

## RUSKIN AND MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE

An illustrated lecture given by Gordon Stainforth to  
The Ruskin Society of London at The Royal Institution  
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“To myself, mountains are the beginning and end of all natural scenery; in them, and in the forms of *inferior landscape* that lead to them, my affections are wholly bound up ... All my best enjoyment is owing to the imagination of the hills” — Notice that expression *imagination of the hills* — it’s a very important theme in Ruskin, and the main theme of this lecture tonight — “All my best enjoyment is owing to the imagination of the hill — colouring, with their far-away memories, every lowland stone and herb ... There is not one wave of the Seine but is associated in my mind with the first rise of the sandstone and forest pines of Fontainebleau; and with the *hope* of the Alps, as one leaves Paris with the horses’ heads to the south-east, the morning sun flashing on the bright waves at Charenton.”<sup>1</sup>

Ruskin actually wants to prove that there is “an increase of the absolute beauty of all scenery in exact proportion to its mountainous character — providing that the character be healthily mountainous”<sup>2</sup> ( — whatever he means by that!) And his conclusion is that “the best image which the world can give of Paradise is in the slope of the meadows and cornfields on the sides of a great Alp, with its purple rocks and eternal snows above.”<sup>3</sup>

Well, I’m not showing you any Alps tonight; instead I’ll be showing you pictures of British mountains taken on medium format, mostly for my book. I hope it will be a new, if rather eccentric, way of looking at them.

Now, there’s one thing I should just say before we start — although Ruskin’s enthusiasm for mountains is apparently boundless, it’s important to dispel the notion, at the outset, that he’s an out and out Romantic. There is another much darker side

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<sup>1</sup>MP 470

<sup>2</sup>MP 470

<sup>3</sup>MP 470

to him, with rather religious overtones. Ruskin never forgets what he calls “the dark sayings of nature”, and he says it is a “self-deception to ... refuse to acknowledge anything in the fair scenes of the natural creation but beneficence.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, he’s the first to admit that nature can be utterly savage and merciless. Even in earliest childhood, he says, his “pleasure in mountains, though in its principal influence entirely exhilarating and gladdening, was never free from a certain awe and melancholy, and a general sense of the meaning of death...” (!!!)<sup>5</sup> He describes mountain people living in hovels, and carcasses in rivers — that sort of thing; and somewhere else he actually goes so far as to say that mountains are representative of some sort of Evil Spirit in the world. One could argue then that he’s a romantic in the proper sense of the term, and not in our modern watered-down, one-sided sense. :Later he says: “This I know — that no good or lovely thing exists in this world without its correspondent darkness.”<sup>6</sup> “[This] is one aspect of things in the world,” he says, “ a fair world truly, but having, among its other aspects, this one, highly ambiguous.”<sup>7</sup> The world for Ruskin is never simple and entirely pleasant, but always full of layers and contradictions. Most of this though, on the darker meanings of mountains — Mountain Gloom, he calls it — he says by way of an extended preamble to his chapter “Mountain Glory”, with its great proclamation that mountains are the beginning and end of all natural scenery, and that they are of enormous benefit to mankind.

So, if we can have the lights down, please — I’ve got 90 slides to show you....

Ruskin’s starting point is to talk about mountains as a revelation, a discovery, as a contrast with what he calls the “frightful and monotonous present.”<sup>8</sup> “Though still forced,” he says, “ by rule and fashion to the producing and wearing all that is ugly, men steal out, half-ashamed of themselves for doing so, to the fields and mountains; and finding among them colour, and liberty, and variety, and power, they delight in these to an extent never before known; and rejoice in all the wildest shattering of the mountain side as an opposition to Gower Street...”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> MP 466

<sup>5</sup> MP 415

<sup>6</sup> MP 467

<sup>7</sup> MP 530

<sup>8</sup> MP 416

<sup>9</sup> MP 400 bott

Strictly speaking, the full romantic feeling for landscape can only be felt, he maintains, by the “modern European child.”<sup>10</sup> So we’re very privileged — to the extent that we’re European, and overgrown children at heart! It is the quality of “The freshness of all things to the child’s newly opened sight”<sup>11</sup> that Ruskin most wants to retain. He imagines what it must have been like for Turner first to see the hills as a child. (Though it’s obviously highly autobiographical of himself):

