Ruskin, Whistler, and the Climate of Art in 1884

NICHOLAS ROBBINS
On 18 October 1884, John Ruskin began what would be his last series of lectures at Oxford, *The Pleasures of England*, by quoting from the Inaugural Slade Lecture he had given there in 1870:

> There is a destiny now possible to us—the highest ever set before a nation to be accepted or refused. We are still degenerate in race; a race mingled of the best northern blood. We are not yet dissolvent in temper, but still have the firmness to remonstrate, and the grace to obey … will you, youths of England, make your country again a royal throne of kings; a sceptred isle, for all the world a source of light, a centre of peace; mistress of Learning and of the Arts … ?

The 1870 Inaugural Lecture concluded with Ruskin’s call for England to ‘found colonies as fast and far as she is able’. And it was the primary text to which Edward Said returned in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) in order to resituate Ruskin’s aesthetic theory, in which empire often remained unspoken, within late-Victorian imperialist ideology. Upon Ruskin’s own return to this passage in 1884, he claimed it as ‘the most pregnant and essential’ of his teachings: ‘Why does this sharply militant passage about nationalism, empire, and race resurface in this moment in Ruskin’s thought, framed by the language of light and purity?

One answer might be that, in 1884, Ruskin was preoccupied with a different but closely related fear of ‘degeneracy’: the advent of a deteriorating environment that, rather than making England a ‘source of light’, was instead casting it into disorienting, non-puritan darkness. Earlier that year, in his lectures *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, Ruskin revealed the appearance of a ‘trembling’, ‘blanching’, ‘filthy’ ‘plague-wind’. This new climate threatened to dissolve the environmental systems that had structured Ruskin’s thinking about both art and politics from the beginning of his career. Hence the relevance of his 1870 lecture, which warned that England ‘cannot remain herself a heap of cinders’, but must instead ‘make her own majesty stainless’ and reclaim a sky ‘polluted by no unholy clouds’. *Storm-Cloud* announced a crisis that traversed politics, art, and the environment, in which Ruskin’s aesthetic conception of nationalism converged with what Brian Day calls his ‘moral ecology’. In the new era of the ‘storm-cloud’, Ruskin perceived a receding horizon of possibility for England and its empire, ‘on which formerly the sun never set’ but now ‘never rises’.

Accounts of Ruskin’s *Storm-Cloud* have rightly focused on its status in the history of environmental thinking, positioning it as a prescient depiction of current-day climate crisis. Yet it was what this new climate portended for art—inseparable for Ruskin from its ecological surround—that gave his account its urgency. His lectures attempted to account for the impending loss of the environmental system that, he argued, had shaped the perceptual faculties of Europe’s artists and architects, and those of England in particular. Rather than examining the storm-cloud’s precise causes, Ruskin’s lectures were concerned primarily with furnishing a description of its effects, this pattern of weather that threatened to fundamentally alter England’s climate. The chaotic nature of this account—‘thrown into form’, as Ruskin writes in the preface to his fragmented, digressive, passionate text—gave cause for critics in his time and ours to consider it as an expression of his declining mental health. Instead of considering the physical or psychic origins of Ruskin’s ‘plague-wind’, this chapter instead considers the decomposing and fragmenting force it exerted on the form of the text itself. And so rather than seeking to find in Ruskin a proto-ecological theorist, I examine instead how Ruskin’s own work of depiction, composition, and revision in *Storm-Cloud* models the place of art in a time of climatic precarity. Examining, first, how Ruskin’s lectures embody the challenges that this new climate posed to sensation and its representation, I then consider how this experience of the environment in *Storm-Cloud* prompted subsequent fears about this ‘trembling’ wind’s effects on English artists.

If Ruskin insisted on art and environment’s perilous entwinement, his familiar antagonist, James McNeill Whistler, would instead attempt to detach the artwork from its ecological relations. Ruskin’s writing was founded on the constant movement between natural systems and formed artefacts—an interchange that Whistler’s art terminated. Instead, through his meticulously unified exhibitions, he constructed self-enclosed, and experimental aesthetic environments for the reception of his art. This Whistler did, in part, in order to argue for the artist’s autonomy from the determining forces of climate, history, and nation central both to positivist, historicist criticism and to Ruskin’s own thought. His art and exhibitions thus model a different relationship of art to the changing climates of modernity. If Whistler’s art was considered indistinct, this was in part due to his refusal to make distinctions between different landscapes and climates, between coal smoke and night air; if it aimed at aesthetic autonomy, that autonomy was dependent upon the invisible infrastructures of the industrial metropolis. It is this indistinctness and autonomy—rather than his non-referential facture or aestheticist stance—that perhaps defines Whistler’s characteristic modernity in the ‘Age of Coal’. And so this chapter proposes that the fissure between Whistler and Ruskin’s conception of art—central to accounts of late-Victorian aesthetics—must also be understood ecologically. In 1884, facing an environment in crisis, Ruskin believed that the inherent interfacing of artist and environment might now come at the cost of art’s coherence and force. That is, unless the environment of England itself could be remade under the sign of its former ‘purity’, one defined by national and imperial frameworks. Whistler instead transformed the artificial environments of the urban metropolis into the grounding of his art, efficaciously not just the labour of the artist, but the distinction between artifice and nature as such.

