

Ruskin's Islamic Orient and the Formation of a European Ideal

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Abstract The Ruskinian attitude towards the non-European, and in particular, the Islamic 'other', may at first seem definitive. This position being made evident from Ruskin's descriptions of the lugubrious nature of Islam's sacred scripture, its peoples, arts and *Weltanschauung*. This paper argues, contrary to this *bien pensant* view, that Ruskin's oeuvre intimates an ongoing, lasting and unfinished discussion with the Islamic Orient, from the earliest drafts of *The Stones of Venice* to later discourses on morality, history and religion. Whilst the sympathies for the refinement and delicacy of Islamic art and its influences upon the Venetian Gothic are well documented in the literature, Ruskin's engagement with Islam (both positive and negative) has yet to be fully explored. This paper endeavours to warp and weft the strands of these ideas into a sustained discussion of Ruskin's ideals in his oeuvre.

Keywords Ruskin. Islam. Europe. Orient. Aesthetics. Gothic.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Ruskin's Parlance with Islam and Islamic Art. – 3 Ruskin's Aesthetic Ideals and Islamic Art. – 4 The Autochthonous Gothic and the Islamic Presence. – 5 Remnants of the Islamic "Lava Stream" in Ruskin and the "Eastern Question".

1 Introduction

The medieval retelling of the ancient *Parzival* drama in Wolfram von Eschenbach's hands stands as a propitious moment in European literature, an epic whose unconstrained desire to explore the *summum bonum* allegorises the Holy Grail as an enchantment with the Christ figure. Contended to deliver religion not as mere theology but as sacrament (Scruton 2020), Wolfram's tale, curiously, necessitates this quest as a meeting with the world of Islam. The drama begins with Parzival's father, Gahmuret, seeking adventure and fortune in the East, accepting a commission at the court of the Caliph in Baghdad. This leads him ultimately to the African kingdom of Zazamanc and the beautiful Moorish (Muslim) Queen, Belacane. There he fights and defends the city from invaders winning the battle

as well as the hand of the queen, with whom he has a son, Feirefiz.¹

The perturbations within Gahmuret, however, lead him back to Europe where he marries again and fathers a second son, Parzival. Later as a young knight, Parzival will find himself in search of the Holy Grail and chances upon, unbeknownst to him, his elder stepbrother in a duel. Realising the Moor with whom he has drawn swords is his brother, the narrative leads ultimately to their reconciliation and Feirefiz embracing Parzival (and Christianity) with the latter becoming the new Grail King. Later in Wagner's adaption, *Parsifal*, his final opera, illusions to the world of the East (and Islam) are not without consequence, such as in Act II wherein the Guardians of the Grail are set upon the 'northern mountain of Gothic Spain' and must contend with the perfidious Klingsor whose adjoining realm nestles yonder "on the southern slope of the same mountain range, facing Moorish Spain".²

Parsifal ultimately destroys the heathen kingdom, not before making a sign of the Cross over its ruins. It seems in the Wagnerian mien; redemption is delivered at the cost of an annihilation of that which was; atonement in what has perished. In Wolfram's earlier rendition, however, vindication of the other does not come without mutual reconciliation.³ The rapprochement with the Islamic world as

foundational to the birth of modern European literature is not without irony, and haunts the pages of many a thinker and their ruminations on what it means to inhabit 'Europe' today. In the elision between these retellings, there exists a further concomitant attitude to how cultures and ideas move, rest and meet across time, namely, between 'consilience' of world views as well as the domination of 'influence' wherein one quells the other.

The seeming antipathy between these views has consequences and is also convenient to us in order to assess John Ruskin's views on Islam which, as shall be argued, are far from insignificant to his thought. In this regard, and with an analogy to Percival, Ruskin neither fully entertains Wolfram's attitude by which the other is conciliated in the moment of acceptance nor Wagner's consummate submission to the will of the other. We may argue, initially at least however, that Ruskin's position is more 'Wolframian' in his sensibility towards the natural outgrowth of the Gothic from Islamic precedents than Wagner's ahistorical reading which shares little appetite for cultural consilience. The intention of the present meditation is then to consider Ruskin's ideas on Islam, art and Gothic in order to evaluate those claims, which are for the most part unfinished, and their place and conception of the 'great community' that is Europe.

2 Ruskin's Parlance with Islam and Islamic Art

In an account of Ruskin's life, the Orient, recognised as principally, and yet not exclusively, as Islamic in mien, can be said to have played an important and long-stand-

ing role. The few works dedicated to this area of Ruskin reveal their significance to his architectural thoughts, and also to his ideas on geography, nations and their

¹ The name Feirefiz is derived from the Old French *vais* and *fiz* meaning 'colourful son' and whose complexion is described by Wolfram as that of a "Magpie" (Gray 1974).

² Bassett 2008, 109.

