The Ruined Cathedral, Black Arts, and the Grave in Engraving

Ruskin and the Fatal Excess of Art

1. The Ruined Cathedral

Throughout this book I have returned to the topic of the reproductive engravings that played such a pivotal role in shaping the reception of art in a period that saw an ever-expanding public engaged with art and its institutions. The importance of mediation was bound to grow as technology made it ubiquitous. But ubiquity itself, as well as the specific forms of dissemination, inevitably affected the range of possible responses to printed images. Like the sites of exhibition with which they were closely associated, the images circulating in the increasing number of popular illustrated journals available for public consumption created new relationships to the objects they displayed.¹

The uncanny figures for engraved reproduction in the work of John Ruskin, which will be addressed in this chapter, are signs of (and responses to) the public’s complex relationship to a modernity in which excess and impermanence are key challenges. I will begin my account of the figures Ruskin uses to evoke these challenges not with prints, but with his words at a site of display that provoked important reflection from him on both topics, and that picks up on the tension between permanence and transient cultural event.² The ruined cathedral in my title occurs in the course of an 1857 lecture with a central place in Ruskin’s career—and one produced in response to a notable occasion. Invited to speak at Manchester on the occasion of the Art Treasures Exhibition, at the height of his fame as a critic, Ruskin responded to the moment with two lectures challenging much the exhibition stood for. With astonishing diligence and remarkable organizational acumen, objects had been gathered from collections all over Britain into another vast palace of glass, a process followed closely and with admiration in the press. But the achievement provoked a forceful response from the critic, including a passage of such extraordinary reach that it demands close attention.

The apocalyptic description of an Italian ruin Ruskin lays out in the course of his remarks—at once about art and about identifying the responsibility for its blighting—is designed to bring to the attention of his listeners the situation of a site of great cultural significance but far from the self-congratulating festival, and
utterly distinct from the immense temporary structure built to house the Art Treasures Exhibition (fig. 8.1). The moment is of a piece with Ruskin’s characteristic challenge to the various temporary palaces of art that proliferated in the nineteenth century, but it does more than suggest that these modern cathedrals are inadequate at their core, that lacking a sense of permanent value they offer repetition as a weak compensation. Ruskin suggests something that needs to be recognized as bold and strange for its power to truly register. The critic argues that his listeners share some responsibility for kinds of damage to which they might reasonably be surprised to hear they bear any relation, for injuries in distant places and times. “Fancy what Europe would be now,” he invites his listeners to imagine, “if the delicate statues and temples of the Greeks,—if the broad roads and massy walls of the Romans,—if the noble and pathetic architecture of the middle ages, had not been ground to dust by mere human rage.” As his topic gathers pace, his focus on agency comes to the fore:

You talk of the scythe of Time, and the tooth of Time: I tell you, Time is scytheless and toothless; it is we who gnaw like the worm—we who smite like the scythe. It is ourselves who abolish—ourselves who consume: we are the mildew, and the flame, and the soul of man is to its own work as the moth, that frets when it cannot fly, and as the hidden flame that blasts where it cannot illumine. All these lost treasures of human intellect have been wholly destroyed by human

industry of destruction… The walls and the ways would have stood—it is we who have left not one stone upon another, and restored its pathlessness to the desert; the great cathedrals of old religion would have stood—it is we who have dashed down the carved work with axes and hammers, and bid the mountain-grass bloom upon the pavement, and the sea-winds chaunt in the galleries.³

It may seem that Ruskin is overstepping more than a little, that his audience of industrialists and merchants of the British Midlands, whatever their faults, are hardly to blame for the pathlessness of the desert, the sea-winds blowing through ruined cathedrals.⁴ But, the aim of Ruskin's words is evidently to identify a far broader sense of responsibility than the relatively limited one entailed in identifying, collecting, and displaying art masterpieces from collections around the United Kingdom. Indeed, this identification of a broad human responsibility for the destruction of art is rare to find outside of the provocation of particular moments of crisis.

Who allowed the roof of the picturesque Abbey to collapse? Who left the sublime temple in the parlous state we find it, a set of toppled columns, pediments, and capitals piled on pitted bases? These can seem more like the kinds of idle questions that might strike a tourist, not moral challenges to the modern art lover liable to be provoked by visiting a temporary exhibition. Ruskin's claim is urgent, however, and it does not exempt anyone when it comes to the condition of a ruin. His hyperbolic challenge has two distinct component parts, one historical and one of immediate application. Epochal religious change is the original cause of the damage, or course—what reduced Parian stone to rubble or lime and tore down the ancient cathedrals is the profound cultural shift from pagan faith to Christian, and then the incomplete but even more violent developments attendant on the emergence of Protestantism. It is a modern sensibility that links these events in an undifferentiated chain of violent change, that suggests that what is interesting about them is the fact of destruction rather than what an earlier era might have seen, the victory of the right side, say, or even the inevitable human development entailed in the change from one system to another. For this reason, I suppose, the originality of Ruskin's position will be harder to recognize than the hyperbole of his prose.⁵ In our own day, when the violent destruction of the idols of a faith in which we do not believe, in a nation we will probably never visit, can easily rise to the level of a moral catastrophe, it may be difficult to miss the novelty of the other element that follows from the general sense that the violence attendant on historical change is to be reprobated more than that change is to be celebrated or justified, which is the emergence of a general sense of (always failing) responsibility or caretaking.

