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# John Ruskin and Nineteenth-Century Education

Edited by  
Valerie Purton



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## Chapter 5

### ‘A VERY PRECIOUS BOOK’: RUSKIN’S EXEGESIS OF THE PSALMS IN *ROCK HONEYCOMB* AND *FORS CLAVIGERA*

Emma Sdegno

The work of Ruskin’s that focuses most clearly on books, on how to read, on what to read and how books should be disseminated is *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). The first of the three *Sesame* lectures, ‘Of Kings’ Treasuries’, concerns a project for the institution of public libraries that was finally to materialize ten years later in *Bibliotheca Pastorum*, one of the many collective and educational enterprises undertaken for the Guild of St George. In this chapter I will examine Ruskin’s edition of the four classic volumes that comprise his ‘Shepherds’ Library’, concentrating particularly on *Rock Honeycomb*, an edition of a selection from the *Sidney Psalter*, and placing it within the context of his long-term interest in the Book of Psalms as a whole. Of the Holy Books, the Psalms, in which the Word is specifically and uniquely both a collective and a personal form of prayer,<sup>1</sup> was a ‘very precious book’ for Ruskin. It repeatedly served him during the 1870s, a decade during which he was meditating on and testing his views on language, on poetry, on art and on man’s wider spiritual search. I shall focus especially on his ideas on translation as a development of a hermeneutic approach he had practised in *Sesame*, as a means of bringing life to a text. I shall subsequently refer to some *Fors Clavigera* letters of the same years, where his method of reading the Psalms in depth is applied also to human experience and to his own life, and sense is clarified through a process of expansion that provokes searching reflection. Ruskin’s massive and constant reference to the Bible and his application of Scripture to contemporary life have been recently explored by Zoë Bennett, who convincingly classes Ruskin as one of the leading ‘Practical Theologians’.<sup>2</sup> Bennett’s perspective is particularly relevant to my reading of Ruskin’s role for the Psalms in *Fors Clavigera*, as

it is in these public letter-sermons that, in my view, these connections are most systematically and most innovatively made.

### The Shepherds' Library Project

*Bibliotheca Pastorum* is a collection of four books that Ruskin edited and published between 1876 and 1888. The four are *The Economist of Xenophon* (1876), translated by W. G. Collingwood and Alexander Wedderburn and prefaced by Ruskin; *Rock Honeycomb* (1877), a selection from *The Sidney Psalter*, an essay on the *Elements of Prosody* (1880), which was meant to be an appendix to *Rock Honeycomb*; and, finally *A Knight's Faith* (1885), passages 'collated' by Ruskin from the journals kept by Sir Herbert Edwardes during his military campaign in the Punjab in 1848–49.

Ruskin's original project was typically broader and more ambitious than the one he actually accomplished. As sketched in *Fors Clavigera* between September 1875 and January 1876,<sup>3</sup> it was also to include 'Ulrich the Farm Servant', a translation of Gotthelf's story of a Swiss peasant, which would have given the series a clearer focus on peasant life and rural ethical values, but was in fact to be published separately later on. The general idea of the series was outlined in *Fors* 37 (January 1874) in these terms:

Every household will have its library, given it from the fund, and consisting of a fixed number of volumes, – some constant and the others chosen by each family out of a list of permitted books, from which they afterwards may increase their library if they choose. The formation of this library for choice, by republication of classical authors in standard forms, has long been a main object with me. (28.20)

This implicitly refers back to the plan of which Ruskin had written in *Sesame and Lilies* 11 years earlier, where he had expressed his wish that there be 'royal and national libraries [...] in every considerable city, with a royal series of books in them; the same series in every one of them, chosen books, the best in every kind'. (28.104).

This project for cultural dissemination on a national scale was eventually to evolve and materialize in the more local and individualized *Bibliotheca Pastorum*, an enterprise with a more definite purpose and less broad in scope. The books to be published in this collection were meant to be kept in the household libraries of the members of the St George's Society, later called the Guild of St George. The name of the collection seems to have been inspired by a visit described in *Fors Clavigera* letter 50, dated February 1875, to a shepherd-farmer's cottage near Brantwood, where eight-year-old Agnes

lived with her father, and where Ruskin found a very poor library of cheap books of no interest to little girls (28.256). This romantic narrative, to which the editors of the Library Edition refer as the genesis of the project, should be taken not literally, but for the multilayered resonance typical of *Fors* remarked on by Dinah Birch;<sup>4</sup> the semantic spectrum of the word 'shepherd' includes rural life as well as the figures of the religious guide, bishop, priest and pastor often directly referred to in the letters of these years. Ruskin had been reflecting upon this repeatedly in his writings ever since 'Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds', that controversial essay of 1851 the implications of which were broader and more complex than he had realized, and which were to surface often in his later works. Significantly in 1875 he republished this essay, announcing it in his January *Fors* in the context of a discussion on the prophetic office of priests (28.236), as a violent attack on the pious, and particularly on evangelicals, whom he frequently denounced in his later works – including *Rock Honeycomb*.

