

John Ruskin's Anti-Modernisation: Expressed through the Clouds

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Introduction

In 1884, John Ruskin (1819–1900) delivered a couple of lectures entitled “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” at the Working Men’s College in London; the first one was on the 4th of February, and the second one was just one week after that (11th of February) to answer to the reaction from the audience. This text is mostly based on his comments on meteorological phenomena and the main focus is on “cloud” as we see from the title. What he discussed, however, was not just the clouds in the sky in meteorological meaning. He saw clouds as a representation of modern society, including environmental problems and moral decline as well.

The main purpose of the lectures, as Ruskin declares at the beginning, was “to bring to [the audience’s] notice a series of cloud phenomena, which so far as I can weigh existing evidence, and [are] peculiar to our own times” (34.9). He insists that what he argues in the lecture are “the signs of the times,” unmentioned by any writers or researchers before (34.9)*. This text contains some environmental observations, but more importantly it is complicated by the metaphorical use of storm-clouds to issue a warning to society.

In Ruskin’s theory, what he saw as the storm-cloud might have been smoke caused by burning coal for operating machines, which explains why it had never been recorded before industrialisation. He explained the detail of the cloud comparing the sky in the late nineteenth century with the one which he saw in his childhood (the early nineteenth century). His lecture, however, “caused much commentary, not all of it respectful” and even “encountered much ridicule” (Hilton, *Later Years* 438; Cook 470). That was because his argument was mostly based on his diaries, instead of scientific analysis: he confused the sky phenomena with social matters, and also his mental conditions.

These points made the audience and the readers feel that the text is just the grumbling of an old man. The text is exactly complicated in psychological aspects, combining meteorology and modern science.

Although evidence suggests he suffered from mental disorder in his later years, there are some significant points through the lecture which make the argument worthy of examination. In this paper, Ruskin's statement is discussed mainly from the following three points: what the storm-clouds really were, and how he recognised them; Ruskin's antipathy to modern society; the religious backbone which was the basis of his theory. Through these points, the lectures "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" will be examined in detail comparing his statements from other works of Ruskin.

1

In the text of "The Storm-Cloud," Ruskin considers climatological phenomena such as clouds and wind, which he even regards as the "signs of the times" (34.41). Since he was no more than an amateur observer, not a scientific analyst of the natural world, it is difficult to see what value his lecture holds without examining his background and the nineteenth-century society. The key elements must be his upbringing and the lifestyle in his early years, and also his mental conditions, especially in his later years.

When examining Ruskin's childhood, the essential factor is his mother, Margaret Ruskin (1781–1871). She was a strict evangelist and brought her son up with the Bible. Ruskin was made to learn some parts of the Bible by heart and read it as daily toil, "as regular as sunshine" (35. 14, 41). She was overprotective, not allowing her son to go out of her sight. As a result he had taken education mainly home until he came to be a student at Oxford (though his mother accompanied with him there too).

The great pleasure for such a boy was the time spent at the garden of his parents' house at Herne Hill. Ruskin's early life was closely connected to the natural objects existing there such as "nests of ants" and various kinds of plants and birds (35.36). He spent happy hours in the garden which he even called "Eden," even though there were "no companionable beasts," no toys or friends to play with, and "all the fruit was forbidden" (35.36). His childhood seems to have been quite unchildlike and "sheltered" under the attentive eyes of his

mother; his apparent stoical and solitary life, however, had a significant role in fostering his curiosity and intelligence, and in cultivating “the habit of fixed attention with both eyes and mind” and “all other bodily sense” (35. 44; Hilton, *Early Years* 15). Though his Paradise could never provide him with companions or fruit, it gave him an indispensable opportunity to grow as a man who had a tolerance of solitude and keen attention to his surroundings.

