



Deposited via The University of York.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/239218/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Pradhan, Pritika (2022) Reading the Detail in John Ruskin's Gothic Aesthetics. *English Literary History*. pp. 719-756. ISSN: 0013-8304

<https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2022.0025>

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

Reading the Detail in John Ruskin's Gothic Aesthetics

In 1900, eight years before he commenced building a literary edifice that embodied his conception of consciousness, Marcel Proust stood before the Portal of the Booksellers at Rouen Cathedral, scanning it for “a figurine of but a few centimeters” amid a “superhuman multitude” of similar figures. As he contemplated his task, he would have recalled John Ruskin's description of the figurine that inspired his “Ruskinian Pilgrimage” to Rouen:

[T]here is a little touch above the hand especially well meant: the fellow is vexed and puzzled in his malice; and his hand is pressed hard on his cheekbone, and the flesh of the cheek is *wrinkled* under the eye by the pressure. The whole, indeed, looks wretchedly coarse... but considering it as a mere filling of an interstice on the outside of a cathedral gate, and as one of more than three hundred [figures]... it proves very noble vitality in the art of the time.

□



Fig. 1. John Ruskin, Plate XIV. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, London: George Allen, 1903. The figure is in the bottom right corner, sequestered in its brooding isolation.

In reading the figure as expressing the “well meant” thought of its Gothic artisan, Ruskin imbues the ornamental details of Gothic architecture with a lively individuality and expressivity that, like the figure itself, strain the containment he attempts to impose on them. Ruskin consistently characterizes details in doubled terms, as individual entities that yet fit within a larger purpose: he claims the figure embodies Gothic “vitality” not only because its animated physiognomy expresses the artisan’s “individual energ[y],” but also because it signifies the apparent integration of the carver’s distinctiveness within the gate as a whole, amid three hundred figures by other carvers. Ruskin’s doubled conception of detail is the basis of his vindication of Gothic art, where irregular parts together form an organic totality richer and more vital than the external symmetries of neoclassicism. Critics have generally accepted his assertions of totality: Jacques Rancière claims that Ruskin’s Gothic artisan “expresses his own will, and his singular manner” by “subordinating himself to the collective work”; similarly, Daniel Williams argues that the artisan’s “individuality and creative self-determination” exist under “broader obedience to the just prerogatives of God.” However, such readings of willing subordination overlook a paradox: Ruskin reads the artisan’s freedom and happiness in a figure that is barely contained in its niche, and is visibly “vexed” at being so narrowly confined. Once recognized as an expression of its creator’s individuality, the figure resists subordination: its distinctive expressivity is paradoxically heightened by containment. Ruskin’s description enhances this individuality: by italicizing the “*wrinkle*” where he locates the artist’s distinctive “touch,” Ruskin adds his own touch, creating a visual “*wrinkle*” that mimetically recreates the sculptural one. Proust recognizes

Ruskin's alignment of detail with individual consciousness: he claims that by reading the "thought of the sculptor" in the figure, Ruskin rescues it from "disappearance... under the leveling of likeness," fulfilling the sculptor's Christian belief that "the individual, that which is most particular to a person or an intention, does not die but... will be resurrected." By representing details in terms of their artisans' passionate and uncontainable individuality, Ruskin generates the effect of individualist subjectivity with which he animates details.

Ruskin's alignment of Gothic details with individualist subjectivity indicates an alternative trajectory of the detail than its marginalization in aesthetics. As Naomi Schor writes in her defining study *Reading in Detail*, the detail has been marginalized in the history of aesthetics – which is shaped by neoclassical anti-detailism, reincarnated as modernist abstraction – through its association with the 'lowly' and feminized categories of ornament and the everyday domesticity of Dutch painting, against which idealism could be defined in masculinized and totalizing terms. With the rise of realism, the detail's association with the everyday translates into the minute and accurate representation of the external world in nineteenth-century novels and paintings, which connotes empirical observation and objectivity. However, viewing detail solely through the decline of classicism and the rise of realism reinforces its reduction to brute materiality, against which subjectivity and creativity are defined. Another influential strand of nineteenth-century aesthetics – German Idealism – interrogates this opposition, by emphasizing the representation of external reality in art and literature as expressing the artist's subjectivity and creativity. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, G.W.F. Hegel views the profuse details of the external world in modern or "Romantic" art, such as literature and genre painting, as generated by a free, self-conscious, and modern subjectivity that meticulously renders external details for their own sake, unsubordinated to character or plot:

[T]he artist's subjective conception and execution of the work of art... can remain faithful both to the manifestations of spirit and also to the inherently substantial life of nature [and] can make significant even what is in itself without significance, and this it does through this fidelity and through the most marvellous skill of the portrayal... [T]he subjective vivacity with which the artist with his spirit and heart breathes life entirely into the existence of such topics... and presents them to our vision in this animation.

"Romantic" details dissolve the divide between subjectivity and objectivity: the artist not only renders details accurately, but also animates them through his virtuosity, by infusing them with his inner life and thought. Hegel's reading of free subjectivity in details establishes details at the center of aesthetic representation, disrupting neoclassical aesthetic hierarchies that subordinate parts to wholes, margin to center, and ideal form to subjective imagination, in keeping with detail's etymology (the French *détailler*: to carve, which denotes the activity of a perceiving subject). This liberating, subversive potential of detail is not fully embraced by Ruskin, who locates Gothic freedom in the artisans' struggles to realize a vision that outpaces their skill, resulting in grotesque details. Yet this subversiveness is realized in the descriptive details of Ruskin's writing, through which he renders Gothic details as individual entities that frustrate, and are animated by, his own struggle to contain them within his vision of totality.

In this essay, I argue that Ruskin's alignment of detail and subjectivity is central to his aesthetics. Ruskin perceives and represents the irregular and individually unique details of Gothic ornament as expressions of the artisans' liberated individualist subjectivities, which both inspire and exceed his conceptions of social and aesthetic totality. I examine the beginning of this dialectic in my first section on *Modern Painters I* (1843), where Ruskin's limited inclusion of "specific" details in art is undermined by his personal fascination with the idiosyncratic details of individual specimens. I trace the intensification of this process in my second and third sections on Ruskin's Venetian Notebooks, and his architectural treatises *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), where his perception of individual Gothic details collapses the binary between objective reality and subjective desires. In his Notebooks, Ruskin's attention to details is frequently inflected with uncertainty regarding their boundaries, delighted effusions at identifying Gothic details in non-Gothic structures, and bemused reflections at detecting multiple styles in a single, aberrant detail. In his meticulous yet virtuosic descriptions in *The Stones of Venice*, the formally ambiguous and stylistically diverse details of Gothic ornament become metaphors for the free subjectivities of individual Gothic artisans, which shape, and frustrate, Ruskin's classifications of their irregular beauty. These contradictions

culminate in his landmark chapter “The Nature of Gothic,” where Ruskin paradoxically locates “Gothicness,” the essence of Gothic architecture, in the individuality and resistance of its diverse details to categorization and containment. To read Ruskin’s notes alongside *The Stones of Venice* is to witness the construction of a verbal Gothic edifice that is at once governed and threatened by its animated and eccentric details.

Recognizing Ruskin’s alignment of details and subjectivity illuminates what critics view as the core inconsistencies of his aesthetics. Jay Fellows describes Ruskin’s “biped” stance between a self-erasing “reticence,” and “an intruding first person who [makes] his foreground presence noisily known.” Rachel Teukolsky notes “two discourses spectacularly opposed” in Ruskin’s works: his empirical observation and classification of natural details, and his deeply personal and lyrical evocations of color. This seemingly contradictory coexistence of an obtrusive subjectivity and self-restraining objectivity in Ruskin’s work is richly illuminated when we examine how the subjective-objective divide is dissolved in the details that underpin his aesthetics. Ruskin’s seemingly objective depiction of details, and his inclusion of details in art, is shaped by his perception of details as generated by, and expressing, their creators’ subjectivities.