“One summer’s evening, after various wonderful stage-coach experiences on the north road, which gave him a love of stage-coaches ever after, he finds himself sitting alone among the hills. For the first time, the silence of Nature round him, her glory opened to him. Peace at last ... no roll of cart-wheel, nor mutter of sullen voices in the back shop; but curlew-cry in space of heaven, and welling of bell-toned streamlet by its shadowy rock. Freedom at last... Here is something God has made which no one has marred. Pride of purple rocks, river pools of blue, and misty lights of evening on immeasurable hills.”<sup>12</sup>

Ruskin describes how he himself was first taken as a child to the brow of Friar’s Crag in the Lake District (“The first thing I remember, as an event in life”) and what he remembers most about it is his “intense joy, mingled with awe.”<sup>13</sup> He goes to great lengths to analyse this strange feeling. He insists (rather surprisingly for him!), that there was *no* religious feeling mixed with it; however “there was a continual perception of Sanctity in the whole of nature, from the slightest thing to the vastest — an instinctive awe, mixed with delight; an indefinable thrill...”

“I cannot in the least describe the feeling,” he says, “but it would often make me shiver from head to foot with the joy and fear of it.” (Mention Tarn Hows)

This strange, complex emotion is quintessentially felt in the *first sighting of a great mountain*. This is his classic description of his first sighting of the Alps — which I’m sure the members of the Ruskin Society will be familiar with:

“— Suddenly — behold — beyond! There was no thought in any of us for a moment of their being clouds. They were clear as crystal, sharp on the pure horizon sky ... Infinitely beyond all that we had

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<sup>10</sup> MP 416

<sup>11</sup> MP 416

<sup>12</sup> MP 582

<sup>13</sup> MP 414

ever thought or dreamed — the seen walls of lost Eden could not have been more beautiful to us; not more awful, round heaven, the wall of sacred Death.”<sup>14</sup> And he says that for him it was an “entrance into life”.

“Examine the extraordinary emotion you feel,” he says, “on first seeing a great mountain, and you will find [it] ... hanging, like dew on gossamer, on a curious web of subtle fancy and imperfect knowledge. First, you have a vague idea of its size, coupled with wonder at the work of the great Builder of its walls and foundations, then an apprehension of its eternity, and a pathetic sense of your own transientness; and then, in this very sadness, a sense of strange companionship with past generations in seeing what they saw. They did not see the clouds that are floating over your head, nor the road by which you are travelling. But they saw *that..*”

One can’t overstress the complexity of the emotion that Ruskin is trying to describe. The one thing he is not saying is that mountains are simply beautiful.

“I am not sure,” he says, “that the idea of beauty was meant in general to be very strictly connected with such mountain forms: one does not, instinctively, speak or think of a ‘Beautiful Precipice’. They have, however, their beauty, and it is infinite.”<sup>15</sup> (This, incidentally, is exactly how Edmund Burke describes our reactions to the *sublime* — something that is both aesthetically pleasing and awesome at the same time. The awe having a great deal to do with the sheer scale, the vastness of the scenery.)

There are “precipices that are robed with everlasting mourning, for ever tottering like a great fortress shaken by war; touched by no hue of life on buttress or ledge, but, to the utmost, desolate: no motion but their own mortal shivering; knowing no sound of living voice or living tread, cheered by neither the kid’s bleat nor the marmot’s cry; haunted only by uninterpreted echoes from far off...” He goes on a lot more — it’s superb — ending with: “A brown moth, opening and shutting its wings upon a grain of dust, may be the only thing that moves, or feels, in all the waste of a weary precipice, darkening five thousand feet of the blue depth of heaven.”<sup>16</sup> (We’re looking at about 1,500 feet of Coire Toll an Lochan, An Teallach.)

