

JOHN RUSKIN AND THE SUMMER OF 1873:
ARE CHILDREN LIKE THAT?

(Part I)

In discussing the image of the child in Victorian England, Peter Coveney has written: "With all the great Victorian pronouncers on education -- the Mills, Ruskin, Arnold, Newman, Huxley, and the contributors to the Essays on a Liberal Education of 1868 -- there was significantly little, if anything, on the actual nature of the child."¹ John Ruskin was intrigued by children and had his theories about how they should be raised and educated, but he may never have come closer to the actual child than he did to the children of Alfred and Margaret Hunt in the summer of 1873.

In the late fifties, Ruskin was the combative champion of young landscape painters, and, according to Allen Staley, he "considered Alfred Hunt the most promising landscape painter exhibiting."² The surviving correspondence between Alfred, his wife, the novelist Margaret Raine Hunt, and Ruskin shows that Hunt remained throughout his life a devoted disciple and loyal friend.³ Perhaps the most interesting of these letters were sent during or relate to the summer of 1873, when the Hunts saw much of Ruskin at Brantwood. The letters reveal Ruskin as mentor and friend, what he offered and what he demanded in both of these roles. Of greatest interest, however, is the way these letters chart the collision between Ruskin's ideal conception of children and the real children of Alfred and Margaret, particularly Ruskin's godchild Venice, named by him after his own interest in the ancient city, and her precocious older sister, Violet.

The story begins when the Hunts asked Ruskin to assume the role of godfather to Venice in 1864. Ruskin made clear what it would mean, or rather what it would not mean, to him. Ever since his "unconversion" from his old Evangelical faith in a Turin chapel in 1858, Ruskin saw all churches as "mere forms of idolatry."⁴ So he wanted to be honest with the Hunts in accepting the role of godfather, writing to Alfred on August 12, 1864:

I shall have a deep pleasure in accenting this trust and bond; -- provided both your wife and you are clearly enough aware of my entire severance from all the ordinarily accepted rituals of Christian or any other "churches" -- I could not hold your child at the font -- because I do not believe one of the things alleged by the priest at it -- nor could I undertake for it one of the things promised there.