing.

By 1856 and the publication of Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin had emerged from his early infatuation with the picturesque and developed his theory of beauty and truth in art, decay in architecture, and intention in ornamentation. Ruskin was now ready to turn his attention to his self-proclaimed first love, geology. The first half of Volume 4

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<sup>134</sup> The loss of religious influence and structure in modern geology is explored by Charles C. Gillispie, *Genesis and Geology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), Mott T. Greene, *Geology in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), J.M.I. Klaver, *Geology and Religious Sentiment* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1997), and Hugh Torrens, *The Practice of British Geology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

<sup>135</sup> The theories of volcanic forces generating the forms of the earth were known as Plutonism, championed by Hutton, and the theories of diluvial or water forces were known as Neptunism, promoted by Abraham Werner (1749-1817).

<sup>136</sup> Davies (1968), p. 27.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

would finalize his critique of the Picturesque and, in the second, outline his geological theory. Surprisingly, little is written about the middle section of this Volume—and the topic for which he had so much passion—but it contains the genesis for his theory of decay.<sup>138</sup> At the cusp of his theory of decay spurred Ruskin to overcome some significant turning points in developing his thinking. He charged himself with explaining the appeal of ruins and decay beyond the novelty of the Picturesque: if one could not find them visually interesting, then were they not only dilapidated relics in need of erasure? In developing his warning about the fall of Venice, he had to prove that evidence of moral temper existed in the inert material of a building; if he could not, then were the differences between Venetian architectural styles not simply a historical discussion? In both instances, Ruskin had to appeal to something beyond the somatic and the moral: stones could not be just material, and morals could not be just concepts. He needed to explain how they were connected, but fortunately, he had help. The mediators of his explanations were his youth's spiritual, poetic, literary, and artistic figures; founding figures that shaped his early visions and stayed with him into Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* and beyond. From Scott, Wordsworth, and Byron, he learned that ideas and morals could be seen and expressed in the stuff of the world; from Turner and Prout, he learned that the material of the world was not inanimate or inert but charged with meaning and value in its facticity; and all of this was governed by his puritan compass, defining and structuring his worldview and spiritual commitment. These aspects came together to inform his theory of decay and his difficult relationship with nineteenth-century geology, explained in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

#### 1.4.2 Victorian Science

Geology as an independent scientific discipline—generally considered the first science for pioneering many of the inductive processes that currently define the scientific method—was formally recognized at the beginning of the 19th century with the foundation of the Geological Society in 1807, although its history goes back much

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<sup>138</sup> Notable works that engage with Ruskin's geology include Nicolson, (1959), Edward Alexander, 'Ruskin and Science', in *The Modern Language Review*, 64, no. 3 (1969), 508-21, Dinah Birch, 'Ruskin and the Science of *Proserpina*', in *New Approaches to Ruskin's Thirteen Essays*, ed. by Robert Hewison (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 142-156, Anthony Lacy Gully, 'Sermons in Stone: Ruskin and Geology', in *John Ruskin and the Victorian Eye*, ed. by Susan Phelps and Anthony Lacy Gully (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), pp. 158-183, Francis O'Gorman, 'Ruskin's Science of the 1870s: Science, Education, and the Nation', in *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), and Mark Frost, "'The Circles of Vitality': Ruskin, Science, and Dynamic Materiality', in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, no. 29 (2011), 367-383.

further.<sup>139</sup> The study of nature and the earth was generally divided into natural history and natural philosophy, where the former is observational and descriptive, and the latter is analytic and explanatory. While overlap in areas of their investigation was common, both are seen as distinct approaches to the study of the earth. Natural philosophers in the tradition of Aristotle, Galileo, Bacon, and Newton sought to explain how the universe worked through the laws of physics and chemistry, whereas natural historians, such as Pliny, Carl Linnaeus, John Ray, and Darwin, sought to observe and describe phenomena in the world through records and taxonomies.<sup>140</sup> One common link between these approaches was the scriptural history of Creation, which held authority in all investigations, more on political grounds than scientific. Investigations into explaining the forms of the earth, the forces at play in the creation and destruction of the earth, and the history of these changes as evidenced in the rock records often had a teleological end: to prove the authority and verity of the scriptural accounts of Creation and God's beneficence. This study, however, was far from organized or structured. Early natural philosophers and historians were usually self-funded amateur gentleman scientists who conducted studies independently of academic institutions or parson-naturalists who saw the study of natural science as an extension of their religious commitments, searching the earth for evidence of the divine creator. Their observations and records varied widely in the forms of evidence and reasoning used to explain the forms and forces of the earth. By the nineteenth century, the frustration with a lack of coordination and the growing evidence that the earth was much older than originally understood led to a concentrated effort to organize and structure the study of the earth and revisit its theological grounding.<sup>141</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, the study of nature and the earth produced some startling findings and disruptive theories; by the time Ruskin entered the fray, tempestuous debates regarding the age and operation of the earth were raging through the learned societies' meetings, journals, and proceedings. At the time, the commonly

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<sup>139</sup> Gohau, Guntau, and Frodeman argue that geology as a discipline and profession developed over a long period and in response to practical, theological, and speculative challenges from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. See Gabriel Gohau, *A History of Geology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p.1, Martin Guntau, 'The Emergence of Geology as a Scientific Discipline' in *History of Science*, 16 (1978), 280-290, and Robert Frodeman, 'Geological Reasoning: Geology as an Interpretive and Historical Science' in *GSA Bulletin*, 107, no. 8 (August 1995), 960-968.

<sup>140</sup> Gohau, pp. 51-3.

<sup>141</sup> The position of religion in geological studies was highly contested in the first half of the nineteenth century. The impact of these debates is covered in Davies, Greene, Laudan, Gillispie, and Klaver.

accepted theological timeline calculated that the earth was approximately 6,000 years old and created by God using power and forces unknown and unfathomable to the human mind.<sup>142</sup> Recent collaborative observations and inductive thinking produced timelines extending millions of years, thus directly challenging scriptural authority. Also, new geological theories such as Lyell's uniformitarianism suggested that the forces that created the earth are the same that are affecting it now, thus restricting the need for divine intervention in forming the world. As part of this new field of inquiry, scriptural authority was challenged by inductive and causal theories intent on explaining the function of the earth and, by extension, its history without the need to resort to divine intervention. The impact of these new approaches was beginning to be felt. By the time Ruskin became a Fellow of the Geological Society at the age of 21, religious authority in geological study was dwindling in favour of the power of the new scientific method and its reliance on empirical fact and reasoned thinking.<sup>143</sup> In terms of Ruskin's strong religious and spiritual convictions, this was a troubling turn in the study of the earth, but also his reliance on facts and observation to reveal divine intention was being taken away from him, realigned to the secular structure of science. The new science of the earth was used to observe and document without including metaphysical or spiritual conjecturing regarding how and why the earth came to be the way it is. From a geological standpoint, there was simply not enough evidence to confirm the hand of God in the creation and operation of the earth, so the question was left deliberately unanswered, relegating it to a question of philosophy rather than science. This left Ruskin with two problems: due to the new inductive scientific methodology, he was left without a divine guarantor for the forms and forces of the earth and its history, and his dependence on fact and observation to reveal spiritual truths was undermined. Seemingly besieged from all sides, Ruskin committed himself to the only thing he could do in such a situation—change science.

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<sup>142</sup> James Ussher (1581-1656) calculated the age of the earth from the dates given in Scripture, identifying the beginning of the universe at 6 pm on October 22, 4004 BCE. Followers of Ussher included Thomas Burnet (1635-1715), who was known for his *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681-1690) and held to the biblical timeline in his theories of cosmogony. See Gohau, pp. 47-9.

<sup>143</sup> There were public debates over the role of biblical records in geological study. William Buckland (1784-1856), an ordained priest, Reader in Mineralogy at Oxford, and an early mentor of Ruskin, was compelled to recant his assertion that he had found evidence of the Deluge in the Kirkdale Cave in Yorkshire. He later admitted that modern glacier theory provided a better explanation.

### 1.4.3 Ruskin's New Science

[T]here is a ruling spirit or σοφία, under whose authority you are placed, to determine for you, first the choice, and then the use of all knowledge whatsoever; and that if you do not appeal to that ruler, much more if you disobey her, all science becomes to you ruinous in proportion to its accumulation, and as a net to your soul, fatal in proportion to the fineness of its thread.<sup>144</sup>

(*Works*, 22:137)

As Ruskin explained in *The Ethics of the Dust* (1866), all science is knowing how to select and employ the right knowledge of the world. He felt that such decisions fell under the purview of wisdom. Ruskin's crusade to right the wrongs of modern earth science uncovered another meaning of decay in the formation and deformation of mountains and landscapes. He had written and published several small observations on landscape, but his first foray into geological theory came in Volume 4 of his defence treatise on Turner. Ruskin frames his geological studies in Volume 4 as a way to justify Turner's depictions of landscape, but it is much more of an exposition of his own observations and studies of geology to that point. Ruskin used the pulpit of *Modern Painters* to project his geological theory and work out where he stood concerning the prevailing theories of the earth. Despite the secularization of geological thought, Ruskin maintained a firm belief in the divine and His hand in the forming and operation of the world. He also relied strongly on somatic fact and keen observation, the touchstones upon which he built his theory of beauty and truth in art and morality in landscape and architecture. His visual interest in natural phenomena guided his investigations of mineralogy, stratigraphy, orogeny, and erosion, dividing his survey into the mountain's materials, the mountain's sculpture, and their resulting mountain forms. This sequence sets up how mountains are built and how erosion sculpts them into their existent profiles. Officially, this was done to provide Turner's power of perception and accuracy of depiction, but it is also an argument for decay as the primary agent and intention in mountain form. The 'finger of God' (*Works*, 6:209) may have traced the original outline of mountains on the earth but erosion was responsible for bringing the Alps to their present and transcendent condition. He ultimately has to conclude that the earth is a wreck, but rather than Paradise being degraded, the earth is constantly in a state of becoming (*Works*, 6:179), and decay is not an

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<sup>144</sup> Ruskin interchanges the terms wisdom, 'sophia', and the Greek spelling of sophia, σοφία, throughout *The Ethics of the Dust*.

agent of erasure but an agent of continuance. Ruskin's later geological investigations and ruminations were published in *Deucalion* and continue the argument that decay is an active agent in the divine plan, which includes setting up the earth with the intention to erode for human beneficence and divine glory.

Reflecting on some of Ruskin's early Bible parables, decay is a character of the human condition and post-Fall situation—to be in decay is the de facto way humans are in the world and how the world is in itself. God set decay in motion when He expelled humanity from Eden, forever linking the destinies of humans and the earth to an act of disobedience. The world in which Ruskin found himself was certainly not Paradise, but it was the world God had still created, and his influence was everywhere in nature. In considering decay and the erosive powers of nature, Ruskin had to believe that this was intentional and part of the divine plan. In his explanations of decay in architecture and mountain form, acting with good intentions—humans or divine—determines the positivity of decay. Decay acts on material regardless of intention, but in Ruskin's mind, intention will determine whether it is perceived as good. Ruskin demonstrates this when promoting the noble and aged architecture of Medieval Venice against the degenerate buildings of the Renaissance, where their distinction resides in their respective moral tempers. Something similar can be seen in the eroding Aiguilles of the Alps: we are expected to understand the degradation of a once-magnificent Edenic mountain as being tragic, yet Ruskin perceives it as being beautiful, life-affirming, and bearers of ultimate truth. Ruskin can account for this eventuality if he believes that the world in which humanity finds itself was designed to decay; decay can be beautiful if the divine mind intended to be so. Ruskin has identified the forces of decay at work in the laws of nature and its impact on architecture and mountain form; he now needed to find the reason for this eventuality and looked to wisdom for answers.

## 1.5 Reflections on Decay

Decay occupies a slippery place in Ruskin's thinking as a word and a concept. As this chapter has shown, the diverse spectrum of decay is evident in Ruskin's thought, and its definition and understanding are inconsistent. However, this is more a reflection of inherited associations or unchecked usage than any coherent or intentional intertextual development. Nascent signs of unease begin as early as in *Poetry* when his references to ruin are typical, but his insinuation of decay being a species of the beautiful challenges



conventional understanding promoted by even the most tolerant lines of Romantic or picturesque thought.<sup>145</sup> Instances such as these indicate how Ruskin is beginning to understand fragments of his own aesthetic thinking that have yet to be rigorously worked out. As such, the meaning of ruin is distinct between Romantic and picturesque thought, but as Ruskin adds aspects of his theory of the beautiful to the discussion, the meaning evolves once again. As the following chapters argue, this is a common process for Ruskin: his ideas about decay are accumulative, evolving and responding to cross-disciplinary discoveries while always developing a larger theistic line of thought.

His decay investigations are often quick punches, devoting a few pages to age and ruin in *Seven Lamps*, the ‘unsculpturing’ of mountains in *Modern Painters*, or the wisdom of natural forces in *Queen*. These energetic fragments demonstrate the mobility of Ruskin’s thinking across disciplines and the working out of one consistent line of thought that teleologically brings his thinking back to a numinous source and divine guarantee. In his search for answers, he has to overcome these biases and restrictions and develop an understanding of his own that reflects his view of the world, a view that was itself developing and changing. When examining the diachronic line of his thinking, one gets a sense that he is solving an unknown and unconscious puzzle as he goes along, where one idea in architecture influences another in geology and so on down the line. Solving problems in one area brings up questions in another, but there is momentum towards coherence. As Ruskin’s ideas about art or architecture coalesce, such as the noble picturesque or typical and vital beauty, they constitute a gravitational mass to which any argument of decay must orbit.

The structure of the following chapters reveals Ruskin’s diachronic line of thinking on decay. Categorizing decay into the four areas of scriptural, moral, aesthetic, and material expressions of decay separates Ruskin’s conceptualizations into manageable and comprehensible silos. Such a taxonomy of Ruskin’s work is advantageous when constructing a theory of decay. In addition to particular explications, there are growing instances of a larger narrative emerging in Ruskin’s thought, one of personal interest and with personal stakes. These centre around the need for divine guarantee in his thinking of the world and becomes a common touchstone in his thinking on decay. My argument

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<sup>145</sup> Refer to the epigraph from *Poetry* in Section 1.3 of this chapter. When speaking of French cottages, Ruskin says it ‘constitutes a kind of beauty from which the ideas of age and decay are inseparable’ (*Works*, 1:13).

balances appeal to the specific and the general, all the while endeavouring to fabricate an imaginary of Ruskin's decay.

# CHAPTER II

## The Emergence of Decay

## 2.0 Glory and Nature

Perfect permanence and absolute security were evidently in nowise intended. It would have been as easy for the Creator to have made the mountains of steel as of granite, of adamant as of lime; but this was clearly no part of the Divine councils; mountains were to be destructible and frail; to melt under the soft lambency of the streamlet; to shiver before the subtle wedge of the frost; to wither with untraceable decay in their own substance; and yet, under all these conditions of destruction, to be maintained in magnificent eminence before the eyes of men.

(*Works*, 6:134)

Ruskin acknowledges the deliberate frailty of nature's material artifacts and in the geological interrogatives of Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, he sets out to explain how the degradation of the world is intentional. Decay entered Ruskin's mindset presumptuously as a deleterious cliché; however, by the end of Volume 4, Ruskin contended that decay was a message of divine order the Creator offered humanity through mountain form. Before then, the concepts of decay, ruin, and erosion carried rote allusion and identity in his thought and writing. In his childhood poem "Heidelberg" (1833-4), he writes of the derelict castle, saying 'it is a ruin, a ruin, a desolate ruin' (*Works*, 2:364), and in "The Broken Chain" from 1839-42, he envisions decay as a degenerative trope:

And the grave-stones, whitely hewn,  
Gleam like camp-fires through the night;  
There, in silence of long swoon,  
In the horror of decay;  
With the worm for their delight,  
And the shroud for their array.

(*Works*, 2:152)

In under two decades, his perspective changed. How did this occur? Poems written in youth attest to inherited influences, whereas theoretical works written by a 37-year-old speak of cogency and self-reflection.<sup>146</sup> Despite the contrariety, both conditions of age are necessary as Ruskin's ideas of decay required time to develop. His imaginary of decay emerged from investigations across artistic, architectural, and geological disciplines but also through careful observation and reflection where biases were confronted and new possibilities considered. By 1856 and the release of Volume 4, Ruskin had published three

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<sup>146</sup> In the footnote for Ruskin's poem "The Broken Chain", written between 1839 and 1842, Cook and Wedderburn note in the imitation of Scott's *Marmion* (1808) and the influence of Coleridge's *Christabel* (1797-1800). See *Works*, 2:124n.

books on architecture, three on landscape art, a collection of juvenile poems, articles on geological observations, and a fairy tale. In these works, he began building a broad aesthetic and theoretical awareness of decay as being more than a stylized picturesque platitude; it had a stronger link to the actions of nature and a divine moral imperative for humanity. As a function of nature's laws, Ruskin had to contend with decay in his theory of the beautiful, situating it within his conceptions of typical and vital beauty. Acts of erosion and degradation were a necessary and welcomed outcome of nature's laws, creating the forms of the earth Ruskin held to be beautiful. However, as his ideas of an organic decay found expression through his artistic and architectural theories, Ruskin also had to confront the ignoble decay of human morals when human action and intentions violated natural law. By establishing the link between the intentions behind actions and their consequences or material disclosures, Ruskin delineates types of decay in their organic and human incarnations.

Narrowing the scope of decay to selective expressions requires a recapitulation of Ruskin's exposure to and ruminations on decay. Chapter 1 of my argument outlined the larger topography of decay around Ruskin's thoughts; Chapters 2 and 3 explain the terroir of decay as it matures into a coherent premise. Chapter 2 explains how decay is a confluence of material presence and natural process exemplify the divine message, exuding goodness in its intention and glory in its recognition. Ruskin's earliest introduction to decay comes from Romanticism and the Picturesque, which coalesce in his first hermeneutic of decay's potential. In seeing erosion and the degradation of natural material as a part of nature's intrinsic operation, Ruskin is encouraged to believe that decay is part of the divine will and accepts its function within the natural world. My argument proceeds to the structure of his theory of the Beautiful from *Modern Painters* and the conditions of age and endurance in *Seven Lamps*, explaining how nature is an expression and extension of divine glory and how humans are uniquely situated within the schema to bear witness and celebrate. In such a situation, humanity can accept the function and nature of decay as inherently good because it is part of the natural law put in place by the Deity. In contrast to this concept of organic decay, a more pernicious meaning of decay is examined in *Stones* with the socio-architectural fall of Venice at the hands of social and political hubris. Despite this moral implosion, Ruskin provides hope through the nature of Gothic: an example of an aesthetic and socio-political expression that celebrates the glory of God and further links a moral and material message to the forms and forces of the natural world.

## 2.0.1 The Glory of God

[T]here is not a moment of any day of our lives, when nature is not producing scene after scene, picture after pictures, 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.

(*Works*, 3:343).

Ruskin's writings are dominated by specific aesthetic, scientific, socio-political, or economic perspectives, yet they consistently point toward the ontological and existential dimensions of the human condition. They specifically centre around what use, or function humans have and how they should act, and his theories are directed at how such imperatives are achieved. These mandates are often woven into the fabric of his propositional arguments. There are points where he pauses to remind his reader of the cosmic order, as in Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*, where he states that '[m]an's use and function [...] are, to be witness to the glory of God, and to advance that glory by his reasonable obedience and resultant happiness' (*Works*, 4:28-9). This covenant determines obedience and fulfilment, a disposition Ruskin returns to often in his arguments. At its heart, this simple dictum drives the intentions of Ruskin's investigations: when recognizing divine glory, humanity's piety will contribute to a felicitous state. In this schema, glory becomes paramount. God's glory is multifaceted: intrinsic in His de facto magnificent presence and extrinsic in His creations, providence, and redemptive acts. Glory is how He is and manifests in what God makes and how He acts, becoming the font of everything good in the world. Moses charged God, saying, 'Show me your glory', to which He responded, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, the Lord'.<sup>147</sup> Glory and goodness are synonymous. I will return in detail to the topic of goodness in the next chapter, but I wish to explore Ruskin's concept of divine glory as the reason for the propitious experience of decay.

Scripture is dominant in conveying the divine glory as the Word of God, but Ruskin believed that the same ministration could be found in the Work of God. The glory and goodness of God's creations are immanent in the world and order of nature. Isaiah proclaims: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory'.<sup>148</sup> As

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<sup>147</sup> Exodus 33. 18-19.

<sup>148</sup> Isaiah 6. 3.

Rosenberg states, nature is ‘God’s second book’ to Ruskin.<sup>149</sup> Essentially, the Bible and Nature both contain and profess the message of God to humanity. Each expresses a constant message but through different expressive modes. However, the written word points towards the message, whereas nature is the message itself. Thus, the ‘truths of nature’ (*Works*, 3:141) are as associated with divine proclamations as they are with visceral facts—indivisible and self-reinforcing and require a special way of seeing.

## 2.0.2 Divine Nature and the Rule of Two

[T]he simplest forms of nature are strangely animated by the sense of the Divine presence; the trees and flowers seem all, in a sort, children of God; and we ourselves, their fellows, made out of the same dust, and greater than they only in having a greater portion of the Divine power exerted on our frame, and all the common uses and palpably visible forms of things, become subordinate in our minds to their inner glory,—to the mysterious voices in which they talk to us about God, and the changeful and typical aspects by which they witness to us of holy truth, and fill us with obedient, joyful, and thankful emotion.

(*Works*, 5:386)

Nature is God’s creation. Nature is the first of His works in the Bible, and creation is His first recorded act. George Steiner (2001) states that ‘we have no myths, no figurations, of a non-creating deity’ and the only limitation to God’s freedom is that ‘He cannot but create’.<sup>150</sup> It is part of God’s character to make, create, and produce artifacts like the earth and the humans who dwell on it. The Bible is replete with instances of God’s creations being inherently good and glorious, and they are infused with the character that made them, ‘[t]he heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork’.<sup>151</sup> Ruskin echoes this, saying that ‘God will not make anything an object of life to His creatures which does not point to, or partake of, Himself’ (*Works*, 4:46).

Naturally, this extends to humanity as well:

[F]or it may be generally observed that whatever good there may be desirable in man, more especially good belonging to his moral nature, there will be a corresponding agreeableness in whatever external object reminds him of such good, whether it remind him by arbitrary association, or by typical resemblance.

(*Works*, 4:76)

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<sup>149</sup> Rosenberg, p. 6.

<sup>150</sup> George Steiner, *The Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 18-19.

<sup>151</sup> Psalms 19. 1-4.

Things like trees and flowers are made to carry the intentions of the divine mind through the divine hand and are intrinsically splendid and animated by an inner glory or life—the mysterious voices that speak of the deity. They are in possession of, or are in themselves, a holy truth. As with the Trinity, where the Holy Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are the hypostatic triune of the Godhead, so are the objects of nature singular with the deity—an *ousia* of nature, or *diune* of material and message. In such an environment, tangibility becomes a divine mode of expression; recall the presence of Christ on earth as a palpable expression of the holy truth when ‘the Word became flesh’.<sup>152</sup> Similarly, nature is when the Word became stone. Presence makes the Word more real: Christ and nature are more accessible to humanity because of their physicality. I deliberately introduce the term *diune* here to account for Ruskin’s continued use of symbolic and material coexistence in the forms of nature. His moral vision of the theoretic faculty speaks of seeing messages in the material, and it is the relationship in the forms and forces of nature that express the divine intention of erosion, degradation, and decay.

The natural world exists as the corporeal result of the divine will and is expressive of divine truth, but its manner of proclamation eludes the written or spoken word. Nature’s ability to reveal sacred truths is noted by Ruskin, saying that:

[T]he nature-worship will be found to bring with it such a sense of the presence and power of a Great Spirit as no mere reasoning can either induce or controvert [and] where that nature-worship is innocently pursued,—*i.e.* with due respect to other claims on time, feeling, and exertion, and associated with the higher principles of religion,—it becomes the channel of certain sacred truths, which by no other means can be conveyed.

(*Works*, 5:378)

Nature is, as Scripture records, the good work of a purposeful mind; it is both manifold and message. In Genesis, God confirms this by proclaiming each of His works to be good. In an addendum written 37 years after the publication of Chapter 3 of Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin clarifies the interaction of nature and humanity, where ‘external creation is not merely useful to man in furnishing him with food, but chiefly in giving him subjects of admiration and reflection’ and that ‘this creation cannot be rightly admired, nor truly thought of, but as the work and gift of a loving Creator’ and inquiring as to ‘what parts or

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<sup>152</sup> John 1. 14.



characters of natural things bear most clearly the evidence of having been so created; and by what faculties we discern and prefer them' (*Works*, 4:51n).

Ruskin believes that nature is created for humanity's benefit, and recognizing this gift fulfils the covenant between the Deity and humanity. However, nature does not surrender its lessons willingly—they are hard-won. He affirms that simple awareness of these natural characteristics is insufficient because humanity must prefer them. Preference infers judgment; thus, humankind must be able to make correctly informed determinations by the heart and mind. Humanity's desire to know these gifts are the 'ultimate instincts and principles of human nature, for which no farther reason can be given than the simple will of the Deity that we should be so created' (*Works*, 4:109). Humankind's 'immortal part' is receptibility towards the message; it is an intrinsic ability (*Works*, 4:210). It is apparent to Ruskin that nature and humanity were meant to coexist and complement each other, and his argument towards this coalescence recognizes the Word found in the Work.

In Ruskin's thinking, there is a consistent dialogue between manifolds of physical reality and their associative moral imperatives. In his estimation, these are dual aspects of a singular condition, the proverbial two sides of the same coin. Ruskin's end game might be to promote a singular moral faculty in human existence, but he does so by examining the virtues of material and immaterial circumstances. This flavour of dualism is consistent throughout his investigations. It is evident in how consciousness is comprised of sense impressions and intellectual conceptualizations in aesthetic contemplation in Volume 1 of *Modern Painters* (*Works*, 3:104), the presence of typical and vital beauty in nature and art in Volume 2 of *Modern Painters* (*Works*, 4:64), the science of feeling and mind in architecture in *Poetry* (*Works*, 1:5), and the air and sagacity of wisdom in *Queen* (*Works*, 19:305). This rule of two is Ruskin's ontological constant: an ongoing dialectic between the material and immaterial in search of a unified moral monism.

To Ruskin, the physical reality of nature's forces and its manifolds are truths; they are nomological facts. Rosenberg wrote that '[n]o one in the nineteenth century had a greater reverence for the physical world; he worshipped equally the materiality of God and the spirituality of matter'.<sup>153</sup> Likewise, nature contained more than a physical reality. As sermons could be deciphered from the words, sentences, and verses written in the Bible, so too could the homilies of nature be read in the world's minerals, rocks, and mountains.

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<sup>153</sup> Rosenberg, p. 20.

The vocabulary may be different, but the message remains consistent. This basic premise of the Word in the Work is the foundation and justification for Ruskin's inquiries, whether about landscape art, architecture, or mountain form. His investigations point toward validating this premise.

### 2.0.3 The Emergence of Decay

We have seen that this subject matter is preferable to four general heads. It is either the record of conscience, written in things external, or it is a symbolizing of Divine attributes in matter, or it is the felicity of living things, or the perfect fulfilment of their duties and functions. In all cases it is something Divine; either the approving voice of God, the glorious symbol of Him, the evidence of His kind presence, or the obedience to His will by Him induced and supported.

(*Works*, 4:210)

Why is the glory of God and divine nature important to understanding Ruskin's ideas on decay? A reply is twofold and based on the preceding premises: first, the glory of God is the ultimate justification for all things existing in the world. Any *thing* in the world is there through the Deity's intentions and will, and by extension, this includes the deliberate inclusion of decay in the forms and forces of the world. Second, nature is God's creation and handiwork, capable of expressing divine intention through its existence. However, decay impacts the physicality of these handiworks, changing them through the act of erosion but also transforming into one of them as a physical ruin. Decay is an active force of the deity that impacts, paradoxically, the works of the deity. It appears to be the deity's will to erode the divine creation. This is important to Ruskin because decay as a process modifies God's creations, indicating that buildings, like mountains, are intended and designed to decay. Ruskin arrives at this conclusion in Chapter 6: 'The Lamp of Memory' from *Seven Lamps* and Chapter 8: 'Compact Crystallines' from Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*. When referring to the glorious Age of a building, Ruskin acknowledges that as buildings age, their 'details must perish' (*Works*, 8:234). Similarly, he notes that 'mountains were to be destructible and frail' (*Works*, 6:134). These conditions point towards the inevitability of erosion and decay; a fact of the world he could not ignore. As objects in the world are considered a message, their degradation also signals intention. The artifact and process both convey meaning, but is the mountain the message or the erosive process? Ruskin believed they were both, even one and the same. Yet, this realization does not come without deliberation and conflict.

Ruskin does not possess this auspicious perspective in his youth; it is earned through years of progressive investigations in the tangled overlap of Romantic prose and poetry, landscape painting and aesthetic theory, and architectural investigation—all of which play a significant role in identifying and understanding decay. The seeds of decay lie nascent in the various approaches to nature, landscape, architecture, and art from Ruskin’s early childhood experiences that combine the influences on his thinking of decay from Romantic, picturesque, and evangelical positions. The following section examines the early influences and understandings of decay Ruskin inherits. At times, there is synergy between aspects of age and decay in architecture and geology, but also conflict between the romanticism of Wordsworth and the picturesque of Gilpin. How Ruskin resolves these tensions determines his understanding of decay, which evolves into seeing decay as a species of the beautiful.

## 2.1 The Awareness of Decay

How best to bid the verdant Landscape rise,  
To please the fancy, and delight the eyes;

Richard Payne Knight<sup>154</sup>

Knight’s lines establish the prevailing thinking on how to look at landscape at the opening of the nineteenth century. He was one of several late-eighteenth-century individuals interested in landscape’s aesthetic appreciation and composition, including Humphry Repton (1752-1818), Gilpin, and Price. In tracing the evolution of Ruskin’s ideas about decay, Knight’s two aspects of the Picturesque are helpful: the topographic materiality of the ‘verdant Landscape’ and the ‘fancy...(and)...delight’ given through the eyes. Reworded, albeit less poetically, it would be that the outward physical characteristics of artifacts in and of the landscape provide identifiable qualities that impact the senses, thus causing a series of experiences ranging from the sensual to the imaginative and intellectual. In essence, the Picturesque aestheticizes nature’s forms and forces. It is, as Hussey (1967) states, a way of deriving ‘aesthetic satisfaction from landscape’.<sup>155</sup> This interaction parallels similar debates in the British aesthetic tradition, outlined by Shelley (Winter 2020) and Costelloe (2013), concerning the nature of beauty, taste, and art

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<sup>154</sup> Richard Payne Knight, *The Landscape: A Didactic Poem in Three Books* (London: W. Bulmer & Co., 1795), p. 1.

<sup>155</sup> Hussey, p. 2.

development in the eighteenth century.<sup>156</sup> By the turn of the century, the Picturesque had become a topic of aesthetic debate and artistic practice that would influence Ruskin's thinking on beauty and art. His interest in the Picturesque probably had more to do with overlapping subject matter—such as a shared interest in landscape, artistic technique and expression, and viewer perception—than theoretical purview. Ruskin's awareness of the Picturesque begins with the artistic movement's general appeal to the broader British audience of travellers and aesthetes, an appeal he would later critique.

The emergence of picturesque travel and the pleasure of discovering ideal scenes of nature are well noted by Hussey and Andrews (1989).<sup>157</sup> Gilpin was one of the earliest to promote a standard definition of the Picturesque as being 'expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture'<sup>158</sup> and is a way to look at the 'face of a country *by the rules of Picturesque beauty*'.<sup>159</sup> It is a way of looking based on the compositional rules inherent in drawing and painting. His definition is more about a method of framing and juxtaposing the artifacts of nature than it is a way of understanding how the inherent or associated landscape characteristics are impressed on the mind.<sup>160</sup> Such a view intends to generate 'rational amusement' in the viewer, not jocularly, but as 'pleasure' according to Price or 'fancy' and 'delight' by Knight. Gilpin's goal was never to produce a new theory of art but rather to present a new way of enjoying looking at nature using the rules of drawing composition already in common artistic practice. As a traveller and artist, Gilpin wished to provide like-minded tourists with pleasurable ways to enjoy Britain's scenery. The Picturesque achieved this by directing attention to how artifacts appear as well as how they are brought together in a composition. It also intended to accentuate landscape as a worthy artistic and aesthetic contemplation topic. The touring routes in Gilpin's travel guides coincide with Ruskin's journeys across Britain. There is little evidence to show Ruskin ever read these guides, but the larger communal picturesque indoctrination was

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<sup>156</sup> Both Shelley and Costelloe have written extensively on the range and depth of the significant figures and theories of the British aesthetic tradition. See Shelley (Winter 2020 Edition) and Costelloe (2013).

<sup>157</sup> Hussey explains the evolution of picturesque travel from the Grand Tour but adapted to the British Isles and opening to a wider audience. See Hussey, pp. 83-127. Andrews devotes the entire second half of his book to the picturesque tours of Wales, the Lakes, and the Highlands. See Andrews, pp. 85-240.

<sup>158</sup> William Gilpin, *An Essay on Prints* (London: T. Cadell, Junior and W. Davies, 1802), p. xii.

<sup>159</sup> William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye*, 5th Ed. (London: R. Blamire, 1800), p. 2, original italics.

<sup>160</sup> John Macarthur points out that the Picturesque was unsure of whether it was aesthetic account or a theory of how to make art (p. 35). Robert Hewison points out that it was both. See John Macarthur, 'The Heartlessness of the Picturesque: Sympathy and Disgust in Ruskin's Aesthetics' in *Assemblage*, no. 32 (April 1997), p. 35 and Hewison (1976), p. 32.

prevalent in the travel excursions of the time.<sup>161</sup> Regardless, Ruskin and his family were enamoured by a picturesque view of landscape and nature, evident in their artistic preferences and travel experiences.

### 2.1.1 Family, Books, and Travels

The Picturesque and its aestheticism was probably not a deliberate choice for Ruskin, but it would have been conspicuous in the art decorating the family home, in the favoured sites of family vacations, or alluded to in the poems and stories read to him at an early age.<sup>162</sup> Judging from the diary and notebook sketches Ruskin kept in his youth, it was the de facto way he was shown the world. The Ruskin family's economic and social position seemed ideal for picturesque indoctrination and consumption; as Hilton and Hanley (2010) describe, they had the financial means to acquire landscape paintings, possessed a cultivated interest and awareness (if not an education) of artistic and poetic expression, and had the leisure time and means to travel.<sup>163</sup> In his youth, Ruskin had travelled 'all of the high-roads, and most of the cross ones, of England and Wales' and was fortunate to see 'nearly all the noblemen's great houses in England' (*Works*, 35:16). In doing so, he would have taken many of the documented picturesque routes and sights as well as had the opportunity to gaze on the grand manner paintings often hung in the great houses, exposing him to a range of artistic and aesthetic expression and achievement.

As Janowitz points out, Ruskin was born at a time when his parents were not immune to the influential legacies of romanticism, nationalism and the picturesque still resonant in England's collective thinking, feeling, and aesthetic preferences.<sup>164</sup> His introduction to these ideas was highly structured and guided by an obliging father and stern mother, providing formative yet, at times, contrary views of aesthetic perception and

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<sup>161</sup> Ruskin's predilection towards the Picturesque and its influence on his early considerations of landscape are explored by Keith Hanley and John K. Walton. See Keith Hanley and John K. Walton, *Constructing Cultural Tourism: John Ruskin and the Tourist Gaze* (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2010), pp. 56-67.

<sup>162</sup> Ballantyne emphasizes Ruskin's early grounding in the Picturesque from infancy because of the family's frequent trips across the country either accompanying John James' sherry sales trips or during their summer vacations. See Ballantyne (2015), pp. 25-26.

<sup>163</sup> The Ruskin family's position and activities is explained chronologically by Hilton in Chapter 1 of his biography *John Ruskin*. Hanley describes the strong interest in travel and tourism in Britain in the early nineteenth century. See Hilton, pp. 1-40 and Hanley (2010), pp. 1-23.

<sup>164</sup> Janowitz, pp. 5-6.

expression.<sup>165</sup> Through his father, a man steeped in the Romanticism of the previous century, Ruskin gained an appreciation for poetry, prose, painting, and nature; through his mother, a devout Evangelical conservative, he received a moral education and a circumscribed Christian perspective. Being home-schooled, Ruskin was subject to his parent's inculcations: John James showed his son the world of picturesque indulgence, and Margaret taught him his moral place in it.<sup>166</sup> Ruskin grew up believing that Scripture was factual and true, concomitant with the physical reality of the natural world. Through this familial guidance, Ruskin's attention was directed to modes of poetic and artistic expression and spiritual and moral thinking that would frame his later life as a critic.

### 2.1.2 Drawing Decay

Ruskin's visual relation to decay emerged through his study of drawing and painting. Under the encouragement of his family—more so his father—Ruskin sought to practice poetry, prose, and drawing in the manner of his masters. Hidden within these works were themes and representations of decay and ruin found in landscape, architecture, and the physical processes of nature. There is little indication from Ruskin that he understood or thought of decay beyond the conventional meaning at the time. In the poems 'On Skiddaw and Derwent Water' (1826) and 'Eudisia' (1828), ruin is used to express the destruction of human creation or the result of a natural disaster.<sup>167</sup> Ruin is also an object or a place, as seen in Ruskin's Venetian tragedy *Marcolini*, where the Orsino Palace is a building in a constant state of decay and disrepair.<sup>168</sup> These archetypal uses

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<sup>165</sup> Hanson notes that Ruskin's stressful relationship with his mother led to him indulging in Wordsworthian 'heart's ease' escapism of nature rather than confronting the restrictive and controlling maternal rule he appeared to have endured. See David D. Hanson, 'Self and Revision in Ruskin's Revaluations of Romanticism, 1830-1880', in *Studies in Romanticism*, 39:2 (Summer 2000), 255-302.

<sup>166</sup> Birch comments on Ruskin's idyllic yet confrontational relationship with his father. Daniels surmised from Ruskin's autobiography his mother's oppressive and controlling nature, especially in terms of Bible training. See Dinah Birch, 'Fathers and Sons: Ruskin, John James Ruskin, and Turner', *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, 18:2 (1994), 147-162 and Daniels (2018), pp. 13-15.

<sup>167</sup> In the poem 'On Skiddaw and Derwent Water', Ruskin alludes to a boy who destroys his own snowman: 'and when he's made it, he strikes it into ruin' (*Works*, 2:266) and in 'Eudisia', Ruskin speaks of the larger degradation of the natural environment by humanity's deforestation efforts: 'in one sad ruin all the pines would fall' (*Works*, 2:270).

<sup>168</sup> In the beginning of the play, the Count Orsino Palace is seen to be 'working his ruin' (*Works*, 2:475). The city of Venice features prominently in his drama, identified by name the stairs and arches of the Rialto, the apartments in the Carrara Palace, and the shelter offered by St Mark's Basilica. Writing began in 1836 and finished a year later. The play is inspired by Ruskin's infatuation with Adèle Domecq, whom he met for the first time on May 18, 1836 (*Works*, 2: xxii), but it also follows his first visit to Venice on his second continental tour in 1835 where he most likely would have seen these settings and the condition of the significant Venetian buildings first-hand.

indicate no greater awareness of decay or ruin as distinct concepts; instead, they are poetic conventions or settings employed for sympathetic effect.

A significant step forward in the awareness of decay occurred during his drawing studies with Runciman in 1831 and when he received an illustrated copy of Rogers' *Italy: A Poem* a year later. Drawing was vital in Ruskin's life and understanding of decay because it eventually directed his eye toward detail rather than composition. However, his early sketching efforts were concerned with technique. He would often shadow his cousin Mary Richardson's drawing practice and did Runciman's lessons by himself.<sup>169</sup> After beginning his formal studies with Runciman, the teacher encouraged Ruskin to invent scenes for his drawings (see Figure 5), an exercise he found laborious and instead favoured drawing from



Figure 5. John Ruskin. *Landscape and Castle*. Marked '9th 1829'. Pencil. Beincke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

life.<sup>170</sup> Rather than invent compositions and scenes, Ruskin favoured sketching and recording things that were present before him. Inventing landscape scenes from his imagination was an exercise in composition, but Ruskin was more interested in factual observation. In *Praeterita*, Ruskin recalls his early lack of originality and memory when it came to composing scenes or drawing objects (*Works*, 35:75). Unbeknownst to Ruskin at

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<sup>169</sup> Walton notes how Ruskin imitated Mary's drawing exercises and eventually took lessons from Charles Runciman (1798-1864) who taught him perspective and how to copy other's drawings. See Paul H. Walton, *The Drawings of John Ruskin* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>170</sup> The importance of drawing from life became vital to Ruskin. See Walton, p. 6. and Nicholas Penny, *Ruskin's Drawings* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2004), p. 10.

the time, his early sketches identified the loci of decay in landscape and architecture. The dilapidated castle in Figure 5 sits on a rocky outcrop before a series of broken mountain peaks—foreshadowing his chapter sequence in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* 27 years later, that begin with the old spire at Calais and then progress to the geological explanation of Alpine Mountain peaks, crests, and precipices.

Ruskin admits to pouring over the illustrations in Rogers' *Italy*; the images of foreign landscapes and architecture appealed to him. The placement of buildings in the topography was an important picturesque characteristic prevalent in Turner, Prout and, to a lesser extent, Stothard's illustrations. While some images contained ruins such as the Temple at Paestum, the Campagna of Rome, or the Temple of Pallas, most buildings were aged or old rather than dilapidated. The picturesque preference for broken and irregular lines was not evident in Turner's and Prout's noble scenes. The illustrations are based on what was there, not the invention of an amusing composition, as seen in Turner's rendering of Rome (Figure 6). Also, paramount was the influence of the poetic text



Figure 6. J.M.W. Turner. 'Headpiece for the Roman Pontiffs', from *Roger's Italy: A Poem*. c.1830. Steel engraving after original drawing.

describing the Italian landscape, architecture, history, and individual narratives. Rogers' verses loosely followed those of Byron and underscored the connection between visual



landscape and textual description.<sup>171</sup> The Romantic naturalism and subjective emotion imbued Turner's picturesque scenes with another possibility of meaning. The emergence of Romantic feelings transformed how Ruskin saw landscape and the world around him. These changes are evident in Ruskin's drawings from his continental tour of 1835, where his drawings demonstrate greater accuracy and fidelity to the scene and subject matter. His drawing of the Hospital at the Pass of St Gothard (Figure 7) shows a similar

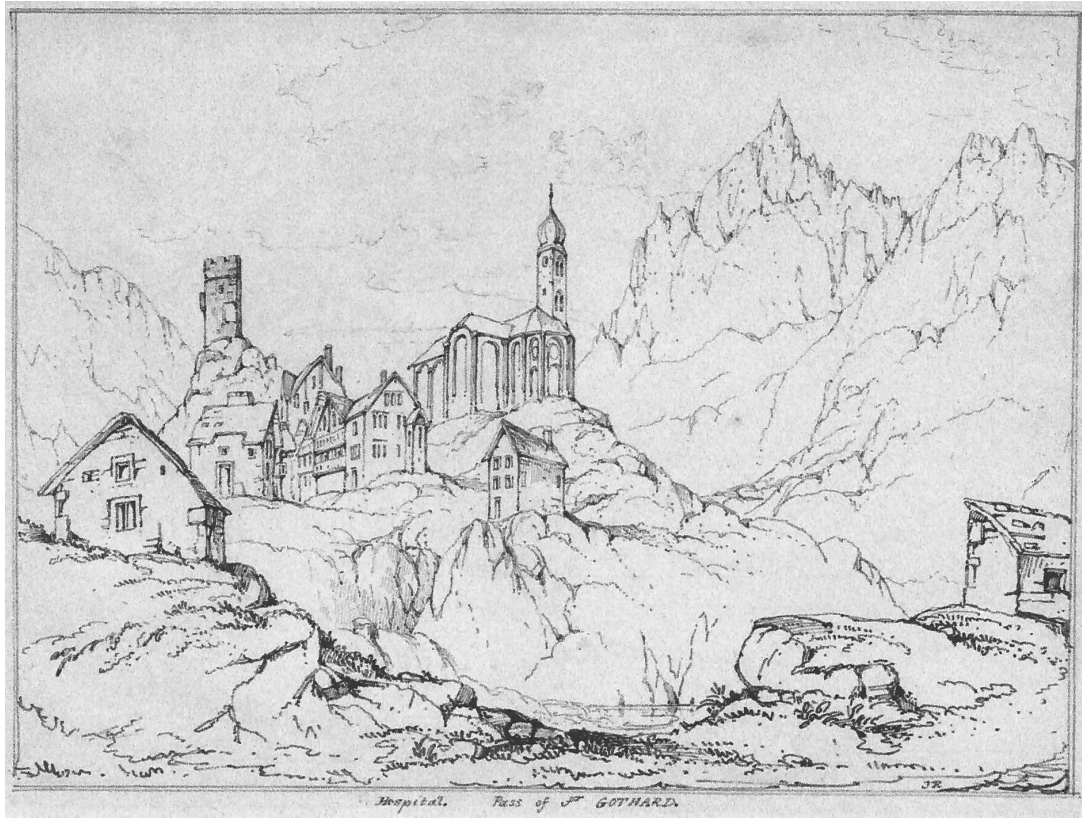


Figure 7. John Ruskin. 'Hospital, Pass of St Gothard'. August 13, 1835. Pencil and Ink. Ruskin Library, Lancaster (RF 2044).

composition to Figure 5, except the drawing style is controlled and assiduous. The rustic architecture is appropriate for an alpine setting but is depicted as resolute and enduring rather than in ruin or regress. The mountain peaks are rendered with the same precision and accuracy as the buildings; their prodigious structure and delicate outline are captured attentively. There is a picturesque quality to the composition: the forced perspective of the buildings gives the roofs and towers a pinnacle-like character, and the clustering of buildings mirrors the series of mountain peaks in the distance. Ruskin addressed this

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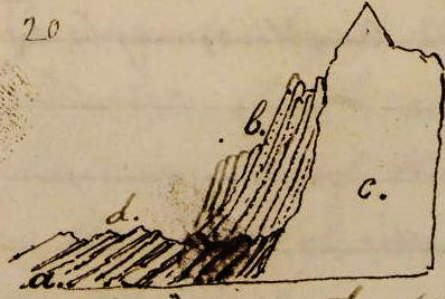
<sup>171</sup> Walton, p. 12.

mimicking tendency in his discussion of the parasitic sublime over a decade later, but it is a conceit of his early artistic endeavours that connects architecture and mountains.<sup>172</sup>

What is absent is any misrepresentation of ruin or decay—Ruskin was not changing the appearance of the buildings or landscape to make them more visually appealing but rather accentuating what is already present. The buildings and mountains are weathered and old but still intact. His choice of depiction indicates a commitment to representing what exists without frivolity or enhancement. He gleaned this from his masters: from Prout, he gained fidelity, and from Turner, he gained magnitude. Without overt visual novelty or drama in the composition, a viewer must retreat inwards to find meaning and solace. Understanding comes from contemplating the artifacts as they are, not as they might be, and Ruskin refused to embellish them. His diaries and notebooks from 1835 onward contain numerous sketches and diagrams demonstrating his penetrative imagination, looking for the inner workings of things in nature, be they mountains or buildings, to determine the genesis of their outward form (Figure 8). This type of drawing would come to dominate his thinking as a way of visually working out how the forms of the earth were intended and realized according to their own inherent constitution, a mix of Word and Work that would guide his thinking on nature and decay.

