MONISM AND PLURALISM: THE HISTORY OF AESTHETICS AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHITECTURE

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In Part I we observed several examples of how the one-sided cognitivism of German Idealist aesthetics led to reductionist conceptions of architecture and in turn to negative assessments of the value of architecture. In Part II, I now turn to one nineteenth-century treatment of architecture that is pluralistic rather than monistic and thus in at least some ways points to the possibility of a more satisfying aesthetics of architecture. I refer to the theory of architecture adumbrated by John Ruskin in The Seven Lamps of Architecture, which even though it must be shorn of some of the Romantic assumptions long ago pointed out by Geoffrey Scott, nevertheless offers at least a model for (what Part I identified as) a synthetizing rather than separatist approach to architecture.

3. A PLURALIST APPROACH TO ARCHITECTURE: RUSKIN

The Seven Lamps of Architecture, first published in 1849, thus three decades after Schopenhauer’s World as Will and Representation and the commencement of Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics in Berlin, is notorious for its conclusion that there are only four styles suitable for contemporary architecture – the Pisan Romanseque, the early Gothic of the Western Italian Republics, the Venetian Gothic, and the

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English earliest decorated. This is hardly the aspect of the work that I wish to discuss, let alone defend. A fortiori I have no intention to defend his even more restrictive remark in the Preface to the second edition of the Seven Lamps that “I have now no doubt that the only style proper for modern northern work, is the Northern Gothic of the thirteenth century, as exemplified in England, pre-eminently by the cathedrals of Lincoln and Wells,” let alone to defend the even more strident remark of this Preface that “there are only two fine arts possible to the human race, sculpture and painting,” so that “What we call architecture is only the association of these in noble masses, or the placing them in fit places.” I cannot reconcile this last remark in particular with Ruskin’s statement in the original text that “perfect sculpture may be made a part of the severest architecture; but this perfection was said at the outset to be dangerous.” Ruskin continues:

[1]he moment the architect allows himself to dwell on the imitated portions, there is a chance of his losing sight of the duty of his ornament, of its business as a part of the composition, and sacrificing its points of shade and effect to the delight of delicate carving. And then he is lost. His architecture has become a mere framework for the setting of delicate sculpture, which had better all be taken down and put into cabinets. It is well, therefore, that the young architect should be taught to think of imitative ornament as of the extreme of grace in language; not to be regarded at first, not to be obtained at the cost of purpose, meaning, force, or conciseness, yet, indeed, a perfection -- the least of all perfections, and yet the crowning one of all…

Here Ruskin makes it clear that the merits of sculpture, which might certainly include their cognitive significance as imitations, should only be part of the larger complex of aims in architecture, which, like language, can please us through formal properties like conciseness and emotional impact or force as well as through its semantic content. A passage like this suggests that Ruskin’s fundamental position is that we should take a synthesizing rather than separatist approach to architecture, seeing it as involving our cognitive powers in play as well as work and engaging our emotional and conative powers as well.

A statement like, “It has been my endeavour to show [...] how every form of noble architecture is in some sort the embodiment of the Polity, Life, History, and Religious Faith of nations,” also suggests that Ruskin takes a multivalent approach to the pleasures of architecture. I do not want to take this statement too literally, but to take it as exemplifying the attitude that the experience of architecture is complex, not restricted
to a single form of cognition as the German Idealists had just argued, but involving and at best fusing a wide range of human values and sources of pleasure. In particular, I want to suggest that Ruskin’s seven “lamps” – sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory, and obedience – can, without too much distortion, be associated with the three sources of aesthetic pleasure identified in the course of the eighteenth century – cognition as such, the free play of the mental or cognitive powers, and the experience and expression of emotion – all three of which were synthesized in a complex account of aesthetic experience by at least a few authors, such as Kames (whose *Elements of Criticism* remained a common textbook in American colleges throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, although I cannot say if that was true for Ruskin’s Oxford in the 1840s). Specifically, I want to suggest that we can interpret the lamps of power and beauty as Ruskin’s versions of the beautiful and the sublime, both of which from a Kantian point of view involve freely playing cognitive powers, the former imagination and understanding, the latter imagination and theoretical and practical reason; that the lamps of truth but even more those of life, memory, and obedience bring out elements of straightforward cognition rather than the free play of cognitive powers in the experience of architecture; and that the lamps of sacrifice but also life, memory, and obedience highlight emotional dimensions of the experience of architecture.⁶

