GARGOYLE NOT GUILLOCHE: RUSKIN AND THE ROMANCE OF ARCHITECTURE

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The Edinburgh Lectures

In the second of the *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* delivered at Edinburgh in November 1853, Ruskin pre-empts responses to the first lecture in the series which he senses will accuse him of being romantic in his proposals. In the earlier lecture he had, not for the first time, praised Gothic architecture while deriding its "modern Greek" counterpart. He compared the "150,000 square windows side by side in the same streets" (12: 18) of Edinburgh New Town with the six hundred year old "window of an English domestic building"—Oakham Castle, claiming that "if every window . . . were of some such form, with perpetual change in their ornaments" its citizens would not "pass up and down the street with as much indifference as now" past "massy lintel[s] of a single stone, laid across from side to side, with bold square-cut jambs" (12: 19). This simplest form of lintel, he says, "is by no means a bad form; on the contrary, it is very manly and vigorous, and has a certain dignity in its utter refusal of ornament," for example, at Stonehenge. But it is not "entertaining" (12: 16) while in its repetitious multiplicity—six hundred and seventy-eight alone along the very side of Queen Street where he is lecturing—it is as monotonous in its simplicity as the myriad "Corinthian and Doric columns . . . in [the city's] banks, and post-offices, [and its] institutions . . . one exactly like another" (12: 17). The example from Oakham Castle has, he says, "like all good art . . . the *capacity of pleasing*" (12: 18-19). It is as we shall see romantic.

Ruskin's perceived need to open his second lecture pre-emptively can be traced to the associationism between architecture and human feeling which was apparent in its predecessor and which he now felt called upon to justify. This is, of course, an associationism which goes back to his earliest work, *The Poetry of Architecture*, published in his teens. There are echoes of the earlier work when at Edinburgh he speaks of the spires of the Cathedral of Coutances in Normandy, citing them as one of the earliest fully developed Gothic examples. He describes them as "literally domestic roofs, with garret windows, executed on a large scale, and in stone. . . . Nothing," he says, "can surpass the boldness or the simplicity of the plan." Yet this very simplicity occasions "so great a complexity and play of cast shadows that [he] remember[s] no architectural composition of which the aspect is so completely varied at different hours of the day." However, the essential observation to be made is the "complete *domesticity* of the work" which proves that "all good architecture rises out of good and simple domestic work" (12: 42-43). This, he claims, is true also for sculpted towers which are crowned by "ordinary ridged gable roof[s]," citing as an example the towers on the northwest angle of Rouen. These he finds repeated "on a smaller scale by the little turret roofs and pinnacles of every house in the town," the association made being not one "of religious feeling, but merely of joyfulness and exhilaration of spirit in the inhabitants of such cities." Further, "the style of architecture with which these [noble] grotesque roofs

are associated" carries with it associations in language and literature. "Have not," he says, "these words, Pinnacle, Turret, Belfry, Spire, [and] Tower, a pleasant sound in all your ears?" (12: 43-44). Referring to the work of Sir Walter Scott, he cites various examples to support his argument culminating in a comparison of the associations of the word "pediment" with these variants on "spire."

"[Y]ou know," Ruskin says, "that, for an immense time back, all your public buildings have been built with a row of pillars supporting a triangular thing called a pediment. You see this form every day in your banks and clubhouses, and churches and chapels [and] are told that it is the perfection of architectural beauty . . . yet," he goes on, "suppose Sir Walter Scott, instead of writing, 'Each purple peak, each flinty spire,' had written, 'Each purple peak, each flinty "pediment".'" "The poem he claims would, not only not have been improved, but would have been spoiled because the association is without value: "the thing spoken of is a nonentity" (12: 46).

"These pediments, and stylobates, and architraves," Ruskin continues, beginning to enumerate the components of the classical orders, "never excited a single pleasurable feeling [and] are evermore dead, lifeless, and useless in art as in poetry . . . on the other hand, that strange and thrilling interest" associated with the terms of Gothic architecture—"Vault, Arch, Spire, Pinnacle, Battlement, Barbican, Porch, and myriads of others, words everlastingly poetical and powerful . . . is a most true and certain index that the things themselves are delightful" (12: 46-47). What he asks the citizens of the Athens of the North is: "Are your daughters drawing . . . as soon as they can use a pencil? Not Parthenon fronts . . . but the ruins of Melrose Abbey, or Linlithgow Palace, or Lochleven Castle." This, he tells his audience, you may call "romantic, and youthful and foolish." He claims, however, that the word "Romance" is "of greater weight and authority" (12: 48) than is commonly believed. This leads us back to the opening comments of the second lecture.

