**Chapter 14**

**Ruskin: Lecturing and Public Voice**

Dinah Birch

In her appreciative review of *Modern Painters* III (1856), George Eliot remarked that ‘very correct singing of very fine music will avail little without a *voice* that can thrill the audience and take possession of their souls. Now, Mr Ruskin has a voice, and one of such power, that whatever error he may mix with truth, he will make more converts to that truth than less erring advocates who are hoarse and feeble.’[[1]](#footnote-1) In suggesting that the correctness of Ruskin’s arguments mattered less than their eloquence, Eliot’s comments exemplify the kind of response that came to exasperate him. In his later years, Ruskin was to identify the supposed distraction of the highly-wrought language of his early works as a reason for his developing a plainer style: "People used to call me a good writer then: now, they say, I cannot write at all; because, for instance, if I think anybody's house is on fire, I only say, ' Sir, your house is on fire.' Whereas formerly I used to say, ' Sir, the abode in which you probably passed the delightful days of youth, is in a state of inflammation.' And everybody used to like the effect of the two ps in 'probably passed,' and of the two ds in 'delightful days.' " (xxvv.400). Ruskin’s writing became more forcefully direct, often achieving its effects through satire or allusive symbolism rather than sumptuous word-painting. However, as Martin Dubois points out, it did not become less personal.[[2]](#footnote-2) Private preoccupations and public responsibility merge in Ruskin’s work as a lecturer. The role became central to his identity as his criticism became more actively political in the late 1850s, in a movement which accelerated after the appearance of the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters* in 1860. Lecturing provided opportunities for immediate communication with a variety of audiences. In 1866, at the age of 47, Ruskin was half-seriously calling himself the ‘Old Lecturer’ in *The Ethics of the Dust* (1866), one of his most self-referential works. The image of the ‘Old Lecturer’ was a playful reflection of the complex myth that Ruskin was constructing from the material of his own life. Francis O’Gorman, reflecting on the composition of *Praeterita*, notes that Ruskin shared Wordsworth’s Romantic impulse to reflect on ‘how his *mind* had grown into what it was.’ [[3]](#footnote-3) He was driven by inward and often autobiographical impulses, but his changing perception of how the strategies of public performance might support the practical consequences of his work was indispensable to the development of his voice throughout the middle and later periods of his career.

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***Lecturing, Teaching and Preaching***

George Eliot’s remarks were partly prompted by Ruskin’s claim for impeccably logical powers of thought in the Preface to *Modern Painters* III: ‘any error I fall into will not be in an illogical deduction: I may mistake the meaning of a symbol, or the angle of a rockcleavage, but not draw an inconsequent conclusion’ (v.7). She saw this as a comic moment: ‘When he announces to the world in his Preface, that he is incapable of falling into an illogical deduction - that, whatever other mistakes he may commit, he cannot possibly draw an inconsequent conclusion, we are not indignant, but amused, and do not in the least feel ourselves under the necessity of picking holes in his arguments in order to prove that he is not a logical Pope.’[[4]](#footnote-4) Ruskin’s hostility to Catholicism was strong in the 1850s, and the suggestion that he might have thought of himself as a Pope, logical or otherwise, would have infuriated him. Nevertheless, an assumption of secure authority is a consistent feature of his public voice. Audiences were divided in their response to his firmly instructive approach. Many found Ruskin’s certainty reassuring, or inspiring. Others resented ‘the inopportune introduction of his religious and didactic bias, which darkens the lucidity of his observation, and often counteracts the good effects his teaching would otherwise have’, as the influential archaeologist Charles Waldstein loftily observed in 1893, at a time when the reaction against the moral assumptions of mid-nineteenth-century movements for reform were beginning to gather momentum.[[5]](#footnote-5) Ruskin asserts his infallibility in secular terms in his 1856 Preface. But his stubbornly-maintained conviction that the power of his work depended on its logical truth, and not its rhetoric, had its origins in his early religious experiences, and in his family background. These were the circumstances that formed his identity as a writer, and as a public lecturer.