³ Bell 2013, 263.

histories as well as their connection to art and beauty.⁴ The mention of Islam, Muslims and the Orient is therefore more than a passing dalliance in his writing and in the development of his ideas. Part of this interest can be read as cohabiting with the variety of his intellectual interests, and much like them, which had enchanted his thoughts early in life, were later reviewed with a certain distance and even disapproval, and yet never truly banished from the rich intellectual imagination at his disposal. Therefore, any definitive remarks concerning Ruskin's praise or opprobrium for Islam and its sensibilities in art are premature if not occasioned upon his larger intellectual projects.

Ruskin's Victorian England and its ideas of Islam at this time can be read as a longer tradition of fascination with oriental culture.⁵ The popularity of the Great Exhibition of 1851 – in the form of Thomas Moore's Oriental romance *Lalla Rookh*, Owen Jones' exposition and lauding of Islamic architecture as optimised in the Alhambra, as well as the eroticising and licentious novella of Emily Barlow (*The Lustful Turk*) and the popularity of harem art etc. – all engage with an exoticised oriental preponderance. In this milieu, and within the closer intellectual orbit of Ruskin, were the fastidious works of individuals such as Robert Hay, Edward Lanes and Owen Jones and the 'Hay's Group', which forged a new intellectual interest in Islamic aesthetics and design. Their burgeoning school is what Crinson defines as a 'New Orientalism', which showed

a new sense of urgency and intellectual enquiry had infected the study of Islamic architecture – a kind of parallel to the oriental renaissance of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when western scholarly knowledge of oriental languages and texts flourished. What had until then largely been either a textual study [...] now became concerned [...] with the reading of artifacts, especially architecture, and a deeper consideration of their worth for contemporary production.⁶

This does not preclude, however, Ruskin's disdain for the popularising of Arabian fancy and the laudation in the Hay's Group more generally and yet specifically of the Alhambra and its ornamentation, found in Owen Jones' work *The Grammar of Ornament*.⁷ As a younger man, Ruskin mentions in *Praeterita*, an early ambition of his was, if fate had joined him with his father's business partner in Spain, to write a history of the early Caliphs of Islam.⁸ Moreover, we know of his at least passing interest in the founder of the religion, Muhammad, from early letters. Having read Thomas Carlyle's lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* (1841), in which Carlyle identifies Muhammad "Hero as Prophet", Ruskin would remark on this depiction in a letter to his father: "read some of Carlyle's lectures. Bombast, I think; altogether approves of Mahomet, and talks like a girl of his 'black eyes'" (Atwood 2013, 247). These remarks made whilst he was still only twenty-two are perhaps expected, and yet not only would his views on Carlyle change

⁴ Howard 1991, 1999, 2000.

⁵ Sweetman 2010.

⁶ Crinson 1996, 26-7.

⁷ *Works* 9: 469.

⁸ *Works* 35: 403.

(referring to him as his “Master” and “Papa” in later correspondence),⁹ but also (as Atwood has shown) his ideas of the ‘hero’ to express a vision not too dissimilar to that of Carlyle (though not a coterminous sympathy with Muhammad). Where this early interest arose is unsure, and yet its fomenting may be recognised from literature he had read as an undergraduate, famously the *Arabian Nights*. In a later autobiographical reflection, Ruskin would express his views on his Protestant upbringing with reference to the work writing:

If he [the reader] will look back to what I have told of the chapter-learning, he will not find it spoken of as immediately delightful or resultful. For any effect it had on my own character hitherto, I might as well have learned the Koran in Arabic. The effect up to this time had been merely literary and imaginative, forming my taste, and securing my belief in the supernatural – or quasi-belief – gradating into the kind of credit I gave the Arabian Nights.¹⁰

Of his panoply of acquaintances, many had connections with the Muslim world. Charles Augustus Howell, for example, served as his secretary from 1865 to 1868 and had lived in Morocco, in which his chosen lifestyle in North Africa was akin to a “sheik of an Arab tribe”.¹¹ David Urquhart, a Scottish member of Parliament and Turkish Diplomat serving on a trade mission, worked

closely with the court of Sultan Mahmud II, especially Koca Mustafa Reşid Pasha. Urquhart’s affection for Turkish life led to a number of influential publications such as *Turkey and its Resources* (1833) and *The Pillars of Hercules* (1850), and became famed for introducing Turkish Baths in Victorian London. E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn mention Ruskin and Urquhart at one time saw much of each other and that on the latter’s encouragement, Ruskin would build a house for himself (Avcioglu 2011, 244). Max Müller, Fellow of Christ Church, and editor of the influential fifty volume *Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910) was Oxford’s first Professor of Comparative Philology and known to Ruskin. Ruskin also held correspondence with the prominent dramatist, Thomas Henry Hall Caine, author of *Mahomet*, a four-act historical sympathetic work based on the life of Muhammad, and who subsequently visited Ruskin at Coniston.¹² Moreover, he knew and admired artists who had gone to the East, such as John Frederick Lewis, who had sojourned a decade in Muslim lands, producing over 600 works.¹³ Amongst the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, William Holman Hunt travelled to the Holy Land, via Egypt as well as Sir Frederick Leighton. And whilst these examples serve not any conclusive proposition of Ruskin’s own interests, for fear of an associative fallacy, such relationships serve to render the intellectual world of his operations as potentially not unfamiliar with the world of Islam.

