e-ISSN 2420-823X

English Literature
Vol. 11 — December 2024

Ruskin's Poetics of Mountains and the Victorian Alpine Spirit

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Abstract The Alps captivated John Ruskin, inspiring an enduring intellectual quest that spanned his lifetime. Through his diaries and seminal texts like *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin's profound spiritual admiration for the alpine landscapes emerges, challenging both the recreational and utilitarian perspectives prevalent in his era. This article contrasts the differing approaches of British and German mountaineers during the Victorian period, showcasing how Ruskin's perspective transcended the prevailing attitudes of his time. It also examines the influence of his philosophy on mountain aesthetics, particularly noting how it inspired artists like Elijah Walton to integrate naturalism with Romantic expressionism, reflecting a deep engagement with the beauty of creation. The article transitions to consider the cultural shift from Ruskin's intellectual veneration to Leslie Stephen's embodied interaction with mountains, offering a nuanced critique of how tourism and commercial endeavours have lessened their majesty. Additionally, the paper explores Ruskin's influence on Reginald Farrer's theory that mountains embody a unique spiritual psychology, broadening the discussion to encompass the interconnectedness between the physical and the spiritual realms. Overall, this contribution offers a contemplative exploration of John Ruskin's profound influence on the appreciation of mountain landscapes, set against the evolving practices of Victorian and German mountaineering.

Keywords John Ruskin. Alps. Landscape. Leslie Stephen. Elijah Walton. Reginald Farrer.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2024-08-13
Accepted 2024-12-21
Published 2025-03-07

Citation Bainbridge, William, (2024). "Ruskin's Poetics of Mountains and the Victorian Alpine Spirit". *English Literature*, 11(1), 65-88.

DOI 10.30687/EL/2420-823X/2024/01/004

1 Introduction

"Mountains are the beginning and the end of all natural scenery", John Ruskin declared, and his lifelong engagement with them shaped a poetics that transformed the way nature was seen, understood, and revered (Ruskin 1903-12, 6: 418). For Ruskin, mountains were not merely features of the landscape but multifaceted symbols encompassing artistic, scientific, and spiritual significance – "cathedrals", as he famously quipped, carved by nature's hand and imbued with spiritual significance (Ruskin 1903-12, 6: 425; Hélard 2005). From his earliest memory of Friar's Crag on Derwentwater to his mature reflections in *Modern Painters* and *Praeterita*, Ruskin's evolving vision of mountains charted a journey from Romantic awe to rigorous observation and, finally, to moral and spiritual critique. This profound relationship was nurtured through his experiences as a poet, artist, and amateur geologist, as well as his deeply held belief that mountains possessed a 'sacramental' power revealing God's order and beauty (McCarraher 2019, 80; Lough 2023).

In his youth, Ruskin responded to mountains with the Romantic imagination of his literary influences – Byron, Scott, and Wordsworth – seeing them as sublime and transcendent. His early writings, such as *The Alps from Schaffhausen*, dwell on their grandeur and emotional impact, treating them as sites of wonder rather than subjects of inquiry. Yet Ruskin was never content with abstraction alone. As he matured, he developed a method of "close observation" blending artistic and scientific approaches to nature (Ruskin 1903-12, 6: 85). In *Modern Painters IV* (1856), he argued that mountains demanded both precision and reverence, insisting that their "*governing* lines" and fleeting phenomena (Ruskin 1903-12, 6: 223) – clouds, shadows, and light – be studied with careful attention. For Ruskin, seeing mountains clearly was both an intellectual discipline and a spiritual act: "poetry, prophecy, and religion, all in one" (333). This clarity was not about perfection but about embracing the limits of perception, where imperfection itself revealed deeper truths (Colley 2009).

By the time of *Deucalion* and *Praeterita*, Ruskin's poetics of mountains had become a deeply reflective and moral project. He grew increasingly critical of the modern obsession with mountaineering, decrying it as a form of conquest that desecrated the sacred. The Alps, once approached with reverence, had become "soaped poles in a bear-garden", reduced to playgrounds for vanity and athleticism (Ruskin 1903-12, 18: 90). Ruskin lamented the commercialisation of nature and the loss of the spiritual connection he saw as vital to truly "seeing" mountains. In his sacramental worldview, mountains were more than geological forms; they were places where divine beauty and human humility met, where the act of looking became an ethical and spiritual encounter. To see mountains, for Ruskin, was not

merely to behold them but to learn from them – about art, about the natural world, and about the soul's place within creation.

Ruskin's vision of the Alps left an indelible mark on Victorian culture, shaping both contemporary and subsequent interpretations of the alpine landscape. Scholars have repeatedly referred to the founding of the Alpine Club in 1857 as a pivotal moment in the history of mountaineering, one that introduced a new Alpine spirit into Victorian culture by adapting Ruskin's ideas to align with evolving perspectives.[1] This dynamic is particularly evident in the work of Leslie Stephen, Elijah Walton, and Reginald Farrer, three prominent Club members whose engagements with the Alps reflect both continuity with and transformation of Ruskin's poetics of mountains. Stephen's *The Playground of Europe* (1871) marked a cultural shift from Ruskin's intellectual veneration of the mountains to an emphasis on physical engagement, celebrating the courage and adventurous spirit of mountaineers. While Stephen shared Ruskin's disdain for the commercialisation of Alpine tourism, his portrayal of the sublime incorporated the thrill of climbing, recasting the Alps as spaces for both reverence and human conquest. This adaptation of Ruskin's ideals reflected the Victorian fascination with exploration and individual endeavour, offering a reimagined relationship with the mountains.

Elijah Walton and Reginald Farrer further illustrate the adaptability of Ruskin's alpine poetics, translating his vision into new artistic and philosophical contexts. Walton sought to encapsulate the poetic and sublime qualities of the Alps in a manner reminiscent of Turner, whose landscapes Ruskin had championed. Combining Romantic sensibility with scientific precision, Walton's art embodied Ruskin's principles of close observation and expressive power, extending them into the visual realm. Farrer, the 'father of the English rock garden', explored the spiritual psychology of mountains, describing them as "enormous pilgrims" striving for divine perfection (Farrer 1908, 74). His reflections echo Ruskin's belief in the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms, adapting his ideas to emphasise the metaphysical significance of the Alps. Together, Stephen, Walton, and Farrer demonstrate how Ruskin's poetics of mountains provided a foundation for creative reinterpretation, ensuring his influence endured through its dynamic adaptability within the Victorian alpine imagination.