Ruskin had an evangelical training as a child. He was taught that the fulfilment of his ambitions would depend on his own disciplined intelligence and powers of observation, but that the substance of his teachings must rest on what Tim Hilton describes as the ‘fervour’ of evangelicalism, with its ‘insistence on the authority of the Scriptures, its stress on salvation in the atoning death of Christ, its belief in the importance of preaching and its lack of interest in liturgical worship’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Within this framework of evangelical belief, the vagaries of personal opinion could never amount to anything more than an expression of fallen human nature. Ruskin’s acceptance of this fundamental precept survived the loss of his faith, and it was a defining characteristic of his critical identity. Far from acting as a constraint, his belief that he was the servant of unchangeable truths that transcended any ‘errors’ of his own making liberated him from anxieties that might otherwise have paralysed his work. His confidence grew from his conviction that he was not speaking for himself, but reflecting a body of unchanging truth constituted outside what Wordsworth uneasily called the ‘uncharter'd freedom’[[7]](#footnote-7) of the individual mind. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), ‘The Lamp of Obedience’ develops the point: ‘Obedience is, indeed, founded on a kind of freedom, else it would become mere subjugation, but that freedom is only granted that obedience may be more perfect; and thus, while a measure of license is necessary to exhibit the individual energies of things, the fairness and pleasantness and perfection of them all consist in their Restraint.’ Ruskin’s reference here is a religious one. He is not addressing himself exclusively to evangelical readers, for ‘that Service which is defined in the liturgy of the English Church to be perfect Freedom’[[8]](#footnote-8) is essential to all Anglican doctrine. Throughout his long life as a writer, Ruskin challenges the liberally individualistic inclinations of his diverse audiences with uncompromising vigour. Writing in 1874, thirty years after the publication of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Ruskin explained that children taught according to the educational principles of his utopian Guild are to be trained in ‘habits of instant, finely accurate and totally unreasoning obedience’ (xxviii:20). He is able to maintain this unwavering position because his voice emerged from a powerful tradition of religious service.

In his account of Ruskin’s precociously sophisticated sermons on the Pentateuch (i.e. the first five books of the Bible’s Old Testament), composed when Ruskin was twelve or thirteen years old, Van Akin Burd notes that ‘obedience receives the greatest attention’ among the ideals in conduct that Ruskin enumerates. When ‘children begin first even to think, they generally begin to assert independence of judgement, this is a very strong example of human depravity and it must be checked at once’, the pious young Ruskin remarked.[[9]](#footnote-9) *Praeterita* famously remembers Ruskin’s very first public performance, as a small boy called upon to entertain his mother’s friends. He was already a serious child, in the weighty evangelical sense of that word, and his mother’s ambitions for him revolved around his religious life. Ruskin, writing long after he had rejected his early beliefs, recalls that she

took me very early to church;- where, in spite of my quiet habits, and my mother’s golden vinaigrette, always indulged to me there, and there only, with its lid unclasped that I might see the wreathed open pattern above the sponge, I found the bottom of the pew so extremely dull a place to keep quiet in, (my best story-books being also taken away from me in the morning,) that, as I have somewhere said before, the horror of Sunday used even to cast its prescient gloom as far back in the week as Friday - and all the glory of Monday, with church seven days removed again, was no equivalent for it. Notwithstanding, I arrived at some abstract in my own mind of the Rev. Mr. Howell’s sermons;[[10]](#footnote-10) and occasionally, in imitation of him, preached a sermon at home over the red sofa cushions; − this performance being always called for by my mother’s dearest friends, as the great accomplishment of my childhood. The sermon was I believe, some eleven words long; very exemplary, it seems to me, in that respect − and I still think must have been the purest gospel, for I know it began with, “People, be good (xxxv.25).

From the very first, the acceptance of obedience carried the authority of instruction.

This anecdote, like Ruskin’s image of himself as an aged lecturer in *The Ethics of the Dust*, is disarmingly self-deprecating. Ruskin claims the reader’s sympathy by describing the rigid evangelical rituals that spoiled his childish Sundays, while giving his recollection the personal and visual particularity that characterises his writing – his readers are distracted by ‘the wreathed open pattern above the sponge’ alongside the bored child. ‘As I have somewhere said before’ – it was in *Fors Clavigera* that Ruskin had said this, more bitterly, in a sustained attack on the evangelical practice of draining any possibility of enjoyment from Sunday activities: ‘when I was a child, I lost the pleasure of some three-sevenths of my life because of Sunday; for I always had a way of looking forward to things, and a lurid shade was cast over the whole of Friday and Saturday by the horrible sense that Sunday was coming, and inevitable.’[[11]](#footnote-11) The nostalgic tone of Ruskin’s story of his first sermon in *Praeterita* is gentler and more humorous. Nevertheless, it reflects deep concerns in Ruskin’s writing, reflecting his later repudiation of evangelical narrowness, while retaining his commitment to ‘the purest gospel’ – ‘People, be good.’

