Different Dreams? Ruskin, Whitman and the American West

Dr Christopher Donaldson

A lot of writers end up being known for a handful of phrases. That has certainly been Ruskin's fate. About a century ago, Virginia Woolf joked that A. J. Finberg's abridgement of *Modern Painters* signalled a change in Ruskin's standing. People, she surmised, evidently thought they still ought to read Ruskin, but they lacked 'the leisure to read him in the mass.'[1] Today, the situation is somewhat different. People may still lack the leisure to read Ruskin, but they now also often lack the patience. As Madhumita Lahiri has pointed out, the rise of the acronym 'tl;dr' (meaning 'too long; didn't read') may be symptomatic of a more general shift in modern literacy.[2] So, perhaps it is not surprising that when people refer to Ruskin's words they often recycle a handful of well-worn quotations: 'golden stain of time', 'no wealth but life', etc.

That is certainly the case when I think about Ruskin and the United States. My thoughts turn to that quip in *Fors Clavigera*. Many readers no doubt know the passage. It is the one in which Ruskin explains his reason for turning down invitations 'to visit America.' 'I could not', he confesses, 'even for a couple of months, live in a country so miserable as to possess no castles.'[3] The statement might seem trivial. In a way, it is. But I think it also reveals a fair bit about Ruskin's attitude towards the United States. Like Thomas Carlyle, Ruskin's valorisation of feudalism and medieval culture sat at odds with the democratic ideals of many nineteenth-century Americans.

To my mind, Ruskin's tendency to disparage American democracy makes Gabriel Meyer's article even more interesting. Ruskin may have softened to the United States by the time he met Francesca Alexander in the 1880s, but he was generally dismissive of Britain's old colony. In 1872, he had teased Charles Eliot Norton that 'all good Americans should live in England, for America's sake, to make her love her fathers' country' (37.51). For all that though, as Meyer has affirmed, Ruskin's influence on American culture was profound. This is a subject that has been examined before, of course. Sara Atwood's work springs to mind, as does that of Mark Frost, Mary Ann Stankiewicz and others.[4] But Meyer's consideration of Ruskin's influence on the 'California Dream' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, building as it does on William Deverell's thesis, opens up a new and important context for thinking about the international scope of Ruskin's legacy.

In doing so, I think Meyer's article also helps to frame a pair of questions that have been integral to the 'Ruskin Beyond Britain' seminar series. The first is a question about what bits of Ruskin get lost in translation or the process of transmission. The second is about the merits and demerits of Ruskin's thought as a point of reference for modern society. Picking up on Meyer's response to Deverell's work, which I also find persuasive, I would like to pose these questions by contrasting Ruskin's outlook with that of his American contemporary Walt Whitman.

---

[1] Virginia Woolf, '*Praeterita*', *The New Republic*, 28 December 1927, 165.

[2] Madhumita Lahiri, 'The View from Here – Too Long; Didn't Read', *English: Journal of the English Association*, 66.252 (2017), 1–5.

[3] John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera* (London: George Allen, 1871), Letter 10, in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), *The Library Edition of The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903–1912), vol. 27 (1907), p. 170. Hereafter all references to the Library Edition are cited parenthetically by volume and page number.

[4] See, indicatively, Sarah Atwood, '"Over-hopefulness and getting-on-ness": Ruskin, Nature, and America', *Printemps*, 91.2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.7411> [accessed 27 September 2021]; Mark Frost, 'A Disciple of Whitman and Ruskin: William Harrison Riley, Transatlantic Celebrity, and the Perils of Working-Class Fandom', *Critical Survey*, 27.3 (2015), 63–81; and Mary Ann Stankiewicz, '"The Eye Is a Nobler Organ": Ruskin and American Art Education', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 18.2 (1984), 51–64.

Reading Ruskin and Whitman side by side can be illuminating. The two had a good deal in common. The fact they were both born in 1819 is really just the tip of the iceberg. Both men, as Mark Frost has observed, 'constructed public profiles as generational prophets with broad appeal to the working classes'.[5] But there are also a lot of differences between Whitman and Ruskin. Their attitude towards American democracy is a notable case in point.