2 The Sport of Mountaineering

In the Victorian era, a significant distinction between travellers and tourists emerged, reflecting deeper cultural and social divides.

1 Hansen 1995; Gamble 1999; Colley 2009; Morrison 2009; Bevin 2010; Lough 2023.

Travellers were characterised by their quest for genuine engagement and discovery, often venturing off the beaten path and immersing themselves in the local culture (Buzard 1993a, 109). In contrast, tourists pursued comfort and followed well-trodden routes, relying heavily on guides and structured tours. They were seen as passive observers, consuming the scenery without truly engaging with it (Buzard 1993b, 31). This distinction led tourists to seek out authentic and diverse experiences based on preconceived notions of picturesque beauty and historical significance. They often prioritised the visual consumption of "Europe's 'poetic' – its 'European' – features", overlooking the daily lives and experiences of local people in favour of sights deemed "worth seeing" and, ironically, authentic (Buzard 1993a, 175).

This fundamental difference in approach is crucial for understanding the period's mountaineering practices, which challenged Ruskin's aesthetic of the mountains. Ruskin, who valued the mountains for their poetic beauty and divine essence, viewed the emerging trend of mountaineering with scepticism, as it reduced the sublimity of these landscapes to mere sites of physical or imperialistic conquest. The sharp, needle-like peaks in the Mont Blanc massif around the Chamonix Valley, known as the Aiguilles, for example, could no longer be seen as the heavenly Jerusalem that had, in 1842, taught him the "real meaning" of the word "Beautiful" (Wheeler 1999, 52). The youthful protagonists of the so-called 'golden age of British mountaineering' were seen as sacrilegious intruders.

This golden age, spanning from Alfred Wills' first ascent of the Wetterhorn in 1854 to Edward Whymper's tragic ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865, exemplified the shift from passive observation to active engagement with nature. This era also saw the emergence of narratives focusing on the climbers' actions rather than the mountains' details (Bevin 2010, 134). Characterised by an incessant rhythm of ascents, it reflected a burgeoning interest in conquering nature. Wills' celebrated ascent, detailed in *Wanderings Among the High Alps* (1856), initiated a period where the Alps were not only admired from afar but actively explored and systematically climbed (Bainbridge 2020, 78-9). By 1865, "thirty-one of the thirty-nine Alpine peaks above 13,000 ft had been claimed by the British" (Bevin 2010, 137). Whymper's dramatic and perilous ascent of the Matterhorn, despite its fatal consequences, symbolised the zenith of this golden age, showcasing both the triumphs and dangers of alpine exploration (Bainbridge 2020, 81).

Whymper's own account, *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* (1871), captures this spirit of adventure and the risks involved in the pursuit of a peak:

> The ascent of Mont Pelvoux (including the disagreeables) was a very delightful scramble. The mountain air did not act as an

> emetic; the sky did *not* look black, instead of blue; nor did I feel tempted to throw myself over precipices. I hastened to enlarge my experience, and went to the Matterhorn. I was urged towards Mont Pelvoux by those mysterious impulses which cause men to peer into the unknown. This mountain was reputed to be the highest in France, and on that account was worthy of attention; and it was believed to be the dominating point of a picturesque district of the highest interest, which was then almost entirely unexplored! The Matterhorn attracted me simply by its grandeur. It was considered to be the most thoroughly inaccessible of all mountains even by those who ought to have known better. Stimulated to make fresh exertions by one repulse after another, I returned, year after year, as I had opportunity, more and more determined to find a way up it, or to *prove* it to be really inaccessible. (Whymper [1871] 1893, v-vi)

As the number of ascents increased, so did the volume of literature on the Alps, necessitating the creation of guides to navigate the proliferating body of alpine and alpine-related publications (Neate 1980). From the 1830s, the Alps were no longer just a barrier for those seeking the hedonisms of the south or the treasures of the Mediterranean. By the time of Ruskin and Stephen, they had become a destination in their own right, with journeys to them representing "a mark of taste, respectability, and wealth to go and pay homage to their splendours" (Ring 2000, 25). At the end of the century, places like Switzerland and the Western Alps, as depicted in these writings, had been transformed into imaginative and physical playgrounds for a distinctly British enterprise: "[A] kind of gymnasium for mind as well as body" (Stephen 1859, 233).

The rise of mountaineering necessitated a re-evaluation of how the Alps were perceived and engaged with. This transformation was evident in the proliferation of mountaineering clubs throughout Europe and the institutionalisation of mountaineering as a sport. However, discussions at and about the Alpine Club often carried a sense of superiority: "[T]he communal views which they expressed must have seemed, in an Alpine context, to be rather like the voice of God Himself" (Clark 1953, 78). Leslie Stephen, a key figure in Victorian mountaineering, embodied the Club's sporting and adventurous spirit, likening mountaineering more to genteel pastimes while emphasising its recreational nature:

> It is a sport which, like fishing or shooting, brings one into contact with the sublimest aspects of nature […] Still it is strictly a sport – as strictly as cricket, or rowing, or knurr and spell – and I have no wish to place it on a different footing. The game is won when a mountain-top is reached in spite of difficulties; it is lost when one is forced to retreat; and whether won or lost, it calls

> into play a great variety of physical and intellectual energies, and gives the pleasure which always accompanies an energetic use of our faculties. (Stephen 1871, 267)

This sentiment was echoed by pioneering female mountaineer Mrs. Aubrey Le Blond, who asserted in 1902 that her passion for the mountains was a "sport purely for the sake of sport" ([1902] 1903, ix). The development of mountaineering as a popular Victorian pursuit can be traced back to figures like Albert Smith, whose ascent of Mont Blanc in 1851 popularised the activity among the middle classes. Smith's dramatic accounts and public lectures that theatrically accounted for his adventure with panoramas, lantern slides, and merchandise, inspired many to follow in his actual footsteps – or from the comfort of their armchairs – transforming mountaineering from a niche activity into a widespread cultural phenomenon (Hansen 1995; 2013, 175). Alongside Smith's sensationalist theatrics at Piccadilly's Egyptian Hall, the extension of railways and steamships further facilitated this trend, making the Alps more accessible and reducing the time and cost of travel, thereby democratising alpine adventures and further entrenching the distinction between tourists and travellers set out above (Huhtamo 2013, 216-43).