Throughout the discussion of the seven lamps, I suggest, Ruskin’s tacit argument is that all of these lamps are sources of pleasure in the experience of architecture, and that there is no reason to restrict our experience – or the buildings that produce it – to any one or any proper subset of these lamps.

Ruskin introduces both the lamps of power
and beauty at the start of the chapter explicitly devoted to the former, stating that

In [...] reverting to the memories of those works of architecture by which we have been most pleasurably impressed, it will generally happen that they fall into two broad classes: the one characterised by an exceeding preciousness and delicacy, to which we recur with a sense of affectionate admiration; and the other by a severe, and, in many cases mysterious, majesty, like that we felt at the presence and operation of some great Spiritual Power.7

Ruskin signals the association of his two lamps with two basic eighteenth-century categories in the very act of stating that his understanding of them also goes beyond the simple distinction between the beautiful and sublime:

the difference between these two orders of building is not merely that which there is in nature between the beautiful and the sublime. It is, also, the difference between what is derivative and original in man’s work: for whatever is in architecture fair or beautiful, is imitated from natural forms; and what is not so derived, but depends for its dignity upon arrangement and government received from human mind, becomes the expression of the power of that mind, and receives a sublimity high in proportion to the power expressed.8

These statements are rich in historical resonances. The initial claim that beauty is something delicate to which we respond with affection while the sublime is something powerful to which we respond with awe is, of course, reminiscent of the way Edmund Burke distinguished between them ninety years before the Seven Lamps.9 The claim that beauty consists in the imitation of natural forms of course reminds one of Batteux’s thesis that the single principle of all the arts is imitation, but I think a more proximate antecedent for Ruskin would have been Archibald Alison’s Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste of 1790, reissued in 181110 and thus presumably still in circulation when Ruskin was young,11 the thesis of which is not that similarities between works of nature and works of art are important because they allow the latter to be a means of cognition of the former, but rather that we enjoy “associations” between art and nature that allow the pleasures of the latter to be carried over in non-rule-governed ways to the former; in other words, Alison’s theory of the associations between art and nature is a version of the Scottish idea of free play, published in the same year as but entirely independently of Kant’s version of the theory of free play, according to which the mind freely plays back and forth between art and nature. I think that this free, associationist rather
than strictly cognitivist interpretation of artistic and architectural beauty is evident in Ruskin’s following chapter on beauty when he states that “I do not mean to suggest that every happy arrangement of line is directly suggested by a natural object; but that all beautiful lines are adaptations of those which are commonest in the external creation; that in proportion to the richness of their association, the resemblance to natural work, as a type and help, must be more closely attempted.” Meanwhile, Ruskin’s account of the lamp of power, namely that we enjoy powerful works especially because of their suggestion of the power of the human mind or minds behind their creation, stands in a tradition going back to Thomas Reid, who asserted, although about beauty, that “it is in the moral and intellectual perfections of mind, and in its active power, that beauty originally dwells; and that from this as the fountain, all the beauty which we perceive in the visible world is derived,” and before him to Shaftesbury, who held that our pleasure in the outward forms of objects is grounded in “the Forms which form, that is, which have Intelligence, Action, and Operation.” But in this case, too, it seems to me, Ruskin is not arguing that we appreciate sublime works of architecture because they give us actual knowledge of the intentions of the human minds that created them, but because they suggest the power of the human mind in a more general way. In both the cases of power and beauty, then, it seems to me that Ruskin is arguing that we enjoy suggestions and intimations rather than determinate cognition, and so these two lamps can be associated with the eighteenth-century theory that in the beautiful and the sublime we enjoy the free play of our cognitive powers rather than actual cognition, perhaps especially with the associationist version of this theory.
The lamp of truth, by contrast, would seem to suggest a more straightforwardly cognitivist account of aesthetic pleasure: if truth is *adequatio rei et intellectus* or correspondence between representation and object, we would enjoy a true representation because of the information it gives us about its object. Here, however, we have to proceed with some caution, because Ruskin’s suggestion seems to be more that we enjoy *truthfulness* rather than *truth* in architecture, *sincerity* rather than *information*:

“That indignation which we profess to feel at deceit absolute, is indeed only at deceit malicious. We resent calumny, hypocrisy, and treachery, because they harm us, not because they are untrue.”

Ruskin’s thesis is not that we should dislike architecture that misinforms us of some truth, conversely that we should like architecture simply because it correctly informs us, but rather that we should dislike architecture that intentionally deceives us, above all about its own materials and structure, because we dislike being intentionally deceived, and conversely enjoy architecture that deals with us honestly, because we like to be dealt with honestly. This is the premise of Ruskin’s thesis that we should condemn architecture that disguises the nature of its materials: not because we need to acquire from architecture some information about the nature of its materials or the natural forces that govern them that we do not otherwise have (as Schopenhauer’s account might suggest), but simply because we dislike being handled dishonestly. And this premise is important because it is what allows for the distinction that Ruskin makes between deception and imagination, his claim that “a communicated act of imagination” is “no lie,” and the allowance he makes that for non-exhibition of underlying structure in what we recognize to be intended as a work of imagination rather than a piece of information, thus his claim that “The architect is not bound to exhibit structure” but that if, in Gothic vaulting, “the intermediate shell were made of wood instead of stone, and whitewashed to look like the rest, – this would, of course, be direct deceit, and altogether unpardonable.”

Ruskin’s distinction between imagination and deception would also allow, I think, for some common ground between him and Geoffrey Scott, who defended the use of stucco to mask the underlying brick in Renaissance architecture against Ruskin’s preference for the honest display of stone in Gothic architecture on the purely aesthetic ground that it allows for pleasing patterns of line and light that could not otherwise be achieved: if a building can be understood as intended as a work of imagination rather than a presentation of fact, then there is room for the enjoyment of decorated rather than displayed structure on Ruskin’s as well as Scott’s
account; indeed, here Ruskin’s otherwise outrageous suggestion in the Preface to the second edition of *The Seven Lamps* that architecture must ultimately exploit the means of painting or sculpture could be used in his defense.

Ruskin’s discussion of “The Lamp of Truth” also includes his notorious argument that even in his own nineteenth century an architecture of wood, stone, and masonry is preferable to one of iron. He writes that the art of architecture:

> having been, up to the beginning of the present century, practised for the most part in clay, stone, or wood, it has resulted that the sense of proportion and the laws of structure have been based [...] on the necessities consequent on the employment of those materials; and that the entire or principle employment of metallic framework would, therefore, be generally felt as a departure from the first principles of the art. Abstractedly there appears no reason why iron should not be used as well as wood; and the time is probably near when a new system of architectural laws will be developed, adapted entirely to metallic construction [...] . [But architecture’s] first existence and its earliest laws must depend [...] upon the use of materials accessible in quantity, and on the surface of the earth, that is to say, clay, wood, or stone: and as I think it cannot but be generally felt that one of the chief dignities of architecture is its historical use [...] it will be felt right to retain [...] the materials and principles of earlier ages.20

On the one hand, this seems like sheer conservatism, adequately confounded by, for example, the accomplishment of Mies van der Rohe in works like the Illinois Institute of Technology campus and the Seagram Building in finding incomparable elegance in the structural forms of steel (and glass). On the other hand, Ruskin’s comments suggest that we find a genuinely cognitive pleasure in architecture as a
form of history, as giving us insight into the past, and that this should not be entirely forgotten in the face of other sources of pleasure. This leads us to “The Lamp of Memory,” which can also be understood at least in part as an expression of the cognitive aspect of architectural experience.\textsuperscript{21}