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<sup>172</sup> The discussion of the parasitic sublime is discussed in the next section. See Section 2.2.



temple on a Corinthian column of Marble. The whole of the Wetterhorn, and of its companion, the Wellhorn, are said to be granite calcareous rock. I do not believe it. The part of the Wetterhorn, which is come-at-able from the Scheideck, is certainly limestone, but the summit of the Wetterhorn has never to my knowledge been ascended, and it is believed without any farther evidence, that because the bottom of the mountain was <sup>calcareous</sup> granite the top must be so. One might as well affirm that Mont Blanc was not granite, because the Mont-aux-vert was mica slate.

In the first place, the appearance, and the form of the summit of the Wetterhorn is not that of limestone rock, from whatever point it may be viewed. from the east, it is a majestic and regular pyramid, with a point as sharp as a needle and with a few jagged rocks.



Figure 8. John Ruskin. *Diary Notebook of John Ruskin*, p. 124. MS6. 1835. Ink. Ruskin Library, Lancaster.

### 2.1.3 The Poetry of Beauty and Decay

It may be observed of the whole of the cottage, that, though all is beautiful, nothing is pretty.

(*Works*, 1:46)

Nestled into a dense explanation of the Swiss mountain cottage, this quiet statement from *Poetry* (1838-9) exemplifies the larger distinction Ruskin draws between things that are amusing and novel and things that are noble and true. Moments of such insight become increasingly prominent in his critical writings due to his increased exposure to new experiences of nature during his continental tours and his growing intellectual power. By 1837, Ruskin had begun his Arts degree studies at Oxford University and gathered notes and insights that would comprise *Poetry* after a summer excursion in the Lake District.<sup>173</sup> The content of the study of Greek and Latin classics at Oxford seemed to have bored him, but the texts would have given him access to systematic thought, including rhetoric, logic, and moral philosophy.<sup>174</sup> These would serve him well when formulating his argument for national architecture and landscape in *Poetry*. Before its publication in 1838, Ruskin was unconsciously assembling or preferencing the constituent elements that would factor into defining a theory of decay. These include a religious predisposition to the order and security of the world, a preference for nature as the ultimate expression of beauty in the world, and his belief that art, be it poetry, prose, or architecture, is the ultimate human expression of such an understanding of nature. At this point, the concept of decay is divorced from these positions because it has yet to be recognized as an essential aspect of nature, specifically impacting its forms and forces. This changes as Ruskin's eye becomes more critical and evaluative in *Poetry*.

Ruskin's understanding of decay emerges from the interrelation between nature, architecture, and landscape themes. As has been explicated to this point, decay is evident in landforms and old buildings and is the result of the erosive forces of nature. As such, decay is the material and formal result of affecting forces. The term decay is also assigned to the erosive process and identified as an active aspect of nature's operations. By the time

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<sup>173</sup> Robert Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford: The Art of Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 2-3.

<sup>174</sup> Hilton notes in a cancelled passage from *Praeterita* Ruskin's distaste for most classical works, except for Plato. See Hilton, pp. 42-3. Brockliss and Brodick describe the courses undergraduates would have taken at Oxford University before 1845. See L.W.B. Brockliss, *The University of Oxford: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 234-5 and George C. Brodick, *A History of the University of Oxford* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1900), p. 192.

of *Poetry's* publication in Loudon's *Architectural Magazine* in 1838, decay was aligned with its effect on landforms and buildings—little attention is given to it as a process. *Poetry* appears at first to be an exploration of picturesque ideas but one that elevates scenery, which includes landscape and architecture, beyond composition and whose comprehension can only be gained by engaging the foundational aspects of the intellect and the soul. Kostelnick speaks of this type of change from 'view to vision', by noting the difference between the view of landscape that titillates the eyes and the vision of nature that moves the heart.<sup>175</sup> Ruskin sets his vision for the Picturesque apart from one centred solely on an amusing composition—the scenic elements might remain, but their intellectual comprehension is elevated. *Poetry* introduces a core relationship between nature, landscape, and architecture where the life and energy of the formal and material world are recognized as being noble by a scrutinizing sensory intellect conditioned to understand beauty as a universal order. These terms become the basis of Ruskin's growing aesthetic lexicon, which he will refine in later works. These concepts will also define the perimeter of his theoretic investigations into nature, becoming the sites of exploration, critique, and redefinition of the nature of the beautiful. As a statement, *Poetry* lacks the conceptual and intellectual rigour of Ruskin's later investigations, but its innocence illuminates the appeal of architecture, geology, and decay in his thinking. While the importance of *Poetry* in the trajectory of Ruskin's major works has often been ignored, its importance is foundational for investigating decay.

*Poetry* was intended and consequently read as an elucidation of the national characteristics of buildings through the lens of a picturesque approach for looking at architecture and landscape. As such, many have seen this collection of essays as a prelude to Ruskin's mature works, a vehicle for introducing new ideas developed elsewhere with greater proficiency. In this vein, *Poetry* is often overlooked. However, this work is illuminating for decay because it establishes the visual and associative contexts in which decay is to be understood in Ruskin's thinking. *Poetry* is conspicuously absent in works by Landow (1971), Tyack, and Ballantyne (2015).<sup>176</sup> Hewison (1976) obliquely acknowledges *Poetry* in Ruskin's debt to Wordsworth, but only in terms of using the poet's *Guide through the*

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<sup>175</sup> Kostelnick, 22.

<sup>176</sup> See Landow (1971), Ballantyne (2015), pp. 51-55, and Geoffrey Tyack, 'Architecture', in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 100-102.

*District of the Lakes* (1810) as a thematic rather than theoretical influence.<sup>177</sup> Rosenberg is more generous and cites the influence of *Poetry* on *Modern Painters*, *Seven Lamps*, and *Stones*, but the themes of beauty, decay, and the intellect are left unexplored.<sup>178</sup> In her study of Ruskin's architecture, Garrigan (1973) identifies *Poetry* as an early instance where the fledgling critic acknowledges age, ruin, and decay.<sup>179</sup> Her investigation highlights the presence and importance of decay, particularly in relation to the Romantic conceptualization of Gothic architecture inherited from Sir Walter Scott, but not its origins or how Ruskin considered it important to his deeper understanding of nature.<sup>180</sup>

Despite the absence of general acknowledgment for *Poetry*, a nuanced approach to Ruskin's novice architectural project is provided by Fitch and Stein (1985), who illuminates the 'architectural poetic'. This identification highlights how architecture relates to landscape and reflects larger ideas of nature and beauty. Fitch states that the architectural poetic is a series of universal laws and forms linking buildings to landscape through a 'unity of feeling'.<sup>181</sup> Feeling is this arrangement's mental and spiritual effect; the poetic is how well, or 'noble', this effort is executed per the laws of nature. This places Ruskin's conceptualization of landscape and architecture within Wordsworth's Romanticism and natural picturesque, where emotional response is vital for transcendental comprehension. To this, Stein adds that the architectural poetic is an intellectual endeavour, promoting architectural form's archetypal and symbolic power as a 'new reordering ritual for the whole of life'.<sup>182</sup> The connection between outward form and inward intention aligns Ruskin's 'science of feeling' with the 'ministry of mind' (*Works*, 1:5), where the nobility of architecture and landscape are uncovered through intellectual rigour. This combination determines the correct understanding of feeling as an equal measure of intellect and emotion. Its moral measurement, or nobility, is how closely it aligns with the laws of nature. Fitch and Stein allude to the deeper intellectual and moral aspects introduced in *Poetry* that will become vital to Ruskin's understanding of nature and beauty. Others who have written on these themes, such as Landow, Hewison, and Garrigan, do

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<sup>177</sup> Hewison (1976), p. 51.

<sup>178</sup> Rosenberg, p. 51 & p. 131.

<sup>179</sup> Garrigan (1973), pp. 202-205.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>181</sup> Fitch, p. 124 & p. 230.

<sup>182</sup> Stein (1985), pp. 328-341.

not consistently acknowledge this debt.<sup>183</sup> In *Modern Painters* and *Seven Lamps*, Ruskin explores these themes in greater detail and with more rigour, but *Poetry* is where these conditions are first established.

At first glance, it is easy to dismiss *Poetry* as a picturesque-flavoured treatise because Ruskin considers architecture and landscape in the structure of the text from a largely compositional perspective. He selects a few examples to illustrate his point, a pattern he repeats in his later writings on architecture and geology, where singular examples represent the larger whole. Rather than stop at the novelty of a pictorial arrangement, Ruskin emphasizes the existential realizations these forms provide the perceiving intellect. Ruskin is not beholden to the Picturesque as defined by Gilpin, Price, or Knight, nor does he abandon the enterprise altogether; instead, he seeks to adjust the nomenclature of the Picturesque to reflect his need to encapsulate the beauty of nature. This perspective obviously benefits from hindsight, but the relationship between nature, landscape, and architecture unfolded as he wrote *Poetry* and developed further in *Modern Painters*, *Seven Lamps*, and *Stones*. Thus, in *Poetry*, Ruskin sets the stage for his future investigations into the nature and character of the Picturesque but also establishes its conceptual limits and how to evolve or move beyond them.

Details become important when identifying the presence of decay. In these details, Ruskin notices the effect of age and decay on architectural form. While England may have its neat cottages, those of France and Italy present signs of erosion, degradation, and decay. France's lowland cottages exhibit 'neglected beauty' and 'obliterated ornament' but 'constitute a kind of beauty from which the ideas of age and decay are inseparable' (*Works*, 1:13). Italian cottages are 'uncomfortable and [in] ruinous disorder' (*Works*, 1:28), perpetuating the country's character of 'decay and desolation in the works of man' (*Works*, 1:13). Ruskin locates the presence of decay in architecture where the forms and surfaces bear characteristic neglect, but also where the process of decay itself is most evident and where 'nature is most beautiful' (*Works*, 1:13). French and Italian cottages appeal to nostalgia and the past, defining characteristics informed by visual evidence. These exchanges within the text highlight the play between how specific details inform and construct general feelings. The poetic, or the science of feeling, ends in the beautiful. While Ruskin has not comprehensively defined the beautiful's characteristics, it is synonymous

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<sup>183</sup> Allowance and understanding are given since their respective investigations have other intentions of revealing different aspects of Ruskin's thinking.

with the poetic feeling—a harmonious existence between material and message. When Ruskin began his investigations of beauty in *Modern Painters*, he would have to confront the latent Picturesqueness underlying his architectural theory in *Poetry* and, in so doing, confront the nature of decay. After *Poetry*, decay assumed a more vital role in his aesthetic thinking and his later geological theories.

## 2.2 Defining Decay

*Poetry* introduced two topic areas to his thinking on decay: the Beautiful and the Picturesque. While the Picturesque deals with Ruskin's favourite topic, landscape, he finds it lacking scope and intent. In exposing its flaws, he highlights what is most important in landscape and nature: ideas of sublimity and beauty. Of the three, beauty has been explored the most. It is the centrepiece of his aesthetic theory and the highest expression of divine intention in the natural world. Ruskin's sublime is more of an extension of the beautiful than a separate category as characterized by Burke. However, in this entanglement of beauty and the sublime lie the seeds for explaining the power of decay. The Picturesque's infatuation with ruin and decay as an aesthetic feature led Ruskin to define what proper decay must be, leading to his inclusion of the sublime as a measurement of an artifact's inherent potential and fulfilment. For the Picturesque to transcend its lower status, it must embrace the sublime to be considered beautiful and noble. In his explorations, Ruskin examines an artifact's outward characteristics and inner virtues, delineating expectations for each in his theory of beauty. If decay is to be elevated from a surface condition into a noble expression, it must engage with aspects of the sublime and the beautiful. How did Ruskin manage this?

The answer begins with Ruskin's highest standard for any artifact in the world: his theophanic aesthetic theory of the beautiful. For decay to be seen as noble, it must engage aspects of the beautiful. Following this is his understanding of the sublime, which differs from other definitions but functions in Ruskin's aesthetic theory of the beautiful as a measure of an artifact's level of transcendence. For decay to ascend from mere surface treatment, it must exhibit sublime characteristics. Lastly, I look at the Picturesque as a failed system and how Ruskin envisions improving it by elevating ruin and decay away from novelty characteristics to expressions of sublimity and beauty.



## 2.2.1 The Picturesque

[T]he modern feeling of the picturesque, which, so far as it consists in a delight in ruin, is perhaps the most suspicious and questionable of all characters distinctively belonging to our temper, and art.

(*Works*, 8:235)

Ruskin had a complicated relationship with the Picturesque. As a concept, it held a low status in his aesthetic hierarchy because it infringed on subject matter that he highly esteemed, specifically the exalted emotions one felt when experiencing truly noble nature, landscape, and architecture. It is challenging to address the broader movements of the Picturesque because, as Copley and Garside (1994) state, the Picturesque is notoriously difficult to define and, as explained later, was hardly a unified theoretic or aesthetic movement.<sup>184</sup> Despite this, it is possible to construct an imaginary of the Picturesque from Ruskin's response to its shortcomings, specifically in *Seven Lamps* and *Modern Painters*, where he describes perspectives of the Picturesque that vexed his thinking. The first is 'universal decay' (*Works*, 8:235) and a 'delight in ruins' (*Works*, 6:9), essentially an adoration of decay for its own sake of appearance, and second a parasitical sublimity that focuses on the 'least essential characters' of an artifact (*Works*, 8:236) while promoting a 'sublimity not inherent in the nature of the thing' (*Works*, 6:10). In essence, the Picturesque for Ruskin is concerned with superficial appearances and a false sense of nobility inferred by associative resemblance. The Picturesque's infatuation with ruin was a matter of mindless taste, a preference for a lower 'surface-picturesque' unconcerned with pathos or sublimity (*Works*, 6:15-6). However, the parasitical sublime is particularly detestable. Its supposed power comes from a character or virtue an artifact does not inherently possess, alluded to when Ruskin says, 'the ruggedness of a cottage roof possesses something of a mountain aspect, not belonging to the cottage as such' (*Works*, 6:10). Sublimity, it would seem, plays a large role in determining a noble picturesque.

Like his dilemma with the Picturesque, Ruskin had difficulties with the sublime. Initially, he believed that the sublime, as proposed by Burke, was not necessary in his theory of beauty. Landow (1971) notes that Ruskin's concept of the sublime emerged necessarily 'to solve the problem of the role of emotion in beauty and art' without the

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<sup>184</sup> Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, *The Politics of the Picturesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 1.

negative associations inherent in Burke's conception.<sup>185</sup> In Volume 1 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin believed that the sublime was unnecessary and that beauty could handle the range of emotions nature evoked, saying '[s]ublimity is, therefore, only another word for the effect of greatness upon the feelings' (*Works*, 3:128). Sublimity is aligned with the power of beauty, as it is 'found wherever anything elevates the mind; that is, wherever it contemplates anything above itself, and perceives it to be so' (*Works*, 3:130). Ignoring the sublime was to forego Burke's emotions of terror, vastness, and pain, and initially, something Ruskin desired to avoid in his theory of beauty. But, he was eventually inclined to admit the sublime into his discussions, as Landow notes, not to perpetuate Burke's dichotomy but to act as an 'aesthetic catchall, as a category into which he could place forms of aesthetic emotion excluded from his theories of beauty'.<sup>186</sup> Landow's statement is valid but downplays the importance of the sublime in Ruskin's aestheticism; it gave Ruskin another emotional category besides the pleasure of beauty to address the range of supra-human experiences, especially of nature. Beauty still reigned supreme, but the presence of the sublime provided Ruskin with a mode through which to analyze the Picturesque and, by extension, decay.

The Picturesque was problematic to Ruskin because it was infatuated with ruin and decrepitude, and its false sense of meaning and value divorced from the artifact itself. Ruskin believed that the Picturesque lacked more significant noble associations and intentions, a point also noted by Reynolds, who claimed it was incompatible with the ambitions of the Grand Manner of high art.<sup>187</sup> Future scholarship on the Picturesque, such as the work produced by Hussey (1967), Andrews (1989), and Robinson (1991), are more sympathetic to its modest agenda, but Ruskin was not one of them. Rather than accept the Picturesque for what it was, Ruskin saw it for what it could express and did not. He had to correct its deficiencies and errors to elevate it as a noble art form worthy of expressing the true nature of landscape. Terminological references and parasitical sublimity needed to be redefined and reoriented. In so doing, Ruskin is working towards a clearer understanding of decay.

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<sup>185</sup> Landow (1971), p. 183.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>187</sup> For Reynolds' letter, see Gilpin (1796), pp. 34-6.

## 2.2.2 Beautiful Nature

The Beautiful is the signature of God upon His works.

(*Works*, 4:75)

This statement from Volume 1 of *Modern Painters* (1846) summarizes Ruskin's conception of the beautiful as a sign of the divine. In his thinking, beauty is the overarching goal of aesthetic experience—his investigative and reflective efforts are to define what constitutes beauty in the world and the pleasurable sensation of beauty in human experience. In his thinking, he ascribes characteristics of the beautiful to the physical, outward qualities of artifacts in the world and the felicitous, inward sensations aroused by recognizing the complete fulfilment of the artifact's inherent intentions. Ruskin writes:

By the term Beauty, then, properly are signified two things. First, that external quality of bodies already so often spoken of, and which, whether it occur in stone, flower, beast, or in man, is absolutely identical, which, as I have already asserted, may be shown to be in some sort typical of the Divine attributes, and which therefore I shall, for distinction's sake, call Typical Beauty; and, secondarily, the appearance of felicitous fulfilment of function in living things, more especially of the joyful and right exertion of perfect life in man; and this kind of beauty I shall call Vital Beauty.

(*Works*, 4:64)

Typical beauty is reserved for artifacts with enough god-stuff to elicit a pleasurable response; vital beauty is the inner realization of this state of affairs, which his proposal for the theoretic faculty governs.<sup>188</sup> The latter is a capacity of human perception; the former results from divine artifice and intention. Both are necessary and requisite for an accurate moral understanding and experience of beauty. In Ruskin's conception, artifacts in the world are existent and engrained with divine glory because God creates them; humanity is graced by the deity with the faculties to recognize this proviso through pleasurable and obeisant sensations. Artifacts are beautiful because they kindle the pleasurable feelings that indicate beauty in the viewer; the relationship is causative and mutually dependent.

In Ruskin's aesthetic system, the sequence of the beautiful flows from artifact to impression: the feeling of beauty is a validation of the inherent goodness and glory of divine creation evident in the things of the world. These expressions of grace are found in

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<sup>188</sup> Ruskin explains this relationship in Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*. I will include excerpts from his description in the following paragraphs.

the objects of perception, and perception is key: ‘any material object which can give us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful’ (*Works*, 3:109). Ruskin denies that ‘the impressions of beauty are in any way sensual; they are neither sensual nor intellectual, but moral’ (*Works*, 4:42). The moral position incorporates the senses and the intellect but stands distinct as a separate state of awareness. This faculty of human perception is governed by *theoria*, or the Theoretic faculty, which is ‘concerned with the moral perception and appreciation of ideas of beauty’ (*Works*, 4:35). *Theoria* is ‘the full comprehension and contemplation of the Beautiful as a gift of God; a gift not necessary to our being, but added to, and elevating it, and twofold: first of the desire, and secondly of the thing desired’ (*Works*, 4:47). Beauty is not a social custom or an arbitrary inflection of taste, but moral because it leads to the godhead:

For, as it is necessary to the existence of an idea of beauty, that the sensual pleasure which may be its basis should be accompanied first with joy, then with love of the object, then with the perception of kindness in a superior intelligence, finally, with thankfulness and veneration towards that intelligence itself.

(*Works*, 4:48)

This simplified summary glosses over the larger aspects of Ruskin’s aesthetic theory that others such as Landow (1971), Hewison (1976), and Fitch cover in greater depth, but it highlights the important distinction between the sources of beauty and the impressions of beauty necessary for a discussion of decay. Landow states that the concept of beauty was the ‘most important idea in *Modern Painters*’<sup>189</sup> and, along with Hewison and Fitch, dedicated significant energy to explaining Ruskin’s theory of the beautiful.<sup>190</sup> And rightfully so: beauty is a recurring and dominant principle in Ruskin’s moral understanding of nature. The structure of his study of the beautiful emerged in the wake of the British aesthetic debates of the eighteenth century, where he addressed errors and shortcomings of several prevailing theoretical positions. According to Shelley (2020), these discussions explored the sources of beauty, beauty’s impact on the affective states in the mind, the associative value of beauty, and the human capacity to judge beauty.<sup>191</sup> It is unclear if Ruskin had a thorough knowledge of the larger aesthetic debates, but Landow

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<sup>189</sup> Landow (1971), p. 99.

<sup>190</sup> Hewison devotes an entire chapter, ‘Ruskin and Beauty’, while Fitch’s discussion of beauty is intermingled with various topics across several chapters. See Hewison (1976), pp. 54-64 and Fitch (1982).

<sup>191</sup> Shelley (Winter 2020 Edition).

distinguishes how Ruskin addresses those issues that directly impact his aesthetic theory, such as Hume's utility theory of beauty, Reynolds' familiarity theory, and the associationism of Alison.<sup>192</sup>

Landow's summary of the structure and conceptual framework of Ruskin's theory of beauty traces the evolution of Ruskin's beauty from Hume, Smith, Burke, Reynolds, and Alison, outlining what beauty is not.<sup>193</sup> His approach is understandable because it reflects Ruskin's isolated and scattered approach to aesthetic philosophy, where, as Costelloe (2013) points out, Ruskin's lack of comprehensive knowledge and interest in the larger debates was evident.<sup>194</sup> What is unclear in Landow's account is a cohesive understanding of what beauty actually is. His analysis of Ruskin's theory explains the pathway to the experience of beauty but not the constitution of the beautiful forms in the world. In a sense, one needs only to look at nature for such evidence, as Ruskin states in *Seven Lamps*, 'all beauty is founded on the laws of natural form' (*Works*, 8:141).<sup>195</sup> These laws govern the outward form of artifacts and their inward assembly and constitution, epitomizing the Deity's goodness and grace, saying, 'if we can perceive beauty in everything of God's doing, we may argue that we have reached the true perception of its universal laws' (*Works*, 4:60). Ruskin's argument for numinous beauty would be at the heart of his critique of the Picturesque.

### 2.2.3 The Fallacy of Universal Decay and Parasitical Sublimity

In the late eighteenth century, Gilpin envisioned the Picturesque as a way to as a way to produce an interesting view.<sup>196</sup> Similarly, in his *Essays on the Picturesque* (1794), Price sought to establish a middle emotional ground of amusement and novelty rather than beauty and terror in the merism of Burke's beautiful and sublime extremes.<sup>197</sup> To make a picturesque scene interesting, there had to be a certain variety of formal components to

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<sup>192</sup> Landow addresses Ruskin's position in relation to these philosophical and aesthetic perspectives in Chapter 2: Ruskin's Theories of Beauty. See Landow (1971), pp. 89-179.

<sup>193</sup> Landow's chapter 'Theories of Beauty' explains in detail the history and influences on Ruskin's conception of beauty. See Landow (1971), pp. 89-179.

<sup>194</sup> Costelloe (2013), p. 227.

<sup>195</sup> This aphorism is from Chapter 4: The Lamp of Beauty from *Seven Lamps*.

<sup>196</sup> Gilpin promoted the Picturesque approach in his holiday travel books *Observations of the River Wye and Several Parts of Wales* (1782), *Observations on the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland* (1786), *Observations on Several Parts of Great Britain, particularly the Highlands of Scotland* (1789), *Observations on the Western Parts of England and Observations on the Isle of Wight* (1798), *Observations on the Casts of Hampshire, Sussex, and Kent* (1804), *Observations on the Counties of Cambridge, Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex and Observations on Several Parts of North Wales* (1809), and his treatise explaining the Picturesque, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty* (1794).

<sup>197</sup> Uvedale Price, *Essay on the Picturesque* (London: J. Robson, 1794), pp. 39-42.

stimulate the eye. Burke had identified certain formal, spatial, and material characteristics of objects with corresponding emotional responses, such as ‘vastness’ to the sensations of the sublime<sup>198</sup> and ‘smoothness’ to those of the beautiful.<sup>199</sup> Gilpin continued this approach, ascribing the terms ‘rough and rugged’ to the Picturesque to differentiate it from Burke’s conception of the beautiful (See Figures 9 and 10). In this schema, the outward physical characteristics of objects induce a sensory and emotional response. The emphasis on physical characteristics in landscape carried over to architecture in the form of a ruin at the hands of decay. Decay, or more precisely, the appearance of decay, became a defining characteristic of the Picturesque. For example, Gilpin states that a classical Palladian temple or other such building would be innately proportional and elegant—pleasing, but ultimately lacking as a novelty because of its canonical rules of tectonic composition. To remedy this deficiency, he suggests using a mallet instead of a chisel: ‘we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated



Figure 9. William Gilpin. ‘An example of smoothness’ from *Three Essays*. 1796. Steel engraving after original drawing.

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<sup>198</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Penguin, 1757/1998), p. 114.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.



Figure 10. William Gilpin. 'An example of roughness' from *Three Essays*. 1796. Steel engraving after original drawing.

members around in heaps',<sup>200</sup> surmising that 'in a word, instead of making the whole *smooth*, make it *rough*; and you make it also *Picturesque*'.<sup>201</sup> In his explanation of the Picturesque, Price uses architecture as a reference point and similarly states that a perfect Grecian temple is beautiful whereas 'in ruin it is Picturesque'.<sup>202</sup>

In both accounts, the roughness and irregularity of a ruin's outlines make it picturesque, but they also allude to the causes of distress, namely erosion and decay. However, it is not the process of decay that is important; it is its effect, and nowhere is that seen clearer than with the architectural ruin (see Figure 11). In most examples used by Gilpin and Price to illustrate the character of the Picturesque, be they landscape, vegetation, people or animals, the decay process is predominantly identified with the architectural ruin.<sup>203</sup> However, the Picturesque sometimes demands greater variety than what nature can provide, as illustrated when Gilpin famously states that the intact facades

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<sup>200</sup> Gilpin (1796), p. 7.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>202</sup> Price, p. 62.

<sup>203</sup> Gilpin and Price provide descriptions of objects (their shapes, outlines, colours, etc.) but rarely the causes of these characteristics. Gilpin refers to weather impacting landscape and Price speaks of vegetation overgrowth, interestingly in association with the architectural ruin. See Price, pp. 62-63.



Figure 11. William Gilpin. *A Ruined Abbey*. 1789. Ink and watercolour. Gallery Oldham.

of Tintern Abbey ‘hurt the eye with their regularity’ and that a ‘mallet judiciously used... might be of service in fracturing some of them’.<sup>204</sup> The intentional destruction of the abbey to make it more picturesque speaks to the desire to make the effect of erosion and decay more prominent, even if by artificial means. Organic decay, it would seem, is insufficient for picturesque novelty.

For Gilpin and Price, erosion and degradation provided the roughness and irregularity of the objects in nature necessary for a picturesque view. In so doing, they identified the role of age and decay as the primary causes of these outward effects, even if the natural process was not particular enough for their discerning tastes. From Ruskin’s perspective, the problem with decay in the Picturesque is that decay is incidental or extrinsic, lacking an authentic expression of the sublime. His measure of picturesque character is determined by the quantity and quality of the sublime it can convey, stating:

[T]wo ideas, therefore, are essential to picturesqueness, the first, that of sublimity (for pure beauty is not picturesque at all, and becomes so only as the sublime elements mixes with it), and the second, the subordinate or parasitical position of that sublimity.

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<sup>204</sup> Gilpin (1800), p. 49.



Landow (1971) identifies the characteristics and feelings of Ruskin's sublime as the 'pleasures of strong, even violent emotion, of asymmetry, of the awesome, the terrible, and the vast'.<sup>205</sup> There is some overlap between Ruskin's ideas and Burke's definitions. However, in a collection of unpublished notes to his definition of the sublime in Volume 1 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin calls the pureness or greatness of the sublime as anything 'above ordinary humanity' in scale and is a sign of 'some superior power' or 'some ruling sympathy that conquers the apathy of the elements, and feels through the inanimation of nature the supernatural unity of God' (Works, 4:369-71).<sup>206</sup> It would appear that the sublime is a sense of the divine and borrows some of Burke's concepts of vastness, magnitude, and infinity but devoid of their associative and horrific passions of 'astonishment'.<sup>207</sup> If Ruskin's unpublished definition of the sublime holds—as Landow professes it does, arguing that the 'omitted sections represent Ruskin's true position'—then the Picturesque as an aesthetic category fails primarily on account of its inability to convey the supra-human conditions of numinous truth and beauty.<sup>208</sup>

For Ruskin, making the sublime a determining factor indicates how the Picturesque can be judged and how decay can be understood. The Picturesque emphasizes the appearance of decay rather than the essential character of decay, which Ruskin aligns with the fulfilment of an appointed function or inherent potential. Ruskin believes that the type of sublimity determines the nobility of decay, saying:

[T]his sublimity may be either in mere external ruggedness, and other visible character, or it may lie deeper, in an expression of sorrow and old age, attributes which are both sublime; not a dominant expression, but one mingled with such familiar and common characters as prevent the object from becoming perfectly pathetic in its sorrow, or perfectly venerable in its age.

(Works, 6:10-11)

Thus, 'universal decay' cannot only be about its appearance. Ruskin questions the Picturesque's emphasis on the 'mere sublimity of the rents, or fractures, or stains, or

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<sup>205</sup> Landow (1971), p. 185.

<sup>206</sup> These explanations on the sublime come from unpublished notes for three-page Chapter 3: 'Of the Sublime' of Volume 1 of *Modern Painters*. The notes were collected as an Appendix in Volume 2 by Cook and Wedderburn.

<sup>207</sup> Burke, p. 101.

<sup>208</sup> Landow refers to these notes as being consistent with Ruskin's use of the term throughout the remaining volumes of *Modern Painters*. See Landow (1971), p. 184.

vegetation, which assimilate the architecture with the work of Nature' that, in so doing, contributes to the 'extinction of the true characters of the architecture' (*Works*, 8:241). The true or inherent character of architecture is the 'exponent of age', of which 'the greatest glory of the building consists' (*Works*, 8:241). For Ruskin, the character of age is internal; it comes directly from the building enduring the effects of decay. This stands in distinction from the appearance of decay that Gilpin and Price advocate: the insincerity of hammering down an abbey to make it appear older than it is. Such a dressing of stone is a parasitical sublimity because it falsely attributes the character of age—an age that should be earned—to something that has not actually endured true decay. Aging is something 'nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart' (*Works*, 6:14) and an ongoing process, not an arranged scene or static composition. The denial of inner character in favour of outward appearance constitutes the lower picturesque; however, Ruskin says:

[I]f these same outward characters be sought for in subordination to the inner character of the object, every source of pleasurable being refused which is incompatible with that, while perfect sympathy is felt at the same time with the object as to all that it tells of itself in those sorrowful by-words, we have the school of true or noble picturesque.

(*Works*, 6:16)

Here, the distinction is clear between Ruskin's noble picturesque and Gilpin's lower picturesque. The character of the inner life of an artifact, be it a building or mountain, is what determines its nobility. When the inner character is true to the function of the artifact or species to which that artifact belongs, then the outward form will authentically express that inherent quality. Ruskin's challenge to the Picturesque is a questioning of its fundamental position and assumption. To be fair to Gilpin and Price, the Picturesque was intended to be a middle ground between the Beautiful and the Sublime, as either a pleasant or amusing way to look at the landscape. However, Ruskin saw it as a failing. His augmented position echoes William Wordsworth's critique of the Picturesque and his Romantic view on nature. The similarities in their approaches point the Picturesque towards a different path, one that is more aggressive and encompassing of the grander and glorious aspects of nature rather than its amusing and anecdotal perspectives.

#### **2.2.4 Wordsworth's Natural Picturesque**

Ruskin's noble picturesque accepts nature and artifacts as they are, not as they should appear. This perspective reflects Wordsworth's position, who, a quarter century earlier, found the Picturesque to be likewise contentious and misleading. Wordsworth took

the Picturesque to task in his *Descriptive Sketches* (1793) and *A Guide through the District of the Lakes in the North of England* (1810-1835), criticizing its terminology and conceptual limits. In terms of an encapsulating definition, the concept of the Picturesque was not broad enough. Situating the Picturesque between the extremes of the beautiful and the sublime meant it was always somewhere between an unadulterated and mesmeric experience. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the words used to describe picturesque feelings—amusement, curiosity, irritation—are timid and mild compared to their Burkean counterparts. Also, the physical characteristics assigned to the objects of the picturesque landscape, the roughness and ruggedness of the picturesque forms, could also be applied to the majesty and terror of mountain peaks or broken shorelines. Wordsworth addresses these concerns in a note for his *Descriptive Sketches*, where he titled some of his sketches of mountains ‘Picturesque’ but stated that ‘the Alps are insulted in applying to them that term’.<sup>209</sup> Anyone gazing at the jagged and crumbling outline of the Aiguille de Charmoz (Figure 12) could describe them

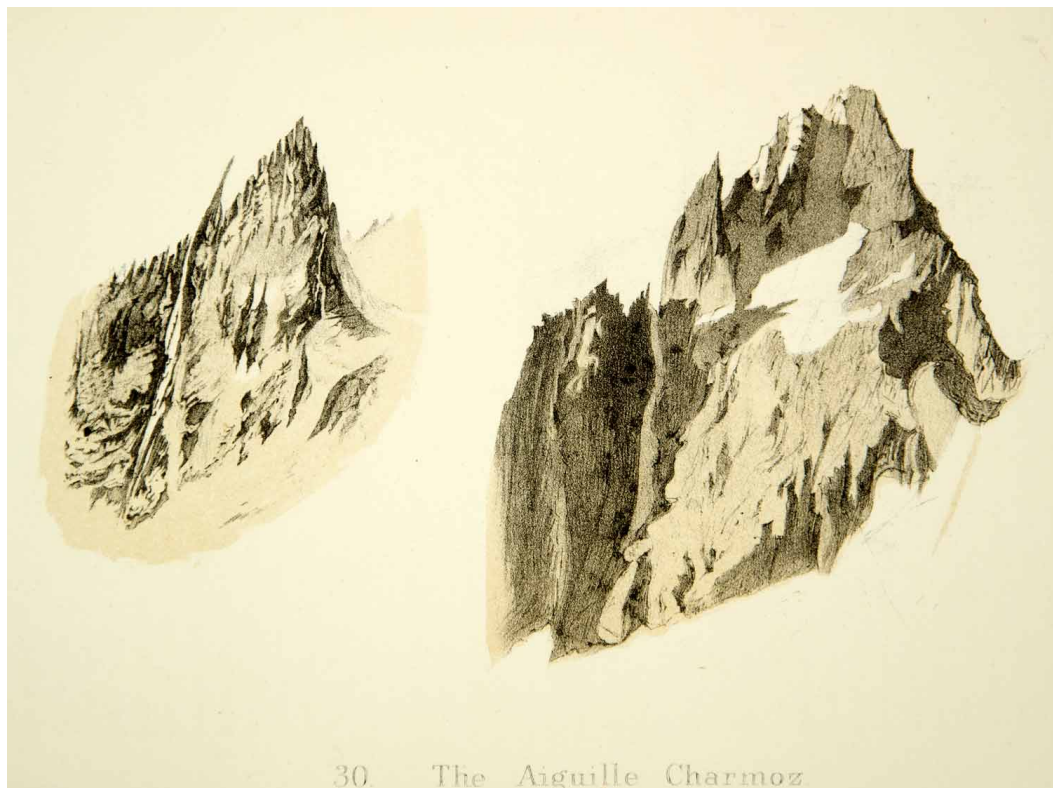


Figure 12. John Ruskin. ‘The Aiguille Charmoz’ from *Modern Painters*, Volume 3. 1856. Steel engraving after original drawing.

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<sup>209</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Descriptive Sketches’ in *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), p. 608n.

using the Picturesque terms of rugged, rough, irregular and with a sudden variation of line. But, according to Wordsworth, these mountains were more than amusing curiosities; they were beautiful yet not the smooth beauty as defined by Burke, and also sublimely vast and infinite, but not terrifying or painful. Where aspects of nature did not adhere to the formal descriptions of the tranquil beautiful nor reach the painful terror of Burke's sublime nor descend to the prosaic amusing landscape scene, it was necessary to either expand the definition of the Picturesque or create a new category altogether. Wordsworth sought to do both.

Costelloe (2013) argues that Wordsworth's primary complaint with the Picturesque is 'the limitations inherent to the language and principles of the Picturesque and its inadequacy for expressing exulted emotions inspired by nature'.<sup>210</sup> There appears to be a disconnection between the terms used and the meaning or feelings they invoke. One can also see this in Price and Knight's treatment of Gilpin's picturesque terms, where agreement on definitions, exclusions, and concepts was rarely achieved.<sup>211</sup> In their defence, these authors looked to the comparatively tame British topography in defining their picturesque allusions and not the resplendence of the Alps. To make the Picturesque more encompassing, it seemed necessary to redefine what a theory of landscape should be, both in broadening the language used to describe the appearance of artifacts in nature and recalibrating the perceptual framework to prioritize emotional and subjective experience. Wordsworth's initial critique is to challenge the basic function of the Picturesque as a compositional approach to looking at landscape. In discussing the differences between sketching the British hills and Swiss mountains, he writes:

I should be sorry to contemplate either country in reference to that art, further than as its fitness or unfitness for the pencil renders it more or less pleasing to the eye of the spectator, who has learned to observe and feel, chiefly from Nature herself.<sup>212</sup>

He also devotes a section to the horrors of 'ornamental gardening' and the penchant for

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<sup>210</sup> Costelloe (2013), p. 173.

<sup>211</sup> As an example, in Gilpin's *Three Essays* (1974), Wordsworth references Burke's definitions of 'smoothness' as a characteristic of the beautiful and how roughness is a distinct character of 'picturesque beauty' (pp. 5-6). Similarly, in his *Essay*, Price alludes to Gilpin's definition of 'roughness' as excluding smoothness, yet retaining instances when smoothness might be an appropriate characteristic of the Picturesque (pp. 44-46n).

<sup>212</sup> William Wordsworth, *A Guide Through the District of the Lakes in the North of England, with a Description of the Scenery, &c. for the Use of Tourists and Residents*. 5th ed., with considerable revisions (London: Hudson & Nicholson, 1835), accessed online at [https://romantic-circles.org/editions/guide\\_lakes/editions.2020.guide\\_lakes.1835.html](https://romantic-circles.org/editions/guide_lakes/editions.2020.guide_lakes.1835.html), section 104.

‘sequestered spots’ from which to gain a view.<sup>213</sup> In defiance against the improvers who injure and distort the landscape, Wordsworth advocates for the beauty of an unimproved nature instead.<sup>214</sup> Costelloe terms this position ‘natural Picturesque’, stating that Wordsworth’s position encourages humanity to live organically with and within nature’s processes.<sup>215</sup> The consequence for Gilpin’s Picturesque is the refusal to compose a scene, instead taking nature as it is and without alteration or improvement. It appeared Wordsworth intended to expand the focus of the Picturesque away from a compositional endeavour into one of an observer seeking the unfiltered truths of nature. There is no evidence that Ruskin read or was aware of Wordsworth’s unpublished draft of a treatise on the beautiful and the sublime from 1811-12, but the resonance with Ruskin’s position is poignant.<sup>216</sup>

To Ruskin, Wordsworth was the poet of description. The poet’s power was to capture the beauty of an image, such as nature, and express the internal feelings it provided. As a youthful Romantic, Ruskin saw Wordsworth’s power as impressive, yet as a Victorian critic, he saw the poet’s work as lacking depth.<sup>217</sup> However, Ruskin admired the poet’s travels and accounts in his youth, leading him to emulate them, with his continental diaries as a clear example. Ruskin saw himself as the peripatetic Wanderer of *The Excursion*, even including a long quotation from the poem as an epigraph for the entire five volumes of *Modern Painters*.<sup>218</sup> Wordsworth pushes for a broader definition and role for the Picturesque by bringing a larger numinous reading of nature, his ‘natural Picturesque’, elevating the amusement of landscape scenes to prophetic statements of divine will and intention. The focus on nature’s sublimity also directed Ruskin’s spiritual inclinations towards the materiality of nature, where his exegetical studies could find expression in the forms of the world.

For Ruskin, this push towards a natural Picturesque would culminate in his theophanic theory of beauty described in Volumes 1 and 2 of *Modern Painters*, published

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<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, section 73.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid*, section 92.

<sup>215</sup> Costelloe (2013), p. 178.

<sup>216</sup> Costelloe discusses Wordsworth’s unfinished manuscript *The Sublime and the Beautiful* (1811-12) at length. See Costelloe (2013), pp. 179-184.

<sup>217</sup> John Beer and Dinah Birch comment on the gradual change in Wordsworth’s status in Ruskin’s estimation, where he replaces Wordsworth with Scott as the true nature poet. See John Beer, ‘Ruskin and Wordsworth’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 28, no. 1 (Winter 1997), 44-45, and Dinah Birch, ‘Elegiac Voices: Wordsworth, Turner, and Ruskin’, *The Review of English Studies*, 50, no. 199 (1999), 339.

<sup>218</sup> Elizabeth K. Helsinger, ‘Ruskin on Wordsworth: The Victorian Critic in Romantic Country’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 17, no. 3 (Summer 1978), 271.

respectively in 1843 and 1846. By 1848 and the publication of *Seven Lamps*, Ruskin had resumed his critique of the Picturesque, shadowing ideas of Wordsworth's natural Picturesque into his own noble Picturesque. Architecture took over from landscape and became the site of his expanding investigation of the nature of decay with *Seven Lamps* and the three volumes of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3) until the release of Volumes 3 and 4 of *Modern Painters* in 1856. However, Ruskin's intellectual activity from the 1840s and 1850s demonstrates a convergence of interest in architecture and geology with one informing the other. His studies and notebooks illustrate the dexterity of his thinking, switching between notes on architectural ornament and mountain composition. With his ideas of beauty in place, the development of decay proceeds in architecture, where the ideas of age, endurance, and intention frame the discussion of erosion as a force and product of nature. Ruskin's growing ability to read the signs in the stones was honed through his architectural observations, a talent he would reuse when he once again turned his eyes to the Swiss Alps to complete his study of decay begun in the observations of mountain cottages and critiques of picturesque views.

