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Imitation and Imagination: John Ruskin, Plato, and Aesthetics

SARA ATWOOD

> One comfort is, that Great Men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness;—in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them. (*On Heroes* 3–4).

THOMAS CARLYLE'S CHARACTERISTICALLY PASSIONATE utterance in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841) reverberates throughout the literature of a hero-worshipping age. Although they often used the example of these figures to different ends, men such as Carlyle, Thomas Babington Macaulay, Samuel Smiles, Charles Kingsley, J. A. Froude, and John Ruskin all believed there were valuable life-lessons to be drawn from the stories of great men, whose exceptional gifts had given them an ability to see into the heart of things and to penetrate the "open secret" of the universe, "open to all, seen by almost none" (*On Heroes* 69). Carlyle's heroes—pagan gods, prophets, poets, priests, writers, and kings—are a disparate group drawn from different countries and eras, but who ultimately share "the divine relation . . . which in all times unites a Great Man to other men" (*On Heroes* 6).

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Like Carlyle's heroes, the figures that make up Ruskin's personal "bede-roll" (Newsome 157) are varied, but in the case of Ruskin, Plato occupies a central place. He is one of five men whom Ruskin insists, in *Fors Clavigera* (1871–84), that his readers study closely as representative of "the wisdom which the Masters of all men—the dead Senate of the noblest among the nations—[have] left for the guidance of the ages yet to be" (*Works* 29: 401). Yet although Ruskin was strongly influenced by Plato, particularly in matters of political economy, social reform and education, his response to Plato's view of aesthetics is less clear. Whereas Plato famously bans imitative artists and poets from his ideal republic,[1] Ruskin looks to the greatest of these as teachers and, in *Fors*, finds some of them "divinely related" with Plato himself—the four other figures, along with Plato, whose lives and histories Ruskin considers essential study are all creative artists: Virgil, Dante, Carpaccio, and Shakespeare. Ruskin's personal heroes, J. M. W. Turner and Walter Scott in particular, are more of the same. Indeed many of the men whom Ruskin most reverences as seers and sages are just those whom Plato would reject as unenlightened imitators. This disparity necessitates a consideration of the ways that Ruskin, who agrees with Plato in so much of his thought, differs with him aesthetically. What does Ruskin—artist, art instructor and the most influential art critic of his time—make of Plato's deep distrust of the imitative arts and of the role he assigns them in his ideal polity?

Of the many classical writers he read, Ruskin was especially drawn to Plato. In 1843 he wrote a college friend that "I . . . think myself very wrong if I do not read a little bit of Plato very accurately every day" (*Works* 1: 494); in later years he began each morning by translating passages of Plato's *Laws* in his diary. While the Bible remained Ruskin's "Ur-text" (Spear 76), from the 1860s he drew increasingly upon Plato, paying close attention to the ways in which their teaching intersected. As Dinah Birch observes, "Plato is seen [by Ruskin] as the most valuable ancient philosopher because he is closest to the Christian spirit" (25). W. R. Inge, Dean of St. Paul's, remarked in 1919 that Ruskin may have owed more to Plato than to his contemporary "master" Carlyle (29). More recently, Tim Hilton has suggested that Ruskin might always have been "a Platonist by temperament" (*Later Years* 54). Plato both confirmed and shaped Ruskin's views on political economy, social justice, education, and the ideal state. Ruskin also shared Plato's idealism, what Inge called his "combination of aristocratism and socialism" (38), but he also concurred with Plato's dislike for democracy, his belief in eternal laws and values, his vision of a self-sufficient and interdependent state, his willingness to forbid that which he considered unhealthy or vicious, and his desire to put his theories to practical test. Ruskin felt a strong affinity with Plato, whose ideas became central to his project of uniting "the force of all good plans and wise schemes" (*Works* 28: 235) and of bringing them to bear on contemporary social questions. As Marcel Proust observed in the preface to his translation of *The Bible of Amiens*:

> Ruskin lives in a sort of fraternal society with all the great minds of all times, and since he is interested in them only so far as they can answer eternal questions, there are for him neither ancients or moderns, and he can speak of Herodotus as he would of a contemporary. Since the ancients have no value for him, except in so far as they are "current" and can serve as illustrations for our daily meditations, he does not treat them at all as ancients. Then again all their words, not suffering from the passage of time and no longer considered as relating to a given period, are of greater importance for him. (76)

For Ruskin, Plato spoke truths that transcended time and culture, ministering to "the continuous soul" (*Works* 29: 242) of mankind as only a truly Great Man could.

Plato was himself an advocate of hero-worship who declared the value of "hymns to the gods and praises of famous men"[2] in a well-ordered state (*Republic* 607).[3] Much of his own life's work was directed at venerating Socrates and at forwarding his teaching. But Plato's understanding of what constitutes a great man is less inclusive than Ruskin's and does not admit creative artists, whom he views primarily as a potentially disruptive social element.[4] Left unregulated, Plato believes, the imitative or mimetic arts—poetry, painting, and music—become dangerous in their ability to invite lawlessness and to corrupt morality. Their action must therefore be strictly controlled:

> And therefore when any one of these pantomimic gentlemen, who are so clever that they can imitate anything, comes to us, and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sweet and holy and wonderful being; but we must also inform him that in our State such as he are not permitted to exist; the law will not allow them. And so when we have anointed him with myrrh, and set a garland of wool upon his head, we shall send him away to another city. For we mean to employ for our souls' health the rougher and severer poet or story-teller, who will imitate the style of the virtuous only. (*Republic* 398)[5]