Consider the following minor coincidence. Ruskin's quip about America's lack of castles first appeared in print in the same year as Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*. Both were published in 1871. *Democratic Vistas* contains some of Whitman's more significant statements on Reconstruction-era society in the US. The pamphlet may not be the most lucidly written of Whitman's works. Portions of it have been 'justly described as diffuse'.[6] Still, Whitman's opening pages plainly spell out political ideals that set him and Ruskin apart. Take the following sentence, for instance: 'The United States are destined either to surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism, or else prove the most tremendous failure of time.'[7]

Now, it is true that *Democratic Vistas* was not a direct response to Ruskin. The pamphlet was really a rejoinder to Carlyle's anti-enfranchisement tirade, 'Shooting Niagara: And After?'. Ruskin did not share all the views Carlyle expressed in that essay, but he did share Carlyle's disdain for America and for the Reform Bill of 1867. Like Carlyle, Ruskin 'saw no prospect that further democracy would improve society'.[8] So, I think it is fair to say that Whitman's arguments in *Democratic Vistas* set him at variance not just with Carlyle, but with Ruskin as well.

That is not to say that Whitman was uncritical of American democracy. The first part of *Democratic Vistas* openly acknowledged what Whitman called the 'appalling dangers of universal suffrage' and the 'crude, defective streaks in all the strata of the common people'.[9] The essay, moreover, expressed his outrage at the failures of Reconstruction society. But *Democratic Vistas* also stressed that America was by no means 'beyond redemption'.[10] And, in a way that suits the 'California Dream' thesis, Whitman held out hope that such redemption might come from the West. The 'regions' around and beyond the Mississippi, he wrote:

> will compact and settle the traits of America [...]. From the north, intellect, the sun of things, also the idea of unswayable justice, anchor amid the last, the wildest tempests. From the south the living soul, the animus of good and bad, haughtily admitting no demonstration but its own. While from the west itself comes solid personality, with blood and brawn, and the deep quality of all-accepting fusion.[11]

That notion of an 'all-accepting fusion', as Meyer has suggested, is essential to the notion of the 'California Dream'. And it is worth noting that Whitman had already characterised California as a place for such 'fusion' a few years before *Democratic Vistas*.

The edition of *Leaves of Grass* he published after the Civil War contained a short poem entitled 'A Promise to California'. That poem originally appeared without a title in the 1860 edition of the collection, but the title Whitman added after the war drew an emphatic connection between California and, what C. D. Albin has called, the 'collective impulses of democracy.'[12] The final two lines of the poem bear this out:

---

[5] Frost, 'A Disciple of Whitman and Ruskin', p. 63.
[6] Arthur Wrobel, '*Democratic Vistas* (1871)', in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, ed. by J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), pp. 176–179 (p. 177).
[7] Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (New York: Redfield, 1871), p. 4.
[8] Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 398
[9] Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, pp. 4, 21.
[10] Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, p. 43.
[11] Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, p. 28.
[12] C. D. Albin, '"A Promise to California" (1860)', in *Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, pp. 552–53 (p. 553).

For I know very well that I and robust love belong
among you, inland, and along the Western Sea;
For These States tend inland, and toward the Western Sea—and I will also.[13]

Before reading Meyer's article, I would have said that these sentiments were more relevant than Ruskin to the 'healing of both body and body politic' that Deverell claims defined the ideal of California after the Civil War.[14] But I find Meyer's characterization of Ruskin's 'remarkable and remarkably under-reported' influence on the California Dream convincing, and that raises an interesting question.[15] Why should an undemocratic thinker, and one who was so preoccupied with the art of medieval Europe, have had such a profound effect on the redemptive, democratic dreams of the American West?

