



**'Seeing within the temple of the Heart': Beauty and *Theoria* in
Ruskin's *Modern Painters***

Nikolas Prassas
University of Oxford

'...this I know, that if a prophet touched your eyes, you might
in an instant see all those eternal spaces filled with the
heavenly host...'

Fors Clavigera, Letter 75

In September of 1876, during one of his sojourns in the Swiss Alps, John Ruskin wrote to a friend that among the points of 'true value' realised in the initial volumes of *Modern Painters* none were more important than 'the distinction made between ordinary sight, and what – there being no English word for it – I was forced to call by the Greek one "Theoria".'¹ That Ruskin considered the principal achievement of his first major work to be the elucidation of the concept of *theoria* is confirmed when we consider the 'Readings in *Modern Painters*' written a year later and delivered at the University of Oxford where he was then the incumbent professor of Fine Arts. In the second lecture that he delivered, Ruskin returns his attention to the first and second volumes of *Modern Painters*, and there

1 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), XXIX: *Fors Clavigera* (1907), pp. 575-6.

discovers that the 'essential business of the book' had been entirely unknown to him as he wrote it. The 'main value' of this work, Ruskin now recognised, was not, as he had thought, in the pages on Turner and the canons of pictorial art, but 'in the very adoption of and insistence upon the Greek term *Theoria*, instead of sight or perception.'² Despite these coupled assertions as to the importance of the concept of *theoria* both it, and the account of beauty on which it is founded, have been largely disregarded by readers of *Modern Painters*. This neglect had begun so early that it was noted by Ruskin himself. At the close of his life, when only the lamp of memory still burned, we find Ruskin writing in *Praeterita* that the second volume of *Modern Painters* is 'usually read only for its pretty passages; its theory of beauty is scarcely ever noticed.'³ After Ruskin's death, and with the dwindling of what Chesterton called his 'vague but vast'⁴ influence, his account of beauty and its theoretic apprehension sunk into complete desuetude. Although there have been intermittent attempts to lift the ideas of *Modern Painters II* out of obscurity, most notably in the work of Peter Fuller and, more recently, Paul Guyer, Ruskin's aesthetics are still almost wholly ignored.⁵

One of the reasons for this neglect may be found in that word – 'aesthetics' – which always sits so uneasily in an essay on Ruskin. It is his misfortune that on the one occasion he decided to do violence to the conventions of his own language, and give to a common term an uncommon usage, Ruskin chose 'aesthetics'. However, whether

2 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), XXII: *Lectures on Landscape, Michelangelo & Tintoret* (1906), p. 512.

3 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), XXXV: *Praeterita and Dilecta* (1908), p. 414.

4 G K Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 44.

5 See P. Fuller, *Theoria: Art and the Absence of Grace* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988) and P. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics: Vol. II The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 187-229.

Ruskin's theory ruined itself on a linguistic infelicity or by some other means, it is not our present purpose to discover. Rather, this essay should be understood as an effort in redress. It shall be our business to determine what exactly Ruskin's theory of beauty and its contemplation consists in and what value we should ascribe to it. In the course of our inquiry I mean to show that the set of doctrines concerning theoretic contemplation and the nature of beauty propounded in *Modern Painters II* are not only coherent but that they are original. In so doing I shall put this essay into contention with the work of two early readers and admirers of Ruskin – E T Cook and A W Knight. For Cook, Ruskin's work was uniformly coherent but not original; the Gospel according to Ruskin is, we are told, 'one of glad tidings, not of news.'⁶ For Knight, what was original in Ruskin's work on beauty came at the cost of its coherence, *Modern Painters* being for him 'philosophically unsystematic to the last degree.'⁷ Should we be able to show that, *pace* Cook, Ruskin's theory of beauty is significantly original, and that, *pace* Knight, it has a more than factitious unity of argument, the ultimate concern of this paper might be fulfilled – that is, to 'reanimate' Ruskin's theory and thereby show that it warrants our renewed attention.

Before we enter the quick of interpretation it is necessary first to make a brief digression on the architecture of the essay and the manner in which our investigation shall be conducted. The essay is arranged into three sections; the first concerns what we might call the subjective pole of Ruskin's account of beauty – his analysis of the faculties of mind and the way they are exercised in the act of theoretic contemplation. The second section then moves from the subjective to the objective pole – giving an account of those beautiful things that are the objective correlates of *theoria*. Our analysis will finally resolve into a third section where we consider

6 E. T. Cook, *Studies in Ruskin: Some Aspects of the Work and Teaching of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1890), p. 3.

7 A. W. Knight, *The Philosophy of the Beautiful vol. I* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1890), p. 221.

how Ruskin conceives of the value of beauty and of the deprivation suffered by those who can no longer apprehend it. It will by now be clear that this essay is founded on and guided by an overriding prejudice – that Ruskin's work, especially in the field of aesthetics, is of undiminished significance. To borrow from Paul Ricoeur, our interpretation is informed not by 'suspicion'⁸ but the hope of rectifying and restoring the meaning of an important text. If we were to put this in Ruskin's terms we might say that our interpretation is guided by what he calls 'love'. It is, for Ruskin, love, not critical suspicion, that guarantees the rectitude of our judgements and our taste. For taste exalted by love, he tells us, has delights 'too penetrating and too living, for any whitewashed objects or shallow fountain long to endure or supply. It clasps all that it loves so hard, that it crushes it if it be hollow.'⁹ Should this essay be successful, it will have demonstrated that the ideas expressed in *Modern Painters II* are substantial enough to survive this test.

(1) Aesthesis and Theoria

Ruskin begins the opening chapter of *Modern Painters II* with an assertion of its main purpose. The first volume was a vindication of the work of those English landscape painters, Turner chief among them, who had recalled the artist to his proper function and restored the health of European painting. Large portions of the book were concerned with the observation of natural forms and the means by which the created world could be represented with canvas and pigment. In this second volume Ruskin moves from 'things outward and sensibly demonstrable' to the 'value and meaning of mental impressions'¹⁰. In other words, the issue of this volume, at least initially, is not the world of things, but the powers or aptitudes

8 P. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven; London; Yale University Press, 1970), p. 28.

9 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), IV: *Modern Painters II* (1903), p. 59.

