

Elizabeth Eastlake v. John Ruskin: The Content of Idea and the Claims of Art

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Elizabeth Eastlake v. John Ruskin: The Content of Idea and the Claims of Art

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Résumé

En 1856, dans son compte-rendu des trois premiers tomes des *Peintres modernes*, Elizabeth Eastlake critique l'insistance avec laquelle John Ruskin affirme le primat des idées en art tout en n'attribuant au langage du peintre qu'une fonction instrumentale. Aux « idées de vérité », inhérentes à la nature, aux « idées de beauté », non sélectives, et aux « idées de relation », dont il se sert pour censurer certaines œuvres de Raphaël, elle oppose les qualités propres à la peinture, celles que la peinture met en œuvre en utilisant les ressources de son propre langage, à savoir la couleur, la forme, l'ombre et la lumière, ainsi que l'expression. Puis, dépassant le cadre de cette opposition, elle va jusqu'à soutenir que « les meilleures idées » font partie du langage du peintre. Sans se référer à la théorie du *disegno*, elle semble néanmoins invoquer l'indissociabilité du concept et de la pratique caractéristique de cette tradition. La proximité de la thèse d'Eastlake avec l'esthétisme en germe dans les *Feuilles d'automne* (1856) et *Le Vallon du repos* (1858) de John Everett Millais, autant que les affinités qu'elle suggère entre la musique et l'art visuel indiquent un changement de paradigme qui annonce les thèmes majeurs du Mouvement esthétique de la fin du XIX^e siècle.

Rare in the history of art is the adjudication in a court of law of substantive aesthetic questions, as against the determination of titles to ownership or issues of authentication. Such an instance is notoriously the lawsuit for libel against John Ruskin, heard by the Court of Exchequer in London in 1878, in which James Abbott McNeill Whistler sought from the critic £1000 in damages. The occasion was Ruskin's assault in his journal *Fors Clavigera* in July 1877 on what he called "the conceit of the artist" as nearly approaching "the aspect of wilful imposture" and Whistler's "Cockney impudence" in asking "200 guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."¹ Ruskin thus stigmatized Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, while professing concern for the protection of a prospective purchaser of the picture through Sir Coutts Lindsay who, with his wife Lady Blanche, owned the Grosvenor Gallery where it was shown in that year. As literary historian Adam Parkes put it, Ruskin castigated Whistler's attention to painted surfaces at the expense of moral depths as a "self-regarding display of technical mastery that posited a fraudulent relation with their spectators by asking them simply to admire and pay up."² When queried at the trial by the defendant's representative as to the asking price for a painting on which, Whistler said, he had worked two days at most, the painter replied that he asked this price for the knowledge he had gained in the work of a lifetime.³ Whistler fundamentally attacked Ruskin's capacity to judge on the grounds that only an artist, one who spent a lifetime in the professional practice of art, might be competent to rule on the merits of pictures, or of art generally. This assumption is consistent with the motive that George Smalley, London correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, attributed to Whistler for bringing suit, suggesting that Whistler was intent on turning Ruskin's charge of imposture against the accuser.⁴

It is in this premise of the artist's exclusive knowledge and competence to judge that the significance of the contest lies, even though libel in the case was judged legally as a question of the critic's honesty and fairness of opinion.⁵ Whistler could

draw implicitly on ancient authority understood as supporting a view, widely held in England, that only practising artists were qualified to pass judgment on works of art. This position was articulated, for instance, by Frederic Farrar, Archdeacon of Westminster and Chaplain in Ordinary to the House of Commons, in his *Life of Christ as Represented in Art*, published in London in 1894. Farrar invoked what he took to have been laid down as a rule by the younger Pliny some 1800 years before: "On pictures, sculpture and modeling, no one other than a practitioner can judge."⁶ In fact, Pliny's Epistle suggests conditionally that "if it takes an artist to judge painting, sculpture and modeling, only one philosopher can really understand another;" he thus expresses doubt that he understands perfectly the philosopher Euphrates. Despite his classical scholarship, Farrar could confidently interpret Pliny's statement as legislative because to do so coincided with a prevailing view in Britain that art knowledge was properly technical. In the larger public especially, artistic competence was associated with mechanical operations or manual skill, with scant recognition of what the painter James Northcote called "the mental part"⁷ of the artistic process. Assumptions equating art knowledge with craft inhered in the language commonly applied to the production of works of art in the nineteenth century and they underlay the expectation, for example, that only a professional artist was qualified to be director of the National Gallery.⁸

