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Ruskin After 200

Thinking with Ruskin in the Twenty-First Century

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Ruskin's Rubbish

Deanna K. Kreisel

Ruskin was obsessed with garbage. In the introduction to *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866), he rails against the defilement of the little pools and rivulets near his boyhood home by “street and house foulness; heaps of dust and slime, and broken shreds of old metal” and the use of a nearby pub’s front area as a “protective receptacle of refuse; cigar ends, and oyster shells” (1903, 18:387). Nearly twenty-five years later, in *Fiction, Fair and Foul*, he continues to lament the rubbish heaping up near a suburban development outside London in a description that is itself a tour de force of bricolage: “Half a dozen handfuls of new cottages, with Doric doors, are dropped about here and there among the gashed ground ... bordered on each side by heaps of—Hades only knows what! ... ashes and rags, beer-bottles and old shoes, battered pans, smashed crockery, shreds of nameless clothes, door-sweepings, floor-sweepings, kitchen garbage, back-garden sewage, old iron, rotten timber jagged with out-torn nails, cigar-ends, pipe-bowls, cinders, bones, and ordure, indescribable” (34:266).¹ (Of course, nothing is *really* allowed to remain indescribable before the juggernaut of Ruskinian prose.)

When we think of Ruskin as an early ecological thinker, we tend to think not of littering but rather of industrial pollution, against which he

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launched a magisterial screed in *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884). This late (strange) work has become rich compost for an efflorescence of recent scholarship on Ruskin's ecological preoccupations, including Vicky Albritton and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson's *Green Victorians: The Simple Life in Ruskin's Lake District* (2016), Allen MacDuffie's *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (2014), and recent essays by Heidi C. M. Scott, Jesse Oak Taylor, Siobhan Carroll, and Daniel Williams. As MacDuffie notes, Ruskin has become a touchstone "for a whole host of twentieth- and twenty-first-century ecological economists who seek to put ... environmental concerns at the center of economic and social analysis" (2014, 169).

As such criticism has often underscored, it is difficult—if not impossible—to separate Ruskin's nascent environmentalist critique from his other lifelong critical preoccupations. For example, Ruskin associated the proliferation of household waste with the mass production attendant on the growth of suburbia, and hence with the despoliation of the countryside and increased alienation of labor—and these were all aesthetic problems in addition to being problems of social justice or ecology. In what follows I will consider the relationship between the environmentalist and aesthetic strains in Ruskin's thinking, focusing particularly on his hatred of litter and lifelong obsession with wrought-iron decoration. In the emblem of *iron*—natural resource, raw substance, building material, decorative excrement—these various components of Ruskinian thought are congealed and crystallized.

The relationship between aesthetic pleasure and environmentalist critique is a fraught one: the romanticization of "Nature" has recently been reviled as integral to an instrumentalist orientation toward the other-than-human world. For Timothy Morton, for example, such thinking "has set up 'Nature' as a reified thing in the distance, under the sidewalk, on the other side where the grass is always greener, preferably in the mountains, in the wild," and even more strongly: "'Nature' fails to serve ecology well" (2010, 3). The work of Ruskin, shaped by simultaneous commitments to aesthetic beauty and a proto-ecological sensibility, is an ideal place to examine the long-standing entanglement (and mutual hostility) of these two critical modes. Is there a way in which an ecological aestheticism can be harnessed, rather than simply reviled, in our own historical moment? Can Ruskin furnish a model for such a productive merger?

How, indeed, should the ... overwhelming strength [of our educated and intelligent classes] act, when the man who gives an inflammatory lecture, or breaks down the Park railings, or invades a Secretary of State's office, is only following an Englishman's impulse to do as he likes; and our own conscience tells us that we ourselves have always regarded this impulse as something primary and sacred? (Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* [1869])

You should not have cast-iron railings fixed outside the house, which boys are always knocking down, and very rightly too, for they always look cheap and shabby. (Oscar Wilde, "The House Beautiful" [1882])

These two quotations, united only by the figure of the iron railing, could serve as mottoes for their respective authors. Writing in the aftermath of the Hyde Park riots of 1866, Arnold laments the hooliganism that attacked the railings around Speaker's Corner: Arnold and the rioters both understood the assaulted iron bars as markers of privacy and security attendant upon a certain kind of class privilege. Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, celebrates the destruction of this same type of railing in its bourgeois incarnation: Wilde's aesthetic sensibility understood the mass-produced variety of railing ("cast" iron as opposed to "wrought") as an assault upon that same privilege, in the form of taste.