Before defining the "true" meaning of the word, Ruskin finds it necessary to refute "false" meanings; first in respect of romance writing where it may be synonymous with falsehood as in "the French talk of *Des Romans*, and thus the English use [of] the word Romancing"; second where it has come to signify "weak, foolish, speculative, unpractical, [and] unprincipled" because of young people's particular capacity for "reverie, and imaginative pleasures" at the expense of "their plain and practical duties." However, the "real and proper use of the word romantic is simply to characterise an improbable or unaccustomed degree of beauty, sublimity, or virtue." Addressing himself to the "practical men" of Edinburgh, Ruskin asks them to observe that romantic feeling "is indeed one of the holiest parts of [their] beings. It is the instinctive delight in, and admiration for, sublimity, beauty, and virtue, unusually manifested." Furthermore, "far from being a dangerous guide, it is the truest part" of being "even truer than . . . consciences" (12: 53-54).

At this time he claims that in architecture romantic feeling will be found in the Gothic gable, not in the Greek pediment, for:

> all the loveliest Gothic architecture . . . is based on the group of lines composed of the pointed arch and gable . . . the beautiful apse of Amiens Cathedral . . . [is] formed merely of a series of windows

> surmounted by pure gables of open work . . . [while] at the transept porches of Rouen, or at the great and celebrated porch of the cathedral of Rheims, or at that of Strasbourg, Bayeux, Amiens, or Peterborough . . . these lovely compositions are nothing more than richly decorated forms of gable over pointed arch. (12: 35)

Further, their truth lies in their derivation from the most frequently occurring forms and contours of nature. To illustrate this, in the first of the Edinburgh lectures Ruskin shows his audience the terminal leaves of an ash-spray. After considerable detailed analysis he concludes that their leaves "spring from the stalk precisely as a Gothic vaulted roof springs, each stalk representing a rib of the roof, and the leaves its crossing stones." Further, "the beauty of each of those leaves is altogether owing to its terminating in the Gothic form, the pointed arch." He contrasts this with the spray of an ash tree which has been taught Greek and which has received the "Attic architectural rules of right." "Here," he says, "is a cluster of ash leaves, which I have grown expressly for you on Greek principles." Ruskin's rationale for this transformation is that he has only replaced "the beautiful spring of the Gothic vaulting in the ash bough" with a flat lintel and so on (12: 26). This is, in fact, one of his sillier arguments in his espousal of the rightness of Gothic architecture, but nevertheless it remains important because it marks a point beyond which his architectural ideas may be seen to change as he came increasingly under the influence of myth and began to make his own mythopoeic interpretations of the world.

Architecture and Natural Form

Ruskin's disavowal of the forms of Greek architecture may be traced back to *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) where he first espoused the notion, repeated in the Edinburgh lectures, that the essence of architectural truth lay in its derivation from nature. In "The Lamp of Beauty" he insists "that all most lovely forms and thoughts are directly taken from natural objects." This is so because he assumes the opposite: "that forms which are not taken from natural objects must be ugly" (8: 141). Ruskin claims that he does not mean "that every happy arrangement of line is directly suggested by a natural object," but rather "that all beautiful lines are adaptations of those which are commonest in external creation." Further, the greater their resemblance to natural forms, the richer are their associations. They become "a type and help" for the invention of beauty beyond which humankind cannot advance without direct imitation of natural forms (8: 139). For this reason the triglyph and the cornice of the Doric order are, for Ruskin, not imitative, or at best "imitative only of artificial cuttings of wood"; accordingly they are not by his standards beautiful. They exert influence over the mind by virtue of "their severity and simplicity." On the other hand the fluting of the Doric column which Ruskin sees as "the Greek symbol of the bark of the tree" is imitative and accordingly displays beauty, albeit of a low order in its feeble resemblance to "many caniculated organic structures. . . . Again: the Doric capital was unimitative," such beauty as it had being "dependent on the precision of its ovolo, a natural curve of the most frequent occurrence." Addressing himself to the Ionic order, he goes on to describe its capital, an architectural invention which is to his mind "exceedingly base," as

depending for such beauty as it possesses "on its adoption of a spiral line." This he describes as "perhaps the commonest of all [lines] that characterise the inferior orders of animal organism and habitation." Further progress," he says with obvious reference to the Corinthian order, "could not be made without a direct imitation of the acanthus leaf" (8: 139-40). There are, however, "many [habitual] forms of so called decoration in architecture" which Ruskin asserts are not ornamental but "ugly things" which the architect should charge as being "For Monstrification" (8: 141-42).