Ruskin’s aestheticization of details is part of a broader inclusion of details in art, which is foundational to the rise of modern aesthetics under philosophers such as Hegel. Ruskin has generally been excluded from the narrative of modern aesthetics, which favors modernist abstraction, and focuses on eighteenth-century German aesthetic philosophy and nineteenth-century French avant-garde movements, due to his apparently object-centric attention to details, and his suspicion of the sensualizing tendencies of Continental aesthetics. Yet Ruskin’s perception of free subjectivities in details touches on a central question in aesthetics: the relationship between, as Hegel writes, “the sensuous and the spiritual... between theory or subjective thinking, and objective existence and experience.” Ruskin’s affirmation of the subjectivity of Gothic details encapsulates how Hegel and other aesthetic philosophers located liberated modern subjectivities in details and their associated genres, such as Dutch painting and modern literature, making them the basis of the modernist understanding of art as a singular realm of sensible experience. In examining the subjective and aesthetic content of Ruskin’s Gothic details, I explore how they lay the foundation of the modernist abstractions that paradoxically exclude them.

The Specific Details of *Modern Painters*

Ruskin’s alignment of details and subjectivity begins in *Modern Painters I*, where he includes a limited degree of details to distinguish between species, while excluding individuating details – in such vivid, fascinated terms as to include them verbally, as the locus for individual self-expression. In this section, I examine how the increasing particularity and subjectivity of Ruskin’s details in landscape art anticipates his idiosyncratic readings of Gothic details.

Ruskin’s defense of details proceeds through his revision of the complicated idealism of Joshua Reynolds, the key English neoclassical artist and theorist. Reynolds’s acknowledgment that “ideal perfection and beauty” are to be sought in natural objects with individuating “blemishes and defects” results in an aesthetics that alternates, as Schor writes, between “a strict anti-detailism consonant with classical Academic discourse” and “recognition of the uses of particularity in keeping with the contemporary rise of realism.” In his “Third Discourse,” Reynolds declares “the whole beauty and grandeur of the Art” to consist in rising “above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind.” The Academic artist asserts his gender- and class-based mastery through the excision of details: while the minute imitation of nature is the province of “mechanical,” working-class artisans, the gentleman artist of “Genius” “distinguish[es] the accidental deficiencies, excrescences and deformities of things, from their general figures”; in taming the unruly variety and particularity of nature – which Reynolds, in a Classical tradition going back to Plato and Aristotle, designates as feminine – the male artist “corrects nature by herself, her imperfect state by her more perfect.” Yet Reynolds’s feminization and pathologization of details is undermined by his acknowledgement that the artist must study details carefully, if only to excise them, making his “Ideal” of nature a “paradox,” unlike any object actually found in nature. In his “Fourth Discourse,” Reynolds expands on this awareness to include a limited degree of detail:

[S]ome circumstances of minuteness and particularity frequently tend to give an air of truth to a piece... Such circumstances therefore cannot wholly be rejected.

Reynolds's recognition of details' their truth-value attests to their undeniable presence in eighteenth-century art, including his own: as Ruskin points out, Reynolds "enforced with his lips generalization and idealism, while with his pencil he was tracing the patterns of the dresses of the belles of his day." By identifying the neoclassical master with his fashionable female portraiture, Ruskin subverts Reynolds's gendered neoclassicism. Though Reynolds insists on subordinating detail to the painting's grandeur, Ruskin's reading reveals that the very inclusion of detail opens an uncontrollable breach in the ideal.

In *Modern Painters I*, Ruskin expands on Reynolds's incipient realism to ground the ideal in natural particulars. He argues that Reynolds's dictum that "general truths are more important than particular ones" misconstrues the truth of nature, which lies in "distinctiveness" rather than "universality." Accordingly, he reconceives Reynolds's ideal as "specific character," or the essential characteristics of the species:

Every herb and flower of the field has its specific, distinct, and perfect beauty; it has its peculiar habitation, expression, and function. The highest art is that which seizes this specific character, which develops and illustrates it.

"Specific character" illustrates the extent and limits of Ruskin's revision of neoclassicism. While he includes details common to all members of the species, he prohibits those details that differentiate *between individual specimens*. His prohibition reiterates Reynolds's terminology in more particularized terms: "The qualities and properties which characterize man or any other animal as a species, are the perfection of his or its form and mind, almost all individual differences arising from imperfections; hence a truth of species is the more valuable to art, because it must always be a beauty, while a truth of individuals is commonly... a defect."

Ruskin's "specific" focus reveals the influence of the classificatory strategies of Enlightenment natural history, which employed empirical attention to detail to form categories "truer to nature – and thus more real – than any specimen." Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison describe how eighteenth-century "atlases" or illustrated encyclopedias synthesized the common features of a group of natural objects, while excising individuating details, to create standardized "working objects" that made "nature safe for science." Rachel Teukolsky views *Modern Painters I* as a verbal version of an "atlas": "Just as the atlas of natural history supplied both particular types and ideal forms cleansed of idiosyncratic detail, so too Ruskin wants a landscape painting 'true to species' without distracting individuating detail."

Yet Ruskin's "specific" focus is undermined by his susceptibility to individuating details, as illustrated by his suspiciously vivid refutation of charges of "Denner-like portraiture." The eighteenth-century portraitist Balthasar Denner, dubbed *Poren-Denner*, was a byword in nineteenth-century aesthetics for his "slavishly mimetic portraiture," pores and all. Ruskin condemns Denner's "numbered hairs and mapped wrinkles" as "the lowest and most contemptible art," as they are represented "for their own sake," unsubordinated to an ideal. However, his denunciation is complicated by his meticulous enumeration of "Denner-like" details *in the act of banishing them from representation*:

Denner-like portraiture would be the endeavour to paint the separate crystals of quartz and felspar in the granite, and the separate flakes of mica in the mica slate; an attempt... far removed from what I assert to be great art (the bold rendering of the generic characters of form in both rocks).

Ruskin's *preteritio*, or rhetorical mention of omitted things, reintroduces through his word-painting the lowly individuating details he would expel from landscape painting. Ruskin's individuating details become an indirect self-portrait: by describing the details his landscape artist *would have painted* had he been the myopic figure of his critic's accusations, Ruskin becomes that artist, indulging in the proscribed description of counterfactual individuating details.

Ruskin's paradoxical affinity with individuating details reveals their potential to indirectly express the perceiver's subjective emotions and desires. Remarkably, Ruskin's description of "Denner-like" details as represented "for their own sake" reconceives the slavish imitation of nature as an alluringly free and self-indulgent visual mode that characterizes the imaginative child: "Infants in judgment... we delight in the faithful plumage of the well-known bird." Specific details represent Ruskin's attempt to temper this allure by subordinating it to categories of empirical and theological "truths" that converge with his lingering adherence to

masculinized, neoclassical ideals: he praises “specific” detail as “detail referred to a great end, sought for the sake of the inestimable beauty which exists in the slightest and least of God’s works, and treated in a manly, broad, and impressive manner.” Yet Ruskin struggles to control his visual desires, as he confesses to Isola Cowper-Temple: “The worst of me is that the Desire of my *Eyes* is so much to me! Ever so more than the desire of the mind.” Ruskin’s desiring subjectivity undermines his abstracting imperatives, as he frequently reverts to indulgence in individuating details.

Ruskin’s struggle reveals the instability of the divide between “specific” and individuating details, which is implicit in John Locke’s classical empirical text *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, read by Ruskin before writing *Modern Painters I*. Locke argues that the mind “abstract[s]” the sense impressions it receives as a *camera obscura* into categories based on the shared qualities of objects. Accordingly, as cited by Ruskin, Locke distinguishes between “primary qualities” such as form, which characterize the species, and “secondary qualities” such as color, which are “powers of producing... sensations,” and denote the contingencies of individual perception. However, Locke acknowledges that the primary quality of form is not object-centered, but created by the mind:

Wherein... consists the precise and *unmovable Boundaries* of [the] *Species*? ’Tis plain, if we examine, there is *no* such thing *made by Nature*, and established by Her amongst Men.

The category of form can be destabilized by the slightest physical deviation. In this context, the distinction between “specific” and “individuating” details becomes unsustainable, as Lynn Festa writes: “The addition or subtraction of one detail may dislodge the object (or subject) from the category to which it supposedly belongs.” The untenability of the “species” category undermines empirical “abstraction,” revealing it to involve individual perception.

Locke’s concerns lay the foundation of a skeptical “psychologistic tendency” in empiricism that was developed by David Hume, who influenced Romantic as well as German Idealist writers. Peter Garratt traces the influence of David Hume’s skeptical insistence on tracing knowledge to the consciousness on Kant and Hegel, and on British Romantics. Specifically, David Hartley reconceives Lockean empiricism by way of Hume, in his theory of associationism, or the capacity of the mind to make associations “in response to a particular visual scene” – a key influence on Wordsworth, cited by Ruskin in *Modern Painters I*. Romantic associationism makes explicit the individualist psychological tendencies implicit in empiricism.