Railings are a convenient metonym and easy target for the two social critics' (widely divergent) ire since they were—and are—a ubiquitous feature of the London urban landscape. The area railing, as architectural feature, is particularly associated with the long, unbroken stretches of so-called terrace houses that began engirdling London in the Georgian period (Fig. 9.1). The ubiquity of this particular type of railing is the result of a convergence of architectural need and technological advance; as Gloag and Bridgwater point out in their history of cast iron in architecture, "[T]he terrace house created a demand for miles of railings of a repetitive design, which foundries could produce easily and economically. These basemented houses needed protective rails round the areas which lighted the lower floors. Many of the earlier balconies and railings were of wrought iron, but as the custom and demand increased, cast iron was more frequently used" (1948, 115).



Fig. 9.1 Iron railings enclosing an area. (Photograph by the author)

The area itself is “an enclosed court, specifically a sunken court, shut off from the pavement by railings, and approached by a flight of steps, which gives access to the basement of dwelling-houses” (*OED*). The area was a by-product of another building practice, the excavation of a basement level and slight building-up of the street with the leftover earth, with a resulting difference between the street level in front of the house and the courts level in back (Fig. 9.2).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first usage of the word “area” in this particular sense is in *The Spectator* in 1712; by its next cited usage nearly a hundred years later, in the Duke of Wellington’s Dispatches of 1810, the word “area” has already accumulated both metaphorical import and particular class associations: “when we do go, I feel a little anxiety to go, like gentlemen, out of the hall door ... and not out of the back door, or by the area” (Wellington 1844, 3:823). Because it is associated with the offices and other utilitarian spaces in the basements of terrace houses—ingress for house supplies and coal, and egress for shady characters—and also is accessible by and visible from the street, the area is

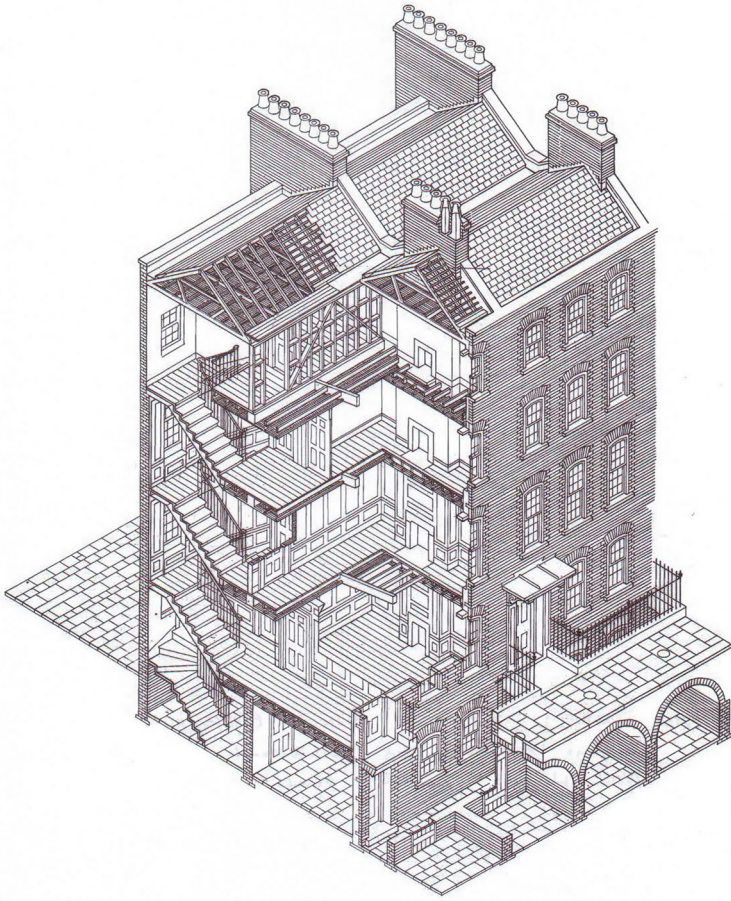


Fig. 9.2 Cutaway isometric view of a pair of ten-room buildings, representing the prevailing image of “typical” early eighteenth-century London terrace houses. (Drawing by Keith Garner for Alan Baxter and Associates, 1996)

literally a liminal space in a way that the courts and stables at the back of the house are not. It is a borderland between the domestic and the civic, the secret and the open, while partaking properly of neither.