In the mid-1870s Ruskin was revising his former evangelical positions in the direction of an ecumenical inclusiveness, and through his works aimed at broadening the horizons of his readers' minds also. To this end he compares texts, also commissioning translations from archive materials from his pupils. After finishing work on *Rock Honeycomb* in the summer of 1876, he was to spend the autumn and winter writing the *Guide to the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice* and *St Mark's Rest*, works that fulfilled a need to voice and come to terms with forms of high religious praise, devotion and sacrifice, such as those he found in the stories of early saints and martyrs, and in their translations into words and paintings, such as Jacopo da Varagine's *Golden Legend* and Vittore Carpaccio's cycle of paintings of the life of St Ursula.

One of the major functions shared by the *Bibliotheca Pastorum* volumes is that of being a spiritual guide. This is self-evident in Xenophon's *Economist*, a long-neglected work on household management, in Sir Herbert Edwardes's life as a Christian military officer in the Punjab, as well as in Gotthelf's 'Ulrich the Farm Servant'. At first sight, this purpose does not seem to be directly shared by *Rock Honeycomb*, the preface of which speaks of it as a music book for the children of St George's Schools: 'Every child should be taught from its youth, to govern its voice discreetly and dexterously, as it does its hands; and not be able to sing should be more disgraceful than not being able to read or write' (28.107–8). Closer examination, however, shows *Bibliotheca Pastorum*, and particularly *Rock Honeycomb*, to be connected to *Sesame and Lilies* by links of a linguistic as well as a thematic nature. In particular, Ruskin's analysis of Milton's *Lycidas*'s lines 108–131, on bishops' 'blind mouths', seems to resonate with passages in *Rock Honeycomb* and in the letters of *Fors Clavigera* of the years 1875–76. As I shall try to show in this chapter, the lines shine through

Ruskin's textual exegesis of the Psalms, and his reflections on the language of the Priest-Shepherd.

Like most of Ruskin's works, *Rock Honeycomb* cannot be considered independently, as if it were complete and self-sufficient. Not only is it unfinished – it was meant to be followed by a second volume – but also and more importantly it is strongly connected to other works Ruskin was writing at the time, and particularly to *Fors Clavigera*. These letters, with their multiple overlapping patterns that disappear and interweave with one another, provide an expansion of and a commentary on the Psalms, bringing them into the present time by means of examples that do not so much make plain as offer readings that displace and force reflection.

*Rock Honeycomb* was issued in June 1877, and directly engaged Ruskin as editor and commentator. It reveals involvement with a text that had grown over a long period of time and gives unusually definite form to Ruskin's pervasive reading of the Bible and the Psalms. The book fits within the educational project that informs the mid-1870s, when Ruskin was focussing on the act of translation and ways of recovering the sense of an original.

Ruskin's preface to the version of Xenophon's *Economist* he had commissioned from two of his pupils closes with remarks on translation as a form of education that required a slow, careful lingering on words of a kind that had lately become outmoded. He introduced his pupils' work starting from considerations about contemporary university education, the aim of which had 'entirely changed' (31.29). Ruskin recollects 'the ancient methods of quiet study', complaining that 'for discipline and intellect [...] there had been substituted hurried courses of instruction in knowledge supposed to be pecuniarily profitable', and saying that the work of the two translators had been taken from their 'useful time' for their personal but not professional benefit (Ibid.). But Ruskin's words on the educational value of translation were to take on broader implications in his work as editor of the *Sidney Psalter*. In *Fors* 35 (September 1873) he explores the interconnectedness of language and ethical values within the scope of exegesis of Holy Scripture. Modern 'confusion between honest people and rogues', says Ruskin, originates from 'the orthodox Evangelical expression' for all men as 'worms', and 'is a result of peculiar forms of vice and ignorance [...] which belong to the Evangelical sect as distinguished from other bodies of Christian men; and date therefore, necessarily, from the Reformation' (27.650). He justifies this sour statement in a detailed explanation of this 'confusion':

They consist especially of three types: First, in declaring a bad translation the 'Word of God'. Secondly, reading of this singular 'Word of God,' only the bits they like; and never taking any pains to understand even those. Thirdly, resolutely

refusing to practise even the very small bits they do understand, if such practice happens to go against their own wordly – especially money – interests. (Ibid.)

That Ruskin had the Psalms in mind two years before starting work on the *Sidney Psalter* is evident from his insistence here that, the Book of Psalms was 'a very precious book', even though it was not the 'Word of God' but 'the collected words of very wise and good men' (Ibid.). In the same letter Ruskin refers to Sidney as a 'squire' of his own time, whose love and religious poetry were one thing, and whose life and manners challenged Victorian and evangelical morality. 'How very wrong, you think', he rhetorically wonders, that the lovers of *Astrophel and Stella* were both married (27.654)?

We find traces of Ruskin's extraordinarily deep reading of the Psalms also in his unpublished diaries of the mid-1870s. The year 1875 was one in which he took a special interest in the Psalms, as is testified by the massive notes in his MS diaries dating from June to August 1875, all left out of Joan Evans's edition. Starting from 3 June, he transcribed daily, for 15 days, the Collects from the Lincoln Psalter, a 14th century illuminated manuscript in Latin. He thus wrote down 16 different complete prayers from the Psalms.<sup>5</sup> Mid-1875 was a particularly dramatic period for Ruskin. Rose La Touche, the girl he was desperately in love with, died that May. Her presence throughout the writings that follow is pervasive.<sup>6</sup> It is particularly significant to find in the diary entries from 8 July notes taken daily from what he called the 'Blue Psalter', a precious old manuscript in Greek that, as an inscription testifies, he had given as a present to Rose, and which had been given back to him shortly after her death.<sup>7</sup> The fact that he would daily transcribe passages from prayers in the book that had belonged to Rose encourages us to see this as a spiritual practice particularly and personally meaningful for Ruskin. In the months following her death he would interpret objects belonging to Rose as 'messages' charged with symbolic and metaphysical meanings.<sup>8</sup>

