

# John Ruskin's Idealised Vision of Goodness

HANAZUMI Satomi

[Abstract] John Ruskin suggested a unique way to fight against “the dragon” in the nineteenth century via his endeavour to build an ideal community, St. George's Guild. As the name shows, it represents his strong respect for the spirit of old England, and his hope for exterminating the evils. What led him consider such a community was the negative aspects of society on which he focused especially in his later years. Although most people of his days welcomed the outcome of industrialisation, what Ruskin really saw was not the bright aspects. He was worried about labourers who worked as if they themselves were machines, and worsening environmental conditions particularly represented as the darkened sky. For Ruskin, who praised the mediaeval ages, nineteenth-century society was far from ideal one. He argues that the most possible cause of such an unfavourable state behind the prosperity was human mind, and therefore society eventually would be improved if the people regain cheerfulness. Especially in “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century”, lamenting the status quo, he puts emphasis on the unlimited potential of human beings, and insists that the recovery would be up to human beings themselves. What is then required is giving people a proper guide which way to go, in other words, giving education. What the word “education” meant for Ruskin, however, was not “the three R's—reading, writing, and arithmetic” as generally defined. Getting knowledge was not of unimportance, but not so much important as cultivating “a strong mind.” His philosophy on education is strongly based on the moral aspect, and thus he put great emphasis on what to be taught to foster strength to overcome hardships instead of being released from heavy labour or burden no matter how technologies would progress. This paper aims at examining Ruskin's notion from his schemes on the Guild of St. George, what should be done to make people gain the power to tell right from wrong, so that they could get through a gloomy situation.

[Key Words] John Ruskin, St George's Guild, “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century”, ecology, education

## Introduction

“To some of us when we first read it, now many years ago, it seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel,” said William Morris (1834-96), in the Preface to “The Nature of Gothic,” one of the chapters of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), by John Ruskin (1819-1900), which was published individually by Morris in 1892 as a Kelmscott Press book. According to Morris, Ruskin showed not only the path, but showed “what the equipment for that journey must be, and how many things must be changed before we are equipped, yet we can still see no other way out of the folly and degradation of Civilization” (Morris 292). This

paper argues how Ruskin showed the road as a kind of educator as well as a critic.

To investigate the road Ruskin showed, as Morris tells us, it seems appropriate to refer to the scheme of the St. George's Guild, an ideal community Ruskin planned and endeavoured to build from the very beginning. As is assumed from its name, it represents his strong faith in the spirit of old, mediaeval England. As Atwood states, his Guild "had its roots in the past, resembling in many ways an ideal version of a medieval guild" (152). He regarded the medieval ages as the roots of "all that hitherto [ . . . ] of best, all that has been in noble preparation instituted" (22.270-71)<sup>(1)</sup>. The name of the Guild "St. George" on the other hand was said to "kill the dragon and Mammon and restore the waste land of British society" (Hewison 423). Ruskin regarded the nineteenth-century society as the evil one contaminated with the vice of "Mammon," and determined to conquer it, following the example of St. George slaying the dragon. The Guild, therefore, must potentially have such power as the saint had. This community Ruskin envisioned was composed of his ideal and was to show us his idea of what the people should aim at, and how society should be.

## 1. Ruskin's Medievalism

"Abstract of the Objects and Constitution of St. George's Guild" states the fundamental ideas which Ruskin intended to carry out. In the abstract, he lists seven points as essential. Firstly, the guild should consist "of a body of persons who think, primarily, that it is time for honest persons to separate themselves intelligibly from knaves"; secondly, for the purpose of teaching labourers, "schools are to be erected, with museums and libraries in fitting places"; thirdly, people who enter the Guild should give "a tenth of their income, or at all events, whatever they can afford for general charity, to this special object," and should be honest and just to all the men, and also obedient to the Master; fourthly, the Master has to be "elected by majority of the Guildsmen, and is at any time subject to deposition by majority of votes," but should never be dictatorial. In addition, the Guild is to hold its land "in its own name"; moreover people who do not want to take any responsibility or make any promises in spite of their interest in the Guild "may practically become members of it merely by sending it such subscriptions as they please"; and, finally, general subscriptions may be "paid directly to the account of the Guild at the Union Bank," and persons who wish to be members are welcomed at any time if they agreed to the instructions and contact Ruskin (30.3-4). These are the points which Ruskin notified people who were to be the members of the Guild, indicating the basic purpose of creating the Guild.

