

REVIEWS

Late Ruskin: New Contexts by Francis O’Gorman. Aldershot, Hants/Brookfield, VT: Scolar/Ashgate, 2001. xii, 180 pp. + 4 b/w illus. ISBN 1-84014-629-X. \$64.95.

Here’s a good book about Ruskin’s late work, a frequently overlooked, often maligned portion of his remarkable output. Thanks to Francis O’Gorman’s ability to recontextualize much of that work, the barriers which have kept scholars from seriously studying most of these writings should finally fall and a fresh reading begin.

As to why such barriers existed at all: In 1878, Ruskin struggled through a highly publicized, agonizing mental attack. Over the next dozen years, the attacks returned irregularly. By 1889, the deliria had taken a sad toll; Ruskin stopped writing, spending his last decade in virtual silence and isolation. Consequently, with the exception of his unfinished autobiography, *Praeterita* (1885-89), regarded by most scholars as among his greatest books, publications from this period – despite his repeated assertions that, between attacks, he was as mentally acute as ever – have often been regarded, *ipso facto*, as tainted by the effects of defaulting synapses. To make matters more complicated, almost two decades before his first mania, Ruskin had radically altered the direction of his work, eschewing his role as art critic to publish a series of assaults on what he considered the destructive effects of Britain’s commitment to laissez-faire capitalism. So harsh was the tone of these attacks that they came to be regarded by many critics, if not exactly as the products of a degenerating mentality, as “not among his best works,” a sorting saved for the outpourings of his “first career”: *Modern Painters* (1842-60), *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), and dozens of other essays, lectures, and smaller volumes on art and its meaning for moderns. The last three decades of Ruskin’s working life became more or less inconsequential.

It is this misinterpretation that Francis O’Gorman seeks to dispel by turning his fine analytical eye on a selection of Ruskin’s writings from 1860 to 1889. Rather than offering an exegesis on the overarching meaning of this work, he gives us a series of chapters intended to show that during Ruskin’s last creative period, not only was his sanity intact, but all his writings were informed by a carefully considered didactic, almost always missed or misunderstood by inattentive readers. Examining sequentially *Unto this Last* (1860), *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), the “Inaugural Lectures on Art” (delivered after Ruskin’s 1870 election as Slade Professor of Fine Art, Oxford), *Fors Clavigera* (1871-84), “The Three Colours of Pre-Raphaelitism” (1878), and *The Bible of Amiens*