The diary notes also certainly testify to a wish to appropriate an ancient form of Christian practice. The whole month of July is occupied in daily writing down prayers from the Greek Psalter, and from 29 July to 3 August he copied each day from a French book of hours one of its seven daily prayers starting from Prime and ending with Compline.<sup>9</sup> References to the Psalms in 1875–76 *Fors* as well as his own annotated edition of the *Sidney Psalter* issued in 1877, whose preface was finished on 27 July 1876, should be considered as part of this daily reading and religious meditation. What these unpublished notes demonstrate is Ruskin's interest in early forms of prayer, an interest that fits within his broader research in the origins of Christian worship in art. These are mainly collective, community forms of devotion; the prayer Ruskin transcribes most frequently is the Collect, the one in which

the celebrant involves the whole congregation. This is an aspect that is particularly important in the light of Ruskin's major concern during the years he was creating the Guild of St George, with a search for Christian models and a new language.

### **Wrought Gold: The Sidney Psalter**

The collection of Psalms versified in part by Sir Philip Sidney and to a greater extent – after the death of the poet – by his sister Mary (later Countess of Pembroke), had circulated in manuscript copies and enjoyed vast popularity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, before falling into oblivion. The collection reappeared in the 1823 Chiswick Press limited edition of 250 copies, edited by Samuel Weller Singer.<sup>10</sup> In his introduction to *Rock Honeycomb*, Ruskin explains that this edition was inaccurate in spelling, punctuation, and word identification, and that he had selected and amended the Psalms also to rectify the damage they had suffered from oblivion and then misuse. It was, in other words, one of several acts of restoration of religious art works that engaged Ruskin during these years.

In his preface to *Rock Honeycomb* Ruskin does not enter the debate on the divided authorship of the Psalter, which was already concerning scholars who recognized those attributed to Mary Pembroke – the last 107 out of 150 – to be superior poetry to the first 43 attributable to her brother Philip.<sup>11</sup> Ruskin does not even mention Mary here – a lack the editors of the Library Edition make up for by inserting her portrait into Ruskin's preface – and when he does refer to the possibility of different authorships he does so only to say that he had wrongly imagined the Chiswick edition to be 'tolerably correct'; Ruskin had thought he would be able 'to distinguish Philip's work from that of any other writer concerned in the book', but when he had set himself to study the Psalter he realized that the part traditionally attributed to Philip, 'instead of shining out with any recognizable brightness [...] included many of the feeblest passages in the volume' (31.113). Even so, Ruskin thought that in spite of corruptions and imprecisions 'the entire body of the series was still animated by the same healthy and impetuous spirit [...] and could not be divided into worthy and unworthy portions' (Ibid.). His judgment here avoids the question at issue, seeming to shift the focus of authorship onto an 'impetuous spirit'. This could be read as unstated praise of Mary's work, and at the same time as implying an idea of collective/impersonal authorship. From another, and opposite, point of view he seems to wish to silence the issue of gender and foreground the male qualities of shepherd and squire that Sidney embodied. Earlier in 1872, in *Fors* 23 (27.415), and in 1875 in *Fors* 55, he had written that the two poets were equally or 'undistinguishably perfect' (28.373).

Of the Psalter's 150 Psalms, Ruskin published 44, including 11 by Mary, accompanying the text with a commentary comparing the English to the Greek and Latin versions. In his introduction and notes on single Psalms he lays down principles of translation that provide insights into his practice. Close mutual relations between the acts of making poetry and that of translating are foregrounded, carefully observed, and tested. 'The main use' of his edition 'to modern readers', he says, depended on their 'fully understanding [...] the manner and melody of these ancient paraphrases' (31.114).<sup>12</sup>

Ruskin probably knew Dante's words in *The Convivio* about the inevitable failure of all attempts at translating the Psalms, the impossibility of rendering the melodic and rhythmic components he calls 'il legame musaico', the musical connection. 'And this is the reason why', says Dante, 'the verses of the Psalter are without the sweetness of music and harmony, for they were translated from Hebrew into Greek, and from Greek into Latin, and in the first translation all their sweetness perished'.<sup>13</sup> Dante's idea of translation was typically medieval. Ruskin seems to agree with him when he says English versions had generally failed to render meaning because they missed the music. But he believes it was possible to recast poetry in another language, as Sidney's endeavour demonstrated. For Ruskin, Sidney's version rooted Hebrew in English forms. As such it was not an individual act, but rather the outcome of a collective national enterprise. Ruskin seems to draw our attention to the way these paraphrases had enlarged the boundaries of the English language when he says that if the original is rough and harsh, Sidney does not use 'genteel language', but 'any cowboy or tinker's words, if only they help him to say precisely in English what David said in Hebrew' (31.116–17). The faithful translator follows the register of the original, even though apparently inappropriate, upsetting and puzzling. He thus forces uncouth terms into the language, infusing English, and its religious language in particular, with new vigour.