The lamp of memory seems like the most straightforward expression of a cognitivist aspect in Ruskin’s conception of the sources of architectural pleasure. Specifically, Ruskin argues that architecture is a medium for knowledge of the human past. “Architecture is to be regarded by us with the most serious thought. We can live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her [...] there are but two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness of men, Poetry and Architecture.”\textsuperscript{22} But Ruskin’s conception of the cognitivist function of architecture as a vehicle for memory differs from that of the German Idealists in several key ways. Unlike Hegel, Ruskin does not conceive of architecture as a – doomed – vehicle for metaphysical knowledge, nor, like Schopenhauer does he conceive of it as a – not necessarily doomed – vehicle for knowledge of the fundamental forces of non-human nature; he conceives of it specifically as a vehicle for knowledge of human history. And then it should also be noted that architecture serves human memory in several ways, partly intentionally but also partly unintentionally. Ruskin begins his discussion of the “Lamp of Memory” with the case of buildings whose decorations are “animated by a metaphorical or historical meaning,”\textsuperscript{23} buildings whose ornamentation is thus intended to carry a message about a people and their present and past to the future. But he also argues that buildings are witnesses to history in ways that could not have been intended by their original builders, that the glory of a building may be:

\begin{quote}
\textit{in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity [...] it is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture; and it is not until a building has assumed this character, till it has been entrusted with the fame, and hallowed by the deeds of men, till its walls have been witnesses of suffering [...] that its existence [...] can be gifted with [...] language and life.}\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Here Ruskin claims that buildings are witnesses to the human deeds that play out within and before them, much of which of course cannot have been foreseen by the original builders and may even undermine their intentions in all sorts of ways, and that we who come later can read this
history in the buildings as they stand, well-preserved or ruined or in between, before us. Ruskin also notes that can get a sense of non-human history from buildings as well, from the “superinduced and accidental beauty [...] of the rents, or fractures, or stains, or vegetation, which assimilate the architecture with the work of Nature, and bestow upon it those circumstances of colour and form which are universally beloved by the eye of man.” Buildings thus yield us knowledge of the general processes and specific events of both non-human and human history.

Now Ruskin’s last remark about the universally beloved color and form that are produced by natural processes suggests that in actual experience the cognitive significance of architecture cannot be separated from what might have been thought of as its purely aesthetic dimension; and since it would also be artificial to separate the historical significance of architecture from our emotional response to human history, the argument of “The Lamp of Memory” suggests that all three aspects of the experience of art distinguished in eighteenth-century aesthetics are in fact fully merged in the experience of architecture as Ruskin conceives it. But before I turn to the emotional dimension of the experience of architecture, let me just mention that there are cognitivist aspects to Ruskin’s accounts of the lamps of “Life” and “Obedience” as well. Ruskin uses his chapter on “The Lamp of Life” to begin the argument that he will continue in the famous chapter on “The Nature of Gothic” in The Stones of Venice that we love the evidence of the creativity of all involved in the creation of a work of architecture, the stoncutters as well as the master mason or architect, as itself the product of the various lives of all these people, their “accidental carelessnesses of measurement”
as well as their “proposed departures from symmetrical regularity, and the luxuriousness of perpetually variable fantasy.” But there is another, or perhaps more general argument here, that “no inconsiderable part of the essential characters of Beauty depend [...] on the expression of vital energy in organic things, or on the subjection to such energy, of things naturally passive and powerless”; the “vivid expression of the intellectual life which has been concerned” in the production of architecture is one instance of this, but so might be the evidence of organic but non-human life in, say, the limestone used in a building. The presupposition of Ruskin’s argument is that of course we must in some way understand the expression of life in any of its forms in architecture before we can respond to it in other ways. A similar assumption underlies Ruskin’s argument in his final chapter on “The Lamp of Obedience.” His argument here is that architecture can be an expression of freedom, as opposed to mere chaos, only if it is an exercise of “Restraint” within a style – it is in this context that he makes the claim earlier mentioned that there are only four styles suitable for modern building. But of course to work within a style, even to innovate within it and test its limits without exceeding them, the architect has to understand the style and its laws; so freedom in design and construction, which might be associated with the eighteenth-century idea of free play, also has to be associated with knowledge. The necessity of connecting rather than separating free play and knowledge is also on display in this passage, which begins the penultimate section of the final chapter of The Seven Lamps of Architecture.