Ruskin draws on associationism to characterize “specific” details in terms of individualist subjectivity. He praises the “particularization” of flowers by “Shakspeare [sic] and Shelley,” where “particularization” entails that the poet not only perceive natural details with empirical fidelity, but also render them as “vehicles of expression and emotion”:

[T]he great poet or painter... observes every character of the plant’s colour and form... he associates it in his mind with all the features of the situations it inhabits [so that] the flower is to him a living creature, with histories written on its leaves, and passions breathing in its motion.

Ruskin’s keyword “associate” reveals his use of associationism to aestheticize the representation of “specific” details in painting and poetry, by affirming the artist’s infusion of these details with personal emotions and memories. Despite Ruskin’s “specific” focus, his characterization of “specific” details in terms of individual and personal associations, combined with the instability of the species as a category, opens the way for the heightened particularity and subjectivity of individuating details.

Ruskin’s reading of the “secondary” details of color emancipates the individualist subjectivity that is partly contained in “specific” details. His voice, controlled and classificatory when describing “specific” details, becomes personal and passionate when describing details of color:

If we look at nature carefully, we shall find that her colours are in a state of perpetual confusion and indistinctness... every hair’s breadth of polished surface gives a little bit of the blue of the sky, or the gold of the sun ... the confusion and blending of tint are altogether so great, that were we left to find out what objects were by their colours only, we could scarcely in places distinguish the boughs of a tree from the air beyond them.

Ruskin’s criticism of the “unimportant” details of color is complicated by his palpable personal

fascination, which turns the seemingly scrupulous and self-effacing description of individuating details of color into a mode of self-indulgence. Heightening this indulgence are the details of *color*, which, as Rachel Teukolsky points out, represents “a language of Romantic subjectivity,” an immediate rendering of human sensation, in Romantic texts such as Goethe’s *The Theory of Colors* (1810). Describing details of color enables Ruskin to heighten and diffuse his desiring subjectivity in his lyrical and virtuosic details, which enhance the play of color and light, and blur the boundaries between his perception and the objects he sees. Similar lyrical self-dissolutions characterize Ruskin’s impassioned defense of J.M.W. Turner’s *The Slave-Ship*: “thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood [which] mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, and... incarnadines the multitudinous sea.” Though Turner’s melting colors may seem very different from empirical details, they enable Ruskin to achieve a deeper fidelity to sensation that is at the core of his realism: fidelity to the experience of Dionysiac self-dissolution in individuating details of color.

Ruskin’s self-dissolution in individuating details makes them an oblique mode of self-representation. Jay Fellows argues that Ruskin, possessing an intensely desiring visual self but fearing to lapse into egocentrism, seeks “a highly visible and memorable landscape to be perceived by an invisible and forgotten optical self... a world large enough to either hide himself or lose himself.” However, this loss of self translates into a disappearance of self *into* the landscape, which becomes the self’s “mirror.” If, as Fellows claims, Ruskin’s descriptions of landscape are an oblique autobiography, then individuating details press this dialectic to its limits, as the appearance of extreme objectivity, generated and animated by Ruskin’s desiring subjectivity.

Ruskin’s self-dissolution in the Dionysiac details of color casts new light on a different kind of detail: the concrete, Apolline details of Ruskin’s “first order” poet, who masters his emotion in order to “perceive rightly.” Ruskin favorably compares “first order” poets such as Dante to “second order,” Romantic poets such as Coleridge, who project their emotions on what they see, resulting in “a falseness in all [their] impressions of external things,” or “pathetic fallacy.” His criticism of Romantic subjectivity contrasts with his earlier praise in *Modern Painters I*, and apparently indicates his intensifying objectivity in reaction to the then-influential Kantian conception of a unified perceiving self. Seemingly confirming his anti-subjective and anti-Continental tendencies, Ruskin denounces the “Subjective”/“Objective” divide for its “German dulness [sic], and English affectation,” and its “egotism”: “[I]nstead of... ‘It is objectively so,’ you will use the plain old phrase, ‘It is so,’” and instead of “‘It is subjectively so,’ you will say... ‘It seems so to me.’” Ruskin’s commonsensical observation may appear to indicate his increasing objectivity (despite his abjuring the term): he seeks to ‘objectify’ subjectivity itself, cleanse it of differences in individual perception. Yet this envisaged ‘objective’ self is undermined by his choice of color:

[T]he word “Blue” does *not* mean the *sensation* caused by a gentian on the human eye; but it means the *power* of producing that sensation [which] is always there, in the thing, whether we are there to experience it or not.

Ruskin’s reconception of the undeniably personal perception of color as an objective quality reintroduces individual subjectivity in the attempt to erase it. Galison and Daston argue that the rise of objectivity as an epistemic virtue in the mid-nineteenth century is inseparable from the idea of a powerful, distorting subjectivity to be suppressed. Objectivity can only be attained through “the negating of subjectivity by the subject,” so that practices aimed at cultivating objectivity, such as the scrupulous observation of details, paradoxically generate and intensify the self they are intended to suppress. Ruskin’s scrupulous observation of the individuating details of color heightens and diffuses his subjectivity in those details.

We see the self-suppressing generation of subjectivity in Ruskin’s analysis of first order poetry. Ruskin describes this poetry as “*pure fact*,” revealing his desire for objectivity in as subjective a realm as poetry. However, the self-restraining observation of facts paradoxically intensifies the self, as seen in Ruskin’s reading of the following lines:

Whose changing mound, and foam that passed away,

Might mock the eyes that questioned where I lay.

Apparently spoken by “a man... desiring that his body may be cast into the sea,” the above lines

literalize Ruskin's envisaged submersion of self in a vision of objectivity. Yet Ruskin's desiring self resurfaces in the details of his fanciful and figurative criticism: "'Mound' of the sea wave is perfectly simple and true... one wave goes on, and on, and still on; now lower, now higher, now tossing its mane like a horse." The supposedly objective first order poetry through which he distances his desiring self, expresses that self obliquely in the breathless figures of his criticism.

Ruskin's individuating details are the locus of a conception of modern subjectivity different from the unified Kantian subject: one that is heightened and diffused in details, interrogating the divide between subjectivity and objectivity. His seemingly scrupulous description of individuating details becomes a highly figurative and virtuosic mode of oblique self-expression and self-representation. This process begins in Ruskin's empirical-Romantic "specific" details in *Modern Painters I*, moves towards greater subjectivity and particularity in his melting Dionysiac details of color, and finds concrete form in the Apolline details of *Modern Painters III*. Bridging Ruskin's Apolline and Dionysiac details are the Gothic details of his architectural treatises in the early 1850s (before *Modern Painters III*), which occupy an appropriate state of in-betweenness: they are more 'objective' than poetic details, being concrete, external entities that Ruskin scrupulously measures and records, even as he imbues them with greater subjective content, as expressions of the free subjectivities of individual Gothic artisans. The rest of this essay examines Ruskin's aestheticization of Gothic details, and its implications for modern aesthetics.

The Intellectual Details of Gothic Architecture

In aestheticizing Gothic details, Ruskin adopts, and overturns, the intellectual marginalization of details in neoclassicism. The marginalization of details by neoclassicists such as Reynolds relegated "mechanical" details to the mindless decoration of living spaces, while conferring on the fine arts, the creations of free men of Genius, the elevated intellectual role of evoking the free mental pleasures of aesthetic contemplation. However, Ruskin overthrows this divide in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, where he describes the ornamental details of Gothic architecture as "the vivid expression of the intellectual life concerned in their production." He views ornamental details as aesthetic entities in their own right, which evoke "Artistical and rational admiration" in viewers, by express the free thought of Gothic artisans that was previously only accorded fine artists. Through these intellectualized Gothic details, Ruskin turns the definition of architecture away from "mere building" to "the art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man... that the sight of them may contribute to his mental health, power, and pleasure." Gothic details, far from being a marginal overlay of ornament, embody an architecture that combines decoration with the free intellectual expression and the affordance of mental pleasure previously accorded the fine arts.