---

(1) Following citations from Ruskin's works are all quoted from the Library Edition., *The Works of John Ruskin*. 39 Vols., noted as (vol./page).

The most obvious reason why Ruskin respected the medieval ages was “Love of Order.” He regarded it as “one of the most useful elements of the English mind” as well as “one of the fundamental stones of moral” (19.205). He explained the noblest features of “the Gothic heart,” saying that “the habits of philosophical investigation, of accurate thought, of domestic seclusion and independence, of stern self-reliance and sincere upright searching into religious truth” could be recognised most frequently “in the distinctive creation of the Gothic schools” (10.242). In short, what Ruskin adopted as the basic spirit of his community was this Gothic heart.

With regards to human spirit, Ruskin understood that architecture was the representation of human mind and the reflection of society; thus it would not be too much to say that we could recognise the quality of human soul at the time when it was built. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), for instance, we could recognise this, as he focuses on the past as well as architecture. Among the “seven lamps,” the lamp of memory is very significant in terms of “the emotional power of history”: he regarded “the past as an object lesson or inspiration to mankind” (Chandler 200). He had a “sense of continuity” and showed his belief that “the real history is all underneath” (Chandler 200; 33.59). It could be said that Ruskin might be a man who understood the present as the collection of all the past experiences and events, and this is the reason why he put much importance on history, including that of the mediaeval ages.

With such respect for those ages, Ruskin’s Guild allowed no power other than the natural power and human power in cultivating land or making something necessary for life. He never let any modern technologies be brought into the Guild: there are “no machines moved by artificial power” and “no untended or unthought”—substances the only sources of power allowed in the community were “wind, water, and animal force” (27.96; 28.19). It shows that what Ruskin really sought was not simply being released from heavy labour.

Further element which cannot be failed in the point of medievalism is the feudal system. In that system, all the people are placed in a particular position in society, following their superiors. According to the abstract of the Guild, it has to have a leader—the Master, elected by its people, and people are to live in the community under his command. As a major premise, however, there should be respect for each other. This Chivalry can be exemplified by the spirit of the medieval ages based on Christian “caritas.” Masters in the feudal system are to be generous enough to take care of their people, which Ruskin called “the power of largess,” in other words “the protection of the weak by the strong” (28.258). This can be understood as a form of mercy, and it represents warmth to the people.

In regards to the relationship among the people, Ruskin explains what are required to the people or in other words the duty for each class. Firstly, the upper classes, which “are originally composed of the best-bred,” the blessed few; they have responsibility to keep society well-organised and admirable (17.430). According to him, the points required for those people are: “the general maintenance of law and order”; to keep the people in the lower classes away

from famine, and “any other consequence of their carelessness of folly”; to make efforts to raise rest of the people “to the nearest level with themselves” (17.430). The people in the upper classes have much responsibility for society due to their advantageous, and even authoritative position, so that are expected to be the respectable model.

On the contrary, what is required for the people in the lower classes, as well as the element which should be taught to the children in the Guild, is “Obedience.” Ruskin suggests that “obedience to their fathers, mothers, and tutors” and “the nature of humour, making the obedience solemn and constant” should be taught first, for obedience and humour are both “native in man, and the roots of them cannot wither, even under the dust-heap of modern liberal opinions” (28.20-21). They are to follow their parents, tutors, and masters in return to the protection they are given.