10 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 25.

of the mind – the various faculties or energies that we exercise as we come to know the world about us. As G C Lichtenberg would put it, the focus shifts from the 'world I am not' to the 'world that I am.'¹¹ This move from world to world brings with it a transformation in tone and style. Although Ruskin would still convict himself of rashness as he revised this volume of *Modern Painters* in 1883, he is a more cautious and a more diffident writer when he deals with this second, interior world. For of the two it seems that Ruskin thought the inner world of man to be the more mysterious. Indeed, he argues that the mistake of those 'metaphysicians' (always a term of derogation for Ruskin) who endeavour to 'fathom and explain the essence of the faculties of mind' is that they invariably 'lose sight of all that cannot be explained' about our soul.¹² Because we, as human beings, are already so much involved in the mystery of our faculties we can only 'feel' and 'define' rather than explain.

Acknowledging this mystery, Ruskin does not attempt to enumerate all the faculties that constitute the mind or to describe every relation that extends between them. To produce such an anatomy would have driven him far from the centre of his primary concern. What he insists upon is that we must posit three separate faculties to account for the different ways man perceives the world – the aesthetic, the theoretic and the imaginative – and that these perceptual faculties form a significant constellation. Given the limits of our essay, the third faculty in this triad will be placed in parentheses so that the theoretic and the aesthetic might be treated in isolation, as it is these two that are most profoundly involved in the apprehension of beauty. The first thing we should note about this dyad of faculties is that the relation that obtains between the theoretic and the aesthetic is not one of parity but of subordination and superordination. The aesthetic faculty, according to Ruskin, is

11 G. C. Lichtenberg, *Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: Philosophical Writings*, trans. S Tester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), p. 73.

12 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 224.

of a lower order or 'rank'¹³ than that of the theoretic as it is not a specific faculty of man but one that he shares with the brutes. We must remember that for Ruskin the nature of man is twofold; he is 'coherently and irrevocably' animal and spiritual.¹⁴ To suppose man to be exclusively of the one nature or the other would be to mutilate him. Being such a creature he is invested with certain capacities that exalt him above the rest of the visible creation. Among other things, it is the theoretic faculty that gives man his 'specific separation'¹⁵ from the animals. As we proceed through this section of our enquiry we shall first consider the function of the aesthetic faculty before we climb to the higher plane of the theoretic.

Ruskin begins his account of the aesthetic faculty by restituting the dispelled etymological meaning of the Greek 'aesthesis'. When we return the word to its original meaning 'aesthesis' signifies the 'mere sensual perception of the outward qualities and necessary effects of bodies'.¹⁶ It is with this sense that Ruskin uses the word throughout his treatment of the two faculties. His reason for so transforming the word is not, as Knight supposes, merely 'arbitrary'.¹⁷ For Ruskin so many of the mistakes in the contemporary philosophy of beauty might have been avoided had we never departed from using 'aesthesis' as the Greeks did. When the word was first twisted into its new meaning it gave birth to the fatal error of confounding the operations involved in our regular sense perception and the operations involved in our apprehension of beauty. So long as we cannot tell these two apart, Ruskin suggests, we shall not be able to arrive at a single accurate conclusion on the subject. Curiously, we find Immanuel Kant make exactly the same plea as Ruskin in an

13 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 25.

14 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), VII: *Modern Painters V* (1905), p. 264.

15 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 144.

16 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 42.

17 A. W. Knight, *The Philosophy of the Beautiful, Vol. I* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1890), p. 221.

important footnote on the 'Transcendental Aesthetic' in his *Die Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. As with Ruskin, Kant believed that the use of the adulterated modern sense of 'aesthesia' had led philosophy into a series of conceptual confusions. And, like Ruskin, Kant supposed one remedy for this to be the total 'extinction' of the meaning that had been imposed upon 'aesthesia'.¹⁸ This peculiar sympathy between Kant and Ruskin is so remarkable because we have no reason to believe that Ruskin ever read a single word of any of Kant's works. Moreover, as Ruskin tells us in his appendix to volume III of *Modern Painters* he considered his own 'steady pursuit of naturalism' to have been completely incompatible with the main tendencies of 'German metaphysics'.¹⁹

Having accounted for the reasons Ruskin made this linguistic innovation we can move now to the operation of the aesthetic faculty itself. It is, perhaps, best understood as the faculty in virtue of which the five senses have their unity. The oral, aural, visual, tactile and olfactory modalities of sense are all federated under the aesthetic. By each sense we perceive the world in a similar way – immediately and without the intervention of any higher faculty or the imposition of any concepts. Thus, whenever we are engaged in the sensory perception of the environing world we are exercising the aesthetic faculty. Moreover, Ruskin believed that, like all other creatures that partake of an animal nature, human beings are so constituted as to either take pleasure in or be repulsed by certain simple and complex sensations. Where a primitive sensation, such as the taste of a fruit, issues in delight or relish we can call it an aesthetic pleasure. This is all clear enough. However, Ruskin proposes, and I believe with good reason, that there is a difference in the sorts of pleasure that we can derive from our set of senses. There are, he suggests, a higher and a lower form of aesthetic pleasure. The difference between these two sorts of pleasure

18 I. Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. W S Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing company, 1996), p. 74n.

19 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), V: *Modern Painters* III (1904), p. 424.

depends upon the sense by which they are received. Our lower pleasures, according to Ruskin, are those we get from the olfactory, tactile and oral modalities. What excitement we have in the taste of good food and the fragrance of roses is of this lower sort. Our higher pleasures are taken from those senses that remain – the visual and the aural. One should note that Ruskin is not alone in dividing the senses into a lower and higher set. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, also considered sight and hearing to have a special eminence among the senses because they were *maxime cognoscitive* (the most cognitive).²⁰ However, for Ruskin the 'primal ground'²¹ for the superiority of the higher senses is not to do with their relation to the intellect, but with the form of pleasure they convey. Unhappily, those passages in which Ruskin attempts to demonstrate this superiority are somewhat opaque and largely confused. However, if we consider briefly the phenomenology of sense perception, we discover that Ruskin's decision to stratify and thereby differentiate the senses and their pleasures is well founded if not properly explicated.

Let us think of the way in which we find pleasure in our sense of taste. Before I can enjoy the taste of an apple, for instance, I have to bring myself – my body – into localised contact with the fruit. Likewise, the pleasure of touch immediately involves my body in intercourse with the object of pleasure. Thus, as Hans Jonas has noted in a remarkable essay, the 'very coming into play' of the senses of touch and taste 'already changes the situation obtaining between me and the object.'²² If we turn now to the visual sense modality this change in situation, either by my doing or the doing of the object, is not necessary. By sight I can consider the visual manifold, and delight in its appearance, without having to dispose of the object in any way. This means that the pleasure to be had by the higher and lower senses are radically different. In the case of

20 St Thomas Aquinas cited in R. Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 23.

21 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 45.