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<sup>14</sup> Praet 103

<sup>15</sup> MP IV: 253

<sup>16</sup> MP IV: 235

So the main point Ruskin is making is that we're in a completely new dimension — everything is utterly different. Certainly it's completely different from ordinary city life — and, for this reason, Ruskin never tires of contrasting the highlands with the lowlands. For example:

“Neither in its clearness, its colour, its calmness of space, or its wrath, can water be conceived by a lowlander, out of sight of the sea... The sea itself, though it can be clear, is never calm in the sense that a mountain lake can be calm. The sea seems only to pause; the mountain lake to sleep, and to dream.”<sup>17</sup>

And, again:

“There is no effect of sky possible in the lowlands which may not in equal perfection be seen among the hills; but there are effects by tens of thousands, for ever invisible and inconceivable to the inhabitants of the plains, manifested among the hills in the course of one day...”

“And of the nobler cloud manifestations — the breaking of their troublous seas against the crags ... or their going forth of the morning along their pavements of moving marble, level-laid between dome and dome of snow — of these things there can be as little imagination or understanding in an inhabitant of the plains as of the scenery of another planet...”<sup>18</sup> (Notice how Ruskin always speaks of the lowlander as a lower, and very ignorant form of life!)

His conclusion is that: “The superiority of the mountains in all these things to the lowland is as measurable as the wealth of a museum compared with that of a simply furnished chamber. They seem to have been built for the human race as at once their schools and cathedrals; full of treasures of illuminated manuscript for the scholar, and quiet in pale cloisters for the thinker... These great cathedrals of the earth, with their gates of rock, pavements of cloud, choirs of stream and stone, altars of snow, and vaults of purple traversed by the continual stars ...”<sup>19</sup>

“The mountains of the earth are its natural altars, overlaid with gold, and bright with brodered work of flowers, and with their clouds resting on them as the smoke of a continual sacrifice...”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> MP 471

<sup>18</sup> MP 473

<sup>19</sup> MP 473

<sup>20</sup> MP 481

Well — so much for Ruskin’s general emotions about mountains. Where he differs from all other artists and writers before him is in the extraordinary detail with which he studies mountain forms. Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, called “On Mountain Beauty”, is probably the most painstaking and profound ever made by an artist — or certainly by a British artist. He is fascinated above all by the way mountains are *made*.

“Mountains are to the rest of the body of the earth what violent muscular action is to the body of man. The muscles and tendons of its anatomy are, in the mountain, brought out with force and convulsive energy, full of expression, passion, and strength... This, then, is the first grand principle of the truth of the earth. The spirit of the hills is action, that of the lowlands repose...”<sup>21</sup>

Ruskin talks of all mountains having “a particular cast and inclination; like the exertion of voluntary power in a definite direction, an internal spirit, manifesting itself in every crag, and breathing in every slope, flinging and forcing the mighty mass towards the heaven with an expression and an energy like that of life.”<sup>22</sup>

“Their mass seems the least yielding, least to be softened of all earthly substance. And, behold, as we look further into it \* it is all touched and troubled like waves by a summer breeze; rippled far more delicately than sea or lakes are rippled; they only undulate - this rock trembles through its every fibre like the chords of an Æolian harp ... Into the heart of all these great mountains, through every tossing of their boundless crests ... flows that strange quivering of their substance.”<sup>23</sup>

There is, Ruskin notices, “some great harmony among the summits”, a “tendency to throw themselves into tidal waves, closely resembling those of the sea itself; sometimes in free tossing towards the sky, but more \* frequently still in the form of breakers, concave and steep on one side, convex and less steep on the other...”<sup>24</sup>

We will “soon be amazed,” he says, “by the complexity, endlessness, and harmony of the curvatures. [We] will find that there is not one line in all that rock which is not an infinite curve, and united in some intricate way with others ... the multitudinous

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<sup>21</sup> MP 114

<sup>22</sup> MP 122

<sup>23</sup> 107 *Ruskin Today*

<sup>24</sup> MP IV: 209-10

involution of flowing line, passing from swift to slight curvature, or slight to swift, at every instant...”<sup>25</sup>

But he says that although a mountain was “created with one ruling instinct” — he’s talking particularly of mountain building movements, in geological terms, of the “strike” and folding — its destiny depended nevertheless on the direction of the small and all but invisible workings of atmosphere, water and ice.

