RUSKIN'S ECOLOGIES: FIGURES OF RELATION FROM MODERN PAINTERS TO THE STORM-CLOUD

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The Courtauld

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Beauty, made in the year 1772 on several parts of England; particularly the mountains and lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland, two volumes (London: Blamire, 1786), vol. 1, p. 191.

63. Ruskin, 9.267 (*The Stones of Venice* 1, 1851).
64. William Hogarth dubbed this the line of beauty and the line of grace. See Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty: Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste* (London: Samuel Bagster, 1753).
65. Ruskin, 6.239 (*Modern Painters* 4, 1856).
66. Ella Mershon, 'Ruskin's Dust', *Victorian Studies* 58:3 (2016): pp. 469–70, 476, 479–80. See also Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 100–7.
67. Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*, p. 32.
68. Ruskin's 'pathetic fallacy' can be summarised as poetic fancy, or emotional distortion introduced in the description of the appearance of things: 'All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the "pathetic fallacy"'. See Ruskin, 5.205 (*Modern Painters* 3, 1843, 'Of the Pathetic Fallacy'). Ruskin takes the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge as an example: 'The one red leaf, the last of its clan; that dances as often as dance it can'. Ruskin explains that Coleridge fancies that the leaf has a life and a will of its own. Yet a dying leaf is powerless—it does not choose to 'dance'. There is also the contradistinct substitution of death with merriment, and the wind with music (5.206–7). See also Landow, *Aesthetic and Critical Theory of John Ruskin*, pp. 321–457, especially pp. 378–87.
69. Ruskin, 7.217 (*Modern Painters* 5, 1860).
70. Ruskin, 10.35 (*The Stones of Venice* 2, 1853).
71. Ruskin, 4.474 (*Modern Painters* 2, 1843): 'When you say a growing thing, therefore, you mean something advancing towards death'.
72. Ruskin, 4.155. See also the letter to Dean Liddell, 1 Dec 1878, quoted in Ruskin, 25.xxx: 'Man is intended to observe with his eyes, and mind; not with microscope and knife'. Also see Dinah Birch, '"That Ghastly Work": Ruskin, Animals and Anatomy', in Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison (eds.), *Victorian Literature and Culture: Contexts for Criticism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), and Wilmer, '"No Such Thing as a Flower … No Such Thing as a Man": John Ruskin's Response to Darwin', pp. 97–108.
73. In short, Darwin's theory was a theory of adaptation in that small changes in initial conditions for life can have amplified effects. The expression of form is environmentally dependent and the most favourable expression for an animal's particular environment will be selected. The evolution of species is thus based on selected traits that are natural (pressures exerted by nature) and sexual (pressures of selecting mates that can produce live, healthy offspring with a survival advantage). See Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* [1859], in Paul H Barrett (ed.), *The Works of Charles Darwin*, twenty-nine volumes (London: Routledge, 2016).
74. Ruskin, 26.349 (*The Two Paths*, 1859: Lecture 4, 'The Influence of Imagination in Architecture', 23 January 1857).
75. Ruskin, 4.68–9 (*Modern Painters* 2, 1846: Section 1: Of the Theoretic Faculty, Chapter 4 'Of false opinions').
76. Ruskin, 25.292 (*Proserpina* 1, 1875).
77. Ruskin, 25.289.
78. Ruskin, 25.289. In the footnote on p. 280 is written: 'On a printed proof, among other matter intended for St Mark's Rest [Ruskin, 10.163 (*The Stones of Venice* 2, 1853)], is the following additional passage on the subject: "Now, lastly, of the Thistle, more strictly the Acanthus. The prickliness of its leaf becomes at last its grace, so that of all leaves it is chosen at last for its Gratia by the Masters of working nations, and chosen, according to their tradition, in that Corinth where the Greek wisdom, or sophia, was to have her final obedience rendered to her"'.
79. Ruskin, 25.90.

7

Forms of Intermediate Being

JEREMY MELIUS

I begin with two scenes of composition. The first occurs in a well-known episode of John Ruskin's autobiography, *Praeterita* (1885–9), looking back to the emergence of his pictorial and environmental sensibilities from what he calls their 'chrysalid' state.[1] The scene unfolds in the forests of Fontainebleau when Ruskin was twenty-three. Recovering from the flu, he heads out for a walk, 'languid and woe-begone', strolling along 'a cart-road among some young trees, where there was nothing to see but the blue sky through thin branches'.[2] Exhausted, he 'lay down on the bank by the roadside to see if I could sleep. But I couldn't, and the branches against the blue sky began to interest me, motionless as the branches of a tree of Jesse on a painted window'.[3] Entranced by what he sees, Ruskin takes out his sketchbook in order to draw 'a little aspen tree', and the static forms come to life:

> Languidly, but not idly, I began to draw it; and as I drew, the languor passed away: the beautiful lines insisted on being traced,—without weariness. More and more beautiful they became, as each rose out of the rest, and took its place in the air. With wonder increasing every instant, I saw that they 'composed' themselves, by finer laws than any known of men. At last, the tree was there, and everything that I had thought before about trees, nowhere.[4]

In its staging of received assumptions displaced by vivid, particular facts, the passage corresponds to Ruskin's many accounts of visual revelation in *Praeterita* and elsewhere. But follow the web of connections he traces here: Ruskin's vitality returns through his encounter with the tree, energy drawn from the attentiveness that its formal intricacy has drawn out of him. He becomes involved in the complex circuitry of an act of depiction that somehow reroutes its own agency, as Ruskin finds himself both witness to and participant within a living network 'composing' itself. Indeed, the passage comes very close to suggesting that the tree has drawn its own picture by way of its frail human amanuensis: a self-sustaining image that escapes becoming fixed. For if the tree's initial likeness to a stained-glass window allows Ruskin access to its already pictorial aspects, those static qualities themselves undergo redefinition as the passage goes on. The 'beautiful lines' come alive, on the page as in the air, confirmation of the aspen's dynamic living form.