22 H. Jonas, 'The Nobility of Sight', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* xiv (1954), p. 514.

touch and taste our pleasure is in the way the object affects our bodies. Conversely, when we take pleasure at the sight of something what we enjoy is not the effect it has on us, but the thing itself as it appears. It seems to me that this is what Ruskin is trying to say when he speaks of visual pleasure as an 'object of life' and not a mere instrument.²³ Moreover it is because the pleasure of sight involves a distance of percipient and perceived that it can be 'prolonged' without damaging the sensibility that receives it. It is, in part, the 'destructiveness upon prolongation' and the 'incapability of continuance' that relegates the pleasures of touch and taste beneath those of sight.²⁴ This stratification of the two sets of senses has an important bearing on the question of beauty. Ruskin considers only the higher sense modalities to be in any way involved in the perception of beauty, as only these find their pleasure *in* the privileged object itself.

However, before we can apprehend beauty something must be added to the higher aesthetic senses. If by some terrible calamity we were suddenly divested of all our faculties save the aesthetic, though we would still find certain sensations gratifying or pleasurable, we would be entirely incapable of perceiving beauty. The injury would be so great that it would reduce our form of life to one of sheer animal brutality; and something more is needed than our basic stock of animal aptitudes before the beauty of the world is disclosed to us. As Ruskin tells us in *Aratra Pentelici*, so much as there is in us of 'ox, or of swine, perceives no beauty and creates none.'²⁵ In order to clarify Ruskin's argument at this important juncture, let us return to the letter of 1876 with which this essay commenced. Having insisted on the vital importance of the notion of *theoria*, Ruskin proceeds to offer an example of what happens when our higher faculties become paralysed. The morning on which he composed the letter, Ruskin had taken his walk through the pass

23 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 46.

24 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 46.

25 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), XX: *Lectures on Art and Aratra Pentelici* (1905), p. 208.

of Simplon, a region of Switzerland he considered to possess a particular intensity of beauty. In the course of his walk he was confronted, at the bridge of the great gallery, by a caleche carrying four French youths. To his astonishment this group seemed entirely inured to the beauty of the scene, continuing their conversation, wholly 'undisturbed by any of these external phenomena.'²⁶ Agitated by the dimness of their sealed souls, Ruskin wonders what it is that keeps his heart warm to beauty – what, in other words, these insensate youths lack. That his sight is more acute than most, and that he has a certain aptitude for seeing colours correctly, he admits but discounts as a suitable explanation for this difference. Although the eye requires a certain degree of cultivation before the world can be vividly seen even the most blunted sensibility would have been able to receive the manifest beauty of Simplon. He concludes that what he has, and what they want, is the ability to engage in *theoria*.

Thus we are finally brought to the question of the theoretic faculty. It is also at this point, as we turn to the second element in the dyad, that one of the apparent virtues of *Modern Painters II* becomes a vice. Unlike a most tracts in aesthetics, Ruskin's small book does not have that 'spiral tendency' that Ralph Waldo Emerson speaks of in his essay on 'Beauty'²⁷; it is compact in form and direct in its exposition. However this tendency for condensation, otherwise so salutary, means that the theoretic faculty is never sufficiently elucidated by Ruskin. There are a number of questions that he seems either not to have considered or otherwise ignored or deemed specious. Perhaps the most important of these concerns the nature of the relationship between the sensations delivered by the aesthetic faculty and the exercise of the theoretic. What the order of his argument in chapter II suggests is that theoretic contemplation

26 J. Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, p. 575.

27 R. W. Emerson, *The Conduct of Life* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1860), p. 245.

depends for its materials on the unimpeded functioning of the higher sense-modalities, though this is never explicitly stated. It is confirmed when we consider a note appended to the revised edition issued in 1883:

...for the perception of Beauty, I always used Plato's word, which is the proper word in Greek, and the only possible single word that can be used in any other language by any man who understands the subject, - 'Theoria' – the Germans only having a parallel to it, 'Anschauung,' assumed to be its equivalent, for Anschauung does not (I believe) include bodily sensation, whereas Plato's Theoria does...²⁸

What then does the exercise of the theoretic faculty involve? Again Ruskin is never completely clear, but it appears as though theoretic contemplation can be divided into two distinct moments and that, further, these two moments involve what we shall have to call the exercise of the human spirit, which is to say, that in the human creature which delivers it from and raises it above the life of animal immediacy. In order to explain the first moment we must return to our analysis of the higher senses. Because the felicities of sight can be enjoyed without threatening the security of our reason or blunting the sensibility by which they are received, we are made able to dwell on them. As Ruskin would say we can 'gather together'²⁹ the various impressions we have of the pleasing object and focus our attention upon it without the fear of debauching ourselves by 'inordinate indulgence.'³⁰ It is this gathering together of and dwelling on our pleasure that marks the first moment of *theoria*. In order to grasp the elected object with this sort of attention we have to dispense with any lingering thoughts of how it might be used or disposed of. *Theoria* is therefore, in one sense of the word, disinterested – it is innocent of any motive or design on that which it apprehends, hoping merely to be with it rather than have it. This

28 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 57.

29 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 47.

30 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 44.

disinterested attitude is implied in Ruskin's use of the Greek word itself; indeed, I would argue that this is one of the main reasons that he favoured it. For, as Hans-Georg Gadamer has suggested, when the Greeks spoke of *theoria* they meant by it 'a true participation [...] being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees.'³¹ As we normally have our commerce with objects they are inserted into a network of means and medial ends. It is just this scheme that dissolves in the act of contemplation. For Ruskin the second we entertain the thought as to how the object might be put to use we are no longer engaged in *theoria*. As he suggests in Volume I of *The Stones of Venice* the delight we have in the way objects appear must not be confused with that which we have in their potential usefulness, as 'they have no connection; and every effort that you make to reason from one to the other will blunt your sense of beauty or confuse it with sensations altogether inferior to it.'³²

In this regard we can compare Ruskin with Lord Shaftesbury, to whom a number of intellectual historians trace the introduction of the notion of disinterestedness to the discourse of aesthetics.³³ We read, for instance, in Shaftesbury's *The Enquiry into Virtue and Merit* that 'contemplative delight' is of a 'kind which is related not in the least to any private interest of the creature.'³⁴ One could say that in its first moment or phase, Ruskin's *theoria* is coextensive with Shaftesbury's 'contemplative delight'. However, for Ruskin, there is a second moment to the theoretic attitude, above the divestment of our personal interests, which must be fulfilled before we can apprehend beauty in all its fullness. If *theoria* is in one sense – the sense that Shaftesbury uses – a disinterested attitude, then in

31 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J Weinsheimer and D G Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 127.