In dissolving the divide between the fine arts and the decorative arts, Ruskin's Gothic details exemplify a new conception of art as a singular realm of sensible experience. Jacques Rancière traces this conception to the disruption of the category of the fine arts to include "images, objects and performances that seemed most opposed to the idea of fine art," such as modern literature and genre painting, whose profuse details affiliated them with the prosaic world, and violated classical symmetry and harmony. Yet these genres came to be "experienced as events and associated with the idea of artistic creation" precisely in that violation: their imperfect, excessive details came to signify modern subjectivity and creativity, free of neoclassical constraints. Ruskin's Gothic details encapsulate in miniature this new understanding of art, as individually unique entities that express the free inner life and thought of innumerable Gothic artisans.

Ruskin's association of Gothic details and liberated subjectivity is part of a longstanding tradition in nineteenth-century German Idealist aesthetics that aligns Gothic irregularity with free spiritual expression. In his 1772 essay "On German Architecture," the once-staunch neoclassicist Goethe is converted by his first sight of Strasbourg Cathedral: a "harmonious mas[s], alive with countless details" that gives form to man's innermost "independent feeling," in defiance of neoclassical symmetry. The Gothic thus epitomizes "true and great art," as opposed to the sterile neoclassical realm of "fine art." Goethe presages Ruskin in identifying the Cathedral a vernacular (here, German) Christian alternative to French neoclassicism. Similarly, Goethe's characterization of the Gothic as "roughness that is full of meaning" anticipates Ruskin's vindication of the Rouen figure's "coarseness" as expressing the artisan's thought. However,

Goethe views Gothic details, and by extension Gothic artisans, not in individual terms, but as collectively contained within the cathedral's "harmonious mass," in keeping with his Romantic organicism, where "everything contribut[es] purposefully to the whole."

Hegel develops Goethe's association of Gothic detail with the spirit to align Gothic architecture with modern subjectivity. He uses the detail as the basis of a history of aesthetics that charts the progress of spirit through increasingly particularized art forms. While Classical art, with its lack of detail, represents spirit in a limited state of consciousness that finds perfect embodiment in matter, the profuse details of "Romantic" arts are generated by a modern spirit that is too liberated and self-conscious for material embodiment. Faced with the prosaic modern world, spirit turns inward and attains inner freedom and self-consciousness, becoming "subjectivity," and realizes its inner freedom by recreating and animating the contingent details of the external world. Hegel identifies Gothic architecture with an incomplete stage of freedom, where spirit struggles to realize itself in the resistant medium of stone, creating details that "disappear in face of [the cathedral's] outlines." Naomi Schor views Hegel's containment of details as "sublimation": the conceptual and rhetorical strategies through which Romantic aestheticians ushered detail into representation in the face of neoclassical prohibitions, by "elevat[ing]" its brute materiality. Schor emphasizes sublimation's debt to neoclassical idealization, where details can proliferate only within the totality of the cathedral. However, I would emphasize the particularity and subjectivity sublimation enables in Hegel's enthralled descriptions. Hegel describes details that, far from disappearing, fret and roil the stone:

[N]othing is left to the artistic representation but to refuse validity to the material and the massive in its purely material character and to interrupt it everywhere, break it up, and deprive it of its appearance of immediate coherence and independence.

Hegel's Gothic details attest to the vitality of "aspiring spirit" that is energized by its struggles to inscribe itself on a resistant medium. These details express the inner freedom and vitality of artisans in their minute imitation of natural forms – to the point of defying their medium's materiality, making the impassive stone appear alive and about to bud and branch into eternally new permutations.

When Ruskin writes that "the work of the Gothic heart is fretwork still, and it can neither rest in, nor from its labour," he participates in a broader Romantic tradition that aligns the Gothic with the struggles of modern, "aspiring" subjectivity. Though there is no evidence that Ruskin read Hegel, Ruskin's secretary W.G. Collingwood claims his "extraordinary aptitude for picking up a hint, and making the most of it, inclines me to believe that what he knew of Hegel was gathered orally from some enthusiastic friend." Referencing Collingwood, Robert Hewison writes, "[T]he echoes of Hegel in Ruskin are strong... [though] this is a question of parallels and not of influences." However, the Romantic writers Ruskin read are possible sources of idealist influence. Thomas Carlyle, whom Ruskin acknowledged as his "master," emphasized the German idealist conception of art as arising from "the inmost Spirit of Man." The French writer Alexis Rio (read by Ruskin in 1843) praised early Christian art as the "imperfect but progressive expression" of the people's "faith," sentiments Ruskin develops to defend the Gothic. Encountering the vast expanse of a Gothic cathedral, where "endless complexity and variety [are] united into one whole," kindles Coleridge's experience of the sublime. One can thus trace an intellectual-historical line of descent from the German Idealist view of Gothic art as spiritual expression to Ruskin's perception of the artisans' free subjectivities in Gothic details.

Where Ruskin differs from his Continental and Romantic forebears is his attention to individual Gothic details, whereby he emancipates details from the Romantic organic ideal. Where Hegel describes details collectively, Ruskin describes Gothic details with empirical fidelity, which converges with his view of the distinctive individualities of Gothic artisans. Ruskin's meticulous descriptions of individual Gothic details affirm the liberated subjectivities of individual Gothic artisans he perceives in them.

The Founding Stones of Venice

Ruskin's perception of the artisans' free subjectivities in Gothic details encapsulates his broader identification of the greatness of medieval Venice with the personal feeling and faith of its citizens. In *The Stones of Venice I*, he "deduce[s] from the arts of Venice" that her "political prosperity" originated not in her commercial activity or public policy, but in "the private feelings of her citizens," and specifically "the vitality of religion in private life." In particular, Ruskin

finds evidence this faith in architectural “pieces of detail,” such as “capitals” and “moulding,” in keeping with the builders’ Christian belief in individuality and particularity: “Christianity having recognized, in small things as well as great, the individual value of every soul.” Ruskin thus locates in individual details the Christian individuality and free interiority that characterize “Romantic” or modern art.

Ruskin seeks to expand his perception of the Christian individuality of Gothic details, by using details to reconstruct the rise and fall of Venice. He declares his treatise “the only existing account of the details of early Venetian architecture on which dependence can be placed,” favorably contrasting it to neoclassical-influenced architectural histories of Venice that are less cognizant of details, such as Leopold Cicognara’s “inaccurate” *Le Fabbriche e i Monumenti cospicui di Venezia* (1838–1850), and the Marchese Selvatico’s “useful, though vague” *Sulla Architettura e sulla Scultura in Venezia* (1847). At the same time, Ruskin intends to “put the details together” to reconstruct the history of Venice, in contrast to contemporary architectural historians such as James Fergusson, who merely “give[s] details” through meticulous descriptions in *Picturesque Illustrations of Ancient Architecture in Hindustan* (1848), without examining their broader historical significance. Ruskin’s intended bifocal reading reveals the continuing influence of ideals of empirical and theological “truths”: he seeks to abstract Gothic details into historical categories that will support his totalizing moral narrative of Venice’s rise and fall. Yet his totalizing objectives are undermined by his own perception and affirmation of individualist subjectivities in the unique details of Gothic architecture.

The titles and chronology of Ruskin’s Venetian Notebooks reveal the slow breakup of his totalizing project on encountering the richly variegated and irregular Gothic details. While he initially focuses on houses (his first notebook in Venice, begun in late October/early November 1849, is titled “Housebook 1”), he soon becomes interested in individual features (beginning the “Door Book” in mid-December 1849) before moving down to miscellaneous elements – capitals, arches and windows – recorded in the delightfully named “Bit Book.” Around this time, he also begins recording a plethora of details, from mouldings to pillar capitals in a notebook he simply names “Gothic Book.” Throughout, in his larger “M” and “M2” notebooks Ruskin constantly attempts to compose and re-compose details into art-historical categories, which are often frustrated by the variegated details he describes. Like the Gothic details they record, and by extension, the individualist subjectivities Ruskin perceives in those details, Ruskin’s Notebooks at once undermine and animate his verbal edifice of the Gothic.

Ruskin’s perception of Gothic details in terms of individualist subjectivity is evident early in his stay in Venice. In late November/early December 1849, he records in his “Notebook M” a disruption in the rigidly regular Byzantine carvings in an arch of the Palazzo Lion-Morosini:

[I]n the soffit wreath, two little beasts, one on each side... have one a paw, the other a claw, extended over the flattened roll at the angle... an interruption which is so small the paws being not the 150th part of the [diagram]: that the eye does not perceive it – it seems purposeless; and yet is delightful.