Throughout his career on the lecture platform, Ruskin’s strategies were fundamentally those of the preacher, whose formal responsibility it is to elucidate the word of God as it is expressed in a Biblical text, rather than putting forward his personal views. However, as he distanced himself from the rigidities of evangelical doctrine, he adapted the traditions of the sermon in the light of his changing priorities as a critic and reformer. The divinely ordained text may be other than Biblical. A leaf, a cloud, a sculpture or a building might offer as much, as an emblematic catalyst for analysis and instruction. Other patterns of public discourse also came to influence his rhetoric as a lecturer. Thomas Carlyle, formed like Ruskin within an assertively Protestant culture, provided an early alternative to the paternal authority of John James Ruskin.[[12]](#footnote-12) The uncompromising insistence of Carlyle’s moral perspectives was appealing to Ruskin. So too was Carlyle’s rebarbatively Scottish identity, for the Scottish background of Ruskin’s own family was important in confirming his sense of an outsider’s identity, as a radical dissenter and innovator in the literary circles of mid-nineteenth-century London.[[13]](#footnote-13) *On Heroes, Hero-Worship* *and the Heroic in History* (1841), a collection of six lectures delivered in the spring of 1840, establishes Carlyle’s characteristic voice, and helped to demonstrate the persuasive potential of the published lecture. But Carlyle did not altogether share Ruskin’s preacherly inclination to develop his thinking on the basis of the exposition of an authoritative text. His emphasis is on the human, rather than the divine or the natural, and though he identifies religion as ‘the chief fact’ to be noted in the character of a hero, his interest in ‘the Great Men sent into the world’[[14]](#footnote-14) prioritises their resolute autonomy, rather than their devotion. The exclamatory and often comic idiosyncracies that became marked in Carlyle’s style were alien to the more instructive, expository approach that evolved in Ruskin’s early writing. Ruskin’s first publications appeared in periodicals – articles on geology in Loudon’s *Magazine of Natural History* in 1834, when Ruskin was fifteen, and a more ambitious piece on ‘The Poetry of Architecture’ (1837-8) in Loudon’s *Architectural Magazine*. The primary aim of these essays was to establish Ruskin’s credentials as an instructor, and they are full of the detailed observations and researches that occupied his adolescent years. They are, like much of Ruskin’s writing, intended to be educational; yet they are not simply designed to convey information. ‘Dead, and cold, and lightless is information unassisted and alone’, Ruskin remarked in a letter to his father, written when he was a high-spirited seventeen-year-old. ‘Thought flashes through it like lightning through ice’.[[15]](#footnote-15) ‘The Poetry of Architecture’ bears out this early conviction. Its title is significant, for alongside the influence of the sermon as a formative model in the development of Ruskin’s public voice is that of Romantic poetry.

If Ruskin’s mother hoped that her son might become a zealous evangelical clergyman, his father, a successful and widely travelled businessman, harboured more worldly ambitions for his only child. Ruskin’s tone in *Praeterita* is again one of mild mockery, as he described how his father had fondly hoped that he would "enter at college into the best society, take all the prizes every year, and a double first to finish with; marry Lady Clara Vere de Vere; write poetry as good as Byron's, only pious; preach sermons as good as Bossuet's, only Protestant; be made, at forty, Bishop of Winchester, and at fifty, Primate of England" (xxxv.185). John James Ruskin undoubtedly longed to see his talented son win the social success that he felt he had never quite achieved himself. However, his interests and aspirations were more complex than Ruskin is willing to acknowledge here. He was a keen amateur artist and a wide and discriminating reader, with largely Romantic tastes inflected by loyalty to his Scottish roots. John James’s enthusiasm for landscape painting, the fiction of Walter Scott, and the poetry of Byron, provided the foundation for Ruskin’s cultural identity. It was in his father’s company that he first looked at buildings with interest, as he accompanied John James on his business trips. Family loyalty and affection were bound up with the religious foundations of his earliest formation as a writer.