As for the observation, Ruskin was stimulated by “the published, the illustrated edition of [Samuel] Roger’s *Italy*” (35.28–29). It gave him the chance to view and appreciate watercolour paintings by J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), and he learnt to see various kinds of things, especially natural objects, with watchfulness. Close and frequent observation of things such as flowers, birds and minerals, eventually resulted in his works like *Proserpina* (1875–1886), *Love’s Meinie* (1873–1881) and *Deucalion* (1875–1883). As for the process of establishing his system of observation, his father’s occupation was also significant. Ruskin’s father, John James Ruskin (1875–1864), was a sherry merchant, and thus had many opportunities to travel both inside and outside of the country. The family travelled with the father on business, and met and visited many people and places. These trips around Europe helped Ruskin develop certain habits which he stuck to throughout his life. Instead of keeping diary in general way — recording his own feelings, family matters and so on — he exactly wrote the explanations of his experience with clear words using some sketches. In this way, he developed “the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world,” that is to say “to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way” (5.333). He had established his custom to see the things around him since first he spent his time in “Eden” at Herne Hill.

For Ruskin, who had grown up with such an affinity to natural objects and had a remarkable habit, the first of July in 1871 came to be unforgettable. He unexpectedly noticed something strange and new to him on his way to Abingdon from Oxford, of which he explained as follows:

For the sky is covered with grey cloud: — not rain-cloud, but a dry black veil, which no ray of sunshine can pierce; partly diffused in mist, feeble mist, enough to make distant objects unintelligible, yet without any substance, or wreathing, or colour of its own. (27.132)

This was his first observation of the clouds in question, which he eventually called the storm-cloud or plague-cloud. He repeatedly stated that what he had recognised as the storm-cloud was a new and dreadful experience the first in more than fifty years of his living with interest in natural phenomena, including skies and clouds.

These clouds were not temporary ones, but continuously made Ruskin worried after he first noticed them. He was uneasy and came to be convinced that they were “made of poisonous smoke” since there were “at least two hundred furnace chimneys in a square of two miles on every side of [him]” (34.33). Such understanding of the cause of the clouds does not seem to be strange, if examining the social and historical background.

As is well known, the nineteenth century, in which Ruskin lived, was a time of rapid change within industry and the economy, including an expansion of trade which led to national prosperity. Especially in the middle of the century, Britain enjoyed its first flourish as a superpower, and showed off the power of the British Empire, particularly at the Great Exhibition held in 1851. As I. G. Simmons points out, the Crystal Palace symbolically represented the nineteenth century as the age of iron and glass, both of which needed a huge amount of coal as an energy source (150, 164–65, 167). Then its output more than doubled just within thirty-five years (1815–50) together with the amount of consumption multiplied remarkably (Simmons 167). The British industry thus gradually relied on coal.

There is another thing which could not be forgotten; thanks to the development of steam engine, new systems of transportation such as steamships and railways emerged. These ships and locomotives were operated by consuming a large amount of coal as an energy source, but they also played a great role as transporters of coal from the mines to the places where it was used (Thorsheim 3–4). Owing to this new style, it absolutely came to be possible to move from one place to another in much shorter time. Besides, it led to a shift from a primary-industrial society to a secondary-industrial one: “the proportion of people engaged in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries” decreased from thirty-six per cent to nine per cent within a hundred years (1801–1901) (Simmons 149). This meant that people were less conscious of the climatic changes, but more importantly, the bond between them and the natural world weakened

too. Ironically, it was railways which compensated for the loss of the link with nature, and more people in town visited “spa towns . . . or to coastal resorts” by railways (Simmons 149–150). The locomotives played an important role as a transporter of coal, as an energy source, and as a promoter of a new kind of leisure as well.

Even though there was no doubt that the combustion of coal made great profits for the nation, it caused an unwelcome by-product — smoke. While railways greatly contributed to making the lives of people more convenient, it came at a cost. The railway system thus can be regarded as having a double-edged influence. However, especially during the former half of the nineteenth century, because of the lack of scientific knowledge about smoke, there was no recognition that it was harmful. To make the matters worse, in the middle of the nineteenth century, most people were wrongly informed that smoke was not only harmless, but even as an “antidote to pollution” (Thorsheim 2). It was not until the next half of the century when the “miasma” theory, which said the smoke was a gas “given off by decaying plants and animals matters,” was gradually dispelled thanks to the progress of science such as bacteriology (Thorsheim 2). Under these circumstances, there was no way for the movement or the effort to reduce harmful smoke to emerge.