32 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), IX: *Stones of Venice I* (1903), p. 73.

33 See J. Stolnitz, 'On the Origins of Aesthetic Disinterestedness', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* xx (1961) pp. 131-143.

34 Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Cambridge; Cambridge university Press, 1999), p. 202.

another sense of the word it is necessarily and essentially interested. The other sense that I have in mind is that which Kant uses in his *Die Kritik der Urteilskraft*. As Ernst Cassirer has noted 'interest' for Kant is understood as 'interest in the experience of the thing, in the production or existence of the object contemplated.'³⁵ When we adopt a disinterested attitude, according to Kant, we not only exclude all thoughts of how we might use the object, we also remove any sort of interest other than that in its pure form. Every desire that might disturb or interfere with our perception of form, any question as to the provenance of the object, must be extirpated before our judgements can be said to be disinterested. Ruskin would have been unable to make any sense of such a claim. This is because he believed that the beauty of an object can only truly be seen once we take a special sort of interest in it. And for Ruskin it is this interest that ultimately separates *theoria* from *aesthesis*. Before we can see the beauty of the creation we must, Ruskin tells us, receive it with 'gratitude':

Now the mere animal consciousness of the pleasantness I call Aesthesis: but the exulting, reverent, and grateful perception of it I call Theoria. For this, and this only, is the full comprehension and contemplation of the Beautiful as the gift of God; a gift not necessary to our being, but added to, and elevating it...³⁶

We have to see beauty in its sheer gratuity, as something set before us not in need but in love. This 'grateful perception', Ruskin suggests, cannot be understood as either sensual or intellectual. We have already established that mere sensual perception will not suffice to explain how we come to know the beautiful. Where beauty is concerned 'the eyes of man are of his soul, not of his flesh.'³⁷ Nor can theoretic apprehension be intellectual as, were the

35 E. Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, trans. J. Haden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 310.

36 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 47.

37 J. Ruskin, *Lectures on Landscape, Michelangelo & Tintoret*, p. 512.

perception of beauty a form of cognition, our power of receiving it would be commensurate with our powers of ratiocination. This must not be so, as our sense of beauty does not grow as we become more competent reasoners. As this 'grateful perception', which is the fulfilment of *theoria*, is neither intellectual nor sensual, Ruskin concludes that it must be essentially 'moral'.³⁸ This seems, initially, to be a very strange assertion to make, for when we usually speak of the moral part of man we do so with reference to *praxis* not *theoria*. The realm of morality involves doing, getting, having, and so on – in short, the deeds of man not the way he views the world. What then can he possibly mean when he contends that our contemplation is moral? For Ruskin the reason we can so speak of *theoria* is because it involves the dispositions of our 'heart';

It is evident that the sensation of beauty is not sensual on the one hand, nor is it intellectual on the other, but is dependent on a pure, right, and open state of heart. Dependent both for its truth and for its intensity, insomuch that even the right after-action of the Intellect upon facts of beauty so apprehended, is dependent on the acuteness of the heart-feeling...³⁹

What could Ruskin possibly mean when he speaks of the heart? Clearly, he is not referring to something merely carnal or bodily but rather, in the words of C S Peirce, to the heart understood as a 'perceptive organ'⁴⁰. To say that our sensitivity to beauty is a matter of the heart – the affective core of the human person – is to involve the question of beauty with the question of love. In order to see and to apprehend the real depth of beauty we must, according to Ruskin, summon within us a certain intensity of love. For, it is when we look at the world with the love of the heart that we can

38 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 35.

39 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 49.

40 C. S. Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sander Peirce* vol. v-vi, (Cambridge: Bleknap Press, 1935), p. 339.

understand it as a gift, and only when the world is so seen is its beauty made intelligible. Without reference to the action of the creator what beauty we encounter can only be imperfectly apprehended. Ruskin does concede that we can have a certain etiolated sense of beauty in the first moment of *theoria*, but the splendour of the creation is not fully disclosed until it is met by the percipient with the hallowing reverence of love. For, as the theologian Pierre Rousselot S.J. has said, 'Love, the free homage to the supreme Good, gives us new eyes.'⁴¹ This intimate relation between our love and our perception of beauty – between the heart and the eye – forms the topic of Ruskin's 1870 Hilary term lecture at the University of Oxford. The intensity of our perceptions of beauty, he declares in this address, 'is exactly commensurate' with the 'purity of the passion of love, and with the singleness of its devotion.'⁴² We must receive with love what love first gave; why this is so will become apparent as we turn to Ruskin's account of the objective constitution of the beautiful itself.

(2) The Objective constitution of the Beautiful

'...there is nothing in common in our different uses of the word "beautiful" ... we use it "in a hundred different games" ...'

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*⁴³

Having established what is involved in the exercise of the theoretic faculty we can now move to its objective correlate – the beautiful object. This leads us out of the initial three chapters of *Modern Painters II* and into the remainder of the first section of the book. However, before we can hope to understand Ruskin's positive account of what the beautiful is we must first pass through those theories of beauty that he tests and discards in the fourth chapter. There are, according to Ruskin, four common opinions held

41 P. Rousselot, *The Eyes of Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), p. 56.

42 J. Ruskin, *Lectures on Art and Aratra Pentelici*, pp. 90-91.

43 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951* (Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), p. 104.

concerning beauty that must be exploded before we can hope to form any firm and stable conclusions on the matter. To these four I would add a fifth that, given Ruskin's own account of beauty, he is committed to discard. If we are to understand why Ruskin cannot hold this fifth theory we shall have at first to leave *Modern Painters* altogether and consider a statement from volume one of his later works, *Prosperina*:

You will find on reflection, and more convincingly the more accurately you reflect, that there is an absolute sense attached to such words as “decent,” “honourable,” “glorious,” or “καλός,” contrary to another absolute sense in the words “indecent,” “shameful,” “vile,” or “αἰσχρός”... and that the divinity of the mind of man is in its essential discernment of what is “καλός,” from what is “αἰσχρός”...⁴⁴