**Sensation**

Standing before his audience at the British Institution in London on 4 February 1884 to deliver the first part of *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, Ruskin faced an acute challenge of representation. He had to produce this strange wind, which caused leaves ‘to tremble and the sun to shine inconstantly, as a phenomenon particular to its own crisis’. In the process, Ruskin had to give weather a historicity and objecthood that had been absent in his earlier works. In the *Storm-Cloud* series, Ruskin faced an acute challenge of representation. He had to produce this strange wind, which caused leaves ‘to tremble and the sun to shine inconstantly, as a phenomenon particular to its own crisis’. In the process, Ruskin had to give weather a historicity and objecthood that had been absent in his earlier works. In turn, this new climate tasked Ruskin with submitting this life-long project to a working-through of memory’s fragmented inscriptions, he hoped to recover narrative coherence in the midst of a shattered environmental system.

To heighten the impact of the storm-cloud’s deviance, Ruskin first had to establish what had been lost—the ‘Divine Power … which had fitted, as the air for
human breath, so the clouds for human sight and nourishment.\textsuperscript{17} In order to suggest the sky's vital force, he summons his past records of the sky: sketches that he had enlarged, likely onto transparencies, with 'colours prepared for [him] lately by Messrs. Newman', the artists' supply firm.\textsuperscript{18} With the help of a theatre producer, and the assistance of limelight, Ruskin presented his records, which he called 'diagrams', using a 'white light as pure as that of the day'.\textsuperscript{19} These enlarged and projected images transformed the interior lecture hall itself into a space of immersive experience, a form of environmental perception that enlisted the embodied observer in its unfolding.\textsuperscript{20} His audience was presented with Ruskin's drawing of an afternoon sky seen from his Lake District home, Brantwood, in August 1880 (Fig. 9.1). Ruskin's mark-making in the watercolour moves between different scales and opacities that suggest roiling, interlocked forms of vapour animated by vital, yet ordered, energies of transformation. This projected image was accompanied by Ruskin's rhythmic textual account of the way that the clouds in this sky formed 'threads, and meshes, and tresses, and tapestries, flying, failing, melting, reappearing; spinning and unspinning themselves, coiling and uncoiling, winding and unwinding', animated by 'pulses of colour, interwoven in motion,—intermittent in fire'.\textsuperscript{21} Such language animated the static image through the environment's temporal duration. In this dual materialization of the ordered sky, Ruskin hoped to stage for his audience a sense of what, in the fifth volume of \textit{Modern Painters} (1860), he had called the 'consistence' or 'orderly adherence' of inanimate matter to coordinated systems—a 'nobleness' that was always threatened by 'corruption'.\textsuperscript{22} His attempts in that book to fashion a perspectival system that could accommodate the system of the sky constituted his most ambitious, and strangest, effort to fashion an aesthetic programme from the seemingly disordered, resistant matter of environmental systems (Fig. 9.2).\textsuperscript{23}

Yet Ruskin insists that the referent exceeds the capacity of his 'diagrams' to communicate their intensity. The representation of the sky on paper, limited by the material quality of the substrate and the artificial lighting, could never attain the same brilliance of hue. Speaking of another of his drawings, depicting a sunset in 1876...
seen from his childhood home at Herne Hill in London—whose partially gridded structure recalls his perspectival system—he said that it showed ‘one of the last pure sunsets I ever saw’ (Fig. 9.3). While insisting that the chromatic density of the image is no ‘exaggeration’, still ‘[t]he brightest pigment we have would look dim beside the truth’. Such diagrams, as he claims of the Brantwood view, ‘can only explain, not reproduce’ the sky (see Fig. 9.1). Ruskin had long discussed the absolute difference between the material phenomena of nature and those which artists could achieve on paper or canvas. Yet in this case, this distance of the record from the immanence of the experience it records is marked by a new sense of loss. The sensations to which these ‘diagrams’ refer are now impossible in the degraded climate of the present. As such his records of departed environments take on the complex forms of presence and historicity that, as Jeremy Melius has suggested, characterise his reproductions of artworks. His ‘diagrams’ of the sky, in attempting to give a history of the environment, produced the ‘diabolic clouds over everything’ that he wrote back in the 1875 diary entry, Ruskin turns back to the ‘first time [he] recognised the clouds’ near Oxford in spring 1871, a phenomenon later reported in the July issue of his serial publication Fors Clavigera. A parade of dates and places then unfolds in his circulating account: a reference to a ‘faltering or fluttering past of phantoms’ at a production of Faust in Avallon, France, in August 1882; a ‘healthy and lovely’ winter in 1878–9; then, a series of diary entries from the summer of 1876, one celebrating the ‘entirely glorious sunset’ he had illustrated (see Fig. 9.3), another assailing the ‘dense manufacturing mist’ and a ‘deep, high, fribines of lurid, yet not sublimely lurid, smoke-cloud; dense manufacturing mist; fearful squalls of shivery wind’; then another appearance of the wind from 1879 that ‘waked [him] at six … lasted an hour, then passed off … settling down again into Manchester’s devil darkness’, followed by a ‘fearfully dark mist’ in February 1883; finally returning to the ‘diabolic clouds over everything’ that he registered four years earlier.