### 2.3 Unconscious Suffering: The Decay of Architecture

The Science of Architecture, followed out to its full extent, is the noblest of those which have reference only to the creations of human minds. It is not merely a science of the rule and compass, it does not consist only in the observation of just rule, or of fair proportion: it is, or ought to be, a science of feeling more than rule, a ministry to the mind, more than to the eye. If we consider how much less the beauty and majesty of a building depend upon its pleasing certain prejudices of the eye, than upon its rousing certain trains of meditation in the mind, it will show in a moment how many intricate questions of feeling are involved in the raising of an edifice; it will convince us of the truth of a proposition, which might at first have appeared startling, that no man can be an architect, who is not a metaphysician.

(*Works*, 1:5)

In his earliest statement on architecture in *Poetry*, Ruskin ranks it as one of the noblest human creative endeavours. In *Seven Lamps*, he states that 'architecture must be the beginning of arts, and that the others must follow her in their time and order' (*Works*, 8:255). Despite this lofty goal, architecture's purpose and meaning change throughout his architectural writings, with emphasis shifting and theories developing as he goes. Beyond the stylistic concerns *Poetry* is known for, he examines how combinations of architecture and landscape impress the sensory and intellectual faculties of the perceiver. A decade later, Ruskin defines true architecture in *Seven Lamps* as a building's ornamentation, stating

that ‘Architecture concerns itself only with those characters of an edifice which are above and beyond its common use’ (*Works*, 8:29). Sound construction is necessary, as there cannot be ‘any good architecture which is not based on good building’ (*Works*, 8:29), but this is not its primary mission—architecture’s function is communicating through decoration. By the time of *Stones* (1851-3), Ruskin charges architecture with three virtues: ‘we require from buildings, as from men, two kinds of goodness: first, the doing their practical duty well; then that they be graceful and pleasing in doing it; which last is another form of duty’ (*Works*, 9:60). The basic tenets of acting and looking well are carried over from his previous architectural explorations, but the speaking role for ornament broadly suggested in *Poetry* and *Seven Lamps* receives specific treatment. What architecture says and how it says it became the primary focus of Ruskin’s architectural theory, beginning with *Stones* and sporadically expounded in works such as *The Flamboyant Architecture of the Valley of the Somme* (1869), *Verona, and Its Rivers* (1870) and *The Bible of Amiens* (1880). The three initial works present the core values of his architectural theory, and his subsequent writings on architecture contribute limited insights to what has already been expounded. This brief summary captures most of the prevailing attitudes and perspectives of the broad scholarship on Ruskin’s architectural thought but also establishes a trajectory towards a deeper investigation of decay that escapes most of these efforts.<sup>219</sup>

Much like the role of perception in his theory of art mentioned earlier in this chapter, Ruskin’s architectural perception is based on the premise that something in the world impresses on the human senses, prompting a corresponding and appropriate sensory and intellectual reaction. If the impression is noble enough, it becomes a moral reaction. As an aesthetic mode of conveyance, painting and architecture are similar. The mechanics of his aestheticism are explained earlier in the chapter and in detail by Landow (1971),

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<sup>219</sup> The existing literature on Ruskin’s architecture is significant in terms of breadth and depth. The most extensive summaries of Ruskin’s architectural thought begin with Kristine O. Garrigan’s *Ruskin on Architecture* (1973) and more recently with Geoffrey Tyack’s ‘Architecture’ in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin* (2015). They provide an overview of the totality of Ruskin’s thought on architecture. Specific studies focus on aspects of Ruskin’s architecture from singular or tangential perspectives, often linking his thought with broader themes or disciplines. These include John Unrau’s *Looking at Architecture with Ruskin* (1978), Michael W. Brooks’ *John Ruskin and Victorian Architecture* (1987), and Anuradha Chatterjee’s *John Ruskin and the Fabric of Architecture* (2018). Locational studies of architecture in Venice and Italy include Robert Hewison’s *Ruskin’s Venice* (2000) and *Ruskin on Venice* (2009), Francis O’Gorman’s ‘Ruskin’s Aesthetic of Failure in The Stones of Venice’ (2005), Stephen Kite’s *Building Ruskin’s Italy* (2012) and ‘Building Texts + Reading Fabrics: Metaphor, Memory, and Material in John Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*’, (2012). The collection of essays published as *The Lamp of Memory: Ruskin, Tradition, and Architecture*, edited by Michael Wheeler and Nigel Whiteley (1992), comment on the social, political, and aesthetic aspects of Ruskin’s architecture.

Garrigan (1973), Fitch, and Costelloe (2013) and need not be repeated here.<sup>220</sup> In painting, Ruskin saw this as how landscape impresses the painter who conveys their experience to the viewer. Someone like Turner, who, as Ruskin argues, possesses the right moral vision, can convey the proper interpretation to a viewer, who, if likewise properly oriented as Ruskin advises, will receive a similar impression. The similarities between painting and architecture are evident on this point, with only the medium of expression changing. However, architecture has a unique characteristic that distinguishes it from painting—its ability to decay. Rather than looking at what architecture intended to say in terms of deliberate or inferred content, but at what architecture says as an object at the hands of nature. Decay in architecture sits in these two arenas: it erodes like the rest of the world, linking it closer to nature, and it represents human propriety as it can express noble or ignoble intentions. But, in Ruskin's eyes, it is within its physical erosion where decay finds its expression and, ultimately, its value beyond the moral imperative it is meant to convey. The corporeality of architecture is shared with mountains.

*Seven Lamps* and *Stones* express, respectively, the noble principles and examples of architecture and a lamentable parable of social collapse that infects and distorts the city's architectural efforts. The character of noble physical erosion is presented in *Seven Lamps* and the failure of human propriety in *Stones*. Within the argument of these two books, the discussion of decay begins with the glory and age of architecture found in the 'Lamp of Memory' chapter in *Seven Lamps*. Ruskin uses Volume 2 of *Stones* to trace the evolution of Venetian Gothic, culminating in his natural architecture manifesto 'The Nature of Gothic' in which he outlines the formal and communal conditions for noble architecture. Within this argument, the seeds of decay are planted, and by Volume 3, Ruskin examines the socio-architectonic decline of Venice that Ruskin reads in the ornament of Gothic and Renaissance architecture. Here, the pejorative understanding of decay emerges in conjunction with human pride, avarice, and impiety. The examination of organic decay continues in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, *Seven Lamps* and the medieval and Gothic chapters of *Stones*. The continued examination of the moral decay and fall of society is resumed a decade later in Ruskin's social critiques on political economy of the 1860s.

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<sup>220</sup> The structure of Ruskin's aesthetic system and its influences are explained in detail in Landow (1971) and Costelloe's (2013) chapter on. In *Ruskin on Architecture* (1973), Garrigan explains the importance of architecture to his aesthetic thinking and Fitch weaves the larger trajectories of Ruskin's individual and spiritual struggles with his aesthetic and religious perspectives in both art and architecture.



### 2.3.1 Architecture in Decay

Architecture is a pivot point for Ruskin's ideas of decay, moving beyond picturesque allusions to engage with aspects of ontological function. A painting of a ruin captures the artist's impression of decay; however, architecture participates in it. The painting's canvas and frame can indeed wither and age, but its subject matter remains forever fixed. Conversely, Rouen Cathedral or the tower at Calais endures erosion as part of its existence, its essence forever evolving in response to the laws of nature. As a result, architecture becomes more existentially aligned with the objects of nature than a painting's representation of it. Architecture is subject to nature's continual erosive processes, not a momentary impression of it; it participates and engages with the forces of nature just as rocks, trees, and mountains do. Like objects in nature, architecture is an embodied experience—being physical, temporal, and re-encounterable—and reflective of changes to its material constitution.<sup>221</sup> The presence of decay is worn by architecture's outer fabric: its decoration and structure.

Ruskin's larger arguments for architecture centre on decoration rather than building structure, but the concepts of decay hold for both. Like painting, architectural ornament can capture aspects of nature in their expression, a fact keenly encouraged in Ruskin's nature-centric worldview. All good and noble ornament should be of natural objects, as they are 'the expression of man's delight in God's work' (*Works*, 9:70). Ornament never depicts nature in decay, only in the best examples of nature's ideal form. Ruskin states that ornament 'must consist of such studious arrangements of form as are imitative or suggestive of those which are commonest among natural existences, that being of course the noblest ornament which represents the highest orders of existence' (*Works*, 8:154). Unlike a painting of a decaying artifact in nature, ornamentation as an artifact participates in decay. Like the building's bones upon which it rests, ornament does not represent decay, it suffers from decay as it is susceptible to physical degradation because of its intrinsic veracious state. To understand decay in Ruskin's thinking, it is imperative to look at how architecture and ornament succumb to the mechanism of decay—how they engage with the laws of nature—not how decay is depicted or represented. This is what

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<sup>221</sup> Paul Crowther notes that a distinguishing aspect of architecture's phenomenological depth is its re-encounterability, or the ability to return to locations that inevitably change with each new encounter due to changes in the subject and object of perception. See Paul Crowther, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (even the frame)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 201.

the Picturesque got wrong.

Ruskin's understanding of architectural structure is perfunctory, indicating some awareness of the effects of weather on buildings, but it is subsumed in his explication of architecture's primary duty of being in service to ornament. Volume 1 of *Stones* is a basic understanding of their preferred proportions and how buildings stay upright; it is more about how architecture supports decorative ornament. In *Seven Lamps*, Ruskin asks for 'an honest architecture' of structure and material (*Works*, 8:60). Assembly should be forthright, and a wall should 'stand for ages', a point he emphasizes when comparing a building to the immutable Mont Cervin (*Works*, 9:82). Here, the 'masonry of the mountain' serves as an example for how material and outline work in unison (*Works*, 9:87). Nature may act as a source of aesthetic representation in ornamental depiction, but also as a guide for structural coherence and by extension the process of decay, a point to which I return in Chapter 3. Presently, I examine how Ruskin's definition of architecture is dominated by ornamental decoration. Issues of tectonics and assembly are relegated to the margins or deemed irrelevant to his discussions. Until, that is, Ruskin confronts decay in the chapter 'Lamp of Memory' from *Seven Lamps*. Before this chapter, Ruskin dealt with architecture as a static artifact, existing in a perpetual state of the present. He may have been aware of a building's age, or even the age in which it was built, but he never had to explain its aging. When confronted with the burden of time, he had to account for the 'necessity of destruction' (*Works*, 8:244). In so doing, age and endurance in architecture became indications of its potential greater glory.

### 2.3.2 The Lamps of Glory and Age

For, indeed, the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity.

(*Works*, 8:233-4)

This is a remarkable statement to make about a building. Despite the concoction of ornamentation, precious materials, and stylistic considerations that confront architecture's realization, Ruskin asserts in *Seven Lamps* that a building's most glorious feature is that it is still around. More precisely, it is still around despite slowly fading away. When he argues for age here, Ruskin intimates that it is both an era and an operation. Age represents the collection of human histories and memories—the 'passing waves of humanity'—but also

material disintegration due to the passage of time. Age, in Ruskin's first iteration, appears in Brooks (1987), Unrau (1978), Kite (2016), and Chatterjee (2018), whose investigations align predominantly with historicity or restoration.<sup>222</sup> Ruskin's insistence on age being glorious perplexed scholars, such as Garrigan, who, in her masterly summary *Ruskin on Architecture* (1973), finds no place for it in her argument.<sup>223</sup> To be fair, Ruskin provides his readers with an endless parade of definitions of architecture to choose from, seemingly one in every chapter of *Seven Lamps*, but the connection between architecture and glory is particularly germane for an argument about decay. When reading Ruskin, one must be attentive to his language. His choice of the word glory in this instance could be another of his stimulating adjectives but given the word's association with divine craft and a building's aging at the hands of nature, it reads like a deliberate choice. Glory, in this instance, is explicative of the divine, and by extension, the divineness of architecture is to be found in its age.<sup>224</sup> Thus, in Ruskin's statement above, age has two possible associations. But what 'age' is Ruskin referring to: is it a time period or a form of decay? He refers to both.

In the first instance, Ruskin alludes to age as being a period of time, and a preferable one. To this point, the above-mentioned scholarship promotes rich and convincing arguments about Ruskin's preference for the European Middle Ages as the correct period of time. Their assessment is largely undisputed. For example, his enthusiasm for Rouen cathedral is largely due to it being from a different age, where medieval Christian idealism permeated every aspect of its creation and presentation. This era is important because it recalls a time when the proper moral temper was suffused in the stones of a building, becoming an enduring testament to such communal convictions. This contributes to the argument against restoration and the need for preserving old buildings because they are touched by the hand of the divinely inspired craftsman. It is these signs of devotion and piety that Ruskin seeks out in his architectural observations: evidence of divine inspiration and truthful expression. For viewers to learn from this message, the mode of conveyance (i.e., the building) must still be around. But surely, the

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<sup>222</sup> This omission is not a fault nor error, but rather the result of a different focus for each author's arguments. However, it is interesting that such a prominent statement has not been investigated further. See Unrau (1978), Michael W. Brooks, *John Ruskin and Victorian Architecture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), Stephen Kite, *Building Ruskin's Italy: Watching Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2016), and Chatterjee (2018).

<sup>223</sup> Garrigan (1973).

<sup>224</sup> The glory of God and its expression through the forms of nature are explained earlier in this Chapter in Section 2.0.1.

biblical message is more important than the book it came in, so why is Ruskin so adamant that age is architecture's greatest glory? Age is more significant than just being of a certain time period; it is about what service architecture provides humanity and how it does so.

Ruskin writes that architecture's gift to humanity is to conquer forgetfulness, saying '[w]e may live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her' (*Works*, 8:224). Architecture remembers, but what does it recall? As mentioned above, it recalls the craftsman's moral temper, but, at a pietistic level, it recalls humanity's collective devotion to God. Ruskin writes about the need for architecture:

The covenant that He made with men was accompanied with some external sign of its continuance, and of His remembrance of it, so the acceptance of that covenant might be marked and signified by men, in some external sign of their love and obedience, and surrender of themselves and theirs to His will; and that their gratitude to Him and continual remembrance of Him, might have at once their expression, and their enduring testimony, in the presentation to Him, not only of the firstlings of the herd and fold, not only the fruits of the earth and the tithe of time, but of all treasures of wisdom and beauty; of the thought that invents, and the hand that labours; of wealth of wood, and weight of stone; of the strength of iron, and the light of gold.

(*Works*, 8:36)

Architecture is the offering humanity gives to the Deity, but it is not the building that is essential: 'I do not want marble churches at all for their own sake, but for the sake of the spirit that would build them' adding 'it is not the church we want, but the sacrifice; not the emotion of admiration, but the act of adoration; not the gift, but the giving' (*Works*, 8:39-40). In such a scenario, the offering of architecture as an artifact allows humanity to demonstrate its piety and obedience. This is why Ruskin proclaims Architecture to be more than just structure, saying a 'building does not become architecture merely by the stability of what it erects' (*Works*, 8:28). The artifact is not the purpose of building, but the offering cannot be demonstrated without it. As an analogy, the earth need not exist to prove God's omniscience and omnipotence. Yet it does. As Ruskin notes, it is a testament to His glory for humanity's benefit—the earth's existence has a purpose; it fulfils a function. In this genuine state, artifacts exist and are necessary to the covenant because they demonstrate and affirm: consider God as the burning bush, the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, the Ark of the Covenant, and Solomon's Temple as scriptural evidence—physical reminders of spiritual presence. As Ruskin implies, artifacts are inessential for physiological existence but essential for spiritual fecundity, a point Landow

(1971) notes in his discussion of Ruskin's symbolic and allegorical tendencies.<sup>225</sup> From this perspective, it is easier to see why Ruskin was not interested in architectural genealogy or historical style because these were more about the self-reflective character of the artifact and not the offering it was meant to represent.

Whether sought after or not, architecture enters the world as a record of people's piety and obedience; it becomes a statement of the covenant between humanity and the Deity. Humanity's affirmative demonstration of this bond is recorded in its formal expression, specifically architectural decoration and ornamentation. Most of Ruskin's writing on architecture is about enciphering the message into medium—what gets captured, how it is expressed, and how it is read. He is teaching his generation of architects to build like those of old, so that future generations will inherit the great testaments of faith and devotion. It should be noted that whether those of the Victorian age can live up to the medieval paradigm is a separate debate; Ruskin has doubts. However, once the statement in stone is made, it is there for eternity—or, as long as the building lasts. This last caveat presents the dilemma of decay. Architecture, as a sacramental statement and as a material thing, inevitably collides with the laws of nature. Thus, a building's endurance suddenly becomes essential if the message is to persist. How does Ruskin resolve this situation?

The deific message Ruskin envisaged as conveyed through the material form is strong, but the medium itself is fragile, incapable of sustaining the expression indefinitely. Certainly, the stones of architecture will endure longer than a paper leaf or leather book, but they will eventually decay. The spectre of decay haunts all material things; it is a fact of nature that he must confront, and he curiously accepts it as a positive outcome. Rather than look at it as pitiful—the destruction of a once-beautiful thing or the consequence of Original Sin—Ruskin embraces the inevitable disintegration of the material thing. If something like a building exists in the world, it cannot remain a static artifact—erasure must be a necessary condition of its existence. Ruskin approaches this predicament in a few ways. He encourages architects and craftsmen to build and create with the idea that their work endures, saying, 'when we build, let us think that we build for ever' (*Works*, 8:233). Solid building techniques and materials will promote this, as referred to above in Volume 1 of *Stones*, titled 'Foundations', promotes how to build structures well. Old

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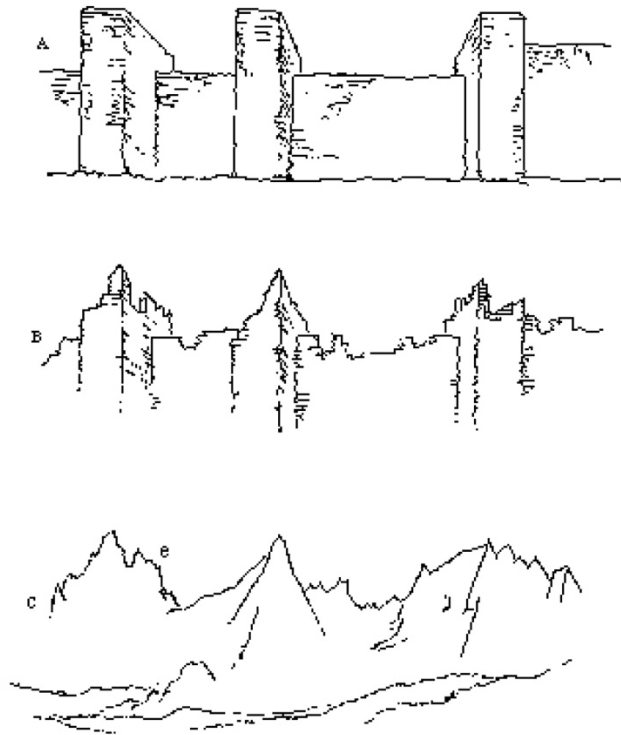
<sup>225</sup> Landow devotes his final chapter, 'Ruskin and Allegory', to explaining the language types and Evangelical readings of scripture, typological symbolism, the symbolical grotesque, and myth as allegory. See Landow (1971), pp. 321-457.

buildings can still be of practical use if built well and maintained, a point he promotes in *Seven Lamps*, saying ‘take proper care of your monuments, and you will not need to restore them’ (*Works*, 8:244). Oldness and agedness are indicators of a long life of service, continuing to exist and function despite the ravages of time. This point contradicts the Picturesque, which promotes age and decay primarily for sensory enjoyment, even accelerating erosion through deliberate and disingenuous means. The last and probably most important aspect is that endurance in the face of decay is a moral lesson.

When speaking of the old tower at Calais, Ruskin acknowledges the ‘record of its years written so visibly, yet without signs of weakness or decay’ but separates it from being a ruin because it is still useful to the old fisherman, who is himself ‘beaten grey by storm’ (*Works*, 6:11). There is an analogy of purpose and character indicated. The pertinent distinction is not that a building ages, but how it ages that is important. Decay is a test of character: the materials of nature are exposed to erasure, and how they respond speaks of their virtue. Is this perhaps a message for humanity? Ruskin thought so. This inherent quality he characterizes as ‘unconscious suffering’, where ‘there is the unconscious confession of the facts of distress and decay, in bywords; the world’s hard work being gone through all the while, and no pity asked for, nor contempt feared’ (*Works*, 6:15). Ruskin continues his argument by furthering the distinction between the lower and noble picturesque, where the tendency to romanticize the suffering is lower and the acceptance of it is noble. Ruskin’s argument furthers the Picturesque debate by delineating a more noble role for the Picturesque, but at its heart is his recognition of an inherent structural character in material objects in the face of decay that mirrors or informs the right human constitution.

Through their simple existence, buildings teach humanity a moral lesson—one taught by the laws of nature. Rather than copying the forms of nature in painting or ornaments, Ruskin is directing attention to how these natural forces act. It is through action that true character is revealed. By addressing the dilemma of decay, the reason for his preference for old buildings becomes clearer. It also opens another way to look at nature. Rather than observing the results, Ruskin comprehends its machinations. This becomes paramount in his investigations of geology, where his early investigations into landscape forms assume a further examination of the forces that caused them. Because decay is part of nature’s laws and nature is beautiful, then its effects are likewise beautiful; Ruskin has to accept this in his thinking. The value of decay in architecture is related to how well its material form endured erosion, not its picturesque effect. Recognition of this

pushed Ruskin to consider the effects of erosion on material forms such as buildings and mountains as well. In the chapter ‘Mountain Glory’ from Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin states the ‘mountains of the earth are its natural cathedrals’, aligning their similarity through form and function (*Works*, 6:457). It is not difficult to see how his ideas about the message, endurance, and decay of architecture are transferred to landscape and vice versa (Figure 13).



**Fig. 35**

Figure 13: John Ruskin. Figure 35: ‘The Buttresses of the Aiguilles above Chamouni’, from *Modern Painters*, Volume 4. 1856. Woodcut.

*Seven Lamps* came out two years after Volumes 1 and 2 of *Modern Painters* were published. His notebooks and trips used to compile content for these books show evidence of architectural and geological thinking; the two were intermixed. Ruskin had already established his theory of vital and typical beauty. From this, the forms and forces of nature are charged with representing true beauty. In the erosion of buildings and mountains, their demise is under the governance of nature, the same forces responsible for the world’s beauty. Ruskin begins to see such degradation as a part of the larger natural system. Organic decay emerges as a positive eventuality and inevitability of the greater laws of change that steward nature’s processes. Ruskin’s appeal to decay being reflective of inner strength passes the purpose of decay from an aesthetic novelty in the Picturesque to a

resonance reflection of divine will and intent. Organic decay in contrast to other definitions of decay provides distinction. However, there is another meaning of decay Ruskin explores through architecture: the moral failure of the Venetian craftsmen, patrons, and communities. The insidious decay Ruskin alludes to is that of moral decay of humanity and society, when pride, avarice, and impiety circumvent an allegiance to natural systems and natural law. This is exemplified in the decline of Gothic architecture not because of material degradation but because of the moral decline of those who procured it. In such a scenario, the material form of architecture is innocent; the intentions behind its realization are suspect.

### 2.3.3 Fallen Stones, Venetian Decay

There is not the remotest possibility of any success being obtained in any of the arts by a nation which thus delights itself in the defilement and degradation of all the best gifts of its God; which mimics the architecture of Christians to promote the trade of poisoners; and imagines itself philosophical in substituting the worship of coal gas for that of Vesta.

(*Works*, 9:13)

Ruskin dates the Fall of Venice on May 8, 1418, with the death of Carlo Zeno, the last true Doge (*Works*, 9:21). He attributes its collapse to a decaying spiritual life—the inner ‘vital religion, observe, not the formal’ (*Works*, 9:31). In his estimation, the people’s fall is the city’s fall. Stein (1975), Hewison (2009), and Sawyer describe Venice’s decline in terms of the ruin narrative found in the city’s artistic and architectural legacy, its religious and moral implosion expressed through typology, allegory, and myth, and Ruskin’s personal disgust at Venice’s modernization and restoration efforts in the nineteenth century.<sup>226</sup> As Stein notes, Venice is a morality tale, and *Stones* can be seen as ‘the legend of an ideal civilization, from its rise to its moral, social, and artistic collapse’.<sup>227</sup> Ruskin believes Venice’s collapse is due to a moral failure, a point reinforced by Rosenberg, who reiterates Ruskin’s belief that morality governs the rise and fall of nations.<sup>228</sup> Moral decay is especially troublesome because it implies that humanity knew better but acted otherwise. Ruskin considered such a decision indicative of human failing rather than architectural impudence, a charge far worse than an incorrect stylistic choice.

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<sup>226</sup> See Hewison (2009), pp. 1-7; Stein (1975), pp. 69-118; and Paul L. Sawyer, *Ruskin’s Poetic Argument: The Design of the Major Works* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 106.

<sup>227</sup> Stein (1975), p. 73.

<sup>228</sup> Rosenberg, p. 87.



To Ruskin, this failure was evident in the stones of Venice—its architecture— which Fitch states ‘becomes a vehicle for the revelation of divine judgment upon a society’.<sup>229</sup> If *Seven Lamps* was a treatise on how to build proper moral architecture, *Stones* was a lesson on what happens when it goes wrong. Interestingly, it is not the impudence of a cinquecento architectural style that is at fault but a failure of human prudence and piety. Though Ruskin had no love for the Romanist style, the Venetian devolution began from within, not through external subjugation but internal degradation, a point echoed by Hewison (2009).<sup>230</sup> The importance of Venice to Ruskin is well established—both in his writings and in subsequent Ruskinian scholarship—establishing the city as an important location, a symbol and allegory, and a warning.<sup>231</sup> I do not intend to redress the existing literature but to illuminate those aspects that contribute to Ruskin’s distinction between organic and moral decay. The first step towards this understanding is identifying how Ruskin could tell that buildings were morally deteriorating.

What makes the city state’s fall from grace more tragic are the magnificent heights from which it fell. In Ruskin’s parable, Venice was a model for noble building before its architectural regression. Building on *Seven Lamps*, *Stones* introduces the standard against which true architecture can be measured. Stein (1975) notes that in ‘The Foundations’ chapter of Volume 1 of *Stones*, Ruskin’s delineation of architectonic forms set the ‘objective standard for evaluating architectural styles [and] for evaluating the state of culture itself and for ‘determining whether the development of civilization represents genuine progress or moral decline’.<sup>232</sup> At a point in Venice’s past, its society was morally just to produce moral architecture. Ruskin examines a building’s ornamental character to determine its virtuous message. The decoration’s fealty to nature was paramount, but so were the allusions and inferences such decoration made to larger spiritual realities. Tyack (2015) notes how Ruskin’s evaluation begins with a ‘reading’ of architectonic form for allegorical and symbolic meaning.<sup>233</sup> Kite (2012) identifies Ruskin’s intention to decipher meaning from somatic artifacts in the world by ‘building [metaphorical] texts’ from ‘reading

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<sup>229</sup> Fitch, p. 141.

<sup>230</sup> Hewison (2009), p. 227.

<sup>231</sup> The list of Ruskin scholarship on Venice is extensive. While most of the major works I cite in this thesis have sections dedicated to the influence of Venice, Hewison’s books in particular, *Ruskin and Venice* (1978), ‘Notes on the Construction of *The Stones of Venice*’ (1982), *Ruskin’s Venice* (2000), and *Ruskin on Venice* (2009) are comprehensive and address several aspects of Ruskin’s professional and personal approaches to the city.

<sup>232</sup> Richard L. Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation: The Fine Arts as Literature in Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 77-8.

<sup>233</sup> Tyack, p. 101.

[architectural] fabrics'.<sup>234</sup> This follows what Stein wrote about The Foundations chapter, which is intended to 'establish an iconography, a language of interpretation through which architectural detail may be "read" for its moral content'.<sup>235</sup> This approach is sympathetic to Landow (1971) and Rosenberg's understanding of Evangelical exegesis that Ruskin was taught at a young age, where he learned to see the world as a series of signs of divine intent.<sup>236</sup>

Venice's prominence arose judiciously and incrementally, evident in the three examples of architecture at Torcello, Murano, St Mark's, and culminating with the Ducal Palace. The seventh-century island church of Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta, located on the northern island of Torcello, embodies the early Venetian spirit. Ruskin infers the spiritual state of these proto-Venetians by the restrained character of the church's decorations and enrichments, which are executed with 'simplicity and dignity' (*Works*, 10:25). He aligns these first settlers of the lagoon marshes with the wandering Israelites who went to sea to find a new life in service of God, their piety becoming infused within their architectural endeavours (*Works*, 10:19). The single-mindedness of their pious virtue is reflected in the elementary character of their designs. At Murano, the Torcello initiative continues but is later subsumed by extrinsic influences. Ruskin warns of the Venetian abatement migrating from the fringes:

The decay of the city of Venice is, in many respects, like that of an outwearied and aged human frame; the cause of its decrepitude is indeed at the heart, but the outward appearances of it are first at the extremities.

(*Works*, 10:36)

This infiltration is evident in the original tenth-century Church of San Donato and its later fifteenth-century refurbishments. The original rough yet delicate decorative elements of the early church were crafted by 'Romanesque workmen of the early Christian ages' (*Works*, 10:60) but were later defiled by what Ruskin calls the Pagan worship of falsehood (*Works*, 10:67).<sup>237</sup> Ruskin ends the chapter on Murano with his characteristic flurry of homiletics, distinguishing the 'Spirit worshippers' from the 'Flesh worshippers' and laying

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<sup>234</sup> Kite (2012), pp. 418-9.

<sup>235</sup> Stein (1975), p. 78.

<sup>236</sup> See Landow (1971) and Rosenberg.

<sup>237</sup> Ruskin notes the use of rough bricks and coloured marbles for the interior decorative elements at San Donato and how they are handled with a 'delicacy of feeling', harmony, and fineness. See *Works*, 10:47, 56-7.

the groundwork for Venice's impending putrefaction (*Works*, 10:67). The struggle of Murano is an internal contest of ideology—between Christian and Pagan, Romanesque and Renaissance, and the selection of Mariolatry over the Holy Spirit. In Ruskin's mind, the decay of the church and society resulted from immoral and impious decisions, a theme expounded in the example of St Mark's.

Ruskin sees St Mark's as a living ruin, caught between the pull of Gothic and Renaissance stylistic choices dictated by waning religio-social temper. The struggle is internal for the city's soul and the heart of its people captured in the choices of the church's decoration. Through his discussion of St Mark's chromatic incrustated style, Ruskin reduces the conflict between the Gothic and Renaissance architecture to their respective focus on Spirit and Form (*Works*, 10:93). Gothic represents the truest spirit because it looks to nature for guidance and inspiration, a numinous nature that is an extension of the divine; in contrast, the Renaissance is humanistic and self-congratulatory, preoccupied with invented systems of architectonic form. Ruskin states that Gothic architecture has always been a 'religious language' but lost its relevance in favour of the secular Romanist style (*Work*, 10:119). The dispersion of Gothic into Venetian dwellings was a sign of religious coherence and spiritual continuity, whereas the infiltration of Renaissance non-Christian secular style into ecclesiastical buildings signalled the end of a natural Christian community. This conflict is reiterated in Ruskin's examination of the Ducal Palace, which he calls the great work of Gothic Venice and 'the last representation of her power' (*Works*, 10:337). He states that Venetian Gothic reached its zenith with the Ducal Palace; however, the renovation of the old Byzantine palace of Ziani, begun on March 27, 1423, marked the beginning of the Renaissance in Venice and the city's inevitable decline (*Works*, 10:352). Ruskin attributes this descent to the power of council over the power of the deity (*Works*, 10:427) and, more importantly, the post-Gothic 'pursuit of pleasure' (*Works*, 10:428). Thus, Venetian decay is a failure of true and noble spiritual conviction, and its failure is captured in its self-serving architectural production. In these chapters, Ruskin establishes his Protestant vision of a morally ideal society and aligns these virtues with architecture's formal characteristics. However, architecture and ornament are only conduits, vehicles through which messages and temper are expressed. Ruskin's goal here is to identify the moral failings he observes in these outer forms.

The decay of Venice is due to pride—the preference for human achievement over divine achievement is apostasy. The fall is the conscious decision to reject moral principles and indulge in vain and prideful pursuits, favouring avarice and ingenuity over devotion

and duty. In Volume 3 of *Stones*, these are aligned with the advent of cinquecento thinking on the use and abuse of knowledge. Ruskin writes that such pride leads to infidelity, and infidelity leads to the unscrupulous pursuit of luxury and pleasure (*Works*, 11:135). Pride is explained in the chapter ‘Roman Renaissance’, where Ruskin identifies three forms of arrogance: Pride of Science, Pride of State, and Pride of System (*Works*, 11:46). The study of science leads to knowledge for its own sake rather than for divine illumination; a lack of piety and humility leads to favouring aggrandizement, luxury, and opulence; and the fall of divine loyalty to the higher unwritten laws occurs when faced with the indulgence in the sacrilegious lower laws of self-study, the celebration of skilful achievement, and the systematized sciences of useless human knowledge. In essence, pride is the sign of deferring to the brilliance of human achievement rather than honouring humanity’s obedient role in divine apotheosis.

Despite his misgivings in *Stones*, the Gothic provides signs of hope. The prevailing aesthetic problem with the Romanist style is that it violates the fundamental principles of the Gothic, which comprises Fitch’s ‘organic model’ of nature.<sup>238</sup> Ruskin believed that the Gothic episteme seamlessly combines symbolism and formal expression by adhering to nature’s laws and divinely decreed natural law, where the symbolic moral references given by nature are expressed in nature’s forms and actions. In ‘The Nature of Gothic’, Ruskin notes these virtues as changefulness and naturalism with the characteristics as savageness, grotesques, rigidity, and redundancy: virtues are what is aspired towards, and characteristics are how they manifest. These are the temperaments of nature and all good architecture, the ultimate expressions being Gothic. Ruskin’s vision of the Gothic reflects a divinely ordered nature in the laws of its tectonic and stylistic forms, whereas the alignment of geometric design with the Greek and Romanist styles demonstrates the execution of non-natural human principles and laws.

The *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* are an interesting summation of Ruskin’s architectural principles explained in *Poetry*, *Seven Lamps*, and *Stones*. Given at the end of 1853 in Edinburgh, these lectures continue to promote Gothic architecture as the preferred building style. The Gothic is not only tectonically superior to all other styles but aesthetically moral as well because it reflects nature:

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<sup>238</sup> Fitch, p. 268. See also Introduction, Section 0.1.1.

[T]here is a farther reason for our adapting the pointed arch than its being the strongest form; it is also the most beautiful form in which a window or door-head can be built. Not the most beautiful because it is the strongest; but most beautiful, because its form is one of those, which as we know by its frequent occurrence in the work of Nature around us, has been appointed by the Deity to be an everlasting source of pleasure to the human mind'

(*Works*, 12:24-5).

To illustrate his point, Ruskin promotes the superiority of nature when comparing a sprig of ash leaves rendered according to nature's laws and those following Greek principles (Figure 14). The larger debate in the lecture regards the angular tectonics of Greek design

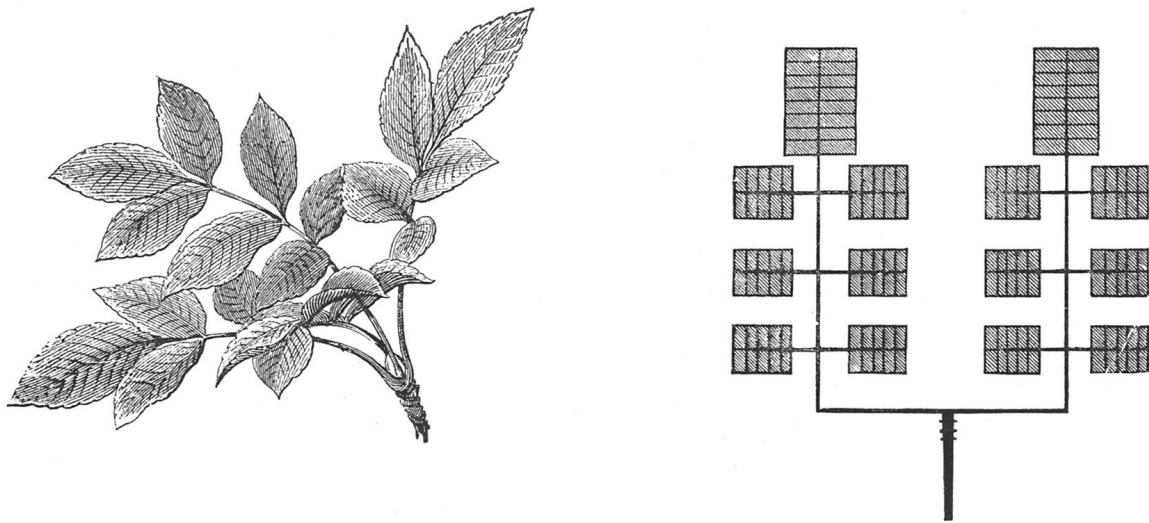


Figure 14: John Ruskin. Plate III: 'Comparison of Ash Leaves' from *Lectures on Architecture and Painting*, 1853. Woodcut.

against the organic, naturally derived forms of the Gothic. Ruskin's argument is persuasive because his vision of nature is the criterion for his tectonic, aesthetic, and moral pleasure, where organic shapes dominate over intellectually derived geometric figures. He states that the inherent arrangement of the Gothic resonates with those of nature through their shared use of lines, saying, 'all of the loveliest Gothic architecture in the world is based on the group of lines composed of the pointed arch and the gable' (12:35). Where nature's lines express their inherent function and purpose, Gothic lines likewise fulfil their architectural intent. Their intrinsic connection and programmatic singularity are expressed in the example of towers and spires, where there is a 'delight in the majesty, height, and strength of the building itself, such as we have in that of a lofty tree or a

peaked mountain' (*Works*, 12:37). He includes a plate of the Church Tower at Courmayeur (Figure 15) showing the tower set against a mountain backdrop. There is no



Figure 15: John Ruskin. *The Church Tower, Courmayeur*. c.1853. Watercolour.

parasitical sublimity; the tower is magnificent because of its discernible inherent strength and internal tectonic logic. The building's assembly is logically 'natural', a type of biomimicry, but not imitative. The tower stands as resplendent as the mountain, both existing as a part of the landscape—each a distinct yet fulfilling expression of their respective designated purpose and inner life. The meaning of age from *Seven Lamps* is evident here as the tower is depicted as weathered and old but not dilapidated or entertaining. The Gothic is a statement about the functional and symbolic affinity between nature and architecture. Ruskin's descriptions of nature for painting in *Modern Painters* differ from those of architectural production. For painting, an artist must understand nature to properly render it, whereas, with architecture, nature's laws must be internalized and transformed into its native form of tectonic expression. Architecture cannot be imitative; otherwise, it risks parasitical transgression. Instead, it must replicate internal laws and not outward forms. When a building's internal purpose is respected, it will be clearly expressed and celebrated in its external form.

### 2.3.4 The Geology of Architecture

[O]bserve—and this is very important—how one and the same character in the work may be a sign of totally different states of mind, and therefore in one case bad, and in the other good.

(*Works*, 11:10)

Ruskin's critique in *Stones* absolves organic decay from any violations and instead levies the blame for spiritual decay on human avarice and pride. The architecture of Venice stands as an unwitting conduit or faultless victim to the corrupt hands of prideful patrons or misguided craftsmen. Ruskin returns to this theme in his critique of society and political economy in the 1860s and onwards, where the warnings of *Stones*, and 'The Nature of Gothic' in particular, become the allegory for a Victorian Britain indulgent in its own success and prideful of its achievements. However, this exemplum is not an Albion issue alone but one facing the industrializing proto-modern world of the nineteenth century at large. Ruskin is responding to the developing trends in science, politics, society, and religion that promote human accomplishment over humble piety. Evidence of pride exists in humanity favouring its own systems of understanding over those provided by the deity, warning that 'all the knowledge a man has must be held cheap, and neither trusted nor respected, the moment he comes face to face with Nature' (*Works*, 11:58). To balance his critique of Venetian hubris, Ruskin offers the noble and correct solution in Gothicness, an organic natural system derived from evident and eternal laws put in place by the divine mind. The philological and physical sciences of human invention are 'untrustworthy' when confronted by the great mysteries of nature and 'whatever is immeasurable, intangible, indivisible, and of the spirit' (*Works*, 11:58-61).

I return to this position in Chapter 4 as it leads Ruskin to reconsider the role of intention in nature and how organic decay is governed by a type of practical wisdom personified in the wisdom myths of *Ethics* and *Queen*. Before then, the evolution of organic decay finds expression in his investigations of the forms and forces of nature, specifically geology and mountain form. The lessons learned from studying erosion on buildings carry over into Ruskin's investigation of mountains, and while the structure of my argument places architecture before geology, Ruskin was examining both concurrently. His diaries and notebooks from his continental tours demonstrate a fluidity of thought between both disciplines, where ideas of architectural structure and mountain composition are explored seamlessly. Ruskin often uses architectural terms to describe mountains and vice versa: mountains are 'noble architecture' (*Works*, 6:118), or the old walls at Verona demonstrate

the ‘stratification’ of mountain assembly (*Works*, 9:81). Their shared somatic presence in the world, logic of order and assembly, and exposure to the forces of erosion and degradation unite them more closely to the forces of an intentional nature than painting or poetry ever could.

Ruskin’s writings on architecture exhibit a developed sense of reading material. As Hewison (2009) states, his developed ability to see the world allegorically and symbolically comes from an Evangelical habit.<sup>239</sup> To be fair, architecture was probably not the first instance of him demonstrating an ability to read material form: Landow (1971) devotes a chapter to Ruskin’s typological symbolism in his book *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*, Sawyer’s book *Ruskin’s Poetic Argument*, and Fitch’s book *The Poison Sky* assume this position as fundamental to their entire arguments. However, it was through architecture where the first sustained effort of Ruskin’s reading of artifacts produced a clearer understanding of what he thought about decay. Ideas of age and endurance in architecture carry over to his study of mountain form, and they frame a discussion regarding the forces of erosion and expose the inner life force and idealistic intentions that Ruskin envisioned for material artifacts. Ruskin’s geological studies continue the investigation of decay first brought forth in his early architectural writings, taking the opportunity in the later volumes of *Modern Painters* to elaborate on how to continue reading material artifacts correctly. In studying mountain forms, Ruskin is moving from the architecture of humanity to the earthly architecture of the demiurge. The stakes are also increasing. While there are material similarities between the two subjects, the emergence of greater hallowed mysteries and unknown theistic intentions cloud the endeavour. Unable to fall back on the knowable traits of human piety or human pride, Ruskin is confronted with the great unknown of divine will and intent. Despite this challenge, he firmly believes that glimpses of the Deity’s mind are ingrained in the things He makes and the potential of communion with the divine, as Wilenski (1933) notes the ‘persistence of [Ruskin’s] fundamental belief in the possibility of direct contact between himself and God.’<sup>240</sup> The Works of God, the forms of the earth, contain traces of the divine and through his study of organic nature, Ruskin hopes to discover what these might be and

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<sup>239</sup> Hewison (2009), p. 220.

<sup>240</sup> R.H. Wilenski, *John Ruskin: An Introduction to Further Study of His Life and Work* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., Publishers, 1933), p. 343.



how they might be of use to humanity as it forever struggles with the existential dilemma of life and belief.

Decay is one of those enduring clues. The additional dilemma Ruskin confronts is why God's material message is wilfully disintegrating. The decay of architecture showed that erosion is revelatory of a material's inner strength; the decay of mountains by the hand of the creator was harder to explain, let alone justify. If the Word in the Works was intended for human awareness, then its subsequent erasure must also somehow be anticipated. Was such an erasure the result of humanity's insolence, or was it part of a revelatory plan, a deeper message for devoted rumination and reflection? Ruskin confronted this challenge as he moved from his architectural studies to confront the architecture of nature. He now had to explain why decay was either a hindrance or a benefit, with each conclusion dramatically affecting his sacrosanct worldview. The next chapter examines Ruskin's fundamental understanding of the earth's structure from a religious and geological point of view that sometimes overlaps while others are divergent. Layered over this is an ongoing dialogue regarding the meaning of tectonic and orogenic earthly forces to his conception of decay. If Ruskin is ultimately to derive meaning from decay, it must be related to the grander divine intentions and not succumb to the positivistic and secularized scientific methodology dominating the nineteenth-century geological perspective of nature.