Ruskin regards obedience as “essential to a society,” and even attacks the concept of liberty:

How false is the conception, how frantic the pursuit, of that treacherous phantom with men call Liberty: most treacherous, indeed, of all phantoms; for the feeblest ray of reason might surely show us, that not only its attainment, but its being, was impossible. There is no such thing in the universe. There can never be. The stars have it not; the earth has it not; and we men have the mockery and semblance of it only for our heaviest punishment. (8.248-49)

To summarise, all the people and substances in the world are subordinate to a mightier force: all materials including the earth and the stars are never able to be free from the law of the universe. This is at the foundation of Ruskin’s feudal system, which he tried to adopt as the central concept of the Guild.

## 2. Moral Decline Reflected in the Sky

For a man who had such admiration for mediaeval society, the condition of the nineteenth-century society was far from an ideal one. Especially in the latter half of his life, Ruskin focused on the negative aspects of society. While other people were satisfied with prosperity and the development of industry and technology, Ruskin was concerned about the people who were being made to work as if they were machines, and also worried about worsening environmental conditions. Although time and spatial differences were in some ways reduced, and Ruskin himself owed much to the new technologies, he was not the kind of a man who praised them without scepticism.

There is no doubt that machinery has caused great benefit to industry, and enabled things which were impossible only with human hands, these are not the points which we should put importance on. People who had got to know the advantages of machinery gradually

came “to be counted off into its wheels, and weighed with its hammer stokes” and what would then happen to those people is “vain, incoherent, destructive struggling for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature to themselves” (10.194-195). Whether they were conscious of it or not, they could do nothing but keep on working to get bread.

The reason why Ruskin criticised such a condition was not because “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” (10.194). What brought unhappiness to the people was not necessarily poverty, but the lack of delight in work, which they saw as no more than a means to make a livelihood. A further effect mechanisation caused was the system of the division of labour, to which Ruskin made vehement objections. In such system, workers were not assigned the whole process of making things, but instead were forced to make just a small portion of the whole.

In addition to such influence brought to human beings themselves, what could not be ignored was pollution, especially represented as the darkened sky. Ruskin stated in one of his texts that the nineteenth century would “be recognised in future meteorological history” by “the plague-cloud” which was “one of the phenomena hitherto unrecorded in the course of nature” (34.31). The cloud Ruskin referred to was a negative by-product brought by combustion of coal which brought great benefits to successful manufacturers. Ruskin had paid considerable attention to such matters, especially in his later years, delivering significant lectures. In a couple of lectures entitled “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” (1884), Ruskin discusses air pollution. The main point in this text is sky phenomena, as is obvious from the title.

It was in 1871 that Ruskin unexpectedly noticed such a cloud for the first time, and it was “the storm-cloud—or more accurately plague-cloud, for it is not always stormy” (34.9-10). When he first recognised the plague-cloud, he was sure that it was “made of poisonous smoke” from all the chimneys around him (27.133; 34.33). His concern that the weather had changed during the nineteenth century made him more unsettled, and this was taken up in the lecture. As he recognised, “by-products of the chemical industry” were emitted into the air by burning coal, as an energy source for railways, factories, and some other places, and such a “thick and persistent London fog” was at its peak at the end of the nineteenth century (Simmons 150-51, 166). Such continual thick fog had deprived people in towns of clear visibility, but provided “an ideal cloak” for theft and mob activities (Thorsheim 7). The fog, therefore, was unpleasant for most people, and not just an environmental problem, but a serious social matter as well.

The more interesting point of Ruskin's statements is that according to him, it is people themselves who “choose to mix up dirt” and choke themselves with their “own nastiness” (34.39). He felt that modern progress had resulted in physical and moral gloom, and he showed his unease at the declining moral condition of the nineteenth century. Some critics point out it:

Raymond Fitch says that Ruskin connected “the outward signs” recognised as black clouds filled the sky and “an inward and spiritual pollution” (2). Denis Cosgrove read the text of “The Storm-Cloud” as a “commentary on the moral and political state of Britain” (97). The reason why he emphasised the moral decay as the source of air pollution could also be considered in the context of his religious faith. Having a strong sense of natural objects as the creation of God, he uses the word “blasphemy,” referring to the current state of the darkening sky (34.40). His real meaning was that bringing the black sky and clouds was just the same as polluting the abode of God.