Building on this distinction, another significant contrast emerged within the realm of mountaineering: the differing approaches of British and German mountaineers. These two nations, being among the most important and competitive in mountaineering during the nineteenth century, often saw achieving first ascents as a hotly contested endeavour. In his *Italian Alps* (1875), for example, Douglas Freshfield humorously contrasted these two groups, capturing their distinct ethos with a touch of wit. In simplistic terms, British mountaineers could be seen as embodying the spirit of travellers, characterised by their adventurous and often spontaneous pursuits. German mountaineers, instead, displayed a more methodical and disciplined approach, somewhat paralleling the characteristics of tourists who sought structured and purposeful engagement with their surroundings. Take, for instance, this example:

> Our Alpine Clubman affords while in the Alps an example of almost perpetual motion [...] He dashes from peak to peak, from group to group, even from one end of the Alps to the other, in the course of a short summer holiday. Exercise in the best of air, a dash of adventure, and a love of nature, not felt the less because it is not always on his tongue, are his chief motives. A little botany, or cartography, may come into his plans, but only by the way and in a secondary place. He is out on a holiday and in a holiday humour. (Freshfield 1875, 182-3)

The brisk pace of the British mountaineer serves here as a symbol of lightness – lightness of spirit, as hinted at by "more bad jokes than valuable observations" (Freshfield 1875, 183); lightness of equipment, with climbers able to maintain a cheerful demeanour even when local guides face difficulties; and lightness of objectives, even, often deliberately painted as lacking serious significance, apparently to underscore the differences between the two said "races". Conversely, the German mountaineer approached his Alpine excursions with a disciplined rigour, setting him apart from the more leisurely and indifferent British counterpart:

> Far different is the scheme and mode of operation of the German mountaineer. To him his summer journey is no holiday, but part of the business of life. He either deliberately selects his 'Excursions-Gebiet' in the early spring with a view to do some good work in geology or mapping, or more probably has it selected for him by a committee of his club. About August you will find him seriously at work. While on the march he shows in many little ways his sense of the importance of his task. His coat is decorated with a ribbon bearing on it the badge or decoration of his club. He carries in his pockets a notebook, ruled in columns, for observations of every conceivable kind, and a supply of printed cards ready to deposit on the heights he aims at. (183)

These two approaches, crisply yet tendentiously articulated by Freshfield, offer a revealing lens through which to consider Ruskin's perspective on the Alps. Ruskin's poetic vision and profound reverence for the mountains starkly contrast with both the British mountaineer's humour and the German mountaineer's rigour. Each group, in its own way, embodies a facet of the broader cultural engagement with the Alpine landscapes that Ruskin passionately defended and critiqued. Ruskin believed that there were two distinct ways of perceiving landscapes, as delineated by Helsinger (1982): the excursive sight of the ordinary beholder and the sublime vision of the poet or artist. Ruskin saw his role as a critic to explore how landscape art and poetry could address threats to imaginative perception. He argued that the ordinary beholder's experience of landscape was similar to that of a traveller, characterised by a constantly shifting perspective and the accumulation of views. This excursive sight, associated with the picturesque, involved leisurely exploration and contemplation of details from varying perspectives.

Conversely, the sublime vision entailed an intense, sudden confrontation with a single, overwhelming view, often represented in the images rendered by Friedrich or Turner, leading to profound reflection and imaginative insight:

> Where sublime, poetic, or imaginative vision produces exceptional landscape experiences, excursive sight – the play of eye or mind moving leisurely through a scene or subject – produces the pleasures that earlier writers associated with the picturesque and Ruskin defined as the particular experience of the ordinary beholder. (Helsinger 1982, 69)

Both approaches, however, diminish the intrinsic, spiritual value of the mountains that Ruskin so cherished. As he articulated, "Mountains are to the rest of the body of the earth, what violent muscular action is to the body of man. The spirit of the hills is action, that of the lowlands repose" (Ruskin 1903-12, 6: 427). He championed a deeper engagement with the landscape, moving beyond mere visual appreciation to an understanding of the mental, physical, and social aspects of perception, essential for appreciating both art and the natural world.

3 The Debate on Mountain Beauty

Ruskin's early meticulous sketches capturing the sublime beauty of the mountain vistas were complemented by detailed geological diagrams and descriptions, underscoring his holistic approach to understanding these landscapes.[2] Unlike many of his contemporaries, who often focused solely on either the aesthetic or scientific aspects, Ruskin seamlessly integrated both, the imaginative and the excursive perceptions of vision. This dual approach set Ruskin apart, demonstrating his commitment to viewing the Alps as complex natural phenomena with intrinsic value, to be studied panoramically from a distance, or as if scrutinised under a microscope.

His concern for the Alps in this vein famously reached its highpoint with *Modern Painters IV*, with its 'Mountain Gloom' and 'Mountain Glory', in 1856. Ruskin's works, furnished with botanical or geological sketches and diagrams, whether of the Alps or the Lake District, reflect his profound reverence for the natural world, where art and science converge to offer a comprehensive toolkit for the appreciation of the mountains. His diaries reveal a methodical process

2 See for instance, Ruskin's 1834 contributions to Loudon's *Magazine of Natural History* where he talks of how "contortions of the limestone at the fall of the Nant d'Arpenaz, on the road from Geneva to Chamonix, are somewhat remarkable" or where the granite sections of Mont Blanc "appears to contain a small quantity of gold, as that metal is found among the granite débris and siliceous sand […] I have two or three specimens in which chlorite (both compact and in minute crystals) occupies the place of mica" (Ruskin 1903-12, 1: 194-6).

of observation and documentation, capturing the grandeur and minute details of architectural, societal, or painterly milieux, as well as the alpine.