# CHAPTER III

## The Theories of Decay

### 3.0 Theories of Decay

I can hardly conceive of any one standing face to face with one of these towers of central rock, and yet not also asking himself, Is this indeed the actual first work of the Divine Master on which I gaze? Was the great precipice shaped by His finger, as Adam was shaped out of the dust? Were its clefts and ledges carved upon it by its Creator, as the letters were on the Tables of the Law, and was it thus left to bear its eternal testimony to His beneficence among these clouds of heaven? Or is it the descendant of a long race of mountains, existing under appointed laws of birth and endurance, death and decrepitude?

(*Works*, 6:209)

Ruskin struggled with the possibilities of mountain form. He wondered if the shapes of the central peaks of the Alps existed as evidence of divine fiat or were the consequence of erosive forces acting in absentia of deific decree. Each possibility carried potentials and problems that vexed his geological thinking about the role of decay: if mountains were the perfect statement of the divine hand, why would God permit them to disappear? Conversely, if mountains are nothing more than the ruined hulks of a once-perfect world, how could Ruskin find them the epitome of beautiful form? In either instance, decay is pivotal in deforming what was once perfect or perfecting what is currently in disarray. At times, Ruskin sways to one side or the other in his geological investigations, tempted by the positivistic reasoning of mechanistic theories but also stayed by his devotion to divine intention and wisdom's intendance. Regardless of the orogenic theories or wonders of creation, the forms of the earth stood before him—Ruskin had to reconcile how mountains remained beautiful despite their legacy of decay and change.

The undercurrent of change is a vital context in which this dilemma of decay as considered beautiful is set. Ruskin must account for the beauty of natural form when the world is constantly in flux. As explained in Chapter 2, Ruskin's idea of vital beauty as a moral recognition of divine glory reigns supreme, but it is dependent on typical beauty, or the outward forms of artifacts, for the conveyance of such an awareness to the perceiving intellect.<sup>241</sup> It might have been enough for Ruskin to simply say that beauty is just the felicitous sensation, but he identifies certain characteristics and qualities of artifacts that would elicit such a response. These were not fixed, like Gilpin's smooth and rugged topography, but contingent on the proper execution an artifact's unique inherent

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<sup>241</sup> See Chapter 2, Section 2.2.1.

potential.<sup>242</sup> Thus, if there is no fixed ideal form for a mountain or a building, how is beauty to be determined? Ruskin's solution was to look to the perfection of an artifact's current form by the arrangement and organization of its constituent elements. In a mountain, it could be the arrangement of its minerals or stratigraphy, or with a flower, it could be its calyx or petals. The right form becomes the ultimate goal and is brought into cohesion through the 'leading lines' of nature—the rules of final form. Such a condition provides decay with a hand in the creative process. When considering mountain form, decay is about getting the material of the world into the right configuration which can be achieved through assembly or degradation. When the right form is the ultimate goal, either process is viable. In Ruskin's geological thinking, he divides his attention to both the arenas of mountain assembly and mountain decay as both must be equal participants if the right and noble form is to be achieved. Decay's role in nature, as an extension of the law of change, is to bring the materials of the earth into these beautiful arrangements.

To explain decay's active role in determining the earth's final forms, I examine three aspects of decay in Ruskin's geological histories, as expressed in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*<sup>243</sup> and *Deucalion: the laws of change, the connection between the earth and humanity, and the role of beauty in nature*. These are presented according to Ruskin's three eras of geological history explained in *Deucalion: Crystallization, Sculpturing, and Unsculpturing*.<sup>244</sup> Volume 4 is not aligned with the later tripartite divisions found in *Deucalion*, but the chapters on the Firmament, Crystallines, and Coherents align with the era of Crystallization and sets the world and the intentions of the Deity in place while parsing how Ruskin's vision reflects his Christian education and reflects the progress of natural philosophy and theology to the nineteenth century.<sup>245</sup> The chapters 'The Dry Land', 'Lateral Ranges', and the 'Central Peaks' deal specifically with Sculpturing and

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<sup>242</sup> Gilpin's characterization of beautiful and rugged landscape is explained in Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2.

<sup>243</sup> For the sake of brevity in the upcoming references, I will omit the reference to *Modern Painters* when referring to Volume 4 in this chapter.

<sup>244</sup> These three eras come from Chapter 2: The Three Eras in *Deucalion* (*Works*, 26:118). The three eras template comes from both the geological history of Charles Lyell's *The Principles of Geology* (1830-33) and Peter Simon Pallas' (1741-1811) three rock categorizations. Lyell lists the Primary era, or Eozoic, as when the earth's crust was formed and absent of fossils; the Secondary era, or Palaeozoic, as when life appeared on Earth, as evidenced in the inclusion of fossils in rock strata; and the Tertiary era, or Mesozoic and Cenozoic, which is the time of mammals and higher life forms (Vol. III, pp. 8-22.)

<sup>245</sup> These are Chapter VI: The Firmament, Chapter VII: Of the Materials of Mountains:—First, Compact Crystallines, Chapter IX: Of the Materials of Mountains:—Secondly, Slaty Crystallines, Chapter X: Of the Materials of Mountains:—Thirdly, Slaty Coherents, and Chapter XI: Of the Materials of Mountains:—Fourthly, Compact Coherents.

survey the actions of humankind and the Deity, where humanity's behaviour changes nature and the world, sustaining the debate between a cursed or blessed earth.<sup>246</sup> The chapters on 'Aiguilles', 'Crests', 'Precipices', 'Banks', and 'Stones' are aligned with the Unsculpturing section, which delineate Ruskin's explanations of mountain form through natural materials and processes.<sup>247</sup> This is where decay appears as a force that brings the forms of the world into their current and beautiful state.

References to Ruskin's geological interests are consistent across Ruskin scholarship but sparse in terms of explicating his geological philosophies.<sup>248</sup> Attention is paid principally to the influential aspects of landscape art and aesthetics in Volumes 3 and 4 of *Modern Painters* and less to his geological reasoning. In writing about Ruskin's apocalyptic trajectory, Fitch (1982) dismisses the empirical studies of the earth, saying 'they are not the Ruskin who is the chief concern of this book' but does allow that they 'evidence the purpose and design of the mythic builder'.<sup>249</sup> In such a move, Fitch spurns the particular in favour of the general. The same holds true for Lacy Gully (1993), who devoted an essay on Ruskin's geology in *John Ruskin and the Victorian Eye*. While contextually valuable, it is more of a broader overview of Ruskin's interest in geology than a meditation on his conjectures.<sup>250</sup> Sdegno (2015) writes a brief but evocative survey in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin* on the 'interlude' chapters of Volumes 3 and 4 of *Modern Painters*, providing a metaphysical and aesthetic overview of Ruskin's mountain geology.<sup>251</sup> However, decay is not represented the larger theorems as the survey is too brief and covers too much ground to delve into specifics. Spuybroek (2016) approaches Ruskin's ideas of science tangentially as part of a larger investigation of aesthetics but brings a conceptual rigour to the coherence of Ruskin's thoughts by integrating diverse aesthetic, existential, and ontological contexts into a sympathetic framework. However, his take on Ruskin's geology serves to

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<sup>246</sup> These are Chapter VII: The Dry Land, Chapter XII: Of the Sculpture of Mountains:—First, the Lateral Ranges, and Chapter XIII: Of the Sculpture of Mountains:—Secondly, the Central Peaks.

<sup>247</sup> These are Chapter XIV: Resulting Forms:—First, Aiguilles, Chapter XV: Resulting Forms:—Secondly, Crest, Chapter XVI: Resulting Forms:—Thirdly, Precipices, Chapter XVII: Resulting Forms:—Fourthly, Banks, and Chapter XVIII: Resulting Forms:—Fifthly, Stones.

<sup>248</sup> Listing the entire collection of commentaries containing references to Ruskin's geology would be excessive. Ruskin alludes to his preoccupation in geology throughout his collected works and his obsession with it directly in the opening lines of Chapter VII of *Praeterita* (*Works*, 35:120-1). Suffice it to say that references to Ruskin's geological interests appear in discussions of his early career interests, covered in detail by Rosenberg, Hewison (1976), Hilton, and Ballantyne (2015) and the relationship between geology and landscape in painting and art, as explained by Landow (1971), Fitch, Sonstroem, and Nichols.

<sup>249</sup> Fitch, p. 285.

<sup>250</sup> Lacy Gully, pp. 159-183.

<sup>251</sup> Sdegno, pp. 32-48.

advance his agenda of sympathy, not decay. My contribution differs in providing a specific intertextual hermeneutic of Ruskin's ideas of change and beauty that lead to recognizing decay as a creative activity. This begins with how the world is set up. To comprehend Ruskin's peculiar take on geological causality and history, examining its origins within his thoughts and writings is prudent. I begin where Ruskin begins: the beginning of the world as Crystallization.

### 3.1 Crystallization

But there was a period, or a succession of periods, during which the rocks which are now hard were soft; and in which, out of entirely different positions, and under entirely different conditions from any now existing or describable, the masses, of which the mountains you now see are made, were lifted and hardened, in the positions they now occupy, though in what forms we can now no more guess than we can the original outline of the block from the existing statue.

(*Works*, 26:118)

For Ruskin, crystallization is both geological and scriptural. He describes creation and formation as bringing materials into existence from nothing but also as composing them in a beneficent and emblematic manner. As Klaver (1997) and Gillispie (1996) note, the earth's origins are indeed mysterious in terms of verifiable history and logical explanation.<sup>252</sup> Like other geologists of the time, Ruskin would only speculate about the earth's origin due to a lack of compelling factual evidence regarding orogenic theories that confused the line between uniformity and scriptural narrative. Like other theistic naturalists, he could justify creation through the spiritual truths of Scripture, but crystallization brought them into the world. To crystallize means to make into a crystal, to become concrete and fixed, or to be clear and defined.<sup>253</sup> Ruskin's first era embraces all three definitions: he explains the mineralogical constitution of crystalline rocks, the setting in place of the principal forms of the earth and establishes the reasons for their existence and operation. The era of Crystallization is the era of beginnings.

The beginning of the universe is to bring something into existence—to make it real. It is a dual act of *creatio ex nihilo*, and then wilfully crafting the 'formless void' of the earth.<sup>254</sup> Creation also includes setting in motion the forces of nature, producing wind,

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<sup>252</sup> Klaver, pp. 31-2.

<sup>253</sup> 'Crystallize', in *Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/crystallize\\_v?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/crystallize_v?tab=meaning_and_use)> [accessed February 13, 2024].

<sup>254</sup> Genesis 1, 2.

light, and air, and the building of the earth, producing water, land, and sky. Their subsequent interaction—an intentional arrangement—is the basis for the laws of nature or how everything is envisioned to behave. In this first era, the purpose of decay is ingrained early in Creation when the forces of nature are determined, and the foundational elements of the world are set. But it will not be until Ruskin's third era that decay is enacted. For now, decay is established as potential and resides under the larger governance of the law of change.

Change is a fundamental character of the laws of nature. From the beginning of his theoretical explorations of art, architecture, and landscape, Ruskin says that 'the truths of nature are one eternal change—one infinite variety' (*Works*, 3:145), and the love of change is 'a principle of human nature, and the pleasantness of variety resulting from it' (*Works*, 4:97). Unlike a static representation of nature in painting, nature is constantly changing. Change becomes the overarching intention that governs decay as a process. The geological chapters in Volume 4 do not engage with erosion per se but rather lay the groundwork for how decay is accepted and understood by aligning the laws of change with divine intention. Before the world can degrade, it must first be set up.

### 3.1.1 The Firmament

Understand by the term "Heavens" the compass of infinite space around the earth, and the expression, "bowed the Heavens," however sublime, is wholly without meaning; infinite space cannot be bent or bowed. But understand by the "Heavens" the veil of clouds above the earth, and the expression is neither hyperbolic nor obscure; it is pure, plain, and accurate truth, and it describes God, not as revealing Himself in any peculiar way to David, but doing what He is still doing before our own eyes day by day.

(*Works*, 6:109-10)

The first attempt at explaining change is establishing the methods responsible for it. In Chapter VI: 'The Firmament' from Volume 4, Ruskin connects worldly facts with scriptural history and a theological narrative. He provides an exegesis of Creation to establish the real presence of God. It is a balance between divine symbolism and natural fact but also a dialogue of affirmation where the sacred is sought out in the forms that, in turn, identify the divine. Here, Ruskin argues that the divine presence is not unknowable nor confined to a scriptural narrative but an objective fact present in the world. Fitch argues this approach is a 'new survey of natural truth, the intrinsic symbolism of natural

forms'.<sup>255</sup> Nichols adds that Ruskin does not distinguish between 'the *invisibilia*, the angelic creation, and *visibilia*, its visible counterpart' in discussing heaven,<sup>256</sup> and Sdegno qualifies Ruskin's exploration of mountain forms as metaphysical and aesthetic finalism.<sup>257</sup> Symbolism and form are but one truth: the *diune* of medium and message.<sup>258</sup>

Ruskin centres his argument around the firmament, the second day of Creation, where God made the sky by separating the 'waters from the waters', creating heaven as an expanse of sky and clouds.<sup>259</sup> His hermeneutic affirms the divine aspects of Heaven as the existence of real things in the world and should be described as such. Locating Heaven as a part of the world makes it more accessible and readily present. This perspective does not restrict the revelation of God's magnificence to the chosen people or locations of scriptural history but exists as a cloud 'doing what He is still doing before our own eyes day by day' (*Works*, 6:109-110).<sup>260</sup> The emphasis on clouds as a spiritual manifestation is deliberate support for Turner's atmospheric rendering skills, but he also links the exponents of the firmament—water, cloud, and mist—to the presence of the Deity as the 'immediate and active presence in all the powers and changes of creation' (*Works*, 6:111). Powers and changes are understood as the laws of nature—the secondary causes God puts into motion at the beginning of everything. Power provides the forces necessary to realize instantiations of the firmament, and change exists as its native order, the destination to which all efforts are directed. Even at the world's founding, Ruskin hints at its inevitable decline.

From a mechanical perspective, the earth's decay will occur courtesy of the various incarnations of water and wind, such as torrents, glaciers, snow, and rain. Before such a fated descent can begin, Ruskin establishes these primordial elements in the Creation period. The Firmament has a corporeal presence but is also associated with a natural force. Before the act of Creation, the earth was a 'formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep', and a divine wind swept over the waters.<sup>261</sup> The waters seem

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<sup>255</sup> Fitch, p. 281.

<sup>256</sup> Nichols, p. 377.

<sup>257</sup> Sdegno, p. 40.

<sup>258</sup> The 'diune' is my term used to describe the dual existence of message and medium. This was proposed in Chapter 2.

<sup>259</sup> Genesis 1. 1.

<sup>260</sup> Ruskin identifies locations where God presented Himself as a cloud in the Sinai and the Temple of Solomon, and to Ezekiel and the disciples on Mount Olivet. See *Works*, 6:108-9.

<sup>261</sup> Genesis 1. 2.



synonymous with the deep and the cynosure of the divine wind.<sup>262</sup> The first act of creation brings forth light, dispelling the darkness of the deep and revealing the water that God divides on the second day. The creation sequence reveals and separates the waters before calling forth the dry land. Water as an aqueous substance and wind as an energetic force—necessary elements for decay—exist before the emergence of the dry earth. The water of the deep becomes the water of oceans and rivers we know but creates the air and clouds we also know. Ruskin is not speaking allegorically here but instead describing the state of the physical world as it was and, to a great measure, still is.

### 3.1.2 Goodness

God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.<sup>263</sup>

What God makes is good—He says so Himself. As Genesis chronicles, God made the world and, at every step of the way, declared that it was good. By stating that ‘it was good’, God imparts a divine value to whatever He makes. God did not create because of some limitation or absence within Himself—as being omniscient and omnipotent, all things are possible—but rather as a display of sovereignty and to delight the beings He created. Whybray (2007) notes that goodness could be satisfaction felt with a well-made artifact or that the word good could refer ‘more directly to the *usefulness* of the world—presumably primarily its usefulness to mankind’.<sup>264</sup> Goodness as a quality could also be goodness as a purpose. Ruskin sees both eventualities, where the artifacts of divine creation are good because they are beautiful and, in concert with his proposed theoretic capacity, serve the purpose of glorifying the Deity. The things created have a measurable quality of goodness and fitness for human existence and flourishing, depending on how they elicit an appropriate response from our senses and intellect. All things God created, in turn, exist to declare His greatness.

Humankind finds itself thrown into an environment conceived of and brought into existence by a divine power, where evidence of this wisdom and benevolence can be found

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<sup>262</sup> In the notes of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ‘the deep’ is expressed as the Hebrew ‘tehom’ and sometimes associated with the Babylonian goddess Tiamet, a divinity representing oceanic chaos. Later interpretations see the ‘Spirit’ of the Trinity as the wind of God. The footnote also states that God creates order from a watery chaos. See notes, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 11.

<sup>263</sup> Genesis 1. 10.

<sup>264</sup> R.N. Whybray, ‘Genesis’ in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, edited by John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 42.

in the artifacts of the world. As Ruskin notes, humans are graced with the capacity to perceive it and the moral obligation to glorify it. By declaring that His creations are good, the Deity establishes the standard by which all goodness is measured. Humanity need only look to His creations for examples. Goodness is the privilege of the Godhead: ‘No one is good but God alone’,<sup>265</sup> and God does not change; ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever’.<sup>266</sup> Goodness is demonstrated through action—by doing and making. Goodness is inherent to the Deity and shared, where ‘the Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made’.<sup>267</sup> Here, it is seen that God’s goodness is imparted into the things he makes—the earth and everything on it. Thus, the world by reason and moral law is eternally good. Ruskin felt this to be true, saying, ‘follow the finger of God, as it engraved upon the stone tables of the earth the letters and the law of its everlasting form’ and that these lines were ‘traced, with Divine foreknowledge’ (*Works*, 6:116). The imprint of grace is coded into the forms and forces of the world, even those in operation at this very moment. Ruskin believed this knowledge is revealed through the artifacts of the world God has set in place. As such, he relies on scriptural truths and physical evidence captured in mountains and rocks to exalt goodness. As proof of divine intent, Ruskin offers his understanding of the first rocks of Creation—the crystallines.

### 3.1.3 Crystallines

We have to observe, first, the state of perfect powerlessness, and loss of all beauty, exhibited in those beds of earth in which the separated pieces or particles are entirely independent of each other, more especially in the gravel whose pebbles have all been *rolled into one shape*: secondly, the greater degree of permanence, power, and beauty possessed by the rocks whose component atoms, though all of one kind, have some affection and attraction to each other; and lastly, the utmost form and highest beauty of the rocks in which the several atoms have all *different shapes, characters, and offices*; but are separately united by some fiery, or baptismal, process which has purified them all.

(*Works*, 6:132)

To Ruskin, rocks are not just rocks. As with any object in nature, they also contain a purpose and message. Not all rocks are equal: some are more beautiful, while others are more useful. Ruskin’s first rocks—the primary rocks of the first era—are crystalline. They constitute the primigenial matter of the world. The crystalline rocks are the first of his

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<sup>265</sup> Mark 19. 18.

<sup>266</sup> Hebrews 13. 8.

<sup>267</sup> Psalms 145. 9.

primary, secondary, and tertiary categories, outlined in Volume 1 of *Modern Painters* (1843) and associated with geological eras forty years later in *Deucalion* (1883).<sup>268</sup> The primary rocks support the other two, where the secondary rocks are formed of broken fragments or altered substances of the primary, and tertiary rocks are formed from the ruins and debris of both primary and secondary (*Works*, 6:128). He defines crystalline rocks as composed of the fewest substances and destined for the hardest service nature requires, be it physical or spiritual (*Works*, 6:136). Crystalline rocks are ‘capable of more interesting variety in form than any others’ (*Works*, 6:136), with mica being a distinguishing character.<sup>269</sup> When the mica is irregular, it forms a Compact Crystalline (Figure 16); when the mica is regular and in layers, it forms a Slaty Crystalline (Figure 17) (*Works*, 6:139). Compact Crystallines are

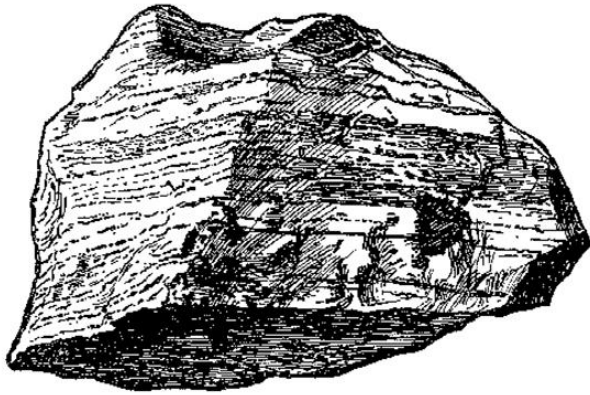


Figure 16: John Ruskin. ‘Compact Crystallines’, *Modern Painters*, Volume 4. 1856. Woodcut.



Figure 17: John Ruskin. ‘Slaty Crystallines’, from *Modern Painters*, Volume 4. 1856. Woodcut.

speckled and tough and decompose into the purest sand and clay (*Works*, 6:143). They decompose due to exposure to weather or mechanical pulverization and not through any internal or inherent deficiency (*Works*, 6:143). This sediment produces the purest landscape that ‘cannot become muddy, or foul, or unwholesome’ (*Works*, 6:143). Crystallines are the first rocks because of their simplicity, arrangement, and duty. From the beginning, Ruskin promotes both their structural composition and how they decay.

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<sup>268</sup> See *Works*, 3:430 and *Works*, 26:118.

<sup>269</sup> Mica is a group of sheet silicate minerals, known for their tendency to form distinct layers. See <https://mineralseducationcoalition.org/minerals-database/mica/>, accessed February 24, 2024.

To Ruskin, the crystallines embody the purest intentions of divine creation, yet their manufacture remains a mystery. At the beginning of Chapter IX, he states that ‘one of the notable characters of the whole group of the crystallines was the incomprehensibility of the processes which have brought them to their actual state’ (*Works*, 6:146). They belong to the mysteries of Creation. As understood today, crystalline rocks are formed when hot, molten magma crystallizes and solidifies.<sup>270</sup> Volcanic activity continues to make more, but Ruskin infers that these rocks are primary because of their purity and necessity, regardless of when they were produced. Unlike the secondary and tertiary rocks that can be worked, crystallines are unsuitable for building because they are too hard to carve delicately (*Works*, 6:153). Crystallines are reserved for mountain architecture and world-building, and ‘where they are, they seem to form the world’ (*Works*, 6:150-1). They provide support for other rocks and exist as objects for human contemplation: ‘We yield ourselves to the impression of their eternal, unconquerable stubbornness of strength; their mass seems the least yielding, least to be softened, or in anywise dealt with by external force, of all earthly substances’ (*Works*, 6:151). In an odd corollary, he argues that this condition benefits humanity by limiting quarries in alpine landscapes and spoiling the view (*Works*, 6:154-5). Does Ruskin believe the world is so particularly ordered that geological deposits, architectural figuration, and sightseeing are interdependent? This could be a throw-away line but given Ruskin’s emphasis that nature is divinely ordered and includes humanity’s engagement, such a statement should not be easily dismissed. As it turns out, humanity plays a significant role in nature’s order, and as he continues his argument, this entanglement becomes increasingly salient.

The chapters on crystalline rocks align with the Crystallization era of his geologic history: primary rocks come from the first era. This would place these rock’s structure, order, and composition in divine hands at the beginning of the world. The compositional origins of these ur-rocks elude description, just as the titanic forces of the Crystallization period that produced them defy rational explanation. They are parts of the earth’s initial creation and purpose. Later rocks of the secondary and tertiary character can be explained with greater precision because they employ existing materials, forms, and forces. Their ordering and position are logical and rational, which basic laws of change can explain. As seemingly prestigious as these rocks are, they are by no means resolute, as ‘perfect

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<sup>270</sup> ‘Igneous Rocks’, USGS, <https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/what-are-igneous-rocks>. Accessed on February 13, 2024.

permanence and absolute security were evidently in nowise intended' and that 'mountains were to be destructible and frail', but 'under all these conditions of destruction, to be maintained in magnificent eminence before the eyes of men' (*Works*, 6:134). Change is implied through degradation, but not for its own sake. Ruskin's caveat for the observer makes human involvement an essential factor in finding the beauty in erosion.

As the pervasiveness of nineteenth-century causal theories regarding the operation of the earth grew, the role of humanity's importance in its function diminished. Geological laws seemed to have an inherent logic independent of human needs, as seen in Hutton's concept of 'deep-time' and Lyell's uniformitarianism.<sup>271</sup> Ruskin could not abide by these perspectives because a world without a connection to humanity seemed cold and barren, devoid of meaning and purpose. However, he was well-schooled in observing facts and not oblivious to the geological arguments surrounding him. What troubled him with these teleological positions was that they drove the need for divine influence from their speculations. Ruskin needed to have a plausible reason for the beauty of nature, including a divine intention and an inherent ability in humanity to recognize and celebrate divine creations. This gave meaning and purpose to the Deity, humanity, and the world at a time when inductive scientific investigations seriously questioned this collaboration.

### 3.1.4 Coherents

The interconnection between nature and humanity becomes clearer as Ruskin discusses the coherent series of rocks. The coherent rocks are lesser rocks composed of the detritus of crystallines. While compositionally inferior to crystallines, the compact and slaty coherents are more abundant and useful to humanity, especially in creative endeavours using the 'great groups of [...] marbles' (*Works*, 6:162). When discussing slaty coherents in Chapter X, Ruskin identifies the flaky character of some coherents, such as slate, and how they split well and are useful in architecture as a roofing material (*Works*, 6:160). Here, the composition of the rocks is pragmatically beneficial to humanity. Ruskin sees this as a gift and not a discovery. Rather than permit the possibility of human ingenuity in finding a

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<sup>271</sup> Hutton's 'deep-time' and Lyell's uniformitarianism involve forces and time lines that exceed the tenure of human history. The term 'deep-time' was used by John McPhee to account for the long geological time lines Hutton envisioned in his *Theory of the Earth* (1788). See John McPhee, *Basin and Range* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980). Similarly, William Whewell coined the term 'Uniformitarianism' in 1837 to describe Lyell's theory in *The Principles of Geology* (1830-3) that geological processes are uniform over time in contrast to the prevailing Catastrophist position that advocated for sudden and violent changes. See William Whewell, 'Lyell's Geology, Vol. 2' in *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 47, (March 1832), pp. 103-132 (126).

practical purpose for random rocks, Ruskin promotes a premeditated purpose for the rock's structure and application, removing such inventiveness from humanity and placing it in the hands of an all-knowing Maker. This speaks to some of his larger arguments of pride, humility, and obedience found in other discussions. It also strengthens his argument for the purpose of nature to instruct human endeavours.

The compact coherents explained in Chapter XI are most helpful to building and sculpture (*Works*, 6:162). Interestingly, the beauty of these great groups of marbles can only be revealed by humanity:

They are farther marked as the prepared material for human work by the dependence of their beauty on smoothness of surface; for their veins are usually seen but dimly in the native rock; and the colours they assume under the action of weather are inferior to those of the crystallines: it is not until wrought and polished by man that they show their character.

(*Works*, 6:163)

In this description, the true beauty of marble can only be found once human hands work it. This fact encourages physical engagement with the material, something impossible without human participation. Untouched marble may be beautiful in the landscape, but only the sculptor or craftsman can reveal its hidden sublimity. The stark beauty of the crystallines enthralls the mind when viewed in their totality, but the coherent's beauty is revealed through nature-human engagement. These stones seem destined for the creative human arts of architecture, ornament, and sculpture.

It is important to recognize that Ruskin is writing about geology and mineralogy from a very particular viewpoint: his argument concerns the structure of nature to benefit and influence artists and their art. This position alienated him from the more prevalent geological discussions at the time, especially those that minimized the need for religious narrative in favour of materialist and positivist positions. The obituarist for the *Geological Society* in 1900 qualified Ruskin's geological contributions, accordingly, writing that 'we must not forget his services to our science, in directing the attention of artists and others to the effect of geological structure and the of the character of rocks on scenery'.<sup>272</sup> It is easy to forget that despite its lengthy geological explanations, Volume 4 is still a treatise on Turner's painting prowess. Also, despite these lengthy geological explanations, this volume is neither a scientific treatise in the vein of Buckland, Lyell, or Whewell. But this is the

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<sup>272</sup> *QJGS*, 56, pp. lx-lxi, 1900.

point of Ruskin's philosophy. From his perspective, detaching the observer from the observed is impossible, especially if humanity's most profound purpose is to expound divine glory. In such an arrangement, the two must be present and commensurate. The earth is tailored to reflect the goodwill and intentions of the Godhead, and the human experience is tailored to reveal and revel in the mysteries of cosmic design. God has His plan for the universe, and humanity is a part of it—Ruskin's statements regarding fewer quarries, roofing slate, and marble sculpting, as mentioned above, allude to such premeditation.<sup>273</sup> Again, these instances could be read as mere coincidences, but when placed in conjunction with the larger movements of Ruskin's speculations, they reveal his numinous worldview. These are singular instances but cumulatively become irrefutable evidence of a consistent and supreme order.

#### 3.1.4 Nature's Laws

I have to prove to them that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in their philosophy, and that the truth of nature is a part of the truth of God; to him who does not search it out, darkness, as it is to him who does, infinity.

(*Works*, 3:140-1)

Ruskin's approach to the forms and forces of the world is governed by two masters: Scripture and Natural Philosophy. The biblical account of Creation was more or less set since the 6th century BCE; however, the path and scope of natural philosophy was less clear.<sup>274</sup> Grant (2007) states that natural philosophy is a catch-all term for the study and questioning of the physical universe and began before recorded history 'with no name to designate it'.<sup>275</sup> As Gohau (1991) points out, evidence of rigorous explorations extends to early Greek thought by the Aristotelians, Platonists, Stoics, Pythagoreans, and Epicureans.<sup>276</sup> Their work was a conflation of empirical observations, formal reasoning, speculation, and myth used to uncover explanations and axioms of nature's operations. The consistency in nature's enactments led to distinct deliberations. Natural philosophy covered many diverse areas of inquiry known more commonly today as physics, chemistry,

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<sup>273</sup> See above, Section 3.1.3.

<sup>274</sup> According to the Priestly source, the first five books that comprise the Pentateuch were probably written during the Babylonian exile in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. See G.I Davies, 'Introduction to the Pentateuch' in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, edited by John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 19.

<sup>275</sup> Edward Grant, *A History of Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>276</sup> Gohau, pp. 14-16.

botany, and zoology, with few links governing a singular approach. Inquiries addressed the disposition and history of nature: how it functioned and, in terms of landscape and geology, its history.<sup>277</sup> Ruskin's own geological investigations are derived from strands and tenets of certain geological thinking that combine factual observation with theological purpose.

The study of nature progressively revealed consistent and comprehensible actions that later developed into laws, leading many to confirm, such as the parson-naturalists and natural theologians, that nature was designed and intended. McGrath (2022) explains that from the seventeenth century onward, the revelatory importance of nature as the work of God was becoming as important as Scripture, or the word of God.<sup>278</sup> DeWitt (2013), Gillispie (1996), and Klaver (1997) argue that a basic assumption was that the guarantor of those laws was God, and nature was widely believed to reflect and propagate divine qualities.<sup>279</sup> Through these investigations, a distinction between religion and science had rarely been made. As Harrison (2006) notes, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, science and theology operated without division or the perceived need to be separated; it was how natural philosophy was conducted.<sup>280</sup> Ruskin's approach to nature follows this dictum, promoting the co-existence of fact and faith as axiomatically true. The study of the earth was increasingly seen as a moral education as much as an intellectual one. Gillispie states that 'those who were investigating and admiring the Lord's work were necessarily participating in the Lord's work'.<sup>281</sup> As part of his natural philosophy, Ruskin promotes humankind's active engagement with the earth to uncover the mysteries of divine intent. The study of nature was noble because it reaffirmed faith, developed individual character through the self-discipline and self-sacrifice of rigorous study, and revealed the moral intent of the divine will.<sup>282</sup> DeWitt notes that these devotional and ontological practices are

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<sup>277</sup> These aspects are generalized from the works of Grant, McGrath (2023), Gohau, Laudan, Greene, and Chignell and Pereboom. See Chignell and Pereboom.

<sup>278</sup> Alister McGrath, 'Natural Theology', in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. by Brendan N. Wolfe (University of St Andrews, 2022) [www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/NaturalTheology](http://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/NaturalTheology), and Gillispie, p. 4.

<sup>279</sup> See Anne DeWitt, *Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 23; Gillispie, p. 4; and Klaver, p. 1.

<sup>280</sup> Peter Harrison, "'Science' and 'Religion': Constructing the Boundaries", *The Journal of Religion*, 86, No. 1 (January 2006), 81-106.

<sup>281</sup> Gillispie, p. 4.

<sup>282</sup> DeWitt identifies the study of nature as a spiritual practice, devotional exercise, and moral character development in John Herschel's *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (1830) and the *Bridgewater Treatises* of William Whewell (1833) and Thomas Chalmers (1843). See DeWitt, pp. 25-6.



commonly promoted in the works of Issac Newton, John Ray, Thomas Burnet, William Paley, William Whewell, and James Clerk Maxwell.<sup>283</sup>

Excursions into nature were a ‘popular and gentlemanly pastime, pursued both for [their] outdoor amusement and for its edifying religious qualities’.<sup>284</sup> Ruskin’s early geological observations revealed a penchant for observation—a gentleman amateur making detailed surveys of landforms. His early observations, such as ‘Enquiries on the Causes of the Colour of the Water of the Rhine’ and ‘Facts and Considerations of the Strata of Mont Blanc’, both published in Loudon’s *Natural History* in 1834, were devoid of outward theological content, focusing predominantly on discernible facts. These and later reports are purely descriptive and rarely speculative, borrowing heavily from his early Alpinist influences such as Saussure (Figures 18 and 19) and Forbes (Figures 20 and 21) for their accuracy and facticity. Ruskin proudly proclaims that he always presents the truths of nature: ‘I never theorize; I give you the facts only’ (*Works*, 26:109) or ‘I describe facts or semblances, not operations’ (*Works*, 6:182). Facts for him were empirically derived and spiritually true. However, as his art and architectural theory developed and matured, the landscape retained its physicality but became more numinous and moral.

Gillispie notes that early forms of geological investigation were initially a search for facts which proved Creation in terms of the Mosaic account given in Genesis.<sup>285</sup> In a teleological approach, naturalists had the religious answers to their geological questions before they began their research. This aprioristic rationale was responsible for cosmogonies—speculations on the origin and history of the earth—that attempted, as Laudan states, to causally explain the physical actions and forms of nature from a religious predisposition.<sup>286</sup> While no single theory satisfied all the observers of nature, most were univocal in the belief that a beneficent divine hand was involved in the formation and operation of the earth; however, to what degree became a matter of eristic debate.

As natural philosophy developed from a study and description of nature and its laws into an inductive science, it removed the need for divine intervention to explain the forming events and the resultant structure of the earth by restricting what could be theorized from empirically derived facts. Nothing could be declared as truth where

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<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-28.

<sup>284</sup> Klaver, p. 1.

<sup>285</sup> Gillispie, pp. 19-20.

<sup>286</sup> Laudan, p. 2.



Figure 18: Horace Bénédict de Saussure, *Aiguilles des Charmoz*, 1797. Steel engraving after original drawing.



Figure 19: John Ruskin, *Aiguille de Servoz*, from Loudon's *Magazine of Natural History*, Vol. III. 1834. Woodcut.



GLACIER OF LA BREVENA, SHOWING THE STRUCTURE OF THE ICE.

Figure 20: James David Forbes. 'Glacier of La Brevna, shewing the structure of ice' from *Travels Through the Alps of Savoy*, 1843. Steel engraving after original drawing.



Figure 21: John Ruskin. *Aiguille Chamois-Chamonix*, 1849. Pencil, ink, and watercolour on paper. The Ruskin, Lancaster University.

objective facts could not be reliably ascertained and confirmed, which, as Dewey (1939) argues, eliminates the need or presence of any forms of idealistic spiritualism and supernaturalism.<sup>287</sup> Scriptural authority failed in this regard, especially after stratigraphic and uniformitarian truths had questioned the Mosaic timeline and could not be regarded as a legitimate source of geological history. The perceived consequences of this minimization significantly impacted Ruskin's geology as he still saw the hand of the divine as an integral part of any scientific inquiry, stating emphatically that 'the distinction even between natural science and theology is illogical' (*Works*, 22:170).

### 3.1.5 'What a Sunday!'—Natural Theology and the Theology of Nature

[W]ith so much science mixed with feeling as to make the sight of the Alps not only the revelation of the beauty of the earth, but the opening of the first page of its volume.

(*Works*, 35:116)

'What a Sunday!' Ruskin exclaims in *Praeterita*, the day he reached the doorway to the Alps for the first time after savouring the mighty Black Forest and falls of Schaffhausen (*Works*, 35:113). A half-century later, the significance of that impression never faltered, recalling:

I went down that evening from the garden-terrace of Schaffhausen with my destiny fixed in all of it that was to be sacred and useful. To that terrace, and the shore of the Lake of Geneva, my heart and faith return to this day, in every impulse that is yet nobly alive in them, and every thought that has in it help or peace.

(*Works*, 35:116)

On that day, the Ruskin family took their Sunday sermons from stones—the devotional lessons divulged by mountain forms. Unlike anything he had experienced before, the surge of fervent emotions transformed and complicated his understanding of nature. Finally, the youthful fireside recitations of Wordsworth, Scott, and Byron's alpine excursions were before him and rang true in his heart, giving him a real sense of the spiritual in nature. He loved nature as a harmony of things, saying:

The Alps and their people were alike beautiful in their snow, and their humanity; and I wanted, neither for them nor myself, sight of any thrones in heaven but the rocks, or of any spirits in heaven but the clouds.

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<sup>287</sup> John Dewey, *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Volume 14: 1939-1941, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, 17 vols (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), XIV, p. 64.

The importance of thrones and spirits would always remain, a carry-over of his Protestant moral education, but their desired expression became more somatic and less abstract. At this moment in his life, and arguably every point henceforth, the reality of revelation was more tangible in the forms of the Alps than in the word of Scripture. Rather than rely on a cognitive grasp of sectarian truisms conveyed by the written word, the sensory experience of the physical world unleashed a torrent of emotions and feelings that overwhelmed the intellect, imposing another form of hierophantic revelation not readily understood. Nature, it seems, could speak to Ruskin of the divine in ways the Bible could not. The question was how to decode this numinous second book.

As poignant as it was, Ruskin's nature experience was not wholly unique. As stated in the previous chapter, Ruskin's Romantic and picturesque experiences prepared him for a perceptive and spiritual engagement with the world. Historically, deciphering the divine in nature was not always clear, even for those who were spiritually and theologically committed. The argument towards divine revelation through a sensory experience of the world was the domain of natural theology and, along with natural philosophy, encountered territorial and terminological challenges in the Victorian era. As Taliaferro (2012) notes, by the nineteenth century, the distinctions of natural philosophic practice became increasingly nuanced.<sup>288</sup> Natural theology was likewise scrutinized, where more precise definitions and applications were explored. Stanley (2015) gathers the prevailing spiritual-naturalistic traditions under the terms 'theistic naturalism', or 'theistic science', but theistic science itself was not a monolithic term nor consistently practiced.<sup>289</sup> Most of the early debates concerning the study of the earth and its revelatory role were theological: theories that were either promoting or infringing on sectarian positions regarding the verity and authority of Scripture. A recurring debate emerged between natural theology and the theology of nature, or a difference between natural reason and sacred revelation. The former is deistic and assumes one can gain religious knowledge by studying the natural world; the latter envisioned that natural laws confirm and validate Scripture as revealed theology.<sup>290</sup> Natural theology can operate without Scripture and reason towards

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<sup>288</sup> Charles Taliaferro, 'The Project of Natural Theology', in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. by William L. Craig and J.P. Moreland (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012), pp. 1-23 (p. 2).

<sup>289</sup> Stanley, p. 4.

<sup>290</sup> Stanley, p. 48 and Taliaferro, p. 1.

God's existence, whereas the theology of nature relies on scriptural exegesis to ensure a sacred understanding of the world. Both are teleological and lead to confirming the existence of God, but each has its locus of ultimate authority in competing camps.

Ruskin's approach to nature exhibits deistic and theistic leanings. His explication of landscape's moral and numinous character through the laws of nature is undoubtedly deistic, but, as Sdegno notes, his constant use of revelatory metaphors and Bible quotes affirm a theistic disposition.<sup>291</sup> Such efforts validate the things in the world with the authority of the written Word. However, the deistic and theistic positions orbit a larger goal: understanding how and why nature was created and expressive of divine intentions. In *Natural Theology* (1802), Paley's argument directs attention to how the universe is organized, from the micro to the macro, as evidence of grand design. 'Design implies a designer,' he points out in his notable pocket watch analogy, 'contrivance must have a contriver'.<sup>292</sup> Rather than rely on the written Word, Paley suggests the divine can be known through what He has made. Paley believes that the divine mind is captured and written into the laws of nature, ready to be read and understood. This deistic argument runs askew of scriptural literalism, such as Evangelicalism, which emphasizes the importance of the Word over the things of nature. This literalist position does not preclude naturalistic inquiry, only its preferred role in revelation—the natural world complements Scripture but does not circumvent its primacy. Ruskin felt the divine intention of nature, but he needed to learn its geological language to decipher its message.

## 3.2 Sculpturing

Then, out of those raised masses, more or less in lines compliant with their crystalline structure, the mountains we now see were hewn, or worn, during the second period, by forces for the most part differing both in mode and violence from any now in operation, but the result of which was to bring the surface of the earth into a form approximately that which it has possessed as far as the records of human history extend. The Ararat of Moses's time, the Olympus and Ida of Homer's, are practically the same mountains now, that they were then.

(*Works*, 26:118)

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<sup>291</sup> Sdegno points to Ruskin's prolific use of Bible quotes and scriptural metaphors in response to scientific challenges. See Sdegno, p. 40.

<sup>292</sup> William Paley, *Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1802/2006), p. 13.

The era of earth sculpturing is pivotal in the relationship between humanity and nature. The first era of Crystallization put materials and forces in place and the second era of Sculpturing gave them form and purpose. Ruskin wrote his three eras at a time when geological theory and inductive reasoning promoted a much different theory of the earth's formation than that provided in Genesis. While much of the geological evidence of early earth formations remained speculative, Lyell's uniformitarianism promoted that the geological changes currently in action could account for past changes if permitted enough time to do so. Such a theory negates the need for extraordinary forces to account for the earth's forms—a theory Ruskin soundly rejects.<sup>293</sup> Many factors are at play with Ruskin's geology, but humanity's relationship with the physical world is the primary concern. Ruskin firmly believes that the earth was created for humanity's benefit and God's glory. But this relationship is not without its challenges. Humanity's continual disobedience and subsequent punishments enacted upon the earth further complicate the ideal original configuration. Steeped in Evangelical lore, Ruskin is committed to the theological position of the depraved human condition and the devastation it brought to the earth. The earth was punished for humanity's sins. Despite this narrative, Ruskin remains conflicted about the current state of the world and questions what role humanity plays in the current form of the earth: is humanity responsible for a degraded post-Edenic world? In his account of sculpturing the earth's forms, Ruskin has to reconcile the earth's current state with the Deity's divine intentions for humanity. He begins by returning to the Genesis narrative.

### 3.2.1 The Dry Land

Crystallization provided the primordial stuff from which the shaping of the earth could begin. Once the unformed material is in place, the sculpturing of the earth's landscape begins. In the chapter 'The Dry Land' from Volume 4, Ruskin augments and extrapolates Creation as presented in Genesis. His second geologic era of Sculpturing is carving the raised masses into the forms we see today (*Works*, 26:118). Referring to a biblical timeline, the actual sculpturing probably occurred on the third day of Creation when the waters were gathered, and the dry land appeared. The act of separation generates distinct yet connected forms. Until that point, 'the earth had been *void*, for it had been *without form*' and Ruskin noting how 'the waters should be *gathered* was the command

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<sup>293</sup> In Chapter 2 of *Deucalion*, Ruskin celebrates Lyell's influence but at the same time rebukes Lyell's uniformitarianism, claiming that 'in the broadest bearings of it, entirely false' (*Works*, 26:117).

that the earth should be *sculptured*' (*Works*, 6:116). Sculpturing brings unformed things into a coherent shape.