Plato's distrust of imitation and his reverence for truth and reason are at the center of his quarrel with the arts. Poets (and by extension painters and other practitioners of imitative art) are for him primarily imitators of the truth, concerned with appearances rather than realities. What's worse, these appearances are deceptive. As Benjamin Jowett observes, for Plato the poets "were the Sophists of their day. . . . He regards them both as the enemies of reasoning and abstraction" (clx). In the *Republic*, Socrates criticizes poetic representations that depict gods or heroes behaving badly, cruelly, or exhibiting weakness; while Socrates (and Plato, one assumes) admires Homer, he objects to the "lies" (*Republic* 377) in his poetry that show the gods in a false light. For Plato and Socrates, whether such representations are allegorical or not is no matter, for young people, unable to distinguish allegory, will take these stories at face value and be tempted to behave unworthily. Instead, tales for the young should be "models of virtuous thoughts" (*Republic* 378), intended to teach honor, virtue, and courage. Plato distinguishes between simple narration (the relation of events), imitation, and a union of the two. Unsurprisingly, he concludes that the simple style alone is admissible; the others, though admittedly attractive, are too risky. Plato is equally strict in musical matters, banishing the Ionian and Lydian melodies as too relaxed and admiring Egyptian laws forbidding musical innovation (*Republic* 399; *Laws* 657). Similarly, Plato rejects "multiplicity of notes" (*Republic* 399) and complex rhythms in music for their tendency to create the sort of confusion, leading to lawlessness, which is produced by the deceptions of poetry and painting. The discussion of music in both the *Republic* and

Laws is understandably extensive given its centrality to Plato's educational scheme. "Music is more celebrated than any other kind of imitation," observes the Athenian in the *Laws*, "and therefore requires the greatest care of them all. For if a man make a mistake here, he may do himself the greatest injury by welcoming evil dispositions, and the mistake may be very difficult to discern, because the poets are artists very inferior in character to the Muses themselves" (669). Yet Plato's strictures on music, like those on poetry and painting, are driven by the same objection to deceptive imitation. The best music, he explains, contains a graceful expression of a harmonious and a courageous life, one composed of simple harmonies and rhythms conducive to virtue.

Poets, as imitators "thrice removed from the truth" (*Republic* 597) can have no knowledge of the truth. "[T]he imitator," Socrates declares, "is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image" (*Republic* 598). Lacking first-hand knowledge of the things he writes about, Homer cannot be taken as a guide in serious matters; had he or his poetical peers possessed any real knowledge of war, politics, education, or government, Socrates argues, they would certainly have become leaders and teachers followed by many devoted disciples. As it is, "poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators; they copy images of virtue and the like, but the truth they never reach" (*Republic* 601).[6] Plato argues that the "honeyed muse" (*Republic* 607), ministering as it does to an inferior principle in the soul and encouraging irrational passions, is ruinous to the understanding. Its seductive power threatens not only the well-ordered republic of men, but also "the safety of the city which is within" (*Republic* 608). Plato's attitude toward the honeyed muse is accordingly aggressive; in the space of only two pages in the *Republic*, Socrates and his companions discuss the need to "control," to "obliterate," to "expunge," to "reject," and to "strike out" the work of the imitative poets (386–87). Poetry in Plato's ideal state is to be limited to simple hymns and praises of gods and heroes, the only acceptable imitation being that of one just and good man of another. In the late work *Laws*, Plato goes so far as to argue for strict censorship of the imitative arts, to be overseen by judges appointed for their pre-eminence in virtue and education. Because creative artists are often incapable of distinguishing what is good from what is evil, the Athenian suggests devising "a law that the poet shall compose nothing contrary to the ideas of the lawful, or just, or beautiful, or good, which are allowed in the state? Nor shall he be permitted to communicate his compositions to any private individuals, until he shall have shown them to the appointed judges and the guardians of the law, and they are satisfied with them" (*Laws* 801). These judges will select those musical compositions, dances, and poems that they consider acceptable, throwing aside utterly, or examining and amending, those that are unsuitable. The creative artist must conform to the models of the state. The result of this regulation will be a pure and noble art capable of developing virtuous citizens.

Plato expresses his criticisms of painting in the *Republic* in similar language. Like poetry, he considers painting an imitation of appearances rather than realities and the painter's art of "conjuring and deceiving by light and shadow and other ingenious devices" (*Republic* 602) produces a confusion in the human mind that can only be assuaged by the logical disciplines of measuring, numbering and weighing. "This was the conclusion at which I was seeking to arrive," Socrates declares, "when I said that painting or drawing, and imitation in general, when doing their own proper work, are far removed from the truth, and the companions and friends and associates of a principle within us which is equally removed from reason, and that they have no healthy aim" (*Republic* 603). Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates exclaims that the man who knows the just and good and honorable "will not seriously incline to write them in water with pen and ink or in dumb characters which have not a word to say for themselves and cannot adequately express the truth?" (276c). As Plato expresses it in *The Republic*, the merely imitative arts, in their inability to reach the truth, threaten to frustrate the soul's progress towards the good, for "that knowledge only which is of being and of the unseen can make the soul look upwards" (529). In his view, poetry and painting nourish feelings at the expense of reason and offer only shadows of those ideal Forms that constitute the essence of all things. Of the four faculties of the soul described by Plato, the perception of shadows is the lowest, subordinate to reason, understanding, and faith. The Parable of the Cave is perhaps Plato's most memorable expression of the dangers of imitation. Plato is suspicious of the emotions as antipathetic to reason. As Jowett remarks, "Plato is the prophet who 'came into the world to convince men'—first of the fallibility of sense and opinion, and secondly of the reality of abstract ideas" (clx). Ruskin was no sensualist, but he valued noble emotion as a moral element. In the 1865 lecture "Of Kings' Treasuries," Ruskin regards the emotions in a spirit that Plato would surely have condemned:

> You have heard many outcries against sensation lately; but, I can tell you, it is not less sensation we want, but more. The ennobling difference between one man and another,—between one animal and another,—is precisely in this, that one feels more than another. If we were sponges, perhaps sensation might not be easily got for us; if we were earthworms, liable at every instant to be cut in two by the spade, perhaps too much sensation might not be good for us. But being human creatures, it *is* good for us; nay, we are only human in so far as we are sensitive, and our honour is precisely in proportion to our passion. (*Works* 18: 78–79)

Ruskin's engagement with Plato was characteristically dynamic. Plato's teaching was not, for him, an antiquated set of ideas bound by time and culture, but vital wisdom that could be made to speak to modern concerns. Ruskin's use of Plato in his own work is not mere recapitulation, but rather an exercise in what Ross Eddington has called "re-interpretation and indeed modification" (24), in which Plato's ideas emerge reanimated by a Ruskinian spirit. Whereas Plato's intention is to define principles, Ruskin's goal is to incorporate those principles within a program of his own: he "begin[s] with what Plato concludes in;—for *his* dialogues are all excavatory work, throwing aside loose earth, and digging to rock foundation; but *my* work is edificatory, and I have to lay the foundation first" (*Works* 29: 227). Platonic wisdom serves as an essential element of this foundation, but in building upon it, Ruskin uses a variety of materials that result in a structure uniquely his own.

Ruskin's moral aesthetic owes much to Plato; the *Republic* and *Laws* in particular—the "two great treatises" (*Works* 29: 227) that influenced Ruskin most deeply—examine the relation of art to morality and the consequent moral responsibility of creative artists. Yet whereas Plato emphasizes the role of the arts in *forming* virtue, Ruskin maintains that virtue is necessary for the production of noble art. Plato envisions a pure (because strictly controlled) art that will teach youths to be noble and virtuous. As J. C. G. Rouse has noticed, "[B]y learning to appreciate the good and the beautiful in art, they will learn to love them in life" (119). Ruskin reverses this principle: "You must have the right moral state first, or you cannot have the art. But when the art is once obtained, its reflected action enhances and completes the moral state out of which it arose, and, above all, communicates the exultation to other minds which are already capable of the like" (*Works* 20: 73). Thus, for Ruskin, "the fineness of the possible art is an index of the moral purity and majesty of the emotion it expresses . . . so that with mathematical precision, subject to no error or exception, the art of a nation, so far as it exists, is an exponent of its ethical state" (*Works* 20: 74).

While Plato finds all but the most carefully regulated arts morally threatening and therefore unworthy, Ruskin's vision is more nuanced. This subtlety results in part from what some commentators have rather awkwardly—and inexactly—described as Ruskin's "materialism," referring to his love of things: pictures, books, buildings, minerals, flowers and so on.[7] Yet Ruskin's so-called "materialism" is rather more accurately depicted as a form of what he himself called "my Spiritual Platonism" (*Works* 36: 592), a position allied with his Christian belief.[8] Just as Plato elevates the spiritual over the material, so too does Ruskin loves things ultimately for the spiritual truths they disclose. Writing retrospectively in 1873, Ruskin claimed that "in the feelings which change material things into spiritual, I believe none, even of the strongest men, had much advantage of me" (*Works* 29: 540). Turner's pictures, for Ruskin, represent truths of the highest order; they are undoubtedly beautiful things—and Ruskin clearly enjoyed his Turner collection—but beauty, in Ruskin's view, is bound up with truth and the divine. Similarly, Ruskin's love of the materiality of nature is expressed in terms of the higher truths it might offer. His mytho-poetic studies of botany and ornithology, *Love's Meinie* (1873) and *Proserpina* (1875–76), were written to counter the materialism of modern science, which blindly separated the material facts of existence from its deeper moral and spiritual implications. Summing up the message of *Modern Painters* (1843–60) in an 1888 Epilogue, Ruskin asserts his conviction "that the knowledge of what is beautiful leads on, and is the first step, to the knowledge of the things which are lovely and of good report;[9] and that the laws, the life, and the joy of beauty in the material world of God, are as eternal and sacred parts of his creation as, in the world of spirits, virtue; and in the world of angels, praise" (*Works* 7: 464).

One wonders what Plato might have made of this far less temperate description of Turner in the first volume of *Modern Painters*:

> And Turner—glorious in conception—unfathomable in knowledge—solitary in power—with the elements waiting upon his will, and the night and the morning obedient to his call, sent as a prophet of God to reveal to men the mysteries of His universe, standing, like the great angel of the Apocalypse, clothed with a cloud, and with a rainbow upon his head, and with the sun and stars given into his hand.[10]

Although this highly wrought passage was withdrawn in later editions of the book, it expresses the strength of Ruskin's youthful feeling for art,[11] a feeling which in many ways shaped the course of his life and career. *Modern Painters* was Ruskin's first attempt at developing and expressing his aesthetic principles.[12] While not written in response to Plato's aesthetics, it nonetheless bears traces of his presence; unsurprisingly, when one remembers the importance that the youthful Ruskin placed on his daily bit of Plato.

