

## “THE EARTH-VEIL”: RUSKIN AND ENVIRONMENT

Sara Atwood

John Ruskin’s understanding of the natural world, and of man’s place in it, is at the heart of his thinking about the arts. “There is nothing that I tell you with more eager desire that you should believe,” he told his Oxford students in 1872, “nothing with wider ground in my experience for requiring you to believe, than this, that you never will love art well, til you love what she mirrors better” (22:153). What she mirrored, for Ruskin, was the world – the virtues of its people and the beauty of nature. Ruskin believed that good architecture in particular – the physical expression of our dwelling on the earth – can only be produced by a culture that reverences and respects the natural world. Without right feeling for nature, architecture will be correspondingly bad, brutal, poorly designed, and poorly built. “Therefore,” he urges, “when we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them” (8:233). *The Poetry of Architecture; Or, The Architecture of the Nations of Europe Considered in its Association with Natural Scenery and National Character* is Ruskin’s earliest work of criticism, published when he was just eighteen. Using the pseudonym Kata Phusin [“According to Nature”], the young author began by declaring that

the Science of Architecture, followed out to its full extent, is one of the noblest of those which have reference only to the creations of human minds. It is not merely a science of the rule and compass, it does not consist only in the observation of just rule, or of fair proportion: it is, or ought to be, a science of feeling more than of rule, a ministry to the mind, more than to the eye. If we consider how much less the beauty and majesty of a building depend upon its pleasing certain prejudices of the eye, than upon its rousing certain trains of meditation in the mind, it will show in a moment how many intricate questions of feeling are involved in the raising of an edifice; it will convince us of the truth of a proposition, which might at first have appeared startling, that no man pleasing certain prejudices of the eye, than upon its rousing certain trains of meditation in the mind, it will show in a moment how many intricate questions