In his works, particularly in “The Storm-Cloud”, Ruskin suggests that the world will continue to decline, and eventually be corrupted, if the people keep ignoring the effects of coal or machinery and their own moral decay.

### 3. Cultivating Human Mind

Though Ruskin criticised society and pointed to the human mind severely as the cause of such declining, he also insisted that all the people had the “power of purifying the air, by dealing properly and swiftly with all substances in corruption” (34.41). As is discussed above, he believed that the cause of the darkness reflected to the sky was the people themselves, therefore he believed that the world would get brightness again if the people had proper morality. Based on such faith in human nature, what Ruskin seemed to imply was the significance of cultivating the “honesty” of the people themselves before “England on which the sun never set” would become the one “on which he never rises” (34.41). Unfortunately, he believed that the recovery from the unacceptable state depended on the unlimited potential of the human beings.

In Ruskin’s opinion, what is essential is “real education” in order to gain (or regain) such cheerfulness in mind (17.328). When examining the notion of education, the work most clearly shows Ruskin’s educational theory is *Fors Clavigera*. As already has been discussed so far, letters of *Fors* show us the concept of the Guild, and that his ideal community would have a school as a “working model of [his] theory” though it could not be led into materialisation (Atwood 152). It is thus possible to expect to see what “education” meant to him, or what is required for people—all including adults and children—to be taught in order not to lose their ways to go.

Characteristically, his education does not aim at attaining knowledge by reading books. For instance, in Letter 4 (1871), he says that “knowledge by itself will not make you happy; still less will it make you rich” (27.62). Besides, his educational theory is beyond “the mere intellectual part,” and in that theory, what should come first is morality, for “intellectual before moral education is impossible” (17.65; 18.65; 28.655). He states that actually “reading and writing

are in no sense education"; his ideas are quite different from the conventional pedagogy which "is to teach (as usually understood) the three R's" – reading writing, and arithmetic (22.244; 29.479). At the same time, he even insisted that people "had better not know how to read and write" if its quality would not be satisfactory, since inaccurate reading could develop a "personal conceit and ambition in minds of selfish activity" (17.397; 29.231; Atwood 483-84). He did not completely deny reading and writing as educative methods, but these are not the skills that Ruskin wanted to be gained through the educational process.

What Ruskin sought instead of getting knowledge was nurturing "Souls of good quality," and he put the highest priority on developing "the inherent gentleness and justice that will enable mankind to reach the maximum of life" (17.56; Atwood 117). In addition, one of the characteristics of his educational theory can be represented as the words "harmony of body and soul" (WL 38; qtd. in Atwood 99). We can recognise his belief that bodily sense should also be cultivated as well as the soul.

The reason why Ruskin asserts the importance of human soul over the matters of education is that "there are three Immaterial things, not only useful but essential to Life"—that is to say "Admiration, Hope, and Love" (27.90). He insists that it is impossible for human beings to live only by materials, and that even if there is wealth or richness in substance, it would not be enough for people to lead hopeful and fruitful lives. In fact, he got on his project with the aim "to let [his] pupils feel the pleasure of *useful* muscular work," and also to make them understand "what a pure country scene may be made by the active of gentle minds and delicate hands" (20.xli-xlii; Ruskin's emphasis). In this sense, though he indicates not necessarily learning at school, he put importance to make all the people, including the upper classes, feel delight in moving their body. In his teaching, when trying to make society better, acting practically is much more important than stating and arguing theories. Besides, physical activities should be done regardless of the social class.

As well as physical training, according to Ruskin, another method, musical training, is effective. Music is one of the forms of art, which is "most directly ethical in origin [. . .] the most direct in power of discipline; the first, the simplest, the most effective of all instruments of moral instruction" (19.176). Besides, learning should not be mere repetition of imitation, but should be the joy of discovery (Chandler 294). Accepting all the things supplied to us is not the same as being obedient: developing our reason is more necessary and admirable. Rhythm and harmony nourish human nature; thus, Ruskin put them into the curriculum of the school in the Guild of St. George.

