

RUSKIN IN MILAN, 1862:
A CHAPTER FROM "DARK STAR," HELEN GILL VILJOEN'S
UNPUBLISHED BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN RUSKIN

Edited, with an Afterword, by James L. Spates,
and an Introduction by Van Akin Burd

Introduction

When I opened the papers of the American scholar Helen Gill Viljoen (pronounced "Fil-yoon") bequeathed to me on her death in 1974, I soon found the unfinished manuscript of her biography of John Ruskin, a project on which she had been working since the early 1930s. Viljoen and I had become acquaintances about 1952 when she was a Professor of English at Queens College in New York, and through our long correspondence, I had followed her progress on this biography that she had entitled "Dark Star: The Life and Work of John Ruskin." Not only had she entrusted this manuscript to me, she had also given me permission to publish any part of it. As I began reading, I thought that here was at least a volume from Ruskin's birth through his college years deserving publication as a sequel to her *Ruskin's Scottish Heritage* (1956), which she had written as a "Prelude" to this biography. I was amazed by the originality of her opening chapters on Ruskin's childhood. Most impressive was her devotion to the two scholarly principles she had laid down in the *Heritage*: first, that a biographer of Ruskin must work from *all* the manuscripts, not just those which E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn had chosen to use in the editing of the Library Edition of his collected works, and, secondly, that the writer should use Ruskin's autobiography, *Praeterita*, as an imaginative rather than a factual recollection (*Heritage* 16-17).

I abandoned my ideas for publication, however, as I faced the difficulty of finding a publisher for an incomplete work, and as I discovered textual problems in the manuscript which I could not easily resolve. In 1990 I deposited the manuscript in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. In 1996 I told a younger scholar, James L. Spates, about this manuscript and, in his recent study of her papers, he has succeeded in tracing the evolution of Viljoen's interpretation of Ruskin, outlined her plans for the final text of her