It is almost impossible for us to conceive [...] the sudden dawn of intelligence and fancy, the rapidly increasing sense of power and facility, and, in its proper sense, of Freedom, which such wholesome restraint would instantly cause throughout the whole circle of the arts. Freed from the agitation and embarrassment of that liberty of choice which is the cause of half of the discomforts of the world; freedom from the accompanying necessity of studying all past, present, or even possible styles; and enabled, by concentration of individual, and co-operation of multitudinous energy, to penetrate into the uttermost secrets of the adopted style, the architect would find his whole understanding enlarged, his practical knowledge certain and ready to hand, and his imagination playful and vigorous [...] .

Here knowledge is argued to be a necessary condition of free play. That might mean that knowledge is not a source of pleasure in its own right, but only a means to the pleasure for both architects themselves and
the audiences for their work over time that comes from the playful and vigorous imagination. But, as we have seen, the knowledge of both history and the laws of non-human as well as human nature that we can get from architecture is also, in Ruskin’s view, a source of pleasure in its own right. So there is no danger that knowledge will be reduced to a mere means for the pleasure that comes from free play: both are sources of architectural pleasure in his view.

Finally, I return to Ruskin’s recognition of the emotional dimension of our experience of architecture. As I already suggested, it would be entirely unnatural to separate our emotional response to human deeds and for example “suffering” from our cognition of them, and likewise artificial to separate our emotional response to manifestations of human freedom from our knowledge of the laws or style or other laws that furnish the constraints within which freedom can be meaningfully exercised; so the emotional aspect of the experience of architecture is implicit throughout Ruskin’s treatment of its cognitive dimensions in the lamps of memory and obedience. It would be equally implausible to leave out the emotional aspect of architectural experience from “The Lamp of Power,” Ruskin’s version of the sublime: his statement there that,

> In the edifices of Man there should be found reverent worship and following, not only of the spirit which rounds the pillars of the forest, and arches the vault of the avenue [...] but of that also which reproves the pillars of the earth, and builds up her barren precipices into the coldness of the clouds, and lifts her shadowy cones of mountain purple into the pale arch of the sky; for these, and other glories more than these, refuse not to connect themselves, in his thought, with the work of his own hand [...].

“THE PRESUPPOSITION OF RUSKIN’S ARGUMENT IS THAT OF COURSE WE MUST IN SOME WAY UNDERSTAND THE EXPRESSION OF LIFE IN ANY OF ITS FORMS IN ARCHITECTURE BEFORE WE CAN RESPOND TO IT IN OTHER WAYS.”
makes clear the emotional impact of the sublime in architecture on the author, but on the author only as a representative of us all: we cannot think of “the works of God upon the earth” and “the dominion over those works which has been vested in man” as “intellectual Lamps of Architecture” without also experiencing a profound emotional response.\[32\]