Such reductive premises in the Victorian era narrowed what may have subsisted of Sir Joshua Reynolds's claim a century earlier for painting as a liberal art and his related insistence on the imagination as central to art. Concerned to discriminate "the greater truth, as it may be called, from the lesser," he distinguished in his Fifteenth Discourse to the Royal Academy (1790) "the larger and more liberal idea of nature from the more narrow and confined; that which addresses itself to the imagination, from that which is solely addressed to the eye."⁹ Ruskin pronounced on the idea content of art in quite different terms in *Modern Painters*, the first three volumes of which

appeared in 1843, 1846, and 1856 (later volumes are not considered here). In these earlier volumes he may be seen to react against the understanding of art as properly technical—and as defiantly affirming his qualifications to judge—as well as challenging Reynolds’s “liberal idea of nature.” For Ruskin, ideas are inherent in the book of nature, which is God-given; he does not allow for ideas of nature that might exceed what is immediately accessible to the eye. He considers it the artist’s role to record visual impressions through a discipline of sheer receptivity and patient observation. In the first volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin argues in effect for the study of art as a commons open to male non-practitioners, criticizing the distinction he sees in Reynolds’s Fifteenth Discourse between “excellences” that belong to the painter “*as such*,” and those which belong to him in common with all men of intellect.¹⁰ Ruskin objects to what he construes as the professional boundaries drawn by Reynolds between artists and “men of intellect” in these terms: “Painting, or art generally...with all its technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends, is nothing but a noble and expressive language, invaluable as the vehicle of thought, but by itself nothing.”¹¹ Ruskin then compares the painter’s relation to artistic means to a poet’s relationship with grammar, neither artistic means nor grammar being professional qualifications. Because the means, or auxiliary resources, of the painter are no more significant in themselves than is grammar to the poet, he can refer to perfect pictures and poems as synonymous.

Elizabeth Helsinger in *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* locates Ruskin’s understanding of art as a language in a lineage promoting the defense of painting that, along with earlier precedents, had an English source in the premise of eighteenth-century painter-theorist Jonathan Richardson that “Painting is another sort of Writing.”¹² In her exploration of Richardson’s debt to the epistemology of John Locke, Carol Gibson-Wood thus summarizes Richardson’s views: “Painting functions like language because images can communicate ideas often better than words.”¹³ Richardson’s claim for the information value of painting’s language, she argues, is integral to his affirmation of art’s dignity. Faced with the apparent difficulty of aligning this legacy with Ruskin’s understanding of the issue, Helsinger offers no comment on his dismissal of the language of art as, in itself, nothing. This is the crux of the critique of *Modern Painters* that will be explored below. As though to redress Ruskin’s starkly apodictic judgment on the opposition of ideas and language, Helsinger finds him indebted to the “Ideas of Sensation,” which Locke defines as constituting “the primary material of language”¹⁴ in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. For Ruskin ideas have reference to truthful statements about the qualities of material things and to emotions or thoughts not immediately, or at all, connected with an object. There is a slippage throughout his work in which qualities, which could only

be produced in a perceiving subject, are treated as inherent in objects and as such become “facts.”

Elaborating on the thought quotient in art, Ruskin anatomizes categories of ideas for which art is conceived to serve as vehicle. Among these, “Ideas of truth” relate, as we would expect, to fidelity in artists’ representation “of any fact of nature.”¹⁵ The heading “Ideas of beauty” engages the contemplative faculty and refers to pleasure taken in the beauty of objects to be painted; the determination of subjects, however, should eschew selectivity as Ruskin stipulates that the artist must be prepared to find beauty in all natural phenomena.¹⁶ From this apparent difficulty, we move on to “Ideas of relation,” a category comprising ideas produced within the imagination that have to do with the conception of the artist’s subject. “Ideas of power” are held to be complementary or almost always associated with some of the higher ideas of truth, beauty, or relation. In the third volume of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin expatiates on “Ideas of relation.” “The first and noblest use [of these],” he writes, “is to bring sensibly to our sight the things which are recorded as belonging to our future state, or as invisibly surrounding us in this.”¹⁷ These are evidently ideas of what is believed (more properly, beliefs) and Ruskin offers comparatively few instances in which he thinks that treatment of such ideas has been effective artistically; he admires Orcagna’s *Last Judgment* and Fra Angelico’s *Paradise* not as art but as “real visions.” He has much to say, however, about works offending against “Ideas of relation” and arraigns as betraying “false imagination” several works that were highly revered in the nineteenth century. Ruskin believes they erred in seeking after the ideal, which for him was an abuse of the imaginative faculty. Such in the medieval tradition were portrayals of the Virgin as a richly attired princess, rather than as a simple Jewish girl bearing the calamities of poverty. This exercise of “false Imagination” culminates in Ruskin’s account with Raphael’s *Madonna della Sedia*, a “subject for the display of transparent shadows, skilful tints, and scientific foreshortenings” but no more than “a pleasant piece of furniture for the corner of a boudoir.” He goes on to denounce “the clear and tasteless poison of the art of Raphael [which] infects with sleep of infidelity the hearts of millions of Christians,” deploring especially its effect on frivolous young ladies whose unwholesome devotions consist in gazing “into the dark eyes of the Madonna di San Sisto.”¹⁸

No pronouncement on aesthetic questions and no attacks on certain pictures could have seemed more wrong-headed than did these declarations of Ruskin from the point of view of Elizabeth Eastlake (1809–93). She appears here with her mother in a Hill/Adamson calotype of ca. 1845 as Miss Elizabeth Rigby (fig. 1). The daughter of a Norwich obstetrician who died when she was eleven, she wrote to earn a living, availing herself of anonymity as did most unmarried women who published at



