

“The Interwoven Temper of my Mind”: Ruskin and Adaptation

Emma Sdegno

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Simone Francescato

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

The essays gathered in this issue are a selection of the contributions presented at the International Conference *Adaptation, Revision and Re-use: Modes and Legacies of Ruskin's Work*, organized by FoRS, the Centre for Ruskin Studies at the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies of Ca' Foscari University Venice, in collaboration with the Policlinico di Torino and the Guild of St George. Held in Venice in December 2023, the conference invited scholars working in a variety of fields, ranging from literature to art, from architecture to social and environmental studies, to participate in a multi- and interdisciplinary dialogue.¹

Adaptation is a mode that Ruskin claimed for himself. In a subtly ironic self-portrait, he described the working of his mind as “tightly knitting together” the spheres of art and science. As he wrote in *Praeterita*:

the adaptation of materials for my story out of Joyce's *Scientific Dialogues* and *Manfred* is an extremely perfect type of the interwoven temper of my mind, at the beginning of days just as much as at their end—which has always made foolish scientific readers doubt my books because there was love of beauty in them, and foolish æsthetic readers doubt my books because there was love of science in them (Ruskin 1903-1912, 35: 56).

¹ Other selected contributions from the conference were published in *Venezia MD-CCC*, vol. 13, 2024.



Open access

© 2024 Sdegno, Francescato | 4.0



Citation Sdegno, E.; Francescato, S. (2024). “The Interwoven Temper of my Mind”: Ruskin and Adaptation”. *English Literature*, 11(1), 7-12.

DOI 10.30687/EL/2420-823X/2024/11/000

Ruskin was not alone in using the metaphor of adaptation to describe the workings of the human mind in the Victorian age, where Darwinism was rapidly spreading, providing new ways to interpret the biological and psychological environment (Young, 1970). In underlining the “inter-woven temper of [his] mind”, Ruskin was drawing attention to what he thought to be the impossible separation of the scientific and the aesthetic, which was becoming commonplace in his time. In proposing the aforementioned quote as a starting point for the Call for Papers of the conference, organizers aimed to open up discussions in various critical directions from an interdisciplinary perspective, which is an unremitting prerogative of academic research today.

Ruskin’s work makes an ideal field of inquiry, as his entire oeuvre is shaped by his non-compartmentalised knowledge, and by a creative drive that blends scientific observation and aesthetic insight with ethical reflection and social commitment in an original combination that is unequivocally humanistic (Ferroni, 2024).

Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006, 2013) identifies adaptations as forms of intertextuality, where the adapted works are experienced through the memory of other works, in a process of repetition with variation. Ultimately, adapted works are always palimpsests of other works. Most of the essays collected in this issue develop along a diachronic line, and seem to conceive of Ruskin’s texts as either palimpsests of texts distant in time and/or place (i.e. the classics, as shown by Mark Usher), or read later texts as palimpsests of Ruskin’s (from Henry James to Leslie Stephen to Elijah Walton, and Reginald Farrer, as well as J.P. Faunthorpe, the early editor of *Fors Clavigera*). Other essays focus on adaptation as a process, which gives birth to a theoretical speculation (Tucker), and an artistic (Dickinson and Kelly) or scientific conversation (Orestano).

The volume opens with Paul Tucker’s essay “Revisioning the Image: Ruskin’s Iconology-in Progress”, where the author offers a snippet of his forthcoming work on the significance of visual art and the centrality of the “image” in Ruskin’s oeuvre, postulating a recurring and consistent iconological reflection across his many writings. Tucker argues that for Ruskin “an image is first and foremost something formed, a material product whose most distinctive characteristic is its capacity to evoke the presence of some object in ways expressive of its maker’s reflective stance towards the visible and perhaps the invisible too”. Central to this interpretation of the image is the category of “ideas”, which Ruskin retrieves from Locke. For Ruskin, Tucker writes, “ideas were not objects of, but means to knowledge – knowledge mediated, not originated by the production and reception of the work of art” (PP). Linking Ruskin’s “image” to Pearce’s dimension of “index”, Tucker ultimately concludes that “for Ruskin the image is a representation whose essence is explicitly declared to be interpretative, but the locus and orientation of whose interpretative ‘action’ are

diversely intended and articulated over time”. (PP) Tucker traces the steps to this indexical iconological thought to major works dedicated to the visual arts but also to others dedicated to architecture (*Seven Lamps*) and drawing (*The Elements of Drawing*, *The Laws of Fésole*).