Despite his appreciation for the Alps, Ruskin personally only really climbed one mountain of note, the Buet (10,164 ft) (Clark 1953, 31-2). He believed the true beauty of the Alps could be best appreciated and perceived visually, and from a distance and from comfort, a belief that conflicted with the experiences of many mountaineers who found profounder meaning in the physicality of reaching the summits. He wrote to Miss Susan Beever, his artist neighbour on Coniston Water, in 1874:

> All that is lovely and wonderful in the Alps may be seen without the slightest danger, in general, and it is especially good for little girls of eleven who can't climb, to know this – all the best views of hills are at the bottom of them. I know one or two places indeed where there is grand peeping over precipice, one or two where the mountain seclusion and strength are worth climbing to see. But all the *entirely* beautiful things I could show *you*, Susie; only for the very highest sublime of them sometimes asking you to endure half an hour of *chaise à porteurs*, but mostly from a post-chaise or smoothest of turnpike roads. (Ruskin 1903-12, 37: 142)

Ruskin's kaleidoscopic alpine writings reveal contradictions that some may interpret as a genuine enthusiasm for climbing. His ambition grew particularly after he began frequenting the Alps in 1842. An early "appetite for laborious climbs and precipitous ridges" led him to ascend Skiddaw, the hills around Chamonix, and even Vesuvius, where he found joy in pushing his physical limits (Colley 2010, 146-7). Ruskin's dedication to climbing was integral to his understanding of mountains; he embraced the exertion as essential to experiencing and comprehending these landscapes. As Colley notes, "Ruskin's climbing – his physical and kinetic relationship to the mountains – is essential to his understanding of them" (2009, 43).

As mountaineering gained popularity during the Victorian era, Ruskin grew increasingly critical of its prevailing attitudes and practices. In the 1867 preface to *Sesame and Lilies* (Ruskin 1865), he famously condemned the reduction of the Alps to mere objects of physical conquest, describing mountaineering as treating the majestic mountains like "soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again, with 'shrieks of delight'" (Ruskin 1903-12, 18: 90). His critique extended to the militaristic and imperialistic rhetoric that had infiltrated the mountaineering community. Ruskin opposed the notion that climbing mountains should serve to instil values of conquest and dominance over nature, particularly as a celebrative and formative pursuit for the young:

> Therefore, gentlemen of the Alpine Club, as much danger as you care to face, by all means; but, if it please you, not so much talk of it. The real ground for reprehension of Alpine climbing is that, with less cause, it excites more vanity than any other athletic skill. (Ruskin 1903-12, 18: 22)

Such views, Ruskin argued, were antithetical to the true appreciation of mountains, which were to be approached with reverence and contemplation. This criticism was partly informed by the tragic Matterhorn disaster of 1865, where four British climbers and a guide died during the descent, whereas Whymper survived (Messner 2017). Ruskin lamented how, unlike in other domains and professions where modesty may have prevailed, mountaineers often boasted about their exploits in the Alps. He criticised the members of the Alpine Club, noting that while their genuine thirst for mountain knowledge and youthful spirit was commendable, their actions driven by competition and the desire for praise were ultimately vain and misguided (Ruskin 1903-12, 18: 23).

Ruskin's shift towards a disdain for the purely scientific exploration of the Alps is expressed in his critiques of figures like the mountaineer-scientist John Tyndall, author of texts such as *The Glaciers of the Alps* (1860) and *Hours of Exercise in the Alps* (1871). In *Deucalion* as well as in *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin viewed the approach of "conceited" Tyndall, particularly in relation to the movement of glaciers and other scientific matters, as emblematic of a secular and utilitarian approach to nature that stripped the mountains of their symbolic or sacred value. Owing to the championing of Forbes' glacier theory over Tyndall's own version, Ruskin dismisses Tyndall somewhat cuttingly throughout *Deucalion* in indicative ways:

> Professor Tyndall never fails to observe with complacency, and to describe to his approving readers, how unclouded the luminous harmonies of his reason, imagination, and fancy remained, under conditions which, he rightly concludes, would have been disagreeably exciting, or even distinctly disturbing, to less courageous persons. And indeed I confess, for my own part, that my successfullest [sic] observations have always been made while lying all my length on the softest grass I could find. (Ruskin 1903-12, 26: 143)

The focus Tyndall and others placed on discovery and physical conquest represented a broader cultural shift towards secularism and materialism. Ruskin saw the Alps as divine creations that demanded reverence and contemplation. While he valued scientific study, he opposed approaches that treated the mountains merely as objects to be dominated or dissected. Ruskin's geological interests, as witnessed in *Deucalion*, reflect his belief that scientific inquiry should coexist

with a deep appreciation for the natural world's beauty and spiritual significance. The tenth chapter of *Deucalion*, entitled "Thirty Years Since", offers a personal and reflective account of Ruskin's early experiences in the Alps, including his introduction to mountain observation under the guidance of his mentor, James Forbes. In *Praeterita*, for instance, Ruskin describes his first view of the Alps as containing "so much of science mixed with feeling as to make the sight of the Alps not only the revelation of the beauty of the earth, but the opening of the first page of its volume" (Ruskin 1903-12, 35: 116).

This broadly reflects Ruskin's unique ability to blend physical apprehension and poetic meditation, establishing a middle ground between the expectations of science and imagination. His emotional and spiritual responses to the mountains remain grounded in meticulous geological study, demonstrating how scientific observation and artistic creativity coexist. In *Modern Painters I*, for instance, Ruskin attempts to teach the reader how to properly see and thus appreciate what he later describes as revealing "the mysteries of God" in the colour of the natural environment (Ruskin 1903-12, 3: 301). Mountains, he contends elsewhere, possess an "occult influence" which "has been both constant and essential to the progress of the race" (6: 426). Ruskin's writings often evoke a sense of wonder and reverence for the natural world, urging his readers to look beyond the surface and uncover the profound beauty and meaning that lie within.