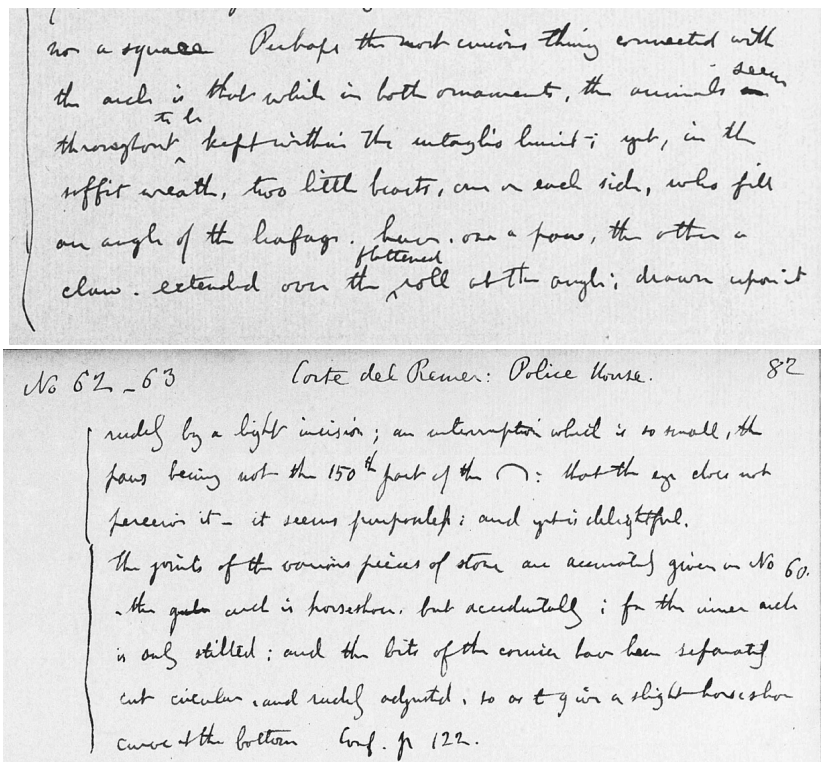


Fig. 2. John Ruskin, "Notebook M," M.81-82. 1849-50. Folio 42. The Ruskin Library and Research Center, Lancaster University.

Slightly more successful in escaping their confinement than the gnome, the two beasts disturb an ornamental scheme where every other animal is "kept strictly within its coil." Ruskin's description of the beasts' "delightful" "purposeless[ness]" approaches disinterested aesthetic contemplation; in locating this aesthetic power in Gothic ornamental details, Ruskin affirms their aesthetic status as the free subjective expression of Gothic artisans. In *Stones of Venice I*, he argues these details marking the beginning of the transition from Byzantine regularity to "Gothic fire and energy": in their deviating emergence, they signify the emergence of the Gothic carver, who strives to be noticed amid other carvers' details. The aberrant monsters, which seem to realize Reynolds's pathologization of details, become metaphors for the liberatory, individualist subjectivities of Gothic artisans.

Ruskin's reading of the artisans' free subjectivities is a characteristically oblique mode of self-representation. His alignment of details with subjectivity anticipates the photographic *punctum*, which Roland Barthes describes as "the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me." Like the beasts, the *punctum* occupies a liminal position between subject and object, being an element in a wider scene that evokes an intense affective response in the perceiver: "[the punctum] is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there." Barthes consciously affirms his subjective desires and memories, when he views his mother's face in the Winter Garden photograph as an independent detail that signifies his mother's individuality. In contrast, Ruskin transposes his desiring self into the 'objective' historical figure of the Gothic carver, who willingly subordinates himself to a larger ideal. In *Stones of Venice I*, he repurposes the beasts' deviance as submission to a just authority: they "lay their small paws across the enclosing fillet" in "not merely willing, but happy submission." Yet, as with the Rouen gnome, the beasts' underlying deviance does not disappear, but becomes the foundation of an aesthetic based on individual aberrance: "Gothic fire and

energy.”

In his fragmentary notes Ruskin indulges in the inner freedom he locates in Gothic details, which he is constrained to identify and classify in his finished work. In the “Bit Book,” he identifies another incipient Gothic spark in an unidentifiable detail in the frieze of the predominantly pre-Gothic/Lombardic church of San Fermo Maggiore at Verona:

This lamb as like a real lamb as they can make it.

two beasts [?] on plinth below so ill cut that I cannot say if wolf or dog or fox but full of spirit.

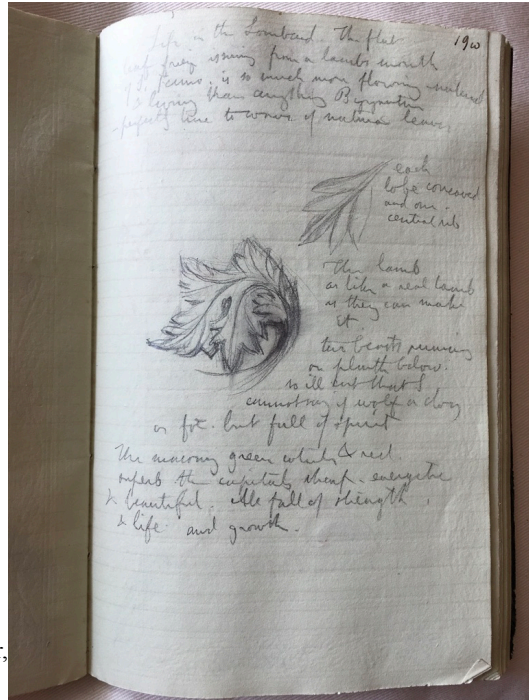


Fig. 3. John Ruskin, “Bit Book,” BB.64L/19w. 1849-50. RF1996P1614. The Ruskin Library and Research Center, Lancaster University.

The “ill cut[ting]” of the unidentifiable beasts paradoxically enhances their “spirit[ed]” appearance for Ruskin. Yet they are absent in *The Stones of Venice*, perhaps because his delight in their ambiguity contrasts with his serious and self-conscious quest for accuracy:

[I]t is not easy to be accurate in an account of anything, however simple. Zoologists often disagree in their descriptions of the curve of a shell, or the plumage of a bird... how much greater becomes the likelihood of error in the description of things which must be in many parts observed from a distance... I am ashamed of the number of times in which I have had to say, in the following pages, ‘I am not sure’... [but] I have endeavoured, down to the smallest matters, to ascertain and speak the truth.”

Ruskin uses uncertainty as a spur to greater efforts at truth, even as he acknowledges that truth remains elusive. His drive for objectivity is generated by his recognition of the inevitable subjectivity of perception. This confession may explain the absence of the unidentifiable beasts from his text: they exemplify the frustration of his quest for accuracy. Yet their impact is felt in “The Nature of Gothic,” where Ruskin vindicates Gothic imperfection as signifying the freedom of the Gothic artisan, who strives to carve his vision even if his skills are less than consummate. Ruskin’s vindication of Gothic struggle signifies his own struggle to ‘carve’ details accurately in language, even as he revels in their ambiguity and irregularity. In affirming Gothic imperfection and freedom, Ruskin affirms his own imperfect and idiosyncratic art of criticism.

Ruskin struggles to assert the singularity of Gothic details while also making them cohere

in art-historical categories that are responsive to their rich irregularity. He praises the builders of the Ducal Palace for discarding the “centralisation of the Byzantine [style]”: where Byzantine builders left the buildings’ corners bare, the Gothic builders, in a sign of independence, bestowed “the main decoration” on the building’s corner angles. Ruskin singles out the lifelike carved leaves in the Palace’s ‘Vine Angle’ depicting the intoxication of Noah:

[E]very leaf is bent & waved like reality: and the surface so smooth that it cannot be believed it was ever chiselled: - smooth almost to lustre: except one leaf thrown to the front or outer angle on purpose: which is curved with its entire [sic] reticulation: cross bars and all: in raised ribs, from its undulating surface: I never saw anything so far carried in imitative sculpture.