⁹ *Works*, 37: 248.

¹⁰ *Works*, 35: 25.

¹¹ *Works*, 36: 51.

¹² Allen 1997, 222; *Works*, 37: 263.

¹³ Ruskin would say of Leighton that “in some degree I claim even Sir Frederick Leighton as a kindred Goth” (*Works*, 33: 318).

3 Ruskin's Aesthetic Ideals and Islamic Art

The fact of being amongst the first art theorists since the Renaissance to recognise, as a prototypically Christian and European expression of art, that the Gothic foreshadows within the unlikely fulcrum of Islam, is a significant intellectual contribution. Its relevance in Ruskin's ideas of Islam oscillated between erecting strictly dialectical positions in which Europe stands on one side, to a distant appreciation of Islam's achievements. In either case, there is depth and complexity wrought in his ideas, which can be seen to oppugn their appearance often considered in the broader literature. For Ruskin, goodly work is a condition of beauty, serving its own reward by honestly attending to the natural materials, and nature more generally, in the craftsman's ward as well as the world which surrounds him. Beauty then ushers forth an embodying of truth tethered not only in the craftsman's hands but also the age of a people and the sensibilities of their conditions.¹⁴ Ideals for art and architecture, which for Ruskin were forged by a lifelong study and admiration of the Gothic, meld a philosophy of moral work and a poetics of life. In drawing on his knowledge of architectural history, Ruskin's claims for an Islamic influence on the Venetian Gothic, in the first volume of *Stones of Venice*, and historically locates this from around the 1180s. He claims that

the Doric and the Corinthian orders are the roots, the one of all Romanesque, massy-capitalled buildings - Norman, Lombard, Byzantine, and what else you can name of the kind; and the Corinthian of all Gothic, Early English, French, German, and Tuscan.

Now observe: those old Greeks gave the shaft; Rome gave the arch; the Arabs pointed and foliated the arch. The shaft and arch, the framework and strength of architecture, are from the race of Japheth: the spirituality and sanctity of it from Ismael, Abraham, and Shem.¹⁵

Expressing the connective-tissue between the East and West, Ruskin draws on the analogy of a "lava stream" to illustrate the outgrowth of the Arab (read Islamic) influence into the architectural vision and world view of European art:

The Arab, therefore, lay under no disadvantage in colouring, and he had all the noble elements of constructive and proportional beauty at his command: he might not imitate the sea-shell, but he could build the dome. The imitation of radiance by the variegated voussoir, the expression of the sweep of the desert by the barred red lines upon the wall, the starred in shedding of light through his vaulted roof, and all the endless fantasy of abstract line, were still in the power of his ardent and fantastic spirit. Much he achieved; and yet, in the effort of his overtaxed invention, restrained from its proper food, he made his architecture a glittering vacillation of undisciplined enchantment, and left the lustre of its edifices to wither like a startling dream, whose beauty we may indeed feel, and whose instruction we may receive, but must smile at its inconsistency.¹⁶

¹⁴ Landsdown 2019.

¹⁵ *Works*, 9: 34.

¹⁶ *Works*, 9: 282. See Appendix 22 in the first volume of the *Stones* for a further exposition on this topic, headed "Arabian Ornamentation" (*Works*, 9: 469).

A little later, Ruskin will use the image of a "lava stream" to indicate where the marks and warmth of Islamic influences were handed to other forms of building:¹⁷

The Arab banished all imagination of creature form from his temples, and proclaimed from their minarets, "There is no god but God." Opposite in their character and mission, alike in their magnificence of energy, they came from the North and from the South, the glacier torrent and the lava stream: they met and contended over the wreck of the Roman empire; and the very centre of the struggle, the point of pause of both, the dead water of the opposite eddies, charged with embayed fragments of the Roman wreck, is VENICE.¹⁸

In light of these examples, Crinson argues, when Ruskin "wrote *The Stones of Venice* [his views] of Islamic culture was a positive one that could emphasize both its deep seriousness and its vibrancy".¹⁹ Furthermore, that there is a positive reception in the manner of the interpolation of world views with Islam with that of Europe is evidently a "fusion" or at least an "infusion of aesthet-

ic modalities".²⁰ Ruskin will further build on the *typos* of Islamic influences with regard to the Ducal Palace as the great meeting of the varying influences on Venice, claiming between approximately the Ninth to the Eleventh centuries Venice had adapted almost entirely the appearance of Mamluk architecture.²¹ This is illustrated by Ruskin in the evolution and the fluidity, for example, of pointed arch progression.