*The Poetry of Architecture* reflects these beginnings in that it focuses on modest domestic buildings, rather than monuments to civic or ecclesiastical grandeur, developing the Romantic argument that the construction of cottages or villas should harmonise with natural surroundings and national character. As the teenaged Ruskin defines it in this essay, architecture emerges as a product of both thought and feeling, rather as Wordsworth had described the origins of poetry in the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) as ‘continued influxes of feelings … modified and directed by our thoughts’.[[16]](#footnote-16) For Ruskin, architecture ‘is, or ought to be, a science of feeling more than of rule, a ministry to the mind, more than to the eye’ (i.5). What the preacher and poet have in common, as their identities converged in the distinctive public voice of Ruskin’s maturity, is an insistence on the primacy of a disciplined inward experience, grounded in careful analysis and observation, and culminating in the scrupulous communication of a body of truth with implications common to all human experience.

***The Public Lecture***

The confluence of evangelical faith and Romantic feeling formed Ruskin’s identity as a writer. Yet he became neither an ordained minister nor a poet. His sense of public responsibility did not allow for a life wholly devoted to the creative arts, while his commitment to a Romantic aesthetic, and his wish to reach a wide audience, could not accommodate a clergyman’s everyday duties to his parish and his bishop. The five expansive volumes of *Modern Painters* (1843-60), one of the last great works of European Romanticism, gave Ruskin scope to move between art and ethics. But *Modern Painters*, like *The Stones of Venice*, was an expensive and demanding work, and only readers with money and leisure at their command could assimilate the full range of its sustained arguments. The public lecture, a widely popular medium for instruction and entertainment in Victorian Britain, offered an alternative means of reaching those who might never be in a position to study his major works.

The rise of the public lecture was in part due to the influence of the model developed in America, where the Lyceum movement had promoted adult education through a variety of dramatic performances, debates and speeches through the early decades of the nineteenth century. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s lectures in Manchester in 1847-8 became celebrated, or notorious, as an attempt to reproduce the success of this movement for English audiences. They attracted widespread notice for their dense and challenging intellectual material, delivered without theatrical flourishes. But many hearers were affronted by their blunt challenge to cultural, political and religious orthodoxies. Martin Hewitt notes that the resulting controversy reflects the ‘contested nature of the lecture platform, and the complexity of the cultural roles and meanings of the public lecture itself.’[[17]](#footnote-17) Lectures could entertain, rouse, inform or politicise their audiences - or they could provide a living for the diligent lecturer, for accomplished performers could expect significant payment for their efforts. As Matthew Bevis explains, ‘the age’s growing fascination with public speaking’ has generated increasing levels of interest among social and political historians.[[18]](#footnote-18) The work of these historians has revealed a world much closer to the rough and tumble of mid-century Victorian polemics and popular culture than anything that the sheltered Ruskin had previously experienced.

Ruskin’s father was beginning to be an old man when Ruskin began to turn to the lecture podium, and he was dismayed. Substantial and beautifully-produced publications like *Modern Painters* (1843-60), *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), or *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3) seemed to him appropriate reflections of the social distinction he had wanted for his son. He saw lecturing, with its associations with American publicity-seekers and people who needed to earn a living, as a vulgar business, which would diminish his son’s prestige and distract him from what he considered to be more worthwhile activities. Hilton reports John James’s protests as Ruskin began to develop an interest in communicating his thoughts as a public lecturer in 1853, as *Modern Painters* still lay unfinished: “‘I don’t care to see you allied with the platform’, he wrote, ‘ ― though the pulpit would be our delight ― Jeremy Taylor occupied the last & Bacon never stood on the former.’” (Hilton 1, 205). In a series of letters written in August 1853, Ruskin wrote defensively to his father about his plan to give a series of formal lectures on architecture and painting in Edinburgh: ‘I do not mean at *any* time to take up the trade of a lecturer … all that I intend to do is merely, as if in conversation, to say to these people, who are ready to listen to me, some of the simple truths about architecture and painting which may perhaps be better put in conversational than literary form … I shall assuredly have plenty to say, and shall say it in a gentlemanly way, if not fluently” (xii.xxvi-vii). Ruskin’s four Edinburgh lectures, on Architecture, Decoration, Turner and his Works, and Pre-Raphaelitism, polished and published as *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* (1853). They were extraordinarily popular. Each attracted an audience of more than a thousand, largely drawn from the great and the good of his father’s home city. This might have made Ruskin nervous. One contemporary account suggests that his performance as a lecturer at this point in his career, as he experimented with the potential of the form, was uncertain in tone, as it shifted between the gravity of a composed text and a more informal manner: ‘And now for the style of the lecture, you say; what was it? Properly speaking, there were in the lectures two styles essentially distinct, and not well blended, - a speaking and a writing style; the former colloquial and spoken off-hand; the latter rhetorical and carefully read in quite a different voice – we had almost said intoned … the effect of the transition was often strange, and the audience, too, evidently sometimes had a difficulty in following the rapid change, and did not always keep up with the movement’ (xii.xxxii). According to E. T. Cook, Ruskin’s biographer and editor, who attended Ruskin’s later lectures in Oxford, a degree of distinction between highly worked sections and more informal passages continued to be characteristic of Ruskin’s approach to public speaking ‘in most of his Oxford discourses’ (xii.xxxiii). As he grew in experience, however, Ruskin learned how to manage his lectures more effectively, forging a strong personal connection between speaker and audience that depended on a carefully managed balance of instruction, challenge and entertainment.