The noble and brilliant synthesis of the intrepid spirit of adventure – a sentiment that was increasingly maligned by Ruskin – that characterised the golden age of British mountaineering is undoubtedly represented by Stephen's influential *The Playground of Europe*, which compiled and re-adapted previously published articles. It appeared in the same year as Whymper's *Scrambles* in 1871, and arguably restored "a degree of respectability to Alpine mountaineering at a period when the sport had not fully recovered from disrepute after the Matterhorn accident" (Braham 2004, 108). In this seminal text, Stephen openly disputed with Ruskin regarding the methods for decoding the beauty of the Alps. He proposed a more kinaesthetically driven vision of the mountains; for him, the Alps were to be seen up close, as the final outcome of a physically embodied relationship with the natural environment.

Both critics somewhat distanced themselves from the romantic model, which, by altering nature, focused entirely on the sentimental effect, opening the contemplation of the landscape to subjective fantasies that had little to do with the empirical reality of places themselves. What needed to be retained from that model, however, was the sublime effect that the contemplation of the Alps could elicit. For Ruskin, this effect should derive from a 'critical perception', consciously geological and purely optical, to replace the romantic 'imaginative perception'. He ends his critique of romanticism by offering as

exemplar to his readers an image of the workings of his own mind, a phrase that points to a process of critical perception defined as the obverse of the romantic imagination. The sublime poetry of the mountains was to be grasped scientifically, by recapitulating the phases of their history as admirable objects produced by nature. Stephen, however, believed it was impossible to separate the eye from the body. Byron, Scott, Wordsworth, and Shelley had offered a simplistic, subjective, metaphysical, if not impertinent vision of the Alps; the effect of the sublime would not arise from a merely imagined sense of impotence but from an embodied experience, felt on one's own body, of one's inadequacy in direct physical contact with the mountain (Morrison 2009, 501-2).

Stephen's approach measured the mountaineering value of a mountain not in mathematical terms, nor in the geological terms of its long lithification processes, much less in the subjective terms of a romantic imagination. Instead the value of a mountain is measured in terms of muscular exertion, in the minutes, hours, or days it takes to climb it. Muscular effort provides a more tangible unit of measurement and educates the mountaineer on what 500 or 1,000 ft of elevation truly mean, based on the movement strategies required to overcome them:

> To him, perhaps, they recall the memory of a toilsome ascent, the sun beating on his head for five or six hours, the snow returning the glare with still more parching effect; a stalwart guide toiling all the weary time, cutting steps in hard blue ice, the fragments hissing and spinning down the lung straight grooves in the frozen snow till they lost themselves in the yawning chasm below; and step after step taken along the slippery staircase, till at length he triumphantly sprang upon the summit of the tremendous wall that no human foot had scaled before. The little black knobs that rise above the edge represent for him huge impassable rocks, sinking on one side in scarped slippery surfaces towards the snowfield, and on the other stooping in one tremendous cliff to a distorted glacier thousands of feet below. (Stephen 1871, 278)

Stephen's tactile, fully immersive experience in the mountain landscape offered a contrast to Ruskin's more contemplative and reverent approach. Yet, Stephen did not wholly abandon this reverence and poetic engagement. His method accommodated Ruskin's views by merging critical, geological perception with an embodied, haptic experience. This blending of perspectives underscores a harmonious relationship between the two thinkers, presenting a unified vision and phenomenology of mountain appreciation that values both analytical rigour and emotional depth, treating climbing as both a practice and a form of poetry.

The word 'playground' in Stephen's title belies what he really thought about the Alps. He undoubtedly saw them as a kind of playground where leisured intellectuals and academics could climb, but he also revered them as 'sacred' architectonic creations – "the most noblest of Gothic cathedrals" (Stephen 1871, 69). The Alps "were the natural retreat of men disgusted with the existing order of things, profoundly convinced of its rottenness" – "the love of mountains is intimately connected with all that is noblest in human nature" (49, 65). His descriptions mix his emotional position towards mountain landscapes with humour: "[A] man may worship the mountains, and yet have a quiet joke with them when he is wandering all day in their tremendous solitudes […] Joking, however, is, it must be admitted, a dangerous habit […] I have myself made some very poor witticisms" (269). Stephen's imagery here clearly alludes to Ruskin's view set out in *Modern Painters IV*: "[T]he mountains of the earth are its natural cathedrals, or natural altars, overlaid with gold, and bright with broidered work of flowers, and with their clouds resting on them as the smoke of a continual sacrifice" (Ruskin 1903-12, 6: 457). The general level of irony and modesty displayed in Stephen's text, however, sets the two authors apart.

Ruskin and Stephen are known to have disagreed and argued, as is evidenced in several written retorts Stephen made to Ruskin. In *The Playground* Stephen strives to avoid the affected prose of mountain writing, which plunged "into ecstasies about infinite abysses and overpowering splendours", and when he admired Ruskin's metaphorical gesture of linking "mountains to archangels lying down in eternal winding-sheets of snow" converting them "into allegories about man's highest destinies and aspirations" he hardly offers him up as a model to emulate (Stephen 1871, 268). Stephen, here, critiques Ruskin's ornate writing, instead plainly favouring at this point the critical type of perception over the imaginative one:

> Mr. Ruskin has covered the Matterhorn, for example, with a whole web of poetical associations, in language which, to a severe taste, is perhaps a trifle too fine, though he has done it with an eloquence which his bitterest antagonists must freely acknowledge. Yet most humble writers will feel that if they try to imitate Mr. Ruskin's eloquence they will pay the penalty of becoming ridiculous. (269)

As the definitive mountain connoisseur who had explored glaciers, pioneered new routes, and accomplished numerous notable ascents, Stephen further articulated his hybrid style of appreciation in works such as *Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking* (Stephen 1873). Stephen's legacy, much like Ruskin's, significantly influenced mountaineering culture and literature, contributing to the enduring resonance of Ruskin's alpine spirit.

4 Turnerian Mountain Views

Ruskin's influence on art and aesthetics, particularly through his work *Modern Painters IV*, profoundly shaped Victorian perceptions of mountains. His concepts of 'Mountain Gloom' and 'Mountain Glory' inspired members of the Alpine Club and many artists capturing the sublime and picturesque qualities of the Alps. J.M.W. Turner was central to Ruskin's idea of 'Mountain Beauty,' which acted as a manifesto for Turner's work (Nicolson 1959; Sdegno 2015, 38-9). Ruskin's vision encouraged a blend of naturalism and romantic expressionism, vividly embodied in artists like Elijah Walton. Walton's *Peaks and Valleys of the Alps* (1867) is a quintessential adaptation of Ruskin's principles, combining natural detail with an emotive portrayal of landscapes, reflecting his insistence on truth to nature. Turner's influence on Walton is evident in Walton's meticulous representations and his attempt to evoke the spiritual and emotional responses inspired by the mountains.