A great exhibition foregrounds the work of gathering and display, and—as any curator can testify—puts pressure on the other role of institutions of culture: the protection of irreplaceable objects. Evidently Ruskin is not trying to prevent his
listeners from attacking cathedrals or reducing ancient statues to lime, so what remains in his analysis is a boundaryless sense of responsibility. The question is how this novel concept of international artistic caretaking articulates with the occasion of its presentation. Ruskin's aim is to evoke a dynamic process involving the practical effects of the modern psychology of art in subjects understood to be not only witnesses to the beauty of admired objects, but agents determining their fate. The public's relationship to art will evidently determine the care it is liable to give to, or withhold from, things it may or may not treasure. But, the care for which Ruskin is arguing is itself shaped by material experiences in the first place, which is where the site of Ruskin's lecture becomes germane to his remarks. The fundamental premise of the organizers of the Art Treasures Exhibition is that accumulation is a certain good. However, at this locus of indigestible accumulation and the self-satisfied love of art, Ruskin launches an uncompromising attack on accumulation itself and the network of ideologies and assumptions supporting it. Something about the temporary palace of art in Manchester makes Ruskin think about other palaces never meant for impermanence but reduced to that condition. The Art Treasures Exhibition, assembling as it did an extraordinarily large collection of work and as impressively massive an audience, was an ideal place for Ruskin to draw attention to the threat presented by plenitude itself.

Ruskin shares with the organizers of the exhibition the desire to make art more widely meaningful, but the pressure resulting from a thronging audience as well as from the accumulation of art inspires in the critic a fear of losing value in quantity (see fig. 8.2). And there were concrete reasons for the concern to which Ruskin gives voice. Season tickets were sold in order to allow repeated visits, and a train line was built to bring visitors as near as possible to the exhibition. But it was widely held that the exhibit in itself was impossible to take in in its entirety. The account of a contemporary conveys the overwhelming volume of material on display:

one can study there all the arts of design from their beginnings to the present: painting, engravings, numismatics, goldsmith work, damascening, ceramics, delicate carving, fine cabinetmaking, inlaying, the art of enameling pottery, of doing repoussé work with metals, of cutting crystals…Imagine a palace all of glass, in which would be found gathered the great gallery of the Louvre, the Cluny Museum, the cabinet des Médailles, the reserve deposits of the Cabinet d’Estampes…—and you will still have only an imperfect idea of this exhibition.

Ruskin gave the remarks he delivered at the Exhibition two titles: “The Political Economy of Art” became, on its reissue in 1880, “A Joy Forever (and its price on the market).” The titles taken together (and including parenthesis) suggest what is extraordinary in Ruskin’s response to the event that provided the immediate occasion for his talks. He himself identified these lectures as the beginning of the second part of his career, when he turned most fully toward social questions, but
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The titles suggest the continuity between his aesthetic and economic concerns. The specifically curatorial topic of how art might be usefully administered when it is no longer experienced as a highly punctuated and infrequent event, but as a boundless stream of goods needing conceptual organization, is developed in relation to the exhibition, which is a prime instance of the very problem he has set himself.8

A fragment of the first line of Keats’s Endymion—“A Joy Forever”—had indeed been engraven on the principal archway over the entrance to the exhibition. Ruskin is concerned enough with this circumstance to draw attention to it many years later; in the opening to the preface of the 1880 reissue of the lectures he underlines the point of the new title. By sending his readers back twenty-three years, Ruskin invites them to consider the relationship between event and argument, that is, between forgetting and returns—a theme that recurs in his discussions of the Crystal Palace and its aftermaths. The irony of endless time—of forever—crowning the transient structure housing an impermanent phenomenon, itself likely to be a vague memory in the reader’s mind at the moment of reading, is central to his discussion.

The question may reasonably be asked: why should the collection of Art Treasures in Manchester make Ruskin think about ruined cathedrals? Why does this great demonstration of the love of art and of organizational prowess on the part of his contemporaries lead him to the problem of impermanence? The

Fig. 8.2 “The Manchester Art-Treasures Exhibition. The Grand Hall.” Wood engraving. Illustrated London News, May 9, 1857.
answer is at once fundamentally material and deeply conceptual: Ruskin’s theme is the direct relationship between the accumulation of aesthetic objects and the destruction of the possibility of their enjoyment. The argument comes together at the figure of the audience; he is talking about that difficult thing, the responsibility of the public in relation to its own aesthetic pleasure or fatigue. Ruskin responds to the gathering of art and people about which he has been invited to speak by challenging the premises of the event, by presenting accumulation itself as fundamentally dangerous to the appreciation of art. I have largely been quoting from “The Accumulation and Distribution of Art,” the second of the two lectures in The Political Economy of Art, and a text in which the critic develops at length the problems raised by the mammoth exhibition, an argument that has at its heart Ruskin’s sense that the material form of the presentation of art has a crucial effect on the consciousness receiving it:

the amount of pleasure that you can receive from any great work, depends wholly on the quantity of attention and energy of mind you can bring to bear upon it… If you see things of the same kind of equal value very frequently, your reverence for them is infallibly diminished, your powers of attention get gradually wearied, and your interest and enthusiasm worn out; and you cannot in that state bring to any given work the energy necessary to enjoy it. (16:56–7)

The response of an audience to art is bound to be shaped by its presentation in a crowded, but disconnected, jumble. Ruskin reflects on whether it is better to scatter a small amount of attention over many pictures than it is to focus a great deal of attention on one:

the question is not a merely arithmetical one of this kind. Your fragments of broken admirations will not, when they are put together, make up one whole admiration; two and two, in this case, do not make four, nor anything like four. Your good picture, or book, or work of art of any kind, is always in some degree fenced and closed about with difficulty. (16:58)

At the heart of Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” is the suggestion that a great deal of the power of art in earlier periods was due to its distance from its audience, its role in worship creating an ineffable relationship between intimacy and unbridgeable distance, the closing of this gap being an integral part of modernity’s relationship to art. Benjamin, like Ruskin, includes both reproduction and exhibition in his treatment of the experience of art in modernity; indeed, it is exhibition which provides the model for the crisis he anticipates from technological reproduction:

A painting has always exerted a claim to be viewed primarily by a single person or by a few. The simultaneous viewing of paintings by a large audience, as
happens in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis in painting, a crisis triggered not only by photography but, in a relatively independent way, by the artwork’s claim to the attention of the masses.9

Benjamin traces “the social basis of the aura’s present decay” to a desire for intimacy with the art object that is part of mass society’s tendency to destroy the individual character of any particular thing. The process Benjamin describes is a poignant one involving something like the desire for an experience of closeness that is stripped (as a desire and as an experience) of the quality of difference that should be the particular promise of intimacy itself. The decay of aura is shaped by a desire for the constant encounter of the same. What Benjamin identifies as “the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things,” is matched by “their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction” (105; emphasis in the original). Benjamin and Ruskin are preoccupied by the urge toward closeness that Benjamin, following Valéry, identifies as characteristic of modernity, towards the “Conquest of Ubiquity” that gives its title to the essay that inspired Benjamin’s own:

the amazing growth of our technologies, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component, which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power.10

Valéry’s “ubiquity” is a condition that affects the valuation of all objects, not only those being acted on directly either by reproduction or public inspection. The question for Ruskin throughout his career, and increasingly toward the end of the century, is whether accumulation and reproduction will come to play a positive part in the production of work, or whether they need to be understood as participating in a process—at once sign and cause—inevitably tending toward chaos and decay.11

The reasons for the urgency of Ruskin’s attack on a debased experience of art become all the more visible in those cases when his response is provoked not by the unique event of an Exhibition, but by a far more widespread and related phenomenon: the ubiquity of engraved reproductions of art, particularly in the popular press. But both issues are closely related in the period, and in his thought. Benjamin and Ruskin are both responding to a cultural complex that always includes the two sites of display: the halls of exhibition and the pages of the popular press.

While art lovers in previous centuries had had to rely on expensive forms of reproduction which, as a matter of course, limited the experience of art to a relatively small number of people and even to a fairly limited repertoire of images, Thomas Bewick’s epochal invention of wood engraving in the early nineteenth century soon led to the proliferation of periodicals which made the image—quite
literally—cheap. The illustrated papers of the nineteenth century not only followed developments in the arts, they often included reproductions meant for display. And the interest they showed in exhibitions was a fundamental part of the cultural influence of those transient events. Henry Cole, the principal organizer of the Great Exhibition and founder of the South Kensington Museum that would become the Victoria and Albert, is clear on the ways in which technological developments in reproduction were destined to have an effect closely related to that which was aimed at by those structures of exhibition, but exponentially magnified: “The great end of the whole art of engraving,” he notes in 1838, “is to render the spirit and genius of a great artist accessible to the thousands, or the millions, by embodying them in cheap and portable forms. Wood engraving, professedly the cheapest and most portable of all the representations of great pictures, excels equally in fulfilling the highest mission of its art.”

The Penny Magazine, which blazoned its cheapness in its title, was established by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in 1832 with the express aim (as formulated in the preface to the first volume), “to gratify a proper curiosity, and cultivate an increasing taste, by giving representations of the finest Works of Art, of Monuments of Antiquity, and of subjects of Natural History, in a style that had been previously considered to belong only to expensive books.” A footnote in the same volume referring to a print of one of the most famous of these works of art in England, “Christ Delivering the Keys” from Raphael’s Cartoons at Hampton Court (fig. 8.3), makes clear the ambitions such an image satisfies. “The

Fig. 8.3 “Christ delivering the Keys to St. Peter.” Wood engraving after Raphael. The Penny Magazine, December 1, 1832.
Cartoons,” it notes, “are shown, with the other pictures, to visitors, upon payment of a fee to the person who goes round the apartment. We hope, when the new National Gallery is finished, that they will be removed to London, so that the public may be delighted and improved by their contemplation without the exaction of sixpences and shillings” (349n). The circulation of The Penny Magazine reached 200,000 in its first year, a success soon matched by the various periodicals that followed closely on its heels.

As my argument is about the speed of change and the problem of excess, it may be as well to list some of these notable successors. The Penny Magazine was followed by Punch in 1841 and the Illustrated London News in 1842. On the continent, 1843 saw the establishment of a number of titles, which also proclaimed their commitment to the distribution of images right on the masthead: L’Illustration, Die Illustrierte Zeitung. Throughout the middle of the nineteenth century, the pace of founding of new magazines did not slacken: Harper’s Weekly began publication in 1857, and Cornhill Magazine in 1860. The proliferation I am trying to illustrate was not simply a matter of variety of journals, but of copies printed; by 1863 the Illustrated London News had reached a circulation of 300,000.16

As the passage I have quoted from the first issue of The Penny Magazine makes clear, from the very earliest point of this boom in publishing, it was not lost on art boosters that a new era in mass access to the image had arrived. In 1846, an anonymous author declares in the Art Union that “engraving on wood is destined to do far more for ‘the million’ than it had yet done; if our artists will aid our wood engravers, they will effect great things for the mass” (quoted in Fox, 9n). And indeed, The Penny Magazine featured regular articles on “The Lives of Remarkable Painters,” accompanied generally by a portrait of the artist and a reproduction of at least one of his works, engraved in wood (see fig. 8.4). (It is in the course of this series that Anna Jameson undertook the moral rehabilitation of Raphael discussed in Chapter 2.)

During the development and run of the Art Treasures Exhibition The Illustrated London News followed the pattern of promotion and response established with the Great Exhibition, recording in vivid detail the planning, construction, and opening of that event, as well as its reception by the public.17 But already in 1851 the Illustrated London News offered its readers a wonderful mise-en-abyme acknowledgment of the relationship between exhibition, illustration, and the press: an image of the journal being produced, to the fascination of onlookers, on a “Patent Vertical Printing Machine” running within the confines of the Crystal Palace itself during the Great Exhibition (fig. 8.5).

