

John Ruskin and Climate The Storm-Cloud of the Anthropocene

Francesca Orestano
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

Abstract The essay offers an analysis of John Ruskin's 1884 lectures on *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, focusing on his notions about the phenomenon of the storm-cloud, his careful recording of its occurrence in various parts of England since the 1870s, and his search for its causes and meaning. Even though in the eyes of his contemporaries the arguments expounded by Ruskin might have sounded confused, and devoid of scientific logic, his concern was genuine, and his climate observations and notions, albeit lacking the scientific explanation of the phenomenon, were correct insofar as they attributed the presence of the black malignant cloud to man's perverse management of nature and its resources. Such condition, mainly dating from the rise of the Industrial revolution, has earned the name of Anthropocene, thus defining the era in which the human impact on Earth has reached critical levels. Ruskin's lectures can be read as an early foray in cultural climatology, he being a fellow in ecocriticism, a *proto*-environmentalist, very much alert to men's moral responsibility towards nature. In addition, the essay focuses on Ruskin's critique of scientific language, and on the apparent contradictions marking his discourse, as the most remarkable aspect of his analytical procedure. Such *aporias* led to a significant widening of the epistemic horizon, where nothing, including science and chemistry, prophecy and passion, religion and myth, would be lost or undervalued.

Keywords John Ruskin. Victorian Science. Climate. The language of science. Ruskin's mind.

Summary 1 Ruskin and Climate: The Ongoing Debate. – 2 Ruskin and the Black Cloud: From Childhood to His Old Age. – 3 The System of the World and the Language of Science. – 4 The Sky Observed: The Malignant Wind, Its Causes and Meaning. – 5 A Beautiful Mind.



Peer review

Submitted 2024-11-17
Accepted 2025-01-10
Published 2025-03-07

Open access

© 2025 Orestano | 4.0



Citation Orestano, Francesca (2025). "John Ruskin and Climate". *English Literature*, 11(1), 51-64.

1 Ruskin and Climate: The Ongoing Debate

Why go back to Ruskin, and to a period that may now appear long gone? Because when reading Ruskin one can appreciate the wide-ranging effect his statements would earn in the course of time, not only when they addressed art and architecture, the condition of English society and of the English environment, but also as far as notions of air pollution and climate change would be touched upon in his last lectures and writings.

The accent on Ruskin and landscape, seen not only as a picturesque or sublime object of contemplation for tourists, painters and photographers, but as a living thing, essentially and organically connected with human lives, was at the core of the collection edited by Michael Wheeler on *Ruskin and Environment. The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1995). Harriet Ritvo, with *The Dawn of Green. Manchester, Thirlmere, and Modern Environmentalism* (2009), also moved from landscape to environment; so did Sara Atwood, in *"The earth veil". Ruskin and Environment* (2015), where she reminded us that despite the historical gap between past and present, it is possible today to view Ruskin as a forerunner of modern environmentalism. She maintained that "Ruskin was particularly sensitive to the damaging disconnection wrought by industrialism and so-called progress [...]. He is often labelled an early or *proto* environmentalist" (Atwood 2015, 2-3). Atwood added that we should consider the significance of Ruskin's statements in the context of today's concerns about climate, but without blurring the inevitable differences that intervene between the past and the present. The monograph by Fredrik Albritton Jonsson and Vicky Albritton, *Green Victorians. The Simple Life in John Ruskin's Lake District* (2016), told the story of the first 'post-carbon' society in England, the small Langdale Valley enclave, whose citizens were taught about the dangers arising from the fossil fuel economy by Ruskin's preaching and by his active promotion of a new culture of sufficiency in the entire Lake District.

Ruskin's statements about climate have earned a well-deserved place within the Anthropocene studies: during his life the transformation of England caused by the Industrial Revolution was tainting the air, the land, the cities. Ruskin was aware of the damages industry caused to the environment. This awareness places him in the context of the Anthropocene awareness of the damages men caused to the planet, as argued by Jesse Oak Taylor in "Storm-Clouds on the Horizon. John Ruskin and the Emergence of Anthropogenic Climate Change" (2018).