My second scene comes in Ruskin's study of a sketch by J. M. W. Turner, which he compares with the motif itself: a view from the alpine road to Fribourg over the spires of Lausanne (Figs. 7.1 and 7.2). Contained in a sketchbook dating to 1836, the picture offers an example of Turner's 'memoranda' drawings, as Ruskin calls them, recording features seen from a particular prospect to be filed away for later use.[5] It is a modest thing, one of thousands, never meant for exhibition. Yet in *Modern Painters* 5 (1860), Ruskin lingers over the depiction at length, describing it in minute detail. The drawing is '*both* commemorative and determinant', he says—both a record of the scene encountered and a forceful rearrangement of its aspects.[6] Turner 'never draws accurately on the spot', Ruskin claims, 'with intention of modifying or composing afterwards from the materials; but instantly modifies as he draws, placing his memoranda where they are to be ultimately used, and taking exactly what he wants, not a fragment or line more'.[7] As Ruskin's reconstructive analysis proceeds, a whole complex of negotiations with the motif ensues. The castle must be lowered so that we can see the lake; the 'last low spire on the left' brought into view to better portray the city as a 'spiry place', as Turner 'quietly sends to fetch the church from round the corner [and] places it where he likes'. Even the otherworldly peak of the Rochers d'Enfer, 'highest in the distance', submits to the ordering of Turner's 'unblushing tranquillity of mind'. For every line 'indicates something that is really there, only everything is shifted and sorted'. Indeed, '[n]ot a line is lost, nor a moment of time; and though the pencil flies and the whole thing is literally done as fast as a piece of shorthand writing, it is to the full as purposeful and compressed'.[8] In his insistence on that purpose and compression, Ruskin comes to his larger point:

> I know not if the reader can understand,—I myself cannot, though I see it to be demonstrable,—the simultaneous occurrence of idea which produces such a drawing as this: the grasp of the whole, from the laying of the first line, which induces continual modifications of all that is effaced; no experiment made, but every touch is placed with reference to all that are to succeed, as to all that have gone before; every addition takes its part, as the stones in an arch of a bridge; the last touch locks the arch.[9]

Fig. 7.1
Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Lausanne from the North-East* (1836). Val d'Aosta sketchbook, folio 48 recto. Pencil on white wove paper, 11.3 × 19 cm. Tate, London (cat. Turner Bequest CCXCIII 48). Photo: © Tate.

Fig. 7.2
After John Ruskin, *Turner's 'Memoranda' Sketch of Lausanne in the National Gallery*. Woodcut, reproduced in *Modern Painters* 5 (1860). Library Edition, figure 98, facing 7.242.

Ruskin returns here to the troubled ground of *Modern Painters* 4 (1856).[10] There, he had attempted to defend his insistence on Turner's essential accuracy while also acknowledging the force of the artist's imaginative reconfiguration of the landscape, a squaring of the circle that has attained some notoriety in Ruskin studies. Here, emphasis shifts to the sheer intricacy—the internal workings—of such compositional decision and arrangements. And by way of its close analysis of the sketch, the passage builds towards its greater claims. Too great, some might say: sceptical readers may balk at some of the passage's exaggerations. Yet such exaggerations prove necessary to Ruskin's whole enterprise. Through them, he tries to find language for something essential to the structure of strong pictorial configurations, and to the experience of their apprehension. It is a feeling of the parts locking into place at the impetus of some inscrutable intentional structure; of the composition having unfolded over time even as the results strike us now as happening all at once. As he studied Turner's drawing before the motif, trying to participate in its compositional decision and force, Ruskin scanned the surface for ways in which the drawing's configuration might index not only its spatial rearrangements but also its paradoxical being-in-time. The temporality of its production—terrifyingly fast—and the gentler temporality of its reception come together within the time of depiction itself. The image is still and yet not still, its elements simultaneous in their effects, but also slowed immeasurably down as we take the picture in, dilating the moment of encounter within a temporality neither quite Turner's nor our own. For all their complexity, these are effects that anyone who has looked long and hard at such configurations will have felt. They stage a totality that somehow has been arrived at, an inevitable order emerging organically rather than having been imposed. Getting such effects into words presents no easy task, one with implications beyond Turner's modest view (although Ruskin's devotion to its modesty remains touching).

Communities of form

When Ruskin came to publish the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters* in June 1860, some seventeen years after volume one appeared, he offered a conclusion of sorts, but also broke new ground. *Modern Painters* had long since outgrown its initial conception as a defence of Turner's landscape painting in order to encompass an extraordinarily wide range of concerns with representation as such. Yet, this volume marked a further stage still. *Modern Painters* 5 has a powerful internal coherence unique within the larger work, offering the critic's most intricate theorisations of pictorial form, as well as some of his most sustained descriptions of individual works of art, both gathered under the heading 'Of Ideas of Relation'. The nature of composition—vital yet 'inexplicable'—makes up the volume's great theme.[11]

In what follows, I am mostly concerned with the descriptive specificities of Ruskin's search for an ecology of pictorial structure. For it is part of my argument that only in the fine-grained attention undertaken within Ruskin's descriptive prose did his wildest and most searching analytic work get done. Nonetheless, his programmatic statement of the problem, itself beautiful and destabilising, offers a place to start. A crucial moment of explanation comes in the midst of a chapter called 'The Law of Help':

> Composition may be best defined as the help of everything in the picture by everything else.
>
> I wish the reader to dwell a little on this word 'Help.' It is a grave one. In substance which we call 'inanimate,' as of clouds, or stones, their atoms may cohere to each other, or consist with each other, but they do not help each other. The removal of one part does not injure the rest.
>
> But in a plant, the taking away of any one part does injure the rest … If any part enters into a state in which it no more assists the rest, and has thus become 'helpless,' we call it also 'dead'.
>
> The power which causes the several portions of the plant to help each other, we call life. Much more so in an animal. We may take away the branch of a tree without much harm to it; but not the animal's limb. Thus, intensity of life is also intensity of helpfulness—completeness of depending of each part on all the rest. The ceasing of this help is what we call corruption; and in proportion to the perfectness of the help, is the dreadfulness of the loss. The more intense the life has been, the more terrible is the corruption.[12]

I quote at length because one can hardly do otherwise. Once the flow of definitions starts, it hardly stops, cascading down the pages of his text. 'Composition' leads to 'help' which leads to 'life', but only by way of 'helplessness', 'corruption', and 'death'. Only against this dreadful ground can Ruskin's notion of vital composition truly emerge. But never emerge completely. Death haunts nearly every page of *Modern Painters* 5, from its description of the moss and lichen adorning tombs—'slow fingered, constant-hearted', 'weaving [their] dark, eternal tapestries'—to the 'deathful selfishness' of vulgarity that a later chapter anatomises, and on to the unforgettable bleakness of the volume's conclusion, which can barely draw its reader back from wearing 'death's crown' at the grave.[13] And moreover, returning to the passage at hand, nowhere does Ruskin stipulate where, exactly, along this continuum of animacy and feeling pictorial composition should in fact be seen to lie. It is living, yes, because helpful—but to what degree? Is such composition more plant-like or more animal in nature? How distinct from inorganic processes of development? How close, finally, to the stillness of death?[14]

Careful reading of the text shows Ruskin's answers to be various. But I would suggest that the crucial analogue to the 'helpful' structures of pictorial composition precedes the passage discussed above, occuring in Ruskin's analysis of plant growth—the relational system of leaf acting upon leaf, branch upon branch, tree upon tree—with which *Modern Painters* 5 opens. 'Of Leaf Beauty', as this first section is called, addresses the living forms that constitute such 'mystery of intermediate being'—a mode of life 'which breathes, but has no voice; moves, but cannot leave its appointed place; passes through life without consciousness, to death without bitterness; wears the beauty of youth, without passion; and declines to the weakness of age, without its regret'.[15] It does so by tracing the history of tribulations that plants undergo as they negotiate between an irresistible will to growth and the environmental adversities that inhibit their flourishing. Ruskin undertakes this analysis with almost hallucinatory slowness, type by idiosyncratic type (for established botanical terminology will hardly capture the principles he wishes to portray), but also, in places, year by year, as he grows his textual branches before our eyes (Figs. 7.3, 7.4, and 7.5).[16]