When Ruskin’s challenge in Manchester comes, then, it does so in the midst of the cheerful exhibitionism that characterized the era. And it is worth noting the balance between material and conceptual issues driving Ruskin’s concerns. The prints from which so much was expected were not only inexpensive and easy to
produce in huge numbers, they were also of a dramatically lower quality than the kinds connoisseurs had admired for centuries. Still, it is not on the grounds of connoisseurship that Ruskin declares himself disturbed by the decline in quality of these reproductions; his real concern is for the loss of what Benjamin would call aura that is the result of the presence (the omni-presence) of such work in culture. In *A Joy Forever* Ruskin takes the occasion of the Arts Treasures Exhibition to launch a forceful attack on the values in culture which support the event, and which it instantiates:

of one thing you may be sure, that art which is produced hastily will also perish hastily; and that what is cheapest to you now, is likely to be dearest in the end. I am sorry to say, the great tendency of this age is to expend its genius in perishable art of this kind...There is a vast quantity of intellect and labour consumed annually in our cheap illustrated publications; you triumph in them; and you think it so grand a thing to get so many woodcuts for a penny. Why, woodcuts, penny and all, are as much lost to you as if you had invested your money in gossamer. More lost, for the gossamer could only tickle your face, and glitter in your eyes; it could not catch your feet and trip you up: but bad art can, and does; for you can't like good woodcuts as long as you look at the bad ones. If we were at

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Fig. 8.5 “Patent Vertical Printing Machine, in the Great Exhibition.” Wood engraving. *Illustrated London News*, May 31, 1851.
this moment to come across a Titian woodcut, or a Durer woodcut, we should not like it—those of us at least who are accustomed to the cheap work of the day. We don't like, and can't like, that long; but when we are tired of one bad cheap thing, we throw it aside and buy another bad cheap thing; and so keep looking at bad things all our lives. (16:41–2)

Ruskin's diagnosis is evidently more than a simple complaint about taste. The lived experience of the failure of aura is symptomatically manifested as an absolute loss of the possibility of attention. The modernity the critic describes is not satisfied with plenty; it is driven, instead, by an inescapable perpetual disappointment. As the appetite cannot be sated by cheap images, constant change is the only recourse for the jaded sensibility, though it merely results in that deadening proliferation that is at once cause and symptom of a crisis in culture. When he turns his attention to the human effort that is expended in order to feed the desire for disposable images, Ruskin traces the fatal implications of so much cheap art in two directions: it is pernicious to the sensibility of the public and damaging to the lives of those laboring to produce ephemeral work that will never satisfy an inexorable appetite.

Attention, a key word in Ruskin's lexicon when he attempts to address the psychological challenge presented by the modern relationship to art, describes an experience that is compensatory, but never fully sufficient. The flawed modern relationship to art becomes diagnostic of a social crisis it cannot in fact solve. Moments that feel like a fuller experience may come to be understood as in some measure compensating for a lifetime of unsatisfactory social exchanges, but the love of art will not be able to patch over the psychic or affective damage attendant on the conditions that determine the decay of aura. The problem is structural as well as practical: the fantasy of a vanished ritual or even salvific relationship toward the art object is, after all, not one of full-on complete aesthetic encounter (whatever we understand that to be), no more than any kind of intimate relationship we rely on for support is chiefly characterized by full knowledge or even reiterated gazing. Arm's-length can be a good distance from which to take in an object; an embrace offers the opportunity of full contact and the experience of more elements of the beloved, but is rarely the occasion for thoughtful informed reflection. The altarpiece still in the church for which it was always intended, before which the priest has performed sacramental rites for centuries, below which generations of church-goers have burned candles in the hope of gaining some divine favor: it is not just that such a sacred object is materially obscured by the conditions in which it is found, but that worship itself, or even the simple fact of familiarity, shares very little with the conditions that shape the modern love of art.

The first use of “aesthetic” in the modern sense given in the Oxford English Dictionary (“Of or relating to the perception, appreciation, or criticism of that which is beautiful”), dates to 1812 and, indeed, it describes something that either was not experienced, or had no need to be named in an earlier era. The situation
imagined when aura is evoked—that state of unalienated unselfconscious relation-
ship—is precisely what is irrecoverable in modernity. The modern experience of
art is fundamentally an experience of a loss with sources not to be found ultimately
in the aesthetic. And so, it presents an opportunity for reflecting on the nature of
what is missing or currently unavailable because of an ongoing social crisis. It is
“we” who threaten the ancient cathedrals of old religion not in the sense that we
may inherit some complicity in earlier acts of violence, but in that the relationships
possible with objects we claim to admire are distorted by the play of attention and
inattention that characterizes the modern engagement with art.

2. Black Arts

If Ruskin is prescient in his analysis of the psychological effects of cheap mass-
produced art in 1857, thirty years later he is remarkable in his treatment of a
problem which evidently had only become more urgent. The onslaught of images
did not abate, of course; it increased at an astonishing rate as new technologies
came to the fore, wood engravings eventually being supplemented and then over-
taken by photographic processes. Ruskin’s response to photography is complex; it
was a medium he often used with pleasure and fascination to document buildings
at risk or to bring to England images of central importance to his aesthetic ideals.
Nevertheless, he chose a remarkable title for the article on reproduction he pub-

Black arts is, of course, another term for the practices of magic, or even necro-
mancy. They are black because they are forbidden or hidden. It is just Ruskin’s
joke, however, that the arts he has in mind are black because they are precisely the
contrary of forbidden, and not hidden at all. In reproduction these arts are also
literally black, because they reduce everything to the black lines of ink making up
the image.