Later, the evolution of Ruskin's ideas shows how geography, morality and sentiment are influential causes in the development of art and help distinguish farther the ties between Islamic and Christian aesthetics. For example, in the third volume of the *Stones* he develops a theory of the five climes with each having a particular affinity to art and topography. Here Ruskin's definition of the 'Northern' and the 'Southern Savage' are useful as a means to discern respective artistic capabilities of peoples. Whilst the Northern peoples are defined by reason and the careful imitation of nature in figuration, the Southern sensibility is towards imagination and pathos. Whilst not used consistently throughout his work, especially in the first volume of the *Stones*, pastiches are given liberal borrowings between Byzantine

¹⁷ Analogy to the volcanic is not always positive such as in a discussion of Turner's *Vesuvius* (*Works*, 22: 13). In the *Seven Lamps*, and appropriately in the discussion on the "Lamp of Life", Ruskin discloses another reading of the lava stream and one in which, analogously to a nation's providence and destiny is "first bright and fierce, then languid and covered, at last advancing only by the tumbling over and over of its frozen blocks. And that last condition is a sad one to look upon [...] in Architecture more than in any other; for it, being especially dependent, as we have just said, on the warmth of the true life, is also peculiarly sensible of the hemlock cold of the false" (*Works*, 8: 193).

¹⁸ *Works*, 9: 38 (capitals in original). These thoughts resonate with a robust earlier rendition in Gibbons, which Ruskin was familiar with, namely, that "The creed of Mohammed is free from suspicion or ambiguity; and the Koran is a glorious testimony to the unity of God. The prophet of Mecca rejected the worship of idols and men, of stars and planets, on the rational principle that whatever rises must set, that whatever is born must die, that whatever is corruptible must decay and perish" (Gibbons 1993, 5: 339).

¹⁹ Crinson 1996, 53.

²⁰ Crinson 1996, 53. In the case of Venice, this is evident further in the ways its nomenclature mirrors eastern traditions. For example, the Italian *fondaco* is derived from the Arabic *funduq* (trading post) (Howard 2002, 36) and that the city itself was described by the prominent art historian Giuseppe Fiocco as a great *suq* (Arabic for marketplace) (Howard 1991, 59).

²¹ *Works*, 9: 41.

and the Arab (Islamic) as defining the southern enunciation of art.²² This view is further accentuated in the fifth volume of *Modern Painters* (1860)²³ where he dissects the globe based on five distinct climes of which the 'sand-lands' (Muslim lands) harbour the qualities of intelligence necessary for religious art to flourish. In both accounts, the emphasis on Islamic art as 'serious' and 'sensuous' is evident.²⁴

Ruskin would write in *The Poetry of Architecture*²⁵ that the national character of a people and the offerings of beauty which they present to the world are the products of climate, terrain, temperament and morals. Such ideas, which Ruskin later develops, are certainly not unique to him, since they reoccur in nineteenth century aesthetic ruminations and have strong pre-modern antecedents.²⁶ Of further interest is the apparent contradiction in Ruskin which pairs this aesthetic with the

moral values of a people begging the question: "how could the Muslims produce beauty having been infidels, in the view of Ruskin?"²⁷ In *The Two Paths*, for example, his reaction to the popularising of oriental art by Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament*²⁸ as well as the fifth volume of *Modern Painters* seems to point to an answer namely, that fidelity to nature and the study of natural form marks European distinction, in whose wake, the Islamic mien opted for the fantastical, natural conventionalism and ludibrium of the imagination.²⁹ The problem is that disobedience to natural form is, as a consequence, corollary to laxity in the moral tenor of a people, since nature, for Ruskin, is itself a moral pedagogue.³⁰ The natural conventionalism of Islamic art (embodied in the geometric abstraction of its ornamentation) would lead to it embracing 'mere pleasure' and persuasion to the fancies of the fantastical (thus Ruskin's critique of the

22 The close proximity of these respective visions of architecture are most commonly used by Ruskin to define Byzantine art as 'contemplative', 'mystic', 'mythical', and 'symbolic'; it had 'constancy', 'want to freedom', 'petrification', 'formalism', and 'monotony'. By contrast, Islamic was described by words such as 'exquisite', 'ardent', and 'fantastic'; it had 'excitement', 'enchantment' and 'evanescence' (Crimson 1996, 50).

23 *Works*, 7.

24 Crimson 1996, 49. Ruskin's sentiments towards the development of an aesthetic by virtue by a topographical medium is recorded amongst his earliest cognitions on art in fact, whilst still a first-year undergraduate at Oxford.

25 *Works*, 1: 11-73.

26 A case in point would be Fergusson's *A History of Architecture in All Countries* (1865), in whose introduction a theory of race and architecture is developed.

27 Howard 1999.

28 In particular, see Lecture I, *The Deteriorative Power of Conventional Art Over Nations* (*Works*, 16: 259-92).

29 This is not unusual and serves the normative critique of the 'Muslim Mind' as one possessed by sensuality. See an early distinction between the different qualities of mind in Ruskin's distinction between '*aesthesis*' and '*theoria*' in *Modern Painters* (*Works*, 4: 42). One may also take the further example of his comparison of a Persian manuscript with a Turner drawing, taken from the third lecture in the *Queen of the Air*, in which he notes: "at this moment there is open beside me as I write, a page of Persian manuscript, wrought with wreathed azure and gold, and soft green, and violet, and ruby and scarlet, into one field of pure resplendence. It is wrought to delight the eyes only; and it does delight them; and the man who did it assuredly had eyes in his head; but not much more. It is not didactic art, but its author was happy: and it will do the good, and the harm, that mere pleasure can do" (*Works*, 19: 394).