Here, too, death and loss shadow growth. He compares the development of plants to that of coral: 'the animal which forms branched coral, builds, I believe, in calm water': it thus 'builds in monotonous ramification, untormented, therefore unbeautiful'.[17] The plant, by contrast, faces torment head on, pursuing 'a life of endurance, effort, and various success, issuing in various beauty'.[18] More is at stake here than platitudes about adversity forging good character, vegetal or otherwise. Death turns out to constitute 'leaf beauty' as such. Through the involute architecture of his sentences, Ruskin follows the course of a single hypothetical plant:

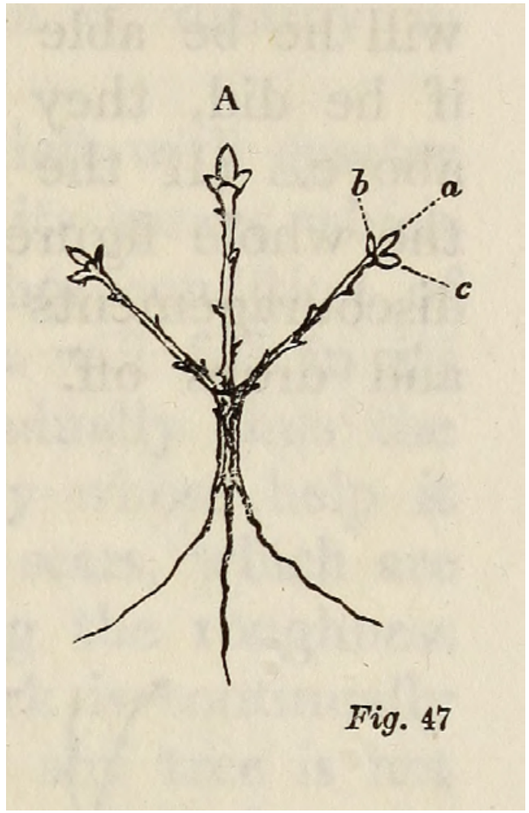

Fig. 7.3
After John Ruskin, *Elementary Type of Tree Plant, as it will be in a Second Year.* Woodcut, reproduced in *Modern Painters* 5 (1860). Library Edition, figure 47, 7.75.

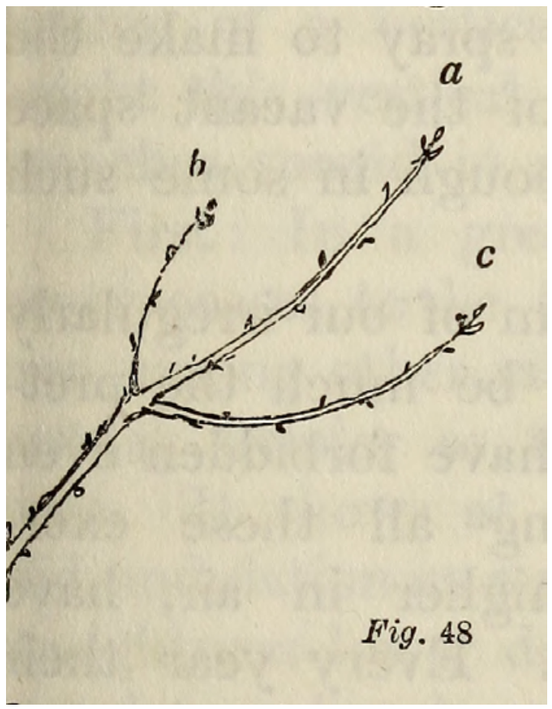

Fig. 7.4
After John Ruskin, *Modifications of the Elementary Type during Subsequent Growth.* Woodcut, reproduced in *Modern Painters* 5 (1860). Library Edition, figure 48, 7.75.

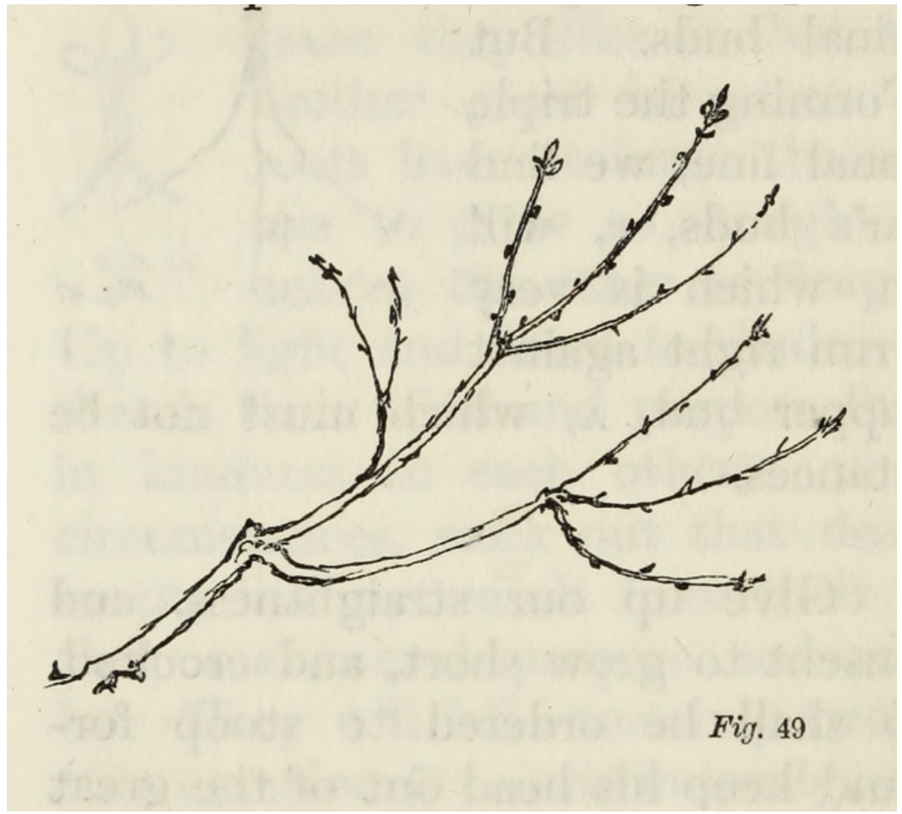

Fig. 7.5
After John Ruskin, *Modifications of the Elementary Type during Subsequent Growth.* Woodcut, reproduced in *Modern Painters* 5 (1860). Library Edition, figure 49, 7.76.