As stated above, the strange clouds which Ruskin recognised were probably derived from smoke, the other side of the national prosperity. What he felt strange and fearful, however, was not only the clouds but also the wind accompanying it. He investigated the unfavourable wind carefully and divided the signs of wind into six categories: “a wind of darkness” which suddenly makes a sky dark; “a malignant quality of wind” which “had bitterness and malice”; a wind that “blows tremendously” which “is more panic-struck, and feverish” with the sound of “a hiss”; one that thickens continually so that the light is never the same “for [more than] two seconds”; the power to diminish and intensify an ordinary storm; the most important sign, which is the characteristic of blanching the sun instead of reddening it, which causes “the peculiar darkness” (34.33–39). For Ruskin, the last one was especially annoying, and he noticed that “all the leaves were falling sere and yellow” even during the summer of 1883, and “they were entirely terrific; but only sudden maxima of the constant morbid power of this wind” (34.67–68). Even though it cannot

be denied that six categories of the wind by him were not at all scientific, there were some people in his audience who agreed with him and sent a few letters which listed the examples of the blighted plants. Simmons points out scientifically and estimated that there was “a mixture of carbonic acid, sulphuric acid and nitrogen oxide [that] checked the growth of some trees and destroyed others” (166). In addition to the blackened sky because of the cloud, the air was absolutely polluted by chemicals which harmed the growth of crops, and health of livestock and needless to say, human beings.

We have discussed the storm-cloud and its physical cause with historical facts, but that is not enough to know what the clouds exactly were. As some critics point out, Ruskin’s mental condition influenced his recognition of the sky phenomena and the statements of the text of “The Storm-Cloud.” In his later years, he suffered from serious mental illness, especially depression and it seems to be helpful to take this psychological aspect into consideration in order to understand the storm-cloud more precisely.

Using the psychological theory by Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), the black and unfavourable clouds can be interpreted as “projection” of the inward state of Ruskin (Fitch 14–15 / Cosgrove 98). Projection tells “a replica of one’s own unknown face” and “the unknown side of the individual’s own psyche,” thus it can be said that the sky was a projection of his deep psychology state, at least to his own eyes (Fitch 15). According to the theory, the blackened sky and clouds were the representation of his own mental condition which declined and resulted in deep depression with fear, frustration and uncertainty; he unconsciously projected his inward state to the sky, and that very sky made him distressed: there was a kind of vicious cycle.

It was on February of 1878 when Ruskin showed strangeness for the first time; he wandered in his imagination or dream, and he suddenly said that he finally married Rose La Touche (Hilton, *Later Years* 377). Rose was a girl with whom Ruskin fell in love in 1858, when he was thirty-nine and Rose was just nine. Later he proposed to her, but of course her parents never allowed them to get closer, and at the end he mourned deeply when she died young in 1875. Anyway, there was no possibility for him to have a closer relationship or to get married, which could be possible just in his fantasy.

Ruskin himself noticed that his strength both mentally and physically had

been declining, and there were some possible reasons other than he was getting old: in the late 50s he experienced "unconversion" which had an impact on his religious belief; financial difficulties relating to the plan for the Guild of St. George, which would be mentioned in the next section; the hopeless love for Rose and her death; and his parents' death (Hilton *Later Years* 355–374). These elements must have worked in a complicated way, and in hallucinations, he fought against an offensive "Devil" which often appeared in his diary, and sometimes projected to the sky in the form of a storm and wind to make him irritated (Viljoen 92–93). Eventually, he could no longer distinguish between his imagination and reality.

Thanks to support from his friends and relatives, Ruskin regained his calmness within a month. In 1881, however, when Thomas Carlyle whom Ruskin called "Papa" died, he once again felt pangs of solitude and retreated to his fantasy world. He expressed his grief that "there were only Carlyle and me . . . now there's only me," put his hand into the fire, insisted that Rose would come to see him, and said meaningless words and ordered everyone to leave him alone in the house (qtd. in Hilton *Later Years* 418–423). With regards to this second breakdown, the point which cannot be missed is that he came to be strongly concerned about his surroundings, particularly the condition of the sky. He often contrasted the former sky in his childhood with a current darkening sky and was annoyed by the fact that there was no longer clear beautiful sky above his head.