In tracking the unstable subject position of this narrative, it becomes clear that this process of revision that guided his attempts to define the storm-cloud reverse the equation that Ruskin proposed for his visual diagrams—that they explain, but cannot reproduce, the environmental effects to which they refer. Here his patterns of verbal expression reproduce (rather than explain) the scattering, dissolving effects of the storm-cloud. Through his account, Ruskin narrates the dissolution of the stable relationship between environment and representation, the balance to which his writing always strove, even if it proved consistently elusive. He had admitted the account was ‘thrown into form’ and we might understand this phrase to describe his own experience of the storm-cloud. The effect of the climate’s changes cast him into a crisis of spatial and temporal form, a collapsing of interior and exterior relations, which then shaped the interpretive process of revising his archive of perceptual experience. His lecture stages the effects of this climate for the lecture’s audience in a plainly bewildering fashion, yet with an your own coal-scuttles’. Such subjects—urban, interiorised, enclosed—were precisely the kind of artificially sustained ‘animal frames’ that he feared that the plague-cloud would produce.

When it comes to defining the storm-cloud, Ruskin turns away from visual records toward language and narration. While claiming he ‘should have liked to have blotted down for you a bit of plague-cloud’, he implies the single visual record’s insufficiency in describing its effects. Yet his inability (or arched unwillingness) to give a visual record of the storm-cloud also suggests its own evasion of Ruskin’s perceptual grasp. He gives instead a quasi-classificatory description of the storm-cloud: a ‘malignant quality of wind, unconnected with any one quarter of the compass’, a wind that ‘blows tremulously’, which ‘degrades, while it intensifies’ storms and ‘blanches’ the sun. All are qualities of attenuated sensation, rather than fixed nodes of visual classification.

Instead of such classificatory logic, Ruskin gives a narrative description of his encounters with this new climate. He begins this account of the storm-cloud by citing an entry from his diary made at Bolton Abbey in 1875—describing the atmosphere’s ‘tremulous action’, its ‘fits of varying force’—within which entry he refers to his experience of the same phenomenon in Vevey, Switzerland, in 1872. ‘I am able now to state positively’, the quoted entry continues, ‘that its range of power extends from the North of England to Sicily’, effectively overwriting delicate geographic gradations of climatic variability. Moreover ‘it blows more or less during the whole of the year, except the early autumn’, thereby disassembling seasonal orders of temporal progression. From this statement that operates at the largest possible scale, the entry turns to the day it was written, when the trembling cloud ‘has entirely fallen; and there seems hope of bright weather, the first for me since the end of May, when I had two fine days’. Following this 1875 diary entry, Ruskin turns back to the ‘first time [he] recognised the clouds’ near Oxford in spring 1871, a phenomenon later reported in the July issue of his serial publication Fors Clavigera.

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intensely rendered internal vivacity. If Ruskin's rambling and vexed narrative had the effect of rendering his sanity suspect, it might be more apt to assign to his observations the status of a ‘true hallucination’, a kind of visionary perception that confirms its own reality even as the verifiability of the external object remains unstable.35 Rather than provoking a chronologically or geographically systematic history of this new climate, the storm-cloud induces a meditation on time's atmospheric and unrecordable aspect and the decomposing effect of the 'plague wind' on the unfolding both of nature's systems and of Ruskin's periodising narrative.36 In the diary entry from 1875 with which he began, written from his desk at Brantwood, Ruskin writes: 'This wind is the plague-wind of the eighth decade of years in the nineteenth century; a period which will assuredly be recognized in future meteorological history as one of phenomena hitherto unrecorded in the courses of nature.'37 This account of the weather outside the window continually slips through temporal registers. It establishes the 'eighth decade of the nineteenth century' as a historic epoch in which the climate of England was altered; such phenomena will be recorded in the future, which future was in the process of arriving in the form of Ruskin's own lecture. But the storm-cloud dissolves the boundedness even of Ruskin's own process of recording: While I have been writing these sentences, the white clouds above specified have increased to twice the size they had when I began to write; and in about two hours from this time ... the whole sky will be dark with them, as it was yesterday, and has been ... during the last five years.38