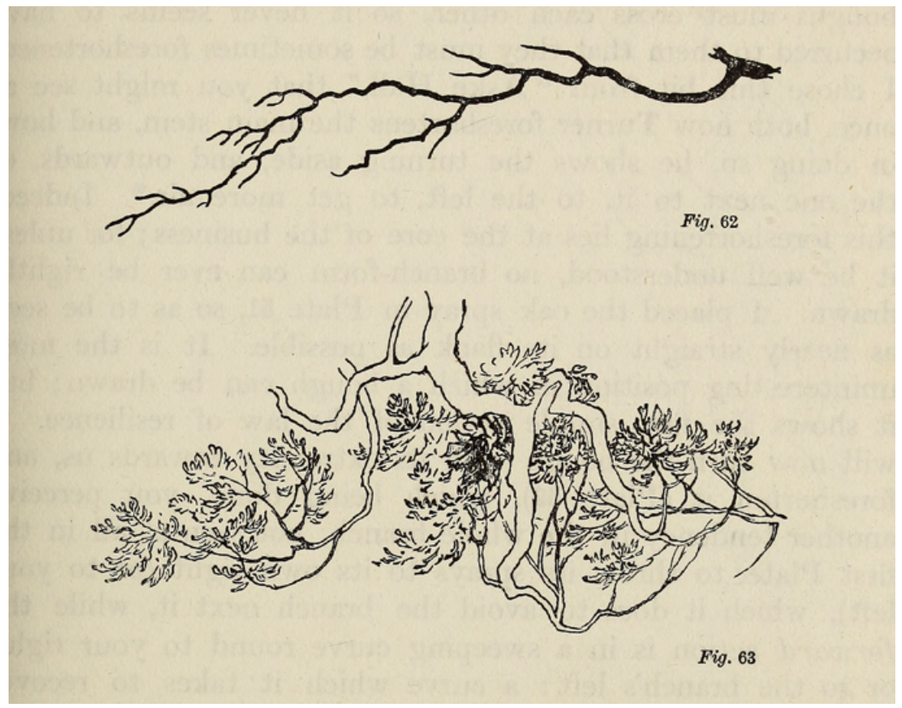

Fig. 7.6
After John Ruskin, *Branch from Salvator Rosa's 'Apollo and the Sybil' (figure 62) and Branch from Turner's 'Aske Hall' (figure 63).* Woodcuts, reproduced in *Modern Painters* 5 (1860). Library Edition, figures 62 and 63, 7.93.

> All the three buds and roots have at heart the same desire;—which is, the one to grow as straight as he can towards bright heaven, the other as deep as he can into dark earth. Up to light and down to shade;—into air and into rock:—that is their mind and purpose for ever. So far as they can, in kindness to each other, and by sufferance of external circumstances, work out that destiny, they will. But their beauty will not result from their working it out … They will fail—certainly two, perhaps all three of them: fail egregiously;—ridiculously;—it may be, agonizingly. Instead of growing up, they may be wholly sacrificed to happier buds above … Instead of getting down quietly into the convent of the earth, they may have to cling and crawl about hardest and hottest angles of it, full in sight of man and beast, and roughly trodden under foot by them;—stumbling-blocks to many.
>
> Yet out of such sacrifice, gracefully made—such misfortune, gloriously sustained—all their true beauty is to arise. Yes, and from more than sacrifice—more than misfortune: from *death*. Yes, and more than death: from the worst kind of death: … premature, oppressed, unnatural, misguided—or so it would seem—to the poor dying sprays. Yet, without such death, no strong trunk were ever possible; no grace of glorious limb or glittering leaf; no companionship with the rest of nature or with man.[19]

These 'hidden histories' of trees are without exception grim.[20] In the face of them, the passage's final point about the wider reaches of companionship may seem to ring hollow. And yet it proves essential. Such grimness makes up the ground of a wider community of forms.

It is here that Ruskin's language of mortality differs from the one Charles Darwin was developing at almost the same moment. In all probability, we are faced here with a case of intriguing parallels rather than direct influence. *On the Origin of Species* had appeared at the end of November 1859, in tantalising proximity to *Modern Painters* 5, published just a few months later in June 1860, but it is unlikely that Ruskin knew Darwin's text at this time, and I suspect he may never have read it.[21] (We know for sure that he read Darwin's *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* [1871] during the 1870s, and reacted violently against it. In the late 1850s, when Ruskin was at work on *Modern Painters* 5, however, this was still to come.) Nonetheless, Darwin had concluded *Origin* with his famous evocation of an 'entangled bank', populated by 'elaborately constructed forms'—'plants of many kinds, … birds singing on the bushes, … various insects flitting about, … worms crawling through the damp earth'.[22] These forms, however, can only develop within a kind of hellscape, trapped within a ceaseless 'Struggle for Life' governed by 'Natural Selection' and 'Extinction', subject to 'war of nature', 'famine', 'death'.[23] For Darwin, too, there comes a kind of beauty from this, or more properly a kind of sublimity: 'There is grandeur in this view of life', he writes.[24] But it stems from outright antagonism, from the endless warfare between 'less-improved forms' and better-adapted ones, as the processes of evolution play mercilessly out.[25] The history of struggle lives on in the bodily forms of its winners.

Ruskin, by contrast, insists that his branches grow not in competition but 'in kindness to each other', anticipating something closer to Peter Kropotkin's anarchist natural history, perhaps.[26] The leaf is 'full of fears and affections', he says—fears, that is, but also affections—in relation to the world and to its fellows, like members of a family, or of a neighbourhood, or, as he sometimes insists, citizens of a state.[27] The analogies can devolve into playful pseudo-sociological commentary. In the assertive individuality of their leaves, for instance, '[t]he laurel and rhododendron are like the Athenian or Florentine republics', centred on strong individual personalities.[28] The aspen, meanwhile, with its thinner, more 'tremulous and directionless' leaves, is 'like England … shaking pale with epidemic panic at every breeze'.[29] But whether pursued in humour or in a more sombre mode, the analogies get at something fundamental to Ruskin's understanding of 'Leaf Beauty'. As in such collective social bodies, any leafy grouping must be understood as constituting an 'arrangement of … concessions'.[30] And in the case of leaves, at least, this entails the development of 'an exquisite sensibility':

> They do not grow each to his own liking … ; but by a watchful instinct, far apart, they anticipate their companions' courses, as ships at sea, and in every new unfolding of their edged tissue, guide themselves by the sense of each other's remote presence … So that every shadow which one casts on the next, and every glint of sun which each reflects to the next, and every touch … aid or arrest the development of their advancing form, and direct … the curve of every fold and the current of every vein.[31]

In this delicate formal clairvoyance, shivering through every extremity, we may find Ruskin forging a new descriptive vocabulary for pictorial composition. His sentences turn and branch to follow the forms to which he attends. The 'exquisite sensibility' proves crucial to Ruskin's account of landscape painting, of course, and its rendering of nature. Part of Turner's greatness, it emerges, lies in his ability not only to make a whole composition hang together, but also to participate in the smaller modes of sympathetic volition Ruskin describes. The text offers a pair of illustrations for comparison (Fig. 7.6). The top branch belongs to Salvator Rosa, a favourite target of Ruskin's: 'You cannot but feel at once, not only the wrongness of Salvator's, but its dullness … That bough has got no sense; it has not been struck by a single new idea from the beginning of it to the end'.[32] By contrast, Turner has somehow managed, in the vital twisting branches shown below, to picture a whole topology of artistic and natural thought.