The fact that the waters and dry land are tethered is not coincidental. As Ruskin stated, gathering one meant the sculpturing of the other, and in his estimation, water and mountains are inextricably linked. He points out that the kind of land summoned were ranges of 'swelling hill and iron rock, for ever to claim kindred with the firmament, and be companioned by the clouds of heaven' (*Works*, 6:116). Mountains are strategically placed to permit the flow of water as rivers; it is the first purpose of mountains, as the 'dew and rain fallen on the face of the earth shall find *no* resting-place' (*Works*, 6:121). Mountains are also in place to 'maintain a constant change in the currents and nature of the *air*' (*Works*, 6:124), a point established by John Ray and William Paley.<sup>294</sup> This second purpose directs the different incarnations of air, such as torrents and mists, across the elevated topography. A consequence of the interaction of air with material produces the third use of mountains to 'cause perpetual change in the *soils* of the earth' (*Works*, 6:125). The erosion caused by the forces of air breaks and grinds the higher peaks into fragments of rock, sand, and clay deposited by rivers in the hills, valleys, and plains alongside the mountain ranges. These elements were not put in place at the time of creation but came after the law of change was introduced into the world. These mountain conditions coalesce, working in unison towards a desired end that must include or reflect alterations to these original forms.

For Ruskin, change is the process through which the earth is made inhabitable. He knows this is true because the world is not only fit for habitation but is beautiful to us. Mountains, rivers, and air are 'beneficent operations of laws necessary to the existence of man and to the beauty of the earth' (*Works*, 6:125-6). The interaction of mountains with water results in the decay of the material world but also produces the material needed for humanity to exist and flourish. The erosion of mountains provides soils for growing plants, the fragmented rocks provide building material for human shelter, and the presence of mountains moves the clouds and weather. The design of the earth is useful for humanity's existence. The mountain system provides everything humanity needs to exist: food and shelter, but also something more. Not all the earth is habitable:

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<sup>294</sup> John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (London: Printed for R. Harbin, 1691), pp. 215-220. There is no indication of Ruskin acknowledging Ray's book, although he does use some of Ray's flora descriptions from *Catalogus Plantarum Angliæ* (1668) in the Rudimentary Series from the Ruskin Art Collection, Oxford (*Works*, 21:241).



[A]s much as we shall ever need is evidently assigned to us for our dwelling-place; the rest, covered with rolling waves or drifting sands, fretted with ice or crested with fire, is set before us for contemplation in an uninhabitable magnificence.

(*Works*, 6:123-4)

Where humanity cannot live, it is instead designed to inspire and amaze:

[T]hose desolate and threatening ranges of dark mountain, which, in nearly all ages of the world, men have looked upon with aversion or with terror, and shrunk back from as if they were haunted by perpetual images of death, are, in reality, sources of life and happiness far fuller and more beneficent than all the bright fruitfulness of the plain. The valleys only feed; the mountains feed, and guard, and strengthen us.

(*Works*, 6:127)

The law of change refers to observations of geological erosion but also aligns with the greater catastrophic earth-building theories, such as Neptunism and Vulcanism, Hutton's theory of 'deep-time', or Lyell's uniformitarianism. Change could have a broad application, but for Ruskin, it aligns with the intentions of the Deity and is manifested through the actions of nature, particularly those of erosion and decay. Change appears early in *Poetry* in Ruskin's discussions of age and decay (*Works*, 1:13), landscape form (*Works*, 1:15), and a dominant characteristic of his Gothic aesthetics. The intention of change and mountains is a debate for natural theology as modern geological studies envision laws independent of divine control or purpose. Ruskin used the geological debates to inform his understanding of nature but had to retain a theological aspect that was explicative of a purpose for all of creation and not patronizingly simplistic.

To his mind, the earth seemed ideally set up for humanity to flourish and remain in a changeless state. However, human disobedience squanders the initial attempts at setting up a perfect world. His Evangelical upbringing feeds Ruskin's inclination to see the loss or decline of moral virtue in the world, which is expressive in *Seven Lamps, Stones*, and the earlier volumes of *Modern Painters*. As Rosenberg, Hewison (1976), Fitch, and Sawyer articulate, his disenfranchisement with human disobedience, pride, and hubris increasingly dominates his post-aesthetic writings.<sup>295</sup> From such a position, it is possible to see why Ruskin aligns his geological sculpturing era with the earliest records of human history and the events in Scripture, where human disobedience undermines the earth's original goodness and alters its intentions. Ruskin struggles with the reality of an intended ideal

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<sup>295</sup> See Rosenberg, Hewison (1976), Fitch, and Sawyer.

world, where the potential of beauty, grace, and glory conflict with the realities of human depravity—a legacy of disobedience, denial, and defilement. Is the earth set up as a prime world, or is it the remnant of Original Sin, never able to regain its former glory?

### 3.2.2 Apple, Blood and Flood

The history of human actions in Scripture directly impacts the earth's condition while establishing a genealogy of how decay should be understood and contextualized. In Ruskin's estimation, the earth is offered as a gift to humanity—designed to sustain and inspire. In return, God only asks for fealty. Genesis explains the formation of the world but also what happens to it because of humanity's actions. In 'The Dry Land' chapter, Ruskin describes how the earth was created for humanity's benefit, but it is unclear if this refers to a pre-Edenic, Edenic, or post-Edenic existence. Eden is essential in how God's intentions for the earth are to be understood. Eden means 'delight' and is the perfect relationship between humanity, nature, and God.<sup>296</sup> The first humans were intended to live in a paradisaical state and follow a simple covenant with God, creating a perpetual existence of piety and obedience. The laws of nature appear to function in Eden: the rivers flow, fruit grows, and the garden needs tending, except nothing changes. The landscape of Eden does not appear to change in any significant way. This would seem to contradict the current laws of nature that would actively erode any topography. Different laws may be at play, and Ruskin's allusion to the different forces in action during the second era could refer to the unnatural perpetuation of this static state.<sup>297</sup>

Life in Eden for Adam and Eve is a perpetual presentness devoid of time and change. Their only chore in the Garden is to 'till it and keep it', the first active human engagement with the earth beyond passive perception.<sup>298</sup> This commitment is divinely decreed but also beneficial because, through tending and cultivating the trees, the literal fruits of their labour will sustain them. Unfortunately, disobedience brings about a collapse of this arrangement, and humanity's active relationship with the earth changes after the Fall. The disobedient act of eating the forbidden fruit results in Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, invoking a previously unknown series of natural laws of mortality, where time and decay are set in motion. Gaining worldly knowledge coincides with the laws of

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<sup>296</sup> *The Oxford Commentary on the Bible*, p. 44.

<sup>297</sup> Refer to the opening quote at the beginning of the Sculpturing section of this chapter. See *Works*, 26:118.

<sup>298</sup> Genesis 2. 15. Genesis notes that God places beautiful trees in the garden.

change; knowledge of the good and evil carries the consequence of sin and mortality, both changes of an idyllic state. Up to this point, the earth was innocent of transgressions against the Deity but ironically cursed because of the first humans' actions. To punish the sinners meant punishing the earth: 'cursed is the ground because of you'.<sup>299</sup> Expelled from Eden, Adam and Eve and their descendants are forced to work the cursed earth for their continued existence.

Like their father, Cain and Abel worked the earth, but in different ways. As a farmer, Cain was directly connected to the cursed soil, whereas Abel tended to the uncursed livestock as a shepherd. The second act of disobedience results in Abel's death at Cain's hands. Cain's fratricide, a human act of defiance, stains the earth with blood. In response to Abel's murder, God decrees that Cain is 'cursed *from* the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood'.<sup>300</sup> The reading of this statement has many possible interpretations. Byron (2011) notes that the preposition 'from' in this context could mean that the earth was cursed *along* with Cain, or that Cain was punished *more* than the earth, or that Cain was punished *on* the earth rather than *from* it.<sup>301</sup> Conversely, the earth is perhaps not innocent and a possible accomplice in Cain's act, as it willingly drank Abel's blood. As explained by Nicolson (1959), the curse of Cain can also mean that the soil is cursed or that the earth itself is cursed for everyone and not just for Cain.<sup>302</sup> In each scenario, however, the earth remains cursed. Consequently, neither Cain nor his descendants can produce crops for consumption, indicating that the earth continues to be cursed even after Cain's death. Almost 1,500 years pass after Cain's curse, when Lamech, praising the virtues of his son Noah, proclaims, 'out of the ground that the Lord has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands'.<sup>303</sup> The cursed earth he refers to could be from the Adamite or Cainite curses, but the need for relief from the toil of work could refer to the difficulty of working the tormented land as much as it is a consequence of Original Sin. Lamech's prophecy could relate to Noah saving the best of humanity during the Flood as God wipes out the worst.

In the antediluvian world, the earth is seen to suffer as humanity suffers, but humankind's sins also appear to degrade the earth itself. The unproductive soil spoken of

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<sup>299</sup> Genesis 3. 17.

<sup>300</sup> Genesis 4. 11, my italics.

<sup>301</sup> Byron, p. 95-96.

<sup>302</sup> Nicolson, p. 104.

<sup>303</sup> Genesis 5. 29.

by Lamech coincides with the rise of wickedness and depravity in humankind. When God speaks of the decline of humanity, He declares the earth is spoiled and filled with violence, seeing ‘that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth’.<sup>304</sup> There is a link between humanity and the earth, some of which the earth embodies and some where these events occur. The earth, in this instance, could stand in for humanity and their actions and not the land itself; however, in the following declaration, God says, ‘I am going to destroy them along with the earth’.<sup>305</sup> God is distinguishing between humanity and the land upon which they live—both are destined for destruction because of their corruption. Destruction is not total annihilation—the earth does not cease to exist, nor is all of its denizens eradicated—only the current incarnation of humankind is destroyed and the tainted earth supposedly redeemed or cleansed. Rather than obliterating humankind and the earth with the spoken word, the ultimate power of an omnipotent Creator, God instead unleashes rain to cause a flood—a force of nature. Thomas Burnet (1635-1715) stated in 1681 that the Deity acts through the agency of natural forces and laws—second causes—and not through direct ordinance seen in Creation.<sup>306</sup>

The Flood is indeed enormous, covering the tops of ‘all the high mountains... fifteen cubits deep’.<sup>307</sup> Its immense power was enough to destroy all things on the earth, save a family of novice seafarers and their zoological cargo. But the earth did not escape unscathed. In Ruskin’s second era, the period of Sculpturing, mountains are ‘hewn or worn’ by violent forces, unlike those currently in action (*Works*, 26:118). According to him, this era goes back as far as Exodus but does not include the Flood, and the mountains were presumably formed by this time. His sculpturing era could have occurred during the Deluge—the Flood could qualify as a violent force. But were the mountains sculptured or deformed, or both? Burnet and John Woodward (1665-1728) stated that the earth’s current forms were the result of a catastrophic deluge.<sup>308</sup> It was difficult to tell if the Flood purified, deformed, or sculpted them. While antediluvian mountains might have existed

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<sup>304</sup> Genesis 6. 11-12.

<sup>305</sup> Genesis 6. 13.

<sup>306</sup> Thomas Burnet, *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, Fourth Edition (London: Printed for John Hooke, 1681/1719), pp. 131-2.

<sup>307</sup> Genesis 7. 19-20.

<sup>308</sup> Burnet’s *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681) explained how the Flood, which emerged from caverns under the earth, brought forth the oceans and mountains. John Woodward’s ‘An Essay Towards a Natural History of the Earth’ (1695) says that a catastrophic deluge created the rock formations and lands forms as we know them today.

before the Flood, their original appearance is unknown; Scripture does not mention their appearance or form, although Burnet speculates that they were plain and smooth.<sup>309</sup> In their works, Bede (672-725), Burnet, and Woodward promoted degradation from a purer state, a state of the world different than the one we currently occupy.<sup>310</sup> In their estimation, the old Edenic earth perished, and a new one emerged due to Original Sin.

These existed as speculations regarding the appearance and structure of the antediluvian world based on scriptural history rather than physical evidence. Burnet's preference for smooth and plain mountains could reflect the prevailing attitudes towards the appearance of nature. To travellers such as John Evelyn (1620-1706), the Alps appeared as a collection of waste and debris swept from the Lombardy plain.<sup>311</sup> Mountains were also sources of fear and terror; they were considered ugly and deformed. Gohau (1991) notes that this changed when naturalists began to see divine order in the forms of the earth: 'In one century the general view had reversed: mountains were no longer heaps of rubbish but admirable proofs of the existence of God'.<sup>312</sup> Gohau also identifies eighteenth-century naturalists such as John Ray (1627-1705), Noël-Antoine Pluche (1688-1761) and Élie Bertrand (1713-1797), who spoke of the marvellous and beneficial character of the forms of the earth, envisioning a wonderful machine rather than a wreck, emphasized natural theology, and that the earth was put in place for humankind to admire.<sup>313</sup> Ultimately, Ruskin had sources for a degenerative vision of nature based on Scripture and an optimistic vision based on an aesthetic and intellectual engagement with nature and the world.

What haunted Ruskin were the intentions of the Deity concerning when change was implemented; it reflected his conflicting ideas about the promise or decline of the earth and humanity. If the mountains endured the Deluge unaltered, then the forms we see today were as God had intended. But, if the mountains survived the incredible forces God brought to the earth, why would they now succumb to the relatively insignificant erosive forces of wind, rain, and ice? Was this part of God's post-Deluge plan? Did He

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<sup>309</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, pp. 72-3. According to Nicolson, this condition of the antediluvian world is also promoted by Bede and Woodward. See Nicolson, pp. 90-92.

<sup>310</sup> Nicolson notes Burnet and Saint Bede's (672-735) claims the antediluvian world was smooth and plain. Gillispie identifies the Neptunists as natural philosophers who sought evidence of the Flood in the laws and history of the earth. See Nicolson, p. 90 and Gillispie, pp. 41-72.

<sup>311</sup> John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. by William Bray, 2 vols (London: M. Walter Dunne, 1818/1901), I, p. 335.

<sup>312</sup> Gohau, p. 53.

<sup>313</sup> Gohau, pp. 51-2.

change the laws of nature after the Flood? Conversely, God declared that He would “destroy the earth” and all that dwelled on it. Obviously, this does not mean literal destruction since some incarnation of the earth was still present after the floodwaters subsided. This could also refer to the shape of the mountains, meaning that the catastrophic powers of the Flood carved the original mountain forms into the current forms we see today. In the process, however, it appears it also stripped the world of its original innocence, perhaps the intended meaning of ‘destroy the earth’. God also promises to “never again curse the ground because of humankind,” referring to the Adamite and Cainite curses and the Flood’s destructive forces.<sup>314</sup> Does this remove the curse, or is it a promise not to curse it further? Could this signal a new life for mountains as well? Is this the point where the natural laws as we know them arise? These questions were not lost on Ruskin, who addresses these concerns in the next two chapters of Volume 4. He works through these dilemmas by looking at the details of the earth’s structure and how it is oriented towards ending in beautiful forms.

### 3.2.3 Wrecks of Paradise: Lateral Ranges and Central Peaks

From what first created forms were the mountains brought into their present condition? into what forms will they change in the course of ages? Was the world anciently in a more or less perfect state than it is now? was it less or more fitted for the habitation of the human race? and are the changes which it is now undergoing favourable to that race or not? The present confirmation of the earth appears dictated, as had been shown in the preceding chapters, by supreme wisdom and kindness. And yet its former state must have been different from what it is now; as its present one from that which it must assume hereafter. Is this, therefore, the earth’s prime into which we are born: or is it, with all its beauty, only the wreck of Paradise?

(*Works*, 6:177)

This comment from Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* presents the two possibilities of the earth’s state: the earth’s prime or the wreck of Paradise. The first alludes to a present perfectness, while the other to a degraded artifact of a once-perfect era. Each embodies divergent intentions and operations relating to the notion of change and, by extension, the role of decay. Beauty is present and equal in both states but unequal in how it is determined. Prime earth is beautiful, whereas wrecked earth is likewise beautiful but a shadow of a possibly incomprehensible and unnatural beauty. Both possibilities could exist

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<sup>314</sup> Genesis 8. 21.

in Ruskin's eras; at times, he allows for both eventualities, but his interest is in the era of early human history—the era of Unsculpturing.

Ruskin opens his discussions of mountain sculpturing with questions about intentions and how it shepherds change in the landscape. He writes of mountain sculpturing in the 'Lateral Ranges' chapter of Volume 4 and the 'great laws of change, which are the conditions of material existence, however, apparently enduring' (*Works*, 6:176). As a law of nature, change is a de facto state of existence, and it has a purpose; as he wrote in Volume 1 of *Modern Painters*, 'the truths of nature are one eternal change—one infinite variety' (*Works*, 3:145). One constant change to material existence in nature is erosion and decay. As it turns out, decay is a simple and predictable event, yet it impacts every material thing in the world. Ruskin engages in the geological theory of destruction and renovation but believes all movement is teleological—working towards an end (*Works*, 6:178). He looks at how the forms of the earth are in a continual state of becoming (*Works*, 6:179). This state is intentional, with him saying:

In the human architecture the builder did not calculate upon ruin, nor appoint the course of impediment desolation; but that in the hand of the great Architect of the mountains, time and decay are as much the instruments of His purpose as the forces by which He first led forth the troops of hills in leaping flocks:—the lightning and the torrent, and the wasting and weariness of innumerable ages, all bear their part in the working out of one consistent plan; and the Builder of the temple for ever stands beside His work, appointing the stone that is to fall, and the pillar that is to be abased, and guiding all the seeming wildness of chance and change, into ordained splendours and foreseen harmonies.

(*Works*, 6:180-1)

There is much to digest here. The most significant and obvious fact is that decay as change is intentional: controlled by God, the great Architect, and not left to chance. Erosion and decay are not haphazard but strictly governed to beautiful effect. Decay is also an expression of the forces of nature: the wind, air, and rain of the lightning and the torrent. All of the forces of erosion work in unison, according to the divine intentions of the Maker. The reference to the builder-architect points towards a building and the earth both being designed; the allusion of architectural creation is used to explain the earth's assembly and order. It begs whether the earth was designed to decay; it did not escape Ruskin's attention. If the forms of the earth are arranged in such ways as to decay, how does this affect the constitution of minerals, rocks, and mountain ranges?

The remaining sections of the Lateral Ranges chapter are dedicated to how the shape and materials of the mountain are composed and how erosion influences its life. At

times, the weight of these questions burdens Ruskin, and he often retreats to the relative safety of describing what he sees: 'I describe facts or semblances, not operations. I say "seem to have been," not "have been." I say "are bent;" I do not say "have been bent"' (*Works*, 6:182-3). His devotion to descriptive prose is admirable considering his numinous perspective, but the inevitability of justifying their existence is ever-present. Some questions are too big to ignore or be satisfied with description only, especially when dealing with the current dilemma of erosion and decay:

Whether the whole mountain was called out of nothing into the form it possesses, or created first in the form of a level mass, and then eventually bent and broken by external force, is quite irrelevant to our purpose; but it is impossible to describe its form without appearing to imply the latter alternative; and all the distinct evidence which can be obtained upon the subject points to such a conclusion, although there are certain features in such mountains which, up to the present time, have rendered all positive conclusion impossible, not because they contradict the theories in question, but because they are utterly inexplicable on any theory whatever.

(*Works*, 6:183)

Throughout the chapter, the ideas of decay return. The forms of fragments that 'submit itself only to the gradual influences of time and storm' (*Works*, 6:184) and 'what marks there are, the rain and natural decay have softly traced through a long series of years' (*Works*, 6:195). Ruskin describes the forms he sees and posits possibilities for their current condition.

The next chapter, 'The Central Peaks', identifies decay as the sculptor of mountain form. The power of these forms overwhelms descriptive Ruskin as he once again slips into conjecture, saying:

I can hardly conceive of any one standing face to face with one of these towers of central rock, and yet not also asking himself, Is this indeed the actual first work of the Divine Master on which I gaze? Was the great precipice shaped by His finger, as Adam was shaped out of the dust? Were its clefts and ledges carved upon it by its Creator, as the letters were on the Tables of the Law, and was it thus left to bear its eternal testimony to His beneficence among these clouds of heaven? Or is it the descendant of a long race of mountains, existing under appointed laws of birth and endurance, death and decrepitude?

(*Works*, 6:209)

After reading this, it is hard to believe Ruskin's adherence to 'facts only'. It is important to remember that his facts also contain elements of truth, as expressed in his exposition on



the truths of nature in Volume 1 of *Modern Painters*.<sup>315</sup> These are not empirical facts describing outward appearance but represent inward moral imperative and purpose. There is a hint of dismay in capitulating to inductive forces as the only viable explanation, and Ruskin offers a response to whether these mountains are divinely carved or eroded fragments:

It is *not* as it was once. Those waste leagues around its feet are loaded with the wrecks of what it was. On these, perhaps, of all mountains, the characters of decay are written most clearly; around these are spread most gloomily the memorials of their pride, and the signs of their humiliation.

“What then were they once?”

The only answer is yet again,—“Behold the cloud.”

(*Works*, 6:209-210)

He implies that decay is actively responsible for the mountain’s current appearance and not the direct hand of God, saying ‘their form, as far as human vision can trace it, is one of eternal decay. No retrospection can raise them out of their ruins, or withdraw them beyond the law of their perpetual fate’ (*Works*, 6:210). The divine intention remains in place, but the execution is left to secondary causes. The fall of mountain forms seems to lay with decay, the harbinger of ruin and destruction. But Ruskin does not leave it there; these mountains cannot exist only as wrecks because they would cease to be beautiful.

Ruskin’s Sculpturing era deals with a form of decay that was not present during the Edenic period. The movement from static to change is a consequence of human disobedience and a condition of human existence. Ruskin is adamant that nature is intentional and beautiful in its most majestic incarnations. He struggles with the presence of mountains as either direct evidence of the hand of God or the result of natural forces put in place by God—the hand of God by proxy. When he mentions the earth’s prime, is he referring to a better nature-human condition? When he refers to the wreck of Paradise, is he implying that as beautiful as the earth is now, it is but a shadow of what it once was—former glory devalued by human disobedience and wickedness? Does humanity’s contumacy taint or spoil the beauty of nature? Is a decaying earth only a reminder of recalcitrance—tortured, deformed, and degraded? Part of Ruskin’s test for nature has to do with how it relates to humanity’s presence and interaction. Because of this dilemma, Ruskin probably left the second era of Sculpturing nebulous and speculative; there were

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<sup>315</sup> When introducing his Ideas of Truth, Ruskin states that truth ‘signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind or senses, or any fact of nature’ (*Works*, 3:104). See Volume 1 of *Modern Painters*, Chapter 5.

no definitive facts in either the rock records of the world or in Scripture. In describing limestone cliffs, he states that ‘the geologist plunges into vague suppositions and fantastic theories in order to account for these cliffs: but, after all that can be dreamed or discovered, they remain in great part inexplicable’ (*Works*, 6:186).

### 3.2.4 Geological Plunges

Ruskin’s account of the earth’s creation is decidedly scriptural and moral, but it contains the necessary configuration of minerals, shapes, and forces essential for his understanding of final mountain forms. However, such a cosmogony ran askew of the nineteenth century’s concurrent geological and scientific theories that were becoming increasingly descriptive, positivistic, and uniform.<sup>316</sup> Laudan notes that the causal and historical spheres of scriptural influence were gradually eroded with every new geologic discovery, and Stanley notes that catastrophes, floods, and miracles were no longer necessary to explain geological form, and the chronicles of Creation could not contest with stratigraphic postulation.<sup>317</sup> The palaeontological movements of deep-time and uniformitarianism suggested timelines that conflicted with biblical history, leading to complex and hyperbolic explanations in order to reconcile the theological rift. When faced with irrefutable rock records, even stalwarts of a natural theological position like Buckland, author of the *Bridgewater Treatise ‘Geology and Mineralogy Considered With Reference to Natural Theology’* (1836), had to admit that any history of the earth should be based ‘on the rocks, not on the Bible’.<sup>318</sup>

Scriptural history found itself in an increasingly tenuous position when faced with scientific theorizing; however, the way such theory was conducted was even more forbidding. The emerging dominance of inductive thinking—spurred by Bacon, Whewell and Huxley—limited what causal theories could explain and formulate as laws without specific observation or direct evidence.<sup>319</sup> Snyder (2023) notes that Bacon’s weariness of deductive arguments, which led to biases and false assumptions, inspired Whewell to develop inductive methods as a way to get at clear thinking and true knowledge about

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<sup>316</sup> Gillispie, p. xxxi.

<sup>317</sup> Laudan, p. 2 and Stanley, pp. 71-7.

<sup>318</sup> Laudan, p. 170.

<sup>319</sup> Bacon was the first to promote an inductive theory in *Novum Organum* (1620), later to be picked up by Whewell. Whewell’s original ideas on inductive method. Huxley’s promotion of inductive method as the driving force behind scientific inquiry.

objective phenomena in the world.<sup>320</sup> This is achieved through observation, experimentation, and hypothesis based on empirical evidence from which generalized statements or principles could be made. Whewell avoided accepting any preconceived notions that had not been rigorously tested before accepting them as valid, thus eliminating bias, opinion, or prejudice.<sup>321</sup> In speculations of the earth's formation, geological inquiry was encouraged to remain silent in the absence of corporeal proof. The loss of scriptural authority of a Mosaic timeline also compounded its relevance regarding the shaping of the earth through Creation history; as Gillispie explains, 'few denied that Moses had indeed described an impressive flood, but as a primary, universal geological agency, it was abandoned.'<sup>322</sup> The Bible may still retain moral authority but could no longer be considered a reliable historical document.

These broader dilemmas that afflicted the legacy of natural philosophy and natural theology impacted Ruskin's consideration of contemporary geology and science, forcing him to reassess what was most likely true for his understanding of mountains. A seminal point lay in his aesthetic approach to landscape and the divine guarantee of beauty. Beauty loses its importance and value in Ruskin's aesthetic ontology without a sacred intention. Without it, beauty, as it is found in nature, has no external reference and must thus be a concoction of human deliberation, judgment, or taste—a point he disavowed at the beginning of *Modern Painters*.<sup>323</sup> Inductive methodology encouraged speculation only on what could be empirically observed and colligated. The consilience of rock records offered explanations of nature that did not require the presence of divine will to operate. This caused Ruskin trouble. He was adept at discerning facts through observation but could not push the evidence to its inductive conclusions if it threatened his divine security. Rather than face the void, Ruskin instead pushed the sacred deeper into the mysteries of the earth. The earth may function without the need for divine intervention, but even its causal actions, no matter how small, could present evidence of divine forethought. The transcendent or metaphysical *prima causa* could give way to immanent and comprehensible secondary causes.

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<sup>320</sup> Snyder (Winter 2023).

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>322</sup> Gillispie, p. 140.

<sup>323</sup> Ruskin explores the false opinions concerning beauty in Chapter 4 of Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*. See *Works*, 4:66-75.

### 3.3 Unsculpturing

Not, however, without some calculable, though superficial, change; and that change, one of steady degradation. For in the third, or historical period, the valleys excavated in the second period are being filled up, and the mountains, hewn in the second period, worn or ruined down. In the second æra the valley of the Rhone was being cut deeper every day; now it is every day being filled up with gravel. In the second æra, the scars of Derbyshire and Yorkshire were cut white and steep; now they are being darkened by vegetation, and crumbled by frost. You cannot, I repeat, separate the periods with precision; but, in their characters, they are distinct as youth from age.

(*Works*, 26:118)

Unsculpturing moves the forms of nature into their current prime or wrecks what was once most perfect. Ruskin's descriptions of mountain forms through the intentions of natural laws lean towards the former—he sees nature producing beautiful mountains before our eyes. But these moments of perfection are fleeting and rare. Post-Paradisal, decay is degradation and the earth's forms are lesser than they once were. In the era of the earth's prime, the forms of the earth are perfect, and their current lines and forms are the epitome and result of divine intention. At Ruskin's most optimistic, the earth's prime is fecund physically and spiritually; at his bleakest, the earth is materially corrupt and morally defiled. Sawyer alludes to the challenge of inductive science to natural theology on how to read mountain form, where 'at the edge of intelligibility lies either the deity or the void'.<sup>324</sup> Ruskin is adept at envisioning both. Fitch and Sawyer convincingly argue for Ruskin's apocalyptic and deleterious perspectives, but an optimistic earth—the envisioned prime of its possible existence—hovers above his most dire premonitions.<sup>325</sup> He explores both possibilities in his later writings: lamenting the earth's defilement while positing its possible and intended beauty. Ruskin reflects at the edge, and what follows gloom is glory.

#### 3.3.1 Outlines and Leading Lines

Now this sculpture by streams, or by gradual weathering, is the finishing work by which Nature brings her mountain forms into the state in which she intends us generally to observe and love them.

(*Works*, 6:320)

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<sup>324</sup> Sawyer, p. 154.

<sup>325</sup> Both books by Fitch and Sawyer explore the destructive implications of Ruskin's apocalyptic perspectives, especially in his later years.

In the five chapters on the Resulting Forms of Volume 4, Ruskin explains how Unsculpturing brings mountains into certain forms. Their forms are archetypal and key. At its core, Unsculpturing is a mix of superposition and degradation—setting up and tearing down mountains. Superposition relates to the arrangement of the earth’s material, and degradation is how the forces of nature erode such material to produce mountain forms. In Ruskin’s explanations, the final forms achieved through this interaction are not due to happenstance but are strictly governed. This proviso was not foreign but rather nascent in Ruskin’s thinking on the principles of art and nature until he discussed mountain forms and their decay. His discussions of orogeny are a mix of minerals and forms, with the shape of peaks and hills becoming the dominant goal of Nature’s intentions. Throughout the discussion of mountain forms in Volume 4, Ruskin emphasizes forms and describes the ‘safest contour’ for mountains to take to avoid collapse (*Works*, 6:198). The Aiguilles attain ‘the utmost possible peakedness in aspect, with the least possible danger to the inhabitants of the valleys’ (*Works*, 6:227-8) and massing their rocks to achieve the ‘boldest character possible’ (*Works*, 6:201). From his descriptions, terms such as contours, peakedness, character, and many others speak of forms, not minerals. Minerals are composed and ordered to produce these forms and lines. He alludes to materials achieving or maintaining a specific form through the governance of lines. Throughout these discussions, Ruskin continually refers to ‘governing or leading lines’ (*Works*, 6:231) that ‘rule the swell and fall and change of all the mass’ (*Works*, 6:232). These laws of nature describe an object’s primary qualities or bounding lines and have been a part of his understanding of the laws of nature that regulate landscape and architecture. The first mention of leading lines occurs in *Poetry* (Figure 22) when he explains how architecture must be arranged to complement the lines of nature (*Works*, 1:178). Leading lines reappear in Volumes 1 and 2 of *Modern Painters*, *Seven Lamps*, and *The Elements of Drawing* (1856-7), where Ruskin calls them a ‘vital truth, because these chief lines are always expressive of the part history and present action of the thing’ and they are not static but dynamic because ‘they show in a mountain, first, how it was built or heaped up; and secondly, how it is now being worn away’ (*Works*, 15:91). Leading lines do not represent a current state of an object, especially one in decline, but rather the ideal type of form. These lines are more than descriptive aspects of a distant object but a guiding principle about how a form is ordered and continues to evolve, even in decay. Also, set within the

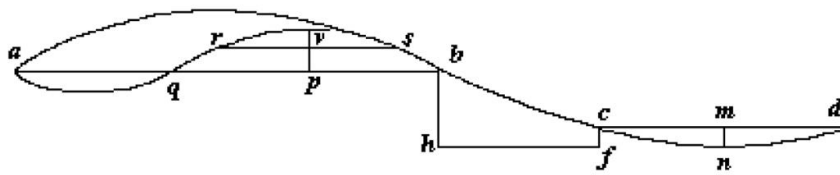


Fig. 28

**[LEADING LINES OF VILLA-COMPOSITION]**

Figure 22: John Ruskin. 'Leading Lines of Villa-Composition', from *The Poetry of Architecture*, 1838. Woodcut.

era of Unsculpturing they are continually in motion; forms come into existence as the forces of decay change their material arrangement.

Leading lines are found everywhere in nature. These lines form the outlines of all naturally occurring elements, from leaves to trees and rocks to mountains. They refer to an object's 'outward qualities' (*Works*, 3:109) and are based on Locke's primary qualities that are 'utterly inseparable from the body'.<sup>326</sup> These are what Ruskin calls the 'truth of form' and rule every miracle of life (*Works*, 3:159). They are present in the shape of a robin's feather in *Love's Meinie* (*Works*, 25:37) and the synergy of a swallow's wing profile compared to those of a boat's sail (*Works*, 25:61). These lines order the Gothic-like structural elements of leaves (*Works*, 25:287) and landscape-like character of stem and leaf forms in *Proserpina* (*Works*, 25:304). Leading lines also govern the works of humanity, especially in relation to landscape. In *Poetry*, Ruskin notes the preferable lines of chimneys (*Works*, 1:64), the pleasing variety of lines of the mountain villa (*Works*, 1:87) or the picturesque Blue Country (*Works*, 1:148). These proper noble lines express the fulfilment of an object's inherent potential, which is the 'ideal of the species' Ruskin calls their highest beauty.<sup>327</sup>

These leading lines are part of an object's formal character and fall under Ruskin's understanding of typical beauty. As mentioned in the previous chapter, typical beauty pairs with vital beauty to convey the moral message inherent in the second book of nature.<sup>328</sup> In Volume 2, Ruskin provides six characteristic 'types' of beauty: infinity, unity, repose, symmetry, purity, and moderation.<sup>329</sup> In general, Ruskin aligns these attributes as eternal traits of the Deity, but Landow notes these modes are also reflective of traditional

<sup>326</sup> Locke, p. 85.

<sup>327</sup> See Chapter 1, Section 1.0.1.

<sup>328</sup> Refer to Chapter 2, Section 2.2.1.

<sup>329</sup> These comprise Chapters V-X of Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*, pp. 76-141.

aesthetic theories that promote universal order and beauty.<sup>330</sup> These types lack singular attributes but promote a general impression or sensation of these objects; however, it is only through these objects that such feelings can be achieved. According to Hewison (1976), these theological types and shadows are essential because they ‘express the nature of God, through the material facts of the world in forms accessible to man’.<sup>331</sup> If one is to read the book of nature, there must be a codex to be read. Ruskin notes that his types were ‘any character in material things by which they convey an idea of immaterial ones’ (*Works*, 4:76n).<sup>332</sup> The ‘character of material things’ is the empirical mode of expression provided by Ruskin’s leading lines.

When discussing the forms of mountains, Ruskin speaks of how the skilful arrangement of materials achieves these desired lines and contours. Volume 4 presents his mountain types, lines that define the Aiguilles, Precipices, Banks, Crests, and Stones. In speaking of the forms of crests, he says, ‘there seems something, therefore, in this contour which makes its production one of the principal aims of Nature in all her compositions’ (*Works*, 6:243), and in speaking of radiant lines similar to a swan’s wing, he says ‘if, therefore, the mountain crests are to be perfectly beautiful, Nature must contrive to get this element of radiant curvature into them in one way or another’ (*Works*, 6:248).<sup>333</sup> The organization of the earth contributes to establishing these governing lines, where ‘nearly all these curvatures are obtained by Nature’s skilful handling of perfectly straight beds’ (*Works*, 6:251). The presence of leading lines results from material massing, material ordered in such a configuration as to produce these lines.

As the composition of rocks is reducible to minerals, so are the forms of mountains down to lines. In his mountain geology, Ruskin explains how mineral alignments, such as mica and crystals, are in service of producing resultant leading lines of stones, crests, the Aiguilles, and the lateral ranges (Figure 23). The very order of the earth is in service of these lines. Mountain structure accounts for most of the governing line, but clouds and snow are likewise necessary, becoming a ‘principal element in mountain form’ (*Works*, 6:293). The combination of mountain, cloud, and snow comprise the final form; the forms

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<sup>330</sup> Landow (1971), p. 115.

<sup>331</sup> Hewison (1976), p. 58.

<sup>332</sup> This additional note and explanation of ‘typical’ appears in the 1883 re-arranged edition of Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*.

<sup>333</sup> Ruskin wrote about this law of radiation in his *The Elements of Drawing*, published in 1858, a year after Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*. These laws of composition echo the laws of natural form explained in Volume 4.



**Fig. 25**

Figure 23: John Ruskin. ‘The Sculpture of the Central Peaks’, from *Modern Painters*, Volume 4, 1856. Woodcut.<sup>334</sup>

of nature are not only relegated to bare mountain structures. It is plausible that Ruskin’s beautiful lines were derived from natural examples considered a posteriori, taken from years of studying nature. Conversely, these lines could have been designated a priori, and nature could be structured around achieving them and humanity charged with uncovering these mysteries. These lines are, remember, the sources of pleasure in Ruskin’s aesthetic system, not the materials themselves. Landow and Costelloe note that these lines have their roots in the aesthetic systems of Burke and Gilpin that assign linear characteristics to the Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque.<sup>335</sup> However, there is a difference between nature’s governing lines and the sketched outlines of objects: the former is a characteristic of intentional design, whereas the latter is a graphic representation of the boundary line of an object’s form detected by the eye. Leading lines govern form, whereas outlines describe form.

When Ruskin speaks of the ‘great set of lines’ of inferior peaks (*Works*, 3:450), he refers to their lines of beauty (*Works*, 3:427). From *Poetry to Deucalion*, Ruskin has long maintained that all beautiful lines are curves.<sup>336</sup> He reminds his readers of the deeper significance associated with these leading lines:

There is an expression about all the hill lines of nature, which I think I shall be able hereafter to explain; but it is not to be reduced to line and rule, not to be measured by angles or described by compasses, not to be chipped out by the geologist or equated by the mathematician. It is intangible, incalculable; a thing to be felt, not

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<sup>334</sup> The image shows the hard rock crystallines of the great mountains as dark, the softer coherents of neighbouring hills in light lines, and the gravel and sand of the great plains as dots.

<sup>335</sup> See Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2.

<sup>336</sup> Ruskin wrote about how all beautiful lines are curved. Significant examples appear in *Poetry* (*Works*, 1:113), *Modern Painters* (*Works*, 4:87-88), *Seven Lamps* (*Works*, 8:145), *Stones* (*Works*, 9:268-9), *Love’s Meinie* (*Works*, 25:38), and *Proserpina* (*Works*, 25:257).



understood; to be loved, not comprehended; a music of the eyes, a melody of the heart, whose truth is known only by its sweetness.

(*Works*, 3:468)

The formal character of beauty in mountain forms is ‘composed exclusively of curves’ (*Works*, 4:88). Some of the earliest examples appear in *Poetry* in Ruskin’s description of the curved hills of the Austonian landscape (*Works*, 1:112-3) (Figure 24), and these

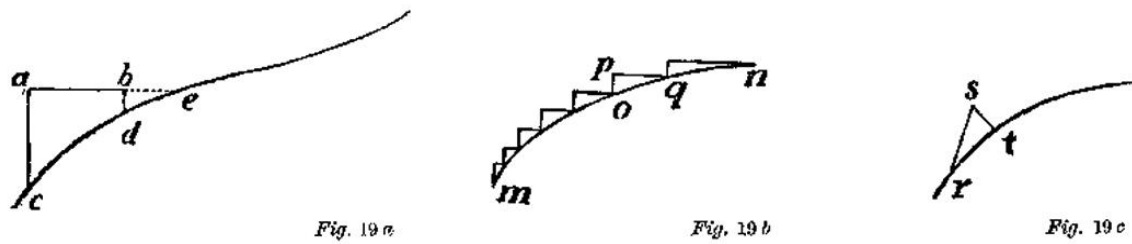


Figure 24: John Ruskin. ‘Ausonian Landscape Curves’, from *The Poetry of Architecture*, 1838. Woodcut.

explorations continued in Volume 4 when he examined the curved lines of banks and crests using similar terminology and referencing repeating forms, as seen in Figure 25.

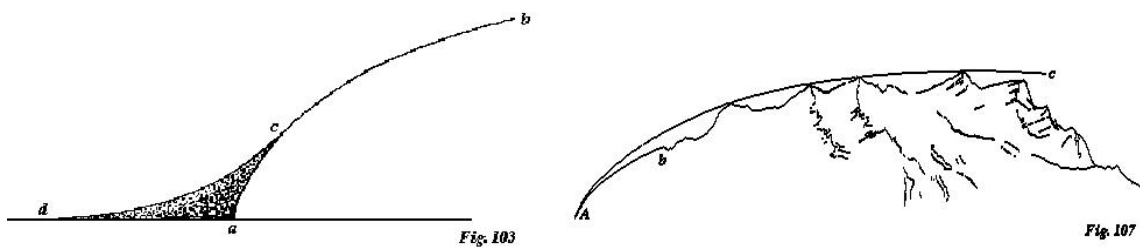


Figure 25: John Ruskin. ‘Bank Lines’ and ‘Crest Lines’, from *Modern Painters*, Volume 4, 1856. Woodcut.

These curves occur at a variety of scales and across a spectrum of applications, ranging from the ‘curved cleavage’ of an Aiguille peak (*Works*, 6:231) to the broad sweep of the Mont Blanc massif. In *Stones*, Ruskin provides a telling diagram containing nature’s characteristic curves, ranging from a leaf to an entire mountain range (Figure 26). This drawing emerges from his collective studies on geology and architecture found in his diaries from his continental tour in 1849 and demonstrates concurrent and coherent thinking on leading lines across different disciplines.<sup>337</sup> Ruskin presents his understanding

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<sup>337</sup> The drawing is a composite of various studies of mountain outlines by Ruskin. They are from his diary notebook dated 1848-49 (MS6), located at The Ruskin, Lancaster University.

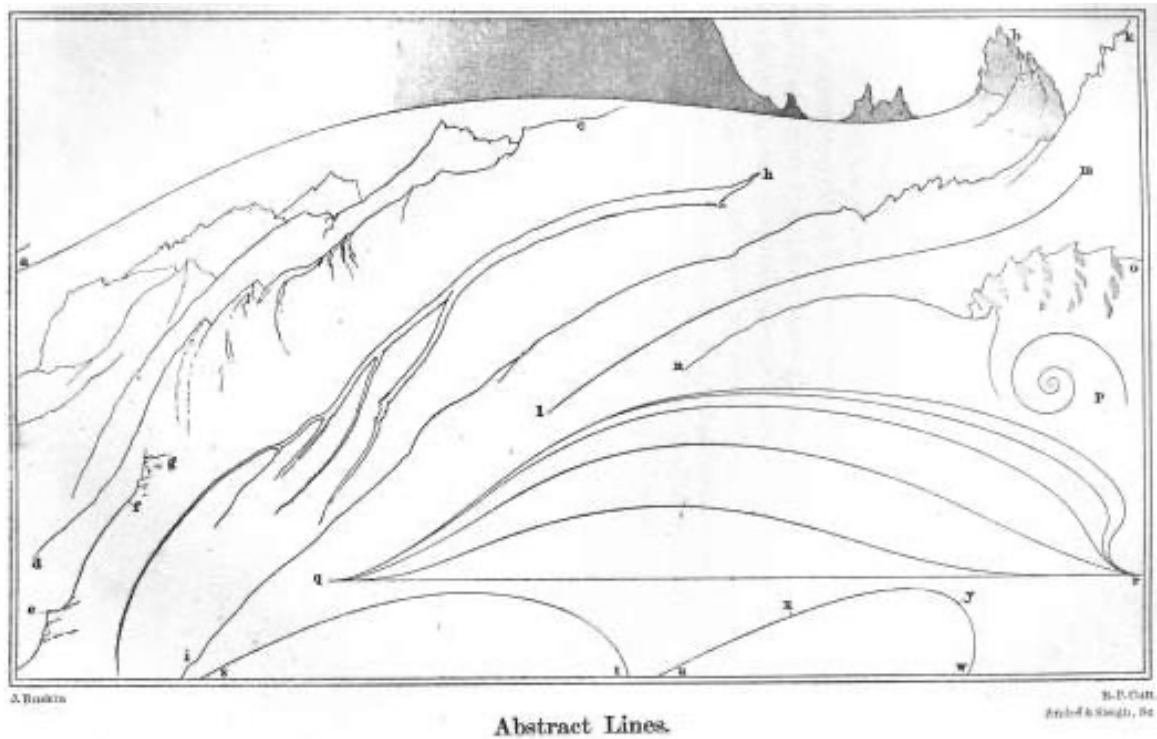


Figure 26: John Ruskin. 'Abstract Lines', from *The Stones of Venice*, Volume 1. 1851. Engraving.

of where leading lines can be found and their relative character. In infinite scales and combinations, nature's laws work towards generating these forms and the materials of the world, be they leaves, shells, or stones, play a designated role in achieving them.