Reverend T.G. Bonney, a geologist and mountaineer, frequently collaborated with Walton. In his introduction to *Peaks and Valleys of the Alps*, Bonney references *Modern Painters* and articulates Walton's views using Ruskinian rhetoric:

> Let it, however, be remembered that, though the pictures are contained in a book, they are not meant to be looked at like engravings, but as pictures – a distance of about three yards will be the best standpoint for most persons. Perhaps also I ought to apologize for quoting so freely from Mr. Ruskin's works. My excuse must be that no one, whose writings are known to me, understands the Alps better than he, or can describe them in such apt and eloquent words. If his fourth volume of 'Modern Painters' were more studied, we should have fewer of those caricatures of Nature which now, under the names of 'Scenes in the Alps', too often disfigure our Exhibitions. (Walton 1868b, 8)

Bonney's sentiments echo Ruskin's idea that "the increase in the calculable sum of elements of beauty to be steadily in proportion to the increase of mountainous character" (Ruskin 1903-12, 6: 420). Bonney emphasises that although Walton's images are presented in a book, they should not be viewed as engravings but as paintings, as if in a gallery, and were best seen from a set distance. Truth in nature, which according to Ruskin was best demonstrated by Turner's artistic style, was emulated by Walton, as Astill has hinted at in suggesting "Turner's combination of minute observation and Romantic expression […] was Walton's greatest influence" (Astill 2003, 155). Turner went as far as tying himself to the mast of a ship to achieve this combination through direct contact with the landscape, an act

popularly cast in the legendary episode that saw him fully experience the atmospheric effects of a storm (Wettlaufer 2000, 158). In promoting Walton as Turnerian, Bonney presented him as Turner's legitimate heir:

> My companion E. Walton, whose enthusiasm for his art renders him proof to most of the minor miseries of life, could not find it in his heart to leave such studies of storm-clouds, sea and mountain, and even succeeded, by propping himself against the funnel, in making useful pencil sketches. (Bonney 1870, 429)

Walton's paintings frequently juxtapose detailed naturalism with broader, more atmospheric elements of the landscape. His meticulous attention to detail in depicting geological features and atmospheric conditions, for example, exemplifies the Ruskinian ideal of fidelity to nature, where the artist's role is to reveal the underlying truths of the natural world through careful observation and skilled representation. And yet Walton's attempts to use what might be termed a 'Turnerian Light' or 'Turnerian Mystery' adds a layer of enigma and depth to his work, echoing Turner's own practices, even though the latter were more successful in execution and reception.

Walton's initial acclaim was met with later criticism. By the 1870s, Douglas Freshfield critiqued Walton's repetitive techniques and lack of innovation, arguing that his focus on a few select effects neglected the individuality of different alpine regions. In *Italian Alps*, Freshfield stated: "Walton, with too much feeling for colour, and occasionally for mountain form, seems to lack the force and perseverance necessary for the production of complete work" (Freshfield 1875, 333). Later, in 1880, he added, "Mr. Walton can paint a brilliant snow-peak or mountain mists better than anyone. But he is content to repeat year after year one or two effects" (Freshfield 1880, 302). This critique reflects a broader cultural shift towards a more precise and detailed appreciation of mountain landscapes, aligning with the transition towards photographic realism that began to dominate the latter part of the century.

Walton's trajectory, from *Peaks and Valleys of the Alps* to works perceived as repetitive, reflected the evolution of Victorian public and critical taste, which increasingly shifted from romantically inflected interpretations to a preference for exacting detail and topographical accuracy (Astill 2003, 157-8). His works, scrutinised for their adherence to Ruskinian and Turnerian principles of naturalism, struggled to align with the era's growing fascination with realism and precision Freshfield noted that artists like Walton fell short of Ruskin's multifaceted approach to representing and seeking truth in nature: Walton's style was too elaborate to match Turner's sublimity and too

generic to capture the picturesque's sentimental intimacy, expressing instead "imperfect knowledge" (Freshfield 1875, 345).

The shift in artistic taste away from Walton, or even Turner, was influenced by advancements in technologies and cartography, and underscored a growing demand for representations that could serve both as accurate records of natural phenomena and as aesthetically pleasing artworks. This transition is further exemplified by Edward Theodore Compton, an Anglo-German mountaineer and contemporary of Walton, whose works represent a departure from Walton's romanticised portrayals to a style that emphasised photographic precision and detailed representation (Wichmann 1999). Compton's images are marked by their meticulous attention to the minute details of the alpine landscape, capturing the stark, unembellished beauty of the mountains. This approach resonated with a new generation of art lovers and mountaineers who valued scientific accuracy and the tangible representation of the alpine environment over the interpretative and emotional renderings favoured by Walton and his contemporaries. Already in 1865, it should be noted, the Alpine Club recognised that photography had certain advantages over painting for the purpose of mountaineering (Hansen 1991, 245).

The aesthetic evolution from Walton to Compton signifies a broader cultural transformation in the appreciation of mountains, transitioning from Ruskin's emphasis on the spiritual and poetic aspects of mountain beauty to a more secular and empirical appreciation. This shift is evident in the growing popularity of mountaineering literature, which focused on the physical challenges and achievements of climbers rather than just the poetic contemplation of the landscape. Stephen occupies the middle ground between the lived and experiential elements of mountain appreciation and the imaginative and poetic ones. The move from romantic to more realistic portrayals in both literature and visual art marks a significant cultural pivot, highlighting the complexities and diversities in the engagement with alpine landscapes.