Ruskin's keen interest was in the working of an artist's mind as well as his own. For Dinah Birch *Modern Painters* (1843-1860) is “an exercise in spiritual and aesthetic autobiography [...] a version of what Wordsworth described as the ‘The Growth of a Poet's Mind’”. Birch sees that “profoundly Romantic work”, as “a Victorian reflection of the impulse that had led to Wordsworth's *Prelude*, to Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* or even to De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*” (Birch 2020, 2). Rachel Dickinson and Déirdre Kelly's inter- and transdisciplinary contribution, “Tracing Ruskin's Threads: Legacies in Linen, Lace and Place”, examines Ruskin's work and legacy from the point of view of material culture, and textile culture, specifically. The authors show the attention Ruskin paid to cloth and lace-making in historic Lancashire and Venice, and how he adapted the language of cloth-making in some of his major works (*Praeterita*, *Fors Clavigera*). Textile terms pervade his works and help him express the beauty of other materials such as marble or stone. Rachel Dickinson and Deirdre Kelly's is a fascinating exploration into the crafting of Ruskin's work where the figure of the weaving “blurring disciplinary boundaries” materializes in Kelly's artwork: “Such language of textiles runs throughout Ruskin's work. Ruskin's references to ‘acicular art’, are accompanied by blurring disciplinary boundaries and an implied mapping of often unexpected relationships. He uses this ‘inter-woven’ approach to offer ways of seeing and envisaging future possibilities, teaching his readers and tracing routes to build a culture of community”.

Adaptation borders with revision and re-use when one studies the history of ideas, images, and concepts on the line of influence and legacies. This is the approach taken by Mark Usher in “Upcycling Antiquity in *Unto This Last*”, a contribution which demonstrates that Ruskin's ideas on economy are in fact deeply rooted in classical ethics in a close-knit intertextual dialogue with his contemporaries. Far from being “shallow embellishments”, the references to Greco-Roman authors (Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon, Hesiod, Cicero) show the originality of Ruskin's economic theory and their independence from that advanced by other thinkers of the 1830s and 1840s, such as Karl Marx, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill. Critics have often dismissed Ruskin's contribution to economic theory as derivative or unsystematic, failing to understand his re-use of the classics to make a point about pressing issues of the times, such as the spread of competition in the free market and the denial of the human dimension of economic exchange. Usher argues than *Unto This Last* ultimately shows

“Ruskin’s impatience with twisted notions of wealth that fail to account for the human persons involved in its creation.”

On the palimpsest of *The Storm Cloud of the 19th Century*, Francesca Orestano highlights Ruskin’s debate with contemporary science. In “John Ruskin and Climate: The Storm-Cloud of the Anthropocene”, Francesca Orestano analyses the lectures later published in “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” (1884), where Ruskin voices an ecological concern that makes him a precursor or early observer/critic of climate change in the Anthropocene. Orestano examines the origin of the text, its “ill-founded” contemporary reception and unrecognized historical accuracy, focusing on Ruskin’s method and use of scientific language. In this text, she argues, “Ruskin also underlined his preference for a method of investigation which in itself betrayed the epistemic *Zeitgeist* of the late Victorian age, inasmuch as the art critic’s ambition was to operate like a scientist in order to attain the reliability and precision of chemistry and geometry. Thus from two very distant angles of the epistemic horizon Ruskin was stressing once more the dramatic changes that had been occurring in the world climate”. Orestano concludes that “the value of these lectures resided not only in the observation of a natural phenomenon, the storm-cloud, which has become sadly familiar today all over the globe; but, more fundamentally, in going back to the ethical roots of the phenomenon, in indicating the responsibility of those who were in charge of health and welfare, and in unveiling the supposed moral primacy of science, the fruit of “the modern vulgar scientific mind”.