In Volume 4, Ruskin pulls together these ideas of material structure, leading lines, and the degradation of organic decay in his observations of the resulting forms of the lateral ranges and central peaks of the Aiguilles near Chamouni. They contribute to the pleasing lines of nature, desirable outcomes that harmonize and unite the forms of the earth. These mountains are a mix of compact and slaty crystallines beneficially arranged to assume the 'boldest forms' (*Works*, 6:218). The splintery spires of the Aiguilles 'sustain themselves in the most fantastic and incredible fineness of peak against the sky' (*Works*, 6:229-230). Their forms play an essential role in perception, and Ruskin reminds his readers about the purpose of this volume, which is 'the observance of the nature of *beauty*, and of the degrees in which the aspect of any object fulfils the laws of beauty stated in the second volume' (*Works*, 6:238).<sup>338</sup> This is how the forms of nature elicit a pleasurable

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<sup>338</sup> Ruskin is alluding his theory of beauty explained in Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*.

response in the viewer through typical and eventually vital beauty. Ruskin is appealing to the Aiguilles' beautiful bent and curved shapes and how nature arranges strata for such effect. At the beginning of the chapter, he asks:

Is not this very marvellous? Is it not exactly as if the substance had been prepared soft and hard with a sculpturesque view to what had to be done with it; soft, for the glacier to mould and the torrent to divide; hard, to stand for ever, central in mountain majesty?

(*Works*, 6:216)

The intended and resultant forms of the earth dictate how the material should be placed and how erosion should occur to extract the pleasing form. The final form is anticipated a priori, a sequence that indicates premeditation. Are the forms and materials of nature organized to produce pleasing shapes, or are the viewers conditioned to admire the shapes nature produces? This offers an interesting dilemma. Given that Ruskin is writing for a landscape painting audience, it is probable that the laws of nature governing form are aesthetically conditioned and intended for pleasing effect. Furthermore, if Ruskin believes the world is highly ordered and intended for human benefit, then such premeditation of nature is distinctly plausible. It appears that nature has an agenda to direct the earth's material into specific forms. The laws and structure of nature are designed to make pleasing forms—the curved leading lines he sees in nature.

Returning to the point made earlier, mountains such as the Aiguilles may provide visual delight, but they also have a social responsibility to humanity: they must exist in a stable form while providing sustenance in the form of mountain debris for building and shelter and the diversion of water and weather for human subsistence. In such a condition, the ideal form of any mountain must balance these functional aspects. The leading lines of mountains are not only aesthetic conditions but architecturally determined. In contending with the laws of change and the forces of erosion, mountains must attain their 'safest contour', which relies on sound construction (*Works*, 6:198). This safety comes from the internal assembly logic, where the arrangement of crystalline and coherent rocks facilitates a balance of visual appeal and tectonic security. It is clear from Ruskin's position that the design of mountains includes the presence of humanity living at its base. The leading lines of landscape forms, especially those of the grand mountains, pull double duty in being visually beautiful and functionally sound. Recalling his claim in Volume 2 of *Modern Painters* for how beauty is found in the idealism of a species, it is evident that Ruskin is outlining the function and purpose of mountains across a spectrum of aesthetic characters

and operative virtues.<sup>339</sup> Their fulfilment incorporates a foreknowledge of their intended purpose, the assembly of the earth's forms to fulfil this purpose, and the necessary natural laws to enact them in the present day. To Ruskin, this harmonious arrangement is proof of divine intention and execution in the forms and forces of the natural world. To mountains, Ruskin writes:

To fill the thirst of the human heart for the beauty of God's working,—to startle its lethargy with the deep and pure agitation of astonishment,—are their higher missions. They are as a great and noble architecture; first giving shelter, comfort, and rest; and covered also with mighty sculpture and painted legend. It is impossible to examine in their connected system the features of even the most ordinary scenery, without concluding that it has been prepared in order to unite as far as possible, and in the closest compass, every means of delighting and sanctifying the heart of man.

(*Works*, 6:118)

### 3.3.2 Tender Laws, Perpetual Beauty

We have now cursorily glanced over those conditions of mountain structure which appear constant in duration, and universal in extent; and we have found them, invariably, calculated for the delight, the advantage, of the teaching of men; prepared, it seems, so as to contain, alike in fortitude or feebleness, in kindness or in terror, some beneficence of gift, or profoundness of counsel. We have found that where at first all seemed disturbed and accidental, the most tender laws were appointed to produce forms of perpetual beauty; and that where to the careless or cold observer all seemed severe or purposeless, the well-being of man has been chiefly consulted, and his rightly directed powers, and sincerely awakened intelligence, may find wealth in every falling rock, and wisdom in every talking wave.

(*Works*, 6:385)

Ruskin's geological investigations are studies in structure and form intended to explicate the beauty of nature. As an extension of his argument from Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin focuses primarily on the typical beauty of nature's forms, explaining the assembly of landscape and describing the resultant forms. In conjunction with his theory of vital and typical beauty, the theories of ideal form in Volume 2, age, endurance, and inner life from *Seven Lamps*, and the allegorical character and symbolic virtues of Gothic naturalism from *Stones* find coherence in his geological explanations. It seems that the forms of nature are intended to be beautiful through the expression of inner life and virtue,

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<sup>339</sup> See Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*, Chapter XIII: 'II. Of Generic Beauty'. *Works*, 4:163-175.

which are manifested in their outward appearance and form. Landscape and mountains achieve such perfection through their assembly, or sculpturing, and erosion, or unsculpturing—processes, or laws of change, that lead to realized forms. This is a point Spuybroek makes when he refers to morphology in the production of artifacts, saying ‘Nature, in its construction of forms, displays a consistency of production techniques that is even more wondrous than their functionality’.<sup>340</sup> Ruskin examines the evidence of such production in his study of landscape form and affirms that decay participates in bringing material form into beauty.

Before any of his theorizing could begin, Ruskin had to admit to the dominance of the laws of change in a world that was intended in Genesis to be unchanging. The laws of change condition any argument he makes; change cannot be overcome, and it must be dealt with in any vision of nature. Ruskin cannot rely on the demiurge setting immovable and unchanging earth forms in place and expecting them to exist forever. Despite his misgivings over Lyell’s uniformitarianism, he recognized its value in the era of unsculpturing and the folly of miraculous intervention in a highly regulated world. Since humanity’s Expulsion from Eden and fall from grace, change has been an inevitable aspect of the world; where and when change begins—pre-Edenic or post-Edenic—is debatable, but its presence cannot be denied. Ruskin is satisfied with leaving such debates to speculation, as dealing with ‘unknown forces over immeasurable ages’ is inherently problematic, especially in the increasingly positivistic geological atmosphere of the nineteenth century (*Works*, 26:xxiv). Unlike the forces of Creation, the forces of change are aligned with the current laws of nature and are knowable to humanity. He is cognizant of this fact and encourages his readers to look at mountains and consider ‘not so much what those forms of the earth actually are, as what they are continually becoming, that we have to observe’ (*Works*, 6:179). When considering the landscape and mountains, the broader imperative of change is given specificity through erosion and degradation, where ‘continual becoming’ refers to the process of decay.

At this point, it is important to remember the question from the introduction of this chapter: what role does decay play in Ruskin’s conceptualization of beauty? As mentioned earlier, the mechanics of organic decay are not difficult to understand; however, comprehending the extent of decay’s role in bringing beauty to a changing world is more

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<sup>340</sup> Spuybroek, p. 218.

complicated because it means inspiring the term with a differing meaning and intent beyond decrepitude and destruction. As the previous section outlined, the curving leading lines of nature constitute the beautiful, not the existent material itself. Mountains, buildings, and landscapes are beautiful because of these lines. Governance of the lines is what the laws of nature do; its goal is to bring the world into these forms for humanity's benefit. This type of expression resides in Ruskin's theory of typical beauty. The difference between vital beauty and typical beauty is important in his study of landscape and mountain form. In his theory of the beautiful, the human experience is central. Vital beauty is the final validation of providential human experience, where the experience of the world stirs the sensations of beauty. Beauty may begin in nature, but it ends with human moral recognition by the theoretic faculty. However, decay resides within the realm of typical beauty. The decay of material artifacts contributes to the felicitous experience one has in perceiving them, but decay's actions are directly responsible for actively shaping the material world of nature. For Ruskin, decay and the laws of change constantly move the material of the world into ever-changing states and forms, pushing forms toward the ideal leading lines of beautiful form.

Despite decay's positive contribution to nature's beautiful lines, any 'final' beautiful form will never be reached in a world governed by change. It would reason that any final form is whatever condition it is currently in. Ruskin notes in *Lectures on Architecture* that an artifact's beauty is only beautiful when it adheres to the dictates of nature; otherwise, it is considered ugly when it is 'in violation of a natural law' (*Works*, 14:29). Similarly, his hierarchy of ideal form states that every artifact possesses the potential to reach an ideal state, but not everything does. He attributes this to humanity having too much beauty around, saying it would negate its specialness:

Beauty has been appointed by the Deity to be one of the elements by which the human soul is continually sustained; it is therefore to be found more or less in all natural objects, but in order that we may not satiate ourselves with it, and weary of it, it is rarely granted to us in its utmost degrees.

(*Works*, 14:29)

In his ranking of beauty, those artifacts possessing the greatest potential of expressing the highest beauty are those considered most noble. In this realm, Ruskin places mountains as the highest in nature, writing in the chapter 'The Mountain Glory' from Volume 4, 'to myself, mountains are the beginning and the end of all natural scenery' (*Works*, 6:418). In achieving their highest potential, mountains are capable of expressing the purest beauty.

Such achievement is conditioned by the laws of change and the decay process during the unsculpturing era 'since man was man' (*Works*, 26:113). Ruskin's closing statement of his first lecture of *Deucalion*, 'The Alps and Jura', summarize his task for decay:

I have touched in this lecture briefly on the theories respecting the elevation of the Alps, because I want to show you how uncertain and unsatisfactory they still remain. For our own work, we must waste no time on them; we must begin where all theory ceases; and were observation becomes possible,—that is to say, with the forms which the Alps have actually retained while men have dwelt among them, and on which we can trace the progress, or the power, of existing conditions of minor change.

(*Works*, 26:112-3)

### 3.3.3 Revisions of Decay

Whether the whole mountain was called out of nothing into the form it possesses, or created first in the form of a level mass, and then actually bent and broken by external force, is quite irrelevant to our purpose; but it is impossible to describe its form without appearing to imply the latter alternative; and all the distinct evidence which can be obtained upon the subject points to such a conclusion, although there are certain features in such mountains which, up to the present time, have rendered all positive conclusion impossible, not because they contradict the theories in question, but because they are utterly inexplicable on any theory whatever.

(*Works*, 6:183)

In describing the lateral ranges of the Valley of Cluse, Ruskin attempts to reassure his readers that he only reports what he sees: 'I describe facts or semblances, not operations' (*Works*, 6:182). However, in the next paragraph, he delivers the epigraph above, drifting into speculation as the paragraph unfolds and his objectivity seemingly dematerializes. Is Ruskin confused? Inconsistent? It is also possible that Ruskin is exploring possibilities or deeper dichotomies as he writes, settling on one to the exclusion of the other. Understanding the laws of nature caused him considerable consternation but also a clear revelation. The geological sections of Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* advance Ruskin's thinking on decay as his understanding of the laws of nature coincides with an effort to produce a theory of the earth where nature, in its most authentic form, is the epitome of beauty. This purest form includes the effects of decay. All of nature's efforts are directed toward this goal; all of humanity's efforts in natural philosophy or aesthetics are directed toward recognizing this fact. However, the path to realization is littered with obstacles Ruskin must overcome. His revision of picturesque and aesthetic theory, natural theology and scientific methodology, and empirical and symbolic perception produced a tenuous

supposition open to contradiction and critique but firm in its teleological rationale. Ruskin struggles to reconcile the inconsistencies between existing theoretic or empiric positions and his vision of how nature, and by extension the earth and humanity, operate together. One could look at Ruskin's published work as being inconsistent and contradictory, but one could also see it as a public display of his inner contemplations—he is working out ideas before his readers, taking them along on his epiphanic journey. Statements about mountains and rivers, such as '[b]ut in what form was the mountain originally raised which gave that torrent its track and power?' could be read rhetorically as a way to set up a concocted rebuttal or could be read inquisitively, where he is genuinely attempting to formulate viable hypotheses line by line (*Works*, 6:179). Such ambiguities generate space for considering the motives of his geological works. Volume 4 could exist as an example of such an exegetical process, where positions and ideas are challenged and reflected on, and viable resolutions are offered within chapters, even paragraphs. From this position, his arguments are campaigns of discovery. There are no rote solutions; summations only lead to more questions. However, the evolution of his thinking on decay harmonizes his teleological agenda on the laws of change and humanity's role in finding beauty in the natural world. These are the fundamental criteria to which any theory he devises must submit.

Ruskin builds his theories from what he can see, both materially and spiritually. He contends with conflicting accounts of the earth's history from two of his most irrefutable sources: Scripture and observation. The record of earth building provided in Scripture reveals the Deity's intentions, which Ruskin revisits in the early chapters of Volume 4. Here, he explains the earth's nomological condition, foregrounding air and water as the eventual agents of decay. The goodness of God sanctions the inherent goodness of these erosive acts; it becomes an underlying condition of Ruskin's conception of decay. Goodness is essential in situating the motivation and intention of the divine will because it lends surety to decay's purpose in nature's laws and demonstrates divine foreknowledge of how the earth is constructed for humanity's benefit. If decay is a divine punishment for human sin, then its theological inference is predominantly deleterious. Given Ruskin's Evangelical proselytization that the world is depraved and in decline, this would make sense. However, Ruskin does not accept a wrecked earth as a sanction for humanity's misdeeds. By distancing himself from Evangelical inculcations, he finds himself closer to a spiritual truth that envisions the earth as the paragon of meritorious design and action. Nature is resolute in the face of human misconduct and promotes a salubrious covenant



with humankind ameliorated through its laws and forms. Ruskin does not diminish the human history of insurrection, but its impact on nature's mechanics is negligible—he still envisions a natural system directing humanity towards the glory of God.

Ruskin's study of architectural and mountain form revealed the inevitability of decay, forcing him to account for the beauty of natural forms that are always in flux. As a result, beauty is never a fixed form, but a series of adaptable assemblages. In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin establishes that typical beauty is aligned with material nature and that vital beauty is any artifact's providential inner life. Aside from Landow's objection to Ruskin's theory of beauty that beauty can *only* come from nature, the fact that beauty in nature is outward form reflecting inner life remains consistent.<sup>341</sup> The fulfilment of an artifact's designated function or inherent potential is a determining factor of its inner life, and beauty gives Ruskin a measure from which to gauge the relative beauty of any artifact at any stage of its existence. Rather than having one fixed ideal form, such as a Polykleitos statue which promotes a canonized fixed standard, Ruskin's ideal form is always changing. For him, it is the curved line. Rather than one form, it is a fluctuating confluence of curved leading lines that an artifact can fulfil at every stage of its life. In mountain form, this can occur at the various stages of its assembly and degradation. Ruskin gives all of nature the provision of achieving curved leading lines as being the epitome of beauty in natural form. This means that decay can participate in the achievement of a mountain's inherent potential, where the laws of change are in effect and the rules of decay are enforced. In Ruskin's system, knowing that material form must change and that mountains are comprised of certain minerals arranged in certain ways to facilitate such change, decay is a *causa efficiens* in realizing a mountain's full and intended potential.

Fellows (1975) notes that 'Ruskin is obsessed with the problems of endings'.<sup>342</sup> For Ruskin, the endings of decay lay in the questions of intentions and the teleological ends of nature. As has been noted, he is secure in the divine guarantee for the world's purpose; the issue is fathoming its operations. A curious byproduct of his landscape investigations is the agency Ruskin affords the laws of nature. Increasingly, he refers to Nature—the personified capitalized 'Nature'—as directing, willing, or wishing to do something, actions he ascribes to the purview of wisdom. Nature and wisdom soon become synonymous in his

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<sup>341</sup> Landow, p. 91.

<sup>342</sup> Jay Fellows, *The Failing Distance: The Autobiographical Impulse in John Ruskin* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 3.

thinking. God may have set up the world through wisdom, but He put Wisdom in place to run it, thus linking design, assembly, and erosion through divine foreknowledge and intention. Wisdom is in a unique position to unify the creative and erosive actions of nature under one agency. Might understanding wisdom unlock the mysteries of nature? Ruskin believed so. His investigations after 1860 emphasized and scrutinized wisdom in the natural and human realms. The next chapter explores how Ruskin's interest in wisdom emerges in response to the challenges of political economy and social order as well as the challenges to teleology proposed by inductive science and geological thinking. Reconciling wisdom with nature gives decay its final justification for his architectural and mountain form.

# CHAPTER IV

## The Wisdom of Decay

## 4.0 Wisdom

“Know *thyself*;” but can it indeed be sophia,—can it be the noble wisdom, which thus speaks to science? Is not this rather, you will ask, the voice of the lower virtue of prudence, concerning itself with right conduct, whether for the interests of this world or of the future? Does not sophia regard all that is above and greater than man; and by so much as we are forbidden to bury ourselves in the mole’s earth-heap, by a so much also, are we not urged to raise ourselves towards the stars?

(*Works*, 22:139)

The Delphic maxim Γνῶθι σεαυτόν is more than self-knowledge to Ruskin; it is the ‘proverb of proverbs’ (*Works*, 18:273) and the refrain for his later life.<sup>343</sup> In Volume 5 of *Modern Painters*, he says, ‘Know thyself; for through thyself only thou canst know God’ (*Works*, 7:262). Wisdom, Ruskin says, is to know thyself (*Works*, 22:179). He uses the quote several times in *Ethics* (1866) and *The Eagle’s Nest* (1872) to express humanity’s existential position, the limits of human knowledge, and what constitutes appropriate human action.<sup>344</sup> He speaks of humanity’s place in the cosmos, the practical wisdom we need daily, and the noble eternal wisdom we should all aspire to emulate. Ruskin urges us to know our limits but never give up on the marvellous, a critique he levied against Aristotle’s phronetic activity.<sup>345</sup> While always present as a justification for divine order and action in nature and human propriety, the history and function of wisdom emerged as topics of direct investigation in his humanistic thinking from the 1860s onwards. However, there were types of wisdom that required sorting, and while all deriving from a primary source, they each had different areas of application and operative modes. The direction of Ruskin’s inquisitive mind often dictated the type of wisdom at play. In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin wrote about human ability and potential, but his later writings discuss reining in and setting limitations. This is partly in response to his growing awareness of economic

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<sup>343</sup> Γνῶθι σεαυτόν, or gnōthi sauton, is the Greek phrase that is translated into English as “Know thyself”. It is one of the three maxims inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, the others being Μηδὲν ἄγαν, or Mēdēn ágan meaning “Nothing too much” and Ἐγγύα πάρα δ’ ἄτα, or Engúa pára d’ Áta meaning “Give a pledge and trouble is at hand”. The first written reference to them occur in Plato’s *Protagoras* (c.380 BCE). See Eliza G. Wilkins, *The Delphic Maxims in Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1929), p. 1.

<sup>344</sup> In *Ethics*, Ruskin refers to knowing thyself as recognizing one’s existential and hierarchical position, stating that ‘you can only know who you are, only by looking *out* of yourself’ and that one should ‘measure your own powers with those of others’ (*Works*, 18:273). Here, Ruskin is alluding to humanity’s common position and shared existence. In *The Eagle’s Nest*, he mentions how humanity is often ‘stooping in science beneath himself, and striving in science beyond himself; and the “Know thyself” is, for him, not a law to which he must in peace submit; but a precept which of all others is the most painful to understand, and the most difficult to fulfil’ (*Works*, 22:138).

<sup>345</sup> Ruskin noted that Aristotle’s phronesis was so practical that it had no sense of happiness (*Works*, 22:136) or the marvellous (*Works*, 22:138-141), two characteristics his prudential wisdom did include.

and social avarice but also the shifting boundaries of science and knowledge that Ruskin saw as drawing humanity down into the mole's heap instead of raising its heart to the stars. In these areas, wisdom is often governed in singular but consistent ways, contributing to a deeper apprehension of its pervasiveness and ubiquity. This was no less true for examining decay in areas of human affairs and natural phenomena.

As a blanket declaration, decay is governed by wisdom; however, the relationship is not always intrinsic but, at times, subtly inferred. Tracing the presence of decay involves connecting threads of thought that align but are not explicitly stated. As I argued in Chapter 3, decay in nature is part of the laws and principles of change that impact both architecture and mountains. The decay associated with a fall from grace, such as the cases of Venice or Victorian Britain, gains significant traction in Ruskin's later thoughts, whereas the decay of material forms explained in *Modern Painters* and *Stones* is more indirectly expounded and confirmed. The decay in human affairs is generally associated with a lack of wisdom, with Ruskin providing Solomonic guidance on overcoming such a deficit. Wheeler calls this Ruskin's 'Victorian wisdom literature', a turn in Ruskin's thinking towards the scriptural maxims of Proverbs, Solomon, and John.<sup>346</sup> The decay of worldly material assumes an even stronger association with wisdom, as nature's laws fall increasingly and literally into the hands of an active and personified Sophia, where wisdom is given control over natural forces, including those of change and decay.

Chapter 3 explored the presence and structure of decay in the forms and forces of the earth; Chapter 4 examines the intentions and motives behind those operations. My argument examines how wisdom directs decay, providing the intention behind the forms and lines of nature discussed in the previous chapters. A distinction between eternal and practical wisdom is needed to explain Ruskin's development of a personified vision of wisdom. Ruskin's explanation of practical wisdom develops into constructing a natural phronesis that directs the laws of change and decay. In this capacity, wisdom becomes the final piece of the decay puzzle, tying together architecture and mountains through divine intention. In Chapter 2, I argued that Ruskin's interest in external forms and the role beauty played in their divine presence. This, in turn, led to Chapter 3's investigation of how natural phenomena are composed to create leading lines. In Chapter 4, the architect of those compositions and intentions is revealed and explored as wisdom, not a pearl of

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<sup>346</sup> Wheeler (1999), p. 170.

static, eternal wisdom but an active demiurge alive in the world. To arrive at this condition, it is necessary to examine the evolution of Ruskin's conceptualization of phronesis, or practical wisdom, and how it came to direct the intentions of wisdom in nature, thus revealing a harmonious purpose for decay within the laws of nature and a world of material existence. To begin, I explain the emergence of Ruskin's ideas of practical wisdom derived from classical sources and how this evolves into a personal expression of wisdom governing the laws and intentions of creation and change in nature.

## 4.1 Fragments and Fragmented

The disproportion between the length of time occupied in the preparation of this volume, and then slightness of apparent result, is so vexatious to me, and must seem so strange to the reader, that he will perhaps bear with my stating some of the matters which have employed or interrupted me between 1855 and 1860.

(*Works*, 7:3)

In the Preface to Volume 5 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin apologizes to his art-inclined readers that his attentions have been engaged elsewhere. This declaration of other matters is accompanied by a more personal and autobiographical tinge, signalling a change of focus in his ruminations and department. He was moving from theorizing about art to the criticism of art, and wisdom—or lack thereof—was becoming an increasingly consistent element in his polemics. Wheeler (1999) splits his book, *Ruskin's God*, into two parts focusing on two applications of wisdom: 'the "Author of *Modern Painters*" sought to teach his readers how to see architecture, paintings, and landscape' whereas 'the "Victorian Solomon" who wrote on political economy and created the Guild of St. George wished to teach them how to live'.<sup>347</sup> Wheeler situated this divide in 1858, a year Ruskin remembered in *Praeterita*, with a flair for understatement, as 'eventful' (*Works*, 35:525). It was the year of his self-professed unconversion in Turin—the 'Queen of Sheba crash' as he called it (*Works*, 35:498)—where Ruskin's evangelical beliefs were 'put away, to be debated of no more' (*Works*, 35:496), and the year he stopped counting the days he expected to live.<sup>348</sup> It was when Ruskin's aesthetic investigations were shifting from theory to criticism with the completion of Volumes 3 and 4 of *Modern Painters* in 1856 and the final volume

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<sup>347</sup> Wheeler (1999), p. xv.

<sup>348</sup> Hilton notes that on September 7, 1856, Ruskin calculated the remaining days he had left to live. He started at 11,795 in his diary and terminated the practice on July 8, 1858 at 11,192. See Hilton, p. 235.

prepared for publication in 1860. His interest in political economy and social criticism awakened with the publication of *The Political Economy of Art* in 1857 and *Two Paths* in 1859.<sup>349</sup> He was mentally and socially recovering from the fallout of his annulment with Effie Gray four years earlier and embarking on a pivotal new relationship, having met Rose La Touche for the first time on January 3, 1858.

The distinction between Ruskin's early and later phases of life saw changes and transformation. Hewison (2009) notes that Ruskin's 'work of the 1840s had been shaped by a God-centred faith in nature; his work of the 1850s turned more and more towards man, and the modern wilderness that followed the Fall'.<sup>350</sup> Much of Ruskin's early life's influences were passing away: Wordsworth died in 1850, Turner the following year, and Prout the year after that. His marriage was annulled in 1854, and Cook and Wedderburn call the period between 1856 and 1860 'the busiest in Ruskin's busy life' (*Works*, 7:xix). In 1857, Ruskin was invited to organize Turner's drawings for the National Gallery while finishing the final volume of *Modern Painters*, literally putting Turner to rest. His notoriety put him in demand, and he was lecturing publicly three to four times a year until his first mental collapse in 1878.<sup>351</sup> Lecturing became his primary source of communication, where his publications increasingly became collections of public lectures or, in the case of *Fors*, public letters. Fading was the naïve Ruskin; arising was the jaundiced Ruskin. Those who sought the empathetic guidance of the 'author of *Modern Painters*', like the citizens of Bradford, now had to contend with the moral scolding of the Victorian Solomon.<sup>352</sup>

Rather than continue to develop his theoretical ideas, which as an aesthetic system of art and architecture were largely defined with the end of *Modern Painters* and *Stones*, Ruskin lectured on art's role in society and the nature of what Fitch calls the 'social organism', or the existential structure and purpose of societies, not individuals.<sup>353</sup> He was experiencing what he wrote to Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1908) as a 'loss of landscape feeling', as his earlier interests in nature and landscape were diminishing in power and the

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<sup>349</sup> The Manchester lectures on July 10 and 13, 1857, were later published on December 3 the same year as *The Political Economy of Art*. It went through three editions with the essays 'Education on Art' (1867) and 'Remarks Addressed to the Mansfield Art Night Class' (1868) included. These were republished with the additional essays 'Social Policy' (1875) in 1880 and title *A Joy For Ever*.

<sup>350</sup> Hewison (2009), p. 244.

<sup>351</sup> Hilton, p. 258.

<sup>352</sup> Ruskin was invited to speak on the proposed Exchange building in Bradford on April 21, 1864. His opening remarks disparage his audience for their lack of wisdom. This lecture was later published as 'Traffic' in 1866 (*Works*, 18:433-458).

<sup>353</sup> Fitch, p. 456.

urge for social criticism was growing.<sup>354</sup> This approach was neither new nor unexpected. While the early volumes of *Modern Painters*, *Seven Lamps*, and *Stones* were largely expositions on fundamental art, architecture, nature, and aesthetic principles, Ruskin demonstrated an acute awareness of society's problems, and their root causes based predominantly on a lack of proper religious conviction. Despite the complications, these quandaries did have simple solutions. In addressing Victorian culture's moral and ethical issues, Ruskin appeals to wisdom to guide humanity's actions—a rudimentary move from which the confluence of thought and action should flow. While it may have seemed initially pellucid, cutting the Gordian knot of avarice, pride, and folly would prove arduous. His work became a delicate balance of condemnation and salvation, with the blade of wisdom playing a pivotal role.

In *Ruskin's God*, Wheeler isolates Ruskin's wisdom narrative from his economic and social criticism, demonstrating how it regulated his position and thoughts. Wheeler notes how 'Ruskin became convinced that his mission was to change people's way of life, rather than their way of looking at pictures, buildings and landscapes.'<sup>355</sup> At wisdom's heart, he identifies Solomon's maxims in Proverbs as practical ethics regarding the use and misuse of money, good conduct and the maintenance of order, social reform, and a return to providence to provide true wealth in life.<sup>356</sup> Life—the endowed ability to live and the ordinances on how to live—becomes paramount, as Ruskin aligns with the Gospel of John's life wisdom and disavows material gain, saying, 'there is no wealth but life' (*Works*, 17:105). Solomonic wisdom forms the basis of Ruskin's own wisdom literature, but Wheeler notes that the grand Christian redemption narratives of his earlier works give way to 'fragments of wisdom' assembled from Christian and Hebraic religious belief and Greek and Egyptian mythological traditions.<sup>357</sup>

'Fragments of wisdom' aptly describes much of Ruskin's work during this time—a range of topics and an instability of temper and direction that, as Rosenberg notes, led to no unifying theme in his works of this period.<sup>358</sup> In addition to his investigations on art, architecture, poetry, and prose, Ruskin wrote on economic, social, and scientific topics, but they are often unified in their univocal quest for wise resolutions and a better life. Like

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<sup>354</sup> Hewison (2009), p. 262.

<sup>355</sup> Wheeler (1999), p. 155.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155, 159, 160.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>358</sup> Rosenberg, pp. 147-8.



the porous rocks of his mineralogically-based moral narratives in *Ethics*, wisdom continually emerges as the ‘crystal cement’ uniting these disparate fragments into a cohesive whole (*Works*, 18:240). If there is one continuous element Ruskin promoted in his social criticism, it is the use and abuse of wisdom—both eternal and sagacious—by individuals and society. Rosenberg offers an insightful psychological exposition of Ruskin’s mental state, identifying his new-found humanism, disenfranchisement with Victorian society, and consuming mania for Rose La Touche that contributed to his critical works of the 1860s and beyond.<sup>359</sup>

As much as Ruskin’s criticisms were directed towards institutions and policies, they were also reflective and autobiographical—not-so-subtle expressions of his growing inner turmoil. The tragedy of his personal struggles was given public notice, chapters in what Rosenberg calls Ruskin’s ‘book of pain’.<sup>360</sup> He contends that Ruskin’s mineralogical essays in *Ethics* (1866), his lecture on education in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), and his book on work and exchange *Time and Tide* (1867) are veiled messages of sympathetic appeal and religious reproach directed at Rose.<sup>361</sup> Despite the increasing vexations, Ruskin could liberate enlightening and constructive expressions from the tumult of his necrotic visions. In 1869, he would turn his mind to *Queen*, an optimistic and mythopoeic reverie on wisdom, proving Rosenberg correct when he said that Ruskin’s great talent was to ‘make great art out of great illness’.<sup>362</sup> His investigations of science, myth, and wisdom opened new approaches to considering nature and, importantly, the role of the laws of change and decay.

Wheeler and Rosenberg’s work participates in a long tradition of engaging with wisdom and myth in Ruskin scholarship, especially from Hayman (1978), Fitch (1982), Birch (1988, 2001), and Weltman (1997, 1998, 1999).<sup>363</sup> These critiques and surveys are valuable because they unpack the origins, relationships, and influences of myth, mythography, and mythopoesis on Ruskin, bringing cohesion to his increasingly fragmented mythic-ism. However, these expository efforts say more about myth than they do about wisdom, such as Hayman, Birch, and Fitch’s emphasis on mythographic

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<sup>359</sup> Rosenberg, pp. 162-6.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>361</sup> Hewison (2009) continues this argument and interpretation in *Ruskin on Venice*.

<sup>362</sup> Rosenberg, p. 151.

<sup>363</sup> John Hayman, ‘Ruskin’s *The Queen of the Air* and the Appeal of Mythology’, *Philological Quarterly*, 57, no. 1 (Winter 1978), pp. 104-114, Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, ‘Mythic Language and Gender Subversion: The Case of Ruskin’s Athena’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 52, no. 3 (December 1997), pp. 350-371, Sharon Aronofsky Weltman ‘Myth and Gender in Ruskin’s Science’, in *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 153-174, Weltman (1998), Fitch, and Birch (1988).

expression or Weltman's gender studies of Ruskin's mythic symbolism.<sup>364</sup> In Ruskin's thought, the purpose of wisdom in nature is to sanction its operations, purpose, and intent. Wheeler (1999) understands this saying 'in the midst of his comparative study on myth, nature remains God's culture for Ruskin'.<sup>365</sup> However, by not focusing on the application of wisdom in the forms of the earth, Wheeler does not pursue wisdom to these ends, leaving a gap in the knowledge of what role wisdom was meant to play in the natural realm. Ruskin devoted most of his aesthetic theory to examining nature's ends, but he did not consider the means through which they were achieved until he examined the laws of change and decay. To arrive at Ruskin's wisdom of nature, it is necessary to begin with how he understood wisdom in its eternal and practical applications.

#### 4.1.1 Wisdom for Life

Let the pastor of the Alps observe the variations of his mountain winds; let the voyagers send us notes of their changes on the surface of the sea; let the solitary dweller in the American prairie observe the passages of the storms, and the variations of the climate; and each, who alone would have been powerless, will find himself a part of the one mighty Mind,—a ray of light entering into one vast Eye,—a member of a multitudinous Power, contributing to the knowledge, and aiding the efforts, which will be capable of solving the most deeply hidden problems of Nature, penetrating into the most occult causes, and reducing to principle and order the vast multitude of beautiful and wonderful phenomena, by which the wisdom and benevolence of the Supreme Deity regulates the course of the times and the seasons, robes the globe with verdure and fruitfulness, and adapts it to minister to the wants, and contribute to the felicity, of the innumerable tribes of animated existence.

(*Works*, 1:210)

This closing statement in 'Remarks on the Present State of Meteorological Science' (1839) was published when Ruskin was twenty and demonstrates his natural-theological view of the organization of nature and the role of wisdom in its order. It speaks of supernatural governance and humanity's role in discovering, understanding, and celebrating its glorious systematization. Even at an early age, he is keen to demonstrate wisdom's various levels, and the hierarchy derived from the theoretical to practical application of wisdom. Ruskin was eager to define the Christian version of wisdom, how it

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<sup>364</sup> Birch explores the origins of Ruskin's fascination with myth and how it influenced his symbolic thinking, an aspect Fitch explored in *The Poison Sky*. Weltman's interest in Ruskin's mythic endeavours stems from an interest in connecting the study of myth and gender studies. See Fitch, Birch (1988, 2001), and Weltman (1997, 1998).

<sup>365</sup> Wheeler (1999), p. 194.

is evident in the world, and how it informs human action. He investigates these three incarnations of wisdom, focusing on their different aspects at different times in his life. His purpose was to edify and educate but also to correct the series of wrongs in Victorian culture. Despite the abundance of wisdom in nature's forms and forces, there is a frightening lack of wisdom in human thinking and action that Ruskin felt needed to be addressed.

Any discussion of Ruskin's wisdom begins with its eternal source: the Eternal Sophia, the Power of God and the Wisdom of God (*Works*, 33:115), or in Greek metaphysics, Aristotle's 'Unmoved Mover'.<sup>366</sup> For Ruskin, eternal wisdom is instantiated in the Godhead, a delineation he derives predominantly from the books of Solomon and Proverbs. Wisdom is a condition or presence of the divine; God does not possess wisdom as a separate trait—God is wise incarnate. All wisdom emanates from the Deity, 'for the Lord gives wisdom'.<sup>367</sup> God as wisdom is a perfect virtue and a timeless truth, a trait of excellence God exemplifies. As a virtue and a concept, eternal wisdom stands distinct from its application. However, wisdom is destined for the world. By wisdom, God creates Wisdom herself, a hypostatized instance of the *ousia* of wisdom, declared in Proverbs: 'The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts long ago'.<sup>368</sup> When called to act, eternal wisdom underlies all intention and phenomena: it creates *ex nihilo*, makes the laws, and orders the universe:

[S]he knows the things of old, and infers the things to come; she understands turns of speech and the solutions to riddles; she has foreknowledge of signs and wonders and of the outcome of seasons and times.<sup>369</sup>

Once in the world, wisdom becomes an expression of natural order and counsels action and thought, but as Ruskin notes, any action draws guidance from the eternal virtue set by the Deity, as 'God is the highest wisdom' (*Works*, 33:453). Holy wisdom, *sancta sapientia*, is Bible-based, Christ-centred, and Spirit-led; it leads to glorifying God and is reflective of the ultimate truth. Wisdom is one of the ways in which God acts, as Ruskin pairs wisdom with truth, benevolence, love, righteousness, kindness, and beauty, revealing an association with Christian characteristics drawn from the sapiential books of the Old Testament:

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<sup>366</sup> Aristotle, 'Metaphysics', in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols, ed. by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), II, pp. 1552-1728, Book XII, vii, 25-6, p. 1694.

<sup>367</sup> Proverbs, 2.6.

<sup>368</sup> Proverbs, 8.22.

<sup>369</sup> Wisdom, 8.8.

Proverbs, Psalms, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Book of Wisdom, and Wisdom of Sirach as well as the wisdom proclamations in Luke and Matthew in the New Testament.<sup>370</sup>

Opposed to the eternal wisdom from above, humanity practices wisdom in the world. Ruskin employs a multitude of different wisdom adjectives—such as earthly, worldly, human, and household—that allude to the practical application of wisdom in the terrestrial and proprietary affairs of humanity. These are the dominant and recurring themes of prudence and phronesis evident in his writing, and stem from a Christian and pagan heritage and, while similar, have a hierarchical distinction. Ruskin derives much of this structure from several Greek sources, notably Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, which prescribes, in simple terms, that humanity has a basic purpose or role that it must fulfil (*ergon*).<sup>371</sup> That purpose is realized in how we think and contemplate (*theoria*),<sup>372</sup> act (*praxis*),<sup>373</sup> and make (*poiesis*).<sup>374</sup> These efforts are directed towards a life of purpose (*eudaimonia*).<sup>375</sup> We live our best lives per our intended purpose through practical wisdom

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<sup>370</sup> Ruskin often pairs wisdom with other virtues expressive of the Godhead across the spectrum of his works. In Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*, he pairs wisdom and truth (*Works*, 4:120) and the ‘wisdom and benevolence of the Supreme Deity’ orders the world (*Works*, 1:210). Wisdom is joined with love as he writes about the making of the hills of the world (*Works*, 6:117). The wisdom and righteousness of God (*Works*, 7:418) are combined with the ‘supreme wisdom and kindness’ in designing nature and the world (*Works*, 6:177, 6:208), as wisdom is evident in the workings of natural laws (*Works*, 6:385). As a sign of goodness in the world, Ruskin also emphasizes ‘the beauty and wisdom of the Divine working’ (*Works*, 6:416).

<sup>371</sup> Ergon, (ἔργον) is translated as function or task of a thing. It is its essence and unique to that thing. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explores how individuals can live a virtuous and fulfilling life by understanding and fulfilling their ergon as rational beings. He emphasizes the importance of cultivating virtues such as courage, temperance, and justice, which enable individuals to fulfil their ergon and achieve eudaimonia.

<sup>372</sup> Theoria (θεωρία) is introduced in Book 10 of *Nicomachean Ethics* and is considered contemplative thought and the highest form of eudaimonia. Roochnik notes that Aristotle never defines what theoria means, but it is a continuous activity and end in itself: theoria is pursued for its own sake. See David Roochnik, ‘What is Theoria? *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 10.7-8’, in *Classical Philology*, 104, no. 1 (January 2009), 69-82 (p. 70). In developing his Theoretic Faculty in Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin distinguishes his moral theoria from Aristotle’s intellectual pleasures (*Works*, 4:43-4).

<sup>373</sup> Praxis (πράξις) refers to practical action or activity, particularly moral action or ethical conduct. It encompasses the notion of putting moral principles into practice through deliberate action. Praxis is contrasted with poiesis, which refers to productive or creative activity, and theoria, which refers to contemplation or theoretical knowledge. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle extensively discusses the concept of praxis in the context of ethics and moral philosophy.

<sup>374</sup> Poiesis (ποίησις) means to make or create something. In the creative process, the expertise needed to achieve a creative outcome falls under the purview of techne (τέχνη), essentially the knowledge and skill of the craftsmen to elicit the desired end result. Poiesis and praxis illustrate the different aspects of human activity and purpose, where praxis is linked to living a virtuous life and poiesis is about harnessing human creativity and skill to transform the world. Book 6 of *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>375</sup> Eudaimonia (εὐδαιμονία) is often translated as ‘happiness’ or ‘flourishing’, but it is best understood as the highest good or ultimate goal of human life—a life lived to the highest virtue. Aristotle argues that reason is humanity’s function (ergon) and thus a good life is one lived rationally. The highest form of eudaimonia is a contemplative life (theoria).

(*phronesis*).<sup>376</sup> Finding the right balance, or middle ground, between excess and deficiency is a moral and intellectual virtue that determines a person's character. Ruskin believes humanity has a purpose and a correct way to live, but it is not purely Hellenic.

Ruskin admonished Aristotle's virtue ethics as 'shallow quibbles' and sought to amend this Peripatetic philosophy with Christian theology (*Works*, 6:484). Christian prudence is largely derived from the sapiential books mentioned above. These are informed by Ruskin's Evangelical education and, as Wheeler (1999) and Hewison (2009) note, the formative Evangelical and Calvinist sermons by Revds Andrews, Dale, Melvill, Taylor, and particularly Richard Hooker, and later dialogues with Charles H. Spurgeon.<sup>377</sup> Despite his apprehension about Archaic and Classical models, the Aristotelean framework helps Ruskin categorize his conception of practical wisdom. The biggest difference is the purpose of life. Aristotle saw a meaningful life (*eudaimonia*) as ending in a retreat into intellectual and abstract reflection (*theoria*), saying, "such a life is superior to one that is simply human, because someone lives thus, not in so far as he is a human being, but in so far as there is some divine element within him".<sup>378</sup> *Eudaimonia* is about action, not results: 'It is doing well, not the results of doing well; it is the life, not the rewards of a life'.<sup>379</sup> Aristotle points towards the divine inclinations of a contemplative life but does not express the nature of that divinity; Ruskin adds that description in his own position. As discussed in earlier chapters, Ruskin sees humanity's purpose as to serve and glorify God through our thoughts, actions, and works. This is important to Ruskin because his interest in creation and making as a form of worship dominated much of his early aesthetic thinking. His later social concerns increasingly focussed on thinking and acting—fulfilling humanity's purpose and intention and living a life of devotional purpose. In his writings on political economy and social critiques, Ruskin expounds a fuller definition of his practical wisdom.

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<sup>376</sup> As defined by Aristotle, *phronesis* (φρόνησις) is practical wisdom or a critical intellectual virtue of knowing how to act in each situation and having the moral foresight to do it correctly. It is distinct from theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) in that it concerns human affairs and actions rather than abstract truths. Aristotle considers *phronesis* as essential for achieving an *eudaimon* life.

<sup>377</sup> Revd Dr Edward Andrews (Wheeler 1999, p. 5); Revd Thomas Dale (Wheeler 1999, p. 12); Henry Melvill (Wheeler 1999, p. 14); Jeremy Taylor and Richard Hooker (Wheeler 1999, pp. 17-8, p. 53); Revd Thomas Scott (Wheeler 1999, p. 18); Revd Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) (Hewison 2009, p. 250). Andrews and Melvill are mentioned in Chapter 1, Section 1.1, along with Ryle.

<sup>378</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and ed. by R. Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Book X, vii 1177b, p. 196.

<sup>379</sup> J.L. Ackrill, 'Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*' in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 15-33 (p. 24).

#### 4.1.2 Practical Wisdom in Political Economy

Ruskin would turn to practical wisdom for his first critique of society's ills, producing ten years of dedicated political economy writings from 1857 to 1867. He drew on sources of the art of household, estate, and city management derived from Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Cicero, and Horace<sup>380</sup> and contemporary figures such as Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) and Matthew Arnold (1822-1888).<sup>381</sup> These were supplemented by critiques of the positions of Adam Smith (1723-1790), David Ricardo (1772-1823), and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).<sup>382</sup> Prior to these writings, fragments of political and prudential unease appear in *Modern Painters*, *Seven Lamps*, and *Stones* concerning the loss of beauty, craftsmanship, and spiritual depth in the economies of art and architecture. Hewison (2009) notes that 'The Nature of Gothic' (1853) is where Ruskin's first foray into social criticism began.<sup>383</sup> However, the lectures and essays that followed the final volume of *Stones* denounced Victorian economic and political institutions and practices. They are critiques of capitalism and industrialization and appeals for social and economic reform, characteristically emphasizing either directly or indirectly the role of art in society. Ruskin argues for a more humane and moral approach to economics, fair wages, equitable wealth distribution, and meaningful labour's importance.

Amid his adjurations, Ruskin offered a hopeful vision of society that prioritized its collective well-being over individual profit. Shrimpton (2015) notes that while the tone of these books is often disparaging, they also 'suggest an alternative to the industrialism, capitalism, and urbanisation of modern society'.<sup>384</sup> Ruskin may have become a harsh critic pointing out the lack of wisdom in collective society, but he is also a visionary and ready to offer solutions to society's quagmires. Others, such as MacDonald, Shrimpton, Lee, and Landow, have written convincingly about the various aspects of Ruskin's social criticism,

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<sup>380</sup> Ruskin lists Plato's *Laws* and *Republic* and Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, as well as Cicero and Horace as influences in *Unto This Last* and *Munera Pulveris* as contributing to his definition of wealth and labour. See *Works*, 17:18, 17:184.