To get closer to the original is also to gain perspicuity and greater clarity of expression, qualities attained, explains Ruskin, by applying the principle of parallelism that informed the original. This is the pattern Sidney restored and onto which he wove his amplificative 'illustrations'. Translation reveals latent and ambiguous meanings by making them intelligible:

While the modern paraphraser will put in anything that happens to strike his fancy, to fill the fag-end of a stanza, but never thinks of expanding or illustrating the matter in hand, Sidney, if the thought in his original appears to him pregnant, and partly latent, instantly breaks up his verse into franker and fuller illustration; but never adds a syllable of any other matter, to fill even the most hungry gap of verse. (31.117)

Ruskin points at Sidney's Psalter as a poetic illustration and clarification that ultimately reveals what had been dim and mysterious in the original and had been often obscured by subsequent versions. By translating the Hebrew word into his own language, the English poet becomes thus a prophet-like figure. And the prophetic function seems to be implied in the *Rock Honeycomb* collection, from which Ruskin states he had omitted components in which 'there was no manifest gain' (31.118). The *Sidney Psalter* is a poetical and musical amplification of the word of David – whose paternity of the whole work Ruskin does not question – and translation proves to be a stage in progressive revelation of that word. Indeed, Ruskin points out that the value of the Psalter rests also on its theological accuracy, that its educational relevance is also ethical and religious. This relevance had, however, been lost in modern times, as a result of confusing transpositions into English of the precise Hebrew terms corresponding to 'vice' and 'virtue', 'piety' and 'atheism', a problem that, as we have seen, he had also tackled in 1875 in letter 35 of *Fors Clavigera*, where he attributes this confusion to post-Reformation evangelicalism. The snare of misinterpretation also occurs, almost systematically, in the *Book of Common Prayer*, whose 'explanatory argument' that introduces – and obscures – each Psalm flattens and deviates from its original sense.

Whereas in the preface Ruskin had laid down the principles that more or less fit within his broad romantic view of translation, in the commentaries on individual Psalms he is much more objective and focuses on specific choices made by the poet. He praises Sidney, but often notes flaws, either questioning his authorship or attributing them to his youth and lack of experience of a sense of doom (Psalm 1) or of being forgotten by God (Psalm 13). Interestingly, his comments on the Psalms generally attributed to Sidney are thick with references to shortcomings, while the Psalms from number 44 on, which are attributed to Mary, are all almost always described as excellent. This is yet another implicit demonstration of his unacknowledged appreciation of them.

If in *Rock Honeycomb* Ruskin 'hoped to resensitize his readers to the roots of authentic Christian spirituality [...]', as Andrew Tate maintains,<sup>14</sup> he does so by reviving not only the Psalms' religious and ethical messages, but also their language, their musical and poetic qualities in the process of transmission of the original word, ultimately considering Psalms as *texts*. In a well-documented but neglected essay, J. C. A. Rathmell points to the novelty and relevance of Ruskin's operation in reviving the *Sidney Psalter*, seeing it as 'crucial to our understanding of the development of metaphysical poetry, but also to our appreciation of Hopkins's study of Miltonic prosody and the evolution of his own self-styled '*sprung rhythm*'.<sup>15</sup> Rathmell, who also published an edition of the *Sidney Psalter*,<sup>16</sup> appreciates Ruskin's notes as well as the essay 'On Sidney's Metres' that prefaces *Rock Honeycomb*, and praises 'the precise fidelity

with which the *Sidney Psalter* penetrates through the often-turbid prose of the Coverdale and Geneva Bibles to extricate the very accent of the Hebraic Psalms'.<sup>17</sup> Rathmell points out that between 1865 and 1875 authors as various as Ruskin, Patmore, Hardy, and Hopkins 'independently through study of medieval Latin hymns, old French canticles, or Elizabethan psalmody [...] rediscovered the harmonic importance of stress in English poetry',<sup>18</sup> attributing it a 'strictly religious character'.<sup>19</sup> The roots of modernism should, he argues, be reconsidered in the light of the influence that this set of new texts brought to end-of-century English literature.

In maintaining the ground-breaking importance of Ruskin's edition of and commentary on the textuality of the Psalms, Rathmell's essay focused extensively on the sound and musical qualities to which Ruskin's edition of the Psalms sensitized his audience. His commentaries seem to offer further hints at the modernity of Ruskin's thinking on the process of translation that are worth exploring. However typically unsystematic, they are once again pioneering. Ruskin's work on the *Sidney Psalter* is the outcome of a complex cross-referencing between the Coverdale, Geneva, the *Book of Common Prayer*, The Septuagint and Latin versions, a philological enquiry that led him to new readings. In their lengthy exegeses Victorian commentaries – such as Spurgeon's comprehensive *The Treasury of David* – did not question the translation tradition, relying on Coverdale and the AV; Ruskin, on the other hand, treads a still largely unexplored interpretative path, trying to recover the original sense from careful reading and comparison of versions.<sup>20</sup> He does not talk about the *Sidney Psalter* as translations, but as 'paraphrases'. In this he seems to subscribe to a definition of paraphrase given by Dryden: unlike metaphor and imitation, it is 'a translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not strictly followed as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered'.<sup>21</sup> Ruskin attributes to Sidney's paraphrases something more when he describes the translation process as the final stage of a refined act of interpretation.