Some of his growing confidence and expertise was gained at the newly established Working Men’s College in Red Lion Square, in London, where Ruskin taught regularly from the autumn of 1854 until May 1858. Without the pressures of the intimidating audiences who had come to hear him in Edinburgh, Ruskin experimented with improvised lectures that drew on stories, or dramatic questions, combined with moral and practical instruction. One member of his audience recalls the effect: ‘Formless and planless as they were, the effect on the hearers was immense. It was a wonderful bubbling up of all manner of glowing thoughts; for mere eloquence I never heard aught like it’ (Hilton 1, 205). Class distinctions had a part to play in this liberation. In speaking to the students of the Working Men’s College, Ruskin was not addressing his social equals. This allowed him a safe space to practise his techniques as a public speaker, without the sense of constraint reflected in his father’s anxieties that in doing so his standing as a gentleman might be compromised. Ruskin never quite freed himself from the social uncertainties that shadowed the lives of his parents, and was always at his most relaxed and forceful as a teacher and speaker when he was addressing audiences that could be seen to possess lower status than his own – young people, women and girls, or working-class men. His relations with powerful men of his own class were always touched with tension and some defensiveness. In this respect, popular performances of the kind that John James Ruskin feared would damage his son’s literary reputation turned out to be a liberation, opening a range of possibilities for the extension of his work as a critic and social reformer. As Hilton notes, it allowed for the beginning of ‘a style that Ruskin would explore in print in years to come, in works that were nominally addressed to working-class audiences; to Thomas Dixon, the cork-cutter of *Time and Tide*, and then to all the ‘workmen and labourers of Great Britain’ in *Fors Clavigera*. (Hilton 1, 205-6). In soothing the anxieties of his father in preparing for his Edinburgh lectures, Ruskin had claimed that ‘all my real efforts will be made in writing’ (xii.xxvi-vii). This was not wholly true, but it remained the case that Ruskin used his lectures as the basis for a series of published works that formed the basis for the expansion of his oeuvre after the completion of *Modern Painters* in 1860.

Contemporary reports, read alongside surviving manuscripts, often suggest that these published texts differed to some extent from the lectures as they were originally delivered. Nevertheless, the sense of an informal, sometimes combative connection with a particular audience gathered to listen at a specific event remains strong, and Ruskin is careful to retain this impression of immediacy. In 1857, a successful lecture series, published as *The Political Economy of Art*,*[[19]](#footnote-19)* marked a turning point in his career as a critic, confirming that issues of social justice were inseparable from his concerns as an art critic. Even John James Ruskin was beginning to resign himself to his son’s changing public profile, observing in a letter to Jane Simon that, as far as political economy was concerned, ‘on this weary subject a few new ideas will do no harm’ (Hilton 1, 247). These lectures were delivered in Manchester, and in 1858 Ruskin declared an ambition to ‘give lectures in all the manufacturing towns’ (xvi.xx). He did not quite manage that, but his active itinerary as a lecturer took him up and down the country over the next twenty years, speaking to a variety of audiences at least three or four times every year. His lectures were usually published soon after their delivery.