The recent exhibition "The Skies Are for All. Ruskin and Climate Change", held in 2022 at Lancaster University, confirms that the action and role held by John Ruskin within late nineteenth-century Victorian debates on landscape conservation and environmental issues

deserve closer attention, and more respect than that which his contemporaries bestowed on his 1884 lectures on *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth-Century*. The focus on Ruskin and environmentalism has become gradually sharper, and more poignant, in proportion with our growing anxieties about climate: the recent performance of “Storm Cloud. Observations of the Sky” by Tom Payne – a multi-layered production with added visual media and sound design which has taken place in Sheffield, on June 19, 2024 – brings once again to the foreground Ruskin’s original text, *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, with its compelling argument and final statements.¹

2 Ruskin and the Black Cloud: From Childhood to His Old Age

In this article, beside focusing on the importance of those last two lectures, I wish to support my argument by setting on the foreground what I consider a central aspect of Ruskin’s involvement with the climate issue, and a remarkable feature of his response to science. This element was Ruskin’s ability to combine observation – conducted and annotated with almost scientific precision – with passion; his capability to include within his epistemic horizon specific notions about the progress of Victorian science, without excluding his passionate response to whatever affected him, stirred his curiosity, awakened his concerns.

The young Ruskin who chose as his pseudonym ‘Kata Phusin’ (‘according to nature’) adopted this signature as a statement defining his vision of, and his attitude towards nature. In *Præterita* Ruskin included one of his earliest writings, if not the very first composition, entitled, after Maria Edgeworth, “Harry and Lucy Concluded. Being the Last part of Early Lessons [...] Printed and Composed by a little boy and also drawn”. It was a home-made, hand-made affair, a booklet telling the story of two children, who observe

a great black cloud from the north which seemed rather electrical. Harry ran for an electrical apparatus which his father had given him and the cloud electrified his apparatus positively after that another cloud came and electrified his apparatus negatively [...]. After this phenomenon was over [...] he soon observed a rainbow and a rising mist under it which his fancy soon transformed into a female form. (Ruskin 1978, 43-5)

¹ For more details about the performance of Dr. Tom Payne, see Guild of St George September 2024 Newsletter <https://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk/resources/newsletters>.

This short and fascinating piece of writing by a young boy, painstakingly pencilled and carefully reproduced in the autobiography, clearly shows that beside Edgeworth's *Early Lessons* (1801) young Ruskin was also intrigued by Joyce's *Scientific Dialogues* on electricity, as well as by *Manfred. A Dramatic Poem* (1817) by Lord Byron.²

An old Ruskin, in *Præterita*, would once again comment about “the interwoven temper” of his mind: a sentence that appears later in this essay, and that was chosen as the epigraph to the Venice FoRS Conference,³ as it points out the apparently diverging attitudes of the passionate art critic, the architect, the artist, the poetry lover, the champion of the “Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain” (1871), and the man keen on scientific research and the latest discoveries of science. The apparent contrast of different epistemic horizons, of heart and brain we may say, would be best expressed in his dramatic 1884 lectures on *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*. More cogently than in other areas, the ability of Ruskin's mind to conflate scientific notions with the empathic response to the British environment he loved – which increasingly seemed more fragile, more endangered, and in need of protection policies – stands the test of time in *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884). The text, in volume 34 of the *Library Edition*, contains two lectures Ruskin gave at the London Institution in February 1884. In these lectures, Ruskin offered a passionate, lucid, dramatic and almost apocalyptic description of the natural atmospheric phenomena he had observed across a certain number of years (Orestano 2023, 155-78).

3 The System of the World and the Language of Science

From *Modern Painters* onwards, Ruskin's view of life on earth – unlike Alexander von Humboldt, or John Muir, or Henry David Thoreau – envisaged all forms of nature as a system structured on the close reciprocity between all living and non-living elements. “The system of the world is entirely one”, he argued (Ruskin 1903-12, 7: 452). In England, during the nineteenth century, this “system” was undergoing dramatic changes. Industry was transforming cities and invading the land with mines, factories, furnaces, chimneys, chemical waste; railways were cutting through views, fields, and prospects;

² *Harry and Lucy Concluded* was the last part of Maria Edgeworth's children's literature stories, *Early Lessons*, 3 vols., London: Joseph Johnston (?), 1801; Jeremiah Joyce, *Scientific Dialogues, Intended for the Instruction and Entertainment of Young People*. London: Johnson, 1800.