People around him gradually became aware that his hatred and fear of modern society was expressed through the sky and eventually resulted in the lecture "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century." As discussed so far, the possible elements of the storm-cloud were largely smoke from chimneys and Ruskin's own mental disorder projected to the sky. In addition to them, his antipathy toward modernisation is an indispensable factor, and that is the main point in the next section.

2

As discussed in the previous section, Ruskin was convinced that the burning of coal enabled the nation to grow and London to expand as a big city with a large population. At the same time, however, he recognised that "enormous

[town] population” could not be supplied with necessities, without the sky “blackened and the air made pestilent” enough to hide the clear sky (28,135–136). Even though he admitted the combustion of coal had made it possible for the country to leap forward, he did not approve of the national prosperity wholeheartedly and had deep apprehension about modernisation.

It is true that his attention to the smoke (or the storm-cloud) were the characteristics which appeared along with his mental breakdown, but Ruskin’s antipathy toward modern technologies can be recognised consistently through his works, even dating back to his early years. In addition, he exactly supposed that there was less direct factor of the storm-cloud other than the smoke from chimneys as knowing from his reference that “mere smoke would not blow to and fro in that wild way (34.33). It tells us that at least for him “the storm-cloud” is not just a “cloud” in the narrow meteorological sense.

Firstly in one of his works, *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (1871–78) written in the form of 96 letters, Ruskin shows his antipathy toward modern society and technology, and says machinery in particular is the object of his hatred. In Letter 5 of *Fors*, written in May of 1871, just a few months before he first noticed the strange cloud (it was not yet named “storm” or “plague”), he declares his concern for the negative impact of “modern science,” including “economic and the other kinds,” which he thought had “reached its climax at last” in his times (27.80). He quotes the “part of a king’s love-song in one sweet May, of many long since gone,” and expresses his concern: “For lo, the winter is past, / The rain is over and gone, / The flowers appear on the earth, / The time of the singing of Birds is come, / Arise, O my Fair one, my dove, / And come” (Canticles: 2.11–13). He had a great fear that the days would come when no one would be able to understand the meanings of this phrase above. In his view, such a lamentable situation was the consequence of modernisation, and he worried that future generations would not be able to enjoy the benefits of the earth.

What Ruskin tried to state through *Fors Clavigera* was not his anger, though. He once had a great plan in his mind to build the Guild of St. George, an ideal community which he tried to realise fully based on his faith and blueprint. Some critics point out that his policy of the Guild could be read as an attempt to the saint to “kill the dragon and Mammon and restore

the waste land of British society" as the name indicates (Hewison 423; qtd. in Atwood 155). The main purpose of the establishment of it was "to take some small piece of English ground beautiful, peaceful, and fruitful," therefore there should be "no untended or unthought" substances (27.96; 28.19). Of course, machinery, one of the biggest targets of his offence, must not be there, because it would only "increase the possibilities of idleness" instead of increasing "the possibilities of life" (27.87). In his opinion, "a man and a woman, with children, properly trained" were happy and healthy by doing their daily jobs such as cooking and sewing all by themselves: if invented machinery to do these jobs in place of them, "they will never be so good nor so happy as without machines" (27.87). This notion is applied not only to family matters, but to the factories of much larger scale. In the factories, machines had been replacing human labour, and he considered they were the cause of idleness instead of diligence. In his eyes, factories with machines brought negative effects to people, especially workers, and should never be acceptable.

As for the factories, Ruskin was not the first nor the only one who disliked them. William Wordsworth (1770–1850) had already shown his hatred toward industrialisation, especially in *Excursion* (1814) some decades before Ruskin declared his antipathy. Wordsworth referred to the factory as a "temple" in which "perpetual sacrifice" was dedicated, and eventually deprived the people, especially children working there, of their health and even "the liberty of mind" (*Exc.* 8.180–185). As a result, people were made incompetent "to impress a vivid feeling on the mind/ Of what there is delightful in the breeze, / the gentle visitations of the sun" (*Exc.* 8. 321–324). What was destroyed by the development of technology was a taste for natural beauty and reasonable mind to enjoy it. Ruskin did not refer to Wordsworth in Letter 5 of *Fors*, but it can be easily imagined that he had been given certain effects by Wordsworth, from whom he was taught how to enjoy and read natural objects.