The essay’s pedestrian subtitle is also important: “A Reverie on the Strand.”
Reproduction has had a special relation to the city since at least the eighteenth
century; the representation of print lovers gazing with fascinated attention at the
merchandise of a print-seller has allowed artists as distinct as Rowlandson and
Daumier to evoke the forms of attention of a diverse middle-class urban popula-
tion. Ruskin reminds us of this tradition by the purposefully incongruous juxta-
position of archaic and modern—the black arts reflected on in a busy London
street. And, indeed, the text of the brief article locates us vividly in the city, along-
side Ruskin, who paints himself as a bewildered, superannuated flaneur over-
whelmed by the pace of change in the metropolis:

I don’t know London any more, nor where I am in it—except the Strand. In
which, walking up and down the other day, and meditating over its wonderful
displays of etchings and engravings and photographs all done to perfection such
as I had never thought possible in my younger days, it became an extremely searching and troublesome question with me what was to come of all this literally “black art,” and how it was to influence the people of our cities. (14:358–9)

As Ruskin identifies the effect of the black arts with the modern life of the city—with its changeability and its expansion—the uncertain steps of an old man in a burgeoning metropolis become emblematic not only of the experience of change, but of its exhausting effect:

What is it all to come to? Are our lives in this kingdom of darkness to be indeed twenty times as wise and long as they were in the light?

The Answer—what answer was possible to me—came chiefly in the form of fatigue, and a sorrowful longing for an old Prout washed in with Vandyke brown and British ink, or even a Harding forest scene with all the foliage done in zig-zag. (14:359)

It is not lost on Ruskin that the exhaustion provoked by his walk in this crowded city of reproduction is a challenge to his career-long celebration not only of art, but of the faithful reproduction of nature:

No one has pleaded more for finish than I in past time, or oftener, or perhaps so strongly, asserted the first principle that a good picture should look like the mirror of the thing itself. But now that everyone can mirror the thing itself—at least the black and white of it—as easily as he takes his hat off, and then engrave the photograph, and steel the copper, and print piles and piles of the thing by steam, all as good as the first half dozen proofs used to be, I begin to wish for a little less to look at. (14:360)

Ruskin is disingenuous when he suggests that the desire to see less is a new one for him: I begin to wish for a little less to look at describes a feeling of long standing—or, perhaps surfeit always feels like a new experience, and so is best described that way. As far back as his inaugural lecture as Slade Professor of Art at Oxford in 1870, Ruskin had presented the problem as arising from what the modern public demands of its art:

There is a continually increasing demand for popular art, multipliable by the printing-press, illustrative of daily events, of general literature, and of natural science. Admirable skill, and some of the best talent of modern times, are occupied in supplying this want; and there is no limit to the good which may be effected by rightly taking advantage of the powers we now possess of placing good and lovely art within the reach of the poorest classes. Much has already been accomplished; but great harm has been done also,—first, by forms of art
definitely addressed to depraved tastes; and, secondly, in a more subtle way, by really beautiful and useful engravings which are yet not good enough to retain their influence on the public mind;—which weary it by redundant quantity of monotonous average excellence, and diminish or destroy its power of accurate attention to work of a higher order. (20:26–7)

The Ruskin of “The Black Arts” is evidently not confronting a new challenge, but developing ideas underlying central works in his oeuvre, Stones of Venice and Modern Painters principal among them. Seeing in modernity the triumph not only of mass production, but of the mass experience of the image, Ruskin cannot help but identify the inescapable effect of such phenomena on the making of new art. Thus, his review of the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1875 ironically returns the art to its source, making the principal artists of the day into mere colorists of the illustrated papers, the annual exhibition into a particularly colorful edition of a journal; indeed he refers to the prestigious event itself as a periodical, “an annual publication”:

Before looking at any single picture, let us understand the scope and character of the Exhibition as a whole. The Royal Academy of England, in its annual publication, is now nothing more than a large coloured Illustrated Times folded in saloons,—the splendidest May number of the Graphic shall we call it?20

Patricia Mainardi has emphasized the often forgotten role of drawing in discussions of reproductive technologies in later periods.21 Because he does not ever forget the work of the hand that goes into making things, Ruskin is able to insist on continuities that run in two directions: between the activities of makers that later periods might put in entirely different categories (such as salon painters, illustrators, and wood engravers), and between laborers and consumers. It is more than irony that drives Ruskin to propose that the productive work of the illustrators may ultimately be more impressive than what he takes to be the feeble colored forms of the Exhibition:

Yet observe, in saying that Academy work is now nothing more, virtually, than a cheap coloured woodcut I do not mean to depreciate the talent employed in it. Our public press is supported by an ingenuity and skill in rapid art unrivalled in any period of history; nor have I ever been so humbled, or astonished, by the mightiest works of Tintoret, Turner, or Velazquez, as I was one afternoon last year, in watching in the Dudley Gallery, two ordinary workmen for a daily newspaper finishing their drawings on the blocks by gaslight, against time.

(14:264)

Dark images made as day fades, gaslight and hurry: the conditions of modern production are linked to the darkness of the art produced. Being against time,
means working to get the image finished even as dark falls and yet another technology is brought to bear to extend the hours of labor, one which interrupts the darkness it cannot end and forms the setting of the illustrators’ work. The workmen draw, cut, and ink in order to produce dark lines in a hurried and penumbral modernity. And hurry is, of course, the other side of impermanence; the engravers need to rush because the transient value of the images they illustrate mean they must be brought out as soon as possible in order to ensure whatever brief value they are destined to have.

3. The Grave in Engraving

In the ruined cathedral and the black arts Ruskin finds two archaic, self-consciously gothic images to describe a fundamentally modern problem: the challenge of the proliferation of the image provoked by the developments of new technologies of reproduction. It is a third and paradoxically yet more lethal figure—“the grave in engraving”—that Ruskin offers as a form of recuperation of the reproductive image and the techniques of reproduction.