Ruskin's method in the book reflects a Platonic concern with definitions; each chapter should be read carefully, he urges, "because all criticism must be useless when the terms or grounds of it are in any degree ambiguous" (*Works* 3: 85).[13] Accordingly, although he spends the first part of volume one defining his terms, many of which are the same terms used by Plato, he is really referring to, most importantly, imitation. There is a subtle but greatly important difference in Ruskin's definition of imitation, one that reflects his different understanding of imitative art.[14] When Plato discusses imitative art, he means all art that depicts appearance rather than essence, and since he considers it impossible to grasp essence or the Forms using the artist's (or the poet's) means, he is really including the entirety of what we would call the fine arts. Plato's approach creates a considerable difficulty for Ruskin, who reverences the fine arts and believes in their elevating, even revelatory, power, yet who also recognizes an element of truth in Plato's objections to imitation. If Ruskin were to succeed at demonstrating the necessary and helpful role of art in a good society, he had somehow to address the old charge of artistic deception. In doing so he seeks both to accommodate and to reinterpret Platonic principles, an approach that, while it yields much of value, is not without difficulties.

Imitation, Ruskin maintains, constitutes a degraded species of art, contemptible in its smallness of conception and devoid of higher ideas. It also lacks truth, which Ruskin defines in reference to art as the faithful statement "either to the mind or the sense, of any fact of nature" (*Works* 3: 104). Imitation differs from truth in that it speaks "to the perceptive faculties only; truth to the conceptive" (*Works* 3: 105) Truth is the foundation, and imitation the destruction, of all art. Imitation must always be contemptible because, Ruskin argues, it is impossible to imitate anything really great. Like Plato, he is quite willing to "at once throw out the ideas of imitation" (*Works* 3: 116). But for Ruskin this does not entail the condemnation of all fine art. While he retains Plato's division of degraded (imitative) art v. noble art, he enacts this division within the boundaries of the fine arts. Ruskin in effect subdivides the fine arts, so that once imitation has been cast aside, there remains a kind of art that can be categorized as "true art," which ennobles and instructs. Ruskin thereby attempts to make room for painting, poetry, and literature within a moral aesthetic. That art is greatest, he declares, "which conveys to the mind of the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas; and I call an idea great in proportion as it is received by a higher faculty of the mind, and as it more fully occupies, and in occupying, exercises and exalts, the faculty by which it is received. . . . [and] he is the greatest artist who has embodied, in the sum of his works, the greatest number of the greatest ideas" (*Works* 3: 92). Plato argues that imitative art is inherently incapable of conveying high ideas or leading the soul towards the good, although in a passage in Book 3 of the *Republic* he envisions a sort of artist "gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful" (401) and capable of communicating these to others.[15] While for Plato this artist is an ideal, for Ruskin he is a reality: the truly noble artist who directs the spectator's mind to the contemplation of what is best and true, "guides him to all that is beautiful, snatches him from all that is base; and leaves him more than delighted;—ennobled and instructed" (*Works* 3: 134).

However, volume one of *Modern Painters* was not, in spite of the confidence and the authoritativeness of its author's tone and approach, a definitive statement of Ruskin's aesthetic principles; rather, it was the first step in a developing model of thought, exploring questions that would concern Ruskin not only during the years between the publication of the first volume in 1843 and the fifth and last in 1860, but during the whole of his life.[16] It is thus not surprising to find Ruskin in later volumes refining and revising statements made in the first volume of *Modern Painters*. The work he had set himself in elevating art to such great heights presented numerous challenges.[17] It was one thing to reject imitation—there was long-established precedent for doing so. But for Ruskin to then turn around and advocate something that seemed very like imitation was bound to complicate matters. In the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853), Ruskin conceded that his case against imitation, as asserted in volume one of *Modern Painters*, had not been made "upon the highest grounds," and he expressed the intention of placing it "on a loftier and firmer foundation" (*Works* 11: 212). It had become necessary to define the means by which the noblest artists communicate truth. As Morriss Henry Partee has noted, "Plato never explains how a man—poet or philosopher—can communicate truth and beauty directly to another mind. He asserts that such images may be transmitted, but he does not recognize any vehicle to accomplish this communication" (87). Ruskin attempts to explain what Plato does not, identifying the vehicle as the Imagination, which serves as an agent of moral truth.[18]

This notion is first introduced in the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846), in which imagination, in its healthy operation, emerges as the faculty responsible for raising art above “a form of pure transcript” (*Works* 4: 223) by modifying and interpreting the facts. The virtue of the imagination, as Ruskin defines it, “is its reaching, by intuition and intensity of gaze (not by reasoning, but by its authoritative opening and revealing power), a more essential truth than is seen at the surface of things” (*Works* 4: 284).[19] In this regard, Ruskin’s concept of the imagination reflects his Christian belief in the divine meaning of things. Characteristically, Ruskin divides the imagination into three forms, according to its various functions: the Imagination Associative “seizes and combines” (*Works* 4: 235) ideas to create an organic unity; the Imagination Penetrative apprehends what the Imagination Associative has selected, seeing into the inmost heart of things; the Imagination Contemplative regards what the two more powerful forms of imagination have conceived. The three forms of imagination are further distinguished from Fancy (also subsequently subdivided), which is restless, concerned only with externals, and cannot feel or be made serious. The highest imaginative faculty, Imagination Penetrative, is inimical to all forms of simple imitation:

> It never stops at crusts or ashes, or outward images of any kind; it ploughs them all aside, and plunges into the very central fiery heart; nothing else will content its spirituality; whatever semblances and various outward shows and phases its subject may possess, go for nothing; it gets within all fence, cuts down to the root, and drinks the very vital sap of that it deals with: once therein, it is at liberty to throw up what new shoots it will, so always that the true juice and sap be in them, and to prune and twist them at its pleasure, and bring them to fairer fruit than grew on the old tree; . . . its function and gift are the getting at the root; its nature and dignity depend on its holding things always by the heart. (*Works* 4: 250–51)

The power of the penetrative imagination is evident in the conceptions of every great poet or painter, Ruskin maintains, and they subsequently offer an inner truth far more profound than any mere resemblance. Imitation alone is derisory because in the process of imitating, the imagination—the great penetrative and associative truth-expressing process—plays no part. Interestingly, in constructing a metaphor for the work of the Imagination Penetrative, Ruskin chooses the image of a cave. It is, he writes, "the Open Sesame of a huge, obscure, endless cave, with inexhaustible treasure of pure gold scattered in it: the wandering about and gathering the pieces may be left to any of us—all can accomplish that; but the first opening of that invisible door in the rock is of the Imagination only. . . . Hence there is in every word set down by the imaginative mind an awful under-current of meaning, and evidence and shadow upon it of the deep places out of which it has come" (*Works* 4: 252). In this cave, the deeper the descent the greater the reward. Thus great men such as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Scott, Carpaccio and Turner do not imitate but reveal essence, the product of an "inner secret spring" (*Works* 4: 252) of truth. Their works are a matter of revelation rather than representation, illumination rather than imitation. Turner's failure to produce transcripts of nature, for which the critics had condemned him, was for Ruskin part of his great strength. Rather than providing a cheap, deceptive copy, Turner sought to portray the "inner and deep resemblance" (*Works* 5: 172) with the result that his pictures express profound truths.[20] This imaginative agency is likewise at work in the greatest poetry and literature; great writers, like great painters, excite the noblest emotions "*by the help of the imagination*" (*Works* 5: 29).

In the third volume of *Modern Painters* (1856), Ruskin returns to the power of the imagination in the short but significant chapter "Of The Use of Pictures." The chapter is truly, as Ruskin warns readers at the outset, "a difficult chapter; one of drawbacks, qualifications, and exceptions" (*Works* 5: 169), the ostensible purpose of which is to explain once again his thinking about facts, truth, and imitation. He is also keen to address doubtful readers who, frustrated by Ruskin's apparently contradictory statements about these subjects, may well have begun to take a rather Platonic view of the question and to ask themselves whether it would not be wiser simply to "give up this whole science of Mockery at once, since its only virtue is in representing facts, and it cannot, at best, represent them completely, besides being liable to all manner of shortcomings and dishonesties,—why not keep to the facts, to real fields, and hills, and men, and let this dangerous painting alone?" (*Works* 5: 176). Because, Ruskin answers, for all the beauty of the real landscape, the noblest art offers something that it cannot provide: reality transfigured by the penetrative vision of a great imaginative painter. Such a painter scorns mimicry; instead, the artist acts as interpreter and guide, directing the viewer's gaze to "the discovery and apprehension of the purest truths" (*Works* 5: 187) and imparting somewhat of the artist's greatness of spirit. "So far from striving to convince the beholder that what he sees is substance," Ruskin writes, "[the noble painter's] mind should be to what he paints as the fire to the body on the pile, burning away the ashes, leaving the unconquerable shade—an immortal dream" (*Works* 5: 185). The concept of "truth to nature" that readers found in Ruskin seemed at odds with his championing of Turner, whose pictures looked stubbornly like pictures, not like windows.[21] Yet Ruskin understood "truth to nature" spiritually rather than materially. For him, Turner's pictures remain more true to nature than any other artist's because they are a construct of the imagination, in which "we recognize a supernatural operation, and perceive, not merely the landscape or incident as in a mirror, but besides, the presence of what, after all, may perhaps be the most wonderful piece of divine work in the whole matter—the great human spirit through which it is manifested to us" (*Works* 5: 187). Whereas Plato observes that painting and poetry "have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence" (*Phaedrus* 275d), Ruskin affirms their "oracular voice" (*Works* 4: 262).

In the chapter "Of Turnerian Topography," which appears in volume four of *Modern Painters* (1856), Ruskin illustrates the exceptional power of the truly imaginative artist by comparing Turner's *Pass of Faido* (1843) with a topographical record of the scene that he has drawn himself. The comparison is deservedly well-known, for it makes a powerful statement—both visually and verbally—about the difference between imitative and noble art, as mediated by the imagination:

> The aim of the great inventive landscape painter must be to give the far higher and deeper truth of mental vision, rather than that of the physical facts, and to reach a representation which, though it may be totally useless to engineers, geographers, and, when tried by rule and measure, totally unlike the place, shall yet be capable of producing on the far away beholder's mind

> precisely the impression which the reality would have produced, and putting his heart into the same state in which it would have been, had he verily descended into the valley from the gorges of Airolo. Now observe; if in his attempt to do this the artist does not understand the sacredness of the truth of *Impression*, and supposes that, once quitting hold of his first thought, he may by Philosophy compose something prettier than he saw, and mightier than he felt, it is all over with him. Every such attempt at composition will be utterly abortive, and end in something that is neither true nor fanciful; something geographically useless, and intellectually absurd. (*Works* 6: 35–36)

For Ruskin, the "spirit of the place" (*Works* 6: 36) matters more than its image—and this realization is not to be had by means of reason and philosophy.