The railings that close off the area are themselves allusive, and only partly by association: they bespeak privilege, wealth, and privacy, elements associated with the cult of domesticity that burgeoned in the early decades

of the nineteenth century. As Karen Chase and Michael Levenson note in their study *The Spectacle of Intimacy*, the 1851 census defined a family as the “persons under one head” who enjoyed “the exclusive command of the entrance-hall and stairs—and the possession of the free space between the ground and sky” (2009, 4). With only a bit of a stretch, one could link the widespread use of the area railing in urban architecture with the increase in land enclosures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the two developments are contemporaneous, and there is a symbolic resonance between the fencing of public grazing land in the counties and the demarcation, in the cities, of tiny street-side microcosms of the same. In the 1807 rural verse tale “The Parish Register,” for example, George Crabbe writes: “To every house belongs a space of ground, / Of equal size, once fenced with paling round.”

However, this correlation is complicated by the multiple and conflicting meanings of the “area” itself. Far from being a miniature version of the “little bit of ground,” “twisted and twirled, and rhymed and harmonized,” as Walpole famously characterized Pope’s garden at Twickenham, the London area space is more like a waste ground that has been abjected through the very act of fencing. For one thing, it is not a garden at all, but rather a below-street-level court that is open to all the trash and depredations of the busy street. In his Introduction to *The Crown of Wild Olive*, quoted briefly above, Ruskin comments on this very phenomenon:

I walked up slowly through the back streets of Croydon, from the old church to the hospital; and, just on the left, before coming up to the crossing of the High Street, there was a new public-house built. And the front of it was built in so wise manner, that a recess of two feet was left below its front windows, between them and the street-pavement; a recess too narrow for any possible use.... But, by way of making this two feet depth of freehold land more expressive of the dignity of an establishment for the sale of spirituous liquors, it was fenced from the pavement by an imposing iron railing, having four or five spear-heads to the yard of it, and six feet high; containing as much iron and iron-work, indeed, as could well be put into the space; and by this stately arrangement, the little piece of dead ground within, between wall and street, became a protective receptacle of refuse; cigar ends, and oyster shells, and the like, such as an open-handed English street-populace habitually scatters; and was thus left, unsweepable by any ordinary methods. (14:387)

The wasteful work involved in the mass manufacture of railings is a particular reason for Ruskinian rage: "Will you count the cost, in labour and coals, of the blank bars ranged along all the melancholy miles of our suburban streets, saying with their rusty tongues, as plainly as iron tongues can speak, 'Thieves outside, and nothing to steal within?'" (27:36).

Several Victorianist critics have recently focused on the extractive economies of coal production in the nineteenth century as particular drivers of both anthropogenic climate change and a growing environmentalist consciousness.² For Ruskin, of course, the aesthetic cannot be separated from the analysis of labor, poverty, and the common weal, yet we can see here that his lamenting the "cost" of "labour and coals" in the same breath imbricates these deeper—perhaps largely unconscious—concerns over resource extraction with his overall critique. The hideousness of the product is a direct function of the injustice of its manufacture, both for the laborer and for the natural world: "You dig a pit for ironstone, and heap a mass of refuse on fruitful land; you blacken your God-given sky, and consume your God-given fuel, to melt the iron; [and] you bind your labourer to the Egyptian toil of its castings and forgings" (28:303–4).