The observation that the root of engraving is grave comes in Ruskin’s most sustained treatment of reproduction: lectures he delivered originally at Oxford in 1872 as “Sandro Botticelli and the Florentine Schools of Engraving,” because he expected to center his discussion on a set of works he wrongly thought to be by the Florentine artist, and which he ultimately published as Ariadne Florentina (1873–1876).\textsuperscript{22} I will address the change of name below, but in order to recognize the danger for which Ariadne’s clue may present some relief it is important to first establish the threat and the promise of the process of engraving that Ruskin posits together by his use of the term grave, a word that allows Ruskin to speak about three fundamental elements involved in printmaking: the serious, the deadly, and the carved—to speak about them together because they are the component parts of an inescapable, though generally neglected, set of relationships. Ruskin supports his premise that “engraving, and the study of it, since the development of the modern finished school, have been ruinous to European knowledge of art” (22:463) by describing a process that not only challenges the ability to love art by jading the sensibilities and fostering the appetite for pointless change, but also deadens the worker who carves designs he had no role in making, trapping audience and art producer in a deadening cycle of mutual unsatisfiable need:

In the miserably competitive labour of finding new stimulus for the appetite—daily more gross—of this tyrannous mob, we may count as lost beyond any hope the artists who are dull, docile, or distressed enough to submit to its demands; and we may count the dull and distressed by myriads;—and among the docile, many of the best intellects we possess. (22:470)
As always in Ruskin, consumption and production are deeply intertwined. Hence his description of what he calls the “entire illustrative art industry of the modern press” brings together the darkness of the black arts with the fated and hopeless speed that is the complement to their impermanence: “industry enslaved to the ghastly service of catching the last gleams in the glued eyes of the daily more bestial English mob,—railroad born and bred, which drags itself about the black world it has withered under its breath, in one eternal grind and shriek, gobbling, staring,—chattering,—giggling,—trampling out every vestige of national honour and domestic peace” (22:469–70).

Still, the grave qualities involved in reproductive technologies are more than simply lethal for Ruskin, a writer for whom tombs are so often places of beauty modernity has forgotten how to love. Sites of interment and their associated memorials are central to Ruskin’s analyses of art; from the sepulchers of Venetian Doges to the funeral effigy of Ilaria del Carretto in Lucca, they recur in his writing as the measure of the effectiveness of art in sustaining memory, in giving praise while marking out something more than an end. “[T]he power of all Christian work,” he notes in Val D’Arno (1874), “begins in the niche of the Catacomb and depth of the sarcophagus, and is to the end definable as architecture of the tomb” (23:25). The conclusion of a well-known passage in The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849) is worth citing in this context because it contains an interplay between apparently incongruous language and images (sowing, the grave, and time) to which Ruskin returns in his lectures on engraving:

it is one of the appointed conditions of the labour of men that, in proportion to the time between the seed-sowing and the harvest, is the fullness of the fruit; and that generally, therefore, the farther off we place our aim, and the less we desire to be ourselves the witnesses of what we have laboured for, the more wide and rich will be the measure of our success. Men cannot benefit those that are with them as they can benefit those who come after them; and of all the pulpits from which human voice is ever sent forth, there is none from which it reaches so far as from the grave. (8:233)

Ruskin recuperates the act of engraving in Ariadne Florentina with the audacious claim that the real essence of this serious art is precisely the most material action entailed in its making: the scratch, the carving, the en-graving. His play on words, a reminder at once of linguistic and of actual facts, allows the lecturer to propose that rather than being naturally suited to its current function, engraving itself has been debased by being made a mere instrument of reproduction. Ruskin carries out an astonishing transvaluation of the medium, turning it from an essentially secondary reproductive form to “the first of the arts” (22:305). His account raises the fundamental act of engraving, when rightly understood and correctly practiced, to the status of a precondition for art, no longer the simple record of
architecture and sculpture: “engraving, though not altogether in the method of
which you see examples in the print-shops of the High Street, is, indeed, a prior
art to that either of building or sculpture, and is an inseparable part of both, when
they are rightly practiced” (22:304).

Ruskin’s account identifies the work of the engraver not as the making of the
copy, but as the carving of the plate. To engrave, he insists, is to make “the most
permanent of furrows.” He repeats this definition for emphasis: “a permanent cut
or furrow.” It is not lost on Ruskin that what he proposes reclaims engraving from
its later and more common meanings. In his definition, it is “essentially the cut-
ting into a solid substance for the sake of making your ideas as permanent as
possible, graven with an iron pen in the Rock for ever. Permanence, you observe,
is the object, not multiplicability;—that is quite an accidental, sometimes not
even a desirable attribute of engraving” (22:320). Ruskin’s emphasis on material
conditions of making include his illustration of the chief tool of the trade, the
graver or burin (see fig. 8.6), as well as his insistence on describing it not just as a
chisel (which magnifies the instrument and emphasizes its links to sculpture),
but, repeatedly, as a ploughshare, as though seeds might be sown in the gap in the
metal cut by the burin: “a solid ploughshare, which, instead of throwing the earth
aside, throws it up and out, producing at first a simple ravine, or furrow...”
(22:348). As we will see, this is an image that will resonate to the close of the
piece, one linking death and carving in a surprisingly fruitful way.

Picking up on the central argument of the “Nature of Gothic” chapter of Stones
of Venice, Ruskin demonstrates that the ever-increasing technical perfection of
engraving is not only pernicious for the consumer, but for the producer as well. I
have mentioned how, in his review of the 1875 Royal Exhibition, Ruskin made the
paintings on display into illustrated prints (with apologies to the printmakers).

