Colubrine Chains and Right Line: A Dædelic Analysis of Ruskin's "Living Waves"

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INTRODUCTION

Ruskin commences the second volume of his late work on geology, *Deucalion* (1875-83) with a chapter entitled "Living Waves." The text is that of a lecture first delivered at the London Institution on March 17, 1880 titled "A Caution to Snakes." He introduces it in the book by admitting that:

> "The opening of the second volume of *Deucalion* with a lecture on Serpents may seem at first a curiously serpentine mode of advance towards the fulfilment of my [geological promises]. But I am obliged now in all things to follow in great part the leadings of circumstance: and although it was only the fortuitous hearing of a lecture by Professor Huxley which induced me to take up at present the materials I had by me respecting snake motion, I believe my readers will find their study of undulatory forces dealt through the shattered vertebræ of rocks, very materially enlivened, if not aided by first observing the transitions of it through the adjusted vertebræ of the serpent. I would rather indeed have made this the matter of a detached essay, but my distinct books are far too numerous already; and, if I could only complete them to my mind, would in the end rather see all of them fitted into one colubrine chain of consistent strength, than allowed to stand in any broken or diverse relations" (26,295-96).

It is significant that in this later life work Ruskin should admit a desire to see the whole polymathic body of his work bound in a single chain of serpentine strength. This is so, because it might be seen as a desire on his behalf to finally close the polygon of his consciousness and its expression in his work. "Mostly, matters of any consequence," he had said earlier are polygonal "and the trotting round a polygon is severe work" but unless it is done a subject will not be properly handled (16,187). Later he answers the criticisms which have been levelled against him for the "multiplicity of subject" which he has addressed and his "opposite directions of investigation" by claiming that these alleged "sources of weakness, are in reality, as the multiplied buttresses of the apse of Amiens, as secure in allied result as they are opposed in direction" (34,474). In "Living Waves" he seeks to have these multiple buttresses of his life's work bound into "one colubrine chain of consistent strength." This was however a vain hope already well out of reach at the time it was expressed. This paper makes an examination of why this was so for his architectural thought.

MYTH AND ARCHITECTURE

Ruskin's architectural thought is able to be reviewed through an examination of his lifelong mythological relationships. These both developed and changed throughout his life and, as Dinah Birch has said he, in common with many Victorians, "discovered languages which others had made out of myth and used them to interpret the fragmentation of his own world" (Birch, 2). This is, of course, the very fragmentation which he sought to bind with colubrine chains.

His mythically based interpretations of architecture which continue to develop in later life (not always in works which are overtly architectural) are centred on his relationship with Dædalus, the mythic first architect and a whole cast of other characters drawn from Greek mythology. The most important of these in the present excursion are a protean Athena and Arachne, the former as guide, the latter as destroyer.

Ruskin's own "serpentine mode of advance" is like that of the creature for which it is named whose essential movement is "undulation,—not up and down, but from side to side" (26,316). We are reminded of Ruskin's major work on mythology, *The Queen of the Air* (1869). Here Athena in her guise of Athena Keramitis (Athena in the Earth) is portrayed as the giver of life where she is associated both with the air as a bird and the earth as a snake. The latter "literally rows on the earth, with every scale for an oar ... A wave, but without wind! a current, but with no fall!" (19,362). The serpent is

> "a divine hieroglyph of the demoniac power of the earth,—of the entire earthly nature. As the bird is the clothed power of the air, so this is the clothed power of the dust; as the bird the symbol of the spirit of life so this of the grasp and sting of death" (19,363).

Ruskin's reference to the serpent as a "divine hieroglyph" is made in the context of the importance for him of myths which are "natural and invariable."

> "The dead hieroglyph may have meant this or that - the living hieroglyph means always the same; but remember, it is just as much a hieroglyph as the other; nay, more, - a "sacred or reserved sculpture," a thing with an inner language" (19,361).

He goes on to cite as examples of the former the use of a serpent crest on the pillars of ancient Egypt which remains mysterious but asks is "the serpent itself, gliding past the pillar's foot ... less a mystery?" (19,361).