The first monstrous so-called ornament to which he turns his attention is Greek fret, the Greek running border which he conflates with its rounded form, Guilloche. He claims that it has an almost perfect resemblance to the form of the crystal of bismuth which can only be produced by artificial means. Greek fret is ignoble because its only reflection in nature is in the unnatural bismuth crystal. Only as a foil to true ornament is "this vile concatenation of straight lines" admissible, and that only sometimes. This much-derided ornament is contrasted with another with which it is often associated and "which is as beautiful" as the other is "painful—the egg and dart moulding." While the former is unnatural, the latter not only imitates nature but it does so "with a peculiar accuracy" in the best Greek work, displaying a "delicacy and keen sense of variety in the curve." Leave out this changefulness "and the moulding is vulgar instantly" (8: 144). Ruskin was to pursue this argument in Volume One of *The Stones of Venice* where he describes "the proper material of ornament" as "whatever God has created; and its proper treatment, that which seems in accordance with or symbolical of His laws." The material of ornament includes first "the abstract lines which are most frequent in nature." These, when "taken out of their [natural] combinations," are unrecognisable as to their source, "their universal property being that of ever-varying curvature in the most subtle and subdued transitions, with peculiar expressions of motion, elasticity, or dependence" (9: 265-66). He had described these when defining typical beauty in Volume Two of *Modern Painters*.

Having "convicted the Greek fret of ugliness, because it has no precedent to allege for its arrangement except an artificial form of a rare metal," Ruskin turns his attention to another form of ornament, used by the architects of Lombardy and also composed exclusively of right lines, albeit with the addition of what he calls "the noble element of shadows." This example is taken from the cathedral front at Pisa but is, he claims, "universal throughout the Lombard churches of Pisa, Lucca, Pistoja and Florence." Accordingly, he feels that "it will be a grave stain upon them if it cannot be defended." At first glance this seems difficult, for "its terminal contour is the very image of a carefully prepared artificial crystal of common salt." However, unlike the artificial bismuth crystal which Greek fret resembles, this form of crystal—though artificial in salt—is one of the first and commonest forms of natural crystallisation, "being the primal condition of the occurrence of the oxides of iron, copper, and tin, of the sulphurets of iron and lead, [and] of fluorspar." Further, the "projecting forms in its surface represent the conditions of structure which effect the change into another relative and equally common crystalline form, the cube." Lombard ornament is saved. "We may rest assured," he says, that "it is as good a combination of such simple right lines as can be put together, and gracefully fitted for every place in which such lines are necessary" (8: 145-46).

Three things are worth noting in this discussion. First, despite numerous statements of Ruskin's which seem to damn all aspects of Greek architecture, it is clear that all things Greek are not necessarily bad although the evidence to date suggests that praise of aspects of Greek architecture is definitely limited and largely grudging. The second point of note is his use of comparisons with the occurrence of crystals in nature as a means of justifying the truth or otherwise of particular forms of architecture. This may be traced back to the section of *The Stones of Venice* previously discussed, concerning the proper material of ornament. Here the second named among twelve appropriate natural references for architectural ornament, after abstract lines, is "Forms of Earth (Crystals)." More importantly, looking forward to the increasing influence of myth in Ruskin's later thought we again find crystals playing a significant metaphorical part. Third, the crystalline references in the praised Lombard design are composed of "right lines." This, if we look at it in the context of Ruskin's total architectural thought, may be seen not as a simple reference to normal lines but as presaging the significance of Dædalic Right line in his architectural theory. An examination of these three points should demonstrate why in Ruskin's romantic view of architecture the gargoyle of Amiens is right while the guilloche of the Erechtheum is not, and why the true inheritance of the Greeks is found in the former but not in the latter. Further, it should demonstrate why Amiens is right but Cologne is not, and why the Parthenon is right but the National Monument and the accompanying buildings on the Calton Hill of the Northern Athens are not.