Secondly, it is appropriate to consider from the point of political economy as stated in *Unto This Last* (1862): "all England may, . . . become one manufacturing town: and English men, sacrificing themselves to the good of general humanity, may live diminished lives in the midst of noise, of darkness, and of deadly exhalation" (17.10). With regards to this point, there was a man who shared Ruskin's notion: William Gladstone (1809–98), the Liberal Prime

Minister (1868–1894). He praised the pleasant things such as the sun and the air, and also praised the whole world as a creation of God, showing his deep sorrow for the tendency that the people were to “go about spoiling and defacing and deforming them” (qtd. in Thorsheim 37). Even though it was likely that he had been politically motivated in his disagreement with “laissez-faire” economics, he was particularly conscious that the atmosphere was deteriorating as industrialisation proceeded.

A critic Vicky Albritton states with regards to this and points it as one of the significant targets of the storm-cloud lecture. The darkening sky expressed, she suggests, “free-trade policy and rampant capitalism” which “had destroyed the agrarian basis of the British economy” and made the country unable to “feed itself but had to purchase food from other countries in exchange for manufactured goods” (36). Ruskin associated this situation of industrial economy with moral corruption, and this is exactly what leads to “blasphemy.” As discussed so far, both Ruskin and Gladstone seemed strongly opposed to liberalism as “political freedom in the sense of freedom . . . to pollute the rivers, to darken the skies” in England (Bell 69–70). The economic freedom, which was prosperous partly owing to industrialisation, was exactly the factor of modernisation causing the spoiling of nature and lead to Ruskin’s antipathy.

Thirdly, in the sense of the ideal style of working, it is worth examining *Stones of Venice* (1851–53), especially the chapter titled “The Nature of Gothic” in vol. II. According to its statements, what Ruskin thought important was not being released from heavy labour by the help of technologies, but working with certain purpose and pleasure:

It is verily this degradation of the operative into a machine, which, more than any other evil of the times, is leading the mass of the nations everywhere into vain, incoherent, destructive struggle for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature of themselves. . . . It is not that men are ill fed, but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread, and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure. . . . they feel that the kind of labour to which they are condemned is verily a degrading one, and makes them less than men. (10.194)

Machines deprived labourers of pleasure in working and just made them

struggle.

In addition, for Ruskin “the great civilized invention of the division of labour” which flourished along with machines is also evil. Ruskin insisted that what was divided was not the labour, but the men themselves. By dividing the segments of labour, “all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail” (10.196). As labourers themselves became just some parts of the process, and were forced to make products with accuracy, they had less opportunity to exercise their intelligence, and were lead to depression instead. Although the burden of labour had been greatly reduced, it is also true that these could never be attained without losing diligence which was highly important in the point of religious faith.

Ruskin considers that human beings were not designed “to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions”; it was therefore necessary for mankind to dehumanise themselves (10.193). Either labourers would give up being themselves to be human beings to work perfectly and become slaves to machines, or they would give up making products with perfection to preserve their characteristics as human beings.

Furthermore, Ruskin's suspicion of artificial things aimed even at some compact devices worked without emitting smoke. It was true that he surely admitted that certain devices were very useful in some ways, thus he travelled around the continent with “cyanometer,” which told him the blueness of the sky (Dearden 12; Fitch 5). In addition, he went to the observatory at Oxford to check the record of the anemometer after he noticed the black strange clouds in 1871. The result of these examples, especially his visit to Oxford, however, was not very helpful in confirming the truth of the storm-cloud and wind; he still could not judge whether the wind was noxious or sound, even though it could tell him the force and direction of wind. Through this experience, what he reconfirmed was “the uselessness of observation by instruments, or machines, instead of eyes” and understood the necessity to determine the qualities of the sky through “the great law of human perception and power”; what we can trust after all were “our eyes and the bodily sense” (24.65–66). For him our own body was actually the most or even the only trustworthy device not equal to any other artificial ones. It is, though, a great irony that he

experienced the great benefits of artifact since it allowed him to go back and forth between Brantwood and London while he showed much anger to the damage caused by the railway network.