What, in this instance, does Ruskin mean by the 'absolute sense' of a word? What is it about the words *καλός* (beautiful) or *αἰσχρός* (ugly) in virtue of which we can speak about them as having an absolute sense? I propose that what Ruskin means is that when a word has an absolute sense it refers univocally to some real property or feature of a thing. Thus when I make a statement as to the beauty or ugliness of an object I am, according to Ruskin, thereby saying something about what that object is. In Wittgenstein's terms, Ruskin considered the word beautiful to be legitimately used in no more than one language game. When one proposes, as Ruskin does, that there is such a sense to the word beautiful that claim necessarily prescind from what we might call the 'emotivist' theory of beauty. For one who adopts the emotivist stance statements of the form 'x is beautiful' can be translated, without loss or remainder, into a statement of the form 'I approve of x'. In other words, for the emotivist, beauty is not something found in the world by a properly disposed subject but is merely what we call

44 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), XXV: *Love's Meinie and Prosperina* (1906), p. 268.

those things that please us. Thus when I declare that X is beautiful and Y is beautiful I do not do so in virtue of something common to X and Y, but because of something common in the relation that obtains between X and myself and Y and myself - that is, that they please me. Therefore, on the emotivist account, the word beautiful has no ostensive sense at all – it has become a mere valorising predicate that confers a certain value on those things we happen to find agreeable – a *façon de parler*.

Having shown the emotivist theory to be entirely incompatible with Ruskin's way of thinking about beauty, we can move now to the four theories refuted in *Modern Painters II*. The first of the 'false opinions' Ruskin deals with is that which proposes the identity of truth and beauty.⁴⁵ We can find this sort of statement made, with some minor variations, by writers as diverse as Shaftesbury, Boileau and John Keats. The error of this doctrine is that it commits us to the absurd position of regarding propositions, and not things, as beautiful. As Arnold Isenberg has suggested, if we took this position seriously we would have to recognise, as an example of beauty, a proposition as banal as “there are no fewer than three people in this room”⁴⁶ should its truth-conditions be fulfilled. For this reason Ruskin encourages us to arraign those who are so free with their use of language as to confound beauty and truth:

...I would most earnestly beg every sensible person who hears such an assertion made, to nip the germinating philosopher in his ambiguous bud; and beg him, if he really believes his own assertion, never hence forward to use two words for the same thing. The fact is, truth and beauty are entirely distinct, though often related things. One is the property of statements, the other of objects.⁴⁷

45 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 66.

46 A. Isenberg, *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 94.

47 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters III*, p. 55.

What is clear from this passage is that Ruskin does believe that there is a relation between truth and beauty, albeit not one of identity. Certainly, as we review the five volumes of *Modern Painters* it becomes apparent that Ruskin consistently dismisses all fakery and counterfeiture, of whatever level of sophistication, as irredeemably ugly. All those things involved in illusion and fancy, anything that presents itself as what it is not, he execrates. It is for this reason that Paul Guyer, in his recent *History of Modern Aesthetics*, has suggested that *Modern Painters* presents an account of beauty and its representation 'based on truth.'⁴⁸ Guyer's assertion is not unproblematic, but it seems to be confirmed when one reads such a passage as the following, from *Modern Painters III*:

....although our concern in this part of our inquiry is, professedly, with the beauty which blossoms out of truth, still I find myself compelled always to gather it by the stalk, not by the petals. I cannot hold the beauty, nor be sure of its for a moment, but by feeling for that strong stem.⁴⁹

One could say that beauty is for Ruskin what medieval philosophers called the *veritatis splendor*, the refulgence or blossoming of the truth. Not all things that are true are beautiful; but all beautiful things must have that 'strong stem' of truth or, better, reality, to uphold them.

The second position that Ruskin disposes of is that which states that beauty is usefulness. As with the truth-beauty theory the proponents of this second erroneous account are using two words to designate the same thing. Or rather, they are hoping to withdraw from the language a word – beauty – which they suppose empty of meaning. In Ruskin's mind the confusion of utility with beauty is the 'most degrading and dangerous supposition' but also, for that reason, the most 'palpably absurd.'⁵⁰ Were we to concede the

48 P. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics: Vol. II The Nineteenth Century*, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 209.

49 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters III*, pp. 149-50.

50 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 67.

identity of beauty and utility we would have to consider anything that could be put to use by man to be beautiful in some degree. It follows that those things we have established as most useful would be commensurately the most beautiful. In this bleakly utilitarian world the art of Turner would be esteemed less highly than the 'spades and millstones'⁵¹ wrought at a factory. And Turner's life – and the form of life of the artist in general – would be the most shameful and wretched conceivable as its sole purpose is the production of useless (which is to say, ugly) things. Such a world, I hardly need to say, would be utterly deranged. For Ruskin what is finally so pernicious about the utilitarian theory is that it is founded on a vicious picture of man as a creature that has 'no ideas and no feelings except those that are ultimately referable to its brutal appetites.'⁵²Beauty, like the good and the true, is necessarily a supra-utilitarian value and so will be forever unintelligible to those for whom such values are unthinkable.

Having dealt with the utilitarian and the truth-beauty theories, Ruskin moves on to a third account – what we might call the familiarity or habituation thesis. This can be stated as follows – we consider beautiful that object or scene to which have been habituated by repeated encounters over an extended period of time. This would purport to explain why, for instance, those who have made their home in a mountainous region might consider a precipice beautiful but not the sweep of a bay or the course of a river through a flattened flood plain. Again, for Ruskin this theory barely rises above the level of nonsense. He contends that habituation can change the way we relate to certain objects but not in the manner that the defenders of this theory would have us think. Certainly, ugliness can be palliated as we become inured to it, but beauty cannot arise out of familiarity. This is because, and here Ruskin is much like Wordsworth, custom either 'deadens the frequency and force of repeated impressions' or endears a 'familiar

51 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 67.