Lecturing engagements led Ruskin to visit towns and cities that he would otherwise have known only by reputation, and this was one of the ways in which the work extended his understanding of social and economic conditions in Britain. Occasionally he would choose to speak in places with family connections, as he had in delivering his *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* in Edinburgh. In 1858, his cousin, George Richardson, persuaded him to lecture in the Kentish spa town of Tunbridge Wells, where Richardson was working as a doctor. Ruskin had often stayed in the resort as a child. In taking ‘The Work of Iron, In Nature, Art and Policy,’ as his subject, Ruskin developed characteristic links between personal memory, observation of the natural world, and social and political issues. As Nicholas Shrimpton notes, the lecture reflects new levels of confidence and accomplishment in weaving his characteristic concerns into a tight ‘imaginative fabric’.[[20]](#footnote-20) The lecture begins with Ruskin’s recollections of childhood visits to Tunbridge Wells:

When, long ago (I am afraid to think how long), Tunbridge Wells was my Switzerland, and I used to be brought down here in the summer, a sufficiently active child, rejoicing in the hope of clambering sandstone cliffs of stupendous height above the common, there used sometimes, as, I suppose, there are in the lives of all children at the Wells, to be dark days in my life - days of condemnation to the pantiles and band - under which calamities my only consolation used to be in watching, at every turn in my walk, the welling forth of the spring over the orange rim of its marble basin. The memory of the clear water, sparkling over its saffron stain, came back to me as the strongest image connected with the place; and it struck me that you might not be unwilling, to-night, to think a little over the full significance of that saffron stain, and of the power, in other ways and other functions, of the steely element to which so many here owe returning strength and life; - chief as it has been always, and is yet more and more markedly so day by day, among the precious gifts of the earth.

As he was later to do in *Praeterita*, Ruskin engages the sympathy of the reader with half-rueful recollections of the confinements imposed on his childhood. Here too, his memories are not simply nostalgic. That ‘saffron stain’, the visual text on which he builds his secular sermon, is caused by the iron in the spring water which gave Tunbridge Wells its name and its identity, and it was the ‘work of iron’ that established the foundations of the industrialisation that his generation had witnessed, in what Matthew Arnold termed, in his elegy for Wordsworth, ‘the iron age’.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is characteristic of Ruskin’s perspective that he understands the creativity of this work to be a product of imperfection, for it is iron in its processes of oxidisation, or rust, which interests him, rather than the metal in a condition of gleaming perfection. It was one of the legacies of Ruskin’s early evangelical religion that he understood growth to be inseparable from the recognition of imperfection and decay, and this conviction informed his understanding of both natural and human value. He explains that ‘in a certain sense, and almost a literal one, we may say that iron rusted is Living, but when pure or polished, Dead’ (xvi. 376-7). Rusty iron combines the metallic element with oxygen, the breath of life; in this state it reflects and serves our own human experiences and values. Ruskin vividly demonstrates the role of iron in what we recognise as the sustaining beauty of landscape and architecture. Iron is what makes sand golden, rather than grey; it adds ‘rich scarlet colour’ (xvi.380) to bricks and tiles, warmth to the pigments of rock and gravel, and fertility to the soil. What had seemed an unfortunate stain, spoiling the purity of the marble basin, becomes a testament to the vitality of nature. In art, the meaning of iron is more ambivalent. Ruskin turns to ‘the work of iron’ in its social context, its ‘ductile and tenacious’ (xvi.387) qualities translated into the destructive divisions represented by the ubiquitous iron railing:

what meaning has the iron railing? Either, observe, that you are living in the midst of such bad characters that you must keep them out by main force of bar, or that you are yourself of a character requiring to be kept inside in the same manner. Your iron railing always means thieves outside, or Bedlam inside; it *can* mean nothing else than that (xvi.390).

In its political action, the work of iron is represented by ‘three great instruments’ (xvi.395); the Plough, the Fetter and the Sword – cultivation, discipline and struggle. Here too, Ruskin insists on the fundamental virtue of obedience: ‘the power and glory of all creatures, and all matter, consist in their obedience, not in their freedom’ (xvi.408). In its closing sections, the lecture moves from exegesis to open exhortation. The lecture approaches the register of the sermon more directly, with a Biblical peroration that is almost apocalyptic in its tone. What had begun with comforting complicity ends with an allusion to Isaiah’s prophecies of judgement in the ‘last days’: ‘nor will it be by patience of others' suffering, but by the offering of your own, that you ever will draw nearer to the time when the great change shall pass upon the iron of the earth; - when men shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; neither shall they learn war any more.’[[22]](#footnote-22) Ruskin intends to unsettle his readers, not to soothe them.

