Ruskin’s Grotesque and the Modernism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis

Peter Nicholls

When one thinks of the qualities that placed Pound and Lewis at the centre of the Modernist ‘vortex’, it is hard to see how the massively influential thought of Ruskin could not have played a significant part in their intellectual formation. Both men were keen critics of their time (capable of producing rousing jeremiads in the Ruskinian vein), and both were, in their different ways, preoccupied with the relations between great art and social justice. Ruskin had in a sense laid the ground for both men: ‘The art of any country,’ he wrote in Modern Painters, ‘is the exponent of its social and political virtues. The art, or general productive and formative energy, of any country, is an exact exponent of its ethical life.’\(^1\) Pound formulates this essential proposition in many ways; for example: ‘I suggest that finer and future critics of art will be able to tell from the quality of a painting the degree of tolerance or intolerance of usury extant in the age and milieu that produced it.’\(^2\) Lewis’s position is rather more ambiguous because of his wariness of any complicity between artistic production and the Zeitgeist, but in The Demon of Progress in the Arts, a work which refers to Ruskin several times, he cautions that ‘The absurd things which are happening in the visual arts at present are what must happen when an art becomes almost totally disconnected from society, when it no longer has any direct function in life, and can only exist as the plaything of the intellect.’\(^3\)

Yet, as a number of commentators have noted, neither Pound nor Lewis ever felt it necessary to engage very closely with Ruskin’s work. We may sense a major debt, as Robert Casillo has done in an
extended analysis of Pound’s relation to Ruskin, but the fact remains that, while neither Pound nor Lewis was generally slow to acknowledge intellectual debts, Ruskin’s name rarely figures in their writings.⁴ In part this may be explained by their shared sense of his historical remoteness. Ruskin had finally resigned from his post at Oxford in 1885, the year of Pound’s birth, and his silence and isolation after 1889 meant that a much younger generation saw his works, like those of Carlyle and Emerson, as ponderous legacies of another age. What is particularly striking about the rare comments Pound and Lewis make about Ruskin is an ease of judgement which implies that the great Victorian is now safely labelled and pigeon-holed, no longer a force to be reckoned with in the kind of textual dialogues both modernists conducted with the past.

The lack of tension is notable if we compare, say, Ford Madox Ford’s account of his youth:

To me life was simply not worth living because of the existence of Carlyle, of Ruskin, of Mr Holman Hunt, of Mr Browning, or of the gentleman who built the Crystal Palace. These people were perpetually held up to me as standing upon unattainable heights, and at the same time I was perpetually being told that if I could not attain these heights I must just as well not cumber the earth.⁵

For the modernist generation, however, Ruskin (along with Carlyle and Arnold) simply ‘personif[ies] an ethos’, as Lewis puts it.⁶ This seems to be the point of Pound’s allusion to Ruskin’s essay ‘Of Kings’ Treasuries’ in Hugh Selwyn Mauberley:

Gladstone was still respected,  
When John Ruskin produced  
‘Kings’ Treasuries’; Swinburne  
And Rossetti still abused.⁷

The connection with Gladstone, and the deliberately weighty diction (‘respected’, ‘produced’) define a conservative world in which the Pre-Raphaelites Swinburne and Rossetti receive only abuse.⁸ Yet, for Pound, Ruskin turns out to be less a cause than a symptom of the world against which he inveighed:

John Ruskin was the only man who ever worried over the horrors of 19th-century British architecture and John Ruskin was