52 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 67.

object to the affections'⁵³

...however far this operation may be carried, its utmost effect is but the deadening and approximating of the sensations of beauty and ugliness. It never mixes, nor crosses, nor in any way alters them; it has not the slightest connection with, or power over, their nature.⁵⁴

The final theory that Ruskin dismisses is the philosophy of 'associationism', a position that has its origin in the work of the Scottish writer Archibald Alison.⁵⁵ It was Alison's belief that we could have no direct emotional response to or pleasure in an object of sight. However, aware that we still seem to respond to certain objects emotively Alison proposed that we might explain our concern for putatively beautiful things by association. According to Alison, beauty is no more than the coupling of an intense emotion or thought with a valent object. Though Ruskin considered this fourth to be perhaps the most attractive of the defunct theories of beauty, he suggests that no two consecutive sentences of sense have been written by its proponents. Alison in particular is convicted by Ruskin of 'laconic and complete' self-contradiction.⁵⁶ The reason Ruskin feels the association theory to be the strongest is not because of the success of its exponents, but that it involves a function of mind that has 'real value and authority.'⁵⁷ Indeed, Ruskin notes that our contemplation of beauty is often overpowered by this 'momentous operation'. The error of the associationist philosophy is the same as that involved in emotivism; it is strictly inconsistent with 'absolute and incontrovertible conclusions on subjects of theoretic preference'. What it shares with the habituation-thesis is the belief that an otherwise unremarkable object can, by some sort of alchemy of mind, be made beautiful. Moreover, it seems to exclude entirely that special sort of beauty

53 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 68.

54 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 68.

55 P. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics: Vol. I The Eighteenth Century* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 226-235.

56 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 70.

57 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 71.

that Ruskin describes in *Modern Painters IV* which 'startles' our lethargy with the 'deep and pure agitation of astonishment'⁵⁸. The notion of a startling or agitating beauty with the force to drive off our languor, one not built up from prior associations but delivered to us almost as a miracle, is simply inconceivable on the associationist picture. Ruskin's most terse treatment of the problems of associationism is found in a letter to Sir Henry Acland, where he declares that:

...whatever power [association] may have is to be cast out of the question in reasoning on beauty, because there is a certain beauty with which it has nothing whatever to do, whose laws are visible in the whole of creation, and whose principles – nay, whose existence – are rendered uncertain in most men's minds, by their bad habit of treating this essential beauty, and the accidental beauty of association, as one and the same.⁵⁹

Ruskin will admit that we can form associations with beautiful things, and that associations of this sort are salutary as the differences in our sense of beauty makes fellowship 'more delightful' by its 'inter-communicate character.'⁶⁰ However he categorically refuses to believe that an object is made beautiful by the process of association. This letter to Acland leads us to a failure common to the theories of association, habituation and emotivism. In each case beauty is made a mere accident of the object and not a property or feature. The corollary of this is that beauty becomes a transient or fading predicate; as we change, and our feelings change with us, we will be able to say of an object one day that it is beautiful and another day that it is not without entertaining a

58 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), VI: *Modern Painters IV*(1903), p. 118.

59 J. Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), XXXVI: *Letters 1827-1869*(1903), p. 59.

60 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 74.

contradiction. And this thought is for Ruskin simply unconscionable as the first test of beauty is that it survives all the changes of disposition and mood that the human percipient undergoes:

[the mark of beauty is] its surviving or annihilating the love of change... for there is much that surprises us by its brilliancy, or attracts by its singularity, that can hardly but by course of time, though assuredly it will by course of time, be winnowed away from the right and real beauty whose retentive power is for ever on the increase, a bread of the soul for which the hunger is continual ⁶¹

Having followed him through the ruins of these four theories we are now at last in a position to approach Ruskin's own positive account of 'real' or 'essential' beauty. He begins his attempt to define the beautiful with a distinction. For the sake of analysis, Ruskin suggests, we can divide beauty into two sorts or kinds; to the first kind he gives the name 'typical beauty', to the second 'vital beauty'. In his decision to introduce these two categories Paul Guyer suggests that Ruskin has returned us to a 'standard eighteenth-century model' for the typology of beauty.⁶² This is an unfortunate assertion as it disguises the originality of Ruskin's two kinds. Moreover, it is an instance of one of the characteristic sins of intellectual history conceived on the world-historical scale; that is, the tendency to erase all that is distinctive about a text or thinker so that he might better fit the contour of a higher thematics. We shall begin with perhaps the more original of the two kinds – typical beauty – of which Ruskin gives a summary definition at the close of chapter III of *Modern Painters II*:

... that external qualities of bodies already so often spoken of, and which, whether it occur in a stone, flower, beast, or in man, is absolutely identical, which, as I have already

61 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 99.

62 P. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics: Vol. I The Nineteenth Century* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 207

asserted, may be shown in some sort typical of the Divine attributes, and which there I shall, for the distinction's sake, call Typical beauty⁶³

This does not do us much good as an ostensive definition being as it is somewhat opaque. Beauty of this kind, we are told, is found where any material body is so informed as to be typical of the Divine Attributes. Among the attributes that Ruskin enumerates are infinity, unity, repose, justice, purity and moderation (although he has no pretension of offering an exhaustive litany). Of course, the question that clamours for an answer is what Ruskin could mean by 'typical'. What, in other words, is the relation that obtains between the divine attributes and the thing that typifies it? In answering this it may be best to consider first what the relation of 'typical resemblance' cannot be. John Stuart Mill's erroneous reading *Modern Painters II* in his essay on Alexander Bain's system of psychology is instructive. According to Mill, Bain's position concerning aesthetics is not unlike that of Alison. He too is an associationist, only his account of how associations form is transposed into the terms of a mechanistic physiology. In Mill's view Bain is about as close to the truth of the matter as one could ever hope to get. Ruskin, he suggests, unconsciously argued himself to within a step of Bain's position and thereby, quite without knowing it, became one of 'the principal apostles of the Association Philosophy in Art'⁶⁴; Mill adduces *Modern Painters II* as evidence:

In one of the most remarkable of his writings, the second volume of 'Modern Painters' [Ruskin] aims at establishing, by a large induction and a searching analysis, that all things are beautiful (or sublime) which powerfully recall, one or more of a certain series of elevating or delightful thoughts.⁶⁵

63 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 64.

64 J. S. Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J M Robson, 33 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-91), XI: *Essays on Philosophy and the Classics* (1978), p. 363.

65 J. S. Mill, *Essays on Philosophy and the Classics*, pp. 363-4.

For Mill, what keeps Ruskin from joining Bain is that he does not recognise causality in association. The argument of *Modern Painters II*, according to Mill, is that there is 'pre-established harmony' ordained between these 'elevating or delightful thoughts' and the objects with which they are connected, rather than the contingent associations formed by commotions in the bundled ganglia of our nervous system.⁶⁶ If we return to the 1845 letter to Henry Acland we see that this simply cannot be Ruskin's view. He writes to Acland that the 'beauty of form, legitimate, real, beauty is traceable to typical qualities but not to associations.'⁶⁷ The relation of typical resemblance, as Ruskin propounds it, is not merely a non-contingent form of association. Were that so we would have no interest in the beautiful object except as the occasion of an idea – an idea, we should add, that could have been arrived at by ratiocination, and so without the need to contemplate the object at all. The idea could be lifted off, so to speak, from the beautiful thing and considered in abstracted isolation. Furthermore, what we have said about the grateful perception of *theoria* would also be rendered nugatory if this is all Ruskin meant by typical beauty.