Fig. 8.6 A burin. In: John Ruskin, Ariadne Florentina. The Works of John Ruskin
(1903–1912), volume 22. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), 39 volumes,
In the course of the lectures that became *Ariadne Florentina*, he held up “Astrea Redux,” a political cartoon by John Tenniel taken from a recent issue of *Punch* (fig. 8.7). Giving this ephemeral piece the focused attention generally reserved for the highest art, he finds in it passages of real but dangerous achievement. He damns the picture with high praise for containing “as high qualities as it
is possible to find in modern art” (22:357). Social and aesthetic analyses come together as he addresses himself to the rich dark passages in the cartoon, comparing them to those in images from an entirely different kind of work, Hans Holbein’s wood cuts for The Dance of Death (1538).

Ruskin’s point is complex because he has in his sights not only the artist of the design, but the carver who transferred that original onto a wood-block and the reader whose eye passed over the reproduced image without a thought to the workmanship involved. He focuses on the dark parts of the engraving to call attention to the fact that the number of cross-hatchings the artist’s pen has made in the course of drawing this entirely ephemeral sketch calls for an unconscionable quantity of precise cuts on the part of the men employed in reproducing it (fig. 8.8), which in itself is symptomatic of the alienation between concept and execution in modern art: “the rapid work, though easy to the artist, is very difficult to the woodcutter; so that it implies instantly a separation between the two crafts, and that your woodcutter has ceased to be a draughtsman” (22:356). Holbein, on the other hand, has kept himself to a limited number of cuts—suggesting the intimate link between his work and that of the craftsman, or that, in fact, he himself was the carver of his own design. Ruskin’s analysis will be familiar to any reader of “The Nature of Gothic.” He celebrates the variety and roughness which is indicative not of destructive mass production, but of a craftsman thinking and engaged with his work. On the other side is the mere repetition of line, as deadening for the worker as the perpetual onslaught of image is for the viewer.

Ruskin recovers the primacy of engraving and makes it a serious matter, but not for this reason any less deadly, and this is the reason why the counter-example of Holbein’s Dance of Death becomes so important to his argument. “Engraving
means, primarily, making a permanent cut or furrow in something,” Ruskin notes, before going on to indicate the difficulty presented by this recovered definition: “The central syllable of the word has become a sorrowful one, meaning the most permanent of furrows” (22:306; my emphasis). In this telling, the sorrowful implications of the grave are a modern development. The fear of the grave and the inability to see it as productive are foundational errors of modernity. Ruskin's lectures function, much in the manner of Holbein's images, as a kind of memento mori, as the attempt to reclaim the value of the graven becomes part of a bold transvaluation of the power of the grave. That both terms have become indicators of transience and meaningless consumption is part of the critic's diagnosis of the modern condition. The recognition of death as a limit or boundary adding significance to life, of the carved line aiming at permanence by means of difficult work on hard material (stone, metal, wood)—these are elements that make the recuperation of the grave possible. Modernity responds to impermanence with reiteration, with the proliferation of disposable reproduced work. Ruskin proposes instead a challenge to impermanence at its base, arguing that the artistic work evident in modernity and the appetite which it whets and leaves unsatisfied combine into a death in life to which an actual end might serve as a reprieve rather than a sorrowful final surrender. The grave in Ruskin offers rest rather than constant change, and the possibility of permanence in memory or tomb.

Holbein's Dance of Death runs through the lectures like the skeletons run through that cycle of woodcuts, a reminder to think of ourselves as never far from the end that will mark the period of our actions. These German works, it bears saying, are shoe-horned into a lecture originally advertised as focusing on Italian themes—“Sandro Botticelli and the Florentine Schools of Engraving.” The incongruous presence of Holbein's images is justified by the part they play in advancing Ruskin's grave theme. Like all memento mori, Holbein's work is at once out of place and just where it should be as it calls attention not just to the proximity of the grave, but to the serious implications of its imminence. The plates with which Ruskin introduces the series resonate with the themes of his lecture, which are those that motivate his analysis of reproduction generally. What he describes as “two of the best wood engravings ever produced by art” (22:352) are woodcuts showing Death approaching or harassing a priest as he delivers his sermon and Death driving the oxen which move the plow of a weary farmer (figs. 8.9 and 8.10).

As Ruskin's attempt to celebrate Italian work that he identifies with a lost purity and healthiness of execution is overtaken by grimmer topics, Holbein becomes a far more important figure than Botticelli. In a kind of historical argument we have already seen suggested by critics of Raphael, and most powerfully developed by Benjamin and Warburg, Ruskin identifies the German engraver's work as deeply responsive to the cultural crisis of the Reformation, and as therefore having far more in common with Ruskin's desperate moral project than with the confident
productions of a more harmonious period. Tracing Holbein’s critical sensibility to the effect of living during an era of spiritual turmoil, Ruskin describes a work of art that is in itself a kind of engaged social analysis: “always melancholy … and entirely furious in its indignation against all who, either by actual injustice in this life, or by what he holds to be false promise of another, destroy the good, or the energy, of the few days which man has to live” (22:354). A quotation from Psalms (23:4) takes on special resonance in the context of Ruskin’s discussion of the engraver as someone driving a furrow: like the critic in modern England, Holbein finds himself in deadly darkness, in “the valley of the shadow of death” (22:416).

If it is easy to locate a connection between Ruskin’s critical aspirations and those he finds in Holbein, it is no less clear that Ruskin discovers analogous figures
for himself within the prints. Indeed, in a fascinating moment of self-conscious reflection, Ruskin identifies at once with the preacher in Holbein’s engraving and with the death-figure who approaches him, leading to a confusing passage of quotation, non-quotation, and a haze of uncertain pronoun reference, in which the lecturing Ruskin ventriloquizes the figure of Death that has come to interrupt the preacher (citing in the process Hebrews 8:1): “Death comes quietly: I am going to be preacher now; here is your own hour-glass, ready for me. You have spoken many words in your day. But ‘of the things which you have spoken, this is the sum,’—your death-warrant, signed and sealed. There’s your text for to-day” (22:355, emphasis in the original).
The link Ruskin has established between graver and plow makes the analogy between the work of the plowman “pressing the iron into the ground” and that of the engraver at his craft readily identifiable. And this is another moment in which the voice of the image is the voice of mortality ventriloquized by the lecturer. In Ruskin’s interpretation, Death is a comfort and help to this carver in the soil. And of course, Ruskin was speaking these remarks, so the pronominal ambiguity in his discussion of “The Last Furrow” includes not only himself, but the audience he is addressing: “‘It is a long field,’ says Death; ‘but we’ll get to the end of it to-day,—you and I’” (22:355).