Chains of feeling

Such descriptions bear obvious comparison to the wider reaches of Ruskin's writings on politics and social life. It is no accident that principles like the 'Law of Help' occur in his writings at just this moment, leading up to a decade in which his attentions turned markedly towards political and economic affairs.[33] *Unto This Last* (1860), Ruskin's savagely critical 'essays on the first principles of Political Economy', would appear within months of *Modern Painters* 5, and some of the latter's centripetal energy no doubt stems from such impulses. At one point, Ruskin even complains that his studies of art 'have been coloured throughout,—nay continually altered in shape, and even warped and broke, by digressions respecting social questions, which had for me an interest tenfold greater than the work I had been forced into undertaking'.[34] It is as if *Modern Painters* itself had undergone deformations akin to those of the branches it describes: the whole project had 'changed like a tree'.[35]

Yet, I think we can see this new species of composition operating most powerfully when the pull of direct social commentary was momentarily suspended (compelling though the outcome could often be) and his concerns with landscape displaced in favour of attending to the grouping of figures in painting. Here, Ruskin would discover community of another kind. During the summer of 1859, on a tour of German galleries, he studied Veronese's *Adoration of the Virgin by the Cuccina Family* (c.1571) closely in Dresden (Fig. 7.7). Along with the rest of the city's collection, it had

Fig. 7.7
Paolo Veronese, *The Madonna of the Cuccina Family* (c.1571). Oil on canvas, 167 × 416 cm. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. Photo: bpk Bildagentur / Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden / Herbert Boswank / Art Resource, NY.

recently taken up residence in a new museum designed by Gottfried Semper, opened just three years before: a building much celebrated in its day, and still so.[36] Ruskin himself was not much impressed. 'All [the] pictures are shown to disadvantage, not excepting [Raphael's] Madonna de San Sisto', he noted in a letter to the painter Clarkson Stanfield: 'she has a room to herself, but it is in a feeble light'.[37] Before Veronese, however, he stood transfixed. His description of the painting would go on to form one of the great set-pieces of *Modern Painters* 5, flowing across several pages of a chapter called 'The Wings of the Lion'. The chapter offers a speculative cultural history of Venice and the formation of the Venetians' character, a sea-faring people shaped by their immediate environment and the demands of their 'ocean-work'.[38] The description of Veronese's painting arises out of discussion concerning the worldliness of religious painting in the Republic, and sinks away into another concerning the importance of the 'trivial, or even ludicrous detail'—what Ruskin elsewhere calls 'The Task of the Least'—as exemplified by the Venetian love of little dogs.[39] 'Throughout the rest of Italy', he writes:

> piety had become abstract, and opposed theoretically to worldly life … At Venice, all this was reversed, and so boldly as at first to shock, with its seeming irreverence, a spectator accustomed to the formalities and abstractions of the so-called sacred schools. The madonnas are no more seated apart on their thrones, the saints no more breathe the celestial air. They are on our own plain ground—nay, here in our houses with us. All kind of worldly business going on in their presence, fearlessly; our own friends and respected acquaintances, with all their mortal faults, and in their mortal flesh, looking at them face to face unalarmed; nay, our dearest children playing with their pet dogs at Christ's very feet.[40]

In its very beauty, Ruskin thought, such world-historical achievement was fragile—almost bound to fail. Its aims ultimately proved 'reckless': Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* (1516–18) 'is a noble picture, because Titian believed in the Madonna. But he did not paint it to make anyone else believe in her. He painted it, because he enjoyed rich masses of red and blue, and faces flushed with sunlight'.[41] However devout, the Venetian painter 'did not desire the religion. He desired the delight'.[42] And so, Ruskin concludes, 'I know not whether in sorrowful obedience, or in wanton compliance [the great Venetians] fostered the folly, and enriched the luxury of their age. This only I know, that in proportion to the greatness of their power was the shame of its destruction and the suddenness of its fall'.[43] Ruskin's judgment here is harsh and unyielding, summoning the denunciatory force of *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3) at its most implacable. His close description of actual pictures tells a different, more nuanced story, even as it always keeps this essential fragility of the Venetian enterprise in mind.

Veronese's painting had been commissioned by the immensely wealthy Cuccina family, originally from Bergamo, one of the most prominent merchant families of sixteenth-century Venice.[44] In a very nineteenth-century way, though, Ruskin took the painting to be personal, showing Veronese's own family, 'as painted by himself'.[45] (In this, Ruskin follows a tradition in place at least since 1743 when the picture first came to Dresden.)[46] The exact identification may be less important for Ruskin's purposes than

the painting's complex pictorial structure, and for the way in which that structure gets fleshed out as a depiction of familial ties. Already in *Modern Painters* 3 (1856), Ruskin had taken Veronese's greatness to lie in his powerful relational sensibility—his concern with forging 'tenderest balance' between a painting's parts, 'noting in each hair's-breadth of colour, not merely what its rightness or wrongness is in itself, but what its relation is to every other on his canvas'.[47] For Veronese 'chooses to represent the great relations of visible things to each other, to the heaven above, and to the earth beneath them … all joined in one great system of spacious truth'.[48] In *Modern Painters* 5, those great relations come wonderfully down to earth.

The sacred group at the painting's left is fascinating; but Ruskin dispenses with the Madonna and saints in four quick sentences, ignoring the angel altogether.[49] Even the figure Ruskin takes to be Veronese's self-portrait—the bearded man leaning to his side behind the column—flits by in an instant. 'He himself stands a little behind, his hands clasped in prayer': that's it.[50] Attention falls instead—falls lavishly—on the intricate web of spatial and emotional adjustments that constitute the family group itself, as they are gathered together under the canopying attention of the three virtues, Faith, Hope, and Charity. Figure by figure, they reveal themselves as 'full of fears and affections' as any leaf:

> His wife kneels full in front, a strong Venetian woman, well advanced in years. She has brought up her children in fear of God, and is not afraid to meet the Virgin's eyes. She gazes steadfastly on them; her proud head and gentle, self-possessed face are relieved in one broad mass of shadow against a space of light, formed by the white robes of Faith, who stands beside—guardian, and companion. Perhaps a somewhat disappointing Faith at first sight, for her face is not in any special way exalted or refined. Veronese knew that Faith had to companion simple and slow-hearted people, perhaps oftener than able or refined people—does not therefore insist on her being severely intellectual, or looking as if she were always in the best company. So she is only distinguished by her pure white (not bright white) dress, her delicate hand, her golden hair drifted in light ripples across her breast, from which the white robes fall nearly in the shape of a shield—the shield of Faith. A little behind her stands Hope …
>
> She has a black veil on her head.
>
> Then again, in the front, is Charity, red-robed … She has got some work to do even now, for a nephew of Veronese's is doubtful about coming forward, and looks very humbly and penitently towards the Virgin—his life perhaps not having been quite so exemplary as might at present be wished. Faith reaches her small white hand lightly back to him, lays the tips of her fingers on his; but Charity takes firm hold of him by the wrist from behind, and will push him on presently, if he still hangs back.[51]