30 Wilmer 2015.

Alhambra as based on similar lines).³¹ Such arguments reveal Ruskin's contradictory thoughts on the matter;

and yet, to conclude this as his abjuration of Islamic art and aesthetics would be premature.

4 The Autochthonous Gothic and the Islamic Presence

Ruskin's writings are seldom consistent and often open for appraisal, so too must it be with his views on Islamic art. Due to the centrality of the Gothic in his oeuvre, we see a necessary arch back to his conceptions of beauty and truth, rendering Islamic art as partial progenitor of a style and descendant of those ideas in the Gothic. This rapprochement is of central importance since it may be argued, as it shall be here, that at least some Islamic ideals which give birth to the great Gothic styles are conceived by terms acceptable to Ruskin's own thought. This may better be surmised as not an associative fallacy but rather an elective affinity to those ideas, praised in Ruskin, and found on the common ground of architectural practice and thought. As such, these ideals are themselves to be found, in one fair way, within Ruskin's own discourses on the Gothic. Whilst this may seem platitudeness, due to the aforementioned lauding of Gothic origins, they presume also a rethinking of the place of Islam within Ruskin's oeuvre. It is, building upon the work of Deborah Howard and others, to argue that there is a complexity to which one must turn in handling Ruskin's views and cannot be limited to the advance of political ideals and intellectual expectations anticipated in his latter oeuvre. It is for this reason that one can measure this parlance, *pentimento* like, in the articulation of his own rendering of the most noble aesthetic ideas to be found in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and the *Nature of Gothic*.³² Again, this is not sur-

prising due to the *abiogenesis* of the Gothic, and yet the connections one may make with Islamic architecture make the less inconspicuous case for a larger treatment of Islam in his thinking.

In the *Seven Lamps*, for example, and in the lamp of "Sacrifice" particularly, the dedication of craft to a supreme being, reflects equally in man's love and obedience to that being. Islamic architecture is defined by Ruskin as an oblation to God, however misinformed it may be in his eyes, nonetheless summoning a deity to which these labours are directed. Similarly, the lamp of "Truth" inheres the dedication to an honesty towards materials and structure and that of "Power" namely, inspiring awe in reaching the sublimity of nature, as allegorised in stone. One may allude to the references in Ruskin's treatment of the Ducal Palace as an appropriate example of this. Here, the grandeur and splendour of the building sits as a mirage of power and truth and can be found in Ruskin's lauding of examples of dressed stone from Mamluk (Cairo) buildings. Again, the lamp of "Beauty" explicates that the beautiful resonates in due understanding of nature and natural forms, which in itself is the lauding of the Divine, in the labours of nature. Speaking of the balcony at Campo San Benedetto (Venice), for example, we may allude to Ruskin's use of the Cinquecento arabesque in this period as illustrative of this lamp. He continues:

³¹ Due to this inherent climatic pathos, the seriousness of art leads to a inescapable cruelty of a people and "cruel nations" for Ruskin were products of "an inheritance of ignorance and cruelty, belonging to men as spots to the tiger or hues to the snake" (*Works*, 16: 307).

³² *Works*, 8 and 10.

It is but the arresting upon the stonework of a stem or two of the living flowers, which are rarely wanting in the window above (and which, by the by, the French and Italian peasantry often trellis with exquisite taste about their casements). This arabesque, relieved as it is in darkness from the white stone by the stain of time, is surely both beautiful and pure; and as long as the renaissance ornament remained in such forms it may be beheld with unreserved admiration.³³

In the exhortation of the lamp of "Life", we may point to Ruskin's description of Basilica di San Marco, as a point of reference of this principle and within which he points out the arabesque as amongst its most lovely features,

Those columns of the principal entrance are among the loveliest in Italy; cylindrical, and decorated with a rich arabesque of sculptured foliage, which at the base extends nearly all round them, up to the black pilaster in which they are lightly engaged.³⁴