³ “Adaptation, Revision, and Re-use. Modes and Legacies of Ruskin's Work”, First International Conference Organised by the FoRS Centre at Ca' Foscari University, Venice, 14th-15th December 2023.

trees were cut; lakes dammed; rivers polluted; animals sacrificed to consumption and cruel vivisection; all forms of life, from insects and lichens to humans, but also including geology and the mineral world, were exposed to violent transformations that seemed, and were, largely unforeseen and practically immedicable.

In his lectures on the *Storm-Cloud* the concept of “system” was touched upon once again in an overarching sentence which brought the “Divine Power” down from the firmament to the earth, to care for human survival and the environment – including the purity of the air and the clouds. The quote is an instance of Ruskin’s verbal inclusiveness, connecting spaces as distant as physics and metaphysics.

In the entire system of the Firmament, thus seen and understood, there appeared to be, to all the thinkers of those ages, the incontrovertible and unmistakable evidence of a Divine Power in creation, which had fitted, as the air for human breath, so the clouds for human sight and nourishment. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 10)

When in February 1884 Ruskin delivered his two lectures on *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth-Century* at the London Institution, the response of the public to his warnings, a response which was directly registered and amplified by the newspapers, was derisive, almost scathing: “At the time when he first published the lectures they encountered much ridicule” (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: xxiii-xxiv). By ascribing climate changes to the Devil, and to a wicked and perverse generation, Ruskin did not convince his audience and his readers. The newspapers “scouted his assertion of radical change, during recent years, in weather aspect as imaginary or insane” (xxiv). Yet, according to the editors of the Library Edition, E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, contemporary criticism was ill-founded. As a matter of fact, they argued, throughout his life Ruskin had been an accurate, almost punctilious observer and recorder of natural phenomena. For over ten years, he had taken notes of his observations of the sky, of the clouds, of the ever-changing lights and phenomena of the air. Ruskin had first noticed the strange storm cloud during a walk from Oxford to Abingdon, in the early spring of 1871:

[The cloud] looks partly as if it were made of poisonous smoke; very possibly it may be: there are at least two hundred furnace chimneys in a square of two miles on every side of me. But mere smoke would not blow to and fro in that wild way. It looks more to me as if it were made of dead men’s souls—such of *them* as are not gone yet where they have to go, and may be flitting hither and thither, doubting, themselves, of the fittest place for them. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 33; italics in the original)

The statement shows the peculiar juxtaposition of two different ways of assessing the same strange natural phenomenon. While focussing on the number of chimneys and furnaces in a measured square location, and on the quality of the cloud impending over the small town of Abingdon, in the proximity of Oxford, with a description evidently based upon observation, Ruskin weakened the scientific, empirically realistic style of his discourse, by suddenly trespassing into a distant realm of air which was peopled by the “dead men’s souls”. This he did at a time when the language of science had already absorbed and even popularised contemporary epistemic changes, relinquishing metaphysics in favour of a strict scientific agenda (Canani, Socio 2023, 12). By venturing into a distant, exoteric realm of restless ghosts, of dead men’s souls, as the painful source out of which the poisonous cloud might have originated, Ruskin had in fact weakened the factual impact he intended to confer to his lectures, and to his meteorological account of changing climate conditions in England. While aspiring to scientific precision, and defending the accuracy of his remarks, Ruskin simultaneously evoked, as possible sources of the phenomenon, the ghosts of the dead soldiers of the Franco-German war of 1870, whose bodies and souls had created “a moat flooded with the waters of death between the two nations for a century to come” (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 33). The last sentence refers to the battles of the Franco-German campaign, which were especially horrible to Ruskin.