“Every one of these notable ravines and crags is the expression, not of any sudden violence done to the mountain, but of its little habits, persisted in continually ... commissioned, with a touch more tender than that of a child’s finger — as silent and slight as the fall of a half-checked tear on a maiden’s cheek — to fix for ever the forms of peak and precipice ... Once the little stone evaded — once the dim furrow traced — and the peak was for ever invested with its majesty, the ravine for ever doomed to its degradation.”<sup>26</sup>

Now, in all this talking of nature as (being) an artist, we might think that Ruskin is falling into a trap which he himself strongly criticises, of treating landscape as if it were alive in some human or animal sense. This he calls the *Pathetic Fallacy* — which basically is to allow our uncontrolled emotions to distort our vision. But what Ruskin does not deny is that there is some spirit of force in Nature. It might at first seem as if his Pathetic Fallacy argument is a straightforward attack on *animism* — which is speaking of the inanimate world as if it were living. (The very compressed account of this in my book, “Eyes to the Hills”, certainly implies this.) No: the Pathetic Fallacy is all to do with *our* emotions. It is the failing of those “who feel strongly, think weakly and see untruly”. We think of ourselves as so important that we treat nature as a mirror of our own emotions.— of our own “pathetic” selves one might say! Seeing mountains as angry, because we are angry, as aggressive when we are frightened— and, when we are happy, saying, for example, that they skip like lambs. All this is more or less meaningless and gives an entirely false account of mountains as they are. It is, Ruskin says, “always the sign of a morbid state of mind, and a comparatively weak one.” The idea that mountains say anything or feel anything is wishful, romantic, mystical nonsense.

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<sup>25</sup> MP IV: 280

<sup>26</sup> MP IV: 208-9

So, for Ruskin, the honest way to look at mountains is to say: “I (the artist, observer) am nothing, and less than nothing; but these crags and heaths and clouds, how great they are, how lovely, how for ever to be beloved, *only* for their *own silent, thoughtless* sake!”<sup>27</sup>

But, what Ruskin *never* denies is that there is a “mysterious sense of *unaccountable life* in the things themselves.”<sup>28</sup> He maintains that even “the simplest forms of Nature are strangely animated by the sense of a Divine presence...”<sup>29</sup> We have the “sense of the presence and power of a Great Spirit as no mere reasoning can either induce or controvert.” The best summary of his rather paradoxical position on the Pathetic Fallacy is when he says that Nature has “an animation and pathos of its *own* , wholly irrespective of *human* presence or passion.”<sup>30</sup> And this he calls “the *power* of landscape.”<sup>31</sup> Now, when Ruskin speaks of *power* it is important to realise that this is not something related to scale. “To the rightly perceiving mind,” he says, “there is the same infinity, the same majesty, the same power, the same unity, and the same perfection manifest ... in the mouldering of the dust as in the kindling of the day-star.”<sup>32</sup> Like Blake’s grain of sand, he likes to speak of “the deep infinity of the thing itself.”<sup>33</sup>

“He who can take no interest in what is small, will take false interest in what is great.”<sup>34</sup> “A stone, when it is examined, will be found to be a *mountain in miniature* . The fineness of Nature’s work is so great, that, into a single block, a foot or two in diameter, she can compress as many changes of form and structure, on a small scale, as she needs for her mountains on a large one...”<sup>35</sup>

Ruskin goes on: “When a rock of any kind has lain for some time exposed to the weather, Nature finishes it in her own way; first, she takes wonderful pains about its forms, sculpturing it into exquisite variety of dint and dimple, and rounding or hollowing it into contours, which for fineness no human hand can follow; then she colours it; and every one of her touches of colour ... is a

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<sup>27</sup> MP 408

<sup>28</sup> MP 380

<sup>29</sup> MP 423

<sup>30</sup> MP 407

<sup>31</sup> MP (407 and) 521

<sup>32</sup> MP 135

<sup>33</sup> MP IV: 76

<sup>34</sup> MP 135

<sup>35</sup> MP IV: 196



minute forest of living trees, glorious in strength and beauty, and concealing wonders of structure which in all probability are mysteries even to the eyes of angels.”<sup>36</sup> It is, he concludes, “a piece of divine art.”<sup>37</sup>

Primarily, though, — as works of art — Ruskin sees mountains as *sculpture*.