Athena (Keramitis) as giver of life to the serpent is doubly antiphona— externally within this role as giver of life to earth and air, internally because the serpent is a symbol of both power and corruption, of both death and healing. It is the "special adversary" of the "light and creative power of the gods" as in the story of Python and Apollo. It is the "power of the earth against the air" in the form of the giants but conversely also "the power of the earth upon the seed" sustaining "the spirit of agriculture" (19,363). The serpent also stands as "a healing spirit,—the representative of Æsculapius, and of Hygieia" and in this guise "is a sacred earth-type in the temple of the Dew;—being there especially a symbol of the native earth of Athens" (19,364).

Athens is for Ruskin the center of one of the three "spiritual powers" of the Greeks, the "constructive" power from which stems their Art. The others are "the vocal, or Apolline, centred at Delphi" and "the domestic, or Demetrian, centred at Sparta "which give rise respectively to Greek Speech and Conduct (31,13). While in the current context it is the Athenian or constructive power which is significant it is worth noting the vocal or Apolline power at Delphi where despite the killing there of Python "yet the oracle is from the breath of the earth" (19,364). Returning to the constructive power of Athens which underpins all Greek art we find Ruskin defining it as the "Grace of Deed," personified in Athena and opposed by "the confusions of Deed" which are represented by the giants over whom Athena is victorious (31,13). This is the scene which Athena choose to embroider on her peplos, described by Ruskin as her "robe of light," the likeness of which was carried every year by the maidens of Athens "to the temple of their own Athena," that is to the shrine of Athena Polias in the Erechtheum, "not to the Parthenon, that was the temple of all the world's Athena" (19,306). Yet over her "robe of light" Athena wears also "on her breast and left arm only [her robe of indignation], fringed with fatal serpents, and fastened with Gorgonian cold, turning men to stone" (19,306). Once again the antiphonal nature of Athena as giver of life to air and earth, to light and serpents is made clear. The portrayal of the victory of the gods over the giants on the robe of Athena stands, says Ruskin as type of "the entire material of Art, under Athena's hand [this being] the contest of life with clay."

Ruskin remains throughout his artistic meanderings firmly attached to Athena Keramitis. These take him in search of "the Athenian and Tuscan schools" where the depiction of Athena's victory, that of the "Grace of Deed," is found in "its full heroic form" not only in tapestry "but in sculpture [as] on the portal of the temple at Delphi ..." (20,269). This he sees as the true expression of the character of "the Ionian or Attic race" wherein "the highest states of human art" express "all the laws of human government." Ruskin traces the lineage of this character from the foundation of Athens to Theseus, victor "over the forms of evil involved and defended by the skilfullest art." Further the pedimental statue of Theseus from the Parthenon which stands as "the central labour of that art" still remains as the finest example of the work of humankine (31,14). For Ruskin the artistic powers of the Athenians are linked with those of the Etruscans, also born of the earth and guarded by Athena Keramitis. Their works are "visibly the same in origin" their "Draconian energy" underpinning "the living arts of Europe" (31,22-23). Etruscan work is "rolled in spiral folds" which recall the spirals drawn by the worm with "his coil, a fern with its bud, and a periwinkle with his shell" (27,405). These present natural spirals which show "apparent irregularities" (28,525) and when emulated "in the Ionic capital and arrested in the bending point of the acanthus leaf, in the Corinthian one" form the primeval basis for "beautiful architecture and ornament in all ages." In architecture they are "eloquent with endless symbolism, representing the power of the winds and waves in Athenian work, and of the old serpent in Gothic work" (27,405). Conversely "there is scarcely a wreathed ornament" to be found in Christian architecture "which cannot be traced back to the serpent's coil" while only rarely is there "a piece of monkish decorated writing ... that is not tainted with some ill-meant vileness of [ignoble] grotesque." Moreover "the very leaves of the twisted ivy-pattern of the fourteenth century" are able to be traced back to "wreaths for the foreheads of bacchanalian gods." In such "degraded art" says Ruskin "it seems ... as if the race itself were still half-serpent, not extricated yet from its clay; a lacertine breed ..." (19,365). Just as the person of Athena is antiphonal so too are those things modelled from her clay. On one hand there is "the Spiral ... with a head to it" found in Athenian and the best Gothic work. On the other lies "the mere earth Ammonite, or headless serpent of Teutonic art" (31,23n); the one bound by colubrine chains, the other by lacertine lines.