***The Professor***

A rhetorical strategy which fuses personal memory and reflection with satire, close observation and analysis, densely-worked patterns of cultural allusion and uncompromising moral challenge continues to characterise the published texts of Ruskin’s lectures throughout the 1860s. Major examples include ‘Traffic’ (Bradford, April 1864), ‘Of King’s Treasuries’ (Manchester, December 1864), ‘The Relation of National Ethics to National Art’ (Cambridge, 1867) and ‘Athena Chalinitis’ (London, 1869), but the complex network of meaning that Ruskin weaves across these diverse texts amounts to more than the sum of their separate parts. Published at relatively affordable cost in associated groups, like *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866), or *The Queen of the Air* (1869),[[23]](#footnote-23) they became Ruskin’s most popular works, exercising an influence that reached well into the first half of the twentieth century.

Ruskin was elected as Oxford’s first Professor of Fine Art in 1869, and his work as a lecturer changed. For the first and last time in his diverse career, he had acquired formal responsibilities to an employing institution. Though the fulfilment of his Oxford duties was never entirely regular, in the early years of his term of office Ruskin’s lectures became less personal and more recognisably professional, if less creatively innovative. Consciously addressed to the needs of a youthful audience, his inaugural *Lectures on Art*, published in 1870, stand among the clearest expositions of his cultural aesthetic, while his lectures on ‘The Relation on Natural Science to Art’, delivered in 1872 and published later that year as *The Eagle’s Nest,* adroitly summarises much of his earlier work. However, Ruskin’s relations with the university became more contentious as the years passed, and distractions crowded in. The Guild of St George, founded as St George’ Company in 1871, absorbed time and energy; so too did Brantwood, his new home in the Lake District. The serially-published letters of *Fors Clavigera* (1871-84)*,* written in association with the work of the Guild and addressed to the ‘workmen and labourers of Great Britain’, provided an alternative forum for Ruskin’s increasingly contentious political and cultural arguments. His development of this radical format was in part a return to earlier Carlylean models of communication, and a reaction against what he had come to see as the irksome constraints of Oxford. Ruskin’s lectures at the university became more intermittent, and less carefully disciplined. Nevertheless, he gave eleven courses of lectures in all, and they attracted large and enthusiastic audiences in Oxford. He occasionally delivered them twice, to accommodate the press of people wanting to hear what he had to say. The lectures drew numerous hearers from outside the academic community, including many women, and were widely reported in the press. They were judged to be a great popular success.

The motives of his audiences were mixed. Some were serious students, whether or not they were enrolled with the university, who attended the lectures in order to learn. But Ruskin was undoubtedly a national celebrity, and not simply a professor, and many of his hearers were simply taking advantage of the opportunity to encounter this great man in person. Others wanted to experience the drama of these diverting public events, for as Ruskin tired of sober professorial conventions, his lectures became more theatrical, and often more eccentric. He made innovative use of visual aids, commissioning large diagrams and pictures to illustrate his arguments, concealing and revealing them as the lecture proceeded. As Martin Hewitt notes, ‘the culture of the popular lecture in Victorian Britain was a culture of spectacle’,[[24]](#footnote-24) particularly in the field of science, and Ruskin exploited these new techniques in the more traditional context of Oxford’s lecture halls. Quasi-comic digressions, or vehement attacks on scientific or political orthodoxies, become more frequent. ‘In the decorous atmosphere of a University lecture-room the strangest things befell’, as the respectable G. W. Kitchin (Dean of Durham Cathedral) recalled, remembering the ‘flappings of his MA gown’, and the ‘scorn and wrath’ of his attacks on Darwinian theories.[[25]](#footnote-25) After a mental breakdown in 1878 led to his temporary resignation of the chair, Ruskin briefly resumed his professorial duties in 1883, giving two increasing provocative series of lectures, ‘The Art of England’ and ‘The Pleasures of England’. In 1885, enraged by the university’s decision to allow vivisection in its laboratories, he left Oxford for good, and his lecturing career reached its conclusion.

