

Biblical Realism in Ruskin's Daguerreotype 'Noah's Vine'

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John Ruskin was a man who lived and breathed Scripture. At the end of his life, he recounted that he could not remember a time when he did not know the Bible. Throughout his childhood, he read the Bible with his mother every day, favouring Psalm 119 above all with its praise of, and yearning for, God's laws. Ruskin's sense of the Bible's place within the fabric of God's revelation became, during his adult studies, the touchstone against which Nature was never found wanting, but against which Man frequently fell short.

For Ruskin, the divine correlation between God's 'two books' - Bible and Nature - found its expression in visual form, particularly in the Gothic style of art and architecture. Here Ruskin was not immune to photography's ability to capture its details with startling realism. Though his vacillation regarding the medium across his lifetime is well-known, his early engagement with daguerreotypes in the late 1840s reveals an enthusiastic appreciation. In collaboration with his valets (first John Hobbs, and later Frederick Crawley), Ruskin project-managed the daguerreotyping of nearly 300 façades and capitals across Europe, and in Venice primarily.

The process of light's reaction with silver sulphides on a copper plate, and the subsequent developing of a direct positive image, had been announced to the world by Louis Daguerre in 1839. The result was a striking visual record with unparalleled fidelity to nature and a mirror-like brilliance. For Ruskin, the daguerreotypes' most compelling aspect was, paradoxically, their 'Rembrandt-like' effect; the architectural surfaces were defined not in terms of harsh outlines but rather a rich, tonally shadowed and highlighted field. In this, Ruskin was adopting a term more frequently applied to William Henry Fox Talbot's paper process (also announced in 1839), in which the element of chiaroscuro typically receives a softer treatment.

In this daguerreotype 'Noah's Vine (detail)' (c.1849-52), we confront one of three figure sculptures which occupy primary positions at the corners of the Ducal Palace, Venice. Placed some ten feet above eye level, surmounting prominent capitals, the life-size figures present what Ruskin called 'the Fig-tree angle' (the principal one, featuring Adam and Eve); 'the Vine angle' (with Noah, as seen, and his sons on the perpendicular face); and 'the Judgement angle' (featuring the judgement of King Solomon). For Ruskin, the first two examples

capture the Gothic spirit, while 'the Judgement angle' is from the Renaissance. In distinguishing the styles, Ruskin elaborates on their respective biblical foci. The Gothic represents 'the frank confession of its own weakness' (the subjects being 'the FALL OF MAN, and the DRUNKENNESS OF NOAH'), and the Renaissance with 'its firm confidence in its own wisdom' ('the JUDGMENT OF SOLOMON'). With the capitalisation as shown in the original typesetting of the text, Ruskin emulated what he thought the building itself was trying to do: that is to say, positioning emphasis at the cornerstones. His daguerreotypes show the angles from multiple perspectives in order to convey the sense in which Ruskin felt the subjects' uncontainableness: their protrusions, their 'depth, breadth, and fullness' which conveyed conceptual as well as material projection.

For Ruskin, the daguerreotypes could indeed serve to document the Palace (preserving their beauty), and might even aid aesthetic instruction (always within limited means), but they also proceeded with a directive that exceeded the bounds of the images' frame to act as a testimony. In a very biblical sense, they had an apologetic. At one level, it is possible to read this through and with the image's details: we have Noah's precipitous fallenness, and we have the profusion of Nature's details in the vine. For Ruskin, the enduring appeal of intricately sculpted foliage and frond in the figuration of a vine (which he noted here as carried to sculptural perfection) was indivisible from the life of God in creation (Genesis), in Israel, through to Jesus as the vine, and leaves for the healing of nations (Revelation). As a subject, the vine has an overwhelming typological continuity with God's salvific plan, which becomes the more contemporaneous in a photograph of reality.

On a deeper level, the daguerreotype's 'power of obtaining veracity in the representation of material and tangible things', described as 'unimpeachable' by Ruskin, is part of a commendable human endeavour to realise 'what is appointed for us here' before the coming of the Day of God. In the last chapter of *The Stones of Venice*, Volume III, Ruskin includes photographic developments in mankind's adolescent emergence, wherein the grasping of new forms of human knowledge needs to reckon less with prosaic definitions of art and technology than with

the spiritual purity of those wielding such knowledge:

‘It is no more art to lay on colour delicately, than to lay on acid delicately. It is no more art to use the cornea and retina for the reception of an image, than to use a lens and a piece of silvered paper. But the moment that inner part of the man, or rather that entire and only being of the man, of which cornea and retina, fingers and hands, pencils and colours, are all the mere servants and instruments; that manhood which has light in itself, though the eyeball be sightless, and can gain in strength when the hand and the foot are hewn off and cast into the fire; the moment this part of the man stands forth with its solemn “Behold, it is I”, then the work becomes art indeed, perfect in honour, priceless in value, boundless in power.’

Such language for craftsmanship, inclusive of photography’s ‘art’, resounds with biblical vocabulary and with biblical concepts of the kingdom of God. Ruskin’s reference to manhood’s ‘light in itself’, which ‘stands forth with its solemn “Behold, it is I,” conflates revelatory settings from across Jesus’ adult life:

his declaration to the crowds ‘You are the light of the world’ from the Sermon on the Mount, and his repeated confirmation ‘It is I’ when appearing to his disciples supernaturally. In another Gospel conflation, the command to cut off one’s hand and foot, or to pluck out one’s eye comes from public-directed and disciple-directed challenges to holy living, in which the graphic impact of bodily maimedness is meant to illuminate the priority (and preferentiality, given the ‘eternal fire’ stakes involved) of getting to heaven over short-term gain. For Ruskin, human endeavour, including photography, must resound with the same self-giving humility, the same sense of standing that ‘in the sight of God, all the knowledge man can gain is as nothing’. In this he is removed from more popular conceptions of photography as ‘the truth of light from heaven’, as one American reviewer of the daguerreotype had it. Rather, just as man is fallen like Noah, so the work or image bears his



John Ruskin and John Hobbs
Venice. The Ducal Palace south-east angle, Noah's Ark (detail).
c.1849-1852, quarter-plate daguerreotype. © K. & J. Jacobson.

story of redemption, over and above a story of God’s revelation.

The medium of photography would impress on its viewers an immediacy of subject, whose biblical references are often treated by Ruskin as of a piece with the immediate human condition. To pick up his writing, and to hold it in view of the photographs, almost viscerally ruptures any sense of iconographic objectivism for the Bible’s subjects. His words explode with the force of Christian intent, with earnest and lyrical biblically-saturated prose that sutures contemporary seeing with soulfulness. Overwhelmingly, it is Ruskin’s own threshold with the world, and a fundamental concern for that of his fellow man, that writes and images itself across his application of photographic seeing.