Ruskin was aware of the predicament of language, especially when trying to describe clouds and vapour phenomena such as diffraction and interference:

The main reason, however, why I can tell you nothing yet about these colours of diffraction or interference, is that, whenever I try to find anything firm for you to depend on, I am stopped by the quite frightful inaccuracy of the scientific people’s terms, which is the consequence of their always trying to write mixed Latin and English, so losing the grace of the one and the sense of the other. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 25)

Ruskin’s lexical choices and un-scientific discourse would easily generate the criticism of the daily press. Consequently, being already aware of the reception of his lectures, Ruskin inserted a passionate defence of his method and its results in the opening paragraphs of the written text of the lectures:

In many of the reports given by the daily press, my assertion of radical change, during recent years, in weather aspect was scouted as imaginary, or insane. I am indeed, every day of my yet spared life, more and more grateful that my mind is capable of imaginative

vision, and liable to the noble dangers of delusion which separate the speculative intellect of humanity from the dreamless instinct of brutes [...]; nor is there a single fact stated in the following pages which I have not verified with a chemist's analysis, and a geometer's precision. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 7-8)

Together with the emphasis placed on his "imaginative vision" and on the "noble dangers" attending his investigation, Ruskin also underlined his preference for a method of investigation which in itself betrayed the epistemic *zeitgeist* of the late Victorian age, inasmuch as the art critic's ambition was to operate like a scientist in order to attain the reliability and precision of chemistry and geometry. Thus, from two very distant angles of the epistemic horizon Ruskin was stressing once more the dramatic changes that had been occurring in the world climate.

4 **The Sky Observed: The Malignant Wind, Its Causes and Meaning**

A few years after 1884, when writing the "Preface" to the *Library Edition* of the Works of John Ruskin, Cook and Wedderburn would remark that Ruskin's observations of the phenomena of "the storm-cloud" were perfectly accurate, confirming that both his account and vision had been quite correct: "The Devil is every bit as black as Ruskin painted him; he is Smoke - smoke, mixed with damp" (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: xxvi). In response to the scathing remarks of the press, the editors added that "[n]othing could be worse-founded than such criticism. Ruskin was before all things a close and accurate observer of natural phenomena" (xxvi). As Ruskin himself maintained, for many years - and at least since "Of Cloud Beauty" in the fifth volume of *Modern Painters* - he had been making patient and accurately recorded observations of the sky, of the air, of the winds, of the clouds. In addition, according to the editors, Ruskin's reliability was *ex post* scientifically confirmed by a passage from a recent study by J.W. Graham, *The Destruction of Daylight. A Study in the Smoke Problem* (1907):

Industrial statistics full bear out the date which Ruskin fixes for the growth of the phenomena in question; the storm cloud thickened just when the consumption of coal went up by leaps and bounds, both in this country and in the industrialized parts of central Europe. Air currents meet the gaseous products of combustion, mixed with minute material particles, and are hindered or diverted in their course thereby, and move forward, dirty, irregular, and scattered. It would appear as though the upper air did

not always have time to become cleansed each day from the gases and carbon which rise into it; there is not enough free space at hand, and an unclean atmosphere blocks what was once the serene expanse of the sky. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: xxvi).

In 1907 Graham also stressed the fact that industrial statistics confirmed that Ruskin's dating of the phenomenon to the 1870s was also correct.

In 1875 Ruskin had not only taken note of the phenomenon, but also predicted its singularity, and its persistence in the course of future time.

This wind is the plague-wind of the eighth decade of years in the nineteenth century; a period which will assuredly be recognized in future meteorological [*sic*] history as one of phenomena hitherto unrecorded in the courses of nature, and characterized pre-eminently by the almost ceaseless action of this calamitous wind. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 31)

Together with observations, he had questions about the origin of the wind, which, despite the accuracy of his description, could not be answered.

And the scientific men are busy as ants, examining the sun and the moon, and the seven stars, and can tell me all about them, I believe, by this time; and how they move, and what they are made of [...]. But I would care much and give much, if I could be told where this bitter wind comes from, and what it is made of. (33)

Ruskin's observations were also accurate as far as the direction of the wind was registered: it came from all directions.

