

Unto This Last: John Ruskin and the Beginnings of English Ecocriticism

Tomáš Jajtner

ABSTRACT

The following paper deals with the beginnings of ecocritical thought in John Ruskin's essay *Unto This Last* (1862). The article presents the context of its economic thought and relates it to the beginnings of "ecology" in the work of German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). The key aspect of Ruskin's approach is a close link between a humane economy and a sense of responsibility for the environment. In his sweeping analysis of laissez-faire capitalism, he contrasts creation with production, focuses on the reductive terminology of political economy and its potentially devastating consequences if it becomes the leading ideology of the state. The final part of the paper assesses the importance of this essay for the development of ecocritical thought as well as its relevance today.

KEYWORDS

John Ruskin, Victorian essays, ecocriticism, economics, ecological thought

Introduction

The all-too-English manner of John Ruskin's writings and art have often been a target of criticism or downright derision. He is one of the supreme representatives of an age which defined the notion of Englishness for more than 50 years which began to be questioned only by the Modernists in the era between two world wars. These critics attacked the by-then standard judgements on a wide range of topics – from good taste in art and English Gothic cathedrals all the way to issues of economics and the reverse side of *laissez-faire* capitalism.¹ However, current discussions about the nature of our dealings with the environment have arguably made many of Ruskin's insights more relevant than ever. As described by Andrew Ballantyne: "In his responses to nature, geology, monuments and machinery, he comes down against exploitative relations in favour of marvelling at beauty and goodness. When humane responses seemed to be decoupled from the machinery of progress and wealth accumulation, Ruskin asserted the importance of re-establishing connections."² His key essay *Unto This Last* from 1860 is, primarily, a polemic featuring theories of liberal political economy of the time. Nevertheless, it can also be seen as one of the first articulations of what is now known as *ecocriticism*, i.e. critical analysis of the ways culture interacts with the environment.

The following paper explores the main lines of thought in the text, connecting Ruskin's economic thought with the necessity to reconcile the cultural forms of human civilisation with the state of the environment in the modern world.

1 "The progressive thinkers of the early twentieth century had little time for him, and saw the spirit of their age embodied in the machine – the steam engine, the *machine à habiter*, the automobile. Especially between the World Wars, Victorian painting and architecture came to be seen as embarrassing, and Ruskin along with them." Andrew Ballantyne, *John Ruskin* (Reaktion Books: Glasgow, 2015), 9.

2 Ballantyne, *John Ruskin*, 9–10.

The Limits of Honour: Economy and Ecology

Unto This Last is primarily a text attacking the basis of liberal capitalist economic thought. Ruskin's basic viewpoint is that of a philologist and artist: indeed, the whole text can be read as an interpretation of the literal meaning of the Greek "Oikonomia" (οἰκονομία), which he translates as "House-law."³ Ruskin is aware of the obsession of his period with reforms and innovations, and the text may thus be understood as a contribution to the debate about the nature of reforms seen as necessary vis-à-vis the challenges of the age.

Indeed, the concept of "oikonomia" presupposes a definition of the "oikos," i.e. the "house" as the object of Ruskin's analysis. This relatively vague definition owes much to the famously ornate language which combines various layers of language and discourse⁴ which refers to the complexity and wonder of life around him. His language thus reveals a deep mistrust in reductive definitions of modern science which aspire to exhaust the totality of reality:

Although Ruskin was often critical of scientific developments, he was not anti-science; his quarrel with modern science stemmed from what he considered its reductive, mechanistic aspects and a growing faith in its pronouncements as potentially complete (what we today call scientism).⁵

The "house" of Ruskin's essay (and his "ecological" thought in general) is the vital continuum of life whose articulate master (or "shepherd" in Heideggerian terms⁶) is humanity. The awareness of a caretaker responsibility defines the basic moralizing tenor of the essay. The "oikos" of reality is not a machine-like organism with impersonal forces and structures, but a totality of life which is to thrive and prosper. The social reforms of the age should take into account the urgent need to restore the timeless notion of a free and responsible individual, possessed with a sense of duty and obligation to him/herself as well as to the good of the entire society. In other words, the focus of the essay presents a human existence whose goal is to attain "honesty":

It was, therefore, the first object of these following papers to give an accurate and stable definition of wealth. Their second object was to show that the acquisition of wealth was finally possible only under certain moral conditions of society, of which quite the first was a belief in the existence, and even, for practical purpose, in the attainability of honesty.⁷

3 John Ruskin, *Unto This Last* (New York: J. M. Dent & sons Ltd., 1921), 5.

4 "[...] his [Ruskin's] perception of the natural world, shaped by his knowledge of the Bible, immersion in Romantic art and literature, artistic training, study of mythology, love of nature, and interest in science, was unlike ours in important ways and is expressed in very different language. He could look at mountains as both a poet and geologist; embrace the power of myth and the lessons of scripture; and employ the vocabulary of emblematic tradition and of science. For Ruskin, nature was never just a subject of study, a sanctuary, or scenic prospect, but an essential element of human life; humans were not merely in the landscape, but of it, intimately connected to the earth in 'the circles of vitality.'" Sara Atwood, "The Assumption of the Dragon: Ruskin's Mythic Vision" in *Victorian Environmental Nightmares*. ed. L. W. Mazzeno and R. D. Morrison. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 27–28.