The deadening labor Ruskin famously bemoans in the "Nature of Gothic" section of *The Stones of Venice* is both cause and result of a larger pattern of deplorable change in the orientation toward nature that is one of the main subjects of his introduction to *The Crown of Wild Olive*. The opening section is a jeremiad mourning the loss of a certain kind of landscape. Ruskin is particularly outraged at the defilement of the pools and streams "immediately bordering on the sources of the Wandel [sic]" (18:385), and laments that "no pastures ever lightened in spring-time with more passionate blossoming; no sweeter homes ever hallowed the heart of the passer-by with their pride of peaceful gladness,—fain—hidden—yet full-confessed.... The place remains nearly unchanged in its larger features; but ... [no] blasphemy or impiety [is] more appalling to me ... than the insolent defiling of those springs by the human herds that drink of them" (18:385–86).

For Ruskin, the hideousness of the iron fence is not just a function of its brute materiality, its reminder of social injustice, or its aesthetic crimes. It is also a scar upon the landscape, an emblem of the encroaching of modern urbanism and the "maw" of London on the utopic spaces of Ruskin's childhood. The growth of population (particularly of a certain kind of population, which elsewhere Ruskin explicitly denounces in classed terms—"[a] *gentleman* would hew for himself a log hut, and thresh for

himself a straw bed, before he would live in” one of the new suburban villas [17:524, emphasis added])—is an inherently polluting proposition. The masses throw their garbage any old where, into the “stainless water, trembling and pure” (18:386) of the Carshalton streams and pools as readily as into the fenced-off area in front of a public house: they respect no difference between urban and rural spaces, just as they respect no difference between landscape and landfill. This depiction fits in well with Ruskin’s general attitude toward encroaching suburbia. As Dinah Birch has pointed out, Ruskin “watched what he interpreted as a catastrophic fall from grace in the suburbs that had produced him” (1997, 234) and this disappointment crystallizes into a “sense of the Wordsworthian shape of his life, moving inexorably further from its springs of creativity as he aged” (1997, 243).

The changes that Croydon is undergoing in 1870 were becoming the target of a broader social critique that lasted throughout the rest of the century. The extraordinarily rapid growth of London’s suburbs—according to H. J. Dyos, the suburbs grew 50 percent per decade between 1861 and 1891 (qtd. in Whelan 3)—far outstripped any attempts at city planning, sanitation reform, or aesthetic common sense. As Lisa Baker Whelan argues in a discussion of the growth of the London suburbs in the Victorian era, middle-class families who moved away from the city in hopes of finding more space, better air, and a healthier environment were often shocked at the “repetition of the evils of urban living they had been trying to escape: bad drains, little public sanitation, poorly constructed houses that were as damp as any lower-class hovel in the city, and less privacy than one might expect” (2010, 1). As one Victorian commentator, a Mrs. Panton, notes in her 1896 treatise *Suburban Residences and How to Circumvent Them*, there are “suburban terrors which are to be dreaded ... as no one knows what torture can be given one by apparently innocent means” (2012, 4–5).

Suburban houses were often quickly built, cheap, and shoddy: “Many builders, knowing their market, incorporated external features of the more expensive villas and country houses into their plans in order to mark their houses as suitable middle-class residences from the street. These decorations took up materials and costs that should have been devoted to the structures themselves. Many suburban houses did not last more than forty years before falling down or becoming uninhabitable due to drafts, bad drainage and rising damp” (Whelan 2010, 30). This is a lament articulated both by Ruskin—“I cannot but think it an evil sign of a people when their

houses are built to last for one generation only" (8:225)—and Charles Eastlake in his 1878 treatise *Hints on Household Taste*: "To speak plainly, it will be a miracle if half the houses that are now being raised in and about London do not, in the ordinary course of things, tumble down long before their allotted time" (1869, 22).

Yet for Ruskin, there is also a sense in which the iron fence is particularly to blame for particular ills: it is not simply a *symbol* of fallenness but a direct contributor to the process of falling. As he laments in one of the letters in *Fors Clavigera*:

Well, the population of Kirkby cannot, it appears ... any more walk, in summer afternoons, along the brow of this bank, without a fence. The well at the bottom was choked up and defaced, though ironed all round.... [T]he people go through the churchyard to the path on the hill-brow, making the new iron railing an excuse to pitch their dust-heaps, and whatever of worse they have to get rid of, crockery and the rest,—down *over the fence* among the primroses and violets to the river,—and the whole blessed shore underneath is one waste of filth, town-drainage, broken saucepans, tannin, and mill-refuse. (28:299–301; emphasis in original)

The iron fence is "an excuse" for defilement (Ruskin italicizes "*over the fence*" to underscore this fact), just as the iron fence in front of the pub in Croyden reifies the "little piece of dead ground" in front, into which passersby suddenly feel liberated to toss their detritus.