Ruskin’s public voice, as a lecturer or in print, had never fitted easily into conventional definitions. He was not a pedagogue of the kind that filled the civic halls of mid-Victorian Britain, and though he clearly benefited from an increasing appetite for such instruction, he was sometimes scornful of ‘the marvellous stupidity of this age of lecturers (xvi.387). His idiosyncratic strategies were formed by his early religious experiences, enriched with an exceptionally diverse range of connected cultural references. He was a deeply learned lecturer, but even as a pioneering professor in Oxford, his objectives were not primarily those of the scholar. Published or unpublished, his public discourses were intended to deepen the moral understanding of his audiences, and change their behaviour. Fulfilling, after all, his parents’ thwarted ambitions, he became Britain’s most brilliant preacher.

1. George Eliot, 'Art and Belles Lettres: Review of *Modern Painters* III', *Westminster Review*, April 1856, 625-33; 627. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See below, pp. 000-00. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Francis O’Gorman, Introduction to John Ruskin, *Praeterita* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2012), p. xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eliot, p. 627. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. # Charles Waldstein, *The Work of John Ruskin; Its Influence Upon Modern Thought and Life* (New York: Harper, 1893), p. 86.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin, The Early 1819-1859* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p.19. For a more detailed analysis of the influence of evangelicalism in relation to Romanticism in mid-Victorian culture, see David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inver-Varsity Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. William Wordsworth, Ode to Duty, *Poems in Two Volumes,* 2 vols.(London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, & Orme, 1807), I, p.72. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Second Collect, for Peace, in the Church of England’s Order for Morning Prayer refers to the service of God as ‘perfect freedom’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Van Akin Burd, ‘Ruskin’s *Sermons on the Pentateuch’, New Approaches to Ruskin*, ed. Robert Hewison (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1981), p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Reverend William Howels, the Welsh minister of the Episcopal Chapel, Long Acre, was celebrated for his eccentric sermons. See Hilton 1, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 27 (December 1872), xxvii.421. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See below, p.000. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Helen Gill Viljoen gives a detailed account of the Scottish influences on Ruskin’s intellectual formation in *Ruskin’s Scottish Heritage: A Prelude* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Thomas Carlyle, ‘Odin’, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship* *and the Heroic in History,* eds. Michael K. Goldberg, Joel J. Brattin and Mark Engel(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Letter from John Ruskin to John James Ruskin, *Family Letters*: *The Ruskin Family Letters: The Correspondence of John James Ruskin, his Wife, and their Son, John, 1801-1843*, ed. Van Akin Burd, 2 vols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), I, 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, eds. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p.127. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Martin Hewitt, ‘Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Dawson, and the control of the lecture platform in mid-nineteenth century Manchester’, *Nineteenth Century Prose,* 25:2 (Fall 1998), 1-23. See also Hewitt’s “Aspects of Platform Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain”, *Nineteenth-Century Prose 29* (Spring 2002),1–32, and H.C.G. Matthew, "Rhetoric and Politics in [Great Britain](http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Great+Britain), 1860-1930" in P.J. Waller, ed., *Politics and Social Change: Essays Presented to A.F. Thompson* (Brighton: Harvester Press,1987), pp. 34-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Matthew Bevis, ‘Volumes of Noise’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2003), 577–91; 578-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The lectures were reissued in 1880 as *A Joy for Ever: (and its Price in the Market)*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nicholas Shrimpton, ‘Rust and Dust: Ruskin’s Pivotal Work’, *New Approaches to Ruskin: Thirteen Essays*, ed. Robert Hewison (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Matthew Arnold, ‘Memorial Verses, April 1850’, l.17, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold,* ed. Kenneth Allott (London: Longmans, 1965), p.227. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. ‘And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.’ Isaiah 2:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Sesame and Lilies* was priced at 3s 6d; *The Crown of Wild Olive* at 5s; *The Queen of the Air* at 6s. When the three volumes of *The Stones of Venice* were first published as a complete set in 1874, they cost £5 15s 6d. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Martin Hewitt, ‘Beyond scientific spectacle: image and word in nineteenth century popular lecturing’, in *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship*, *1840-1910*, eds. Joe Kember, John Plunkett, and Jill A. Sullivan (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), pp. 79-95; p.79. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. G. W. Kitchin, *Ruskin in Oxford and Other Studies* (London: John Murray, 1903), p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)