There is one additional negative influence of smoke on human activities and mentality. James Phillip Kay (1804–77) pointed out that thieves often appeared in places “surrounded on every side by some of the largest factories of the town, whose chimneys vomit forth dense smoke,” and that was possibly because the continual thick fog caused by smoke provided “an ideal cloak” for crimes by depriving people of visibility (qtd. in Thorsheim 7, 53). That is possibly one of the reasons why he considered the sky phenomena as related to the unfavourable moral gloom of his times.

Lastly, the reason why Ruskin recognised modernisation as such negative and lamentable thing should be considered. As he himself makes it obvious in Letter 58 of *Fors*, his ideal world — the Guild — was to be established based on the “old English law” or the laws “of Florence in the fourteenth century,” he highly respected the mediaeval times (28.23, 423). He praised those times largely because of “savageness” which was attained by human hands. He recognised the nineteenth-century society by comparing with his image of mediaeval society as an ideal. Alice Chandler points out that there are two main pillars in Ruskin’s mediaevalism — naturalism and feudalism (195). In the sense of feudalism, the important point is “stable social structure,” and especially by the notion of chivalry there should be “the power of largess,” in other words, “the protection of the weak by the strong” (Chandler 195; 28.258). The people in the upper classes that “are originally composed of the best-bred” have responsibility for society to be well-organised and admirable, while people in the lower classes must keep “obedience” which is “native in man” in exchange for the protection (28.20–21). When taking these points into account, what connect people should be “affection” like in the feudal period, not the interests of money like in the post-industrialised world. As can be seen from the law in the Guild, Ruskin had dreamed of replicating the mediaeval community in the nineteenth century.

Ruskin’s strong distaste for modernised society, largely based on his faith in the mediaeval — or more to say Gothic — period had undoubtedly make the storm-clouds more fearful and unacceptable. Those clouds in question were

not the mere climatological objects but a kind of symbol of his philosophy through which he tried to share with the contemporary and the following generations.

3

As discussed so far, “the storm-cloud” for Ruskin was derived from smoke out of factories, and his antipathy toward industrialisation derived from medievalism. Whether he himself was conscious of it or not, his own mental instability was also a significant element in this identification projecting black clouds in the sky, leading to further depression. Moreover, there is another element which made him take the clouds in question so seriously. That is exactly the topic to be argued in this section — his religious faith. He linked the polluted sky with increasing secularism.

Another name for the storm-cloud tells us Ruskin considered that the sky phenomena had something to do with religion. He sometimes called the clouds and winds “plague” in place of “storm.” The word “plague” in the biblical sense referred to in *Exodus*, meaning “various diseases and pestilences” which is “often seen as divine punishment” (*OED*, “plague”). In Ruskin’s interpretation, the clouds and winds could be identified with a plague. In other words, he regarded the environmental phenomena that England was experiencing was a judgement of God.

People had to be punished — for what Ruskin perceived as “blasphemy.” According to him, “England, and all foreign nations, either tempting her, or following her, have blasphemed the name of God deliberately and openly” (34.10). The reason why he regarded polluting the sky as blasphemous was that he strongly believed “the entire system of Firmament is the incontrovertible and unmistakable evidence of a Divine power in creation”; furthermore, it is undoubtedly God — “Father who is in heaven” — that feeds “the souls of His children with marvels, and satisfying gladness” (27.164; 34.10–11). As already discussed in the first section, he was familiar with the Bible from his very early years thanks to his mother, thus the phenomena in the sky were not merely climatological ones. To pollute the sky, or heaven, meant polluting the abode of God. Allowing this to happen was a signal that people had inadequate religious faith.