Figure 1. David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, *Anne Rigby (née Palgrave) and Elizabeth Rigby, later Lady Eastlake*, ca. 1845. Calotype, 20.3 x 15.4 cm. London, National Portrait Gallery (Photo: © National Portrait Gallery, London).

the time.¹⁹ In 1849 she married Charles Lock Eastlake, painter and soon-to-be elected president of the Royal Academy. At the time of her marriage she was 39, with a literary career going back to the mid-1830s that had begun, as for many women, with translation. Through her own choice Elizabeth Rigby/Eastlake translated notable works of German art history and by 1856, the date of her collision with Ruskin in the pages of the *Quarterly Review*, had translated J.D. Passavant's *Tour of A German Artist in England* (1836), Franz Kugler's *History of Painting: The Italian Schools* (1851, a key work of art history for the nineteenth century), and G.F. Waagen on English collections (1854). From 1842 she had contributed regularly to the *Quarterly*, a leading organ of Tory opinion, and so continued for fifty years with one interruption around 1870, while writing for other periodicals. As a female appointed quite exceptionally to the *Quarterly*, Elizabeth Rigby was initially assigned

to what figured as women's topics: children's literature, books by or about women, and costume. But she also wrote in the period before her marriage on contemporary German painting and on Cologne Cathedral (both articles 1846). Her subsequent essays more predominantly treated art, art criticism, and collections, as in "Italian Art and Landscape" (1852), "The Crystal Palace" (1855), "Photography" (1856), "Galleries of the Louvre" (1865), "Albert Durer" (1879), and "Giovanni Morelli: Patriot and Critic" (1891). In addition to working on her own, Elizabeth Eastlake quite consistently collaborated with her husband, whose interest in the scholarship of art history and in administration increasingly took precedence over his vocation as a painter in the 1850s. From 1855 he served as director of the National Gallery, and she accompanied him on most of his research and collecting tours of the Continent. It was in 1856 that Elizabeth Eastlake's unsigned critique of *Modern Painters* I, II, and III appeared in the *Quarterly Review*.²⁰

In her review she bypasses the problematic status of ideas presented in *Modern Painters* III: what, she might have asked, could be the conceptual content of "ideas of truth" evoked by Ruskin as somehow contained or inherent in already given "facts?" Eastlake's text engages instead with Ruskin's insistence on the nullity of the painter's language except in its instrumental function as a vehicle of thought. She valorizes the painter's resources as distinct from the normally verbal medium of thought. Her thesis is that the only way to determine the ultimate value of art is by identifying "those qualities which no other art but itself can express, and which are therefore to be considered as *proper* [her emphasis] to it."²¹ There are aspects of pictures, she allows, that are "connected with the domain of thought, but distinct from the language of painting itself;" these aspects have to do with the *subject* of the picture, yet count for little as manifestations of thought. Proverb and allegory are forms external to the language of painting. The first she tends to consider unpaintable, while allegory, a recalcitrant challenge to the artist,

will never be found successful, except with glorious colourists and splendid draughtsmen—in short, with such men as Titian and Rubens, who occupy us so completely with the attractions proper to the art, as to render us indifferent to the unattractiveness consequent on the thought.²²

Eastlake had wrestled with Gottfried Lessing's famous demarcation of the boundaries of medium between visual art and poetry in his essay *Laocoön* (1766). Yet her definition of frontiers would not concede the restricted scope of painting or sculpture in its limitation to a single moment, a limitation in contrast to the far wider narrative capabilities Lessing ascribed to poetry. Nor does she give weight to the primacy of poetry as conceptual model for the visual artist, essential for Lessing as

is indicated by his determination of a date for *Laocoön* as posterior to Virgil's *Aeneid*, which he postulated as the sculpture's model.²³ In privileging the artist's means, or *dispositifs*, Eastlake nevertheless allows for an alliance of the painter's materials, not implying their subaltern status, with those of the poet in the domain of what may be metaphorically conceived of as poetic thought. "Indeed," she affirms, "they meet here on such amicable terms as to be equally lenders and borrowers in turn." To recommend "that portion of poetry where natural scenes and objects are attempted to be painted in words" as a model for the painter's language would be absurd, she says, as illustration of Ruskin's principle equating pictures with poems. For here "the materials of poetry...are borrowed from the picture—real or imaginary—and...in reversing the process the painter's language only resumes what belongs not to thought, but to itself."²⁴ Eastlake finds equivocal an investment of thought—she seems to think here of elaborated reasoning—in relation to the spectator's capacity of enjoyment. Indeed, she proposes as a "natural law inherent in the science of art"—we are in a context of legislation!—that

wherever an art admits of marriage with another art...the union can only be effected by dividing the field between them; in other words...the more of art the less of super-added thought will a picture be found capable of containing, and vice versa.²⁵

Such a painting, she asserts, is the work distinguished in its negotiation of this divide but convicted by Ruskin of conveying to heedless girls "a clear and tasteless poison."