Part of the answer no doubt lies in the 'pick-and-mix' approach that defined the progressive reception of Ruskin in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Peter Gurney once pointed out in his study of the co-operative movement in England, many people 'warmed to Ruskin's moral critique of industrial capitalism', while ignoring or disavowing his 'undemocratic prescriptions'.[16] Much the same seems to have been the case in communities like Ruskin, Florida, Ruskin, Tennessee and Roycroft, New York, where the counterbalancing influence of William Morris also prevailed. And I do wonder if the same goes for the Ruskin Art Club and the Oakland Ruskin Club.

Another part of the answer to the questions I wish to pose lies in the degree to which California 'Dreamers', such as Mary Boyce, found themselves having to reconcile the dual appeals of nature and art. Boyce's claim that 1890s LA, though 'peerless in sunshine and flowers, offer[ed] few facilities for the study of art', stands out in this regard.[17] Ruskin may have advised artists to 'go to Nature', but many of his followers in the American West (and elsewhere) evidently found it was also necessary to seek guidance and inspiration in museums and galleries on the East Coast and, more especially, in Europe.

California had a history and art of its own, but a good number of newcomers to the state felt the need to borrow designs and materials from the 'Old World' to interpret it. In an odd twist of fate, some of those settlers even ended up building the castles that Ruskin claimed America lacked. Hearst Castle, near San Simeon, comes to mind, though I expect Ruskin would have dismissed such buildings as profane. That, however, is a subject for another day.

What I want to suggest here, as a provocation to Meyer's paper, is that Ruskin's reception in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century California was marked by a significant tension. On the one hand, what Gabriel has said about Ruskin is true. Ruskin began 'his career as an art critic' by attacking 'the Academy and conventional academic standard in landscape painting.'[18] On the other hand, however, Ruskin's ideas about art were deeply rooted in his own particular sense of the cultural patrimony of Western Europe. Ruskin may have cast off the academy, and he provided inspiration to others in doing so. His criticism created new possibilities. But as much as his aesthetics were revolutionary, his politics and sense of history were paternalistic and patrician. Again, a comparison with Whitman is helpful.

Whitman's notion of history was more Hegelian. In *Democratic Vistas*, he argued that 'the present' was 'the legitimate birth of the past, including feudalism,' but that it was not enthralled

---

[13] Walt Whitman, 'A Promise to California', *Leaves of Grass*, 4th edn (New York: Chapin, 1867), p. 108.
[14] William Deverell, 'Redemptive California? Re-thinking the post-Civil War', *Rethinking History*, 11.1 (2007), 61–78 (p. 62).
[15] See p. XXX above.
[16] Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 297.
[17] See p. XXX above.
[18] See p. XXX above.

to that past. He claimed that what had already been done was 'far less important' than 'results to come.'[19] In a poem Whitman wrote in the same year as *Democratic Vistas*, he elaborated on this point:

> Come Muse migrate from Greece and Ionia,
> Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts,
> That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Æneas', Odysseus' wanderings,
> Placard "Removed" and "To Let" on the rocks of your snowy Parnassus,
> Repeat at Jerusalem, place the notice high on Jaffa's gate and on Mount Moriah,
> The same on the walls of your German, French and Spanish castles, and Italian collections,
> For know a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide, untried domain awaits, demands you.[20]

There is a sense of '*translatio imperii*' here, but the focus is on the progress of the Spirit and not on the transference of tradition or the preservation of the past. Such thinking stands in marked contrast to Ruskin's principles.

Yet perhaps there is also some scope for a rapprochement between these two positions. Ruskin, after all, also held that the past was most truly valuable when it could be made to serve the needs of today. Bearing that in mind might help explain Ruskin's influence on the 'California Dream'. By the 1880s, Ruskin was already a part of a European past on which some Americans drew to define their own culture and way of life. And like a good deal of that history, Ruskin was reinvented in the process. Groups like the Ruskin Art Club took from Ruskin what they deemed most useful. Their reception of Ruskin was much like Finberg's abridgement of *Modern Painters*: an act of selective reading. But it served them in their efforts to make their 'dreams' of a new and better America come true.

---

[19] Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, p. 3.
[20] Walt Whitman, 'Song of the Exposition', *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David Mckay, 1891–1892), pp. 157–65 (p. 158).