It is a malignant *quality* of wind, unconnected with any one quarter of the compass; it blows indifferently from all, attaching its own bitterness and malice to the worst characters of the proper winds of each quarter. It will blow either with drenching rain, or dry rage, from the south,—with ruinous blasts from the west,—with bitterest chills from the north,—and with venomous blight from the east. (34; italics in the original)

In 1879, Ruskin was still filling the pages of his diary with more remarks about the devilish storm-cloud, describing each occurrence of the phenomenon with minute precision, adopting vividly graphic and aural similes, handling description with the experience of a person who could finely draw and paint:

The most terrific and horrible thunderstorm, this morning, I ever remember. It waked me at six, or a little before—then rolling incessantly, like railway luggage trains, quite ghastly in its mockery of them—the air one loath-some mass of sultry and foul fog, like smoke; scarcely raining at all, but increasing to heavier rollings, with flashes quivering vaguely through all the air, and at last terrific double streams of reddish-violet fire, not forked or zigzag, but rippled rivulets—two at the same instant some twenty to thirty degrees apart, and lasting on the eye at least half a second, with grand artillery-peals following; not rattling crashes, or irregular cracklings, but delivered volleys. It lasted an hour, then passed off, clearing a little, without rain to speak of,—not a glimpse of blue,—and now, half-past seven, seems settling down again into Manchester devil's darkness. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 37)

In the end, however, after filling pages of his diaries, year in and year out, Ruskin could just offer his readers a series of descriptions of what he had experienced and noted in the last decades. He had to admit defeat when it came to ascertaining the causes of the phenomenon:

By the plague-wind every breath of air you draw is polluted, half round the world; [...]. If, in conclusion, you ask me for any conceivable cause or meaning of these things—I can tell you none, according to your modern beliefs; but I can tell you what meaning it would have borne to the men of old time. (39-40)

Causes, however unknown, were not coincidental with meaning. Here Ruskin's prophetic voice, often resounding with Biblical emphasis, addressed the iniquities of mankind as the possible, plausible cause of the phenomena he registered in the present. While admitting his own inability to explain in scientific terms the cause of the storm-cloud, he aimed at the wider horizon, envisaging that the space of the scientific laboratory, with its factual experiments and analyses, was under the governance of those who directed scientific research. Meaning had to be searched beyond laboratories, and the dry statements delivered in the language of modern science.

Blanched Sun,—blighted grass,—blinded man.—If, in conclusion, you ask me for any conceivable cause or meaning of these things—I can tell you none, according to your modern beliefs; but I can tell you what meaning it would have borne to the men of old time. Remember, for the last twenty years, England, and all foreign nations, either tempting her, or following her, have blasphemed the name of God deliberately and openly; and have done iniquity by proclamation, every man doing as much injustice to his brother as it is in his power to do. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 40)

Yet his conclusions were not the admission of defeat. Quite the contrary. Ruskin was aware of the transformations England was undergoing in the last decades of the Victorian era, and his commitment to campaigns for the protection of the environment was proof of his awareness. In his view, the ethics behind the origin of the storm-cloud, had more to do with the present phenomenon affecting men and nature, than the use of laboratory instruments and a scientific protocol of investigation could grant:

But more recently, I have become convinced that even in matters of science, although every added mechanical power has its proper use and sphere, yet the things which are vital to our happiness and prosperity can only be known by the rational use and subtle skill of our natural powers. We may trust the instrument with the prophecy of storm, or registry of rainfall; but the conditions of atmospheric change, on which depend the health of animals and fruitfulness of seeds, can only be discerned by the eye and the bodily sense. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 65-6)

The epistemic horizon was shifting. The shift would usher in the wider concerns entertained by the ecological imagination. This was the voice of an old Ruskin, ridiculed by the press as if his storm-cloud warnings were generated by ill health, rheumatisms, delusions. Yet the *Storm-Cloud* argument, as he maintained, embraced a much wider horizon, just like all contemporary notions about society and nature had to do. Notions about the storm-cloud were undergoing the epistemic pressure exercised by science, by scientific knowledge, by scientific language and method, impinging over what Ruskin defined the mental history of the world. But man, he warned, could not restrict his considerations to the dry statements of a scientist. The viewpoint of the meteorologist was not enough.