Ruskin, after all, "instructed painters to rival the geologist, botanist, and meteorologist in their knowledge of topography, vegetation and skies" (Cosgrove 1985, 57), a directive Walton emulated in his works such as *Clouds. Their Forms and Combinations* (1868a) and *Flowers from the Upper Alps* (1869). Walton's methods, outlined in *Peaks in Pen and Pencil for Students of Alpine Scenery* (1872), were praised by *The Athenaeum* for being "most useful, not only to avoid repetition of forms, but to give that wonderful solidity and distance so necessary in Alpine sketching" ("New Works" 1871, 5). Similarly, *The Alpine Journal* acknowledged Walton as "a painter, and not a geographer. He has the sense to see, what very few artists will see, that the peaks have a meaning in their forms, and that wilfully to alter those forms is to destroy the meaning" (George 1867, 205-6).

In an act of philanthropy to his native city, Walton donated in 1868 three large alpine canvases to Birmingham's new Art Gallery (Astill 2003, 153). The mayor, Thomas Avery, happily accepted these "valuable" paintings, thanking Walton for his "noble" and "generous" donation (Langford 1871, 65). One of these large oil paintings, *Monte Civita seen from the Lake of Alleghe* (1867), can still be seen in the gallery's Round Room hanging ensemble today. *The Art Journal* further commented on the gift, albeit in a mixed way, but still it confirmed Walton's standing in terms that could have almost afforded him a place within the pages of *Modern Painters VI*:

> Those familiar with the marvellous power of Mr. Walton's pencil will have no difficulty in realising in imagination the grandeur united with the beauty which reigns over the canvas in his representations of these regions of the avalanche, ribbed ice, and snow; the sunny glow on snowy peaks, the peaceful beauty of lakes slumbering at their base, 'beauty in the lap of terror'. ("Birmingham Society of Artists" 1868, 121)

One year after Walton donated his large Alpine vistas to Birmingham's Art Gallery, *Flowers from the Upper Alps, With Glimpses of Their Homes* (1869) brought his artistic vision into closer focus on the intricate beauty of high-altitude flora. The book opened with a quotation from Ruskin's *Modern Painters III*: "It would be inconsistent with [God's] Infinite perfection to work imperfectly in any place, or in any matter; wherefore we do not find that flowers and fair trees, and kindly skies, are given only where men may see them and be fed by them" (Ruskin 1903-12, 5: 143; Walton 1869, iv). The invocation of these words framed the project as almost an illustration of his ideas, positioning Walton's chromolithographs and Bonney's commentary as a realisation of Ruskin's belief in the divine artistry present even in the most hidden corners of creation.

The luminous illustrations in *Flowers from the Upper Alps*, combining scientific precision with Turnerian sensibility, brought often-overlooked Alpine blossoms vividly to life, elevating these fragile forms to the same status as the Alps' majestic peaks. The work reaffirmed Ruskin's vision of universal perfection and the equal glory of all creation. Bonney deepened this Ruskinian framework by referencing *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866) to critique the growing separation of God and nature in contemporary Victorian culture (Walton 1869, vii; Ruskin 1903-12, 18: 421). Urging a return to humility and spiritual reverence, Bonney called for a Ruskinian worldview that reconciled intellectual pursuits with an enduring acknowledgment of the divine in all aspects of creation.

5 Pilgrims in the Road of Salvation

Bonney's Christian reading of Ruskin was adapted by Reginald Farrer into a secular mysticism that shaped his rock gardening and travel writing (Cox 1930; Elliot 1991; Shulman 2004). A traveller, plant hunter and gardener, Farrer found inspiration in the Dolomites, which he described as a "land of magic" with peaks like "frozen flames" (Farrer 1913, 1). His development of the English rock garden was heavily influenced by these direct experiences, as he sought to replicate in England the natural order and aesthetic harmony of Alpine environments. Criticising the artificiality of contemporary rock gardens, which he dismissed as a kind of Albert Smith-inspired "Alpine peepshow" (Thonger 1907, 12), Farrer insisted that "stone in nature is never disconnected; each block is always as it were a word in the sentence […] boulder leads to boulder in an ordered sequence. A dump of disconnected rocks with discordant forms and angles is mere gibberish" (Farrer 1912a, 12). By merging these aesthetic principles with a critique of shallow engagement, Farrer extended Ruskin's poetics of mountains into a secular yet reverent mysticism that called for an intimate and contemplative relationship with the natural world.

In *Alpine and Bog-Plants*, Farrer's narrative seamlessly blends natural science with spiritual metaphor, drawing on both his deep reverence for Asian spirituality and the mysticism of the Alpine landscape. He described the Alps as participants in a spiritual journey: "All things organic and inorganic, all rocks and mountains and trees must ultimately become Buddha, perfect and unchanging" (Farrer 1908, 74). Mountains, in Farrer's vision, are "enormous pilgrims in the road of salvation", their natural beauty imbued with profound purpose: "even the Weisshorn has in its beauty an energetic fury that suits well with a pilgrim on the Way" (74-5). Incorporating local myths and legends, such as the famous tale of King Laurin, Farrer enriches the cultural and historical dimensions of the Dolomites. His evocative portrayal invites readers to view the mountains through a lens of wonder and reverence: "King Laurin's garden is a land of magic enclosed by peaks like frozen flames. It was long held an impenetrable and enchanted country: mystery surrounded it and the splendid terror of its pinnacles" (Farrer 1913, 1).[3]

Both Ruskin and Farrer promoted a deep engagement with nature, emphasising that true appreciation requires more than just visual observation. In his Oxford lectures, Ruskin openly disregarded the new way of 'doing' landscape promoted by alpinists: "Believe me, gentlemen, your power of seeing mountains cannot be developed either by

3 The legend of King Laurin was known from popular fairytale collections like those by Timme (1877), or articles in widely-read magazines, as in Ilbert (1870).

your vanity, your curiosity, or your love of muscular exercise. It depends on the cultivation of the instrument of sight itself, and of the sense that causes it" (Ruskin 1903-12, 26: 103). This assertion highlights the distinction between the superficial engagement of tourists and the deeper, more meaningful connection fostered by true appreciation and understanding. Ruskin's critique became even more pertinent as "adventurous pioneers" turned into "gregarious tourists" (Scaramellini 1996, 50). He emphasised that "nothing is ever seen perfectly, but only by fragments, and under various conditions of obscurity" (Ruskin 1903-12, 15: 120). This perspective underscores the complexity and depth of truly appreciating the mountains. Ruskin argued that:

> The men who are formed by the schools and polished by the society of the capital, may yet in many ways have their powers shortened by the absence of natural scenery; and the mountaineer, neglected, ignorant, and unambitious, may have been taught things by the clouds and streams which he could not have learned in a college, or a coterie. (6: 438)

Before Farrer redefined the rock garden with his secular mysticism and poetic sensibility, William Robinson had already established its association with Ruskin's ideas (Wasilewski 2020). Robinson, a key figure in nineteenth-century English gardening, explicitly drew on Ruskin's observations of the Alps, quoting extensively from his diaries in *Alpine Flowers for English Gardens* to emphasise truth to nature (Robinson 1870, 91-3). Inspired by Alpine landscapes, Robinson rejected artificial bedding systems in favour of naturalistic designs that mirrored ecological harmony. Ruskin's concept of natural formality, as outlined in *Modern Painters V* (Ruskin 1903-12, 7: 104-9), resonated deeply with Robinson's approach, celebrating nature's intrinsic order over rigid garden styles (Wasilewski 2020). Like Ruskin's Alpine watercolours, Robinson's gardens sought to capture the essence of the mountains through native materials and authentic arrangements. By adapting Ruskin's philosophical and aesthetic ideals into garden design, Robinson positioned the rock garden as a practical realisation of Ruskinian principles, paving the way for Farrer's later innovations.

One aspect of Ruskin's and Robinson's shared vision of democratising botanical knowledge stood in contrast to Farrer's elitist ethos. Ruskin famously derided in *Proserpina* the mix of Latin and English in plant nomenclature as "a doggish mixture of the refuse of both" and "a bar to the fairest gate to knowledge" (Ruskin 1903-12, 25: 200). Both advocated for common English names to make botany more approachable: Ruskin, for instance, poetically called the orange lily the Flame-Lily, while Robinson used plain language in his

writings to reach more simple people (Robinson 1887). Acknowledging the tension between scientific precision and accessibility, Ruskin accepted Latin's role as an international scientific language, while Robinson focused on bridging knowledge gaps without sacrificing botanical integrity (Ruskin 1903-12, 25: 532-3). Their shared belief in making the "lessons of nature" available to all reflected their conviction that connecting people with the natural world could inspire both understanding and transformation, a principle central to their work on gardens and botany (Wasilewski 2020, 8).

For Robinson, Ruskin served as both inspiration and authority in his campaign to introduce the rock garden to England, not only through tangible design but also through language, advocating for a more accessible and familiar approach to botanical nomenclature. However, in his review of Reginald Farrer's *The Rock Garden* (1912a), Robinson detected a dangerous resistance to this endeavour, criticising Farrer's "hardihood" in rejecting Ruskin's rendering of Saxifrage as Rockfoil (Robinson 1912). Farrer's response was unapologetically firm, defending his use of Latin terminology as essential for botanical accuracy rather than as an unnecessary obstacle. He dismissed Robinson's concern that such nomenclature might confuse "maids and matrons", sarcastically remarking that if readers were as "silly" as Robinson suggested, then "let us rejoice" (Farrer 1912b). The review offered Farrer the opportunity to mount a pointed critique of Ruskin's authority and ideas:

> With regard to Mr. Ruskin, do you then claim that he stands beyond reach of all human criticism, and that his every word must be taken as verbally inspired by an angel from Heaven? I cannot follow you, nor see any "hardihood" in exercising the proper human virtue of judgment. An admirable and very verbose writer, of doubtful mental balance through most of his life, and quite off it in later years, Mr. Ruskin combines with a great quantity of glorious and valuable work no less quantity, surely, of fustian and foolishness? Therefore, I repeat, without any sense of hardihood, my personal opinion (no better and no worse than anyone else's), that he made a small but signal blunder of taste in trying to replace a sound, euphonious, easy, and significant name like "Saxifrage" by the cheap and gratuitous Anglo-French affectation of "Rockfoil". The question, however, does not really arise. Rockfoil is, mercifully, a still-born word. Never does it appear, except occasionally in print. In the spoken language no one ever pretends to displace the established splendour of Saxifrage, so that I don't think you or I need cower before "Proserpina". (Farrer 1912b)

Farrer's response to Robinson's critique not only challenged Ruskin's authority but also radicalised some of Ruskin's own critiques of

trivialisation and superficiality in the engagement with nature. Defending his use of Latin nomenclature, Farrer dismissed Robinson's concerns with cutting sarcasm:

> I cannot believe that any "matron or maid" could be silly enough to boggle over so clear a matter. If, however, they are, obviously one does not write even small botanical guide-books for the assistance of idiots, and I can appeal quite comfortably to the more sensible millions. (Farrer 1912b)

This elitist stance echoed in fact Ruskin's disdain for the trivialisation of serious subjects but took it further by rejecting the idea that accessibility should be prioritised over intellectual rigour. By positioning himself as a defender of botanical precision against what he perceived as pandering to superficial tastes, Farrer adapted, in fact, Ruskin's resistance to trivialisation into a robust, if controversial, defence of intellectual distinction.

Ruskin's complex and synthetic perspective, even if occasionally contradictory, created a legacy that extends beyond his time. His holistic approach to nature continues to influence our perception and interaction with mountain landscapes. Figures like Leslie Stephen, Elijah Walton, and Reginald Farrer exemplify this enduring influence, each interpreting Ruskin's ideas in their own ways. Stephen blended reverence for Ruskin's vision with the physical and adventurous spirit of mountaineering, combining intellectual veneration with tactile engagement. Walton sought to translate Ruskin's Turnerian inspirations into art, capturing the poetic and visual essence of alpine landscapes with varying degrees of success. Farrer, however, moved beyond simple adaptation, radically extending Ruskin's critiques of trivialisation by prioritising intellectual rigour and scientific precision, often at the expense of accessibility. Together, these figures illustrate the ongoing significance of Ruskin's poetics of mountains in shaping cultural and aesthetic engagement with alpine landscapes, demonstrating how his ideas have been adapted, challenged, and reimagined over time.

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