In Eastlake's analysis, subjects of some of the finest pictures "embody the simplest, the least original, or even the least consistent thoughts." She concludes that Ruskin's quarrel is with the language of art itself, language which "far from being an inferior attribute, can alone exalt the commonest, or recommend the most mistaken subject a painter may choose."²⁶ In another context, much could be said of her ascription of derisory thought to depictions of the Madonna. Yet the very familiarity of the subject works with her argument. What may at first appear a simple reversal of Ruskin's dichotomous thesis is advanced by appeal to the status of this theme as a commonplace. Her discussion, however, turns away from his oppositional framework in her attack on the assumption that thought can be separated from the language of art. "For in truth," she says,

the painter's language...is not so much to be considered as "invaluable" for his thoughts, as *indispensable* [her emphasis] for them.... The language of the painter, wielding as it does the qualities of colour, form, light and shade, and expression, *includes* [her emphasis] the ideas that these qualities express; for there is not one of these four chief pictorial ele-

ments which does not teem with thought, meaning, feeling, emotion...so that it is false to say that thought can be all, and language nothing, since the painter who speaks the finest language must in that utter the finest ideas, and what Nature has joined together let no sophistry sunder!²⁷

To assert that thought should be understood as included in the artist's means is altogether extraordinary for the period. Such an affirmation is not to be found in Reynolds's *Discourses*, in which thought might be associated with qualities of nobility he aligned with the Grand Manner, yet distinct from the artist's "mechanical" modes of realization. Nor did Charles Eastlake venture in his writing so signal a departure from the received dichotomy of idea and means. His presidential discourse to the Royal Academy in 1859 on essential distinctions between art and poetry set forth as a leading principle "that the excellence of any one of the Fine Arts will consist chiefly in those qualities which are unattainable by the other Fine Arts," arts, that is, in the wider sense of the term.²⁸ As to the idea in art, he found a difficulty for the painter in expressing clearly "an idea distinct from any other" and cautioned against textual prescriptions likely to produce ambiguity in visual representation. In this context Charles Eastlake also warned in principle of "the undue influence" one art might exert upon another, urging that comparisons of the arts should serve to guard against such dereliction.²⁹ While in general the Eastlakes agreed with one another, as Wendell Stacy Johnson has observed,³⁰ it is striking that Charles Eastlake's 1859 discourse, delivered three years after Elizabeth's review of Ruskin, does not take up her thesis that the idea may inhere in the *dispositifs* of art.

In her *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting*, Elizabeth Prettejohn compares the aestheticism of an 1857 review by Coventry Patmore of the Oxford Union murals with that of Felix Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* and with Elizabeth Eastlake's Ruskin review of the year before. Prettejohn quotes from Eastlake's text on verbal language as the proper form of thought, while "the language of painting being capable of utterance where every other art is silent is in itself *everything*" [Eastlake's emphasis]. Prettejohn goes on to say that Eastlake also anticipates other motifs in later Aesthetic writing, such as the analogy between painting and music, and Venetian painting as paradigm.³¹ Elizabeth Eastlake's folding of thought into the elements of colour, form, light and shade, and expression indeed marks a paradigm shift in the nineteenth-century literature of art. It implies that the work might be independent of a literary program, conceivably even of subject, given the assumed relation of traditional subject matter to thought. It also suggests that the work might allow for various readings, might be polysemous, as we would say, and defy attempts to reduce it to a single interpretation. The weight Eastlake assigns to the artist's means might even be construed as challenging the time-



Figure 2. John Everett Millais, *Autumn Leaves*, 1856. Oil on canvas, 104.1 x 73.6 cm. Manchester, Manchester City Galleries (Photo: © Manchester City Galleries/Visimage, Sherbrooke, Quebec).

honoured goal of mimesis. Concerned as she is, however, to justify Renaissance masters in the face of Ruskin's abuse, she does not develop such inferences. Nonetheless, her argument was launched into the public sphere for any who might be inclined to consider the matter, and now seems prescient in relation to what would take form as the Aesthetic movement in the 1860s.

In addition to Coventry Patmore, one who appears most clearly to have taken it up is John Everett Millais in his *Autumn Leaves* (fig. 2). The picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy in May 1856, two months after the publication of Eastlake's review, though work on the painting had begun the previous autumn. I have called attention elsewhere to this conjuncture as significant for the painting.³² An exploration from a different viewpoint of aspects of this connection is proposed here, prefaced by an outline of relevant circumstances. Apart from general interest attendant on the appearance that year of *Modern Painters* III, Millais would have been attracted to the review's subject, given Ruskin's implication with the fortunes of Pre-Raphaelitism. In addition, the author of the review figured quite pivotally in Millais's private life at the time. A devoted friend of Effie Gray Ruskin, Elizabeth Eastlake may have initially suggested to Effie the idea of seeking an annulment of her marriage to Ruskin; she certainly supported Effie's decision to take this difficult course and influenced social opinion in her favour.³³ Effie and Millais were married in July 1855. Regarding *Autumn Leaves*, an entry in Effie's journal, generally recognized as registering Millais's views, reported that he "wished to paint a picture full of beauty and without subject."³⁴ To paint a picture without a subject: that he entertained and acted upon such an ambition was seen as baffling at the time and was anomalous in British art of the 1850s from the standpoint of recent criticism. Yet no context has been proposed for a work not deemed an effective catalyst of the Aesthetic movement, given that the picture did not generate an immediate following. Eastlake's review offered such a context in its closely argued privileging of the artist's means over conceptual content, or what counted as such in a traditional repertory of themes. As we have seen, she dismissed subject as a category in painting and cast the resources of colour, form, light and shade, with expression, as constitutive of thought.