<sup>381</sup> Alan Lee and George Landow identify Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold along with Ruskin as significant critics and wisdom-givers of Victorian society. See Alan Lee, 'Ruskin and Political Economy: *Unto this Last*', in *New Approaches to Ruskin: Thirteen Essays*, ed. by Robert Hewison (London: Routledge & Kagan Paul, 1981), pp. 68-88 and George P. Landow, 'Ruskin as Victorian Sage: The Example of "Traffic"', in *New Approaches to Ruskin: Thirteen Essays*, ed. by Robert Hewison (London: Routledge & Kagan Paul, 1981), pp. 89-110.

<sup>382</sup> MacDonald identifies Smith, Ricardo, and Mill as subjects for criticism for their 'orthodox political economy'. See MacDonald (2015), p. 50.

<sup>383</sup> Hewison (2009), p. 223.

<sup>384</sup> Shrimpton, p. 117.

and these need not be recounted here.<sup>385</sup> Instead, in advancing my argument, I analyze the state of a ‘natural phronesis’, which is evident in Ruskin’s wisdom literature and directed at the laws of nature, one derived from his spiritual and practical convictions. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, wisdom is found at various levels and contexts in the human, natural, and supernatural arenas. Their intersectionality is challenging to prioritize, but their interrelatedness speaks to consistent governance. As Ruskin develops a more personalized version of wisdom in his mythological writings in *Ethics* and *Queen*, he descends from an eternal position towards an active agent in nature, similar in character to the prudential actions he advocated for humanity. The forces of nature choose to behave in particular ways and serve as examples for human action. What is different is that wisdom knowledge is no longer the domain of an abstract maxim or beatitude but becomes concrete examples of right action conducted nobly by the forces of nature and evident in the forms of the world. Ruskin states, ‘Wisdom can only be demonstrated in its ends, and goodness only perceived in its motives’ (*Works*, 6:134n). To this end, humanity has a reference to true wisdom through nature. As he has continually promoted, the natural world produces examples—corporeal aphorisms—of wisdom in action.

A hierarchical distinction between eternal and practical wisdom exists. Aristotle warns, ‘It is absurd to think that Political Science or Prudence is the loftiest kind of knowledge, inasmuch as man is not the highest thing in the world’.<sup>386</sup> In 1 Corinthians, Paul says that ‘the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God’.<sup>387</sup> Ruskin echoes this, carefully noting that not all forms of wisdom are the same and that even with sculptures of the Ducal Palace, one should not confuse prudential wisdom with heavenly wisdom (*Works*, 10:371, 10:379). This tiered positioning is important in distinguishing his types of wisdom. In *Unto This Last* (1862), Ruskin distinguishes between House-law (*Oikonomia*) and Star-law (*Astronomia*), affirming the difference between the two realms in which wisdom is applied (*Works*, 17:19). The appeal to the virtue of eternal wisdom exists at all levels from the separation of Heaven and Earth to the carving architectural ornament. Undoubtedly, supernatural wisdom will always reign supreme, but it is unknowable. God guarantees goodness, but if wisdom is only knowable in its ends, one must study its application. In

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<sup>385</sup> This period of Ruskin’s social criticism is covered at length by the following authors: MacDonald (2015, 2018), Shrimpton, Lee, and Landow (1981).

<sup>386</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), Book VI, vii 3, p. 343.

<sup>387</sup> 1 Corinthians, 3.19.

corollary, Ruskin is principally concerned with the tangible wisdom in nature and human affairs—a personified and knowable form of wisdom he explores in his critiques of political economy and mythopoeic endeavours.

### 4.1.3 Natural Phronesis

Only it is ordained that, for our encouragement, every step we make in the more exalted range of science adds something also to its practical applicabilities; that all the great phenomena of nature, the knowledge of which is desired by the angels only, by us partly, as it reveals to farther vision the being and the glory of Him in whom they rejoice, and we live, dispense yet such kind influences, and so much of material blessing, as to be joyfully felt by all inferior creatures, and to be desired by them with such single desire as the imperfection of their nature may admit.

(*Works*, 4:34)

As the ‘Painter of Nature’, Turner was Ruskin’s artist par excellence because he understood it (*Works*, 3:609). It was not because he rendered nature in detail but because he recognized the moral and spiritual imperatives evident in landscape, mountains, storms and clouds—essentially, nature’s forms and forces. The things of nature were more than objects to be copied. As I argue in the previous chapter, Ruskin became increasingly interested in how the forms of nature were assembled and how the forces of nature worked. The role of the divine hand in the creation and operation of the world was self-evident in its beauty and benefit to humankind. In Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin often speaks of the earth’s forms as having been made by a divine demiurge, and how the forces of nature fulfil God’s will, as ‘God will not make anything an object of life to His creatures which does not point to, or partake of, Himself’ (*Works*, 4:46). In these instances of divine poiesis, Ruskin refers to the praxis of wisdom. In the assembly of the world, it is wisdom that acts; it is wisdom that creates. Increasingly in Ruskin’s later writings, beginning with Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* and extending to the science books *Love’s Meinie*, *Deucalion*, and *Proserpina* and the mythological books *Ethics* and *Queen* of the 1870s, the forces of wisdom in nature become personified, acting according to its own intentions, as a practical wisdom—a natural phronesis.

There is a crucial difference between human and natural phronesis. As discussed above, human phronesis is a guide for deciding how to act. The phronesis of nature is first a record of past action; it has been enacted during Creation, with the works of nature as noble evidence of virtuous decisions and actions. In a sense, the works of nature are historically similar to the accounts of Solomon in Scripture: examples of wise and noble past decisions. However, a more humanizing role for wisdom exists where the phronesis of



nature is still in action through the forces of nature and the agents of change. They continue to act and serve as a real-time example of proper conduct, executing the divine will through law. Ruskin proclaimed: ‘the highest wisdom is found in the laws of nature’ (*Works*, 8:71). To this point, natural phronesis includes past and current action.

To this end, wisdom in action applies to the process of decay. If decay is part of the law of change in nature, it is an extension of the divine will. Thus, decay would execute a particular function in achieving a desired end, in this case, Ruskin’s leading lines in nature and the beauty of the ‘perfect prime’ of the earth. Decay produces the leading lines which stoke the perception of beauty in the human mind, thus fulfilling humanity’s covenant with God to recognize and celebrate His glory. In Aristotelean terms, decay’s purpose, or *ergon*, is to achieve the idealized beautiful state of nature, thus realizing the ‘perfect prime’ of the earth’s forms. The virtuous decision to erode is a form of *praxis* that results in beautiful natural forms, a *poiesis* of creation, thus fulfilling decay’s purpose—its eudaimonic life. This phronetic process makes more sense once Ruskin’s growing allusion to nature ‘making decisions’ becomes more evident in his thoughts. Increasingly, nature is alluded to acting of its own volition. Wisdom in nature, or nature as wisdom, acts as one entity.

This reading of Ruskin’s nature amalgamates his initial observations of aged architecture and alpine terrain. The questions concerning material form led to an explication of the temperament of decay, where the wisdom of nature arises as a governing force in the erosion of buildings and mountains. His wisdom of nature is evident in what nature does, in terms of what it makes or has made, as an artifact or how it goes about doing so. To this end, Ruskin uses nature in three distinct forms: nature as the designation for earthly form and order, nature as an inherent or descriptive characteristic of a worldly phenomenon, and nature as an active force with agency and personality. Volumes 1 and 2 of *Modern Painters* and corollary epistemic explorations in *Seven Lamps* and the three volumes of *Stones*, provided the basis for Ruskin’s understanding of phenomenal nature. As I argue in earlier chapters, nature, for Ruskin, was the existent natural world of Creation—its first meaning and first reference. His argument for landscape painters and architectural craftsmen was that to render nature, one had to know nature. This existed as knowledge of external phenomena and internal organization, described as the laws, facts, truths, and

principles of nature.<sup>388</sup> Ruskin also uses the word nature to describe the inherent characteristics of phenomena. These are descriptions of things in existence and demonstrative of organization and order. Nature as the natural world is also Nature as a system. In *The Stratified Alps of Savoy* (1863), *On Banded and Brecciated Concretions* (1867), *Deucalion*, and *The Distinctions of Form in Silica* (1884), Ruskin is writing about the nature of rock formations, their inherent formal or compositional characteristics: ‘The nature and cause of glacier movement’ (*Works*, 26:134), or ‘a curve of the nature of a parabola’ (*Works*, 26:142), or ‘the nature of metallic veins’ (*Works*, 26:176), or ‘knowledge of the nature of the soils’ (*Works*, 26:198), or ‘the nature of cleavage planes’ (*Works*, 26:354), or ‘the nature of common grey clay slate’ (*Works*, 26:390). The diversity of this application is pervasive, as ‘Nature is so various in her operations’ (*Works*, 26:176). These statements allude to the inherent character of worldly phenomena from which order and understanding are drawn.

Ruskin’s allusions to phenomenal nature were not restricted to landscape. In *Proserpina*, Ruskin uses nature to infer the inherent formal or compositional characteristics of plants, such as the ‘nature of the leaf and flower’ (*Works*, 25:218), as well as their moral characteristics, such as nature’s ‘rudeness and insensitiveness’ (*Works*, 25:288). There are similar instances in *Love’s Meinie*, when describing a ‘creature’s nature’ (*Works*, 25:74). When nature has agency, it is capitalized. For example, when discussing a hidden branch, Ruskin states that ‘Nature never meant you to see it so’, revealing an intention directed at human perception (*Works*, 25:302) or taste, where ‘the seed is prepared in many cases for the delight of [humanity’s] eyes, and the pleasure of [humanity’s] palate, by Nature herself’ (*Works*, 25:372-3). Nature as an agent is portrayed as actively making its own peculiar decisions or acting on a whim. In shaping plants into certain forms, Ruskin says, ‘Nature always has her ins and outs’ (*Works*, 25:352), and with the shape of a rose’s calyx, ‘we find Nature amusing herself’ (*Works*, 25:376). In Lecture X of Volume 2, titled ‘Of Caprice in Flowers’—reminiscent of his Lecture VII in *Ethics* titled the ‘Crystal Caprice’—Nature controls the design of flowers: ‘the whole aim of Nature in it is to give the flower an infinite tenderness’ (*Works*, 25:529). This is similar to Ruskin’s approach to leading lines,

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<sup>388</sup> Throughout all volumes of *Modern Painters*, *Seven Lamps*, and *Stones*, Ruskin continually refers to these traits of nature. Early mention of them appears in *Poetry* and his early geological papers, but they become systematized in the aesthetic theory of *Modern Painters* and extended into the nature arguments in *Seven Lamps* and *Stones*. Recounting all references to nature is unfeasible, but some early instances from Volume 1 of *Modern Painters* include: ‘the laws of nature’ (*Works*, 3:38), ‘facts of nature’ (*Works*, 3:48, 104), the ‘truths of nature’ cover several chapters in Volume 1 (*Works*, 3:135), and ‘nature’s general principles’ (*Works*, 3:155).

where Nature actively guides material into a certain form or, like the flower, a certain feeling.<sup>389</sup>

In Ruskin's thinking, Nature is increasingly seen as making singular decisions in the world. In Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin speaks of nature's will, saying that 'if Nature meant you to be anything else, she will force you to it' (*Works*, 6:29). He alludes to nature's agency and individuality, saying 'what strange and subtle composition is prepared to his hand by Nature, wherever she is left to herself' (*Works*, 6:30), and also in speaking of clouds, '[t]hat is Nature's will in the matter; and whatever we may theoretically determine to be expedient or beautiful, she has long ago determined what shall be' (*Works*, 6:75). Ruskin teases of Nature's agency in Volume 1 in such statements as 'Nature would have given...' or 'Nature would have let you see...' (*Works*, 3:331). Nature is deciding; Nature is allowing. Nature's intentions are not self-referential but directed externally by engaging human perception. Emphasis on these semantic distinctions might appear overly pedantic but point towards a consistent understanding of nature in Ruskin's thinking evident in these statements.

The exploration of nature's facets continued in Ruskin's natural science books, *Love's Meinie*, *Deucalion*, and *Proserpina*, which were published sporadically between the mid-1870s to the mid-1880s.<sup>390</sup> These works reflect what Rosenberg says is 'the play of a brilliant but unbalanced mind'.<sup>391</sup> Hewison (1976) notes that his ornithology, geology, and botany writings attempt a 're-ordering of knowledge designed to show the connections between things' and intended as 'grammars' for the schools of the Guild of St George.<sup>392</sup> Birch (1981) notes these grammars dealt more with 'the principles of a moral vision than with the practice of observational science'.<sup>393</sup> Fitch notes the symbolic importance of these works as an 'antiscientific effort to read and reclassify natural forms as living myths' and his reliance on external form rather than internal structure.<sup>394</sup> Ruskin's approach to science and nature had intentions of unifying them under one revelatory enterprise but also defending them against what he saw as the encroachment of a positivistic and dehumanizing modern science. Wheeler (1999) notes the larger move by Ruskin to address

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<sup>389</sup> See Chapter 3 for my discussion on the leading lines of nature.

<sup>390</sup> *Deucalion* was published in parts from 1875 to 1883, *Proserpina* published in parts from 1875 to 1886, and *Love's Meinie* written between 1873 and 1881.

<sup>391</sup> Rosenberg, p. 180.

<sup>392</sup> Hewison (1975), p. 177.

<sup>393</sup> Birch, (1981), pp. 142-3.

<sup>394</sup> Fitch, p. 601.

current scientific practices, saying ‘[w]hereas the wisdom tradition which Ruskin sought to revive for the nineteenth century celebrated the harmony and coherence of creation; modern science seemed to be based upon separation and division’.<sup>395</sup>

Confronted with the perceived issues of social failing and renegade science and the real issues of his mental and romantic distress, Ruskin advocates for practical thinking and solutions for meaningful living. A phronetic approach allowed him to focus on the world’s smaller, intimate, terrestrial things. In parallel with his critical investigations of practical wisdom in political economy, Ruskin is developing a personified and active Nature in his creative works. Ruskin’s linking of wisdom to nature continues his argument that nature is a source of moral guidance for humanity. However, rather than relying on inert natural examples, Ruskin is pointing toward active ones as a form of continued counsel. A natural phronesis is a guide dog for a blind humanity: leading the way through the world with clear sight and practical knowledge.

## 4.2 Ruskin’s Science: A Natural Phronesis

But are you sure that Aristotle’s Phronesis is indeed the right sort of Phronesis?

(*Works*, 22:141)

Ruskin didn’t contemplate a natural phronesis on a whim; the move towards a natural phronesis is a reaction to the state of natural science in the nineteenth century. His Nature was under siege by what he perceived as a life-less and dispassionate science, disrupting what Fitch calls Ruskin’s ‘organic model’ of nature.<sup>396</sup> Fitch makes the organic model the centrepiece of Ruskin’s view of nature, stating that ‘[o]rganic form, emphasizing purposive self-unification of parts, is simply the controlling metaphor in Ruskin’s work’.<sup>397</sup> The organic model is animated by a vital life-energy dependent on an ordering deity, or what Ruskin calls the laws of Life and Help. He protested the prevailing scientific initiatives of the later nineteenth century towards an instrumental conception of the universe, one in which human experience or divine oversight played no role. In response, Ruskin defended his earlier assumptions of a numinous nature put in place for humanity

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<sup>395</sup> Wheeler (1999), p. 204.

<sup>396</sup> Fitch, p. 518.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*

by a benevolent deity by challenging the dictums of a quantified nature. The tenets of his natural phronesis emerge from this remonstration.

#### 4.2.1 Life, Law, and Help

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.

(*Works*, 7:206)

Life is the vital energy evident in all natural things that do what they are supposed to do. There is a cross-dialogue throughout *Modern Painters* exploring this concept. In Volume 2, Ruskin defines the ‘vital energy’ evident in natural phenomena that humanity intuits with moral satisfaction and pleasure as ‘vital beauty’ (*Works*, 4:146). For example, human awareness of a plant’s pleasantness is ‘signs of life and strength in the plant’ (*Works*, 4:151), and humanity’s ability to recognize it confirms its presence. Ruskin notes that all parts of a plant, its leaves and stalks, perform an appointed function in defining the plant and that ‘the amount of pleasure we receive is in exact proportion to the appearance of vigour and sensibility in the plant’ (*Works*, 4:151). Such experiences are mutually beneficial: ‘the plant is not living for itself alone, that its life is one of benefaction, that it gives as well as receives’ (*Works*, 4:151). This is the essence of Ruskin’s law of help. In Volume 5, and still talking about plants, Ruskin states that ‘the power which causes the several portions of the plant to help each other, we call life’ (*Works*, 7:205). Ruskin says that:

A pure or holy state of anything, therefore, is that in which all its parts are helpful and consistent. They may or may not be homogenous. 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”.

(*Works*, 7:207)

Essentially, aligning a phenomenon’s collective aspects in fulfilling its appointed function is the barometer of a noble or holy life.

In Volume 5 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin highlights his Law of Help, where the small things all contribute to the whole. Fitch states the law of help is central to Ruskin’s organic model of nature, where ‘organic form is the model of life for Ruskin, in nature, in art, and

in society' and pervasive across his thinking.<sup>398</sup> He continues, summarizing that '[l]ife is form, not force; and its essential law, help, is holy'.<sup>399</sup> Fitch's understanding of force in this context refers to the mechanistic aspect of science devoid of life energy. Up to this point in my argument, I have used the term 'force' when considering the forms and forces of nature as part of the organic model that is imbued with the life needed for every divine element. In light of nineteenth-century scientific thinking and as Ruskin moves into his critiques of science, the distinction is essential.

Ruskin returns to the topic of life in his political writings and his science books of the 1870s. In Chapter 3 of *Ethics*, 'The Crystal Life', Ruskin discusses what it means to be alive. Life is associated with a given form: 'I do not think we should use the word "life" of any energy which does not belong to a given form' (*Works*, 22:238). In terms of change and decay, Ruskin adds 'the mode of energy in a living thing implies a continual change in its elements; and a period for its end. So you may define life by its attached negative, death; and still more by its attached positive, birth' (*Works*, 22:239). This is one of the first instances where Ruskin speaks of life outside of an abstract or past-tense condition; he speaks of life in active and mortal terms, alluding to the process of change in the material world vis-à-vis decay. Ruskin sees life captured in a landscape painting or decorative moulding (Figure 27) or the life exhibited in the form of a petal, a leaf, or a branch, but these are static or potential conditions. Instead, he speaks of life as a process: an energy and law of change enacted. The difference is in action between a force that sculpted and a force that is sculpting.

The presence of life and the law of help that Ruskin advocated were challenged by the advancements in scientific thinking in the second half of the nineteenth century. Ruskin fretted that nature devoid of life and help was mechanistic and that such instrumental scientific study could never lead to the revelatory moral truths encoded in the world. To him, science was progressing in the wrong direction: it moved toward self-referential study and hermetic meaning, where scientists directed their efforts to 'investigating, classing, and describing facts with unwearied industry' (*Works*, 22:127). He thought that scientists such as Darwin, Huxley, and Tyndall, focussed on undignified knowledge, choosing to exercise moria, or folly, rather than sophia, or eternal

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<sup>398</sup> Fitch, p. 49.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 27: Ruskin, John. 'Window in the Ca' Foscari, Venice', 1845. Pencil, pen and ink, watercolour. King's College, Cambridge.

wisdom.<sup>400</sup> Ruskin took it upon himself to show how this modern scientific temper missed the point of nature and humanity's role in understanding it. As modern scientists refined their explanation of the world, so did Ruskin by invoking humanistic and mythic narratives that had previously been outside of his restrictive Evangelical domain. Before I engage with his natural phronesis, Ruskin's problems with the Victorian scientific system requires analysis, specifically the issues of teleology and inductive reasoning.

#### 4.2.2 God in a Bottle

[I]n general, the reader may take it for a first principle, both in science and literature, that the feeblest myth is better than the strongest theory; the one recording a natural impression on the imaginations of great men, and of unpretending multitudes; the other, an unnatural exertion of the wits of little men, and half-wits of impertinent multitudes.

(*Works*, 22:99)

Written in 1875 in the Introduction to *Deucalion*, his discursive study of the 'Lapse of Waves and Life of Stones' (*Works*, 22:93), Ruskin establishes his position relative to modern science. His summation of scientific thinking is simple, and at times overly simplistic; however, the circumstances surrounding science were anything but forthright. By the end of the nineteenth century, scientific practice was becoming increasingly regimented, but at the dawn of the century, science was hardly a unified discipline. What is understood today as a series of disciplines, each with their respective domains governed by a singular methodological principle, was by comparison, as Turner (1978) and Winter (1997) note, a rabble of topic areas descended from natural philosophy.<sup>401</sup> Morus (2007) identifies how disciplinary debates and territorial squabbles played out in learned societies, literary quarterly journals, and gentlemen's clubs across Britain, and any perceived scientific coherence resulted from, more often than not, the promotion and popularization of ambitious individual agendas rather than professional colloquy.<sup>402</sup> To be clear,

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<sup>400</sup> In *The Eagle's Nest*, Ruskin discusses the wisdom and folly in science and the pursuit of undignified knowledge in Lecture II: 'Of Wisdom and Folly in Science' and Lecture III: 'Wise Art and Wise Science'. Despite being a series of lectures on art, Ruskin methodically explains how science is beneficial to artistic thinking and production but also its flaws as a larger system of thought. See *Works*, 22:137-149, 22:150-167.

<sup>401</sup> Frank M. Turner, 'The Victorian Conflict between Science and Religion: A Professional Dimension' in *Isis*, 69, no. 3 (Sep. 1978), pp. 356-376 (p. 360) and Alison Winter, 'The Construction of Orthodoxies and Heterodoxies in the Early Victorian Life Sciences' in *Victorian Science in Context*, ed. by Bernard Lightman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 24-50.

<sup>402</sup> Iwan Rhys Morus, '(Stop) Talking About Victorian Science' in *Annals of Science*, 64, no. 1 (January 2007), 93-100 (p. 94).



significant advancements were made, but agreement on cohesive methods of investigation often failed to coalesce. Despite the disarray, change came by the middle of the century. Early ‘scientists’ such as Comte, Lyell, Darwin, Faraday and Maxwell, and Lord Kelvin proposed structured investigative and reasoning methods within their respective studies.<sup>403</sup> Philosophical critiques and pragmatic reviews of these processes led some, such as Whewell, John Herschel (1792-1871), and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), to debate the nature of the respective theoretical and empiricist views of inductive reasoning evident in these theories.<sup>404</sup> Whewell and Mill’s discourses were the most prolific. Mill’s induction was a bottom-up process that derived general principles from specific examples, whereas Whewell’s induction relied on a colligation of facts and a consilience of inductions operating under a guiding hypothesis. While each position differed on how general principles and laws were determined, both approaches relied on collecting and analyzing empirical facts and data—qualities that could only be determined from the phenomena directly and not through inference or association.

Whewell endeavoured to think clearly about scientific inquiry and develop an induction method based on Bacon’s earlier models.<sup>405</sup> Whewell was more concerned with how the inductive process was organized and functioned, not the results it produced. Sankey (2008) suggests that this places Whewell’s inductive theory closer to a hypothetico-deductive method, or method of hypothesis, that seeks methods of justification rather than methods of discovery.<sup>406</sup> As Klaver (1997) notes, Whewell was critical of theoretical positions such as Lyell’s uniformitarianism in *The Principles of Geology*, not because of his theory per se but rather how Lyell theorized.<sup>407</sup> Klaver notes that Whewell admittedly

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<sup>403</sup> Auguste Comte (1798-1857) developed his theory of positivism, *a posteriori* reasoning based on logic and reason from sensory experience. Lyell’s uniformitarianism emerged from his geological studies but found resonance with others, such as Darwin. Darwin’s theory of natural evolution derived from his biological studies. Michael Faraday’s and James Clerk Maxwell’s study of electromagnetism brought together two previously disparate forces. Lord Kelvin (1824-1907) developed an absolute temperature scale and helped develop the first and second laws of thermodynamics.

Also, note the term ‘scientist’ coined by Whewell in 1834 but retroactively applied here to indicate their influence, either positively or negatively, on furthering the development of an inductive scientific method. See Whewell’s review of Mary Somerville’s ‘On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences’, from *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 51 (March 1834), 103-132.

<sup>404</sup> Mill’s *A System of Logic* (1843) and Whewell’s *Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* (1840). Others, such as Charles S. Peirce (1834-1914), developed his pragmatism based on Whewell’s inductive method.

<sup>405</sup> Laura J. Snyder, *Reforming Philosophy: A Victorian Debate on Science and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 33.

<sup>406</sup> Howard Sankey, ‘Scientific Method’ in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Science*, ed. by Martin Curd and Stathis Psillos (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 280-290 (p. 283). Whewell’s emphasis on hypothesis as a defining characteristic of inductive methodology is what set his theory apart from Mill’s.

<sup>407</sup> Klaver, p. 134.

learned much about geology from Lyell's work but was critical of Lyell's view of uniformity because it was impeded by his religious predisposition.<sup>408</sup> Whewell was not against theological positions—he was an ordained Anglican priest and the Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy (previously known as the Professorship of Moral Theology or Casuistical Divinity)—but Lyell's mode of thinking could possibly invoke or defer to theological positions that his evidentiary claims did not support.<sup>409</sup> He advocated for a methodology that appeal to the laws of nature and avoids speculation beyond what the methodology could confirm as axiomatically true. For Whewell, Lyell's stumble was a matter of correct reasoning, not religious presupposition.

Some of Whewell's theories on inductive thinking are addressed in Chapter 3, but here, I want to focus on his insistence on removing bias, opinion, and teleology from scientific thinking, an aspect that complicated Ruskin's scientific position.<sup>410</sup> Ruskin actively observed and described the facts of the natural world, except his guarantor of truth was always the Deity. His scientific reasoning was teleological, where his explanation of phenomena serves an already established purpose or outcome. Hull (1995) defined the teleology of natural theology—a position Ruskin very much holds—as 'God so constructed the world that each entity is invested with the tendency to fulfil its own God-given nature'.<sup>411</sup> Systems and agency are shared in naturalist and theist perspectives; only the latter is determined, whereas the former is not. The differences between Ruskin's science and Whewell's induction revolve around teleology and intention.

Ruskin's deductive position extends from a Cartesian and Aristotelian-based scholastic tradition of natural philosophy that depended on metaphysical first principles to order the universe. This position promoted a unified view of Nature, which could be comprehended through the exercise of logic and reason, and as Gascoigne (2003) notes that up to the eighteenth century, 'natural philosophy remained a branch of philosophy along with metaphysics, logic, and moral philosophy'.<sup>412</sup> The rise of Newton's natural philosophy in the eighteenth century, described in his *Principia* (1687), relied less on deductive reasoning and more on mathematics than logic, as he 'abandoned the attempt

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<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>409</sup> Snyder (Winter 2023).

<sup>410</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>411</sup> David L. Hull, 'Teleology', in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 791.

<sup>412</sup> John Gascoigne, 'Ideas of Nature: Natural Philosophy', in *The Cambridge History of Science, Volume 4: Eighteenth-Century Science*, ed. by Roy Porter (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 285-304 (p. 285).

to construct a model of Nature based on philosophically consistent premises'.<sup>413</sup> The proliferation of Newtonian natural philosophy in Britain, and later on continental Europe, moved towards an inductive approach to natural knowledge based on experiment and an increasingly sophisticated use of mathematics.<sup>414</sup> Breaking with the wider body of philosophy and metaphysics, inductive-based inquiries pushed natural philosophy into increasingly positivistic and materialistic positions.

The denial of teleology left Ruskin without divine security; in such a state, nature was coldly mechanistic. In this condition, decay becomes causal—a consequence of a natural force rather than an intentional life force engaged in constructing beautiful outlines. After building an aesthetic argument and numinous worldview on the presence of the divine in nature, it was impossible for him to now think otherwise. Herschel, Whewell, and Mill had been debating scientific method in the 1830s and 1840s, and the dissemination of these ideas in various modes continued in the following decades later through others such as Darwin, Huxley, and Tyndall.<sup>415</sup> The growth of induction and positivism in science pushed theologically based systems such as Ruskin's to the periphery of inductive scientific debate. Ruskin's appeal to Aristotelian ideas of science could be seen as a rush to the security of a deductive metaphysical position of a unified cosmos, and despite being pagan and ill-defined, it still maintained a divine guarantor. His critique of modern science as one of experiment, classification, and material descriptions is aimed at the growing dominance of an inductive Newtonian tradition favouring *causa efficiens* over *causa prima*. No one embodied this approach more than Thomas Henry Huxley, his X Club, and his mission to drive theology from science.<sup>416</sup>

### 4.2.3 Strangled Snakes and Unimportant Things

For among those books accidentally brought together, and recklessly called the "Word of God," the book of Psalms is a very precious one. It is certainly not the "Word of God"; but it is the collected words of very wise and good men, who knew a great many important things which you don't know, and had better make haste to know,—and were ignorant of some quite unimportant things, which Professor

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<sup>413</sup> *Ibid*, p. 288.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid*, p. 303.

<sup>415</sup> Paul R. Thagard, 'Darwin and Whewell' in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 8, Issue 4 (1977), 353-6.

<sup>416</sup> Huxley started a gentlemen's dining club in 1864, comprised of nine men who supported the theories of natural selection and academic liberalism. In addition to Huxley, the members included George Busk, Edward Franklin, Thomas Archer Hirst, Joseph Dalton Hooker, John Lubbock, Herbert Spencer, William Spottiswoode, and John Tyndall. Their shared ethos was a 'devotion to science, pure and free, untrammelled by religious dogmas'. See Stanley, pp. 30-2.

Huxley knows, and thinks himself wiser on that account than any quantity of Psalmists, or Canticle-singers, either.

(*Works*, 27:650-1)

To Ruskin, Thomas Henry Huxley represented everything wrong with modern science. Huxley's compatriot John Tyndall may have received greater public wrath in Ruskin's lectures and letters regarding his glacier debates with Forbes, but it was the scientific position Huxley vehemently promoted that ignited most of Ruskin's condemnation.<sup>417</sup> At first gloss, it is difficult to see where the furore lies. Huxley believed that science should be grounded in empirical evidence and logical reasoning, saying, 'I cannot but think that the foundations of all natural knowledge were laid when the reason of man first came face to face with the facts of Nature'.<sup>418</sup> Ruskin adhered to a similar position, saying, 'I describe facts or semblances, not operations' (*Works*, 6:182) and 'I never theorize, I give you the facts only' (*Works*, 26:109). But the similarities ended there. For Ruskin, facts pointed towards divine intention, signalled when he slips into conjecture when confronted with a mountain: 'I can hardly conceive any one standing face to face with one of these towers of central rock, and yet not also asking himself, Is this indeed the actual first work of the Divine Master on which I gaze?' (*Works*, 6:209). Huxley abhorred such teleological entitlements, and in the vein of Whewell, emphasized the importance of scepticism, objectiveness, and the willingness to revise one's understanding based on new evidence rather than perpetuate religious proselytization. He saw science as a systematic way to acquire knowledge, which stood in contrast to knowledge derived from tradition or religious authority, saying, 'the man of science has learned to believe in justification, not by faith, but by verification'.<sup>419</sup>

As an advocate for scientific naturalism and the scientific method, Huxley was vocal and divisive. The debate between natural theology and the theology of nature splintered scientific investigation, but both sides still believed in the role of the divine in the laws of nature; Huxley sought to split it up completely by removing the theistic element altogether. His approach, scientific naturalism, opposed theistic naturalism (or theistic

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<sup>417</sup> Lacy Gully calls Huxley one of 'Ruskin's enemies in the scientific community' because of Huxley's agnosticism and specifically because he and Tyndall attacked Forbes' glacial theory, which Ruskin angrily defended. See Lacy Gully, p. 167.

<sup>418</sup> Thomas Henry Huxley, *Collected Essays, Vol. I: Methods and Results* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1893), p. 32.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

science) and attracted a cadre of dedicated and tenacious advocates.<sup>420</sup> A self-taught biologist and anthropologist, Huxley called for scientific practice devoid of religious speculation and theological oversight. His arguments are equally critical of the politics of science as they are of the methods of science. Interestingly, both theistic naturalism and scientific naturalism used the same terminology, concepts, and methodologies when describing and explaining the physical universe; it was their disagreement on teleology and final causes that defined an important aspect of the schism.<sup>421</sup>

The question of teleology is important because of the shared interest between theistic and scientific naturalism in the concept of uniformity. Uniformity is the invariability and regularity of nature,<sup>422</sup> and as Stanley points out, the uniformity of nature is a set of inviolable rules applied to all things in all circumstances.<sup>423</sup> Building on David Hume's proposal that the laws of physics do not change, nineteenth-century deists such as Herschel, Whewell, Lyell, Chambers, and Maxwell believed that the universe was governed by uninterrupted laws put in place by the divine mind.<sup>424</sup> Conversely, scientific naturalists, such as Huxley, Tyndall, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and to a lesser extent by association rather than proclamation, Darwin, believed that the uniformity of nature proved that the universe could exist without the presence of a divine mind. Both sides claimed the principle of uniformity as essential for their scientific practice, and both criticized each other for the misuse of the principle.<sup>425</sup> However, the dividing line between method and belief was not always clear. In *Principles of Geology*, Lyell argues for gradual change of the earth's forms by referring to the existing natural forces in action today

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<sup>420</sup> Turner adheres to the description 'scientific naturalism' to refer to Huxley's group (pp. 10-11). 'Naturalism' as a topic garnered interest and speculation, producing a variety of interpretations and definitions (Turner, pp. 15-16). See Frank M. Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>421</sup> This position is evident in the commentaries on Victorian science, religion and theology by DeWitt, Gillispie, Harrison, Klaver, Laudan, Snyder (2006), Stanley (2013), and Turner (1974, 1978).

<sup>422</sup> *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. 'Uniformity of nature', accessed June 20, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/uniformity%20of%20nature>.

<sup>423</sup> Stanley, p. 34.

<sup>424</sup> In Section IV an V of his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), David Hume (1711-1776) investigates the basis for factual reasoning and the skepticism for inductive reasoning by appealing to observable 'matters of fact' and the consistency of 'cause and effect' in nature. See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1748/2007), pp. 18-23. In his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume also proposed a problem of induction and uniformity of nature, where he claimed that there was no rational justification for believing in the uniformity of nature because it is based on habit or experience and not on logical or empirical certainty. He also concluded that inductive reasoning could only be proved by inductive reasoning, thus creating a circular argument. See David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin Press, 1739/1985).

<sup>425</sup> Stanley, p. 80.

instead of relying on hypothetical or scriptural catastrophic forces antithetical to those currently in play. This position brought him into conflict with theists such as William Conybeare (1787-1857) and Adam Sedgwick (1785-1873), who adhered to a catastrophic position because it permitted the events in scripture, yet Lyell still believed in a divine authority in the order of the world.<sup>426</sup> Lyell's uniformitarianism influenced Darwin's theory of evolution, which inductively explained biological development without the need for a divine fiat. Huxley heralded Darwin's theory of evolution because of its inductive methodology and dismantling of the prevailing ideas of teleology. However, as McGrath (2022) notes, Darwin continued to allude to a wider cosmological teleology ordering the universe,<sup>427</sup> and Lightman believes that Darwin's evolutionism was not the death-knell to teleology as commonly purported.<sup>428</sup> Throughout his life, Darwin continued to question divine design yet still held to the Bible as a source of proper morality.<sup>429</sup> Perhaps this is why Ruskin found Darwin to be a pleasant gentleman even though he abhorred his scientific theories.<sup>430</sup>

It is apparent that leading scientific naturalists could hold religious beliefs while also conducting scientific investigations—the two were not mutually exclusive. However, problems arise between religion and theology. In this context, religion is an ecumenical belief in divine order, whereas theology is an organized orthodox belief in divine instruction. Fair or not, this distinction lies with Huxley, who wrote extensively on the role of science and the scientist in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.<sup>431</sup> Huxley's argument was to remove the unwarranted and unwelcomed influence of theology, in the form of orthodox teleology and dogmatic scriptural literalism, from scientific inquiry and methodology.<sup>432</sup> He believed such appeal to scripture limited what science could achieve

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<sup>426</sup> Greene and Laudan argue that William Conybeare (1787-1857) and Adam Sedgwick (1785-1873) as the 'old guard' of British geology who were suspicious of Lyell's uniformitarianism on methodological and religious grounds. See Greene, pp. 94-5 and Laudan, p. 221.

<sup>427</sup> McGrath (2022).

<sup>428</sup> Bernard Lightman, *Evolutionary Naturalism in Victorian Britain: The 'Darwinians' and Their Critics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 120-2.

<sup>429</sup> Momme von Sydow, 'Darwin: A Christian Undermining Christianity? On Self-Undermining Dynamics of Ideas Between Belief and Science', in *Science and Beliefs: From Natural Philosophy to Natural Science, 1700–1900*, ed. by David M. Knight and Matthew D. Eddy (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 141–156.

<sup>430</sup> Ruskin appeared to have an amicable relationship with Darwin. Darwin visited the Ruskins at Denmark Hill in 1868 and at Brantwood in 1879 and 1881. Despite the cordiality, Ruskin disapproved of Darwin's theory of natural selection and evolution.

<sup>431</sup> See DeWitt, pp. 33-52, Stanley, pp. 19-33, and Turner (1974), pp. 8-37.

<sup>432</sup> Stanley provides a rigorous account of Huxley's agenda for the New Science and New Nature in Chapter 2 of his book. See Stanley, pp. 34-79.

and, in so doing, laid the groundwork for a truer definition of an inductive scientific method. Huxley did reserve a position for individual religious belief but felt that scientific inquiry should be free of teleological agendas that inevitably default to divine *prima causa*. His arguments were persuasive, pushing theology to the periphery of proper scientific inquiry by the end of the century, writing:

Extinguished theologians lie about the cradle of every science as the strangled snakes beside that of Hercules; and history records that whenever science and orthodoxy have been fairly opposed, the latter has been forced to retire from the lists, bleeding and crushed if not annihilated; scotched, if not slain.<sup>433</sup>

Huxley was not the only voice of Victorian science's new perspective, but probably the loudest. Even in the 1860s, Ruskin's religious crisis never dismissed the need for the presence of the divine. It remained in all his work, from political economy and social criticism to science and mythography. Hewison (2009) notes that Ruskin lost his landscape feeling by the beginning of the 1860s, but he continued to advocate for vitalism, animism, and the supernatural in nature, as evidenced by his scientific grammars.<sup>434</sup> However, Huxley's de-theologizing of science was problematic for two reasons: Ruskin no longer held to a dogmatic Evangelical reading of nature and could not envision nature as devoid of the divine. As Frost (2011) points out, Ruskin was too much of a scientist to ignore material facts and causal laws.<sup>435</sup> But, as I explain in Chapters 2 and 3, he was too much of a natural theologian to erase all traces of the divine from nature. He was forced to reconcile his adherence to the material facts of nature and the moral and spiritual truths they inferred—the *diune* could not be split. If it could not be split, though, then perhaps it could be redefined.

From the earliest studies of landscape and architecture, Ruskin proved that his inductive method could infer the general from the specific, but it had to be teleological. It was possible to accept Whewell's colligation of facts and consilience of inductions if they pointed towards the divine ordering of the universe. In Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin supports uniformity in God's actions as 'doing what He is still doing before our own eyes day by day' (*Works*, 6:109-10), but distinguishes between the magnitudes of natural laws in creating and degrading the forms of the earth (*Works*, 6:129). For Ruskin, this teleological

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<sup>433</sup> Thomas Henry Huxley, *Collected Essays, Vol. 2: Darwiniana* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1893), p. 52.

<sup>434</sup> Hewison (2009), p. 262.

<sup>435</sup> Frost, p. 368.

caveat was non-negotiable and, if not accepted, demoted scientific inquiry to lower status, leading to Huxley's fixation with 'unimportant things' (*Works*, 27:651). Contemplating nature, and life for that matter, as bereft of the divine led Ruskin to the deepest conceptual abyss, where Sawyer notes his darkest visions captured the meaninglessness of a perfunctory world: 'at the edge of intelligibility lies either the deity or the void'.<sup>436</sup>

The divine was necessary because it kept humanity in the argument. As I argue in Chapters 1 and 2, Ruskin promoted his aesthetic theory that nature and the world were created for humanity's benefit. Without human interaction or participation, the world is essentially, and literally, devoid of purpose. The key to an anthropocentric position is shaping any investigation of nature—theistic, deistic, or scientific—as a revelatory process: revealing the world's typological and symbolic importance through an exegesis of its material forms and causal actions. Performed correctly, science should always lead to a celebration of God's glory; performed incorrectly, it is at best focussed on inessential things and, at worst, altogether wrong.<sup>437</sup> Frost (2011) highlights the life-less materiality of scientific description in comparison to the dynamic materiality of Ruskinian science, noting that Ruskin is mostly sympathetic concerning observation and documenting facts, less so when it comes to uniformity or inductive reasoning that leads to life-less and mechanistic nature.<sup>438</sup> Ruskin believes that the forms and forces of the earth possessed greater potential to communicate the world's mysteries and meaning than anything science could deliver. To prove this distinction, Ruskin sought to distance himself from Huxley's science, illustrating what his science could reveal to humanity and not just for its own sake. Thus, his science grammars of the 1870s are not inductive revisions but inventions, compiling his penchant for empirical fact and moral truth and reaffirming nature's commitment to expressing the divine will of the Deity. Only this time, Ruskin enlists the aid of non-Christian sources to achieve it. The amalgamation of wisdom myths and literature is his creation and offering as a rebuttal to Huxley's science.

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<sup>436</sup> Sawyer, p. 154.

<sup>437</sup> I have argued for this position in the previous chapters, noting how Ruskin addresses these points when discussing aesthetic and scientific inquiries in *Modern Painters*, *The Eagle's Nest*, *The Ethics of the Dust*, *The Queen of the Air*, and *Deucalion*. For this instance in particular, I refer to the above-mentioned focus on 'unimportant things' by Huxley (*Works*, 27:651), Ruskin's denial of Lyell's uniformitarianism in the opening of *Deucalion*, where he praises Lyell's observational diligence but rebukes his theoretical position, calling it 'entirely false' (*Works*, 26:117), and admonishing Darwin's illogical hypothesis of natural selection from the *Descent of Man* (1871), where in discussing animal form, states 'had Darwinism been true' (*Works*, 22:246-7).

<sup>438</sup> Frost, p. 371.



Ruskin's focus on wisdom myths and wisdom's association with nature gives the concept of decay further creative credence. Myth brings wisdom into action out of history, much more so than the historical Solomon or Wisdom of Proverbs. The forces of nature are guided by wisdom; its actions are witnessed, and its intentions are laid bare. Wisdom acts and does so in accordance with the divine will. Wisdom in nature acts prudentially, is an intellectual virtue, fulfils the will of the Godhead, and demonstrates the right way to act. This is a phronetic act, fulfilling Aristotle's charge for phronesis: knowing what to do in a particular situation and having the moral insight to do it rightly. Wisdom in nature is not theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) but rather concerned with action rather than abstract truths. But, because wisdom is wise, it does no wrong; it is the exemplar for humanity to admire and follow. Wisdom determines the right ends and how best to choose them.

### 4.3 The Queen of Decay: Wisdom in Action

Ah, masters of modern science, give me back my Athena out of your vials, and seal, if it may be, once more, Asmodeus therein.

(*Works*, 19:294)

Ruskin's plea to liberate the spirit of wisdom and imprison the evil spirit of destruction opens his book on Greek wisdom myth, *The Queen of the Air*. Wisdom occupied the majority of his myth studies and formed the core of his mythopoeic endeavours. Dinah Birch wrote in the introduction to her book *Ruskin's Myths* (1988) that 'what myth might mean to us must therefore matter less for my purposes than what it meant to Ruskin', and to that I add my own caveat to examine how myth relates to decay rather than focusing on Ruskin's myths in general.<sup>439</sup> This is not a dismissal of Birch and other writers on Ruskin's myths, mythography, and mythopoesis, such as Hayman, Fitch and Weltman, but an indication that my intent lies elsewhere. Here, I examine how Ruskin used myth to legitimize divine wisdom an active agent in nature, and thus impart an affirmative role for decay in the actions of the earth. The earlier chapters identify decay as part of a natural process governed by divine intention. I have shown examples from Ruskin's work on architecture, landscape, and mountain form that align material degradation with the natural forces of wind, rain, snow, and ice and how such erosion is consistent with the inevitable laws of change. As Ruskin's thinking on the Unsculpturing forces of mountains

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<sup>439</sup> Birch (1988), p. 1.

progressed, he identified an alliance between decay and wisdom, showing how the forms of the earth are designed and intended to decay.

