

RUSKIN'S DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL:
A RECONSIDERATION OF HIS MENTAL ILLNESS AND THE
IMPORTANCE OF ACCURATE DIAGNOSIS FOR
INTERPRETING HIS LIFE STORY

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*Mad let us grant him, then: and now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect,
Or rather say, the cause of this defect,
For this effect, defective comes by cause.*
– (Hamlet 2.2.100-03)

During the last quarter century of his life, John Ruskin suffered severely from what, in the nineteenth century, were called “brain fevers.” The effects of these have been interpreted in various ways, with some interpretations suggesting that the debilitating attacks negatively affected his work after their commencement and some others suggesting that much of his earlier work was affected by an inherited mental instability. The purpose of this essay is to undertake a thorough examination of Ruskin’s mental illness, an examination which, in addition to using a considerable amount of material previously overlooked by scholars, will allow for an alternative interpretation of that illness and its causes. A large proportion of this original material is drawn from Ruskin’s last Continental tour of 1888, a period (insufficiently studied previously) which permits the issues discussed to be placed in high relief. I conclude by suggesting the impact this new view has for the future study of Ruskin’s life and work.

Venice 1888 and the Alexanders

Tim Hilton, Ruskin’s most recent biographer, tells us that shortly after Ruskin – accompanied by his faithful manservant, Peter Baxter, and an aspiring young architect, Detmar Blow – arrived in Venice on 6 October 1888, “some part of”

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