One of the most striking characteristics of high mountain crags he notices is the way they demonstrate what Homer and Dante described as “*cut rocks*”. Both poets, he said, had “got at one character which [is] the essence of the noblest rocks. As distinguished from all other natural forms — from fibres which are torn, crystals which are broken, stones which are rounded or worn, animal and vegetable forms which are grown or moulded — the true hard rock or precipice is notably a thing *cut*, its inner *grain* or structure seeming to have less to do with its form than is seen in any other object or substance whatsoever...”<sup>38</sup>

However, Ruskin is not happy just to leave the matter there, for he notices that there is something very special about the way in which rocks are “cut”. “Nature gives us a more clear demonstration of her will. She is driven to make *fracture* the law of being [of these forms] ... [But] as soon as she is compelled to do this, she changes the law of fracture itself. ‘Growth’, she seems to say, ‘is not essential to my work, nor concealment, nor softness; but *curvature* is, and if I must produce my forms by breaking them, the fracture itself shall be in curves... [That is to say,] the appointments of typical beauty which have been made over all creatures shall not be abandoned; and the rocks shall be ruled, in their perpetual perishing, by the same ordinances that direct the bending of the reed and the blush of the rose.’”<sup>39</sup>

So Ruskin sees nature as a very dynamic thing. But he’s not just talking about erosion over millions of years, he’s also talking about the way a scene is continually changing from moment to moment. And in this respect he sees the role the atmosphere plays as vitally important. He sees the *air* almost as a sort of creative force, or *soul* — breathing life into the inanimate world, just as it breathes creativity into man. (“Inspiration”...??) In an

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<sup>36</sup>MP IV:340

<sup>37</sup>MP IV:340

<sup>38</sup>MP IV:233-4

<sup>39</sup>MP IV

extraordinary lecture Ruskin gave to the citizens of Tunbridge Wells in 1858 he said:

“All the substance of which the earth is made sucks and breathes the brilliancy of the atmosphere; ...There is this curious lesson in even the most insignificant pebble. You look upon it at first as if it were earth only. ‘Nay,’ it answers, ‘I am not earth— I am earth and air in one, part of that blue heaven which you love, and long for, is already in me; it is all my life — without it I should be nothing, and able for nothing ... but, because there is, according to my need and place in creation, a kind of *soul* in me, I have become capable of good, and *helpful in the circles of vitality*.”<sup>40</sup> An editor has commented here: “Ruskin is exceptionally oblique in this part of the lecture”!

Whatever Ruskin means, the main point for *us* is that the air and the atmosphere are an absolutely *essential part* of the mountain landscape, without which it would be dead; and, for this reason, Ruskin spends almost as much time discussing cloud formations as he does rock structures. He sees them as actually having much in common. “How is a cloud outlined?”\* he wants to know “...You cannot have in the open air, angles and wedges and coils and cliffs of cold. Yet the vapour stops suddenly, sharp and steep as a rock, or thrusts itself across the gates of heaven in likeness of a brazen bar; or falls into ripples like sand; or into waving shreds and tongues as fire. On what anvils and wheels is the vapour pointed, twisted, hammered, whirled, as the potter’s clay?”<sup>41</sup>

Now, from all this, I want to draw some lessons for mountain photography from Ruskin — particularly this stress on the ever-changing nature of a mountain landscape — the ever-changing air and the atmosphere and the light. The ever-changing conditions and appearance. The essence of photography is about the fleeting moment in an ever-changing world. Even a mountain landscape photo — or *especially* a mountain landscape photo — must always have a sense of *being in time*.

“Nothing can be natural which is monotonous; nothing true which only tells one story.”<sup>42</sup> (He’s talking about painting, but it applies just as well to photography.)