Getting knowledge was not the central purpose of Ruskin's educational ideal, but this did not mean that intellect was not required. We naturally experience ups and downs in our lifetime, and when struggling with difficulties, what Ruskin thought necessary to be attained in order to overcome them was "a strong mind," or in other words, "a healthy mind." He

explains the strong intellect comparing with the weak one:

[A] strong intellect will have pleasure in the solemnities of storm and twilight, and in the broken and mysterious lights that gleam among them, rather than in mere brilliancy and glare, while a frivolous mind will dread the shadow and the storm; and as a great man will be ready to endure much darkness of fortune in order to reach greater eminence of power of felicity, [. . .and] has more patience and power of expectation, and is ready to pay the full price for the great future pleasure of change. (10.211)

In short, not being afraid of change was undoubtedly indispensable.

In Ruskin's view, what should be provided was "not the love of *Knowledge*, but the love of *Change*," and this was based on "the vital principal" of the Gothic mind (10.214; Ruskin's emphasis). Loving darkness or pain is not the noble nature of human beings, but such mind could ultimately be "*capable of perpetual novelty*" (10.208, 211; Ruskin's emphasis). That is to say, having a thirst for a better world without being satisfied with the status quo, and being ready to accept hardship as well are quite important.

Ruskin did not only states his aim or the purpose, but he also refers to "the final result" of education in Letter 9 of *Fors* (1871): the children should be made to "know what it is to see the sky," to "know what it is to breath it," and to "know, best of all, what it is to behave under it, as in the presence of a Father who is in Heaven" (27.164). As he emphasises in *Modern Painters*, seeing and expressing "the Perfectness and eternal beauty of the work of God" precisely are unmistakably the most important abilities, since all of us "are intended by the Deity to be constantly under their influence" (3.111; 7.9). What Ruskin meant by the words "true education" would be "both effort and a desire for the good," and were accompanied by "a clarity of vision endowed with moral purpose" (Atwood 141). What made Ruskin's idea on education after all, can be said to be founded upon the teaching of the Bible, and he had developed his own ideas with its context. Above all, in the case of the Guild of St George, all things would "be regulated at least by the law of Christ" (28.667). Besides, he admitted in Letter 86 of *Fors* (1878), that he regarded Christian teaching and the Bible as "the basis of [his] education" (29.335). It is not unreasonable at all that Ruskin, who had grown up with his mother's evangelical teaching, came to have his philosophy based strongly on the teaching of the Bible.

Lastly, another remarkable point is that Ruskin was sure and emphasised that "every man in a Christian Kingdom ought to be equally well educated" (11.263). According to him, "*Public Education ... consists essentially in giving Habits of Mercy, and Habits of Truth (Gentleness and Justice)*" (17.394; Ruskin's emphasis). Of course, "every man" includes both men and women (boys and girls). Even though he stated that education for boys and girls were differently directed because they all have their duties fitted to their characteristics, all



children ought to be taught “what to admire, what to hope for, and what to love” (28.128,255). No one in society cannot be aware of the things that is truly important, and could live on their own, unless people are provided education, and no society cannot be led to the better future unless all the members are fairly educated.

## Conclusion

Ruskin believed that only if we could “determine some honest and simple order of existence [. . .] all [our] art, [our] literature, [our] daily labours, [our] domestic affections, and citizen's duty” would “join and increase into one magnificent harmony” (18.458). The inward and outward signs of human beings are correlated with each other, thus “moral change must precede artistic achievement” as well as social reform (Atwood 24). As discussed above, the whole philosophy of John Ruskin is based on his medievalism, antipathy towards industrialisation, and religious faith, which are tangled complicatedly. To learn his philosophy, we cannot avoid getting into “labyrinth of his writing” (Atwood 126). No matter how broad the range of his concerns, however, there can be seen “a remarkable consistency of moral and social emphasis” in his works (Wilmer 8). Based on such background, Ruskin developed his own educational theory, believing in the possibility of regenerating modern society, especially in its moral aspect. It seems that regaining the medieval spirit—or the Gothic heart—was the first step to bring some changes towards the future, and the basis of education.