While aspiring to paint a picture without a subject, Millais also affirmed his intention for the idea content of the work. In a letter to the critic F.G. Stephens, he stated that he wanted the painting "to awaken by its solemnity the deepest religious reflection."³⁵ From his statements and from the pictorial realization of his aims, it may be inferred that he considered the elements of colour, form, light and shade, as well as expression, when operating in synergy, capable of intimating a direction of thought, however distinct from a clear narrative or received iconography. In *Autumn Leaves*, colour functions variously as sensuous presence and as coloured transparency. Above the horizon, a play of

hues evokes the poignancy, not of a climactic Romantic sunset, but of the last pellucid verge of light before nightfall. The painting works its effect through the sky's limpid yellow with contrasting indigo clouds, a contrast that tells against another opposition of light and dark in earthbound shades of the lower four-fifths of the picture's height. This space forms the matrix of a seeming ritual performed by four girls, the unforced gravity of their presence suggested, as it were, by indirection. Expression in the narrower sense is especially marked in the face, beautiful in its exalted mien, of a central figure who appears almost in sacerdotal guise, while flanking figures attend as if by way of homely duty. At far right a small child stands by, self-absorbed, holding an apple. A tumult of colour in the burning leaves they surround may evoke the energies of sun and of earth and the alchemy of natural cycles of decline and return. But neither these nor other possible interpretations exhaust what may be drawn from contemplation of the picture. In refusing a subject, Millais must have counted at once on his conception and handling of painterly resources so as to challenge the spectator rather than deliver an easily recognized—and perhaps as easily forgotten—formula. A further and related refusal was his decision not to append a citation from Psalms (the specific reference not given) with the catalogue entry for his work.³⁶ Millais's choice in this respect seems the more remarkable when we take into account the prestige of literary culture in Britain and the practice, in a sense, of justifying works of art by textual authority. Relinquishing such verbal support for a work he hoped would impress by its religious solemnity surely registered his stake in the resources of art to carry his meaning.

Yet another dimension may be adduced for the pertinence of Eastlake's critique relative to Millais's course in *Autumn Leaves*. It lies in the analogy between music and visual art that she engages centrally for the primacy of qualities proper to painting:

The composer of a song expressly selects words devoid of any depth or completeness of thought so as to give the music scope for itself. We cannot imagine a musical composition to be too full of the beauties proper to music itself; but, having these in the fullest measure... words, or the thoughts expressed by words, are superfluous.³⁷

She then proceeds to the impossibility of imagining a picture too replete with the qualities of painting that she has cited; where these exist in the highest degree, she avers, "thought itself becomes a *hors d'oeuvre*." In another passage Eastlake supports her claim that the painter's means include the idea these qualities express by reference to music:

For as the language of music involves the idea conveyed by it, and the loftier the composer's sound the loftier his meaning; so... there is not one of these four chief pictorial



Figure 3. John Everett Millais, *The Vale of Rest*, 1858. Oil on canvas, 102.9 × 172.7 cm. London, Tate Gallery (Photo: © Tate Gallery, London).

elements which does not teem with thought, meaning, feeling, emotion—all that it is possible for the language of painting to contain.³⁸

In the English literature of art, Eastlake's text is foundational for ideas that became commonplace later in the Aesthetic movement regarding music as a model for the other arts, including poetry. Millais was able to draw on this rationale in his daring project in the mid-1850s for a "subjectless" picture that would depend solely on qualities proper to painting.

Millais had at least a passing acquaintance with the music of Felix Mendelssohn, who visited and performed frequently in England during his brief lifetime and whose compositions enjoyed wide popularity there.³⁹ In 1858 Millais chose for the title of his painting *The Vale of Rest* (fig. 3) a translation of *Rubertal*, title of the fifth of Mendelssohn's *Sechs Lieder*, Opus 59. To accompany the picture's exhibition in the Royal Academy in 1859, he used the line "Where the weary find repose" from the English version of the same song.⁴⁰ Use of this verbal support—albeit from a musical context—represents a turn away from Millais's refusal of a citation with *Autumn Leaves*; that earlier occasion did not mark the beginning of a consistent practice. And

The Vale of Rest, though with similarities to the work of 1856 in its division of earth and sky with fading light, is hardly "subjectless." The presence of a cemetery with nuns, one of them standing in an open grave she is digging, refers insistently to death and transience. Yet the nature of what it might have to say about death is not clear. It may be useful here to explore a reference to music relative to the status of Millais's subject. Along with his Mendelssohn-derived title and quotation, it may be seen that he developed in painterly terms a musical concept that Elizabeth Rigby had treated in an article in 1848 for the *Quarterly Review*, entitled "Music."⁴¹