To understand a landscape properly we need to see it in many different conditions. We need to photograph it over a period of

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<sup>40</sup>Ruskin Today 117

<sup>41</sup>Ruskin Today 98

<sup>42</sup>MP 78

time, to create a *portfolio*. There is no such thing as one definitive image of a mountain (I go into this in “Eyes to the Hills”).

What Ruskin calls the “changeful and typical *aspects*”<sup>43</sup> of nature is the thing that fascinates him most; and he adds that the effect these have upon the eye or heart (rather like the effect of minor and major scales in music) is at least as important as their internal physical make-up.<sup>44</sup>

The two main factors in the continually changing landscape are the continually changing surface and the continually changing light, which are both the result of the changing atmosphere — *and by light I also mean colour* i.e. the whole colour spectrum of light — its hue, its colour temperature and the way it is diffused by the atmosphere, as well as its tone or brightness. Light always has colour.

“Nothing is more common,” Ruskin says, “than to hear it spoken of as a subordinate beauty.”<sup>45</sup> People who regard colour “as a vulgar thing ... end by not being able to see colour at all.”<sup>46</sup> Only in colour photography can the full subtlety of nature be brought out — in fact, it’s the *one* thing colour photography is uniquely able to do.

Ruskin goes so far as to say that colour is “the most sacred element of all visible things.”<sup>47</sup>; “It is richly bestowed on the highest works of creation, and the eminent sign and seal of perfection in them.”<sup>48</sup>

“[Colour] is just as divine and distinct in its power as music, only infinitely more varied in its harmonies”<sup>49</sup>, and elsewhere he refers to it as “visible music”, and speaks of “the entire *melody* of colour”.<sup>50</sup> And from this he concludes that the “perception of colour is a gift just as definitely granted to one person, and denied to another, as an ear for music...”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>MP 423

<sup>44</sup>MP 424

<sup>45</sup>SVII:V:30

<sup>46</sup>MP 455

<sup>47</sup>MP 390

<sup>48</sup>MP 455-56

<sup>49</sup>RT 164

<sup>50</sup>MP 56

<sup>51</sup>SV II:IV:28

I'm *not* saying that a landscape need be very colourful, only that the subtlety of colour is important, even on a dull day.

In other words, there are a thousand varieties of light.

Now, in the final part of the lecture I want to talk about the human dimension in the mountain landscape — the human factor. Ruskin dwells at length on what he calls “the essential connection of the power of landscape with human emotion”<sup>52</sup>, and how it relates to the world of human imagination. Ruskin’s emphasis on the importance of imagination in seeing is actually very modern.

“The real majesty of the appearance of a thing,” he says, “depends upon that penetrating, possession-taking power of the imagination, which ... [is] the very life of the man, considered as a *seeing* creature.”<sup>53</sup> We come back to that phrase (I mentioned at the beginning) “The imagination of the hills.” Likewise, in photography, I believe a great mountain photo is one which relates to the world of our imagination. (I’m not saying this is a great mountain photo, by the way!)

As Ruskin puts it: “The work of nature is ... eminently to get at (the) imaginative power in the beholder, and all its facts are of no use whatever if it does not.”<sup>54</sup> The *emotional* impact is all important. One of the key elements, for example, which is so difficult to convey in a mountain photograph\* is *vastness*. Yet it is one of the most essential of their *sublime* qualities. One of the reasons a mountain captures the imagination is that it is a work of art on a colossal scale. I agree with Ruskin when he criticises those artists who can only see mountains “as pieces of colour of a certain shape. The powers they represent, of *include*, are invisible to them ... they miss the main and mighty lines.”<sup>55</sup>

Many of my favourite shots have started as what can best be described as “dream images”, often based on mountains I have never seen, except in small, fuzzy black and white photos — as was the case here, of Suilven from the east — of from memories of them from long ago. Ruskin uses the term “dream vision” — when talking of Turner — who else! — and we are left with his

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<sup>52</sup>MP 521

<sup>53</sup>MP 348

<sup>54</sup>MP 351

<sup>55</sup>MP507

wonderful image of “the imagination brooding and wandering, but dream-gifted...”<sup>56</sup>

A phrase I use in my book, from Novalis: “Dream becomes world; world becomes dream.”