Much of what is tortuous or figurative in Ruskin is motivated by a historicizing sensibility that made it impossible for him not to see himself as implicated in the disturbing modernity he was interested in challenging.

To-day, the key term in Death’s statement, was embossed by the editors on every volume of the Library Edition of Ruskin’s work because it is Ruskin’s self-chosen motto, adopted, as he tells us in Praeterita, “tacitly underlined to myself with the warning, ‘The night cometh, when no man can work’” (35:391; see fig. 8.11). Ruskin could not help but be preoccupied with the presentation and

![Image of Library Edition cover](https://example.com/cover.png)

Fig. 8.11 Cover of Library Edition of *The Works of John Ruskin*. 
diffusion of his own work. His self-imposed and widely influential role was to encourage the knowledge and admiration of art. And yet, particularly late in his career, he became ever-more uncomfortable with the nature of publicity and publication, and sought out new forms in which to make his ideas known, novel means of diffusion that might overcome the challenges presented by more conventional methods. He began to publish his own works; he undertook the letter-periodical addressed to the working-men of England, *Fors Clavigera*, in the hope that not just the content but the dissemination of his works should instantiate his values. In the grave death-haunted preacher, Ruskin presents to his audience a more organically integrated, traditional, and aura-filled form of communication than the transient importunings of a venal mass media. I have noted that an important theme in *Ariadne Florentina* is that the grave—like the graven—need not be a sign of spiritual death. Hence the further presentation to his students of the image of the plowman from Holbein—preserved forever, though accompanied by death who is whipping his team to a speedier end—a cut image of a grave man, carving a fruitful furrow in fertile earth.

In the course of a complaint about his inability to conclude a variety of projects in *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 60 (December 1875), Ruskin attributes his slow completion of *Ariadne* to the inhibition caused by his imperfect ability when faced with the medium, especially given the achievement of the masters he admires. He writes of the “ashamed censorship of the imperfection of all I have been able to say about engraving,” noting in the same sentence that; “if I take up my Bewick, or return to my old Turner vignettes, I put my Appendix off again—‘till next month,’ and so on” (27:461). And indeed, the lectures do not conclude, so much as end with two long passages from the *Memoir* of Thomas Bewick (1862), the famed inventor of wood engraving. In the first, Bewick insists on the social importance of the continued existence of a class of landowners who farm their own land. In the second, Bewick describes the virtuous life of his acquaintance, Gilbert Gray, a book-binder who abandoned his early training for the priesthood in order to devote a life of frugal modesty to producing “books of an entertaining and moral tendency, printed and circulated at a cheap rate” (22:460). Bewick’s account of this upright man ends with his friends accompanying him to the grave. With these extracts Ruskin picks up on the resonant images from Holbein—of priesthood, death, and plowing—that he had offered his students early in the lectures. His own final brief paragraph is a simple comment on the tomb of Gilbert Gray: “And what graving on the sacred cliffs of Egypt ever honoured them, as that grass-dimmed furrow does the mounds of a Northern land?” (22:460).

It is difficult to cut hard matter with a sharp implement. Each line requires focus, self-control, and attention. To recuperate the grave in engraving as Ruskin does is to establish that the importance of reproductive technology is misunderstood when its power is trivialized. The title he gave the published volume,
Ariadne Florentina, is referred to only once by Ruskin, and only as he suggests his failure to develop the significance of its obscure terms:

when I chose the title for the collected series of these lectures, I hoped to have justified it by careful analysis of the methods of labyrinthine ornament...But the labyrinth of life itself, and its more and more interwoven occupation, become too manifold and too difficult for me; and of the time wasted in the blind lanes of it, perhaps that spent in analysis or recommendation of the art to which men's present conduct makes them insensible, had been chiefly cast away.

(22:451–2)

Rather than an explanation, Ruskin once again recapitulates both the dark places where the project of the text has taken him and the importance of process itself for his argument. But we can fill in his outline a little. Ariadne's clue is a thin line of safety with love at one end and danger at the other; its function is not to spare Theseus his trial, but to retrieve him after he has confronted the threat at the heart of the labyrinth. In the course of a far more extensive treatment of Ariadne in Fors, Ruskin will insist on the hope and risk contained in her clue: “this thread of Ariadne’s implied that even victory over the monster would be vain, unless you could disentangle yourself from his web also” (27:408). The thread neither breaks the maze nor maps out the structure in its entirety. Rather, it allows the possibility of egress by recapitulating the challenging form confronted on the way in. His ostensible failure to develop on his title notwithstanding, Ruskin’s text has certainly made clear the importance of the labyrinthine, that intricate detailed elaboration which is only clarified by careful reflection. By focusing on the attention of the audience on the one hand, and on the work of the printmaker on the other, Ruskin makes a plea for difficulty, for the virtues of the labyrinthine, of a line that takes the form of the maze in order to serve as the clue which provides a hope of escape. In this analysis, each impermanent piece of paper is a sign, not merely of a no longer valued original, but of the work of the hand that carved the lines on the surface so that the image could be made. Ultimately, the kind of attention Ruskin brings to bear allows what can seem merely ephemeral the opportunity to be recognized as grave.