For Ruskin, typical beauty is a matter of form, and so adheres directly to the object contemplated but, to borrow from Dietrich von Hildebrand, it is not the 'expression of the essence' of the thing in question but 'transcends the sphere of the object' altogether. In the beautiful form of a certain created reality a higher, uncreated world can be seen. To again quote von Hildebrand, whose account of beauty is so profoundly similar to Ruskin's, the 'dignity' of typical beauty is not bound to the ontological dignity of its object⁶⁸. It seems to me that the key passage for understanding the significance of 'typical beauty' is given in Chapter XI of *Modern Painters II*; here Ruskin returns upon a common theme – the

66 J. S. Mill, *Essays on Philosophy and the Classics*, p. 364.

67 J. Ruskin, *Letters 1827-1869*, p. 59.

68 See D. von Hildebrand, 'Beauty in the Light of the Redemption', *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 4.2 (2001), pp. 78-92

connection between man's aptitude for seeing beauty and his peculiar eminence in the realm of creatures:

...the fact of our deriving constant pleasure from whatever is a type or semblance of divine attributes... sets a great gulf of specific separation between us and the lower animals, but it seems a promise of a communion ultimately deep, close, and conscious, with the Being whose darkened manifestations we here feebly and unthinkingly delight in.⁶⁹

The phrase to attend to is 'darkened manifestations'. Typical beauty is not merely a matter of association but an actual, albeit indirect and obscure, manifestation of the divine. To use Ruskin's favoured figure, it is the 'stamp'⁷⁰ or seal of God pressed into the world, informing the created manifold so as to be an image of the divine glory. It is nothing less than a mediated revelation of God to man. In this revelation nothing is posited, nothing is enjoined or commanded; it is, one might say, an intransitive revelation, the pure self-disclosure and self-expression of the divine godhead through the work of creation. Quite unconsciously Ruskin furnishes a perfect symbol of this beauty of form in *Modern Painters III*. The passage I have in mind is that where Ruskin offers his reading of the condescension of Beatrice to Dante in the *Divina Commedia*. Ruskin notes that when Beatrice is sent down from paradise to greet Dante he sees the 'image of the twofold personality of Christ reflected in her eyes.'⁷¹ Dante cannot yet behold the godhead directly as he would be unable to withstand the uncreated sunburst of the empyrean. However, by the descent of Beatrice he is given an image of the divine at one remove, reflected in her eyes as a darkened manifestation. Likewise, by the beautiful thing we are given a glimpse of the godhead, but only, so to speak, as an image or icon. Anything more and we would be undone. Typical beauty is thus to be understood as a 'gleaming of the divine form' in the world of the creation:

69 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 144.

70 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 143.

71 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters III*, p. 279.

The knowing that is here permitted to us is either of things outward only, as in those it is whose eyes Faith never opened, or else of that dark part that her glass shows feebly, of things supernatural, that gleaming of the Divine form among the mortal crowd, which all may catch if they climb the sycamore and wait...⁷²

If we return now to the notion of *theoria* it becomes clear why Ruskin supposed the contemplation of beauty to involve the love of the heart. What we apprehend in typical beauty are the figures and forms of Love explicated in the very matter of the visible creation. Thus, in order to become adequate to such beauty our vision will have to be refined by love; we must, as Ruskin would say, see the world from within the temple of the heart. What also becomes apparent is that Ruskin's entire account of beauty would disintegrate were we no longer to understand the world as creation. Were the cosmos, as the materialists suppose, actually a chaos - a spontaneous eruption of contingent, finite particulars - not only would the fact of its existence be absurd, it also would be devoid of all beauty.

We can move now to beauty of the second kind. Again, we shall start with the principal definition that Ruskin offers. Vital beauty is the 'appearance of felicitous fulfilment of function in living things.'⁷³ Wherever we see life as fully potentiated, or witness a creature delighting in doing that thing which is its inmost law and purpose to do, we encounter the vital form of beauty. In Goethe's preface to Schiller's "Glocke" we find a neologism which seems to resonate perfectly with this concept. Writing of Schiller's play, Goethe speaks of what he calls *lebenswuerdigkeit* or life-worthiness.⁷⁴ There are, Goethe suggests, a few among men who

72 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, pp. 208-9.

73 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 64.

74 T. Mann, *Addresses delivered at the Library of Congress: 1942-9* (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1963), p. 112.

glow with a certain life-worthiness – those untouched by languor, those for whom life is never a burden but always pure delight. This seems to be exactly what Ruskin means by vital beauty – the luminosity that enfolds a thing when it is enlivened and irradiated by that 'vital force' which he speaks of in his *Aratra Pentelici*.⁷⁵ This life-worthiness is manifested at two different levels of being; that of lower creatures and that of man. In the case of the former, we perceive happiness and receive it with sympathy. In the case of the latter we perceive moral intention and respond with admiration or praise. Ruskin offers a beautiful instance of this first sort of vital beauty in chapter XII of *Modern Painters II*; he asks us to consider a small plant that, with huge expenditure of energy, cleaves through a sheet of snow to send forth its flower:

...we shall be, or we ought to be, moved in a totally different impression of loveliness from that which we receive among the dead ice and the idle clouds. There is now uttered to us a call for sympathy... which, however unconscious or senseless the creature may indeed be that so seems to call, cannot be heard without affection...⁷⁶

This flower seems to address us and we cannot help but respond to it with sympathy; there is a strange reciprocity, or mutuality, between us and the vital organism. The same diffusive energy enlivens both knots of matter, man and flower. Quite abruptly our life has been enlarged to feel with that 'veil of intermediate being' that Ruskin describes in *Modern Painters III*. What vital beauty we find in man is of a different sort from that of the animal and vegetable realms of the creation. Like animals, a man can 'exult' in his 'own sense of life'⁷⁷, and there is something of vital beauty in that. However, the beauty of the human creature is only consummate when it speaks of moral purpose and resolve. For we can think of many instances where the exultation of happiness alone becomes profoundly ugly – as in the pullulating rage of the

75 J. Ruskin, *Lectures on Art and Aratra Pentelici*, p. 266.

76 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 147.

77 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 7.