Ruskin had focussed on this practice in a key meta-critical essay in *Sesame and Lilies*, where he described the workings of language as an act of translation essential to the construction of meaning. In the first *Sesame* lecture, 'Of Kings' Treasuries', he had famously offered a superb example of hermetic reading in his exegesis of *Lycidas* ll. 108–31, an exegesis that connects the *Sesame* lecture to *Rock Honeycomb* in various ways. In Milton's pastoral monody these lines, attributed to St. Peter, contain an extended invective against corrupt bishop-pastors. Ruskin selects and magnifies the passage as both thematically and linguistically significant – the two levels being tightly interconnected. Milton's lines on the subject of corrupt and true bishops,



dense with theological significance, are investigated and questioned word-by-word in an interpretation that tends to dissipate partisan sectarian readings:

First, is it not singular to find Milton assigning to St. Peter, not only his full episcopal function, but the very types of it which Protestants usually refuse most passionately? His – mitred locks! Milton was no Bishop-lover; how comes St. Peter to be – mitred? – Two massy keys he bore. Is this, then, the power of the keys claimed by the Bishops of Rome? [...] Do not think [...] Milton means what he says; [...] For though not a lover of false bishops, he *was* a lover of true ones; and the Lakepilot is here, in his thoughts, the type and head of true episcopal power. [...] Puritan though he be, he would not blot it out of the book because there have been bad bishops; nay, in order to understand *him*, we must understand that verse first. (18.70)

Then his famous excavation into the ‘blind mouth’ oxymoron in l. 113 is explained with the rigour of an equation: ‘Those two monosyllables express the precisely accurate contraries of right character, in the two great offices of the Church – those of bishop and pastor’. (18.72) Ruskin exercises his interpretative skills on the poem’s dense interlinguistic fabric,<sup>22</sup> and invites the reader to ponder carefully every word, discover its etymological roots, mining and bringing its gold to the surface. He aims at broadening the reader’s cultural horizons, and at the same time puts the interpreter in a ‘subdued’ position: ‘go to the author and find his own meaning rather than yours’, he urges the reader, ‘watching every accent and expression, and putting [yourself] always in the author’s place, annihilating [your] own personality, and seeking to enter into his, so as to be able assuredly to say, – Thus Milton thought, not – Thus *I* thought, in mis-reading Milton. And by this process you will gradually come to attach less weight to your own’ (18.75). If in his *Lycidas* reading Ruskin had untied the knot of the ‘blind mouth’ oxymoron, grounding his hermeneutic act on the original sense of the words in the author’s *intentio* – *on the gold*, say, dug out of the mine – in *Rock Honeycomb* he lingers *on the way* that gold is brought to light and wrought into the rich fabric of Sidney’s Psalms.

Ruskin repeatedly gives instances of Sidney’s use of amplification, a widely recognized stylistic feature of his translations. Numerous amplificatory passages refer to contemporary England; others, significantly, to plainness of speech as a feature of God’s word, as in Psalm 5, where ‘make thy way straight before my face’ (l.8) in the AV becomes

Guide me; in thy justice be my guide!  
And make thy ways to me more plainly known,  
For all I need, that with such foes do bide. (ll. 22–24)

Plainness and clarity are also features of Sidney’s theological language. Ruskin points out that the value of his Psalter rests also on its theological accuracy, implying that poetry, music and faithfulness to the original are all to be preserved in translation. This can be attained by faithful transposition of the original meaning of words, while obscurity is the deceitful language, typical of that employed by modern political economists.

### Language and Labour: The Psalms in *Fors Clavigera*

Ruskin rightly notices amplification as a major feature of Sidney’s translations, and amplification is also one of his own major rhetorical strategies. It is in *Fors Clavigera* that we find his most vertiginous expansions. In some of the letters he wrote in the mid-1870s, extended readings of Psalms are placed within the frame of his larger discourse on education, work, art, community life.<sup>23</sup> In these letters he draws ethical and social lessons from episodes of contemporary life, combining them with sacred and literary sources in a typically overlapping, hyperbolic and provocative manner. The hazardous nature of such associations in *Fors*, a text that is both ‘multiple’ and ‘seamless’,<sup>24</sup> has tended to obscure the soundness of his interpretations and the care with which he searches for meaning. *Fors* 53, issued in May 1875, illustrates this well. In this letter Ruskin provides an extended analysis of and comment on Psalm 8 in which he sifts through different versions of the text and brings to light unpredictable yet convincing connections to labour, education and the purposes of the Guild of St George. Zoë Bennett, in her study of Ruskin’s ‘practical theology’, has described this method as a ‘hermeneutic of immediacy’, ‘a laying alongside, by analogy without mediation’. Juxtaposition of texts does not aim ‘primarily [...] to prove a particular prescriptive point or to trump other texts: he is working by resonance and analogy to open up our imagination and provoke involvement’.<sup>25</sup> The letter starts by mentioning a correspondent who had put it into his ‘mind at once to state some principles respecting the use of the Bible as a code of law, which are vital to the action of the St. George’s Company in obedience to it’ (28.319), and who makes two important comments on Psalms 119 and 8, comments to which I shall dedicate the rest of this chapter.