In this passage, the record and the recorded merge, but only in a disjointed fashion. Ruskin struggles to establish the external reality of the environment, to separate it from his own internality and from the 'thickness of duration' of his embodied perception.39 It is unclear whether the clouds are the subject of his projective observation, or whether he is the object of their transforming and disturbing powers. Produced from this constantly shifting subject position—caught between temporal and geographic conditions—Ruskin's text strains at the borders of legible narrative order.40 It is this continuously disturbed position that Storm-Cloud reflexively stages as the condition of the aesthetic subject in the time of environmental crisis. Rather than a subject opened toward the purposive unfolding of creation, Ruskin's text constructs a fearful, anxious 'animal frame' exposed to a frighteningly indefinite and mutable climate. It was this weakened perceptual capacity, bereft of a guiding environmental order, that he feared the storm-cloud would impose upon England and its artists.

Affliction

As Ruskin finalised Storm-Cloud for publication in May 1884, he sat down to write the appendix to The Art of England, a series of lectures on the recent history of painting in England that he had given the previous year at Oxford.41 The contents of this appendix are haunted by Ruskin's description of the effects that the progressively degrading climate had upon his own aesthetic faculties: I will tell you thus much: that had the weather when I was young been such as it is now, no book such as Modern Painters ever would or could have been written; for every argument, and every sentiment in that book, was founded on the personal experience of the beauty and blessing of nature ... That harmony is broken, and broken the world round.42

Here, Ruskin submits himself and his literary production to the same conditions of environmental influence that he argued also affected artists: this 'broken' system, he wrote, led to 'blinded men'.43 Reflected upon this relationship between artist and environment in The Art of England, Ruskin returns to a famous chapter from the fifth volume of Modern Painters (1860), 'The Two Boyhoods', in which he argues for the formative effect of climate—both environmental and cultural—upon the art of Giorgione and J. M. W. Turner. '[S]ince that comparison was written', he warns, 'a new element of evil has developed itself against art'.44 The Venetian environment of Giorgione's youth that he lovingly described there—'brightness out of the north, and balm from the south'—had now entered, in his 1884 estimation of the intervening 'malignant aerial phenomena', an 'epoch of continual diminution'.45 His account of the Alps in 'The Two Boyhoods' now stood for him as a kind of monument to the 'beautiful and healthy states of natural cloud and light' that had been lost.46 On the other hand, the urban climate that he argued had, in part, produced Turner's sensibility and his ability to 'endure ugliness'—London's 'black barges', 'every possible condition of fog' that had conditioned Turner's to appreciate 'effects of dinginess, smoke, soot, dust'—had only intensified.47 Turner's miraculous conversion by the 'fair English hills' of Yorkshire, his turn to the 'strength of nature' that had just barely snatched him from modernity's desolation and death, would now be nullified.48 '[W]hat ruin it is', he declares, 'for men of any sensitive faculty to live in such a city as London is now'.49

The broader desolation that the storm-cloud heralded is now brought to bear on a very particular question: the fate of 'English art' in this changed climate.

Without in the least recognizing the sources of these evils, the entire body of English artists, through the space now of some fifteen years, (quite enough to paralyze, in the young ones, what in their nature was most sensitive,) had been thus afflicted by the deterioration of climate described in my lectures [Storm-
Cloud, given this last spring in London.\(^{30}\)

Ruskin narrates the effects of the ‘deterioration of climate’ on art as a kind of degenerative disease: one of paralysis and affliction, which bores into and stunts the growth of the artist’s ‘sensitive nature’, which he would later in 1884 term the ‘delicacy of bodily sense’.\(^{1}\) His language of ‘deterioration’ and degeneration echoes the racialised discourses that surrounded both colonisation (such as anxieties about the effect of ‘torrid’ or extreme climates upon the coloniser’s body) and sanitary reform (such as concerns around productivity and health in working-class populations).\(^{5}\) In this case, Ruskin’s concern for purity manifests in his concern for the fate of particularly ‘English’ faculties of representing the natural world.