In the lamp of "Memory" and his discussion of the domicile and its rightful permanence in the built environment, he criticises modern tenements and their restrictions and compares them alternatively to the natural

tents of the Arab or the Gipsy by their less healthy openness to the air of heaven, and less happy choice of their spot of earth; by their sacrifice of liberty

without the gain of rest, and of stability without the luxury of change.³⁵

From the *Nature of Gothic*, we may further draw out similar themes relating back to Ruskin's high demands on architecture as found in the workings of the Southern Savage mind of the Muslim. Of these, "Savageness", for example, offers the primal and unrestrained mien which in Ruskin's works features the subtilty of soul and gentility of labouring which renders the capacities of life fecund for the character of our built world. We may add further that for Ruskin savageness captures an aptitude of thought inclined to the "south" and to be found in the works and thoughts of Muslim nations namely, their untamed and approximate closeness to nature as evident.³⁶ He starts with and appropriates the "southern savage gothic" as the *mise en scène* for the Gothic. Identifying this savage with the "necessity for invention, its purposeful unfinished quality and its revulsion to mere imitation as three defining features".³⁷ The art of "Changefulness" in the design of craftsmen can be elicited from his choice of "Arabian Windows" taken from the Campo Santa Maria Mater Domini, where Ruskin takes account of it being "one of the richest fragments in the city: and a beautiful example of the fantastic arches which I believe to have been borrowed from the Arabs".³⁸ Curious is how the element of changefulness is exacted in the very medium of this transitional moment in the Venetian Gothic. In describing its façade, Ruskin writes "two of the circular ornaments at the points of the arches are larg-

33 *Works*, 8: 75.

34 *Works*, 8: 202.

35 *Works*, 8: 227.

36 Connelly 2015.

37 *Works*, 17: 196-7.

38 *Works*, 11: 320.

er than the rest; that the lateral windows are broader than the three intermediate ones; and that, of the lateral windows themselves, the one on the right is broader than that on the left".³⁹ And that this curious lack of regimentation in the exterior is a hallmark of the "Arabic period" since he further argues:

the same thing takes place - one of the lateral openings is larger than all the rest; and I have not as yet been able to discover the reason for such an arrangement, as these groups of windows appear to have always lighted one room only.⁴⁰

As for the principle of *Naturalism*, Ruskin opens a concomitant discussion on capitals and the construction of the bell on columns. This he does through observing the relative labours of truncation in capital formation by positing stability and refined proportions, when met with the shaft, by starting the masons cut further down with a deeper incision to harness their gradation. This middle ground between the over and under cutting which may be acute in both concave or convex and concludes that

the actual form of the capitals of the balustrades of St. Mark's: it is the root of all the Byzantine Arab capitals, and of all the most beautiful capitals in the world, whose function is to express lightness.⁴¹

"Grotesque" is the attenuation of the imagination to "delight in fantastic and ludicrous [...] images"⁴² as a mark of the Gothic. It reveals a certain freedom and flight from the conventions of normative refined ornament upon dressed stone exteriors whose potential for an expressive commune with the work of the craftsmen, is reminiscent of the fantastical in Islamic building.⁴³ "Rigidity", at the other end, is an activity wrought in the dynamics of the buildings whose "peculiar energy [...] gives tension to movement, and stiffness to resistance, which makes the fiercest lightning forked rather than curved".⁴⁴ Whilst making a clear distinction between the Northern and Southern tribes which accentuate the relative traditions of rigidity in architecture, the place given to Gothic stands as a hallmark for its temper of character which resists the authority of the horde and the individual against the presence of time. This Ruskin speaks in contrast to the "languid submission" of the south.⁴⁵ Finally, as for "Redundance" it is the "uncalculating bestowal of the wealth of its labours" such that in the accumulation of architectural facts a tapestry of labour is emergent, *pentimento* like, for the eyes of the observer.⁴⁶ As Ruskin argues:

And although, by careful study of the school, it is possible to arrive at a condition of taste which shall be better contented by a few perfect lines than by

³⁹ *Works*, 11: 320.

⁴⁰ *Works*, 11: 320. In this regard the discussion of the horseshoe round, or as Ruskin names it the 'Arabic and Moorish arch' is relevant to its appearance as modulation its ability to be modulated as thus found in the 'Early English and French' Gothics (IX. 161).

⁴¹ *Works*, 11: 139.

⁴² *Works*, 10: 239.

⁴³ Crinson 1996.

⁴⁴ *Works*, 10: 239.

⁴⁵ *Works*, 10: 241.

⁴⁶ *Works*, 10: 243.

a whole facade covered with fretwork, the building which only satisfies such a taste is not to be considered the best.⁴⁷

Therefore, in the managing of the eye and articulating of its sharpness,

we cannot say, therefore, that a building is either Gothic or not Gothic in form, any more than we can in spirit. *We can only say that it is more or less Gothic, in proportion to the number of Gothic forms which it unites.*⁴⁸

Herein lies the rub namely, that the Gothic is itself the product of a consilient tradition which is defined in Rus-

kin through, or in opposition to, its providence(s). The examples shown to illustrate this point offer only a pro-paedeutic account of how these ideas bear presence for Ruskin. As Ogden argues, such complexity in the articulation of the Gothic is perhaps a consequence of his broader familiarity with Islam that as a thinker he is “unfamiliar to Victorian and post-colonial scholars alike, a Ruskin who both defines “Gothic” in racially chauvinistic terms as well as, paradoxically, invokes Arab architectural influences as an endless illustration of the best of Venetian Gothic”.⁴⁹ Again, this is not surprising, given the place of Islamic architecture in the development of the Gothic for Ruskin and serves to ensure that perhaps there is a sustained and unfinished quality to his ideas on the matter.