The whole of letter 53 can be read as a thorough reflection on language. The reference that sets the key is to St. Mark’s Gospel (iv.11–12) where Jesus says he uses parables to talk about the ‘mystery of the Kingdom’, ‘so that, hearing they might not understand’, and plain speech only to his disciples (28.320). Ruskin interprets this notion of obscure language not as implying a divine purpose within an eschatological plan, but as totally dependent on its addressees. In other words, God’s teachings are only ‘mysterious’ and

'deceptive' if received by 'false disciples' (Ibid.). There is a sense in which the language of *Fors* can be seen as approaching this provocative disruptiveness of the parables and thus as putting the reader to the test. In letter 53, as well as in many others, the targets of Ruskin's attacks are 'pious' people who are in charge of the Word and yet betray it by offering narrow lessons on charity and love. Thus, the declared aim of the exegeses in *Fors*, as well as in *Rock Honeycomb*, is to unmask deceptions and to unveil evangelical misinterpretations. In this central letter on exegesis Ruskin refers to Psalm 119 as the one that had cost him 'most to learn, and which was to my child's mind, chiefly repulsive' but that 'has now become of all the most precious to me, in its overflowing and passion of love for the law of God' (28.319). And yet, he says, this great prayer on the acceptance of the law of God, the lengthiest of the Psalter, does not reach into the hearts and minds of people because of its language. In fact, he says, if parables could be 'misleading', 'they still had a living use, as well as their danger' (28.323). While 'the Psalter has become practically dead', because familiarity through repetition in daily service has, rather than strengthening its sense, been fatal to it (Ibid.). If the parables, therefore, need true disciples to be correctly understood, the Psalms need a new language, new readings and new translations in order to be brought back to life.

The same letter continues with an extended treatment of Psalm 8, which centres directly on the theme of ruling the earth and was therefore crucial for the Guild of St George. Ruskin quotes from an original Latin manuscript,<sup>26</sup> then gives his own translation based on close commentary and comparison with a Greek version (possibly from his own 'Blue Psalter') to Sidney's, and with one taken from an unidentified service book. It is a fresh reading, a word-by-word comparison that aims to defamiliarize – and therefore bring to life – the most commented-on Psalm of the whole Psalter. Lexical choices are discussed to reset and restore the original sense lost in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which largely followed Coverdale (1535) and the Great Bible (1539). Ruskin starts from the name and attributes of God, pointing out that the *Book of Common Prayer* had, through imprecise translation, shifted the focus from the Fatherhood of God to His power and fame, and had lowered the sense of wonder. The shift starts in verse 1, where the Lord is called 'our Governor', rather than 'our Lord', as in the Latin and Greek sources, and God's name is qualified as 'excellent' thus ranging him within a scale of values that obscures the sense of immense wonder and incomparable splendour, as 'glory' misses the sense of its extraordinary 'magnificence' associated as it is to 'fame' (28.326). Ruskin refers also in general terms to commentaries that are not based on philological work on the text and provide explanatory actualizations and anecdotes, in particular the undertext here seems to be C. H. Spurgeon's comment on Psalm 8. In the letter we

find, it seems to me, various implicit references to Spurgeon's *The Treasury of David*, a commentary on the Psalms that appeared weekly from 1865 to 1885. Spurgeon's reference in this context and in relation to his attack on evangelicalism bears a hidden reference to Rose La Touche, in my view, as it was this fundamentalist preacher who had converted Rose's father to Baptist Evangelicalism in 1863 and nurtured the religious zeal that had devastating effects on Rose.<sup>27</sup> Of verse 2, 'Out of the mouth of very babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength, because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger', Ruskin says that the translation in the *Book of Common Prayer* failed to clarify its sense and was confused by misleading examples. The sense of the verse is that the strength and power of children are all in their innocence, an innocence that allows them to recognize Christ as in Matthew xxi.1. Contemporary readings of the Psalm – and here the reference to Spurgeon's commentary seems to be clear, though veiled – instead, interpreted it by reporting 'amazing instances of the testimony' of children's self-sacrifice and martyrdom.<sup>28</sup>

A further emendation concerns in verse 3 the use of the verb 'ordained' for Latin 'fundare', meaning 'to found' or to set the foundations, to place the stars and the moon firmly in space. On the whole we can say that his version points to the extraordinary nature of God, and at the same time to a language that is not abstract and hierarchical, but physical and rooted in experience. Thus 'mindful' in verse 4 does but imperfectly render the sense of 'look on', 'watch', 'visit' in the original. The image of God that Ruskin provides is more 'fleshly' and closer to man, the most fragile creature in the universe and the one closest to God.

Psalm 8 celebrates the wonder of God and the power of man on earth as His creature. Ruskin expands on this, seeing the seal of God as manifest in man's perceptions and feelings – in the 'perception of evil', 'joy in love', 'agony in anger', 'indignation in injustice', 'glory in self-sacrifice' (28.330). If men rule the earth according to these feelings, they will be godlike, beneficent and authoritative, and the name of God will become 'hallowed' to them, admired and wonderful; but if they forget them they will be false disciples, and will abuse his name, make it 'unholy and unadmirable' (Ibid.). Ruskin attributes an ethical role to feelings, thus opposing the sense of omnipotence the Psalm had encouraged.<sup>29</sup> His reading also avoids a Christological interpretation of famous verse 4: 'what is the man that thou are mindful of him?' Many commentators, including C. H. Spurgeon, have seen in that man the figure of Christ.<sup>30</sup> Not so Ruskin, who rather transposes the singular to the plural – 'when men rule the earth rightly [...] (31.328). Through this shift, men, as a collective body, are the fragile though omnipotent lieutenants of God, as implied in a subsequent reference to the third letter of Pope's *Essay*