It is not just the form of the fence that is to blame, but also its material particularity, the particular material from which it is made. For Ruskin (as well as for Wilde), the distinction between the kinds of iron from which railings and fences were made is a crucial one. Between the middle of the century and its *fin*, a space of nostalgia has opened up wherein architectural features of the previous "era" (however defined) start to take on suggestions of solidity, stability, and good workmanship—the very objects that themselves had seemed shabby and cheap in relation to a yet more antecedent "era" when they first were produced. Thus cast-iron railings are an abomination ("cheap and shabby" Wilde calls them) while wrought-iron railings are admirably Gothic, the product of authentic, individuated labor on the part of a craftsman. This judgment itself requires a kind of connoisseurship that militates against its democratic impulse: the difference between wrought and cast iron is not immediately apparent to a casual observer. (And this has always been one of the paradoxes of Ruskin's

and William Morris's aesthetic agendas, of course—the products of authentic craftsmanship are often too expensive for anyone of the artisan class to afford.)

Yet iron also has other, less immediately apparent, symbolic resonances for Ruskin. In 1858, he delivered a lecture before an audience in Tunbridge Wells entitled “The Work of Iron, In Nature, Art, and Policy”; as Nick Shrimpton has claimed, this lecture “mark[s] a decisive transition in his literary career” (1981, 57), one in which Ruskin tries out a new satirical style that he had partly adopted from Thomas Carlyle. Ruskin's attempt to more thoroughly imbricate aesthetic and economic value, a project that he had begun in *The Stones of Venice*, begins at this point in earnest. In this lecture it is the consumption question which is arguably Ruskin's real topic.³

What interests me particularly about the “Work of Iron” essay is its polemical discussion of the raw material of iron as an important part of a reconfigured relationship between natural and human activity. Rachel Teukolsky argues that Ruskin's turn away from evangelicalism in the same year as this essay meant that, for him, “Nature could no longer be read as the epitome and transcript of God's creation; now it was meaningful only as it spoke to human life and human concerns” (2007, 719). She reads a passage in Volume 5 of *Modern Painters* as emblematic of this new significance of Nature: “The earth in its depths must remain dead and cold, incapable except of slow crystalline change; but at its surface, which human beings look upon and deal with, it ministers to them through a veil of strange intermediate being” (7:14–15), which veil for Teukolsky is a “ghostly crust chilled by the ‘dead and cold’ depths of the earth it covers” (2007, 721).

Of course, iron itself is drawn from the “depths of the earth,” and it is Ruskin's rethinking of these subtle—often nonintuitive—distinctions between the “natural” and the “wrought” that is of particular interest throughout his architectural writings. “The Work of Iron” lecture begins as a panegyric on the beauty of *rusted* iron:

[I]n a certain sense, and almost a literal one, we may say that iron rusted is Living; but when pure or polished, Dead.... [A]ll the substance of which it is made sucks and breathes the brilliancy of the atmosphere; and as it breathes, softening from its merciless hardness, it falls into fruitful and beneficent dust; gathering itself again into the earths from which we feed,

and the stones with which we build;—into the rocks that frame the mountains, and the sands that bind the sea. (16:378)

He does not, however, let the beauty of his prose distract him from his ostensible purpose, which is to awaken his audience to a sense of the connection between the materials drawn from the “cold” depths of the earth and the epiphenomena of human life: “[T]he main service of this metal, and of all other metals, to us, is not in making knives, and scissors, and pokers, and pans, but in making the ground we feed from, and nearly all the substances first needful to our existence” (16:377). But iron, in the form of ferrous oxide, also brings aesthetic pleasure in the form of purple hillsides, picturesque crimson roof tiles, even a blush upon a cheek. Both the usefulness and beauty of iron depend upon its dissolution into rust, which is a product of the reaction between metal (matter) and oxygen (spirit): “[W]hat I wish you to carry clearly away with you is the remembrance that in all these uses the metal would be nothing without the air. The pure metal has no power” (16:385).