In the first place, for nature in the sense of God's creation, heaven is a provider of "Pure Air, Water, and Earth," which are "not only useful, but essential to life" (27.90). On the contrary, as the other side of a weakening religious mind, what Ruskin thought the human beings came to strengthen was the power to bring unfavourable effects on these things. Originally we have potential to "vitate the air by your manner of life, and of death, to any extent . . . so as to bring such a pestilence on the globe as would end all of you" (27.91). The storm-cloud was caused by this power which had been heightened as modernisation or mechanisation proceeded. With reference to the three essential things, Ruskin points out what human power had done; it vitiated the pure air into noxious gas by producing "chemical exhalations, . . . venomous smokes and smells"; it turned "every river of England into a common sewer, so that you cannot so much as baptize an English baby"; it "turned the Mother-Earth, Demeter" (34.91–92). That is to say, there is no doubt that Ruskin believed human beings themselves caused the lamentable situation in question.

According to the storm-cloud lecture, it is impossible for us to live not only without these three materials — air, water and earth but Ruskin rerefers to the fourth element — not fire (which may remind us of the combustion of coal) but the sun. He quotes from "Sardanapalus" by George Gordon Byron (1788–1824). In that text, the sun is described as the "fountain of all life," thus sunset is identified with Death (34.12–14,44). If the sun failed to appear, all God's creation, including human beings, would surely be unable to sustain their lives. In other words, if the humans failed to stop contaminating these essential elements and hiding the sun behind noxious storm-clouds, exhibition would result.

To link the smoke with the end of the world is exactly why some critics regard Ruskin as a "prophetic observer" of the sky, who read the signs of the times as a result of modernisation and "ultimately polluted nature" (Wheeler 178; Cosgrove 96). In fact, Ruskin also refers to the result of blaspheming God and Divine power, necessarily quoting from the bible; "the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining" (Joel: 2.10; 34.41). It is certainly one of the interpretations of this text to regard it as a prophesy by Ruskin, who sketched a darkening society along with the context

of apocalypse: he perhaps sensed that his own mental and physical strength had been getting weaker, and his life was nearing its close, thus he came to identify himself with society which was increasingly contaminated with black storm-clouds.

Ruskin's argument, however, cannot be regarded completely as an eschatology, though the text of "The Storm-Cloud" is apocalyptic to a certain degree as some critics point out. It was true that he criticised and lamented a lot about modern technologies which caused him and society to plunge into depression, but what we must not fail to examine is not that point. While he admitted that the by-product of developing industry caused unacceptable clouds, he never asked to stop that process, nor offered any practical solutions to the already-contaminated environment, or even society. Instead, he emphasises that human beings should do as follows:

What is best to be done, do you ask me? The answer is plain, whether you can affect the signs of the sky or not, you can [discern] the signs of the times. Whether you can bring the sun back or not, you can assuredly bring back your own cheerfulness, and your own honesty. You may not be able to say to the wind, "Please; be still," but you can cease from the insolence of your own lips, and the troubling of your own passions. And all that it would be extremely well to do, even though the day were coming when the sun should be darkness, and the moon as blood. (34.41)

This is part of a quote from the epilogue of the first lecture, and seems to tell us the core and the gist of his lectures. To get decent society back, what Ruskin thought to be necessary was "cheerfulness" and "honesty" rather than reconsidering industrial activities.

This context is inconsistent with the cause of the storm-clouds: as discussed in the previous section, Ruskin implied that there was another factor other than smoke because "mere smoke would not blow to and fro in that wild way" (34.33). According to him, it was the people themselves who "choose to mix up dirt" with their own "nastiness," and we can destroy the essential three materials "at your pleasure"; on the other hand, however, we also have "literally infinite" power to purify them "by dealing properly and swiftly with all substances in corruption" (34.39,92). He expects that if we practise honesty

and cheerfulness, the environment would improve and a comfortable life return; this shows that he did have faith in humanity's instinctive goodness. This is a point of great significance.