One imagines that such a hieratic concept of the artist and the artist's work would hardly have met with Plato's approval. Describing the ungovernable, prophetic character of the noblest forms of healthy imaginative power in *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin cites the "opposition of art to inspiration . . . long and gracefully dwelt upon by Plato in his *Phaedrus*" (*Works* 11: 178). It is true that Plato sometimes floats the notion of the divinely inspired artist, most notably in the *Ion*. But the rhapsode Ion is a rather foolish character, all too willing to claim "divine dispensation" (534c) when Socrates slyly gives him the chance. In the *Phaedrus* too, in spite of discoursing eloquently upon divine madness, Socrates concludes that the "right sort of man" (278b) is one who thinks "that neither poetry nor prose, spoken or written, are of any great value" (278), recognizing instead the superiority of reason and law.[22] It is likely that Plato would have been horrified at the power that Ruskin assigns to imagination, a faculty so dangerously "removed from reason" (*Republic* 603) and so closely allied to the emotions. For Plato, ultimately, as Joseph P. Maguire observes, "the only true artist . . . is the philosophic statesman" (390). In *The Stones of Venice* Ruskin also acknowledges the potential dangers of artistic possession in an "imperfect and ill-trained" (*Works* 11: 179) mind, but maintains his belief in the overwhelming power of the imagination:

> [S]trictly speaking, the imagination is never governed; it is always the ruling and Divine power: and the rest of

> the man is to it only as an instrument which it sounds, or a tablet on which it writes; clearly and sublimely if the wax be smooth and the strings true, grotesquely and wildly if they are strained and broken (Works 11: 179–80).

It is this "ungovernableness" (*Works* 11: 178) that is problematic for Plato, in Partee's view, for it means that the divinely-inspired poet relinquishes that self-possession that represents "an essential virtue" (89) in an ideal state. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates concludes that the inability "to distinguish the dream from the reality, can not in truth be otherwise than disgraceful" (277e). Divine possession also makes the poet a passive receptacle of knowledge rather than an active seeker of the Good. Plato's treatment of artistic inspiration in the early dialogues is ambiguous and ultimately overshadowed by his later dialogues, in which "[his] attitude against the fine arts stiffens into hostility" (Keuls 100).

In *Munera Pulveris* (1862–63), written as Ruskin began a more intense and lasting engagement with Plato's work, he observes that "Plato's logical power quenched his imagination, and he became incapable of understanding the purely imaginative element either in poetry or painting; he therefore somewhat overrates the pure discipline of passionate art in song and music, and misses that of meditative art" (*Works* 17: 208). While he admits that there was "a deeper reason for Plato's distrust of Homer" (*Works* 17: 209) associated with the tendency of all great artists to cloak "the indisputable truths of human life and duty . . . behind these veils of phantasy" (*Works* 17: 209), he nonetheless feels, as Birch has pointed out, "that there is something valuable hidden behind their veils" (66). Further, Ruskin classes Plato himself among those whose wisdom "must be hunted for through whole picture-galleries of dreams" (*Works* 17: 208). Twenty years later, in *The Art of England* (1883), Ruskin returned to this theme, remarking that "whenever, by Plato, you are extricated from the play of logic, and from the debate of points dubitable or trivial; and are to be told something of his inner thought and highest moral conviction,—that instant you are cast free in the elements of phantasy, and delighted by a beautiful myth" (*Works* 33: 295). Paradoxically, Plato is both philosopher and poet, whose own methods often stand at odds with his artistic strictures.[23]

Writing to Henry Liddell in October 1844, Ruskin remarked that he had let the second edition of *Modern Painters* appear unaltered "because I found my views on many points altering and expanding so rapidly. . . . So I decided to let it alone, write the rest first, and then recast the whole" (*Works* 3: 669–70). He continued to recast aspects of the whole in introductions and footnotes to successive editions. In these interpolations one can trace the development of Ruskin's thought as he reassesses his own work. Although he never lost faith in the noble power of art, in later years he questioned the adequacy of his defense of that power. He was particularly critical of his treatment of the imagination. By the time of his inaugural lectures as Slade Professor of Fine Art, delivered at Oxford in 1871, his view of divine artistic inspiration had altered so that he now could characterize involuntary vision and ungoverned imagination as "*always*, the *sign of mental limitation or derangement*" (*Works* 20: 55). He goes on to describe the best art as the work of good men "conscious of no inspiration" (*Works* 20: 56) in whom "the faculty of vision, however strong, was subordinate to that of deliberative design, and tranquilized by a measured, continual, not feverish, but affectionate, observance of the quite unvisionary facts of the surrounding world" (*Works* 20: 56). In a new introduction to volume two of the re-arranged 1883 edition of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin develops this point further, explaining that he finds less in the volume to be corrected than supplied:

> The treatment of this part of the subject is not only incomplete, but involves the omission of all the most important practical questions in the useless curiosity of analysis, just as a common anatomist describes the action of muscles in walking, without thereby helping anybody to walk, or those of a bird's wing in flying, without defining the angles of its stroke to the air. I have thus examined at tedious length the various actions of human conception and memory, without helping any one to conceive, or to remember; and, at least in this part of the book, scarcely touching at all on the primary questions (both moral and intellectual) how far the will has power over the imagination. (*Works* 4: 219)