on *Man*. Pope's passage examines the role of the individual in society, tracing the origins of civilizing institutions, such as government and the class system, in animal life. This occasions reflection on how man may find his way to happiness in this world: by shifting the focus from Pope's concern with the interaction between selfish motivations and altruistic impulses in individuals, Ruskin points out that instinct-based actions lead to good and great works. He privileges instinct over reason and shortens the distance between man, and all living beings. Through Psalm-reading the *Fors* letter orientates discourse towards education and labour. Ruskin does not take up a Christological reading of the Psalm, for his is a Fallen man. He seizes the sense of the word contained in the Hebrew *ben-'adam*, that is, man in his weakness and fragility, in his existence and historicity. This is also the sense of man in Pope's poem, where the individual detached from his original condition is social man. Just as 'lowliness' was the characteristic of all great nations at their beginnings, says Ruskin, that condition could be redeemed through labour – an attitude of devotion and humility exerted in work being 'our first duty' (28.332). Only through human labour does the majesty of God pass into men, for it is the essential condition of happiness, 'of our faculties and felicities', of men's full realization 'making men little less than angels' – 'without that labour, neither reason, art, nor peace, are possible to man' (Ibid.).

Labour is also the link connecting man with the lower creatures and the means to 'kindle Spiritual life' (Ibid). Ruskin here adjusts his earlier ideas of work, ideas that had been contradictory and controversial. In *Fors Clavigera* and in conjunction with the work experiments promoted by the Guild of St George, his views became more defined and more positive. Commenting on the *Fors* 53 passage quoted above, P. D. Anthony maintains that it 'reveals the complexity of his view of work and suggests some reasons why it is an essential part of the process of education'; it implies a defence of manual labour and provides the theoretical grounds for Ruskin's attack on machinery'.<sup>31</sup> In a subsequent passage Anthony contrasts Ruskin's Gothic with Pater's Renaissance conception of work, saying that 'Ruskin's is nearer to a medieval conception of work, that it represents man's imperfection, his animal-like nature as well as his divine aspiration, his grotesque crudity as well as his spirit, his suffering as well as his salvation'.<sup>32</sup> If read in its original context of a commentary on Psalm 8, however, labour is rather a means of connection, drawing a line of continuity through creation. Ruskin's philological reconstruction of the original meaning of the Psalm on the splendour and majesty of God to man terminates with an exaltation of labour. This anticipates subsequent *Fors* letters that touch upon the interconnectedness of manual labour and intellectual work in a cooperative social system. He states this repeatedly in *Fors's*

own multiple discourse. In letter 55 Ruskin provocatively imagines 'simple' and 'refined' work not to be divided but 'collated' in individuals of all social classes. Here too he refers to Philip Sidney, hypothetically wondering whether, had he 'been also taught the art of making brooms', time would have been left 'to the broom-makers of his day for the fashioning of sonnets [...] or the reading of more literature'(28.373). But it is in the following *Fors* letter that he takes up the subject once more in the form of a childhood recollection during his European journeys. And in this letter the Psalm resounds again, this time leading Ruskin to paint a puzzling self-portrait of himself as a little boy, and to reflect ironically on his own early evangelical upbringing and on the shepherd-bishop that he was expected to become, a

little jaunty figure, trotting in its easy chariot, [...] a living diamond, without which the watch of the world could not possibly go', a kind of Almighty Providence in its first breeches, by whose tiny hands and infant fiat the blessings of food and raiment were continually provided for God's Spanish labourers in His literal vineyard; for God's English sailors, seeing His wonders in the deep; for God's tailors' men, sitting in attitude of Chinese Josh for ever; for the divinely appointed wheelwrights, carpenters, horses and riders, hostlers and Gaius-mine-hosts, necessary to my triumphal progress; and for my nurse behind in the dickey. And it never once entered the head of any aristocratic person, – nor would ever have entered mine, I suppose, unless I had "the most analytical mind in Europe," – that in verity it was not I who fed the nurse, but my nurse me; and that a great part of the world had been literally put behind me as a dickey, – and all the aforesaid inhabitants of it, somehow, appointed to be nothing but my nurses; the beautiful product intended, by papa and mamma, being a Bishop, who should graciously overlook these tribes of inferior beings, and instruct their ignorance in the way of their soul's salvation. (28.393-4)

Ruskin's reference to the Psalms is pervasive. In *Fors* it is not confined within the pages of a single letter, but is protracted over various numbers, forming an ongoing discourse with his readers, and with and about himself. A discourse that unfolds dynamically over time on community aims and intimate emotions, the Guild and Rose. As the Psalms are both collective and personal prayers, Ruskin talks through them both of/to his community of readers, and of/to himself. Dinah Birch has maintained that the literary experimental method Ruskin developed in *Fors* 'allowed him to be at once public and private, self-effacing and self-involved'.<sup>33</sup> It seems to me that the frequent occurrence of the Book of Psalms in these letters should be related also to their uniquely constitutively public and private language.