Dionysiac revel. For Ruskin the vital beauty of man must be that of the redeemed life – not in happiness but in his being brought into the 'pulse of an infinite felicity'⁷⁸ – now sorrowful, now joyful, but always with his heart convulsed around the eternal good.

(3) The Value of Beauty

'Our life is not so much threatened as our perception...'

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Experience'⁷⁹

Before we enter on this last section of the essay, let us return once more to the letter from the Simplon Pass. We recall that the only explanation Ruskin could give for the blindness of the French party was that they were unable to assume the theoretic attitude toward the world. What we must now ask is why it is that this should be so. Why is it that Ruskin can exercise his theoretic faculty unimpaired – a faculty which all possess in virtue of being human – while these others cannot? What is it that has 'spoiled and poisoned' them into a 'wreck of animal stupidity' that sees nothing but the 'chaos of the clay they would fain forget they are made of.'⁸⁰ This brings us into one of the major themes of *Modern Painters*; the question of how it is that we become inured to beauty, and how, once inured, we again become sensible to it. To determine what Ruskin thought was the cause of this blindness to beauty we may want to consider a passage from the last volume of *Modern Painters*. In the chapter entitled 'The Dark Mirror' Ruskin presents a picture of the soul of man as a liquid, glass-like element which, when pristine and immaculate, captures and returns the glory of the Lord and his creation:

A tremulous crystal, waved as water, poured out upon the ground; - you may defile it, despise it, pollute it, at your

78 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 71.

79 R. W. Emerson, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 6 Vols* (London: Macmillan & co, 1883-4), II: Essays (1884), p. 339.

80 J. Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, p. 575.

pleasure and at your peril; for on the peace of those weak waves must all the heaven you shall ever gain be first seen; and through such purity as you can win for those dark waves, must all the light of the risen sun of righteousness be bent down, by faint refraction.⁸¹

So long as this 'tremulous crystal' is maintained in its limpid purity it becomes irradiated with those gleams of divinity that are seen in the beauty of the world. However, as Ruskin makes clear, it can be spoiled and polluted into obscurity. Which is another way of saying that our capacity for receiving and reflecting the glory of the divine beauty can be diminished by sin. It is the fall into sin that vexes the crystalline surface of the soul into a turbulent chaos through which nothing can pass. Another figure that Ruskin uses to convey this effect of sin is the hardening of the heart. In the loss of beauty the 'apostolic words come true' that men are 'alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, having the Understanding darkened because of the hardness of their hearts.'⁸² Although here is not the place to offer an analysis of his concept of sin, it is important to note that for Ruskin sin almost invariably is involved in an inordinate concern for one's own self, and so with a failure in what St Augustine would call our *ordo amoris*. The involution upon the self, which cuts our love from its proper objects, is the 'disease of mind' that leads to 'fatalist ruin.'⁸³ By concentrating on himself man, who should be the light of the creation, becomes a mere 'sun in space – a fiery ball, spotted with storm.'⁸⁴ Although Ruskin does not suppose that the blight of sin can be purged entirely he does, at least in the 'Preface' to the 1883 edition of *Modern Painters II*, suggest that men can do something to clarify their soul, though not without the inundation of grace. Indeed, he writes that the only 'definite virtue possible to human

81 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters V*, p. 262.

82 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 49.

83 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters V*, p. 263.

84 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 263.

effort' is commanded in 'the plain words, "*cleanse your hands, ye sinners*"; and *purify your hearts, ye double minded*."⁸⁵

This brings us to a final question. We have determined what the perception of beauty involves, what the beautiful itself is, and how our capacity to see it is lost. We must now ask why this loss is so grievous. Why, in other words, Ruskin has spent so much effort trying to repair it and to bring us back to that state in which beauty is again intelligible? At the beginning of *Modern Painters II* we are told that the function of the book, the end to which all its component chapters are directed, is to summon the moral energies of men to a great 'body of neglected sympathies'⁸⁶, first among which is the sympathy for beauty. But what do we lose when we can no longer see beauty? What shall we miss when we cease to desire what the psalmist so desired – to 'behold the fair beauty of the lord?'⁸⁷ This can all be put another way round – what is the use of beauty? Why should it concern us? Ruskin offers one answer; that the reason we must not fall away from beauty is that it is an end in itself – an appointed end of our very nature. Our function among the creatures, he tells us, is to be a 'witness'⁸⁸ to the glory of the lord. And it is in beauty that this glory is revealed under one of its aspects. Thus to be ignorant of beauty would be to bring about a dis-relation in our inner being; and it would be 'better that we should not exist, than that we should guiltily disappoint the purposes of existence.'⁸⁹ But, of the various ends of life, there is something peculiar about beauty that this argument occludes. Were we to terminate our inquiry here we will have missed one of Ruskin's most original and important contributions to the whole question of beauty and its value. Before we conclude, let us turn again to that passage from *Modern Painters III* concerning Dante's *Commedia*, in particular to the sequence on Matilda and Beatrice. Ruskin proposes that these two figures, introduced by Dante in the

85 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 5.

86 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 71.

87 Psalm 27: 4

88 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 28.

89 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, p. 29.

later cantos of the *Purgatorio*, should both be understood as ciphers or symbols of different forms of life. Matilda represents the glorified life of action; Beatrice, the glorified life of theoretic contemplation consummated for eternity. Both forms of life are available to the Christian *in via*. Of the two, Ruskin contends, the *vita contemplativa*, the life of theoria, is the more exalted, as this form of life will constitute the very 'felicity of heaven'⁹⁰ – that direct and unending contemplation of the very source of being itself, the perichoretic dance of the Triune godhead. When, in our mortal life, we arrest ourselves for a moment and open our heart in theoretic admiration we are participating in some way in this higher life which is the joy of the angels and saints. Contemplating the beautiful we are given a pre-apprehension or foretaste of paradise and become, albeit temporarily, denizens of the city of god. In this foretaste, to borrow from Søren Kierkegaard, we are made 'ripe for eternity.'⁹¹ It is for this reason, finally, that the loss of beauty should be mourned; those bereft of beauty are doomed to make their home in time rather than eternity. And it is precisely because Ruskin has, not only in *Modern Painters* but across his works, done so much to restore the concept of beauty to its fullness that we must resume our efforts to read and assimilate his work. In the words of G K Chesterton, Ruskin 'made what he praised in the old Italian pictures – an opening into eternity'.

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91 S. Kierkegaard, *The Last Years: Journals, 1853-1855*, trans. R. G. Smith (London: Collins, 1965), p. 367.

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