Yet just as the “matter” half of the traditional spirit-matter dichotomy is just as traditionally debased, so, as we have seen, does Ruskin heap scorn upon the manufacture and use of iron in British art and architecture. In addition to the critique of the iron railing in *The Crown of Wild Olive*, Ruskin reserves some choice words for the same structure in the “Work of Iron” essay: “I do not believe it would be easy to calculate the amount of mischief done to our taste in England by that fence iron-work of ours alone”; “observe that the iron railing is a useless fence—it can shelter nothing, and support nothing; ... and besides being useless, it is an insolent fence;—it says plainly to everybody who passes—You may be an honest person,—but, also, you may be a thief: honest or not, you shall not get in here, for I am a respectable person and much above you; you shall only see what a grand place I have got to keep you out of—look here, and depart in humiliation”; “what meaning has the iron railing?... Your iron railing always means thieves outside, or Bedlam inside; it *can* mean nothing else than that” (16:388, 391, 390). He then expatiates on the kind of structure he would prefer to see in place of iron fences:

Last summer I was lodging for a little while in a cottage in the country, and in front of my low window there [was] ... a low wall about three feet above the ground, covered with stone-cress. When I was inclined for society, I could lean over my wall, and talk to anybody; when I was inclined for sci-

ence, I could botanize all along the top of my wall—there were four species of stone-cress alone growing on it; and when I was inclined for exercise, I could jump over my wall, backwards and forwards. That's the sort of fence to have in a Christian country; not a thing which you can't walk inside of without making yourself look like a wild beast, nor look at out of your window in the morning without expecting to see somebody impaled upon it in the night. (16:390–91)

Crucially, Ruskin reads the stone wall as a semiorganic part of the natural world, a liminal structure that fosters the growth of wild plants and softens the boundary between domestic enclosure and untamed nature. The iron fence, on the other hand, rigidifies the distinction between wild and domestic—creatures without are waggishly marked as “beasts,” regardless of their place in the natural order.

We see this dialectical relationship between fence and nature in all of the passages in which Ruskin lambastes the use of iron railings; he is continually groping for the “meaning” of these structures—class division, inhospitableness, enmity, violence, exploitation, sophistication, unkindness, discomfort, and lack of principle (16:388)—and at the same time informing us that fences call these qualities into being, that they mold those who dwell within them through a process of coercive, Gradgrindian influence. The ambivalence between these two accounts is part of a larger problematic in Ruskin's later work, a grappling with the relationship between inner and outer, interior and exterior, domestic and natural. In a sense, this is the problem of the fence itself: as a porous and ineffectual marker of liminality, it enables a confusion between human and natural environments that encourages the hurling of garbage and other kinds of undesirable seepage: “[it] is an insolent fence, which lets everybody gaze at you at all times—not, observe, your gentle courtly friends who wish you well ... but your ill-wishers and enemies, for whom you have prepared the spikes, in whose presence it is quite certain you cannot make any happy or homely use of your garden” (16:391).

Yet the *form* of the iron fence, its “ribs” and “bars” as Ruskin variously terms them, also suggests another structure that functions as an emblem of a troubling modernity: the arcade. In the lengthy essay *Fiction, Fair and Foul* Ruskin critiques the morbid tendency of the modern novel to focus on the inhabitants of big cities and their struggling under the “staggering mass that chokes and crushes them into perdition” (34:269). Dickens comes under particular attack, yet Ruskin disingenuously

“forgives” the author for being unable to write otherwise, living as he does in “streets where summer and winter are only alternations of heat and cold; where snow never fell white, nor sunshine clear; where the ground is only a pavement, and the sky no more than the glass roof of an arcade” (34:271). Ruskin despised the “arcadification” of the modern city, taking particular aim at the Crystal Palace as the apotheosis of this disturbing trend:

The furnace and the forge shall be at your service: you shall draw out your plates of glass and beat out your bars of iron till you have encompassed us all ... with endless perspective of black skeleton and blinding square,—or ... you shall wreath your streets with ductile leafage, and roof them with variegated crystal—you shall put, if you will, all London under one blazing dome of many colours that shall light the clouds round it with its flashing, as far as to the sea. (16:349)

This bizarre image seems like the nightmarish obverse of Michel de Certeau’s famous account of seeing the city from above, from a viewpoint that “transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god” (1984, 92). Ruskin imagines the city of London transformed not into text, but into a kind of magic lantern projection that will indeed be visible from above, at least as “blinding” flashes of light, but only by a *literally* “solar” or celestial eye—there is no transformative vantage point available to the inhabitant trapped under the glittering cage-like dome of the city-as-arcade.⁴

What Ruskin despises about the arcade is similar to what he despises about iron fences: both their process of manufacture and the “meaning,” the sterility and soullessness, of the finished product. Of course, the glass-work of the arcade requires ironwork, so Ruskin’s loathing of the arcade seems a natural enough outgrowth of his loathing of cast iron. Yet there is another important reason the arcade so troubles Ruskin: its literal transparency, which for him takes on a whole host of meanings. As Isobel Armstrong notes:

Glass and iron structures offer, sensationally, strength without mass. Spatial boundaries became indeterminate, as wall mass manifested itself as a simple translucent marker. The free-standing, boundary-less space or “light-space” as the ideal of construction in translucent glass and iron, actually destroyed form by making it impossible to “see” the glass building as an opaque entity.

Whether seen from outside or inside, space becomes abstract.... [This was] behind Ruskin's furious attack on the Crystal Palace's abandonment of "lustreless matter," where glass erased the fact of its mediation. (2008, 9)

This Ruskinian fury extended to any building style that invoked this kind of abstract space. In Letter 29 of *Fors Clavigera*, for example, Ruskin once again laments the grotesqueries of a newly-built suburb near his childhood home:

That same district is now covered by, literally, many thousands of houses built within the last ten years, of rotten brick, with various iron devices to hold it together. They, every one, have a drawing-room and dining-room, transparent from back to front, so that from the road one sees the people's heads inside, clear against the light. Attached to every double block are exactly similar double parallelograms of garden, laid out in new gravel and scanty turf, on the model of the pleasure grounds in the Crystal Palace, and enclosed by high, thin, and pale brick walls. The gardens in front are fenced from the road with an immense weight of cast iron. (27:529)

What disturbs Ruskin about the layout of these new villas is that they are "transparent from back to front," are in fact laid out exactly like an arcade, with a clear sight line from door to door. The family inside, with their heads "clear against the light," are like so many exhibits, zoo animals, or actors on stage, exposed to the view of all manner of suburban flâneurs.

Yet it is not the openness of the houses per se that disturbs Ruskin; immediately before the passage just quoted, he sets up his screed by lovingly remembering the kind of cottages that had existed before the construction of this suburb, with "their doors mostly ajar, or with a half one shut to keep in the children" (27:529). The inhabitants of these homely cottages are also visible to passersby—but their houses are not "transparent" and their heads are not "clear." (In his lecture to young schoolgirls entitled "The Ethics of the Dust," in which Ruskin also uses geology and geological formations as extended metaphor, he informs the girls that they should be happy that they themselves are not made of crystal, lest they be forced to "see through a clear glass the daily processes of nourishment and decay" going on beneath the calm surface of their toilettes, while they are washing their faces and braiding their hair [18:271].)

It is arguably the Crystal Palace, and the arcade in general, that is Ruskin's real target in the antisuburbia diatribe. Other clues in the passage

betray the intimacy of the connection in Ruskin's mind: the already-rotten brick of the new houses is held together "with various iron devices," they are fenced with "an immense weight of cast iron," and even the supposedly beautiful and softening process of oxidation that he so poetically describes in the "Work of Iron" essay is here characterized as the new villas "getting leprous in patches all over the fronts" (27:529). Iron architectural elements—in the suburban villa, the urban arcade, and the Crystal Palace itself—seem to horrify Ruskin in these examples, to signify something very troubling about urbanization and modernity itself, which are figured as spaces of transparency and visibility where human activity is on perpetual display.