The belief and the focus on goodness in ourselves actually did not emerge peculiarly in the argument of the storm-clouds: Ruskin had already grasped the significance of being good as early as the age of four. "People, be good" — these three words were the beginning of his first and best sermon which he preached at home (over some cushions) (35.25–26). Even as a small kid, and in what was just an imitation sermon, he showed that he somehow understood what we should keep in mind was to be good. In addition, in some other works, he states that every person has "some powers for better things, so that "all unacceptable human deeds were their disease, not their nature" (10.191; 18.474). Ruskin's arguments seem to suggest that he believed that the chief and fundamental cause of the storm-clouds was the human mind itself; therefore, the failing society or environment would be improved if the people would bring back "goodness" in their own mind. He strongly believed in the possibility of the mind of man to be reformed before "England on which the sun never set" becomes the one "on which he never rises" (34.41). It can never be said that Ruskin had merely brought pessimistic idea.

Ruskin did criticise the modern life style and implied the end of lives on Earth. His argument, however, did not conclude with a hopeless future; the worst consequence as he prophetically stated would be avoidable, only if human beings could raise their awareness of the crisis which they were facing and react positively to it.

Conclusion

It must be reasonable to presume that the storm-clouds, or plague-clouds were the outcome of smoke, Ruskin's distaste for the nineteenth-century society brought by his medievalism, and his mental condition. All these elements were intermingled and this complexity in climatological, psychological and theological aspects made this text difficult for contemporary audience to understand. In addition, because of the lack of scientific analysis, or any suggestion of practical policies, it has often been regarded as just the lamentation of an aging man. There are some critics who even suggest that this text should

not be regarded as tackling environmental issues at all.

Ruskin's argument, however, would seem as more than the mere gloom of an old man when his representative phrase is included: "man doth not live by bread only" (17.111). As discussed in the previous section, he concluded that the very basis of all the unfavourable things was the human mind which had been declining. Clouds and wind are unmistakably material things, but in his theory, what determines their quality is immaterial. He defines the essential three things for our lives in *Fors Clavigera* as already examined, "Pure Air, Water, and Earth." Following these three essentials, he refers to three immaterial things which are indispensable to know how to live; these are "Admiration, Hope, and Love" (27.90). To summarise, our lives can never be completed unless we understand immaterial things; we have to nourish our admirable mind as well as our physical health. In other words, material fulfilment cannot be sufficient to make our lives happy. As for this point, the critic Jonathan Bate points out that "ecology has to be an attitude of mind before it can be an affective set of environmental policies" (183). What Ruskin prioritised might not be the climatological phenomena themselves but the immaterial thing, that is to say, related to the human mind.

With regards to the style of argument, to make the people understand the urgency, the depth of his sense of crisis and the seriousness, Ruskin used charged words such as devil and blasphemy, exaggerated and dramatized the phenomena. Along with this, he left the problems and the future of society to the audience and his readers, so that it is strongly required for the people to have knowledge and religious faith to a certain degree. It is probable that he was made to do so due to his strong belief in our potential to purify the air, even though it was just the human mind which was the origin of contamination.

"Blanched Sun, — blighted grass, — blinded man"; Ruskin sensed that the Earth and himself were approaching the end of their lives, and he certainly came to be apocalyptic (34.40). That is partly because he worried that he would no longer be able to sustain his happy life: he once defined that real happiness is "the keeping of the little mosses of the wayside, and of the clouds of the firmament" (5.383). The progress of technology, after all, caused thick storm-clouds which contaminated the abode of God and hid the sun, and

eventually made it difficult for us to live happily in nature — the God's creation.

It is absolutely impossible for human beings to change the past and the fact that we have actually polluted the environment, and also impossible to move the heavens by their own efforts, but at least we can be aware of what is happening around us. Although we cannot change “the signs of the sky,” nor bring the bright sun back, we can certainly regain our cheerfulness and honesty. It is fully up to us whether the present condition improves or worsens. No matter how society has progressed with technologies lightening the pollution in the air, the most significant and powerful element affecting the Earth has not yet changed — our minds: capable of such cheerfulness and honesty. Although “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century,” with his unique rhetoric has encountered some harsh criticism since it was published, it is not out of date, but worth examining in this twenty-first century, a time when environmental problems are an unavoidable global issue.

Note

* In this thesis, quotation from *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 Vols. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. George Allen, 1903–12., is shown as (Volume, Page).

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