In “Ruskin’s Poetics of Mountains and the Victorian Alpine Spirit” William Bainbridge explores the way “Ruskin’s vision of the Alps left an indelible mark on Victorian culture, shaping both contemporary and subsequent interpretations of the alpine landscape”. The later generation of mountaineer writers and artists had to come to terms with Ruskin’s critique of the commodification of nature that engaged the rising culture of alpine tourism in the mid 19th century, imbued as it was with a “militaristic and imperialistic rhetoric”. “Ruskin”, the author writes, “opposed the notion that climbing mountains should serve to instill values of conquest and dominance over nature, particularly as a celebrative and formative pursuit for the young”. Bainbridge reflects in particular on the response to Ruskin’s views by three later figures who speculated on the mountains and adapted his ideas to their own agenda, namely Leslie Stephen, Elijah Walton, and Reginald Farrer. Whereas Stephen’s “method accommodated Ruskin’s views by merging critical, geological perception with an embodied, haptic experience”, Elijah Walton “sought to translate Ruskin’s Turnerian inspirations into art, capturing the poetic and visual essence of alpine landscapes with varying degrees of success”, while Reginald Farrer “adapted, in fact, Ruskin’s resistance to trivialisation into a robust, if controversial, defence of intellectual distinction”.

The complex editorial work of the extremely layered and fragmentary palimpsest of *Fors Clavigera* is the object of "Satomi Hanazumi's 'Whitelands Index: The Making of John Pincher Faunthorpe's Index to *Fors Clavigera*'. Hanazumi examines Rev. J. P. Faunthorpe's 1887 edition of the Index to *Fors Clavigera* (or "Whitelands Index"), drawing on papers stored in the "Mikimoto Collection" owned by the Tokyo Ruskin Society in Japan. These papers show how Ruskin disagreed with Faunthorpe's editorial criteria and never gave his final approval to the text, as he originally meant the latter to be a "guide" rather than an index. Hanazumi writes that Ruskin "received quite a few comments [...] from readers, which might have prompted him to work on a guide for the readers' sake. Strengthening the footnotes as a first step was necessary in order to narrow the gap between his statements and the readers' understanding. That Ruskin had a 'guide' in mind may explain why he seems unwilling to reconsider the style of the index with Faunthorpe".

Traces of Ruskin's texts shine through Simone Francescato's reading of Henry James's *Italian Hours*. In "'The pious secret of how to wait for us': the Adaptation of the Ruskinian Picturesque in Henry James's Venetian Essays", Francescato analyses the five Venetian essays that open James's 1909 travel collection. Urging for a reassessment of Ruskin's influence on the American writer, the author argues that these essays offer evidence of James's enduring dialogue with Ruskin and his aesthetic theories and in particular with his final conceptualization of the noble picturesque, a category that, by demanding the projection of human characteristics upon old buildings, is "strongly associated with the human and the social" and ultimately "binds together aesthetics and ethics". According to Francescato, examining James's re-use of the Ruskinian noble picturesque in the five essays that span more than twenty years, is also useful to understand the evolution of James's poetics as well as his changing perception of the lagoon city in the very decades in which it turned into a modern tourist mecca.

Foregrounding the intrinsically intertextual nature of Ruskin's work, the contributions in this volume emphasise the fruitful intersection among those different disciplines and fields that Ruskin strenuously kept "closely-knit" in his texts, given the "interwoven temper of [a] mind" which enabled him to *adapt*. Approaching Ruskin through the fresh lens of adaptation may thus prove to be crucial today, in order to uncover new meanings and purpose in his works. In line with what Arno Naess argues, to conceive of a "deep ecology", of approaches where scientific, economic, and ethical terms join and overlap, has become urgent and mandatory.

Bibliography

- Birch, D. (2020). "Ruskin and his Victorian Readers". *Journal of Art Historiography*, 22, 1-12.
- Day, B.J. (2005). "The Moral Intuition of Ruskin's 'Storm-Cloud', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 45(4), 917-33.
- Ferroni, G. (2024), *Natura vicina e lontana. Umanesimo e ambiente dagli antichi Greci all'intelligenza artificiale*. Milano: La nave di Teseo.
- Hutcheon, L. (2013). *A Theory of Adaptation*. London: Routledge.
- Naess, A. (1973). "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary". *Inquiry*, 16(1), 95-100.
- Young, R.M. (1970). *Mind, Brain and Adptation in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.