Ruskin locates the vine leaves’ naturalism not only in their lifelike details, but also in the disarrangement of the single leaf – the outlier whose disruptiveness embodies the vitality of the tree as a whole. In “The Nature of Gothic,” Ruskin describes the “Vine” foliage as an example of “Naturalism” in art: a “faithful representation” of the vine plant that is “yet so designed that every leaf serves an architectural purpose.” Notably, the errant leaf has disappeared, sublimated into an organic ideal where even its aberration fulfills a broader “purpose.” In the process, Ruskin conceives an organicism that is based on the irregularity and uniqueness of its details, and by extension, of the liberated subjectivities of the artisans.

Through his alignment of Gothic details and free subjectivity, Ruskin reverses the denigration of the Gothic by contemporary architectural historians of Venice, whose neoclassical bias shapes their relative neglect of details. Selvatico describes Gothic architecture as the “rich but ugly” “declining art of the Middle Ages,” fastidiously declaring that he “will not stay to particularise” its “defects.” However, Ruskin pointedly “stays to particularise” the “defects” that Selvatico avoids. Where Selvatico merely lists the figures on the Ducal Palace pillar capitals (“In the ninth [pillar of the upper arcade] one sees the virtues most necessary to man [such as] Faith”), Ruskin meticulously traces the individual figures *on each side* of each capital, reading them as expressions of religious feeling. For instance, he describes a figure on the 8th side of the above pillar as “Very devotional in expression praying to this [drawing] with hands up.”

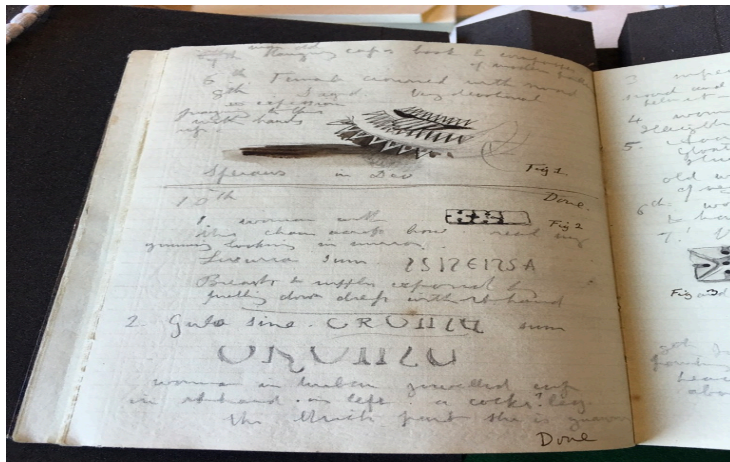


Fig. 4. John Ruskin, Detail, “Palace Book,” 30L. 1849-50. RF1996P1620. The Ruskin Library and Research Center, Lancaster University.

In *The Stones of Venice II*, Ruskin identifies the above carving as a representation of Hope, comparing it to Spenser’s representation of Hope in the *Faerie Queene*. Far from viewing it an illustration, Ruskin considers the carving an aesthetic work on par with Spenser’s verse: “it is nearly as necessary to point out the profound divinity and philosophy of our great English poet, as the beauty of the Ducal Palace.” This mutual illumination and elevation of Gothic ornament

and Spenser's verse exemplifies the broader Romantic vindication of 'imperfect' beauty. Naomi Levine writes that Romantic historians such as Schlegel and Coleridge identified the irregular rhymes of Elizabethan verse as a more vital and inventive use of prosody than the rigidly rhyming, French-influenced neoclassical verse of Dryden and Pope. The Romantic defense of Elizabethan verse uses the same criteria as the defense of Gothic architecture by Goethe and Hegel: imperfect beauty as the creation of modern subjectivity, which shatters the tyranny of classical symmetries. Ruskin enacts this Romantic subjectivity at the level of individual details, which become metaphors for the subjectivities of multiple Gothic artisans.

Ruskin expands his metaphorical reading of subjectivity in Gothic details into a broader conceptual revaluation of artistic genres. He compares the four winds of the pillar capital above the "Fig-tree angle" ("Levante, the east wind; a figure with rays round its head, to show that it is always clear weather when that wind blows") to the "magnificent verbiage of Milton" in *Paradise Lost*:

[Milton] is the very master of Verbiage in its best sense, just as Paul Veronese is a master of costume... as Veronese and Tintoret bring highest dignity out of, or rather put it into, furs, tissues and brocades, so Milton puts a play of colour into his wordy tissue which is as majestic as most men's ideas.

Ruskin argues that Milton elevates his "Verbiage" – ornate, lengthy descriptions, the verbal equivalent of the ornament marginalized in neoclassicism – by infusing it with "dignity." While dignity is a key neoclassical term denoting intellectual gravity, central to Reynolds's elevation of painting as an "Liberal Art," Ruskin revises it to signify the artist's personal infusion of intellectual significance in inherently trivial details. In connecting Gothic details with Miltonic "Verbiage," and the Venetian painters Veronese and Tintoretto, whose rich, melting "play of color" which were viewed as less prestigious than the linear, Classical work of Florentine artists, Ruskin confers on these modern genres the intellectual status previously accorded the fine arts, by affirming the passionate vitality that the artist "puts into" them. Ruskin himself participates in this process, using his play of metaphor to enact the hierarchy-dissolving play he perceives between Gothic ornament, Miltonic "Verbiage," and Venetian "play of color."

At the same time, however, the genre-dissolving play of Ruskin's live Gothic details ultimately threatens to dissolve the categories and narratives he would impose on them. The much-praised "variously different" pillars of the Ducal Palace's Upper Arcade frustrate his classification of historical styles (Byzantine, Gothic, and Renaissance) that is central to his narrative of Venice's rise and fall. He initially finds the capitals to be "ill-executed" compared with those of the Lower Arcade, viewing in them encroachment of Renaissance classicism and regularity, before he revises his opinion on discovering similarly "vilely cut" capitals in the Byzantine/early Gothic church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. In *The Stones of Venice II*, he argues the pillars are "marvellous[ly]" oriented towards the viewer's perspective: the pillars that "[Ruskin] thought the worst above" are actually "the best when seen from below." He similarly struggles to classify the pillar capitals into orders based on their leafage: while he distinguishes the "1st Order" as containing "breast leaves" (smaller leaves between larger ones), each of the capitals has individual variations on breast leaves that require constant qualifications that ultimately render his categories unsustainable. The individually variegated details Ruskin perceives render impossible his vision of totality.

Ironically, some of Ruskin's most impassioned and radical descriptions result when he moves beyond his totalizing imperatives, and instead indulges in the free subjectivity he perceives in them. In the *Palace Book*, he criticizes the "undulation" of the carved leaves of the second pillar of the Lower Arcade as "luxurious Wrong and bad [sic]," for lacking the "spring" of Gothic leaves. Yet this deplorable undulation evidently makes an impression: he draws it in the Notebook and writes "undulation" below, the dips and swells of the letters echoing the visual pattern. Though this particular "undulation" is not in the text of *Stones*, its echo is felt in Ruskin's admiration of the "flaming undulations of the wreathed lines" of French Flamboyant Gothic architecture. While he is ambivalent about the ornate "affectations" of this style, he nevertheless compares the "fantasy" of its undulations to the "burning mystery of Coleridge, or spirituality of Elizabeth Barrett," Romantic and Romantic-influenced verse that exemplifies the imperfect beauty of free spirit. Ruskin's notes reveal that his sense of the Gothic is shaped by those details that, in eluding his classifications, realize to the utmost the liberated, passionate

subjectivities he perceives in details.

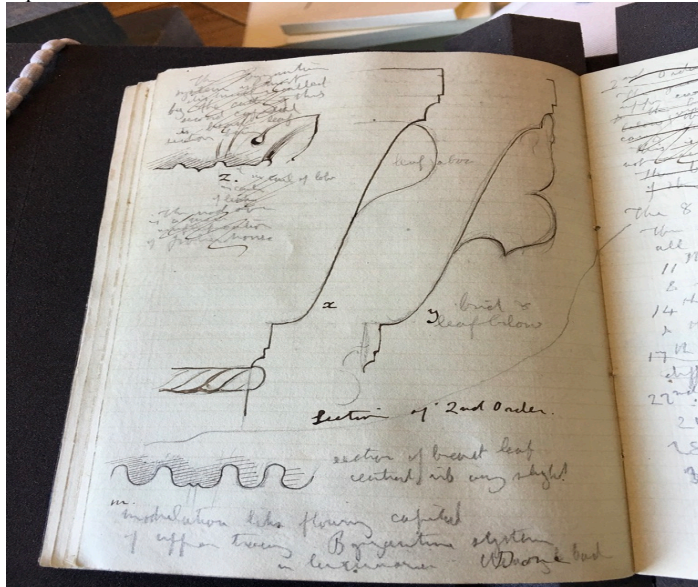


Fig. 5. John Ruskin, Detail, "Palace Book," p. 47L. RF1996P1620. The Ruskin Library and Research Centre, Lancaster University.