The remarkably gentle force of Ruskin's descriptive abilities is on full display here. His narration of the image—or better, his making the image narrative—opens directly onto interpretation, it seems, based on close discernment of detail. ('[P]ure white', that dress, 'not bright white'.) Too often, readers get caught up in Ruskin's prescriptive intensity, his inimitable bossiness as a writer. And how could we not? Polemicising is one of the critic's chief modes, and the complex pleasure of reading Ruskin lies partly in the chances it affords us to bridle at his bullying. But exasperated at his performative fury, one may too easily miss the quieter powers of Ruskin's constative mode—his sheer descriptive efficacy. It is by way of such description that Ruskin's deeper work of thinking through

Fig. 7.8
Detail of figure 7.7

phenomena gets done. Here, the text brings each figure into focus, but only within attention's movement from one form to another, scanning slowly over the picture's surface as it follows the vital network of feeling that threads through them, a tissue of touches and glances, anticipations and apprehensions, which the individuated figures serve to articulate between themselves, semantic and gestural at once.

The enveloping choreography of the virtues constitutes one such structure. The internal balancings of the family members give form to another:

> In front of the mother kneel her two eldest children, a girl of about sixteen and a boy a year or two younger. They are both rapt in adoration—the boy's being the deepest. Nearer us, at their left side, is a younger boy, about nine years old—a black-eyed fellow, full of life—and evidently his father's darling (for Veronese has put him full in light in the front; and given him a beautiful white silken jacket, barred with black, that nobody may ever miss seeing him to the end of time) [Fig. 7.8]. He is a little shy about being presented to the Madonna, and for the present has got behind the pillar, blushing, but opening his black eyes wide; he is just summoning courage to peep round and see if she looks kind. A still younger child, about six years old, is really frightened, and has run back to his mother, catching hold of her dress at the waist [Fig. 7.9]. She throws her right arm round him and over him, with exquisite instinctive action, not moving her eyes from the Madonna's face. Last of all, the youngest child, perhaps about three years old, is neither frightened nor interested, but finds the ceremony tedious, and is trying to coax the dog to play with him; but the dog, which is one of the little curly, short-nosed, fringypawed things, which all Venetian ladies petted, will not now be coaxed. For the dog is the last link in the chain of lowering feeling, and takes his doggish views of the matter [Fig. 7.10].[52]

The mixture of tenderness and humour here, so characteristic of Ruskin at his calmest, stages the interwoven nature of the painting's affective work. Elsewhere, Ruskin notes that 'I am always led away, in spite of myself, from … [discussion of the] placing of lines and masses, into the emotional results of such arrangements', for unlike the 'perfection' of formal organisation, the 'emotional power can be explained'.[53] But here he finds emotional power and formal arrangement to be embedded within each other, giving each other shape. The feeling *is* the form. Again, what matters is less the firm definition of affective state or atomised identity than the way in which those identities become just fixed enough to articulate their coming together. They describe a larger dynamism, a relay across the whole. And it is utterly typical that Ruskin should offer an interpretive key on the sly. The little dog, with 'his doggish views', seems to propose an exit from the charmed circle of the painting: 'He cannot understand, first, how the Madonna got into the house; nor, secondly, why she is allowed to stay, disturbing the family, and taking all their attention from his dogship. And he is walking away, much offended'.[54] But in thus turning away, he lights the whole network of affection up, flipping like a switch. As the 'last link' in a 'chain of lowering feeling', he shows definitively that feeling to be enchained.

'Lowering', of course, raises the issue of hierarchy, one implied already by the whole metaphorics of the family in 'Of Leaf Beauty' and in its more literal depiction here. Such inequality often poses difficulties for readers of Ruskin, one of the things that can make the valences of his politics seem so unstable.[55] To some extent it will simply prove a matter of critical temperament whether one wishes to emphasise enchainment and connection here, or the relative standing of each link within that chain. And I

Fig. 7.9
Detail of figure 7.7

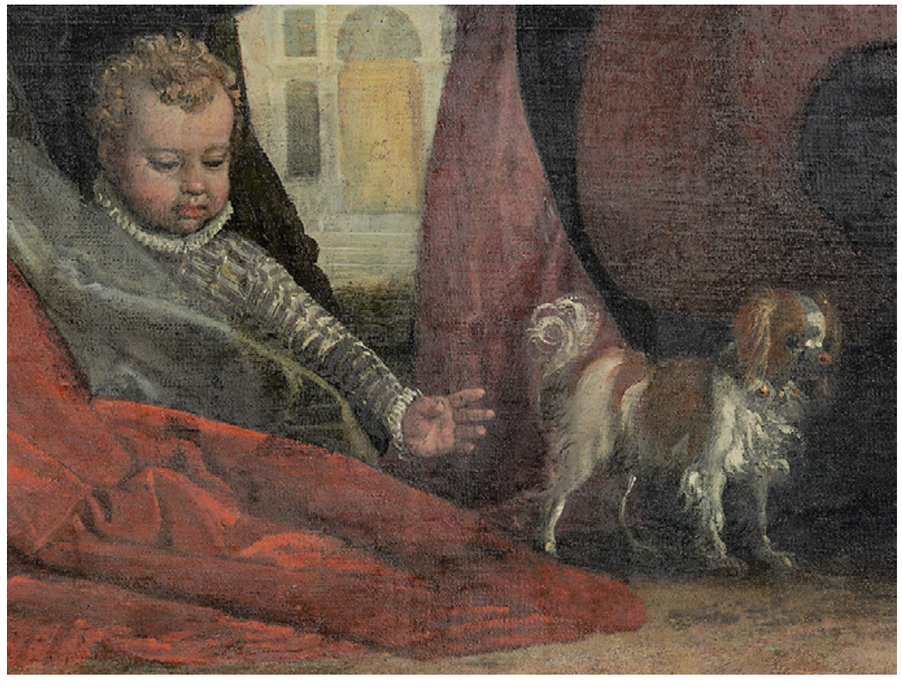

Fig. 7.10
Detail of figure 7.7.

Fig. 7.11
Detail of figure 7.7.