Mythopoeic Architecture

I have recently proposed that Ruskin's architectural thought may be interpreted through an examination of his lifelong identification with the mythical first architect, Dædalus. In this dialectical relationship Ruskin wrestles with the dual nature of Dædalus who is, on one hand, the bestial builder of the Cretan labyrinth from which there is no escape, the type of the reviled Greek fret which "is always a sign of failing instinct of beauty" (8: 144). Dædalus is on the other hand the builder of a house which invites entry, one which exhibits "the finest piece of involution, or cunning workmanship . . . the memory of [which] is kept by the Greeks for ever afterwards in that running border of theirs, involved in and repeating itself, called the Greek fret." This is recognisable in the labyrinth of Dædalus and "on the coins of the place where it was built, Cnossus" (27: 404). Having reference to Diodorus Siculus, Ruskin finds evidence for both sides of Dædalus's character. While he invents on one hand "the entire art of minute ornament; and the deceptive life of statues" (20: 351-52), on the other he invents the saw from the serpent's tooth, evidence of the "cruel and venomous power of his art" which seeks "refuge under blood-guiltiness, with Minos" for whom he built the labyrinth. Dædalus's honourable works are epitomised by his finishing of Aphrodite's temple at Eryx in "the golden honeycomb," while his "infinite mechanical ingenuity" rebels "against the laws of honour and nature" and builds "labyrinths for monsters" (20: 353-54). What then is the distinguishing characteristic between those works of Dædalus which are honourable and those which are dishonourable? Exhaustive analysis reveals it to be found in the presence or absence of Dædalic Right line. If Right line is present in any work, the true inheritance of Dædalus is present; if it is not the work is merely Dædal, the term used by

Ruskin to distinguish the reverse side of Dædalus's influence. Further, this is a distinction which is not limited to the fine arts of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture which, though he distinguishes them from the lower or mechanical arts such as pottery and carpentry, he does not regard as inferior. They are part of a Dædalic continuum between the ploughshare and the cathedral, where the presence of Right line will distinguish works which exhibit the true inheritance of Dædalus from those which are merely Dædal.

We have by now noted a degree of softening in the older Ruskin's attitude to things Greek since their virtually total rejection in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, including even a seeming ambivalence to the previously reviled Greek fret and its progenitor, the Cretan labyrinth. The reasons why this is so are to be found in his changing attitude to myth, particularly Greek myth, which he came to see as the inherited wisdom of the world. His lifelong and continually evolving relationship with Dædalus is the particular architectural manifestation of this. In the course of his long choral dance with Dædalus, Ruskin is accompanied by a whole cast of mythological characters, including notably Athena in various guises and, ominously, Arachne.

The role of Athena in Ruskin's myths is significant in his architectural meanderings with Dædalus, particularly for the current context. As Athena Keramitis, that is Athena in the Earth, she remains umbilically attached to Ruskin in this journey, for in this role she is "a Formative and Decisive power—a Spirit of Creation and Volition." As Athena Chalinitis, that is Athena in the Heavens, who he significantly conflates with the Egyptian goddess Neith, she remains with him as overseer of his "wisdom of conduct and of the heart, as opposed to the wisdom of [his] imagination." As Athena Glaukopis she watches with her maternal owl eye over his journey. She begets the true "Athenian or Constructive Power [which] determined the methods of art, and laws of beauty, for all generations" and which underpins the right inheritance of Dædalus (31: 13). This is found in the work of the Athenian school and echoed in that of the Etruscan, who is like the Athenian "earth born" of Athena Keramitis. He describes Etruscan work as "being rolled in spiral folds" recalling the spiral forms of nature (31: 22-23). These are no longer characteristic of common and inferior orders of nature but the type of curvilinear Right lines, "the simplest of the beautiful curves" (4: 106). These spirals, which in nature show "apparent irregularities," are when "completed in the Ionic capital, and arrested in the bending point of the acanthus leaf in the Corinthian, one the primal element of beautiful architecture and ornament in all ages." They are "eloquent with endless symbolism, representing the power of the winds and waves in Athenian work, and of the old serpent in Gothic work" (27: 405). Ruskin traces the true inheritance of Athens through Magna Græcia to the Normans on one hand and through Byzantium to the Venetians on the other. "There is," he says, "but one Greek school," with the mosaics of St Mark's being "as truly wrought in the power of Dædalus, with the Greek constructive instinct, and in the power of Athena" as any "shaft of [the] Erechtheum" (24: 280-81). The true Greek inheritance may be traced "in the temple pillars of the world . . . the Ionian spiral from Erichthonius [and] and the Doric pillar . . . from Heracles." The Corinthians changed "the Doric ovolo into the wicker basket of the Canephora" and by substituting the acanthus leaf for the Ionic spiral founded, he claims, all Christian architecture (31: 26).