I can’t resist ending this brief discussion on photography with the description Ruskin gives of what (he regards as) the ideal characteristics of the modern landscape painter (as usual, he means Turner!):

“... pre-eminently patient and reserved; observant, not curious — comprehensive, not conjectural; calm exceedingly; unerring, \* constant, terrible in steadfastness of intent; unconquerable; incomprehensible...!”<sup>57</sup> That, incidentally, is the tent I use on all my high mountain camps.

Here it is in the camera position below Suilven, after a blizzard, some five miles from the (nearest) road.

This for me is the secret of mountain photography: to get up and live in the mountains, to be in or very near the camera positions.

And now I want to finish by summarising what Ruskin sees as the main value of appreciating mountains — the “Landscape instinct” he calls it. Today, he would almost certainly have belonged to Friends of the Earth or the Green Party. Rather predictably, he deplores the ravages of advancing tourism, which is the result, he says, of “All the foulness of the modern lust of wealth, without its practical intelligences.”<sup>58</sup>

But he makes some subtler points. In particular, he is bothered that “(Our modern) pleasure in the mountains is never mingled with fear ... as with the medieval; it is always free and fearless ... but *wholly unreflective*; our modern society in general goes to the mountains, not to fast, but to feast, and leaves their glaciers covered with chicken-bones and egg-shells.”<sup>59</sup> [Talk about shot] “Wherever I ... travel in England or abroad, I see that men, wherever they can reach, destroy all beauty ... Every perfect and lovely spot which they can touch, they defile.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>MP445

<sup>57</sup>MP507

<sup>58</sup>SL Intro

<sup>59</sup>MP 398

<sup>60</sup>MP 605

He sums up in a very famous phrase: “You make railroads of the aisles of the cathedrals of the earth, and eat off their altars.”<sup>61</sup>

Ruskin’s attitude towards the (then) very new sport of *mountaineering* was rather ambiguous. At first he greeted it with outright disdain:

“All true lover of natural beauty hold it in reverence so deep, that they would as soon think of climbing the pillars of the choir of Beauvais for a gymnastic exercise, as of making a playground of the Alps.” And a mountain face, he says, is treated “only as an unoccupied advertisement wall for chalking names upon.”<sup>62</sup>

Well, I’m glad to say he later came to modify his views “No blame,” he now said, “ought to attach to the (climber) for incurring danger ... some experience of distinct peril, and the acquirements of habits of quick and calm action in its presence, are necessary elements at some period of life...”<sup>63</sup> And in a letter to his father from Chamonix in 1863 he said how bad for your character it is to turn back from a dangerous place: “you are to that extent weaker, more lifeless, ... more liable to passion and error in the future; whereas, if you go through with the danger ... you come out of the encounter ... fitter for every sort of work and trial, and *nothing but danger* produces this effect>“

That’s all very well as far as it goes - I want to develop a much more *positive thesis*. Climbing is *not* just about coping with danger. Actually, most of the time it’s much less dangerous than it looks. I think it’s much more to do with solving a puzzle set by nature. Laid dormant for thousands of years. Discovered. etc.

Taking an idea from Ruskin – that everything in nature seems to have been “prepared with distinct reference to us, and bears evidence of having been produced by the power of the same spirit as our own”<sup>64</sup> - I want to argue that the climber enters into the playful, creative spirit of nature. The rock artist interacting with a natural work of art. It is actually one of the closest ways we can get to the inanimate world, and appreciate what is given, as a game, a puzzle, by the creative, playful spirit of nature. As I put it in my book:

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<sup>61</sup>SL Intro

<sup>62</sup>SL Intro

<sup>63</sup>SL Intro, quoted Lunn

<sup>64</sup>Athena, 99

“... By working out the problems posed by these natural forms, the human spirit - essentially a spirit of exploration and play, curiosity and cunning - comes into direct contact with the ‘genius’ of the rock. \*

Here, where the earth’s surface has been thrown up and laid bare in enormous three-dimensional sculptures ... is to be found the supreme landscape of adventure, a playground par excellence for the whole superfluity of the human spirit.”<sup>65</sup>

To go back to Ruskin, we are left with the very important and interesting idea that mountains are “centres of imaginative energy”<sup>66</sup>, and that the whole of nature is a “living hieroglyph ... a thing with an inner language.”<sup>67</sup> For him, “the entire surface of the earth, and its waters” is “... a series of changing forms ... all of which have reference ... to the human intelligence that perceives them.”<sup>68</sup>

And he says that we actually have a *moral* duty<sup>69</sup> to go into the mountains and “learn” from them. To compress his argument considerably, and probably simplify it, what he is saying (more or less) comes down to this: Without us, the mountains are nothing: and without them, we are nothing.