5 Atwood, "The Assumption of the Dragon: Ruskin's Mythic Vision," 39.

6 Here I am referring to Heidegger's famous quote in his *Letter on Humanism* (*Brief über den Humanismus*): "Der Mensch ist nicht der Herr des Seienden. Der Mensch ist der Hirte des Seins (i.e. Shepherd of Being)." Martin Heidegger, *Brief über den "Humanismus"*, 1946, in: *Gesamtausgabe, Band 9 "Wegmarken"*, 1. Aufl. (Frankfurt am M.: Verlag Vittorio Klostermann 1976), 342; English translation quoted from Martin Heidegger's *Basic Writings* (Ed. D.F. Krell, London: Routledge, 1993), 245. Heideggerian contribution to ecocriticism is discussed in G. Garrard's *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2004), 30–32.

7 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 13.

Contrary to the standard expectations of a work dealing with political economy, the first chapter of his treatise focuses on the “Roots of Honour” and explores the vital link between the moral principles of a society and its healthy development. Ruskin rejects all economic theories based solely on antagonism between the “masters” and the “operatives.” For him, a sound economic theory cannot leave out the postulate of a mutually beneficial coexistence. Economics may be a science of reconciling different interests and pursuits of happiness in social life, but ultimately it cannot *not* be a science of relations whose central aspect is *justice*, because justice is the core element of social cohesion:

I have said balances of justice, meaning, in the term justice, to include affection, – such affection as one man owes to another. All right relations between master and operative, and all their best interests, ultimately depend on these.⁸

Ruskin uses numerous examples to illustrate his main point of co-relating the various strata of the society together: *soldiers, lawyers, physicians and clergymen*. These all somehow serve the exigencies of life: “The Soldier’s profession is to defend it. The Pastor’s to teach it. The Physician’s to keep it in health. The lawyer’s to enforce justice in it. The Merchant’s to provide for it.” The sense of “honour” within each of these spheres depends on how each can be valuable to the social community it represents and, indeed, on its effort to fulfil this service as faithfully and as “soundly” as possible:

And as into these two functions, requiring for their right exercise the highest intelligence, as well as patience, kindness, and tact, the merchant is bound to put all his energy, so for their just discharge he is bound, as soldier or physician is bound, to give up, if need be, his life, in such way as it may be demanded of him. Two main points he has in his providing function to maintain: first, his engagements (faithfulness to engagements being the real root of all possibilities, in commerce); and, secondly, the perfectness and purity of the thing provided; so that, rather than fail in any engagement, or consent to any deterioration, adulteration, or unjust and exorbitant price of that which he provides, he is bound to meet fearlessly any form of distress, poverty, or labour, which may, through maintenance of these points, come upon him.⁹

This form of “political economy” thus links economics with the basic framework of a sound political community: i.e. its *NOMOS* (the “law”) is related to the *OIKOS* (the “house”) of the *POLIS* (“community”). This “House-law” is, therefore, *eco-nomic* to the degree to which it is *eco-logic(al)*, since it deals with the primary relations defining the different strata of what the “house” (*OIKOS*) encompasses.¹⁰

In that sense, it shares very much in common with the definition of scientific ecology (*Ökologie*), as it was articulated soon after Ruskin published his *Unto This Last* in 1866. The man who coined the term was German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), who defined “ecology”

8 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 24.

9 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 39–40.

10 One interesting problem was Ruskin’s oscillation between two historical conceptualisations of nature, a “hierarchical” one, based on an essentially prescriptive theological notion, and a Romantic one which stresses nature’s independence and leaves space to “describe” it. Cf. Frost, Mark. “Reading nature: John Ruskin, environment, and the ecological impulse.” in *The Victorians and Environment: Ecocritical Perspectives*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 14. In that sense, the essay makes no special distinction between “House-law,” which is to be deduced from the organisation of visible reality, and the “divine law” based on the Scripture.

as a science of relations of various biological organisms to their “environment” which condition their existence.¹¹ For Ruskin, the condition of a sound eco-nomy is a net of selfless relations which condition the existence of the social whole. Healthy economic thought is thus based on the human ability to understand the inner complexity of the relations between the various strata of the society as well the absurdity of the reductive interpretation of the so-called “mercantile” economy. For Ruskin, economy is much more than a mere technology for getting rich. “Wealth” is a potential to be shared by everybody, since the real wealth are the people themselves:

Since the essence of wealth consists in power over men, will it not follow that the nobler and the more in number the persons are over whom it has power, the greater the wealth? Perhaps it may even appear, after some consideration, that the persons themselves are the wealth that these pieces of gold with which we are in the habit of guiding them, are, in fact, nothing more than a kind of Byzantine harness or trappings, very glittering and beautiful in barbaric sight, wherewith we bridle the creatures; but that if these same living creatures could be guided without the fretting and jingling of the Byzants in their mouths and ears, they might themselves be more valuable than their bridles. In fact, it may be discovered that the true veins of wealth are purple – and not in Rock, but in Flesh – perhaps even that the final outcome and consummation of all wealth is in the producing as many as possible full-breathed, bright-eyed, and happy-hearted human creatures. Our modern wealth, I think, has rather a tendency the other way; – most political economists appearing to consider multitudes of human creatures not conducive to wealth, or at best conducive to it only by remaining in a dim-eyed and narrow-chested state of being.¹²

A sound economy presupposes a sense of moral guidance related to the notion of a shared ethical principle which Ruskin sees in the various social implications of the Christian faith. In the Christian context, the difference between the rich and the poor is ultimately dissolved or shifted to a different category, that of *justice*.

So that it is clear the popular economist, in calling his science the science *par excellence* of getting rich, must attach some peculiar ideas of limitation to its character. I hope I do not misrepresent him, by assuming that he means *his* science to be the science of “getting rich by legal or just means.” In this definition, is the word “just,” or “legal,” finally to stand? For it is possible among certain nations, or under certain rulers, or by help of certain advocates, that proceedings may be legal which are by no means just. If, therefore, we leave at last only the word “just” in that place of our definition, the insertion of this solitary and small word will make a notable difference in the grammar of our science. For then it will follow that, in order to grow rich scientifically, we must grow rich justly; and, therefore, know what is just; so that our economy will no longer depend merely on prudence, but on jurisprudence – and that of divine, not human law.¹³

The nature of this “justice” is, indeed, the main paradox of this alternative “House-law,” which is taken from the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:13): “I will give Unto This Last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few

11 “Unter Oecologie verstehen wir die gesamte Wissenschaft von den Beziehungen des Organismus zur umgebenden Außenwelt, wohin wir im weiteren Sinne alle Existenzbedingungen rechnen können.” Ernst Haeckel, *Allgemeine Entwicklungsgeschichte der Organismen* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1866), 286.

12 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 59–60.

13 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 67–68.

chosen.¹⁴ A humane economy for Ruskin is thus a distributive one, driven by the uni-forming and uni-versal human ideals¹⁵ and the divine justice. This principle, after all, also problematizes the key economic notion of value; or *exchange value*, respectively: is everything exchangeable or transferrable into exchange value? If so, how?

This, indeed, is the moment in which Ruskin takes into consideration the whole problem of the capitalist relation towards the environment.

Living Diminished Lives in the Midst of Noise, of Darkness, and of Deadly Exhalation: Values, Ecology and the Art of Being

Ruskin meticulously analyses various aspects of J. S. Mill's utilitarianism and political thought.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the key problem of utilitarian political economy is the lump sum reduction of everything to exchangeable value and the iron logic of commercial profit. An individual who imposes his/her own interests on the world around always faces limits, especially the limits of consumption and the impossibility of reducing everything into a commodity. Ruskin points out that, although there are some reservations as to the possible destruction of the natural scenery in utilitarianism,¹⁷ the whole tenor of the work more or less implies the possibility of understanding natural phenomena as no more than scenery for the economic conquest of the environment:

Men can neither drink steam, nor eat stone. The maximum of population on a given space of land implies also the relative maximum of edible vegetable, whether for men or cattle; it implies a maximum of pure air; and of pure water. Therefore: a maximum of wood, to transmute the air, and of sloping ground, protected by herbage from the extreme heat of the sun, to feed the streams. All England may, if it so chooses, become one manufacturing town; and Englishmen, sacrificing themselves to the good of general humanity, may live diminished lives in the midst of noise, of darkness, and of deadly exhalation. But the world cannot become a factory, nor a mine. No amount of ingenuity will ever make iron digestible by the million, nor substitute hydrogen for wine. Neither the avarice nor the rage of men will ever feed them, and however the apple of Sodom and the grape of Gomorrah may spread their table for a time with dainties of ashes, and nectar of asps, – so long as men live by bread, the far away valleys must laugh as they are covered with the gold of God, and the shouts of His happy multitudes ring round the wine-press and the well.¹⁸

The environment (and the then rising science of ecology) is thus the ultimate boundary of the economic: the impossibility of living beyond the means provided by the environment sets the limit to the expansion of utilitarian economic thought. Nevertheless, the issue of value cannot be

14 The quotation is from King James Bible (available at <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>).

15 Similarly, Ruskin understood the chivalric tradition as the only “worthy” or “honest” response to the tragedy of laissez-faire capitalism. “Ruskin in working upon his idea of the Guild of St George, developed these notions. St George, the Christian knight who came to the defence of the weak, was Ruskin’s figurative and aesthetic response to the debased anti-hero, economic man, whose response to weakness and poverty was exploitation.” Willie Henderson, *John Ruskin’s Political Economy* (Routledge: London, 2000), 171.