From a distance of nearly forty years, Ruskin finds the conclusions arrived at in volume two of *Modern Painters* to be narrow and inadequate. He now sees the relationship between the will and the imagination as one of central importance to his inquiry into the power of imagination in noble art and regrets that neither he nor anyone else has attempted to distinguish between "the powers which can be summoned at will, and directed to chosen objects, [and] those which enslave the conscience, and resist the reason, of their possessor." Echoing passages of the inaugural lectures quoted above, Ruskin declares that "In all cases when it is involuntary, the vision or imagination may be considered as morbid." He advises the reader of this re-arranged edition that the term "Imagination" as used throughout the volume is "meant only to include the healthy, voluntary, and necessary action of the highest powers of the human mind on subjects properly demanding and justifying their exertion." Understood in this way, he hopes his revised analysis may illuminate "the various operations of constructive or inventive genius on the common material of the world" (*Works* 4: 221–22). Ruskin also later rejected the division he had previously made between Imagination and Fancy, having come to see the distinction as primarily a question of semantics. In the 1884 lecture "The Pleasures of Fancy" he refers readers to his introduction to the new edition of *Modern Painters,* volume two, in which he describes "the higher and more universal power which I now wish you to understand by the Fancy, including all imaginative energy" (*Works* 33: 483). In *Deucalion (*1875–83), Ruskin gives an example "to show you in a moment what long chapters of *Modern Painters* were written to explain,—how the real faculty of imagination is always true, and goes straight to its mark: but people with no imagination are always false, and blunder or drivel about their mark" (*Works* 26: 299). These and other late references to the power and the function of the imagination show that Ruskin continued to consider and to revise his ideas on the subject in significant ways.

In preparing to write the second volume of *Modern Painters* in 1844, Ruskin had asked Liddell for advice about "a subject that has given me great trouble—the essence and operation of the imagination as it is concerned with art" (*Works* 3: 670); it was a subject that continued to give him difficulty for the rest of his life. Indeed, Ruskin's reading of Plato may have been the primary source of this confusion, driving him onwards in search of an impossible synthesis.[24] In 1846, the concept of the great associative, penetrative imagination had seemed a feasible solution to his Platonic dilemma concerning the imitative arts. While Ruskin's theory of the imagination yielded (and continues to yield) much of value in its own right, however, it did not ultimately succeed in answering this end. With the benefit of age and experience Ruskin came to see that the field of investigation was wider than it had once appeared and generated more questions than answers. Although he agreed with Plato's belief in the morality of art, in other, important ways his understanding of the arts was irreconcilable with Plato's.

A few remarks made towards the close of Ruskin's life seem to provide a fitting, if sombre, coda to his enduring concern with the workings of the imagination. Despite his recognition of the role of the imaginative faculty in distinguishing noble art from imitation, Ruskin always insisted that he was, himself, "entirely destitute of formative or poetical imagination" (*Works* 35: 608). The tragedy for Ruskin was that he believed he lacked the very faculty that he valued so much. As early as 1846 he had observed in a letter to his friend George Richmond that "I cannot change, or arrange, or modify in the least, and that amounts to a veto on producing a great picture . . . . that's just what *isn't* in me. I can only feel it when it is done" (*Works* 36: 64). As the end drew closer and his mind darkened, he dwelt increasingly on this perceived lack of imaginative faculty. A letter of January 1888, written to Kate Greenaway from Sandgate, where Ruskin was convalescing after yet another period of ill health, offers a wrenching expression of longing:

> You cannot conceive how in my present state I envy—that is to say, only, in the strongest way, long for—the least vestige of imagination such as yours, when nothing shows itself to me, all day long, but the dull room or the wild sea; and I think what it must be to you to have far sight into dreamlands of truth—and to be able to see such scenes of the most exquisite grace and life and quaint vivacity. Whether you draw them or not, what a blessing to have them there—at your call. And there I stopped, and have been lying back in my chair the last quarter of an hour, thinking—If I could only let Katie feel—for only a quarter of an hour—what it is to have no

> imagination—no power of calling up lovely things—no guidance of pencil point along the visionary line—Oh, how thankful she would be to find her Katie's mind again. (*Works* 37: 596–97)

Carlyle had been dead for nearly a decade when Ruskin wrote these words. Although he may not have understood Ruskin's yearning for imaginative vision, having little sympathy with what he considered the "ethereal" and emotional side of Ruskin's personality,[25] he would have recognized his friends despair; in old age Carlyle, too, had known what it was to feel "indolent, torpid, and useless" (Cate 189). In the silence of their last years, neither Carlyle nor Ruskin could have foreseen that they would ultimately come to be numbered among the Great Men they so reverenced, "living light fountain[s]" in their own right, from whom the present age yet stands to learn much that is profitable.

Guild of St. George

Notes

1. As discussed below, Plato does not banish art entirely, but instead argues for strict censorship and control. The ideal republic will have its art, but it will be an art purged "of unwholesomeness and extravagance" (Rouse 183).

2. Similarly, in the *Law*s Plato concedes the propriety of eulogizing those citizens who "have done good and energetic deeds, either with their souls or with their bodies, and have been obedient to the laws" (802), but argues that such eulogy is only properly bestowed after death, as it is unsafe to praise a man unduly before he has "run his course" (802).

3. References are provided according to Stephanus pagination. Thus *Republic* 601 refers not to the page number, but to the marginal Stephanus number, which is constant in every edition.

4. As Dinah Birch has observed, "The paradox here is that Plato is himself pre-eminently a poet among philosophers, constantly turning to metaphor and myth to provide images for his exposition, as indeed did Ruskin" (66).

5. The use of the words poetry and poet in reference to both the "pantomimic gentleman" and the practitioner of the severer style may appear confusing, and has much to do with translation, but in both the *Republic* and elsewhere Plato distinguishes between merely imitative (that is, deceptive) poetry and the simple, virtuous narrative style used to relate past events or to eulogize gods and heroes.