Establishing that decay is a positive change to the built and natural environment and that wisdom is behind such intentions, Ruskin turned his investigations to exploring the character of wisdom myths. These post-1860 investigations align with his thinking on practical wisdom in his writings on political economy; wisdom in nature appears to be a logical extension of such thought. Ruskin's science grammars—*Love's Meinie*, *Proserpina*, and *Deucalion*—explore select aspects of nature, examining how the forms of flower petals, bird's wings, and mountain peaks reflect divine intentions pervasive across all disciplines. Exploring wisdom myths is part of Ruskin's struggle with spiritual relevance identified by Fitch, Birch (1988), and Hewison (2009), but it is also a deeper investigation into the mysteries of divine intention and manifestation in the forms and forces of the world. This section examines Ruskin's ideas of intention, examples of wise action, and mythopoeic creation as a way of amalgamating decades of speculation on the function and purpose of nature. I begin by looking at the relationship between wisdom and intention in nature.

#### 4.3.1 Through a Glass, Darkly

Ideas of beauty are among the noblest which can be presented to the human mind, invariably exalting and purifying it according to their degree; and it would appear that we are intended by the Deity to be constantly under their influence.

(*Works*, 3:111)

For Ruskin, intention is essentially the answer to why things are the way they are. It is the divine guarantee: the world is as it is because God decreed it so. Knowing divine intention is problematic for two reasons: first, humanity's limited comprehensive capacity demarcates what it can know, and second, there are some things which humanity is not entitled to know, as noted in when Ruskin states that 'no mortal has any business with God's intentions, or pretense of insight into them' (*Works*, 4:110n).<sup>440</sup> Obviously, this last position is levied at directly knowing the mind of God, but Ruskin believed that proof of divine intent could be revealed in the forms and forces of the earth through a moral exegesis using the eye and mind. His theophanic aesthetic theory of art espoused in *Modern Painters* is proof of such a belief. In Ruskin's argument, Nature held some answers to the

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<sup>440</sup> This declaration in Volume 2 of *Modern Painters* is a later footnote added in 1883 to clarify an earlier passage written in 1846.

questions of intention—at least, those intended for humanity even if they were seen ‘through a glass, darkly’ (*Works*, 7:262).<sup>441</sup> The issue with which he struggled would be how such intentions could be known.

To answer this question, one must understand the composition and incarnations of intention and how they relate to the larger themes of wisdom in Ruskin’s thinking. Ruskin believes wisdom is present in divine thinking and action and in working out a predetermined plan. This division of intention is similar to G.E.M. Anscombe’s explanation of intention. Anscombe (1957) notes three characteristics of intention: an individual’s expression of their intention to do something, the overt actions that are intentionally executed, and an individual’s motives or aims for acting with intentions, the ‘why’ of such an effort.<sup>442</sup> Davidson adds that ‘someone who acts with a certain intention acts for a reason; he has something in mind that he wants to promote or accomplish’.<sup>443</sup> In this context, an intention is a way of understanding an action undertaken with deliberate cause and foreknowledge of consequences. Applying Anscombe’s three conditions to acts by the deity, divine intention is governed by God’s declaration to do something, such as: ‘Let there be light.’<sup>444</sup> However, God’s power is such that the action of creating light is synonymous with the spoken Word: it is instantaneous: ‘God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light’.<sup>445</sup> God’s motivations for creating light are ultimately to provide an environment for humanity but are also self-referential: ‘God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that it was good’.<sup>446</sup> Goodness exists as an intentional qualitative outcome in conjunction with a physical presence. Some divine actions have clear intentions, actions, and outcomes. God’s declaration to destroy humanity with a Flood is followed by forty days of rain, thus demonstrating a clear action grounded in the world’s phenomena with the intent of ridding the world of sin and renewing His covenant with humanity. But the divine action can, at times, be incomprehensible. The creation of the universe begins with a decree, but the actions of how it was accomplished often elude human comprehension, as do the reasons for such action.

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<sup>441</sup> Ruskin refers to Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians when considering the imperfect or obscure knowledge of God and His intentions that humanity can possess. See 1 Corinthians 13. 12.

<sup>442</sup> Anscombe, § 1-6, pp. 1-12. Anscombe identifies the ‘why’ of intention in Section 5, pp. 9-11.

<sup>443</sup> Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 83.

<sup>444</sup> Genesis 1. 3.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>446</sup> Genesis 1. 3-4.

If the divine intentions and means of creation are abstract and unknowable, how does one ascertain those intentions? Ruskin gave his readers a clue when he stated that wisdom is found in its ends. As wisdom is correlated with intention in Ruskin's thought, intention is likewise demonstrated in the ends of purposeful actions. In assessing divine intentions, Ruskin has the security of declaration and the 'why' of action: God spoke thusly, and God so intended. To him, no one is in a position to question these intentions—they are apodictic and a truth of the world. However, Ruskin is compelled to understand the action itself, or more precisely, he looks to nature to understand those actions in the forms produced. This is why Ruskin has consistently relied on the facts of nature to prove his sacrosanct truths—World over Word. However, in examining the forms of the earth, Ruskin is dealing with continually changing forms, writing, 'it is not so much what these forms of the earth actually are, as what they are continually becoming, that we have to observe' (*Works*, 6:179). Earthly forms are neither eternal nor static; they are in motion and in a constant state of becoming.

The natural agents of change caught Ruskin's attention, specifically in his writings on wisdom myths. In nature, this agency emerges as wisdom: a personified deity acting in the world, acting in nature with practical wisdom and intention. Aristotle wrote about *phronesis* and lends insight into intention in human conduct, saying the actions are 'called just and temperate when they are such as the just and the temperate person would do' and concluding that 'it is correct to say that it is by doing just actions that one becomes just, and by doing temperate actions become temperate; without doing them, no one would have even a chance of becoming good'.<sup>447</sup> In such a scenario, acting is essential, but how and why to act becomes crucial. The concept of *ἔκουσίως* (*hekousiōs*), or intention, becomes important when Aristotle discusses actions.<sup>448</sup> *Hekousiōn* actions are voluntary and understood as 'that which lies within an agent's power and which he does knowingly, that is, not in ignorance of the person affected, the instrument used, or the end of the action'.<sup>449</sup> Involuntary action is 'one performed in ignorance, or [...] beyond the agent's control or

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<sup>447</sup> Aristotle (2000), Book II, iv 1105b, p. 28.

<sup>448</sup> *ἔκουσίως*, or *hekousiōs*, is translated as performing an action intentionally, willingly, and deliberately. Ackrill contrasts Aristotle's understanding of *hekousiōs* as doing something intentionally against doing something 'for itself'. The distinction comes down to a relation between voluntary and involuntary actions (*praxis*) and making a choice. See J.L. Ackrill, 'Aristotle on Action' in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 93-101 (pp. 94-7).

<sup>449</sup> Aristotle (2000), Book V, viii 1135a, p. 94.

under compulsion'.<sup>450</sup> Aristotle says that the 'first principles of action are the end to which our acts are means'<sup>451</sup> and Ackrill (1980a) notes the difference in Aristotle's intentional action between 'what is done—which might have been done from various motives or inadvertently—and why it was done'.<sup>452</sup> Aristotle distinguishes between actions that have inadvertent or deliberate consequences, noting that prescience of intended ends leads to virtuous action that 'has its first principle in the person himself when he knows the particular circumstances of the action'.<sup>453</sup>

Aristotle promotes acting as a just or temperate person would do in terms of intention, action, and knowing—emulation is his phronetic goal. The just or temperate individual is a role model or archetype, exemplifying the purest execution of justness and temperateness. If this understanding is applied to Ruskin's natural wisdom myths, the phronetic activity can exemplify how to act. Birch (1988) notes the difference between divine and human myths, where 'divine myths are helpful; myths concerning human affairs are perplexing and disheartening'.<sup>454</sup> This association fits Ruskin's turn towards a more humanized version of wisdom in the form of myths while also reflecting his growing interest in practical wisdom and increasing focus on the affairs of humanity. This account begins with his study of the Athena wisdom myth in *The Queen of the Air*.

### 4.3.2 A Living Image of Wisdom

This great goddess, the Neith of the Egyptians, the Athena or Athenaia of the Greeks, and, with broken power, half usurped by Mars, the Minerva of the Latins, is, physically, the queen of the air; having supreme power both over its blessings of calm, and wrath of storm; and spiritually, she is queen of the breath of man, first of the bodily breathing which is life to his blood, and strength to his arm in battle; and then of the mental breathing, or inspiration, which is his moral health and habitual wisdom; wisdom of conduct and of the heart, as opposed to the wisdom of imagination and the brain; moral as distinct from intellectual; inspired, as distinct from illuminated.

(*Works*, 19:306)

Ruskin published *The Queen of the Air* in 1869, bringing together his growing interest in mythography and nature worship in a single mythopoeic endeavour. Birch (1988) notes that 'Ruskin recreates rather than interprets myth' and is more interested in the developed

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<sup>450</sup> *Ibid*, p. 95.

<sup>451</sup> Aristotle (1934), Book VI, v 6, p. 339.

<sup>452</sup> Ackrill, (1980a), p. 94.

<sup>453</sup> Aristotle (2000), Book III, i, 1111a, p. 40.

<sup>454</sup> Birch (1988), p.79.

form of a myth rather than their genealogy.<sup>455</sup> Hayman (1978) notes Ruskin's interest in the 'mythological lore of Classical and Christian eras which is concerned with natural phenomena' and emphasizes his 'personifications of natural phenomena'.<sup>456</sup> There are several exhaustive explorations of Ruskin's interest in pagan myths, the growing field of mythography in the nineteenth century, and his mythopoeic tendencies by Fitch, Hayman, Birch, and Weltman, but I will focus on the aspects of the wisdom myths that pertain to the active forces and intention evident in nature's forms and forces.<sup>457</sup> Exploring the wisdom myth will provide the theory of decay with the positive intention to accompany its formal characteristics elucidated in the earlier chapters of my argument. *Queen* is where Ruskin brings together his diverse thinking on spiritual belief, action, and intention by defining wisdom's role in nature's actions and laws. The laws of change and the forces of decay are associated with the wisdom archetype, of which Athena is dominant. Hayman (1978) states that the appeal of mythology to Ruskin was the way it 'transcends different cultures and eras and so arranges a sense of continuity'.<sup>458</sup> Unlike the breadth of his Oxford compatriot Max Müller, professor of Indo-European languages and comparative philology, Ruskin's Eurocentrism limited his myth pool to predominantly Mediterranean examples.<sup>459</sup> This lineage was rich enough for Ruskin to envision how myth can unite diverse spiritual and religious beliefs within a Judeo-Christian perspective.

Ruskin breaks a myth into three constituent parts, a 'root and the two branches': physical existence, personal incarnation, and moral significance of the image (*Works*, 19:300). For Greek myths, Ruskin identifies 'one governing Lord of all things' and four subordinate elemental forces, of which Athena is granted the domain of the air (*Works*, 19:303). As the 'queen of the air', Athena has:

Supreme power both over its blessings of calm and wrath of storm; and spiritually, she is the queen of the breath of man, first of the bodily breathing which is life to his blood, and strength to his arm in battle; and then of the mental breathing, or inspiration, which is his moral health and habitual wisdom; wisdom of conduct and

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<sup>455</sup> Birch (1988), p. 114.

<sup>456</sup> Hayman (1978), pp. 104-5.

<sup>457</sup> See Fitch, Hayman (1978), Birch (1988), and Weltman (1997).

<sup>458</sup> Hayman (1978), p. 106.

<sup>459</sup> Max Müller (1823-1900) was a German-born comparative philologist at Oxford University. Cook and Wedderburn note that Müller occasionally attended Ruskin's lectures and found him to be the 'most tolerant and agreeable man in society' (*Works*, 20:xxxviii). Ruskin refers to Müller's philological studies with respect, calling it the 'science of language' (*Works*, 22:125), and invokes his expertise in *The Eagle's Nest*, *Queen*, and *Proserpina* when considering the etymology of particular words (*Works*, 19:lxvii; 22:125; 25:153).

of the heart, as opposed to the wisdom of imagination and the brain; moral, as distinct from intellectual; inspired, as distinct from illuminated.

(*Works*, 19:305-6)

Here, Ruskin identifies Athena's physical existence as the air of the world, the personal incarnation as the goddess, 'a trusted and companionable deity, with whom you may walk hand in hand, as a child with its brother or its sister' (*Works*, 19:300), and a moral instantiation of life and wisdom. Birch (1988) notes that Athena is 'not simply a figure from the history of Greek religion [but] a living image of wisdom and of moral regeneration'.<sup>460</sup> To Ruskin, myth is a 'story with a meaning attached to it' and explains the ways of nature directed at humanity (*Works*, 19:296). This contrasts with an inductive Victorian science that sought to explain nature objectively and devoid of human participation. As a response to the coldness of the scientific method, myth offered a rich milieu for Ruskin to convey his ruminations on the laws of life and help to re-theologize nature, albeit now from a pluralistic perspective.

As a physical presence, Athena 'is the wind and the rain' (*Works*, 19:333). Wind and rain, storm and torrent are the forces of nature that unsculpt the mountain and erode the building. By linking Athena with the wind and rain, Ruskin aligns her powers with the powers that unsculpt the mountains he wrote of in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*. Wisdom is an active agent, and as a physical presence, wisdom governs the laws of change and is the governess of decay. As a spiritual presence, Athena is 'the Spirit of Life in material organism; not strength in the blood only, but formative energy in the clay' (*Works*, 19:346). This recalls Ruskin's laws of life and help, where the spirit of life gives objects their purpose. Hayman (1978) notes that as a life-giving force, his Queen of the Air 'makes it possible for Ruskin to move easily between "material" and "spiritual" aspects of her creativity'.<sup>461</sup> Life not only helps organisms live, but it is also how they are made. This is a direct recount of Creation where God, aided by Wisdom since the beginning, made the earth and Adam from the earth. In terms of creation, Athena is 'inspired and impulsive wisdom in human conduct and human art, giving the instinct of infallible decision, and of faultless invention' (*Works*, 19:346). The moral implication here is the natural tendency towards doing the right thing: it is habitual, inspired and impulsive, not deliberated or rationalized. As Ruskin said above, this wisdom is not of the brain or intellect, but of the

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<sup>460</sup> Birch (1988), p.103.

<sup>461</sup> Hayman (1978), p. 112.

heart. Athena is incapable of making the wrong decision, or ‘infallible,’ and what she creates is perfect or ‘faultless.’ If wisdom participated in the world’s creation, and an active hand in its Unsculpturing, then it is always correct and always perfect, lending further credence to Ruskin’s claim that we now live in the ‘perfect prime’ of the world.<sup>462</sup> Ruskin also alludes to human art and instinct towards perfection, again aligning the argument with the state of the world where all material organisms are imbued with the wisdom of life. It also lends credibility to his position that the artist should look to nature to see what is best.

Ruskin alludes to Athena’s gift of life, which is breathing, as ‘spirit’ (*Works*, 19:351).

He says:

But it is of great consequence that you should fix in your minds—and hold, against the baseness of mere materialism on the one hand, and against the fallacies of controversial speculation on the other—the certain and practical sense of this word “spirit”;—the sense in which you may all know that its reality exists, as the power which shaped you into your shape, and by which you love, and hate, when you have received that shape.

(*Works*, 19:351)

Spirit, then, is life and the wisdom in life. Ruskin says, ‘there is a power which gives their several shapes to things, or capacities of shape’ and ‘a power which gives them their several feelings, or capacities to feel’ (*Works*, 19:353-4). He summarizes the myth of Athena as a ‘Formative and Decisive power—a Spirit of Creation and Volition’ (*Works*, 19:354). Athena, as Wisdom, guides the earth’s material into its current forms. The leading lines Ruskin explains in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* are the forms wisdom seeks to achieve by eroding the existing landscape with the forces of decay and adhering to the laws of change. In this mythic archetype, Ruskin can amalgamate nature’s material and spiritual expressions while making it understandable and accessible to humanity’s intellectual lens and moral retina. When he alludes to the beauty of aged buildings or crumbling mountains, it is possible to see that decay is guided by wisdom—it is degradation with divine purpose and the intent of eliciting a sense of the beautiful. Decay is not an erasure of material or form but a becoming or emergence of its intended purpose to push the world into its perfect prime.

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<sup>462</sup> See earlier mention of Ruskin’s claim of the earth being in its ‘perfect prime’ in Chapter 3.



*Queen* expresses Ruskin's need for a spiritual understanding of nature reconciled with observable facts and truths and a rebuttal against the needless de-theologizing and de-humanizing efforts of Victorian science's interest in matter, energy, and their laws. Delving into myth allows Ruskin the freedom to concoct his own narrative, one reflective of his religious and spiritual needs as much as his empirical and rational needs, conflicts he struggled with throughout his investigative career. Hewison (1976) wrote that Ruskin 'does not treat myth as a form of allegory [...] but as an expression of the interchange between phenomenal reality and eternity', and his statement on Ruskin's exploration of myth in the 1870s echoes Ruskin's earlier efforts to reconcile medium and message in the 1840s.<sup>463</sup> This connection did not elude Fitch, who states that:

Nothing could be more important than realization of the fact that these theories of Athena are not to him momentary impressions or a pastiche of derivative ideas but represent efforts toward the definitive assertion of a mythic system that has been developing for more than a decade in his work and is intimately related to his religious position and his primary hypothesis of experience, the organic model.<sup>464</sup>

In this context, Ruskin's interest in myth—wisdom myths, in particular—can be seen as an extension of his earlier efforts to understand nature through art and his hierophantic aesthetic theory, the organic model Fitch alluded to.<sup>465</sup> Within such a lineage, the process of decay can extend from empirical observation into expressing divine intention.

The final piece in the mythic puzzle is the role of wisdom as a creator. In terms of making the stuff of the world, wisdom as a demiurge assembles forms from existent materials. In its active role in nature, wisdom becomes the 'unsculptor', seemingly undoing what has already been done. However, wisdom is both: creation becomes more about arriving at forms than fixing them in place, a consequence of nature's unwavering and eternal law of change. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the forms of nature are designed to decay. The assembly of landscape, mountains, rocks, and crystals all play a role in the greater law of change—all constitutively predetermined to be eroded. Wisdom's role is knowing how to create so that it can be destroyed, simultaneously holding office over the laws of making and breaking. Ruskin's exploration of the assembly and erosion of landscape forms in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters* represents the totality of the situation. *Queen* aligns wisdom with their assembly and degradation, providing an active intention in

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<sup>463</sup> Hewison (1976), pp. 155-6.

<sup>464</sup> Fitch, p. 550.

<sup>465</sup> For commentary on Fitch's 'organic model', see earlier in this chapter, Section 4.3.1.

creation and uncreation. In *Ethics*, this condition is continued, but Ruskin demonstrates wisdom in action, bringing together the eternal idealism of prescient intention, divine natural forces, and personified action into the wisdom archetype. As an expression of declaration, action and foreknowledge, the wisdom archetype exemplifies a natural phronesis, a proper way of acting.

### 4.3.3 Tiny Birds and Rosy Crystals

Then Neith spread her wings wide for an instant, and closed them with a sound like the sound of a rushing sea; and waved her hand towards the foundation of the pyramid, where it was laid on the brow of the desert. And the four flocks drew together and sank down, like sea-birds settling to a level rock; and when they met, there was a sudden flame, as broad as the pyramid, and as high as the clouds; and it dazzled me; and I closed my eyes for an instant; and when I looked again, the pyramid, stood on its rock, perfect; and purple with the light from the edge of the sinking sun.

(*Works*, 18:228-9)

In a dream, Neith, the Egyptian goddess of wisdom, showed Ruskin how to build perfectly. This quotation comes from Lecture II: ‘The Pyramid Builders’ from *The Ethics of the Dust* (1866), where Ruskin recounts his vision for a captivated audience of myth-enthusiastic schoolgirls. Following the paths of Ezekiel and John, Ruskin portrays himself as a prophet relaying a vision of heavenly architecture, only this is not a guided tour of an existent place or shown plans for a holy design—Neith constructs the pyramid with Ruskin as a witness to her actions.<sup>466</sup> His mythopoeic endeavour borrows from Scripture and mythology, bringing wisdom out of history and into an active role in the world. *Ethics* (1866) came out three years before *Queen* but six years after his work on political economy began. It is a series of moral lectures disguised as mineralogy lessons for schoolgirls at Winnington. In each one, Ruskin explains nature’s moral life and actions by studying crystals, often invoking wisdom to justify their forms and actions.

The central parable of ‘The Pyramid Builders’ centres on Ruskin recounting his dream, or myth, as Birch (1988) points out, while meditating on a fluor crystal.<sup>467</sup> He is

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<sup>466</sup> Both Ezekiel and John are shown the New Temple and New Jerusalem, respectively, by a heavenly guide/angel and given the measurements of these new places. See Ezekiel 40 and Revelation 21. Moses is given detailed instructions for building the Tabernacle and its furnishings by God. See Exodus 25-31. Similarly, David shares God’s plans for the Temple with Solomon, who builds the First Temple in Jerusalem according to these divine specifications. It is intriguing to note that Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, actually built the Temple. See 1 Chronicles 28-29 and 1 Kings 6-7.

<sup>467</sup> Birch suspects that Ruskin’s dream is an attempt at mythopoesis involving a selection of Egyptian deities. See Birch (1988), p. 89.

witness to an act of creation by the Egyptian goddess of wisdom, Neith, who, alongside her brother Pthah, the god of Truth, laments over the sorry state of earthly architecture.<sup>468</sup> Pthah thinks it is hopeless, saying, ‘let them build’, but Neith argues that ‘what shall they build, if I build not with them?’ (*Works*, 18:227). The assembly of a perfect pyramid in Ruskin’s presence demonstrates wisdom’s creation of perfect architecture, acting with precision, foreknowledge, and decisiveness. While the creative act is highly magical, Ruskin does witness the personification of wisdom acting with intention. After its creation, Pthah shrinks the pyramid into a rosy crystal, the same one Ruskin meditates on, aligning architecture with nature and demonstrating the wise rules of order and assembly that govern both.<sup>469</sup> It is notable that the god of Truth makes this connection. Birch (1988) writes that lower Pthah’s goal is to ‘degrade and diminish what divine wisdom has created’, and in Lecture III, Ruskin identifies the distortion of lower Pthah’s efforts with the mindless work of uninspired craftsmen.<sup>470</sup> Despite lower Pthah’s agenda, the shrunken crystal that Ruskin holds is a mineralogical microcosm of the architectural macrocosm and, at that moment, has intentional parity—the arrangement of the pyramid’s bricks is indistinguishable from the arrangement of the crystal’s atoms, prompting Ruskin to state that ‘when you begin to think of things rightly, the ideas of smallness and largeness pass away’ (*Works*, 18:231).

Ruskin once championed the magnificent landscapes of the Alps or the grand architecture of Venice, yet slowly moved to a smaller view of the world and a fixation on smaller things. How he considered these natural phenomena had changed. Where he was once struck by universal laws and cosmic order beyond comprehension, he is now concerned with practical living, delicate plants, tiny birds, and rosy crystals. However, the wisdom he seeks is somewhere in between, bridging the eternal with the practical. Ruskin asks his readers to look at the small things in life that give pleasure and meaning, saying, ‘by the wisdom of Nature, it has been appointed that more pleasure may be taken in small things than in great’ (*Works*, 22:182). If his early life could be seen as going out into the

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<sup>468</sup> In his notes for *Ethics*, Ruskin identifies greater Pthah as the ‘formative power of order and measurement’ and his usual title is the ‘Lord of Truth’. See *Works*, 18:362-3.

<sup>469</sup> ‘Lower’ Pthah is not a separate god but rather a ‘lower office’ of Pthah. See *Works*, 18:363.

<sup>470</sup> Birch (1988), p. 90. Ruskin notes that lower Pthah relates to manual labour. During modern times, this was further distorted beyond what the Greeks and Egyptians conceived, saying that ‘it is the character of pure and eyeless manual labour to conceive everything as subjected to it: and, in reality, to disgrace and diminish all that is so subjected; aggrandising itself, and the thought of itself, at the expense of all noble things’ (*Works*, 18:242).

world's vastness to learn all that is knowable, then his later life could be a retreat to inner contemplation and reflection on what it all means. Considering his Evangelical unconversion, Ruskin might have found deific laws distant, where the security of things close at hand were more relevant to someone no longer secure in their belief in salvation and redemption. The turn towards the mythic and the Greek preoccupation with life and not the afterlife might have been more appealing than confronting the void. His spiritual dilemma never abated, but its direction and scope shifted. His works emphasized what humanity can know, and it resonated across his later works, which were equally applicable to his religious and scientific thinking. Knowledge of the world is knowing what humans are meant to know. For Ruskin, humanity's efforts should be to uncover what the Deity intends for humanity, communicated through the books of Scripture and Nature: 'I learned both what is secret and what is manifest, for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me'.<sup>471</sup>

#### 4.4 Ruskin's Wise Decay

Ruskin's decay emerged from his observations of buildings and mountains, and it finds conceptual resolution in them as well. While wisdom was present in the beginning of his investigations in nascent form, it found its poetic power through a personified, highly individualized portrayal in his later works. His understanding of decay progresses from picturesque landscape to Gothic architecture to Alpine mountains, culminating with the wisdom myths as the final unifying thread. This sequencing is necessary: for at every stage of development, new ideas feed into each subsequent revelation, continually constructing and defining with growing confidence Ruskin's imaginary of decay. The invention of nature is a vital element to this thinking on decay, for it allows him to construct his own incarnation of natural law. To him, nature is always theologically charged, but not doctrinally so. As mentioned in previous chapters, Ruskin would not accept sectarian interpretations of a defiled earth. For him, nature was destined for greater things. Through his work in *Modern Painters* and on to *Ethics* and *Queen*, nature becomes a blank slate—a tabula rasa on which Ruskin could script his ecumenical musings. Unconvinced by conventional knowledge, he strove to concoct an episteme of nature aligned with his spiritual, aesthetic, and moral imperatives.

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<sup>471</sup> Wisdom, 7.21-22.

Ruskin's nature becomes a mythopoeic invention, governed by wisdom who oversees the forms and forces of change through physical and symbolic expression. Nature is his personal account of the world he has studied for years—an amalgamation of broader prevailing theories and inner personal reflection. Wheeler (1999) shows how Ruskin engaged in myth as a larger response to the challenges of science, especially those of Darwin and his theory of natural selection.<sup>472</sup> He correctly identifies the importance of myth as a pathway to understanding the spirit of life that science could not objectively account for, leading to Ruskin's claim that 'the feeblest myth is better than the strongest theory' (*Works*, 26:99).<sup>473</sup> Ruskin is not attempting to 'science' myth, as Müller's philological approaches might be understood, but rather 'mythify' science to be more inclusive of moral, ethical, and existential aspects that are germane to the human experience. As such, Ruskin's mythopoeic *Queen* falls short of the depth or rigour of Müller's philology, but, as Birch (1988) claims, that is not its intention.<sup>474</sup> It is more of a personal incantation presented in such a way that Rosenberg felt 'Ruskin were chanting a hymn to some forgotten music by which Athena was once worshipped'.<sup>475</sup> Hewison (1976) carefully writes that *Queen* is about the imagination, 'Ruskin's own imaginative process which transformed the physical facts of the world into symbols', but that readers should not forget the importance of the physical, because 'Ruskin always returned to reality and real things, however mystical some of his flights might seem'.<sup>476</sup> Birch notes that Ruskin's focus is not on Athena's corporeality but her ethical character, but I would add on behalf of decay that it is more about his *Queen's* ethical actions pursuant to the physical realm.<sup>477</sup>

In the argument for decay, it is wisdom's actions in the natural world that are as important as their relative symbolic meaning, as one cannot find expression in the absence of the other. His *Ethics* resurrects wisdom as Neith to explain the type of creativity necessary in nature and architecture; *Queen* emerges from his wish to situate wisdom into the laws of nature. In these two incarnations, Wisdom assumes the dual role of creator and destroyer, bringing artifacts into form and, by the laws of change, returning them to whence they came. Despite the importance of wisdom's symbolic value, Ruskin needs

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<sup>472</sup> Wheeler's argument regarding myth and science is presented in Chapter 8 of his book *Ruskin's God*. See Wheeler (1999), pp. 180-205.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>474</sup> Birch (1988), p. 42.

<sup>475</sup> Rosenberg, p. 173.

<sup>476</sup> Hewison (1976), p. 155.

<sup>477</sup> Birch (1988), p. 100.

wisdom to act in the natural world for the benefit of humankind. The wisdom of Neith in ‘The Pyramid Builders’ is acting with prescience and beneficence for the good of humanity. By identifying Neith as wisdom in action, Ruskin completes the triumvirate of intention outlined by Anscombe: declaration, action, and foreknowledge. The parable demonstrates wisdom’s understanding of the architectural plight of humanity and knows how to act. Characteristically, Ruskin encodes wisdom’s message in forms found in nature: a crystal. As he did in *Modern Painters*, Ruskin as the story’s old lecturer and Solomon figure, instructs his audience to look to nature for answers. Where Neith demonstrated how wisdom was captured in nature’s forms, Athena shows how wisdom was represented in nature’s actions. Ruskin demonstrates how wisdom is pervasive through nature’s history of creation and its current creative operation as a form of becoming—the allusion to the leading lines of nature. Showing wisdom in action is his culminating lesson. Wisdom is not relegated to history; it is active and instructive.

With wisdom firmly ensconced in the laws of nature, Ruskin has provided a reason and rationale for the actions of decay. Wisdom is responsible for the creation of the world and its degradation. Like most things in Ruskin’s questioning of the divine motives, much of the reasoning is left to speculation—remembering that he gives us facts, not theories (*Works*, 6:182). His geological theories identify the wisdom of material assembly as well as the wisdom of decay to bring such forms into beauty by achieving the governing or leading lines of nature. The call of geological science to envision the world as acting independent of human will or interest is a position Ruskin cannot accept. Creating beautiful forms is the purpose of nature’s actions. The recognition of beauty in the world is evidence of the Deity’s call to marvel at His glory, to partake in the splendour of His creations, and to heed the call of His Word. Ruskin’s recognition of organic decay’s beauty is piety, accepting the will of God and having faith in His intentions. Ruskin can look to architecture and mountains, knowing that their apparent demise is an ever-present becoming, a testament and declaration of divine beauty presented in the forms and forces of the world.

# CONCLUSION

Reflections on Decay

## Conclusion: Reflections on Decay

The Alps! The Alps!—it is no cloud  
Wreathes the plain with its paly shroud!  
The Alps! The Alps!—Full far away  
The long successive ranges lay.

(*Works*, 2:367)

I close my argument with a quotation from the poem I began with: ‘The Alps from Schaffhausen,’ composed by Ruskin after his first visit to Switzerland. More than any other moment in his life, I feel this sensation of seeing the pinnacle of nature was truly revelatory. In my understanding, the initial impact of the experience never left him and informed his subsequent inquiries, investigations, and ruminations on the mountains that captured his heart and mind. His exegetics became more precise and nuanced yet maintained a sense of wonder, even in his declining thoughts. In his autobiography *Praeterita*, Ruskin fondly remembers that magnificent Sunday in 1833 for his first true sense of natural beauty (*Works*, 35:116). From then forward, the power of nature held sway over his thoughts and direction in life, extending into his observations, inquiries, and theories of art, architecture, society, politics, religion, and myth. As his knowledge of nature grew, so did the list of questions regarding its constitution, function, and purpose. My inquiry into the position of decay emerges from these ponderings, where Ruskin’s questions regarding aged buildings, crumbling mountains, or divine governance over the laws of nature may not have found explicit expression, but tie together threads of a coherent statement of what he believed to be true of architecture, geology, and wisdom.

### Questions Answered

This thesis initially posed questions about decay, culminating in the declaration: How did Ruskin understand decay? The simple answer is that he sees it as an inevitable action of nature; the long answer is, as this thesis explores, much more complicated. Ruskin had no theory of decay, but it shadowed his studies on aesthetics and architecture, geology and landscape, myth and wisdom, and society and political economy. Instances of decay replace any singular theory, and there are sufficient instances to form a cohesive evolution of thought on erosion and its material and symbolic role in nature’s forms and forces. As a process of natural law and the product of such action, decay is a vital element in defining—materially and spiritually—the natural world Ruskin needed for spiritual peace. His early Romantic, picturesque and evangelical inculcations instilled a reverence



for a landscape codified with spiritual and religious significance and purpose. His adroitness in reading literal and figurative meanings from the world around him provided a multivalent understanding of nature's forms and forces—establishing the *diune* of medium and message.

As my argument has shown, decay has two distinct meanings in Ruskin's thinking. The positive organic decay of divine intention stands distinct from a degrading human decay caused by the evils of pride, avarice, and impiety. There are moments of conceit where Ruskin slips into conventional usage of decay with Romantic ruins, artistic tropes, or poetic similes. However, these are isolated instances divorced from the larger trajectory of the two main points of decay he developed in conjunction with the laws of nature and the moral failings of humanity. Ruskin shook the negative connotations by constructing an organic decay that abided by the laws of nature put in place by the Deity and governed by wisdom, making their actions directly the result of the divine will. Religious positioning might make decay look like a form of punishment, the ruining of the earth's forms because of human sin, but Ruskin's commitment to seeing nature as beautiful gave the process of decay an affirmative purpose. Ruskin does not lament the deterioration of mountains but instead celebrates it.

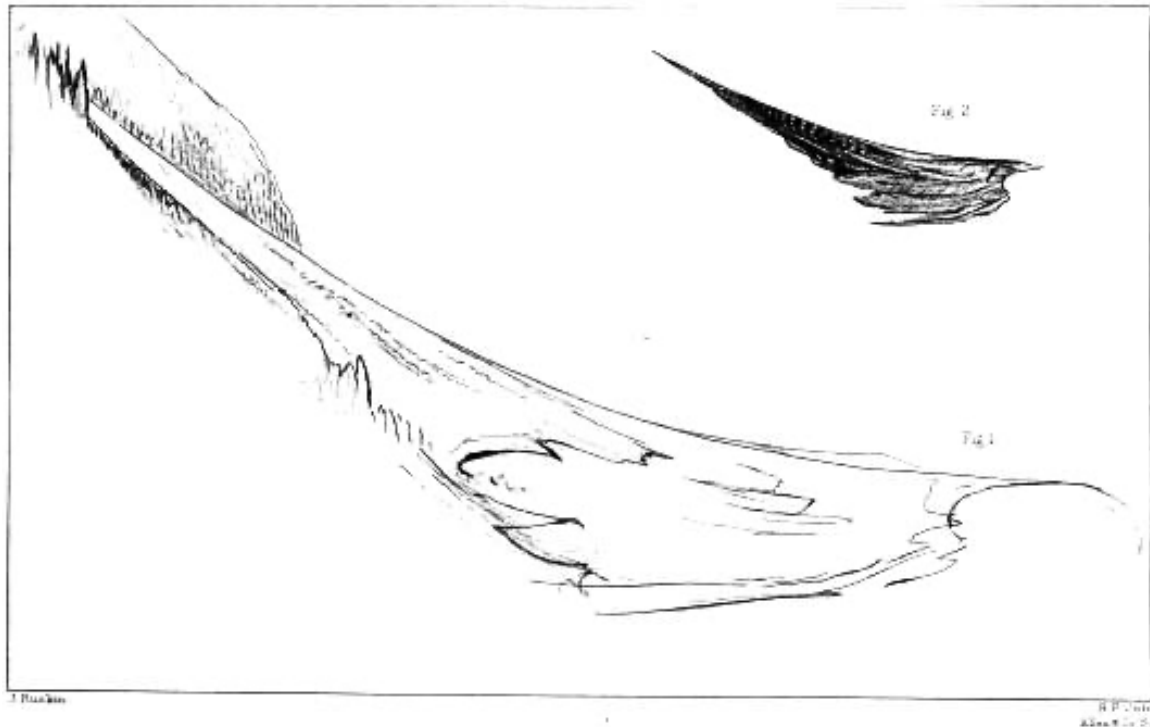
The innocuous question of decay in architecture asked what Ruskin liked about old buildings. His answer in *Seven Lamps* was the glory of age and architecture's endurance; models for human action while also forging closer links with mountains. Age refers to both the time a building was erected and the length of its life. Decay tested a building's legacy; degradation was a process a building endured, and how it faced erasure was a test of character. Such resilience gave Ruskin a sense of the ideal of a species whose inner life demonstrated the fulfilment of an intended function, a condition he associated with vital beauty and described in Volume 2 of *Modern Painters*. Buildings were also founts of social and cultural meaning, holding their creator's collective will and temper within their construction and decoration. As such, they were vehicles through which recognition of a society's values and virtues could be identified in how the raw material of a building was tectonically arranged and dressed. Ruskin's highest example of architecture was the Gothic, the style that best represented the character of nature, both in form and intention. The affinity between architecture and nature defined how Ruskin envisioned architectonic form and, by extension, understood the beautiful forms of mountains and landscapes. Through an explication of decay, the appeal of old buildings and the bonds between architecture and mountain form becomes clearer.

Significant segments of Ruskin's writing and theoretic construction on architecture and mountain form are given to explain why he liked old buildings or why mountain decay was necessary for attaining beautiful leading lines. His dismantling of the Picturesque and the prevailing aesthetic theories of Locke, Burke, and Gilpin open opportunities for decay to be considered in a new light and emerge as an essential element of his thinking on the material forms of nature. Decay becomes a necessary agent in shaping aged buildings and bringing mountain structures into significant form. Once situated as a positive and contributing force of nature, decay comes under the purview of wisdom in the operations of nature's laws. Here, decay becomes an aspect of divine intent, shaping the world for humanity's benefit and celebrating the glory of the Deity. Thus, a theory of Ruskin's decay may have never been explicitly formed or stated, but an imaginary of decay can be constructed from the undercurrent of his observational and theoretical work on landscape, architecture, and mountain form.

The pivotal connecting element was linking decay with the beautiful. Landow's (1971) account of Ruskin's theory of the beautiful and picturesque omits references to the decay of the natural world. References in his argument are given to natural forms as they are, not how they got there. Decay explains this process of arrival into being, and it occupied his geological thinking in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*. The prolonged discussion on Ruskin's geological thinking in Volume 4 is also absent from many scholar's arguments, further contributing to a lack of understanding of decay in existing scholarship. Examinations by Fitch and Sawyer spoke of the symbolic importance of Ruskin's geological pursuits, but they are often directed to other aspects of Ruskin's thought and not particular to the task at hand. Such a situation undoubtedly promotes the strength and dominance of Ruskin's allegorical and symbolic tendencies but foregoes the subtleties of material form that make these observations poignant and part of a larger system of thought where Ruskin needs material and message to coexist and convey a sensation of the beautiful. In a discussion about the constitution of beauty in the material world, decay plays an essential role.

As architecture pointed towards mountain forms, mountains suggested an active force in nature's operations. The role of wisdom in decay differs from the wisdom portrayed by Wheeler or the mythic figure of Athena captured by Fitch and Birch. Nature's wisdom was active in sculpting and unsculpturing mountains to bring them in form with the 'leading lines' of nature: Ruskin's truest sense of formal beauty. His investigations of mountain construction and arrangement in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*

highlighted his insistence on the curved leading lines everywhere in nature, from a mountain debris field to flowers or a bird's wings (Figure 28). In this context, beauty was



45. Debris Curvature.

Figure 28. John Ruskin. 'Plate 45: Debris Curvature', from *Modern Painters*, Volume 4. 1856.

not an exact shape or form but a constellation of certain curved lines that defined an artifact's outward appearance. Wisdom was an active force in nature—Ruskin's Queen of the Air—shaping the earth and responsible for all its operations. With such a benevolent force operating in the world, Ruskin could align the forces of decay with the deity's intentions. He could confidently state that decay was a species of the beautiful because it was firmly situated as a force of nature.

The connections of decay were hard-won and came at a cost. So much of Ruskin's most innovative work comes from responding to challenges he accepted to defend. His defence of Turner is most illustrious, but his warnings on Venice as a response to the Victorian architectural crisis he witnessed in Britain or his crusade against modern science that sought to remove the divine from the operations of the earth spurred him to retort. These quandaries were both external and internal. His later science grammars—*Love's Meinie*, *Proserpina*, and *Deucalion*—of the 1870s are responses to his tirades against political economy begun in the 1860s. Even though his works are laced with extending subtleties and innuendos to other topics or issues, there is often a quietness in Ruskin's writings when

he is at peace with a singular task, allowing his ideas to flow unaltered by agenda, perturbation, or vitriol. Despite the poignancy and acuity of his thoughts and insights in other areas, his ideas of organic decay come from Ruskin's restful mind, where there is little, if any, attempt to make larger associations beyond the connection to an intensely personal reflection on the existential questions on life, meaning and purpose. Compared with the cacophony of political, economic, social, and personal strife that occupied the overt proclamations and subtext of his later public life, such ruminations on the actions of nature present Ruskin at his most authentic and true. Perhaps they are few and far between, but the clarity of intention and purpose shines forth in these moments. In such a state of mind, ranging from *Poetry* (1839) to *Deucalion* (1883), it is unsurprising to see Ruskin accept organic decay as an essential and beautiful part of nature.

## Scholarship

This thesis finds itself in the shadow of the titans of Ruskin scholarship, whose dominant theories hold sway over subsequent understandings of Ruskin's work. This reputation is well-deserved. The works of Rosenberg, Hewison, Fitch, O'Gorman, and Wheeler have endured because their assessment of Ruskin's ideas is insightful, consistent, and resilient in the face of challenge. However, this does not preclude parallel discourses that trace particular threads of Ruskin's thinking. This is evident in the works of Weltman, Spuybroek, Nichols, Chatterjee, and Mershon, who bring cross-disciplinary or divergent approaches to further illuminate the depth and resonance of Ruskin's thoughts and ideas. This thesis charts a course between the two: finding resonance with the major works and enough discord to forge a separate identity and understanding of existing scholarship that overlooked the importance of decay in Ruskin's thought.

This thesis endeavours to augment a latent idea of decay, evident in Ruskin's thinking and has never been adequately explored in existing scholarship. A theory of decay illuminates Ruskin's understanding of nature's eroding forms, nature's laws of change, and the beauty one finds in the world's eroding landscapes. More than a picturesque treatment, decay resides beside his larger aesthetic themes of typical and vital beauty. My argument does not invalidate nor contest existing literature but uncovers the nuances of decay overlooked or ignored. A singular instance of decay might be seen as an irregularity or peculiarity, but demonstrating a consistent evolution and integration of the concept of decay throughout Ruskin's major theoretical works highlights a substantial aspect of his work that has yet to be addressed. While unconventional in its approach, the imaginary of

decay this thesis promotes pulls together disparate threads of mountains, architecture, and wisdom into a compelling re-evaluation of Ruskin's view of nature, beauty, and landscape.

## **Revelations**

This thesis illuminates an overlooked aspect of Ruskin's thought and touches on other gaps in Ruskin scholarship, the largest of which is the dearth of research on Ruskin's geological thinking. Apart from a few dedicated observations by Lacy Gully and Sdegno, the investigation of Ruskin's geological theories and their relationship to the prevailing geological practices and thinking of the time would be beneficial for future Ruskin scholarship. My argument hints at some of these connections, but for the sake of brevity and focus, could not engage with them as deeply as is deserved. Such an investigation reveals aspects of his aesthetic view of the world, the structure of his observational inclinations, and the insistence on religious security in his history and workings of the earth. Further investigations into his geological theories would benefit scholarship on landscape, aesthetics, architecture, and religious belief.

What also emerged in my research was the dominance of religious belief in Ruskin's thinking and how it pervaded his thought at every level. Whether this is the inheritance of his mother's Evangelicalism or the evolution of his later Personal Religion, the need for spiritual security was always present. Even during the time of his religious 'unconversion', the spiritual question always remained. Ruskin just chose not to engage it directly, but it still pervaded his thoughts and remained a question to be answered by some other means. The effort was ultimately in vain, as he returned to religious belief in his later life. The secularizing of Ruskin's thought in certain areas often attempted to downplay the importance of his religious thinking, but as Wheeler and O'Gorman noted, it is impossible to understand Ruskin's thinking without that religious predisposition. Admittedly coming from this secularizing tradition, my argument attained a clearer direction once I embraced the obvious religious tones of Ruskin's thinking. Once I did, the argument for decay became easier to construct. I attribute this awakening to the persuasive and compelling arguments by Wheeler, O'Gorman, and others in whose debt a significant perspective of this thesis lies. The body of Ruskin's literature is diverse, expansive, and enthralling. Continued interest in his work grows yearly as new scholars uncover new ways of understanding, interpreting, and presenting his observations and ideas to the world. If this thesis has value, it will bring an alternate perspective on Ruskin's thinking on architecture, mountains, and wisdom.

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