This speculation rests on his own experimental and embodied account of the weather the day prior to his writing of the appendix of The Art of England. Standing on Lake Coniston near his home on 20 May 1884, Ruskin uses the white surface of his shirt-sleeve, held up against the sky, to measure the diminished scale of tints and colours that would be available to the landscape painter. Most distressingly, rather than finding a richly-hued sky, instead the ‘darkest part of the sky-blue opposite the sun was lighter, by much, than pure white in the shade in open air’. The clouds were ‘shapeless, colourless, and lightless, like dirty bits of wool, without any sort of arrangement or order of action’. The ‘entire form-value’ of the reflections in the lake is lost, and the mountains which in the darkest part of the sky-blue opposite the sun was lighter, by much, than pure white in the shade in open air’. The clouds were ‘shapeless, colourless, and lightless, like dirty bits of wool, without any sort of arrangement or order of action’. The ‘entire form-value’ of the reflections in the lake is lost, and the mountains which may for the moment be ‘clear’ will ‘probably disappear altogether towards evening in mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke’. An artist working in this climate and pressured by the market, will be driven, Ruskin writes, to invent a landscape from a ‘few splashes … according to the mere grey smoke'.  

In Goodwin’s landscape, wild carnelian, salmon, white, and blue curl and streak over the horizon, framed by a dingy haze explicitly represented, here, as industrial emissions. Rather than being caught within the organic net of Ruskin’s analysis, his renewed insistence upon such determinism perhaps evolved out of his own struggles to evade the ever-expanding ‘shade’ of this new climate. Responding to Taine’s environmental conception of art, Ruskin insists that the degradation of English art had its cure only in the wholesale remaking of social and economic structures. And so, he ends The Art of England by asking whether London’s polluted urban environment is ‘indeed the natural and divinely appointed produce of the Valley of the Thames’.\(^{62}\) Ruskin’s gesture towards an alternative world suggests the affinity of his vision with that of contemporary utopian or apocalyptic fiction, such as Richard Jeffries’s novel After London, or, Wild England, published in 1885, which imagines England ‘relapsing’ into a pre-industrial state following environmental collapse.\(^{63}\) Converting a world that would produce something other than the ‘afflicted’ art he was witnessing in 1884, Ruskin returns to the reforming agency of his environmental, social, and aesthetic thought. Art would not change unless the entirety of England could be remade, a call rooted in the ‘divinely’ sanctioned status of the nation’s environment and its role in fostering an art of landscape.

Against nature

Four days before Ruskin sat down in May 1884 to consider the fate of England’s art under the sign of the storm-cloud, Whistler opened the latest of his series of one-person exhibitions in London. Titled Notes—Harmonies—Nocturnes and held at Dowdeswell’s Gallery on New Bond Street, the exhibition aimed, just as Ruskin’s lecture performances had, to produce a space of environmental perception for its metropolitan audience. But rather than the ‘white light as pure as that of day’ with which Ruskin illumined his ‘diagrams’, Whistler instead drew his visitors into an elegant, refined interior defined by, and even mimetic of, the greyed urban atmosphere beyond its doors. Appendimg
a title to the installation itself—Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Grey—he positioned the exhibition as a work of art, suggesting the self-sufficiency of its dense network of aesthetic sensation. Given the disastrous libel suit that Whistler had brought against Ruskin six years earlier, and the ensuing spectacle of the trial, the artist is left unnamed in Ruskin’s criticism of artists in thrall to the ‘shade of the metropolis’. Yet Whistler’s art and his exhibitions were the most powerful example of an aesthetic culture overtaken by the urbanised conditions of perception that Ruskin anxiously anticipated in 1884.

Whistler’s approach to his exhibitions is perhaps the most radical intervention that he made in the artistic practice of his time. Rather than the crowded and heterogeneous spaces of most nineteenth-century exhibitions, he constructed relatively spare, carefully calibrated ensembles. Whistler inaugurated this approach with his 1874 exhibition in Pall Mall, taking up the avant-garde tradition of the one-person exhibition. His strategies included specially crafted frames and carefully spaced arrangements of objects; wall, ceiling, and moulding colours responsive to the tones of his artworks; and natural light modulated by shutters or hanging cloths, called velariums. For his 1884 exhibition, Whistler assembled a group of works, all of a small scale and in a wide range of mediums: oil painting, pastel, and watercolour. The gallery’s walls were hung with pink textiles and painted in two shades of grey, the artworks set into large light-coloured frames. While these sensational exhibitions were part of his outsized artistic persona and constituted a sophisticated business strategy, his reformulation of the exhibition space also carried an epistemological force. These artificial aesthetic climates were the most effective argument Whistler made about the relationship of art to the natural environment: one not of entwinement, but rather one of independence, even opposition.