Fig. 7.12
John Ruskin, *Copy of a Part of Paolo Veronese's 'Family Group' at Dresden.* Photogravure after drawing, reproduced in *Modern Painters* 5 (1860). Library Edition, Plate F, facing 7.290.

certainly do not wish to be understood as endorsing a kind of new-age, user-friendly 'relational Ruskin'—let alone a relatable one—sanitised of his love of authority and order, set adrift to surf the seamless flow. But I do want to follow what I take to have been Ruskin's intuition as he studied the painting up close: that it is made up of hierarchies, joints, unequal and various configurations, yes, but that the painting also works hard—which is to say, works gently, persuasively—to bring things together within an experience of lateral expanse. The boundaries are there, surely, yet it is also as if they might always be under construction, breaking apart and reforming into other articulations before our eyes. The tangled composition teeters wonderfully towards chaos, but its capacious and flexible structure never quite succumbs. New figures flow in from stage right, poised to join the proceedings. In the distance, on and across the canal, other relations, other worlds, open up (Fig. 7.11). Or perhaps other versions of the same world: the tiny figure boarding a gondola in the painting's right-hand corner wears a dress similar to that of the mother that at the picture's centre; perhaps the same dress. Is it her? Yet the frame and comportment of this distant figure seem altered, somehow. Are these figures the same woman, at different moments in time, or in different versions of herself? Ruskin could not have known that she stands before a palace that shares features with the Cuccina family's own on the Grand Canal.[56] A potential narrative relation between the figures thus suggests itself. But Veronese's painting never quite sews things up. The replications remain generative because they are inexact. The play of possibilities stays open. Turned inward on their emotions, the figures are always turning outward, populating space. And pictorial composition emerges here less as a system of fixed bonds than as an atmosphere of potential affinities—an elastic relationality, if you like.

Face to face

The temptation to stay with the painting in this way, exploring its complexities, is hard to resist. Much remains to be said. But in closing, I wish to return to another of Ruskin's ways of dwelling within it. As so often in his campaigns of close looking, here too the manner of description proved visual as much as verbal. As he stood before the painting in the summer of 1859, Ruskin pictured its relations at least twice. One sketch picks out key members of the family group at large, staging a number of the effects I have been trying to draw out of his published description, including even that sensational little dog, haloed here in black (Fig. 7.12). But notice what has happened to the figure Ruskin took to be Veronese. The father of the family—the father of the painting—becomes a ghost. So too the second bearded man beneath him, whom Ruskin declines even to mention.[57] The 'painter's' face has never been filled in, we surmise, but it reads almost as if he has been erased. The decision corresponds to the selectiveness found in Ruskin's verbal description, but now in a different key, and with stranger implications. There is something both disturbing and moving in that decision, as if Veronese could only really appear in his distribution across a relational structure rather than in his person, or as if that structure could only gain traction when released from the father's law. Even that second potential father figure had to go.

A further study proves even more arresting (Fig. 7.13). It depicts the face of the black-eyed boy hugging the column, 'his father's darling'. Of course Ruskin should fix on him so intently. The figure remains magnetic, in all the ways his verbal description conveys. But he also comes to serve as a locus of darker feeling in that description, lingering just around the edges of the prose. The boy, recall, is 'evidently his father's darling (for Veronese has put him full in light in the front; and given him a beautiful white silken jacket, barred with black, that nobody may ever miss seeing him to the

Fig. 7.13
John Ruskin, *Copy of the Head of a Boy, from Veronese's 'Cucina Family'* (1859). Pencil, ink, ink wash, and bodycolour, 28 × 22.3 cm. The Ruskin—Library, Museum & Research Center, University of Lancaster, Bailrigg. Photo: © The Ruskin—Library, Museum and Research Center, University of Lancaster.

Fig. 7.14
After John Ruskin, *A Birch Bud*. Woodcut, reproduced in *Modern Painters* 5 (1860). Library Edition, figure 70, 7.99.

end of time)'. His painted figure needed to be seen to the end of time because the boy himself would sooner or later be gone. Among other things, Ruskin quietly suggests, the painting constitutes a proleptic memorial for the boy. Death, one realises, had not only haunted the painting's historical position on the razor's edge of Venetian decline: it had made itself felt here, too, in the complex of feeling condensed in a body standing close.

Ruskin's copy of the figure registers something of this fragility and fear, but again in a different key. It is striking the extent to which these drawings suggest things that Ruskin's text could never quite bring itself to say. Look, for instance, at the play of dark forms beside his face, bringing it into focus. There is something troubling, anxious, perhaps even demonic about their lack of discipline, as if shadow itself has come to life. The erratic gouache highlights they compete with, on ear and forehead and cheekbone, only add to the sense of things going awry. Tender as they are, the features of the face seem to undergo a process of discoordination the longer one looks at them: between the eyes, for instance, or around the shaping of the mouth, where further shadows gather. These are subtle effects, to be sure, creeping up slowly on the viewer. Once seen, they never fully go away. Their purpose remains mysterious, but darkly enlivening. For if the boy's stare might be mistaken for blank, it also reveals itself to be full of relational feeling. It is as if the drawing itself, even as it sought to fix and work through whatever Ruskin had located in the figure on its own, acknowledged that such isolation could only be deforming.[58] And perhaps the animate, shadowy forms mean to return us finally to the figure's situation within a wider painterly syntax, his being there with others, who- or whatever they are. The boy hovers, almost dances, at the picture's edge, bridging his family and the Madonna's, but also the painting's world and our own. He almost steps down into our world, even as he climbs close around the column, like one of Ruskin's sensitive plants (Fig. 7.14): 'up to light, and down to shade', 'into air and into rock'; a leaf, perhaps, turning outward towards its sun.