Her wide-ranging exploration spans the history of music from ancient Greece to the aesthetics of music in contemporary Europe. Characterizing music as "the purest Sanscrit of the feelings," she traces a development in which, before the seventeenth century, "words had been considered as the necessary interpreters of what sounds meant; now sound began to tell its own tale."⁴² She names Mendelssohn as one of the greatest composers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and celebrates "those pure musical ideas which give no account of their meaning or origin."⁴³ Eastlake here refers to songs without words in the wider sense than that of Mendelssohn's phenomenally

popular compositions for pianoforte, the first of which introduced a new generic concept with its publication in London in 1832.⁴⁴ Especially suggestive for its translation in painting is her discussion of the choice of key in musical composition, that she sees as providing “ground-colour...which is to pervade his [the composer’s] whole work.” Her view of key as an element proper to music with a range of intrinsic meanings was consistent with Mendelssohn’s conviction, specifically announced by his *Songs without Words* and in his stated opinion, that meaning in music is clearer than is verbal utterance.⁴⁵

When transposed to painting, the concept of key applies to the unification of all pictorial elements in terms of mood as against the depiction of action. As noted, activity is represented in *The Vale of Rest* but in no way identified as belonging to a public event or to history, however considered. Nor have we to do with a genre picture that would depict some typifying aspect of life in a given context. A grave having been dug by a sexton for the painting’s purpose, the unlikely figure of a nun as gravedigger, her wimple’s flap blowing back apparently because of the exertion, arrests an expectation that we might be witnessing a routine of convent life. Also implied, as Malcolm Warner remarked, is a disconcerting extension of the open grave into the spectator’s space.⁴⁶ Not referable to a received theme, the picture may be understood in terms of musical key as bringing into focus a range of suggestions around the idea of death—an idea in itself too vast to be a subject, any more than the nocturne as a genre in music could be thought to gesture towards a specific content. In *The Vale of Rest* death’s levelling agency may be seen as keyed in the horizontal barrier between earth and sky formed by the cemetery wall, by the level positioning of the nuns’ heads, and by the even band of cloud bridging oaks and poplars from left to right above a belfry in contre-jour. In the way a key in musical composition may establish a prevailing mood, as a nocturne establishes an affective climate for reverie without a constraining theme, Millais’s picture suggests through a convergence of explicit and inexplicit hints and through relationships of light and shade, a meditation on death, a *vesper* one might say, imagining a genre analogous to that of the nocturne.

Millais’s decision against a verbal citation with *Autumn Leaves* was not a choice that he sustained thereafter. To sell that work he had to insist that a collector honour what appears to have been a prior agreement that he take the picture. *The Vale of Rest* found a buyer from its Royal Academy exhibition, but Millais was obliged to accept £300 less for it than his asking price of £1000. A painting conceived as its pendant, *Spring (Apple Blossoms)* of 1856–59 also proved difficult to sell, and by 1859 Millais was the father of two children. Choosing to produce what he could be confident of selling, he subsequently turned to readily grasped narratives.⁴⁷ Work aligned with Elizabeth Eastlake’s argument for the sufficiency of the artist’s language and its

comparison to autonomous means of musical expression were not easily assimilable to conditions of reception at that point.

Those conditions were beginning to change, however, when in 1873 Walter Pater brought out his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, a masterpiece of aesthetic criticism in the judgment of historian John Addington Symonds.⁴⁸ Subsequently renamed *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Pater added to the third edition of his work “The School of Giorgione,” an essay first published in 1877 that is especially pertinent to issues discussed here. In this text Pater advanced as “the beginning of all true aesthetic criticism” a recognition that “each art...having its own peculiar and untranslatable sensuous charm, has its own special mode of reaching the imagination, its own special responsibility to its material.”⁴⁹ Condemning “the false generalisation of all art into forms of poetry, to which painting is especially subject,” Pater took up the cautions sounded by Charles Eastlake in his discourse eighteen years before. And Pater addressed the antinomy of means and idea that Elizabeth Eastlake resolved in her Ruskin critique by positing an identity of the artist’s thought with supposedly “technical” requirements. Her argument that the idea is, or may be, included in the means and the evocation in her “Music” essay of “those pure musical ideas” inseparable from their constituent form adumbrate a famous pronouncement in Pater’s “Giorgione.” His affirmation there that “all art aspires to the condition of music” implies, as Carolyn Williams puts it in her study of Pater’s aesthetic historicism, “the perfect assimilation of content into form.”⁵⁰ At the same time, he built on Elizabeth Eastlake’s argument by appealing to the German concept of *Andersstreben* “through which the arts are able not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces.”⁵¹ While acknowledging the distinct claims of each art, Pater thus contends nonetheless that one art may be a model for others, as in the axiom of Paul Verlaine’s *Art poétique*: “De la musique avant toute chose.”⁵²