6. In the *Phaedrus,* Socrates maintains the inferiority of the written word as a means of instruction, declaring that the "right sort of man" knows "that only in principles of justice and goodness and nobility, taught and communicated orally and written in the soul, which is the true way of writing, is there clearness and perfection and seriousness" (278).

7. The meaning of the term has become confused through acquiring a multiplicity of uses. It is particularly jarring when used of Ruskin, whose rejection of Victorian scientific and economic materialism served as an integral element of his teaching.

8. Clive Wilmer has written compellingly on this subject in his essay "Was Ruskin a Materialist?" (*Time and Tide; Ruskin and Science.* Ed. Michael Wheeler. London: Pilkington Press, 1996. 85–97).

9. See Phillipians 4: 8.

10. Passages like this one led Charlotte Brontë to remark admiringly of Ruskin that "he eulogizes, he reverences with his whole soul" (*Works* 3: xxxiv).

11. Compare "An Essay on the Relative Dignity of Painting and Music and the Advantages to be Derived from Their Pursuit" (1838), in which the nineteen-year-old Ruskin argues for the greater dignity of painting and the finer perception of painters in similarly enthusiastic language. Ruskin's dismissal of music as the lesser art in this essay is in direct contrast with his mature view, in which he came to agree with Plato about the importance of music as an instrument of moral education.

12. In volume two of *Modern Painters* Ruskin rejects the term "aesthetic" as having reference only to sensual perception, preferring instead the term "theoretic," which he defines as being concerned "with the moral perception and appreciation of ideas of beauty" (*Works* 4: 35). I have used the more familiar term "aesthetic" throughout this essay.

13. R. M. Hare has noted Plato's concern with "isolating and understanding the Idea to which we are referring when we use a certain word" (70); Ruskin's method in the first volume of *Modern Painters* reflects this concern; the first part of the book includes chapters entitled "Of Ideas of Power," "Of Ideas of Imitation," "Of Ideas of Truth," "Of Ideas of Beauty," and "Of Ideas of Relation." The second volume follows a similar structure. Ruskin utilizes the method somewhat more loosely in subsequent volumes.

14. It can be argued that artistic practice had changed in various ways since ancient times, so that the art that Ruskin champions so passionately—especially landscape art—was unknown to Plato. However, this possibility does not affect Plato's primary objection to imitation as deceptive and therefore dangerous. One imagines he would have found even more to trouble him in the nineteenth-century multiplicity of styles and genres, both of painting and of literature.

15. I have used Benjamin Jowett's translation. In his 1871 inaugural course of lectures as Slade Professor of Fine art at Oxford, Ruskin cites this passage as an expression of "the essential relations of art to morality" given in "one lovely sentence" (*Works* 20: 48). Whereas Jowett's version reads "discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful," Ruskin's is "workers who can track the inner nature of all that may be sweetly schemed" (*Works* 20: 48), thereby placing a greater emphasis on the penetrative vision.

16. Ruskin shares this spirit of inquiry with Plato, who in his dialogues is often more concerned with questions than with answers. Plato's and Ruskin's works, while they encourage the reader to think, also frequently reveal the questionings of their authors as they encounter and accommodate new ideas. What has often been taken as contradiction or inconsistency in their work is in fact evidence of change and development. "All true opinions," Ruskin claims, "are living, and show their life by being capable of nourishment; therefore of change" (*Works* 7: 9).

17. Writing to Osborne Gordon in March 1844 about the composition of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin recalls that he had "found that *demonstration* in matters of art was no such easy matter, and the pamphlet turned into a volume. Before the volume was halfway dealt with it hydraized into three heads, and each head became a volume. Finding that nothing could be done except on such enormous scale, I determined to take the hydra by the horns, and produce a complete treatise on landscape art" (*Works* 3: 666).

18. In a letter to Henry Liddell written in October 1844 Ruskin asked for assistance in preparing his discussion of the imagination in art: "Who is the best metaphysician who has treated the subject generally, and do you recollect any passages in Plato, or other of the Greeks particularly bearing upon it?" (*Works* 3: 670).

19. Cf. Carlyle's "open secret."

20. In her study of the Ruskin-Whistler trial, Linda Merrill suggests that Ruskin's condemnation of Whistler's pictures, which provoked the 1878 libel case, was driven in part by a belief that Whistler's indistinct 'nocturnes' were vulgar, deceptive imitations of Turner's later work: "Just as an inferior picture that vaguely resembled a great painting might be

accepted by the public as adequate, a Whistler nocturne, which might appear to the average person a little like a Turner, might be mistaken for a masterpiece" (51–52). Clive Wilmer makes a similar point, observing that Ruskin's abuse of Whistler "was delivered partly in response to the claims made for Whistler as a Turnerian" (7).

21. In his *Academy Notes* for 1859, Ruskin wrote of John Brett's *Val D'Aosta*: "I never saw the mirror so held up to Nature; but it is Mirror's work, not Man's" (*Works* 14: 237). This judgment must have seemed particularly harsh to Brett, as he had set out to paint the picture on Ruskinian principles.

22. Jowett cites the "antagonism between Plato and the poets, which was foreshadowed to him by the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (clx).

23. Jowett describes Plato's dialogues as "poems and dramas" (clvii).

24. I would like to thank Alan Davis for this insight, as well as for his comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I am particularly grateful to him for drawing my attention to the importance of "The Use of Pictures" and the valuable discussion of the imaginative faculty therein.

25. In 1875 Carlyle had dedicated *The Early Kings of Norway* to "dear, ethereal Ruskin, whom God preserve" (Cate 36).

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