Produced during his recent travels in Venice and Holland, as well as various sites in England and London, Whistler’s landscapes in Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Grey proposed, in part, a scrambled geography of aesthetic experience. Assembling a unified harmony out of works produced from far-flung sites, Whistler’s 1884 exhibition constructed an aesthetic economy in which the colour and harmony suggested by nature could be extracted and circulated independent of place. Their value is secured neither by their reference to the places and objects depicted—the kind of narrative coherence Ruskin aimed, and failed, to produce—nor by adherence to an ‘English’ sensibility, but rather by the coordinated density of aesthetic experience accumulated in the metropolis. The works in this exhibition were marked by an even greater sense of unfinish and geographic indeterminacy than usual. His watercolour from St. Ives, Sunrise; Grey and Gold, like Ruskin’s and Goodwin’s, depicts a sky animated by chromatic intensity (Fig. 9.5). Yet while their works, to different ends, insisted upon a vivid referentiality and an articulation of external systems, Whistler’s Sunrise is given over to a celebration of liquidity derived from its own medium, constructing a sky from ragged banks of grey, lemon, violet, and salmon pigment, and working on a liquid-soaked support to produce diaphanously spreading forms that flaunt their own appearance of material entropy. Rather than attempting to capture the interchanges of heat, air, and moisture specific to a place and time, Whistler’s watercolour unfolds instead an artificial ecology of pigment and watery medium. We might see in this work an echo of Ruskin’s lamentation over the artist who invents landscapes with ‘a few splashes’. But rather than the unsystematic, even desperate operation Ruskin describes, Whistler’s novel aesthetic language of landscape was threatening precisely because of its allegiance to system—one whose unity derived not from nature, but from the alternate milieu of the urban interior.

The 1884 exhibition was accompanied by Whistler’s most pointed textual riposte to Ruskin’s theory of art, his epigrammatic essay ‘L’Envoie’ published in the accompanying catalogue, which opens with the notorious claim that ‘A picture is finished when all trace of the means used to bring about the end has disappeared’. Yet Whistler’s description of his own facture could be extended to the self-naturalising economic and physical infrastructure of the metropolis he repeatedly pictured. In his Nocturne in Grey and Gold—Piccadilly, also exhibited in 1884, Whistler takes up a similar grammar of pigment application taken to a further extreme: thin washes of grey, planar silhouettes, and above all the liquid application of pigment in porously

Fig. 9.5 James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Sunrise; Grey and Gold (1883–4). Watercolour, 17.6 × 12.7 cm. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin. Photo: © National Gallery of Ireland.
interpenetrating forms (Fig. 9.6). Here, though, this manner of painting is now applied to the clotted and obscured environment of London, in which buildings, figures, carriages have seemingly dissolved into the atmosphere around them. The 'trace of the means' that produces the dense coal smoke of Piccadilly is effaced alongside the labour of the artist. Such an environment appears, like the watercolour depicting it, to have spontaneously developed of its own agency, without attention to any other systems of 'consistence' that have been disrupted by the unseen forces of human labour and the coal combustion that produced London's obscured environment.

Whistler's exhibition designs produced spaces in which this effacement of material distinction expanded outward into the physical space of the viewer. Seen at Dowdeswell's in May 1884, Whistler's Piccadilly watercolour would have found kindred tonalities with the many shades of grey in the gallery interior. One reviewer of the 1884 exhibition wrote how his Arrangement 'produces on the eye a soft misty effect of delicate colour which seems to pervade the air of the apartment, and not merely to lie flat on the walls', almost like an odour or a vapour emitting from the painted and decorated surfaces. The 'landscape' invented by Whistler's 'splashes' was, then, the immersive interior climate of the gallery itself. Beginning first with shutters in his 1884 exhibition, and later with velariums of hanging cloth, Whistler's experimental lighting technologies attempted to control the diffused illumination of the interior (Fig. 9.7). Hanging above the space of the exhibition like a 'cloud of yellow merino', Whistler's velariums redoubled the 'shade of the Metropolis', producing what one critic would, in 1886, describe as a 'prevailing fog [that] has got into the pictures'. Like the figures in Whistler's portraits, who often barely emerge from the gloom of their setting, Whistler's room-sized Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Grey imagined a merging of the greyed atmospheric matter of the city not only with the pictures within them, but with the exhibition visitors' perceiving 'flesh'. Such a merging was imagined in Whistler's figural watercolours included in the 1884 exhibition, but was also enacted by visitors to

the private view inaugurating the show, who coordinated their costumes to Whistler's Arrangement. These bodies, thoroughly assimilated to their urban climate, represented the stunted aesthetic subjects Ruskin would imagine in The Art of England. Whistler's artworks, and his ideal aesthetic subjects, are radically porous to their surrounding environment: but it is one from which 'nature' and its systems have been rigorously excluded.