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1. Ruskin, 35.311 (*Praeterita* 1, 1885, 1886). For further discussion of the scene, see, among others, Clive Wilmer, 'Creativity', in Francis O'Gorman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 233–4.
2. Ruskin, 35.313.
3. Ruskin, 35.313.
4. Ruskin, 35.313–14.
5. Ruskin, 7.239, 241 (*Modern Painters* 5, 1860).
6. Ruskin, 7.241.
7. Ruskin, 7.241.
8. Ruskin, 7.242–3.
9. Ruskin, 7.243–4.
10. See the discussion in 'Of Turnerian Topography': Ruskin, 6.27–47 (*Modern Painters* 4, 1856).
11. 'Inexplicable': Ruskin, 7.209, 210, 244.
12. Ruskin, 7.205.
13. Ruskin, 7.130, 362, 460.
14. In an extraordinary passage further on in 'The Law of Help', Ruskin imagines 'an ounce or two of the blackest slime of a beaten footpath … near a large manufacturing town' undergoing of its own volition a transformation into the purest forms of its constitutive parts—an 'animation of the inorganic' that looks ahead to obsessive cultural concerns that marked the century's end: Ruskin, 7.207. On these, see Spyros Papapetros, *On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), especially pp. 113–57. Ruskin seems often to have been drawn to questions of relative vitality. As the 'Lecturer' in *The Ethics of the Dust* would put it a few years later: 'You may at least earnestly believe, that the presence of the spirit which culminates in your own life, shows itself in dawning, wherever the dust of the earth begins to assume any orderly and lovely state. You will find it impossible to separate this idea of gradated manifestation from that of the vital power. Things are not wholly alive, or wholly dead. They are less or more alive': Ruskin, 17.346 (*The Ethics of the Dust*, 1866).
15. Ruskin, 7.14–15.
16. For these classifications, see 'The Leaf-Orders': Ruskin, 7.20–3.
17. Ruskin, 7.85.
18. Ruskin, 7.85.
19. Ruskin, 7.74–5.
20. Ruskin, 7.73.
21. Compare Robert Hewison's suggestion that 'although "Darwinism" becomes a regular generic reference [in Ruskin's writings], he never cites *On The Origin of Species* directly, which suggests he may not have read it, whereas … he specifically names and quotes other works': '"The Mind Revolts": Ruskin and Darwin', in Robert Hewison, *Ruskin and his Contemporaries* (London: Pallas Athene, 2018), p. 286. By contrast, Andrew Leng has argued that *Modern Painters* 5 should be considered a sustained—though coded—rewriting of *The Origin of Species*: see Andrew Leng, 'Ruskin's Rewriting of Darwin: *Modern Painters* 5 and "The Origin of Wood"', *Prose Studies* 30:1 (2008): p. 64. Although I do not think this to be the case, many of Leng's arguments differentiating the ideas laid out in *Modern Painters* 5 from Darwin's thought, describing the potential grounds for critique, remain compelling. For a more general account of Darwinian aesthetics as structurally opposed to Ruskin's, see Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
22. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859), p. 489.
23. Darwin, *Origin*, p. 490.
24. Darwin, *Origin*, p. 490.
25. Darwin, *Origin*, pp. 489–90.
26. For Kropotkin's arguments against Darwinism, see Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: William Heinemann, 1902). Ruskin's discussion might also bear productive comparison with Friedrich Engels's unfinished *The Dialectics of Nature* (1872–83).
27. Ruskin, 7.49.
28. Ruskin, 7.41.
29. Ruskin, 7.41. In an extension and complication of his own analogy, Ruskin goes on to suggest that 'the aspen has the better of the great nation, in that if you take it bough by bough, you shall find the gentle law of respect and room for each other truly observed by the leaves in such broken way as they can manage it; but in the nation you find every one scrambling for his neighbour's place': Ruskin, 7.41–2.
30. Ruskin, 7.48.
31. Ruskin, 7.48.
32. Ruskin, 7.93.
33. Mark Frost has suggested some of the political implications of 'The Law of Help' in Mark Frost, 'Of Trees and Men: The Law of Help in *Modern Painters* V', *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 38:2 (2011): pp. 85–108.
34. Ruskin, 7.257.
35. Ruskin, 7.10.
36. On the history of the Dresden collection, see Tristan Weddigen, 'The Picture Galleries of Dresden, Düsseldorf, and Kassel: Princely Collections in Eighteenth-Century Germany', in Carole Paul (ed.), *The First Modern Museums of Art: The Birth of an Institution in Eighteenth- and Early-Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2012), pp. 147–52. On Semper's museum building, see Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Gottfried Semper: Architect of the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 107–17.
37. Ruskin to Clarkson Stansfield, 22 August 1859, quoted in Ruskin, 7.lii. Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (1512) was the collection's most famous painting during the nineteenth century.
38. Ruskin, 7.281.
39. Ruskin, 7.294. 'Task of the Least': Ruskin, 7.217–29.
40. Ruskin, 7.289–90.
41. Ruskin, 7.298.
42. Ruskin, 7.298. At the time he was writing, the *Assumption* stood as a main exhibition at the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, and it is possible that the picture's displacement from sacred to secular space underwrote Ruskin's sense of it as an unwitting emblem of cultural decline. The painting had been relocated to the museum in 1816 and would not return to its home above the high altar of the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari until 1923, as Paul Tucker points out: see John Ruskin, *Guida ai principali dipinti nell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia*, (trans.) Emma Sdegno, (ed.) Paul Tucker (Verona: Mondadore Electa, 2014), p. 90, note 25.
43. Ruskin, 7.299.
44. For recent accounts of the Cuccina family and their relation to Veronese, see, among others, Blake De Maria, *Becoming Venetian: Immigrants and the Arts in Early Modern Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 143–59; Richard Cocke, *Piety and Display in an Age of Religious Reform* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 152–4; Xavier F. Salomon, *Veronese* (London: National Gallery, 2014), pp. 137–41. On the Cuccina cycle more generally, including technical analysis in light of its recent cleaning, see Christine Follmann, Marlies Giebe, and Andreas Henning (eds.), *Veronese, der Cuccina-Zyklus: Kabinettausstellung anlässlich der Restaurierung* (Dresden: Sandstein Verlag, 2018).
45. Ruskin, 7.290.
46. As Cook and Wedderburn note, Francis I, Duke of Modena, had bought the painting directly from the Cuccina family in 1645. But by the time an inventory was drawn up in advance of the Modena collection's sale to the Electorate of Saxony, the picture was noted as 'Family of P. Veronese': Ruskin, 7.290 n1.
47. Ruskin, 5.59–60 (*Modern Painters* 3, 1856).
48. Ruskin, 5.59.
49. 'The Virgin stands in a recess behind two marble shafts, such as may be seen in any house belonging to an old family in Venice. She places the boy Christ on the edge of a balustrade before her. At her side are St. John the Baptist, and St. Jerome. This group occupies the left side of the picture': Ruskin, 7.290 (*Modern Painters* 5, 1860). The prose moves fast but remains sharply observed, especially in its description of the position of the Christ child. More than one recent commentator has missed that balustrade altogether, incorrectly suggesting that Christ stands on Mary's lap.
50. Ruskin, 7.291.
51. Ruskin, 7.291–2. Hope's clothing was originally green, as would be usual in the figure's traditional iconography.
52. Ruskin, 7.292.
53. Ruskin, 7.224.
54. Ruskin, 7.292.
55. For example, whereas I liken Ruskin's interest in organic cooperation to Kropotkin's mutual aid above, others might wish to connect it to the hierarchical 'organic unity' Robert Hewison sees as an 'Ultra-Tory ideal', characteristic of the Ultra-Toryism of the 1820s and 1830s to which he connects Ruskin's political beliefs: '"A Violent Tory of the Old School": Ruskin and Politics', in Hewison, *Ruskin and his Contemporaries*, p. 78.
56. On the presence in the painting of Ca' Cuccina (now Ca' Papadopoli), built in 1566 from a design by Giovanni Giacomo de'Grigi, see De Maria, *Becoming Venetian*, p. 150; Salomon, *Veronese*, p. 158.
57. Modern scholars largely agree that this other figure represents Alvise Cuccina, the head of the family and commissioner of the portrait, depicted beside his wife Zuanna di Mutti. The 'Veronese' figure, meanwhile, has been identified as Zuan'Antonio Cuccina, Alvise's elder brother. See for instance De Maria, *Becoming Venetian*, p. 149.
58. For more on the relational syntax of Ruskin's copies after old master paintings, see Jeremy Melius, 'Ruskin's Copies', *Critical Inquiry* 42 (2015): pp. 75–8.