Pater’s “Giorgione” mobilized Elizabeth Eastlake’s analogies between music and art, as well as claims for the painter’s language made in her Ruskin critique, along with those of Charles Eastlake. It happened that the essay’s publication followed by three months the filing of Whistler’s libel suit in July 1877. The musical titles of Whistler’s works—nocturne, arrangement, harmony, symphony—and also his denial that the paintings were “about” what they might be supposed to represent rhyme strikingly with the development in aesthetics that has been traced. To be sure, Whistler rejected in the course of the trial a prevailing opinion that he intended to demonstrate a connection between art and music.⁵³ May he not have wished by this denial to affirm the distinctiveness of the resources of art? His knowledge as a professional practitioner was centrally at issue in the lawsuit. For Ruskin as well, his knowledge and,

most significantly, his authority were at stake. In the instructions he prepared for the defense of his case, Ruskin invoked as primordial the standard for judging art that he had pronounced thirty years earlier.⁵⁴ It was the premise challenged by Elizabeth Eastlake that pictures be valued according to the worthiness of the ideas they contain. Ruskin is known to have been furious with the trial's outcome, not least because the damages of one farthing derisively awarded to Whistler seemed to him a reflection on the merit of his views, an injury in the nature of *lèse majesté* to his stature as a critic.⁵⁵

A decade before the trial took place, the novelist Henry James in his role as art critic devoted an essay to Ruskin's influence on the practice of art criticism in Britain. In "An English Critic," James wrote that

although Mr. Ruskin has in a very large degree affected writers and painters, he has not yet in any appreciable degree quickened the formation of a school of critics—premising that we use the word "school" in the sense of a group of writers devoted to the study of art according to their own individual lights, and as distinguished from students of literature, and not in the sense of a group of writers devoted to the promulgation of Mr. Ruskin's own views, or those of anyone else.⁵⁶

James was able to name only "three principal art-critics" then active who occasionally published under their own names contributions that appeared in newspapers: William Michael Rossetti, F.T. Palgrave, and P.G. Hamerton. James overlooked substantial numbers of women who published art criticism in the period, not always anonymously, and whose careers in the later nineteenth century have been documented by Meaghan Clarke.⁵⁷ But James's remarks are notable in suggesting that Ruskin's oracular status worked to block or stifle the emergence of a possible school of critics with members who expressed individual views. The problem for independent voices was stated more sharply at the Whistler-Ruskin trial by John Parry, counsel for the plaintiff. In his summation to the jury, he characterized Ruskin as saying, in effect: "I, Mr. Ruskin, seated on my throne of art, say what I please upon it and expect all the world to agree with me."⁵⁸

Ruskin's authority-effect has had an extraordinary afterlife, one long surviving what he deemed its destruction with the trial verdict, his own lifetime, the rise of modernism and accompanying fall from favour of Victorian culture, as well as the incompatibility of his aesthetic dogmatism with ordinary standards of civil discourse. A consequence of this effect relevant to the subject explored here would be art history's failure to integrate into the literature Elizabeth Eastlake's theoretical bridging of an antinomy of idea and means in her Ruskin review. The hegemony as critic that Ruskin claimed and has largely been

accorded, though over some resistance, has much to do with the absence of systematic and critical study of English art criticism, a problem to which Elizabeth Prettejohn has called attention.⁵⁹ Though challenged by current interest in the Aesthetic movement, Ruskin retains the status of a national fetish, ostensibly on the grounds of his literary merit that the underexamined work of many of his contemporaries is assumed to lack. Critics for whom no case is made, or private individuals, may be quoted on quite cavalier principles for anecdotal interest or because they supposedly reveal something intrinsic about the nature of works they discuss. Endemic to this caprice in deciding who is worth reading is an already given assumption that women who wrote substantially in this domain would not have anything of substance to say. How could the serious study of art criticism come about without calling this premise into question? And how might it emerge without some concept of a field of inquiry rather than the model of a proprietary fief?

Notes

- 1 For a full account of the trial with analysis of the legal issues, see Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v. Ruskin* (Washington, DC, and London, 1992). For the context of Ruskin's charge, see his *Fors Clavigera* (July 1877) in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (Library ed.; London and New York, 1903–12), XXIX, 160.
- 2 Adam Parkes, "A Sense of Justice: Whistler, Ruskin, James, Impressionism," *Victorian Studies* 42, 4 (Summer 1999/2000), 597.
- 3 Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, 148.
- 4 Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, 60.
- 5 For the judge's instructions to the jury see Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, 188–96.
- 6 Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ as Represented in Art* (New York and London, 1894), v. His citation "*De pictore, sculptore, fusore judicare nisi non artifex non potest*" (Pliny, Epp. I.10) is given in Betty Radice's translation in *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (Baltimore, 1963), 43.
- 7 Quoted by William Hazlitt in *Conversations of James Northcote, Esq., R.A.* (London, 1830), 163.
- 8 The practice of appointing artists extended into the twentieth century with the directorship of Edward Poynter from 1894 to 1904.
- 9 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* (New York and London, 1966), 236.
- 10 John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 5 vols., (2nd ed.; London, 1898), I, 8. The emphasis is in the original.
- 11 Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, I, 8.
- 12 Properly, "is but another Sort of Writing;" quoted in Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1982), 168. She quotes from the second of Richardson's *Two Discourses* (1719) on a theme presented earlier in his *Essay on*