The urban interior, then—and not the landscape—was the ideal climate of
aesthetic knowledge and experience for Whistler, one in which the subject could be trained to perceive an alternate, artificial aesthetic system. As Caroline Arscott has argued, in his engagement with the subject of fog in particular, Whistler's art was deeply concerned with the embodiment and spatiality of perception; London's dense atmosphere provided him with 'experimental setups to investigate subjective experience at its limit points'. Such an understanding of Whistler's experimental project could be extended to his exhibitions. Whereas the 'diagrams' in Ruskin Storm-Cloud lecture attempted to transport Humboldtian, plein-air scientific experience into the space of the London theatre, the controlled and enclosed perception of Whistler's exhibitions appears closer to the analytic science of the laboratory developing in the late-nineteenth century, a form of knowledge Ruskin derided in Storm-Cloud as 'vitiating revelation'.

His exhibitions perhaps resonate most closely with the 'cloud chambers' constructed for the reproduction of natural phenomena. Such concern for the interior as a space of environmental manipulation formed part of a broader cultural interest in the interior, such as the transporting sensory totality described by Joris-Karl Huysmans's À rebours, also published in May 1884. In Huysmans's interior, the embodied experience of the world can be replaced, with improved precision and intensity, by a carefully sequenced series of perfumes. In the same fashion, Whistler's exhibitions argued for the urban interior's displacement of the natural world as the scene of aesthetic instruction.

Whistler's notorious 'Ten O’Clock Lecture', first given the following year in 1885, would make explicit his challenge to Ruskin's conception of art's environmental being. In this instance Whistler takes up the very 'medium'—the lecture—central to Ruskin's career. In one of the more pointed passages in the 'Ten O'Clock', Whistler aimed to undermine the central tenets of art criticism's geographical and historical grounding:

A favorite faith, dear to those who teach, is that certain periods were especially artistic, and that nations, readily named, were notably lovers of Art … That, could we but change our habit and climate … we should again require the spoon of Queen Anne … Useless! … Listen! There never was an artistic period. There never was an Art-loving nation.

In preaching the complete independence of the artist from the determining agency of climate (and from historicist frameworks, such as the Queen Anne architectural revival), Whistler refutes Ruskin's belief that art's transformation depends on the environment and culture that surrounds it. Indeed in this new climate, as Oscar Wilde's iconoclastic character Vivian from his essay 'The Decay of Lying' (1889) would have it, the causal chain between art and its climate is reversed. It is the artist who determines nature's perceptible aspects. Through the work of painters—and it is clear, Whistler especially—the cultivated urban subject has been taught to see, and to savour, London's 'wonderful brown fogs'. Seeming to draw upon Ruskin’s own language, Wilde's Vivian goes on to claim that the 'extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to this particular school of Art … [Fogs] did not exist until Art had invented them'.

Displacement

In Whistler's conception of the work of art, the artist first immerses himself within, and then turns his back upon the world: transformation begins not in the landscape, but within the material matrix of the artwork, and beyond that, the artificial climates that surround and sustain it. The urban interior, served by its unseen 'coal-scuttles', serves to produce a form of aesthetic perception in which the distinction between the natural and the artificial, between a 'consistent' system and chthonic materialist dissolution, no longer obtains. Ruskin, on the other hand, in hoping to restore England's lost 'fitness' for the production of moral aesthetic subjects, wanted to return the nation to an imagined ecological purity. English art, as such, demanded an English climate. 'A nation is only worthy of the soil and scenes that it has inherited', he said in his 1870 Inaugural Lecture, 'when, by all its acts and arts, it is making them more lovely for its children'. As for the pollution, Ruskin felt it could safely be displaced elsewhere: this returns us to the question of his imperial geography. Earlier in the Inaugural Lecture, he suggests that the 'mechanical operations' of industrial manufacture, 'acknowledged to be degrading in their tendency, shall be deputed to less fortunate and more covetous races'. In 'The Future of England' (1869), Ruskin suggests more explicitly a programme of relocating the factories (and environmental pollutants) of industrial capitalism to England's imperial territories: 'Are her dominions in the world so narrow that she can find no place to spin cotton in but Yorkshire?' Envisioning a paternalist ideal of colonial development, he suggests the 'establishing [of] seats of every manufacture in the climes and places best fitted for it'.