The Nature of "Gothicness"

In defining the Gothic, Ruskin looks to the individuality and resistance of its vivid and diverse details to categorization and containment. He declares that "the universal or perfect type of Gothic" is found in individually unique entities:

[E]very building of the Gothic period differs in some important respect from every other; and many include features which, if they occurred in other buildings, would not be considered Gothic at all; so that all we have to reason upon is merely... a greater or less degree of *Gothicness* in each building we examine. And it is this Gothicness, – the character which, according as it is found more or less in a building, makes it more or less Gothic, – of which I want to define the nature.

Ruskin's "*Gothicness*" is a paradox: an abstraction that inheres only in individually unique specimens, where it is often adulterated with non-Gothic features, making it a matter of degree rather than kind. These specimens range from the ornamental details that defy classification by combining several styles to individual buildings which, by deviating from any fixed blueprint, themselves become irregular, hybrid details in the edifice of "*Gothicness*." Ruskin's identification of "*Gothicness*" in individual deviation contrasts with his earlier abstraction of 'specific' truths from the shared characteristics of individual specimens. In founding his abstract category on individual specimens, Ruskin places individual deviation and independence at the core of "*Gothicness*."

In their lively individual variations, Gothic details become metaphors for their builders' imaginative and liberated Romantic subjectivities. While the Romantic poets of *Modern Painters* imbued "specific" natural details with their personal associations, Gothic artisans carve individually unique details whose organic form is enhanced by the protrusive three-dimensionality of the stone: "Gothic ornament stands out in prickly independence, and frosty fortitude, jutting into crockets, and freezing into pinnacles... never for an instant languid, always quickset." The lively individuality of Gothic ornament also characterizes foundational Gothic structures, such as the pointed arch, which is "not merely... new," but also "*capable of perpetual novelty*," as it "admit[s] millions of variations in itself." This infinite variability makes Gothic structures particularly suited to the expression of individual artisans, each striving to leave his distinctive imprint on the building: "Every successive architect, employed upon a great work,

built the pieces he added in his own way, utterly regardless of the style adopted by his predecessors.” The Gothic building is not a single form, but is composed of the accumulation of individually unique details, and by extension, the subjectivities of generations of Gothic artisans.

Ruskin’s linkage of Gothic details with individualist subjectivities provides him with the basis and the metaphorical method for vindicating the Gothic from neoclassical attacks. The “Gothic” is itself a neoclassical invention: John Dryden declared in his translation of the French neoclassical text *De Art Graphica*: “All that has nothing of the Ancient gust, is call’d a *barbarous* or *Gothique* manner.” The negative definition of the Gothic is part of the neoclassical denigration of details as signifying the labor of mechanical artisans, where classical perfection signified Greek liberty, transferred to the freedom of intellectual artists. Ruskin reverses this association: while ostensibly accepting the association of the Gothic with “barbarousness,” he effects a transvaluation whereby Gothic “Savageness,” with no one detail like another, and each deviating from classical harmony, expresses the thought of artisans free to realize their own designs, even if these exceed their skill. It is classical art, with its identical capitals, that signifies the mental deadness of artisans compelled to suppress their own thought to realize the architect’s design. In this formulation, the Gothic detail – irregular, unique, and powerfully expressive – signifies the carver’s undivided being, whom it enables to be a thinking artist as well as an artisan, by requiring his constant thought and creativity. In contrast, classical art, like the identical mass-produced goods of modern industrial production, require a narrow mechanical focus, reducing the worker to a broken fragment (from the Latin *frangere*: broken), a lifeless parody of Gothic detail: “It is not, truly speaking, the labor that is divided; but the men:— Divided into mere segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life.” Unlike the oppressive uniformity and fragmentation of classical art, Gothic details signify an individualized ideal of freedom based on the free thought and creativity of its diverse artisans.

Ruskin’s descriptive details affirm this individualist subjectivity even in excess of his argument. As if to contain the power of detail he has unleashed, Ruskin insists that the vitality of Gothic details ultimately fulfills a larger totality: “Fragments full of imperfection... indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole.” Yet we have seen how Ruskin’s details do not cohere within totality. Ruskin’s failure energizes his flowing metaphorical descriptions, where he figures his struggle through the struggle of aspiring Gothic carvers: “It is that strange disquietude of the Gothic spirit that is its greatness; that restlessness of the dreaming mind, that wanders hither and thither among the niches, and flickers feverishly around the pinnacles... and yet is not satisfied, nor shall be satisfied.” His metaphorical descriptions exemplify the “more deliberate energy” Hegel identifies in modern literature: the animation of trivial details by the Romantic artist’s subjectivity and virtuosity, realized as a heightened figurative style in literature. It is in the vigorous details of Ruskin’s prose – at once descriptive and metaphorical, vividly particular and yet straining towards an impossible whole – that free Gothic subjectivity is realized.

Focusing on the details of Ruskin’s writing enables a nuanced reading of his classification of art in “The Nature of Gothic.” While “Naturalism” represents his fantasy of “fact and design together,” or detail subordinated to design, Ruskin is fascinated by the work of “men of facts” who give details for their own sake. Even as he censures “Sensualists” such as the seventeenth-century Spanish artist Bartolomé Murillo for “delight in foulness,” he fixates on the “the grey dust engrained in the foot” of one of Murillo’s beggar boys, for gratuitously “thrust[ing] its degradation into the light.” His fixation is illuminated when we consider that the supposed painting of ‘fact’ was identified by Hegel as an expression of modern subjectivity, in his revaluation of ‘lowly’ genre scenes. Hegel identifies in Murillo’s self-absorbed beggar boys the state of “play,” or “absence of care and concern,” which Friedrich Schiller previously attributed to the classical statues of Greek gods. Hegel’s reading of Murillo’s painting aligns free subjectivity with the virtuosic representation of details for their own sake. Though such unconstrained freedom realizes the latent possibilities of Ruskin’s thought, it too extreme for Ruskin: he can only indulge in it by denigrating it, through his verbal ‘carving’ of the dust in the boy’s foot. As with his fascinated elaboration of Poren-Denner’s details, Ruskin’s verbal details achieve greater particularity and subjectivity than he allows in visual details.

Ruskin’s paradoxical verbal details leave twin legacies in twentieth-century literature. Rachel Teukolsky traces the two dominant strains of modernism to the seemingly incompatible

discourses of subjectivity and objectivity in Ruskin's writing. While Ruskin's apparently object-centric observation of details anticipates modernist classicism, which seeks to escape "the human, subjective qualities of language" to attain a "sculptural, precise Truth," his lyrical personal evocations of color anticipate how modernist impressionists use language to "imitate the unpredictable streams of thoughts and sensations," through techniques such as stream of consciousness. I would argue, however, that these two modernist strains only appear opposed: if we consider how Ruskin's details dissolve subjectivity and objectivity, we can trace a similar collapse between modernist classicism and impressionism, both of which employ details in different ways to generate modernist subjectivities.

The classicist desire to escape from personality, which is derived from, and articulated in terms of Romantic subjectivity, reintroduces the subjectivity it is intended to excise. The modernist critic T.E. Hulme, critical of Ruskin's "indefinite" Romantic metaphors, seeks a language that will get "the exact curve of the thing." Yet Hulme's aspiration is haunted by Ruskin's reflection on differing individual descriptions of "the curve of a shell." Hulme's insistence that the poetry must contain "an intense zest" that will communicate itself to the reader entails that the poet infuse details with his subjective emotion, like Ruskin's "first order" poet and his Gothic artisan: not coincidentally, Hulme's 'test' for zest ("Did the poet have an actually realised visual object before him in which he delighted?") echoes Ruskin's test for Gothic details: "[W]as the carver happy while he was about it?" Far from eliminating subjectivity, Hulme conceptualizes a passionate modernist subjectivity that is subsumed into the concrete images it charges with "zest."