Let’s take these two final points one at a time:

First: without us mountains are nothing. A landscape for Ruskin is dead without the human imagination that is brought to bear on it:

“Fragrant tissue of flowers, golden circlets of clouds, are only fair,” he says, “when they meet the fondness of human thoughts<sup>70</sup> ... Desert \_ whether of leaf or sand - true desertness is not in want of leaves, but of life. Where humanity is not, the best natural beauty is more than vain.<sup>71</sup> ... Man is the sun of the world; more than the real sun. Where he is, are the tropics, where he is not, the ice-world.”<sup>72</sup>

The other point was: Without mountains, we are nothing.

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<sup>65</sup>Eyes to the Hills

<sup>66</sup>MP 475

<sup>67</sup>Athena 104-5

<sup>68</sup>Athena 132

<sup>69</sup>241 MP?

<sup>70</sup>MP 521

<sup>71</sup>MP 522

<sup>72</sup>MP 524

Ruskin wonders: “Was all that granite sculpture and floral painting done by the angels in vain?”

“Not so,” he says<sup>73</sup> Quite apart from supplying “utilities” such as water and stones for building, they are “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.”<sup>74</sup>

“... Where at first, to the careless or cold observer, all seems severe or purposeless, the well-being of man has chiefly been consulted (— that’s what he says! —), and his sincerely awakened intelligence may find wealth in every falling rock, and wisdom in every talking wave.”<sup>75</sup>

And, in a key phrase, he asks us to consider “the *generosity or instruction of the hills*” - (and) asks “how far, in past ages, they have been thanked, or listened to; and how far, in coming ages, it may be well for us to accept them for tutors, or seek them for friends.”<sup>76</sup>

“...It may *not* seem form the general language concerning them ... that mountains have had serious influence on human intellect; but it will not, I think be difficult to show that their *occult influence* has been both constant and essential to the progress of the race.”<sup>77</sup>

What he seems to mean is that the love of landscape, and of mountains in particular, is very important for civilised man. In his great climactic central chapter in *Modern Painters*, entitled “The Moral of Landscape” — all this is very compressed — his conclusion is that “When the love of nature is (completely) absent form any mind, that mind is in *many other* respects *hard, worldly, and degraded*, but, when it is present, (and characteristically he overstates his case!) it “is an *invariable* (!) sign of goodness of heart and justness of moral perception (though by mor means of moral *practice* he hastens to add!)<sup>78</sup>

What cannot be overstressed, he says, is the “total inconsistency [of the landscape instinct] with all evil passion; its absolute

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<sup>73</sup>MP 473

<sup>74</sup>MP 94

<sup>75</sup>MP 458

<sup>76</sup>MP 458

<sup>77</sup>MP 473

<sup>78</sup>MP 418



contrariety to all care, hatred, envy, anxiety, and moroseness. A feeling of this kind is assuredly not one to be lightly repressed, or treated with contempt.”<sup>79</sup>

And now he gets into overdrive (he often reminds me of Sam Goldwyn wanting films to start with an earthquake and then work their way up to a climax!)

“The love of nature ... is precisely the most healthy element that distinctly belongs to us; and ... out of it, cultivated no longer in levity or ignorance, but in earnestness, and *as a duty*, results will spring of an importance at present inconceivable; and lights arise, which, for the first time in man’s history, will reveal to him the true nature of his life, and the true field for his energies ...”<sup>80</sup>

Thank you

(Footnote references are to John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, London, 1856)

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<sup>79</sup>MP 417

<sup>80</sup>MP 419-20