Such a solution lurks behind the forms of environmental and aesthetic transformation imagined in Storm-Cloud and The Art of England. It is a response to environmental crisis that depends upon, and redoubles, the radically unequal distributions of power and environmental precarity under empire and capitalism—inequalities that have produced what Rob Nixon calls the 'slow violence' of ecological injustice. Ruskin had a deep influence on the development of ecological consciousness and notions of sustainability, yet as with other late-nineteenth-century environmental thinking, it was a vision structured by geographies of power and exclusion. Like Ruskin himself, turning in a moment of anguish to revise his archive of past records, we also now turn to the past, full of a desire that we might find the materials from which to shape a revisionary lineage of reparative ecological thought. 'Thrown into form', Ruskin's Storm-Cloud suggests a means of dwelling in the strange, inconstant space and time of climate crisis, of being alive and sensate to its shifts while remaining fixed upon the seemingly impossible reconstruction of industrial modernity to serve life, in all its forms. 'To be at once the wounded’, as Brian Dillon writes, ‘and a piercing act of precision’. And recognising, in turn, the sharp ideological limitations of Ruskin’s own vision of environmental transformation—its nationalism, for one—teaches us what will have to be left, finally, behind.

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Richardson, Brian Day, ‘Ruskin’s Criples’, Critical Inquiry 42:4 (2016), pp. 61–96. As Melius writes, Ruskin’s criples were "redundant objects that point away from themselves and towards the discarded thing" (p. 75).

27. Ruskin, 34.16.

28. Ruskin, 34.27. While not subscribing to contemporary physiological aesthetics, which attempted to systematize the human subject’s physical responses to form, it is important to note how Ruskin’s influence on such investigations, and in particular what I would understand as his notion of embodiment to his later aesthetic writing; in particular, on the history of such discussions, see Benjamin Morgan, The Oxonian Moral Materialist: Arthur Schopenhauer and Nineteenth-Century Science (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Ruskin’s remark on attributing human qualities to scientific theories—especially those of John Tyndall—about the physical nature of weather as part of his longer critical dialogue in Storm-Cloud surpasses the insufficiency of scientific method. On Tyndall and Ruskin, see Albritton, D., and Gould’s chapter in this volume.

29. Ruskin, 34.21. While not subscribing to contemporary physiological aesthetics, which attempted to systematize the human subject’s physical responses to form, it is important to note how Ruskin’s influence on such investigations, and in particular what I would understand as his notion of embodiment to his later aesthetic writing; in particular, on the history of such discussions, see Benjamin Morgan, The Oxonian Moral Materialist: Arthur Schopenhauer and Nineteenth-Century Science (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Ruskin’s remark on attributing human qualities to scientific theories—especially those of John Tyndall—about the physical nature of weather as part of his longer critical dialogue in Storm-Cloud surpasses the insufficiency of scientific method. On Tyndall and Ruskin, see Albritton, D., and Gould’s chapter in this volume.

30. Ruskin, 34.58–59 (emphasizes in the original).

31. See Congreve, ‘Mappa mundi, anima mundi’, p. 97. The problem of identifying typifying form was central to practices of meteorology, such as the first cloud classifications directed by Luke Howard in the early nineteenth century, which he named ‘modification’, as they denoted elements of change over time rather than a final, unchanging state. See, for example, Maria Lovisek, ‘On Being Numerous’, Studies in Iconography 49:4 (2010).

32. Ruskin, 34.51–2 (The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century, 1884).

33. Ruskin, 34.4–5.


36. As Melius writes, Ruskin’s criples were "redundant objects that point away from themselves and towards the discarded thing" (p. 75).

37. Ruskin, 34.27.

38. Ruskin, 34.72 (The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century, 1884).


40. Ruskin, 34.21. In his notes on the receipt he received assistance in his lighting effects from William Barret, a successful theatre manager, playwright, and actor. The sketches were dedicated to John Barnard. The Human Condition in Collegedging. According to Cook and Waldhauser, the enlarged diagrams were ‘thrown on a screen by the lime-light’ (Ruskin, 34.21).

41. For an important discussion of what I call a Ruskin’s ‘environmental perception’—the dynamic and encompassed pedagogical encounter with the environment—see James Jerome Gibson, The Ecological Stance: Perception and Attention (Hillsdale and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986).

42. Ruskin, 34.72.

43. In the chapter titled ‘The Law of Help’, Ruskin writes of the relationships formed by inanimate matter: ‘Consistency’ is its virtue. Thus the parts of a crystal are consistent, but of, distinct. Ordered adherence, the best help its atoms can give, connects the parts of such substances’ (Ruskin, 7:20 (Modern Painters 5:1900), p. 205–25, especially p. 211).

44. On the origin of a middle of this period, see John Durants Peters, The Marble Cities: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).}

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Ruskin, 34.21.

37. Ruskin, 34.51–2 (The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century, 1884).


Nicholas Robbins

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RUSKIN’S ECOLOGIES: FIGURES OF RELATION FROM MODERN PAINTERS TO THE STORM-CLOUD

Edited by:
Kelly Freeman
Thomas Hughes
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