The charging of details with subjectivity characterizes the supposed 'impersonality' of T.S. Eliot and the 'Imagism' of Ezra Pound. Pound urges the poet to suppress his subjectivity in favor of "Direct treatment of the 'thing,'" to convey his subject matter in a few precise images. He also propounds the "Luminous Detail" in scholarship, as a "hard fact" that "give[s] us intelligence of a period." Yet the very compression of knowledge enables the poet to leave his subjective imprint on his Images and "Luminous Details." T.S. Eliot's declaration of poetry as "an escape from personality" also entails infusion of self in details. Eliot's claim that poetry originates in emotion implies, as Maud Ellman writes, that the poet's subjectivity "pervades" the text. In Eliot's poetry, self-infusion in details becomes a mode of self-fragmentation. Eliot lectured on Ruskin in his Extension courses in 1916, and Ruskin's lamentation of the decay of Venice pervades Eliot's portrayal of Burbank "meditating" on Ruskin's "seven laws" of architecture amid the ruins of Venice, which become metaphors for a fallen, fragmented modern subjectivity. The wholeness of being encapsulated by Gothic details is inverted by Prufrock's lament: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." Prufrock's mundane "coffee spoons" signify a modern subject who reflects on his own shattering, his inability to cohere, to squeeze "the universe into a ball/ To roll it towards some overwhelming question." Both Pound and Eliot envisage modernist subjectivities that are subsumed into the concrete details they charge with emotion and significance.

Modernist impressionists, in contrast, envisage obtrusive subjectivities that diffuse the material details they perceive into personal sensations and associations. Proust embraces his subjective experience of Ruskin's gnome when he imagines Ruskin resurrecting the Gothic artisan's thought in his own consciousness. Diane Leonard claims that Proust participates in the resurrection he describes, "weaving around the small kernel of Ruskin's text intricate layerings of his own impressions." Proust's famous germination of an arborescence of impressions and memories from a madeleine consummates the richly subjective nature of Ruskin's details, albeit in a direction Ruskin might not have supported. Yet Proust's impressions build on Ruskin's mediation of details: Jesse Matz claims modernist impressions are both "empirical" and "imaginative," connoting "the imprint that lasts and the feeling that passes," and thereby "fus[ing] subject and object." Virginia Woolf heightens this fusion when she directs modern fiction writers away from the excess material details of "Edwardians" such as Arnold Bennett, to the "myriad impressions" that comprise "life itself." Her impressions transform material details to convey the indefinite and shifting processes of perception and consciousness that constitute the essence of subjectivity. The narrator of her short story "The Mark on the Wall" uses the titular unidentified mark to embark on several material identifications ("a nail, a rose-leaf") that

gradually shade into reflections on the “mystery of life.” While this mark is disappointingly revealed to be a snail, Woolf renders the snail image more diffuse in *The Waves*, a famously fragmented text that jettisons conventional narrative elements (plot, closure, and so on) in favor of an array of interwoven consciousnesses. Woolf uses representations of snails to both differentiate and connect the essences of multiple complementary characters who might be facets of a single consciousness: from Louis’s yearning for connection (“That is a snail... I delight in snails”) to Rhoda’s alienation (“The grey-shelled snail... flattens the blades behind him”), to the unnamed narrator speculating on an unidentifiable detail: “*Perhaps it was a snail shell, rising in the grass like a grey cathedral.*” In transforming the humble, hypothetical snail into a Ruskinian cathedral in his or her consciousness, Woolf’s narrator realizes the subjective potential of Ruskin’s details.

Like Woolf’s snail that grows into a cathedral, Ruskin’s details are the seeds from which issues an alternate genealogical tree of modernism. The alignment of detail and subjectivity forms a through line from Ruskin’s Gothic ornament, and their Romantic antecedents, to modernism’s twin, entwined strains. In extending Ruskin’s linkage of subjectivity and detail in directions he might not have supported, modernist details realize the constitutive paradoxes of Ruskin’s thought: his perception and oblique self-affirmation of the artist’s liberated individualist subjectivity in his details.

□

Bibliography

- Anonymous, “*Modern Painters: Second Notice*,” *The Athenæum*, No. 850, February 10, 1844, 132-133.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography*. 1980. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- Carlyle, Thomas. “The State of German Literature,” *Edinburgh Review* 46, 1827, pp. 304-51.
- Collingwood, William Gershom. *The Art Teaching of John Ruskin*. London: Percival and Co., 1891.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Coleridge’s Miscellaneous Criticism*. Edited by T.M. Raysor (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1936).
- Daston, Lorraine J. and Peter Galison. *Objectivity*. New York: Zone Books, 2010.
- Du Fresnoy, Charles Alphonse. *De Arte Graphica*. Translated by John Dryden. London: J. Heptinstall, 1695.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber 1963.
- . *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. Edited by Frank Kermode. London: Faber and Faber, 1975.
- Ellman, Maud. *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987.
- Fellows, Jay. *The Failing Distance: The Autobiographical Impulse in John Ruskin*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975.
- Festa, Lynn. “Crusoe’s Island of Misfit Things.” *The Eighteenth Century*. 52:3-4, Fall/Winter 2011, pp. 443-471.
- Garratt, Peter. *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge, and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Lewes, Spencer, and George Eliot*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. 2 vols. Translated by T.M. Knox. Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Hewison, Robert. *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1976.
- . *Ruskin and Venice*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978.
- Hulme, Thomas Ernest. *T.E. Hulme: Selected Writings*. Edited by Patrick McGuinness. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Leonard, Diane R. “Ruskin and the cathedral of lost souls.” *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*. Ed. Richard Bales. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Levine, Naomi. “Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Historiographical Poetics.” *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2016, pp. 81-104.
- Locke, John. *The Philosophical Works of John Locke*. London: George Virtue, 1843.
- Matz, Jesse. *Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

- Pound, Ezra. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Edited by T.S. Eliot. London: Faber and Faber, 1954.
- . *Selected Prose: 1909-1965*. Edited by William Cookson. London: Faber and Faber, 1973.
- Proust, Marcel. *On Reading Ruskin*. Translated by Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Translated by Zakir Paul. London: Verso, 2013.
- Reynolds, Joshua. *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds*. London: James Carpenter, 1842.
- Ritchie, Anne Thackeray. *Records of Tennyson, Ruskin, and Browning*. London: Macmillan, 1892.
- Rio, Alexis-François. *De la poésie Chrétienne dans son principe: dans sa matière et dans ses forms*. Paris: Debécourt, 1836.
- Ruskin, John. *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*. 37 vols. Edited by Alexander Wedderburn and Edward Tyas Cook. London: George Allen, 1903.
- . "Bit Book." 1849-1850. RF1996P1614. The Ruskin Library and Research Centre, the University of Lancaster. Lancaster, UK.
- . "Door Book." 1849-1850. 1996P1615. The Ruskin Library and Research Centre.
- . "Notebook M." 1849-1850. Folio 42. The Ruskin Library and Research Centre. *The electronic edition of Ruskin's Venetian Notebooks*, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/ruskin/eSoV/transcripts/m/mp82f.html>. Accessed on July 1, 2020.
- . "Notebook M2." 1849-1850. MS Vault Section 14 Drawer 2 Box 4. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, USA. *The electronic edition of Ruskin's Venetian Notebooks*, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/ruskin/eSoV/transcripts/m2/m2p202t.html>. Accessed on July 1, 2020.
- . "Palace Book." 1849-1850. RF1996P1620. The Ruskin Library and Research Centre.
- . *The Diaries of John Ruskin*. Edited by Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1856.
- Schor, Naomi. *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*. 1987. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Schucard, Ronald, "T. S. Eliot as an Extension Lecturer, 1916-1919," *The Review of English Studies*, 25:98 (1974), 163-173.
- Teukolsky, Rachel. *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- The electronic edition of Ruskin's Venetian Notebooks*. The Ruskin Library and Research Centre, the University of Lancaster. Lancaster, UK. <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/ruskin/eSoV/notes/toplevel.html>. Accessed on 5 July, 2016.
- Williams, Daniel. "Atmospheres of Liberty: Ruskin in the Clouds." *ELH* 82:1, Spring 2015, pp. 141-182.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Mark on the Wall and other Short Fiction*. Edited by David Bradshaw. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.
- , *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*. Edited by David Bradshaw. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
- , *The Waves*. Edited by Gillian Beer. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.