5 Remnants of the Islamic ‘Lava Stream’ in Ruskin and the ‘Eastern Question’

As with many matters in his works, it is clear how and exactly why Ruskin's views on Islam and Muslims changed over time. The need to differentiate from the Southern Savage, the vituperative remarks on the Indian Mutiny (1856), Ruskin's comments in *The Two Paths* as well as the inaugural address as Slade Professor (1870) all famously exhort the imperial project and thus exculpate England's yoke over lesser nations and are perhaps not the final word on the matter. Critiques by post-colonial scholars such as Edward Said,⁵⁰ which would paint Ruskin as a muse for the colonial project, are set, it seems, to a premature tone; perhaps this is only a partial corrective in designating him ‘colonialist’. At the other end, to

give an example, one must question the extent to which a national project, or European vision, within Ruskin is itself tenable. As Stoddart has recently done convincingly, analysing his thoughts on such claims, concludes that “Ruskin is perhaps the sharpest critic of his own deployment of nationality as a corrective to the problems of modern social formations”.⁵¹ Subsequently, later in life there is a partial and potentially significant desire to cogitate upon the East, as in November 1876, when Ruskin writes in *Fors Clavigera* of his intentions to pen a work on the “Eastern Question” and in particular on the religion, history and politics of the Islamic Orient:

⁴⁷ *Works*, 10: 243.

⁴⁸ *Works*, 10: 245; emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Ogden 1997, 113.

⁵⁰ Said 1994.

⁵¹ Stoddart 2015, 142.

I want to write a long note in Byzantine empire – Commanders of the Faithful, – Gran Turks – and the ‘Eastern Question’. But can’t: and perhaps the reader will be thankful.⁵²

Left as a musing, as his earlier intentions to pen the history of the first Muslim Caliphs, what would have been made at this juncture in his career as an arch back to the Orient, is left to historical conjuncture. Specifically, from the 1870s, the advent of Ottoman reforms, British involvement in Egypt and the dissolution of the East Indian Company may all have been grist for Ruskin’s mill. Equally, such events may have changed and called into question his own reticence with the European industrial world, slavery, religion and the state of the Northern Savages condition. There seems to be no place for anything in Ruskin, especially the later works, which would however encourage a movement towards the place of a wholly congenial relation to Islam. His retreat into the North, figuratively and temporally, cleft upon the hilltops and mountainous storms, is where he felt most comfortable in the end, in the retreat from convictions of his youth and ultimately the retreat of his reason. However, it is of note that references to Islam do not cease in his later works and correspondence. Writing in *St Mark’s Rest* (1879), for example, he argues

A marvellous thing – the Protestant mind! Don’t think I speak as a Roman Catholic, good reader: *I am a mere*

wandering Arab, if that will less alarm you, seeking but my cup of cold water in the desert; and I speak only as an Arab, or an Indian, – with faint hope of ever seeing the ghost of Laughing Water.⁵³

As Francis O’Gorman has shown, Ruskin’s religious proclivities serve as no “easy labels for his theological position[s]” during this period.⁵⁴ Later Islamic references are equally evident such as in his daily musings. For example, one such appears in a letter to Mrs. Arthur Severn Llangollen on October 15, 1883:

Just came in from the most delicious walk I ever had in England or Wales. Never saw anything like the beauty of the valley between wavy hills of pasture gilded with Fern like an *Arabian book – romance or Koran* – broderie of gold on silk. No heath! – all grass, crag, fern and divinest woods and fields below, and Valle Crucis with its Cross and Abbey and lateral brook. Birds everywhere – and I’ve seen two water ouzels! Off at 12 for Oxford!⁵⁵

Commenting on these references offers, if anything, the dexterity of a fecund mind whose resources were drawn from a great well of diverse ideas. It may also, and not without the presence of a Southern Savage, the noble Arab, show the dwelling of serious art and its lasting impressions on Ruskin. In the latter published oeuvre (*The Bible of Amiens*, published between 1880 and 1885),

⁵² *Works*, 38: 738. The time of this writing was an especially tumultuous period in his life with Rose La Touche dying the previous year and he himself resigning the Slade Professorship just three years later. What these thoughts would have culminated in is unclear though using his writings on colonial Britain we may not be surprised to hear more of the same though with greater intensity of spirit. It is also important to note that Ruskin’s cogitations on related matters may have been the basis for his Eastern Question. For example, whether it may have been similar in candor to his series of letters entitled *The Italian Question* (*Works*, 36: 319) is uncertain. For a nuanced view on his ideas of empire see Faulkner 2000.

⁵³ *Works*, 24: 277-8; emphasis added. The reference to “Laughing Water” is from Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha*.

⁵⁴ O’Gorman 2015, 152.