- the Theory of Painting* (1715). See the discussion of Richardson's theories in Carol Gibson-Wood, *Jonathan Richardson: Art Theorist of the English Enlightenment* (New Haven and London, 2000), especially 145–46 and 207.
- 13 Gibson-Wood, *Richardson*, 145.
 - 14 Quoted in Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*, 169.
 - 15 Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, I, 24.
 - 16 Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, I, 31.
 - 17 Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, III, 50.
 - 18 Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, III, 53–61.
 - 19 For the literary career of Elizabeth Rigby/Eastlake, see David Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake and the Victorian Art World* (Princeton, NJ, 1978); Adele M. Ernstrom, “Equally Lenders and Borrowers in Turn: The Working and Married Lives of the Eastlakes,” *Art History* 15, 4 (December 1992); Julie Sheldon, *The Letters of Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake* (Liverpool, 2009); Susanna Avery-Quash and Julie Sheldon, *Art for the Nation: The Eastlakes and the Victorian Art World* (London, 2011).
 - 20 [Elizabeth Eastlake], “Modern Painters,” *Quarterly Review* 98 (March 1856), 384–433.
 - 21 [Eastlake], “Modern Painters,” 388.
 - 22 [Eastlake], “Modern Painters,” 390.
 - 23 See Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön*, trans. W.A. Steel (London and New York, 1930), 44–47 for his argument giving a larger part of invention to poetry as compared with a greater importance of execution in visual art.
 - 24 [Eastlake], “Modern Painters,” 390.
 - 25 [Eastlake], “Modern Painters,” 391–92.
 - 26 [Eastlake], “Modern Painters,” 393.
 - 27 [Eastlake], “Modern Painters,” 395.
 - 28 Charles Eastlake, “On the Characteristic Differences between the Formative Arts and Descriptive Poetry” in *Contributions to the Literature of the Fine Arts: Second Series* (London, 1870), 332–33.
 - 29 Charles Eastlake, “Characteristic Differences,” 345.
 - 30 Wendell Stacy Johnson, “‘The Bride of Literature’: Ruskin, the Eastlakes and Mid-Victorian Theories of Art,” *Victorian Newsletter* 26 (Fall 1964), 27.
 - 31 Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven and London, 2007), 28 and 286, n. 42.
 - 32 Adele M. Ernstrom, “Elizabeth Eastlake's *History of our Lord as Exemplified in Works of Art*: Theology, Art and Aesthetic Reaction,” *Art History* 35, 4 (September 2012), 766.
 - 33 For Elizabeth Eastlake's support of Effie in this juncture, see Sheldon, *Letters of Elizabeth Eastlake*, 135–61, and Mary Lutyens, *Millais and the Ruskins* (London, 1967), 31–32.
 - 34 Malcolm Warner, “John Everett Millais's *Autumn Leaves*: ‘A Picture Full of Beauty and without Subject,’” *The Pre-Raphaelite Papers*, ed. Leslie Parris (London, 1984), 131–32.
 - 35 Warner, “Millais's *Autumn Leaves*,” 127.
 - 36 Warner, “Millais's *Autumn Leaves*,” 127.
 - 37 [Eastlake], “Modern Painters,” 392.
 - 38 [Eastlake], “Modern Painters,” 395.
 - 39 Louise H. and Hans Tischler, “Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*,” *Music Quarterly* 33, 1 (1947), 3–5.
 - 40 Malcolm Warner, catalogue entry for *The Vale of Rest*, in Parris, ed., *The Pre-Raphaelite Papers*, 176.
 - 41 [Elizabeth Rigby], “Music,” *Quarterly Review* 83 (September 1848), 451–515.
 - 42 [Rigby], “Music,” 503.
 - 43 [Rigby], “Music,” 512.
 - 44 Christa Jost, *Mendelssohn's Lieder ohne Worte* (Tutzing, 1988), 11.
 - 45 Tischler and Tischler, “Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*,” 9.
 - 46 Warner, catalogue entry for *The Vale of Rest*, 175.
 - 47 Warner, “Millais's *Autumn Leaves*,” 140–41.
 - 48 John Addington Symonds, review of Pater's *Renaissance*, in *The Academy* IV (15 March 1873), 103–104.
 - 49 Walter Pater, “The School of Giorgione,” in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1893 ed.), ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley and London, 1980), 102.
 - 50 Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1989), 42.
 - 51 Pater, “The School of Giorgione,” 105.
 - 52 Paul Verlaine, *Art poétique* (1874), in *Ceuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec and Jacques Borel (Paris, 1962), 326–27.
 - 53 Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, 144.
 - 54 Strictly, thirty-four years before. Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, 291, and n. 4, referencing the assertion in *Modern Painters* I that the greatest artist is he “who has embodied, in the sum of his works, the greatest number of the greatest ideas.”
 - 55 Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, 209–12.
 - 56 Henry James, “An English Critic,” in James, *The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts*, ed. John L. Sweeney (Madison, 1989), 34.
 - 57 Meaghan Clarke, *Critical Voices: Women and Art Criticism in Britain, 1880–1905* (Aldershot, 2005).
 - 58 Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, 185.
 - 59 Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Aesthetic Value and the Professionalization of Victorian Art Criticism 1837–78,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 2, 1 (1997), 71–94.