Myth in Stones

Clearly, the Ruskin of the *Queen of the Air* and the associated mythopoeic works of the 1860s is not the Ruskin of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice* and the Edinburgh Lectures a decade or more earlier. He is still a proponent of the Right Gothic architecture epitomised by Amiens and still argues for its later decline. But now its inheritance may be traced back to the constructive power of the Greeks. Greek Athena is present at Amiens, the building described by the French architectural theorist and Ruskin's contemporary Viollet le Duc as the "Parthenon of Gothic Architecture." My questions as to the Rightness of Amiens and the Parthenon and the (non) Rightness of its northern counterpart and Cologne still remain open. An answer may be found in that little-read and most original of Ruskin's mythopoeic excursions, *The Ethics of the Dust*, beginning in the second lecture which is titled "The Pyramid Builders." This is taken up with a myth of Ruskin's own making which he presents as a dream, concerning the Egyptian deities Neith and Pthah. Neith, who Ruskin conflates with Athena, appears in the company of her brother, the Greater Pthah, who in Ruskin's interpretation "represents the formative power of order and measurement." Neith, as the Egyptian Athena, is "the spirit of divine wisdom." Neith examines the work carried out under her brother's supervision and, finding no porphyry or marble upon which men might engrave the figures of the gods but only pieces of dark clay, asks whether is it the will of Pthah that "men should mould only four-square pieces of clay." He replies that as men have forsaken the gods they should "make their clay four-square; and labour; and perish." But Neith asks what will they build without her guidance. Pthah responds by drawing with his measuring rod on the sand, conjuring up "the outlines of great cities, and of vaults, and domes, and aqueducts, and bastions, and towers, greater than obelisks." but wherever Neith looks upon the lines, they, being only the vanity of men, are erased (18: 226-28). And Neith, in her guise of wisdom, builds for Pthah in an instant a perfect pyramid beyond his capabilities to build in a hundred years. Neith and the Greater Pthah disappear and Pthah in his lower guise, that of a beetle who Ruskin equates with the Greek Hephaestus, appears and transmutes Neith's pyramid into a crystal of fluorspar. This, Ruskin claims is, as the work of Neith, Athena, or the divine wisdom Sophia, a type of the true constructive power in life and art, the oversight of which has previously been credited to Athena.

In a later lecture of *The Ethics of the Dust*, titled "Crystal Caprice," Ruskin returns to the work of Neith. Here certain mountain crystals are seen to have a "sort of grotesque sympathy . . . with the beautiful fringe and pinnacle work of Northern architecture." This leads him to dream of Neith and St Barbara together. St Barbara he claims as the true "patroness of good architects" (18: 315-16). They discuss the architecture of Egypt and Greece, with the Christian Saint constantly suggesting improvements in design such as three cornered pyramids and a Parthenon with twin transepts. However, the temple of the dew with its Caryan maidens finds favour, prompting St Barbara to describe the temples she is building in the valleys of France and overlooking the Rhine. She describes crockets and pinnacles with Neith looking ever more grave and throwing her shuttle ever more slowly.

Neith asks St Barbara if she really thinks that this work is done without her, claiming, however, that its pinnacles and flamboyant work are all vanity. We are reminded of the moment once described by Ruskin when the Parthenonic heights of Amiens having been scaled there is a pause. This is found in the noble unity of "fantasy and law" in the buttresses of the north door of Rouen which marks "the great watershed of Gothic art" (8: 89). Beyond this watershed Arachne contends with Athena and the forms of tracery begin to quiver. The former spins tracery which begins "to undulate like the threads of a cobweb lifted by the wind" (8: 92) and the architecture loses its essence as stone. In the dream, however, Ruskin puts things to rights when the workers of Neith and St Barbara contend in building, but just as the Gothic spirits have carried their tower to within reach of the top of the Egyptian spirits' pyramid, its foundations fail and it falls and is snapped off against the pyramid.

Ruskin shows to his audience the lesser Pthah's manifestation of this, "three little pinnacles of mischievous quartz" leaning obliquely like the tower of Pisa and a "pyramid, built of great square stones of fluorspar, straight up" (18: 323). In this crystal formation and the myth which Ruskin has created to explain it lies the answer to the problem at hand. The cathedral of Amiens is right because in it lies that peak of perfection in Gothic architecture which preceded the decline evident in the flamboyant and other later Gothic movements; when the true Athenian constructive power which is perceived by the older Ruskin to have been inherited from the Parthenon is violated. It is lost, however, not only in the decline of medieval architecture but also in the Renaissance and later classic revivals when the reverse side of Dædalus's influence prevails; when the true formative power of Athena is ignored. This is the power which is evidenced in nature in the crystal of fluorspar and in art in the right inheritance of Dædalus where it stands as the contest under Athena's hand of life with clay. Ruskin in his later mythopoeic works has moved on from the position he occupied in the Edinburgh Lectures but certain key points hold true. It is medieval architecture which is romantic but only that which precedes the seduction of the Gothic builders by Arachne. Aspects of true classical architecture are now admitted but even the older Ruskin would not have perceived them as romantic. Had Ruskin addressed the good citizens of the Athens of the North in 1873 as he had in 1853, they would still have known that the new Parthenon on the Calton Hill was not only, not romantic, it was not Right.

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