## Notes

- 1 See Roland Greene, 'Sir Philip Sidney's Psalms, the Sixteenth-Century Psalter, and the Nature of Lyric', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, Vol. 30, no. 1, The English Renaissance (Winter, 1990), 19–40 (23): 'Taken singly, the psalms generally belong at the most 'open' or performative end of the spectrum that runs from ritual to fiction, for they allow, or better, require the reading voice to assume the identity of their represented speaker'.
- 2 Zoë Bennett, *Using the Bible in Practical Theology. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013).
- 3 For a synthetic account of the stages of this project see 31.xiii–xv.
- 4 Dinah Birch, 'Ruskin's Multiple Writing: *Fors Clavigera*', *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*, ed. Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 175–87.
- 5 John Ruskin, *Diary*, 1875, RF MS 20, Ruskin Foundation (Ruskin Library, Lancaster University) 6–13.
- 6 See Van Akin Burd, *Christmas Story: John Ruskin's Venetian Letters of 1876–1877* (University of Delaware Press, 1990); Paul Tucker, 'Un siluro esplosivo', introduction to John Ruskin, *Guida ai Principali dipinti nell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia*, ed. P. Tucker (Milan: Electa, 2014), 9–69; Dinah Birch, 'Ruskin's Multiple Writing: *Fors Clavigera*', 177.
- 7 *The Psalter and Hours* (1275/1300) is now at Brussels, in the Bibliothèque Royale. The catalogue notes say: 'That Ruskin called this his "Blue Psalter" may indicate its previous binding may also have been blue in color. Written in a bold Gothic hand. 24 lozenge-shaped miniatures on gold grounds in Calendar. 'The prayer beginning Ave rose florice / Et roy lalngnie (fol. 237) no doubt made this MS a particularly appropriate gift for Rose in JR's eyes' (Dearden). [...] Inscribed by Ruskin 'Posie with St. C's love, 3 January 1862.' Evidently returned to Brantwood from Rose La Touche, probably following her death on 26 May 1875. J. S. Dearden, 'John Ruskin the Collector,' in *The Library*, 5th ser., 21 (1966), no. 32. [http://dla.library.upenn.edu/cocoon/dla/schoenberg/record.html?id=SCHOENBERG\\_223355](http://dla.library.upenn.edu/cocoon/dla/schoenberg/record.html?id=SCHOENBERG_223355). Accessed on 8 February 2017.
- 8 See in particular, Tucker, 'Un siluro esplosivo', 28–35.
- 9 John Ruskin, *Diary*, 1875, RF MS 20, Ruskin Foundation (Ruskin Library, Lancaster University), 18–29.
- 10 See J. C. A. Rathmell, 'Explorations and Recoveries. Hopkins, Ruskin and the *Sidney Psalter*', *London Magazine*, Sept. 1, 1959, 6, 9, 51–66.
- 11 See 31. xxii–vi. See Margaret Hannay, 'House-Confined Maids': The Presentation of Woman's Role in the Psalms of the Countess of Pembroke', *English Literary Renaissance*, Vol. 24, 1, December 1994, 44–71.
- 12 The subject has been recently treated by F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, 'Poetry of the Psalms', *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. W. P. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 79–98.
- 13 Dante, *The Convivio*, trans. Philip H. Wicksteed (London: Dent, 1903), book I, Vol. 7: 34.
- 14 Andrew Tate, "'Sweeter also than Honey": John Ruskin and the Psalms', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 39, no. 1/2, *Literature and Religion* 2009, 114–25 (123).
- 15 J. C. A. Rathmell, 'Explorations and Recoveries', 51.
- 16 J. C. A. Rathmell, ed., *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and The Countess of Pembroke* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963).
- 17 Rathmell, 'Explorations and Recoveries', 60. Rathmell points out that the use of the Tremellius Bible, enabled Sidney to approximate closely to the original language as well as to perceive the Psalms 'as actually rhythmical poetry', 55.

- 18 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 20 Interestingly, the lexical and interpretative choices that he proposes as alternative to the English versions he examines have often been acquired today by the NIV.
- 21 George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 269.
- 22 'No major poem in English literature, says Steiner, depends more rigorously on implicit citation, on the postulate of a repertoire of allusion, echo, and counterpoint. [...] There is hardly a line which does not solicit, and presume the reader's awareness of relevant classical and Elizabethan constants'. Steiner, *After Babel*, 469.
- 23 See also Anthony Harris, "'Why have our little Girls Large Shoes"?' Ruskin and the Guild of St George', *The Ruskin Lecture* (London: Brentham Press), 1985, 3–22.
- 24 Birch, 'Ruskin's Multiple Writing: *Fors Clavigera*', 182.
- 25 Bennett, *Using the Bible in Practical Theology*, 75.
- 26 The service-book is unidentified to the editors of the Library Edition (28.325). The reference could be to what Ruskin defines as the Lincoln Psalter, from which he extensively quotes in his 1875 diaries (MS 20).
- 27 See Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Later Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Vol. 1: 260–61, Vol. 2: 47–48.
- 28 C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (London: Marshall, 1869–85, 7 vols), Vol. 1: 30–1.
- 29 Cf. Spurgeon's final lines of his comment on this verse: 'Under our feet we must keep the world, and we must shun that base spirit which is content to let worldly cares and pleasures sway the empire of the immortal soul'. *Ibid.*, 32.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 P. D. Anthony, *Ruskin's Labour. A Study of Ruskin's Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 156.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 166. Anthony concludes by saying 'It is ironic that, contrasted with the high idealism of the modern view, it is Ruskin's realistic view that has been called utopian and idealistic'.
- 33 Birch, 'Ruskin's Multiple Writing: *Fors Clavigera*', 176.