ARCHITECTURE AND RIGHT LINES

How is it that the Athenian constructive power can be found in the presence of "the old serpent in Gothic work" yet within the wreathed ornament of that same architecture is the "serpent's coil ... of bacchanalian gods?" The answer may be found in the presence or absence of Dædalic Right line. Ruskin retained a lifelong relationship with Athena in her various guises, remaining umbilically attached to Athena Keramitis and maternally watched over by Athena Glaukopis while he made his architectural excursions in the company

of Dædalus. In the presence of the mythic first architect may be found a mirror of the antiphonal Athena uncovered in the previous section. Ruskin's relationship with Dædalus must encompass both sides of his work and influence; on the one hand the essential Rightness of Greek art as the underpinning of all that is good in Western art, on the other as the maker of works which are merely mechanical. Dædalic Right line is opposed by Dædal work which is superficially seductive but in reality simply the result of "mechanical ingenuity" (28,267). A desired totality bound by colubrine chains is opposed by the vain hope of lacertine lines.

The Right inheritance of Dædalus will be found in the presence, within the art of any period, of Right line. This is a term used by Ruskin to denote truth in form in the art of humankind which has been derived from nature. Right line has nothing to do with either the mechanical work of the right angle or with work, the attraction of which lies "in glitterings and semblances of things more than in their form, or truth" (20,353). When Dædalic Right line is not found in a work of art the true inheritance of Dædalus is violated. Ruskin finds this in the decline of both Greek and Gothic architecture when Right line succumbs to the temptations of Dædalism, the glitteringly seductive reverse side of Dædalus' power. With Athena's gaze averted, her influence as "the spirit of life in material organism ... the formative energy in the clay" (19,346) lacking, the way is open for Arachne to join forces with the false side of Dædalus. Their treachery reduces Classical Greek architecture to the servility of Greek fret while the Greek inheritance in Byzantine architecture begins to decline when the art of Venice rejects the true Dædalic power which this heritage bestows. The organic truth of Gothic architecture has no sooner been realized at Amiens than Arachne begins to spin tracery which undulates "like the threads of a cobweb lifted by the wind" (8,92). While the first results may seem delightful this is the beginning of a deliberate treachery as Right line is sacrificed to Dædalism. The true inheritance of the Athenian constructive power is consistently lost throughout history when Dædalic Right line, which finds its truth in forms which are both organically derived but true to the material out of which they are made, is lost.

RIGHT LINES AND NATURE

Right line in art and architecture is an expression by humankind of the leading lines of nature, that is Dædalus' interpretation of the power of Athena. In *Modern Painters IV* Ruskin describes "the hollow in the heart of the aiguille" as being as "smooth and sweeping in curve as the cavity of a vast bivalve shell." He goes on:

> "I call these the governing or leading lines, not because they are the first which strike the eye, but because ... they rule the swell and fall and change of all the mass ... Nor can any one be more steadfastly averse than I to every substitution of anatomical knowledge for outward and apparent fact; but so it is, that, as an artist increases in acuteness of perception, the facts which *become* outward and apparent to him are those which bear upon the growth or make of the thing" (6,231-32).

The leading lines of nature find their architectural counterparts in Volume 1 of *The Stones of Venice*. "The proper material of ornament," says Ruskin, "will be whatever God has created; and its proper treatment, that which seems in accordance with or symbolical of His laws." This material includes, firstly, "the abstract lines which are most frequent in nature; and then ... the whole range of systematised inorganic and organic forms" (9,265). Abstract lines are defined as "the most frequent contours of natural objects, transferred to architectural forms ..."

> "For instance, the line or curve of the edge of a leaf may be accurately given to the edge of a stone, without rendering the stone in the least *like* a leaf, or suggestive of a leaf; and this the more fully, because the lines of nature are alike in all her works; and when they are taken out of their combinations it is impossible to say from which of her works they have been borrowed, their universal property being that of ever-varying curvature in the most subtle and subdued transitions, with peculiar expressions of motion, elasticity, or dependence ..." (9,267).