The reader will no doubt observe, throughout the following lecture, my own habit of speaking of beautiful things as “natural”, and of ugly ones as “unnatural”. In the conception of recent philosophy, the world is one Kosmos in which diphtheria is held to be as natural as song, and cholera as digestion. To my own mind—and the more distinctly the more I see, know, and feel—the Earth, as prepared for the abode of man, appears distinctly ruled by agencies of health and disease, of which the first may be aided by his industry, prudence, and piety; while the destroying laws are allowed to prevail against him, in the degree in which he allows himself in idleness, folly, and vice. (42-3)

Thus the value of these lectures resided not only in the observation of a natural phenomenon, the storm-cloud, which has become sadly

familiar today all over the globe; but, more fundamentally, in going back to the ethical roots of the phenomenon, in indicating the responsibility of those who were in charge of health and welfare, and in unveiling the supposed moral primacy of science, the fruit of “the modern vulgar scientific mind” (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 72); thus Ruskin denounced its dogmatically virtuous standards, its exoteric yet self-assertive slang, which in his days, as in ours, did easily prevail over and above the vile, unscientific nature of mankind:

But the *deliberate* blasphemy of science, the assertion of its own virtue and dignity against the always implied, and often asserted, vileness of all men and—Gods,—heretofore, is the most wonderful phenomenon, so far as I can read or perceive, that hitherto has arisen in the always marvellous course of the world’s mental history. (73; italics in the original)

5 A Beautiful Mind

One of the pillars that supported the edifice of Ruskin’s observations was, together with his keen awareness of language and its uses, the notion that an ethical stance was inseparable from the act of description.

No scientific people, as I told you at first, have taken any notice of the more or less temporary phenomena of which I have to-night given you register. But, from the constant arrangements of the universe, the same respecting which the thinkers of former time came to the conclusion that they were essentially good, and to end in good, the modern speculator arrives at the quite opposite and extremely uncomfortable conclusion that they are essentially evil, and to end—in nothing. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 76)

The last passages in *The Storm-Cloud* took the shape of a backward glance over Ruskin’s travelled roads, and over a past condition of England that was no more, due to the blighting effect of the cloud and of the dirty atmosphere weighing over what once was sweet idyll, health, and beauty:

Of myself, however, if you care to hear it, I will tell you thus much: that had the weather when I was young been such as it is now, no book such as *Modern Painters* ever would or *could* have been written; for every argument, and every sentiment in that book, was founded on the personal experience of the beauty and blessing of nature, all spring and summer long; and on the then demonstrable fact that over a great portion of the world’s surface the air and the

earth were fitted to the education of the spirit of man as closely as a schoolboy's primer is to his labour, and as gloriously as a lover's mistress is to his eyes. That harmony is now broken, and broken the world round: fragments, indeed, of what existed still exist, and hours of what is past still return; but month by month the darkness gains upon the day, and the ashes of the Antipodes glare through the night. (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 77-8; italics in the original)

In addition, Ruskin pointed out in a footnote on the same page that the previous notion that the cloud and its darkness were caused by volcanic ashes – in fact by a natural phenomenon, the 1883 Krakatoa eruption – was no longer correct, and it bore no relationship with what he had been witnessing and recording in the last decades: the poisonous and protracted power of the plague-wind was something “unnatural and terrific”. Undeniably, man was the culprit for such fragments of past harmony, and for the overwhelming darkness.

Accused of philistinism by Professor John Tyndall, according to Simon Grimble, Ruskin “was under attack not only from the purveyors of scientific culture, but also from the purveyors of the aesthetic” (Grimble 2004, 65). And yet Ruskin was perfectly aware of his *aporia*, to the extent that in *Præterita* – which he began in 1885 – he openly acknowledged the scientific and poetical contradictions that crowded in his mind, and would later confuse, surprise, and entice his readers. Speaking, retrospectively, of his early story about “Harry and Lucy Concluded” – from which this essay took its start – he admitted:

[T]he adaptation of materials for my story out of Joyce's *Scientific Dialogues** and *Manfred*, is an extremely perfect type of the interwoven temper of my mind, at the beginning of days just as much as at their end—which has always made foolish scientific readers doubt my books because there was love of beauty in them, and foolish æsthetic readers doubt my books because there was love of science in them. (Ruskin 1978, 47)

And, on the same subject, but moving from “the world mental history” to the English mind, and to his own mental history, he wrote:

I find the typical English mind, both then and now, so adverse to my own, as also to those of my fellow companions through the sorrows of this world, that it becomes for me a matter of acute Darwinian interest to trace my species from origin to extinction. (222)

Ruskin eventually offered a kind of apology for what would be considered, in his own well-regulated and compartmentalised Victorian times, an instance of undue trespassing, a wilful ignorance of sacred borders, or, worse, the senile confusion of an aging mind. From

today's perspective, he sounds singularly able to not restrict his view to stereotypes, to not confine his thought to given categories.