His works, especially *Fors Clavigera* are certainly not at all easy to understand, but there is a consistency in his insistence on the importance of morality in his statements. Ruskin greatly respected the mediaeval times, and criticised modern society as its opposite. He wanted people to notice the unfavourable condition of the human spirit and the environment resulting from a decay of morality. At the same time, he believed that all human beings have the power to choose the right way to live, and he was convinced that human mind and ultimately society would be regenerated only when the people were properly instructed. It can be said that he has contributed to bringing awareness to the people in his time and following generations in his works.

We have examined three points so far: his respect for the mediaeval ages, particularly for the Gothic Spirit; his criticism against the atmosphere welcoming modernisation; his belief in the power of education to bring back goodness of human nature. All these points are essential when considering morality and his ideas about educational theory. The relation between morality and education can be seen in Ruskin's insistence that “the right moral state” should be the foremost priority, and education is a means of spreading this idea (20.73). The idealistic educational theory for him did not merely involve absorbing knowledge, but cultivating a strong mind and intelligence, or more clearly, regaining the Gothic Spirit.

Intellect must not be frail—Ruskin must have emphasised it because of his strong faith in the human ability to get out from the darkness. His messages seem to be a kind of prophecy associated with a phrase of the Bible: “the light shall be darkened in the heavens there off, and the stars shall withdraw their shining” (Josh. 10:13). He exactly believed that social breakdown had been caused by “a loss of order and restraint” because of modernisation (Atwood 95). It is impossible for us to eliminate every evil on the earth completely. However, it must be possible to raise human spirits which are brave and strong enough to confront the reality. What Ruskin meant by the word “education” may be the means providing the people with a power to tell right from wrong, and a power to realise that the darkened sky is due to the lack of good sense. Giving proper direction to people must be the fundamental purpose of Ruskin’s works and philosophy. So long as we keep having a hope for the bright future, we can notice wrongness and aim at the way of righteousness. Ruskin is said to be one of the persons who showed the notion of welfare, and it must have resulted from his strong respect for the mediaeval ages, especially the Gothic Spirit. Ruskin could be said to have suggested a certain kind of clue to the road on which we should travel, so that we would get out of darkness.

#### Works Cited

- Atwood, Sara. *Ruskin’s Educational Ideals*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2001.
- Chandler, Alice. *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. London: Routledge, 1971.
- Cook, Edward Tyas. *The Life of John Ruskin*. 2 vols. London: George Allen, 1912.
- Fitch, Raymond E. *The Poison Sky: Myth and Apocalypse in Ruskin*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1982.
- Hewison, Robert. *John Ruskin: The Argument of Education*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
- Hilton, Tim. *John Ruskin: The Early Years, 1819-1859*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000.
- . *John Ruskin: The Later Years*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.
- Morris, William. “Preface to the Nature of Gothic by John Ruskin (1892).” May Morris ed., *William Morris Artist Writer Socialist*. Vol.1. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936. 292-95.
- Roger L. Tarr. Eds. “Introduction”. *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books*. By Carlyle, Thomas. Engels, Mark, and Roger L. Tarr. Barkley: U of California P, 2000.
- Ruskin, John. *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 Vols. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1903-12.
- Simmons, I. G. *An Environmental History of Great Britain: From 10,000 Years Ago to the Present*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2001.
- New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, The: Authorized King James Version*. Cleveland: World, n.d.
- Thorsheim, Peter. *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke, and Culture in Britain since 1800*. Ohio: Ohio UP, 2006.
- Viljoen, Helen Gill, ed. *The Brantwood Diary of John Ruskin: Together with Selected Related Letters and Sketches of Persons Mentioned*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1971.
- Wilmer, Clive. “Introduction.” *Unto This Last and Other Writings by John Ruskin*. London: Penguin, 1985. 7-37.

(Teaching Associate, English Department, Japan Women’s University)