The other clue linking the suburban villa with the urban arcade is the proliferation of garbage that Ruskin persistently associates with the growth of suburbia. We have seen how for Ruskin the demarcation, by means of the iron fence, of neighborhood from countryside seems to encourage a profligate and openhanded littering. Yet every time Ruskin describes the construction of a new suburb, he cannot refrain from imaginatively heaping the landscape with refuse. To return to the passage from *Fiction, Fair and Foul* quoted at the beginning of this essay:

Half a dozen handfuls of new cottages, with Doric doors, are dropped about here and there among the gashed ground ... bordered on each side by heaps of—Hades only knows what!—mixed dust of every unclean thing that can crumble in drought, and mildew of every unclean thing that can rot or rust in damp: ashes and rags, beer-bottles and old shoes, battered pans, smashed crockery, shreds of nameless clothes, door-sweepings, floor-sweepings, kitchen garbage, back-garden sewage, old iron, rotten timber jagged with out-torn nails, cigar-ends, pipe-bowls, cinders, bones, and ordure, indescribable. (34:266)

(Even the new houses themselves are figured as refuse, "dropped" on the "gashed ground.") Under the pressure of describing this "indescribable" catalog of rubbish, Ruskin forgets the beauty of oxidation: "every unclean thing that can crumble" or "rust," including "old iron," is consigned alike to his imaginative scrap heap of horror.

What all of these examples share is a disturbing confusion of what properly belongs inside with what belongs outside—the human-made with the natural. Fences that encourage the seepage of household waste; the disturbing transparency of suburban villas (and the heads of their

inhabitants); the crystalline glitter of the arcade, which confuses outdoors and indoors—as much as Ruskin works to redeem the raw material of iron in his 1858 poetic essay, the industrial material of iron is complicit in all of these category confusions.

What the iron frame or rib or bar does, as architectural feature, is announce the human-made materiality of the object in question; it functions as a *parergon* which, in the case of the villa, enframes the imagined glowing scene of private domesticity—rendering it menacing in its “transparency”—and, in the case of the arcade, sets the commodity in relief and infuses it with its particular character. In his gloss of Kant in *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida explains:

The *parergon* inscribes something which comes as an extra, *exterior* to the proper field ... but whose transcendent exteriority comes to play, abut onto, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside only to the extent that the inside is lacking. It is lacking *in* something and it is lacking *from itself*. This additive, to be sure, is threatening. Its use is critical. It involves a risk and exacts a price. (1987, 56; emphases in original)

Part of that price involves the ultimate recognition of the uncontrollable nature of the *parergon*, of its tendency to infect that which it is meant merely to demarcate or protect: for Ruskin, the iron railing/bar changes the quality of the ostensibly “natural” object or scene it enframes. The structure of the villa and the arcade frames and holds in temporary relief, yet also deconstructs the truth of the relationships between both objects and human subjects held in their grasp: the truth of commodification (or we might say “exploitation”). It is the particular nature of the iron bar to frame those objects in a way that is alienating and defamiliarizing rather than aestheticizing.

NOTES

1. References to Ruskin’s writings provide volume and page number from the Library Edition of *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (George Allen and Unwin, 1903–1912).
2. See particularly Elizabeth Carolyn Miller; Devin Griffiths; and Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer.
3. As David M. Craig notes, for Ruskin, “the exercise of moral restraint as a consumer starts in a recognition of specific physical limits. [T]his recognition of physical limits and a commitment to moral restraint are inextricably

bound" (2006, 340). Patrick Brantlinger extends this line of thinking even further when he insists that for Ruskin, "the apparently *private* choices of individual consumers, gendered female, are matters of *public*, national urgency" (2000, 91; emphases added).

4. But note H. G. Wells's fantasy, a couple of decades later, of the arcadified city of utopia: "They will have flung great arches and domes of glass above the wider spaces of the town, the slender beauty of the perfect metalwork far overhead will be softened to a fairy-like unsubstantiality by the mild London air" (165).

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