But the emotional dimension of architectural experience has been on display since the outset of Ruskin’s book, beginning with the first “Lamp of Sacrifice.” This refers to the “spirit which offers” especially for “devotional and memorial architecture” “precious things, simply because they are precious; not as being necessary to the building, but as an offering, surrendering, and sacrifice of what is to ourselves desirable.”\[33\] Through using precious materials in our – public rather than merely private – buildings, we “exercise self-denial for the sake of self-discipline”\[34\] – and express our need to honor, for Ruskin of course specifically our need to honor God.\[35\] The need to express self-discipline and honor must be grounded in our feelings or emotions, not just our desire for pleasure but in a wide range of other, first-order emotions. And in response to works of architecture that express such feelings in their creators similar feelings may be and surely often are expressed in subsequent spectators of those works, even those who do not share the beliefs of the original creators – even one who does not share the belief-systems of their creators cannot fail to be stirred by the Chartres or the Suleimanya of Sinan or the St. Matthew Passion of Bach, although of course the experience of such a spectator can hardly be identical to that of the original creator of the work or its originally intended audience. As Ruskin concludes “The Lamp of Sacrifice,” the creators of such works, “have taken with them to grave their powers, their honours, and their errors; but they have left us their adoration,”\[36\] that is, their emotion, which we, for all our differences, with them and amongst ourselves, cannot but at least to some degree agree with.

So Ruskin actually begins his work with an emphasis on the emotional dimension of our experience of architecture and by implication of aesthetic experience more generally. But we have seen that as his argument unfolds, he equally emphasizes the pleasure of sheer cognition through architecture as well as of the vigorous play of the human imagination in architecture, and further the ways in which all three of these dimensions of aesthetic experience are not merely intertwined but are also interdependent. So I conclude that Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps* is a paradigmatic expression of a
synthesizing rather than separating approach to aesthetic theory in general and architectural theory in particular, and that although a century and three-quarters on, we can hardly feel constrained by his particular stylistic dictates, an enduring benchmark for the complexity of aesthetic ambitions we should have in architectural practice as well.

ENDNOTES


4. Ibid, p. 137.

5. Ibid, p. 203.

6. My interpretation of *The Seven Lamps* thus differs from that offered by Cornelis J. Baljon in “Interpreting Ruskin: The Argument of The Seven Lamps of Architecture and The Stones of Venice,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 401-14. Baljon argues that all seven “lamps” are forms of associations of ideas, thus that the work stands entirely within the tradition of eighteenth-century Scottish “associationism,” represented above all by the 1790 work of Archibald Alison (see p. 403), while Ruskin then broadens his approach to architecture in *The Stones of Venice*. Without controverting Baljon’s claim that Ruskin’s philosophical knowledge was (proudly) confined to the British tradition and excluded German aesthetics from Kant to Hegel (p. 401), I would suggest, indeed already have suggested in my comments about the work of Kames, that the British or even the Scottish tradition is broader than
associationism alone, and that Ruskin’s work is more fruitfully read against
the background of the threefold division of cognition, play, and emotion
that I have suggested.
7. Ruskin, Seven Lamps, p. 69.
8. Ibid, p. 70.
9. See Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of
the Sublime and Beautiful (1757, second edition 1759), edited by J.T. Boulton
(London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), especially Part One, sections
VII-XI, XIX. See also Baljon, p. 403.
11. Baljon goes beyond this weak statement and calls Alison’s work, “a
particularly rich source of inspiration,” for Ruskin (p. 403).
12. Ruskin, Seven Lamps, p. 104.
Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), Essay
15. For a general discussion of this distinction, see Bernard Williams, Truth
17. Ibid, p. 33.
18. Ibid, p. 35.
Fallacy,” e.g., pp. 103-7.
21. Baljon suggests that Ruskin thought iron architecture lifeless and thus
should have included his argument against it in “The Lamp of Life” (p.
403). This overlooks Ruskin’s argument for our historical attachment
to stone rather than iron construction, which would suggest that if his
argument against iron architecture should have been included anywhere
other than in “The Lamp of Truth,” then it should have been in “The
Lamp of Memory.” But had he done that, Ruskin would have spoken
too soon: riding now across a great late nineteenth- or early twentieth-
century railroad bridge such as the Hell’s Gate in New York or the Firth of
Forth bridge in Scotland is certainly an experience redolent with historical
significance.
22. Ruskin, Seven Lamps, p. 182.
27. Ibid, p. 150.
29. Ibid, p. 213.
32. Ibid, p. 70.
34. Ibid, p. 10.
35. Ibid, p. 11.
36. Ibid, p. 28.