Ruskin goes on to describe a series of abstract lines which range in scale from mountain and glacier profiles to leaves and shells, all of which "agree in their character of changeful curvature." He further notes "that almost all these lines are expressive of action or *force* of some kind, while the circle is a line of limitation or support." This explains the fitness of "the circular curve as a sign of rest, and security of support" for use in arches "while the curves, belonging especially to action" are suitable for "the more active architectural features" such as the capital and the base as well as in "minor ornaments; more freely in proportion to their independence of structural conditions" (9,268-69). The leading lines of nature "which bear upon the growth or make" of a thing become the abstract lines of nature assimilated to architecture through their expression of "action or force." The language of the physical creation is translated into the language of art and architecture, that of Athena (Keramitis) into that of Dædalus, expressed in the language of Ruskin.

MANY LANGUAGES

As Sheila Emerson has said "Ruskin was able to move back and forth between the natural world, pictures, and writing by virtue of inherited convictions that the physical creation and art are both inherently languages, the one of God and the other of men" (Emerson 1991,150). She refers to Landow's contention that Ruskin demonstrates how "the visual structures of the natural world" are repeated as "proportionate relationships" in the work of Turner. Further, how Ruskin as the observer of this distances himself from both painter and subject such that they are given an existence for the reader independent of his description.

The governing line of nature, the abstract line of architecture and the proportionate relationships of Turner's art may all "be considered as a function or exponent either of Growth or of Force, inherent or impressed." Furthermore "all forms are ... either indicative of lines of energy, or pressure, or motion, variously impressed or resisted, and are therefore exquisitely abstract or precise ..." (Diaries 2, 370-71). Because of the elusiveness of words, governing lines "which bear upon the growth or make" of a thing ensnare Ruskin in his own attempts to translate them when attempting to define the Greek idea of the power of Athena giving life. In *The Queen of the Air* Ruskin had cautioned his readers:

> "You need not fear, on the one hand, that either the sculpturing or the loving power can ever be beaten down by the philosophers into a gas: but on the other hand, take care that you yourselves, in trying to elevate your conception of it, do not lose its truth in a dream, or even a word. Beware always of contending for words: you will find them not easy to grasp, if you know them in several languages" (19,351-52).

Ruskin might well have heeded his own advice as he moved back and forth between the languages of nature, art and his own descriptions of these in his attempts to explain the "inner language" of nature. He, like the very things which he described, was subject to an inherent or impressed growth or force.

Inevitably Ruskin's desire to bind the multiple buttresses of his life's work with "one colubrine chain of consistent strength," was doomed to failure. Despite his attempts to interpret the fragmentation of his own world by moving between the languages of nature, art and myth he was destined to remain in a world of broken and diverse relations. This is so because of the dialectical nature of his relationships and excursions. His familiar, Dædalus is the proponent of Right line in architecture throughout history but is unable to resist time and time again the temptations offered by Arachne. His guide and protector Athena displays not only the "Grace of Deed" which underpins the Athenian constructive power of Dædalus but antiphonally she gives life to the symbol of power and corruption. Further, by averting her gaze, she is complicit in the seduction of Dædalus by Arachne. Finally, Ruskin himself is trapped in a web, not of Arachne's weaving, but of his own making as he realizes that he cannot represent his intensely visual perceptions in words. Indeed no sooner had he wished to see his work bound by colubrine chains than he transmuted these to lacertine lines "blotted with venomous stain ... the track of [them] on the leaf a glittering slime, and in the sand a useless furrow" (19,365). Ruskin is finally unable to resolve the dialectic inherent in the dual roles of Athena and Dædalus and in his own attempts to translate the language of nature into the language of art and architecture, that of Athena into that of Dædalus. It is as if the serpent has joined forces with Arachne so that, as Ruskin says, "the labyrinth of life itself, and its more and more interwoven occupation become too manifold, and too difficult for me and [I waste my time] in blind lanes of it" (22,452).

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