

Even in this small plot – ‘this crock’ – the poem argues, the physical forces that shape all the universe are present.

Nicholson was not the first poet to put this idea in verse. The Romantics, and William Wordsworth especially, did so long before him. (Indeed, I have often wondered if there is not something of Wordsworth’s ‘meanest flower that blows’ in Nicholson’s humble geranium.)

But it is not only to the Romantics that we should look in seeking out the source of this strain in Nicholson’s thinking. Certainly, we should also turn our attention to the writings of that other bewhiskered lover of Cumberland, John Ruskin.

The notion of the particular as an embodiment of the universal is, of course, foundational to Ruskin’s own theory of genius.

One need look no further for proof of this than to a declaration made in his *Journal of a Tour through France and Chamouni*: the verse-diary Ruskin composed in imitation of Byron whilst touring the Continent at the age of sixteen. I quote the relevant stanza in full:

Give me a broken rock, a little moss,
A barberry-tree with fixed branches clinging,
A stream that clearly at its bottom shows
The polished pebbles with its ripples ringing;
These to be placed at Nature’s sweet dispose,
And decked with grass and flowers of her bringing;—
And I would ask no more; for I would dream
Of greater things associated with these,
Would see a mighty river in my stream,
And, in my rock, a mountain clothed with trees.
For Nature’s work is lovely to be seen;
Her finished part as finished whole will please;
And this should be a mountain-scene to me
My broken rock, my stream, and barberry-tree. (Canto II, 35)³

That these are the words of a young man attempting to put his thoughts into verse is clear. Though the imagery is apt, the rhythm is uneven and the rhyme strained.

The meaning of the whole stanza, however, is sincerely expressed, and it recommends a way of looking at the world that Ruskin would advocate for the rest of his life.

There is more that one might write about this than I have room to include here. But it seems significant to me that, despite some of the critical things Nicholson has to say about Ruskin in *The Lakers*, he and his Victorian forebear held a fair bit in common.

Both, notably, had a passion for geology and botany, and for natural history; and for both this passion was a wellspring of literary inspiration.

³ John Ruskin, *Journal of a Tour through France and Chamouni, 1835*, in *The Poems of John Ruskin*, ed. by W. G. Collingwood, 2 Vols. (Orpington & London: G. Allen, 1891), I, 181-223 (p. 201).

Their genius was, therefore, both poetic and scientific. Like Ruskin, Nicholson was a writer who could capture the workings of the natural world in language, and who could ‘see a mighty river in [a] stream’ – or even, as the lines quoted above attest, in a pot plant.

Even more so than Ruskin, though, Nicholson was a poet who made this way of seeing the world integral to the identity he created for himself in his verse.