⁵⁵ *Works*, 37: 468-9; emphasis added.

which was intended to draw further on religious history and architecture and stands as an important addition to the articulation of the thinkers' thoughts, Ruskin writes, with reference to the Southern Savage and his simplicity:

The influence of Egypt vanishes soon after the fourth century, while that of Arabia, powerful from the beginning, rises in the sixth into an empire whose end we have not seen. And you may most rightly conceive the religious principle which is the base of that empire, by remembering, that while the Jews forfeited their prophetic power by taking up the profession of usury over the whole earth, *the Arabs returned to the simplicity of prophecy in its beginning by the well of Hagar, and are not opponents to Christianity; but only to the faults or follies of Christians*. They keep still their faith in the one God who spoke to Abraham their father; and are His children in that simplicity, far more truly than the nominal Christians who lived, and live, only to dispute in vociferous council, or in frantic schism, the relations of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.⁵⁶

This chastising of the Protestant traditions of his time, to which he himself was a product and devoted for much of his life, seems apt at a time in which he is weary from Carlyle's demise and walking into another mental breakdown the following year.⁵⁷ His religion becomes that of

Saint Ursula, his Gothic that of the North, his land that of Scotland's gelid hills. In disregarding so much he becomes a martyr of the redemption he himself sought in art. However, and curiously, the Arts and Crafts Movement, much of which he inspired, did not resist in the same way and rather, unlike Ruskin himself, would tread about the southern soils of the imagination, opening the door, left ajar by Ruskin, to the world of Islam and the Orient. This influence of Islamic art has yet to be written into the broader history of the movement, though it is evident that a sustained and reverent relation existed. We may draw on as examples of William Morris and his passion for Persian design and love of oriental literature, the Pre-Raphaelite visual obsession with the Islamic world; the typographer Emery Walker's North African, Islamic art collection; the calligrapher Edward Johnston's student, John C. Tarr, who lived in North Africa and greatly admired Islamic artistic culture; the rise of poly-chromaticism in Neo-Gothic design; Edwin Lutyens Mughal-inspired gardens etc. The alacrity with which these ideas were taken hold a decisive turn in the wake of Ruskin's legacy. As Ogden has shown,

on the latter half of the 19th century [...] Particularly in what the Victorians called the Near East and over territory historically occupied by Arabs (especially Egypt), English architects and builders partially re-

⁵⁶ *Works*, 33: 95-6; emphasis added.

⁵⁷ As was his custom throughout his life, and especially during the latter period, Ruskin wanted to donate precious manuscripts, paintings, geological materials and miscellany to charitable causes as well as friends. He is recorded to have donated at least (of which we know) of his Arabic Quran manuscripts. One such given to the Whiteland's College on Christmas Day (1880) having been described as 'very interesting' and bound in "silken satchel with a gold cord, every page being profusely ornamented in flower scrolls and gold" (*Works*, 30: 339). The second was also an illuminated manuscript addressed to Rev. J.P. Faunthorpe on December 6, 1881 stating: "The other [book for donation] is - I don't know what, for I can't read it, and don't know even its right way upwards! So I am ashamed to have it among my books any more, but I think with its pretty silken cover, binding and all, it is just the thing to show your girls what sort of a thing a Book should be!" (*Works*, 37: 381). For Ruskin's inscription in the latter see *Works*, 38: 426.

This of course does not elide those remarks from Ruskin which he makes, of the supercilious and invective variety during this same period. In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton, for example, on February 10, 1863 Ruskin addresses the extremities of battle found in the enemy Civil War in which Norton had been working for the Loyal Publication Society, and compares them with the founder of Islam, writing "Mahomet was mild, Christian-like and rational, in comparison" (*Works*, 36: 432).

shaped Imperial Britain into an Orientalized Italy. Just as in medieval Venice, Arab styles proliferated.⁵⁸

It is due to his compendious interests, to which we ought to give a broad concession in judging Ruskin and his ideas of Islam and the making of European ideals. It seems that one must and in so doing, we do not close the chapter on Islam in his thought but rather necessitate the need for further nuance. As Ruskin writes of the intellectual labours of thought in *Arrows of the Chace* (1880),

in the building of a large book, there are always places where an indulged diffuseness weakens the fancy, and prolonged strain subdues the energy: when we have time to say all we wish, we usually wish to say more than enough; and there are few subjects we can have the pride of exhausting, without wearying the listener.⁵⁹

It is a fitting epithet for Ruskin's own oeuvre (and life), that ceaseless fecundity of ideas to animate and stir his listeners did also dissipate his own energy. As for those "listeners" of Ruskin, our present account evidently says little enough to "weary the listener" on the matter, and yet offers the importance of drawing out these ideas further in evaluating his work. As with Ruskin's other and many discourses battling for attention, we cannot settle on Islam's place in that panoply as taking much room, yet more perhaps than it is often accorded. Concluding his thoughts then on Islam, amidst paradox and polemic, we may mediate that they are neither a paean, as in its place in the development of an entirely wholly European expression, nor do they abnegate its place therein. Ruskin's thoughts are a concatenation wherein the Northern Savage ultimately succeeds where he and his mind would eventually find rest.

⁵⁸ Ogden 1997, 119.

⁵⁹ *Works*, 34: 470.

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