Edward Tyas Cook, in his Introduction to volume 35 of the *Library Edition*, remarked:

The mind was original, and therefore at each stage of its development Ruskin's views seemed insane to the vulgar. His enthusiasm for Turner, his estimate of Venetian Gothic, his political economy were all in turn called mad until they had passed into the accepted thought of the time. The connected study of his work, in relation to environment and circumstances, which it has been a principal object of this edition to facilitate, will, I think, bring the conviction that Ruskin's mental development was throughout life normal and logical. (Ruskin 1903-12, 35: xxxiv)

Very recently, Jesse Oak Taylor considers John Ruskin's lectures on *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* as an experimental foray in cultural climatology, and Ruskin as a fellow in ecocriticism, insofar as

Ruskin recognized not only that the physical climate was changing as a result of human action, but also that such changes heralded a much deeper contradiction within industrial modernity itself. (Taylor 2018, 8)

In conclusion, I should also like to address that contradiction, as one of the most significant aspects and scientific results of Ruskin's analytical procedure, which led to a significant widening of the epistemic horizon, where nothing - chemistry and geometry, prophecy, religion and myth - would be lost or undervalued.

Ruskin was not alone in denouncing the gradual deterioration of the air, the dirty black fog threatening the country and the city. Charles Dickens was the rhapsodist of smog, of water pollution, of the dark snakes enwrapping the sky in their poisonous coils, at once over London and over Coketown. Yet Ruskin's voice would speak louder, and although prone to his typical digressions and unexpected combinations of physics and metaphysics, his ecological commitment still offered the best instance of the dramatic evolution attending the Anthropocene, and affecting the relationship the Victorian mind and imagination entertained with science.

Bibliography

- Albritton, V.; Albritton Jonsson, F. (2016). *Green Victorians. The Simple Life in John Ruskin's Lake District*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Atwood, S. (2015). "The Earth Veil". *Ruskin and Environment*. York: The Guild of St George Publications.
- Bate, J. (1991). *Romantic Ecology. Wordsworth and the Ecological Tradition*. London: Routledge.
- Canani, M.; Soccio, A.E. (eds) (2023). *The Language of Science in the Long Nineteenth Century. Cultural, Lexical, Textual Insights*. Chieti: Solfanelli.
- Davies, J. (2016). *The Birth of the Anthropocene*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Day, B.J. (2005). "The Moral Intuition of Ruskin's 'Storm-Cloud'". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 45(4), 917-33.
- Graham, J.W. (1907). *The Destruction of Daylight. A Study in the Smoke Problem*. London: G. Allen.
- Grimble, S. (2004). *Landscape, Writing and "The Condition of England". 1878-1917, Ruskin to Modernism*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.
- MacDuffie, A. (2014). *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Orestano, F. (2023). "The 'God of Chemistry' Speaks. John Ruskin's *Storm-Cloud* and Richard Jefferies's *After London*". Canani, M.; Soccio, A.E. (eds), *The Language of Science in the Long Nineteenth Century. Cultural, Lexical, Textual Insights*. Chieti: Solfanelli, 155-78.
- Ritvo, H. (2009). *The Dawn of Green. Manchester, Thirlmere, and Modern Environmentalism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ruskin, J. (1903-12). *The Works of John Ruskin*. 39 vols. Edited by E.T. Cook; A. Wedderburn. London: George Allen.
- Ruskin, J. (1978). *Præterita. The Autobiography of John Ruskin*. Introduction by K. Clark. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, J.O. (2018). "Storm-Clouds on the Horizon. John Ruskin and the Emergence of Anthropogenic Climate Change". *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 26, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.854/>.
- Wheeler, M. (ed.) (1995). *Ruskin and Environment. The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.