16 Ruskin’s relationship to J. S. Mill has been thoroughly analysed in a relatively recent book by Graham A. McDonald, Graham, A. *John Ruskin’s Politics and Natural Law: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 89ff.

17 This would obviously clash with the principle of “Greatest Happiness” as outlined by J. S. Mill in his *Utilitarianism* (first published in a series of articles in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1861 and in 1863 as a book).

18 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 122–123.

reduced merely to the economic implausibility of eternal economic growth, but also to the intrinsic values to be found in the environment itself, especially the fact that the environment is the source of the essential wealth, namely life itself: “THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE.”¹⁹

For Ruskin, the environment is the primary reference point of imagination for the human race²⁰: no amount of substitutes can fully exhaust the richness and beauties of nature, since with its times of fruitfulness and aridity in many ways nature stands for life itself.²¹ Turning the environment into a playground of liberal political economy means enslaving it: the ideal of the pastoral, i.e. the sympathetic co-existence of the human and the natural elements, is a lasting challenge of any sound eco-nomy:

Nor need our more sentimental economists fear the too wide spread of the formalities of a mechanical agriculture. The presence of a wise population implies the search for felicity as well as for food; nor can any population reach its maximum but through that wisdom which “rejoices” in the habitable parts of the earth. The desert has its appointed place and work; the eternal engine, whose beam is the earth’s axle, whose beat is its year, and whose breath is its ocean, will still divide imperiously to their desert kingdoms, bound with unfurrowable rock, and swept by unarrested sand, their powers of frost and fire: but the zones and lands between, habitable, will be loveliest in habitation. The desire of the heart is also the light of the eyes. No scene is continually and untiringly loved, but one rich by joyful human labour; smooth in field; fair in garden; full in orchard; trim, sweet, and frequent in homestead; ringing with voices of vivid existence. No air is sweet that is silent; it is only sweet when full of low currents of under sound-triplets of birds, and murmur and chirp of insects, and deep-toned words of men, and wayward trebles of childhood. As the art of life is learned, it will be found at last that all lovely things are also necessary: – the wild flower by the wayside, as well as the tended corn; and and the wild birds and creatures of the forest, as well as the tended cattle; because man doth not live by bread only, but also by the desert manna; by every wondrous word and unknowable work of God. Happy, in that he knew them not, nor did his fathers know; and that round about him reaches yet into the infinite, the amazement of his existence.²²

The element of amazement represents Ruskin’s “wealth of life” *in nuce*: if one “nobly” nourishes the concept of one’s existence, the real “profit” is a sense of wealth that cannot be spent. Since it is fundamentally *sym-bolic*, this sense of amazement references the realm of the “infinite” explored in the world of art. Living a “rich” life is thus a matter of participation, rather than

19 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 116.

20 Cf. e.g. his famous *Lectures on Landscape*, originally delivered at Oxford University in Lent term 1871 and numerous other instances.

21 In fact, Ruskin later develops this idea on numerous occasions in relation to architecture and arts in general, with particular instances discussed comprehensively by Sara Attwood in her essay “‘The Earth Veil’: Ruskin and Environment.” (*Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, new series, vol. 24, March, 2015, pp. 5–24): “John Ruskin’s understanding of the natural world, and of man’s place in it, is at the heart of his thinking about the arts. ‘There is nothing that I tell you with more eager desire that you should believe,’ he told his Oxford students in 1872, ‘nothing with wider ground in my experience for requiring you to believe, than this, that you never will love art well, till you love what she mirrors better’” (22:153). What art mirrored, for Ruskin, was the world – the virtues of its people and the beauty of nature. Ruskin believed that good architecture in particular – the physical expression of our dwelling on the earth – can only be produced by a culture that reverences and respects the natural world. Without the right feeling for nature, architecture will be ill-conceived, poorly constructed and brutal. “Therefore,” he urges, “when we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them” (8:233). ‘The Earth Veil,’ 5.

22 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 123–124.

exclusion, as in the case of profit *at the expense* of someone else; it is also a matter of presence in the act of *creation*, rather than absence as in the act of *production*. For Ruskin, as he had already shown in his three-volume work on Venetian architecture *Stones of Venice*, art redeems labour from toil by giving work real dignity: “Never encourage the manufacture of any article not absolutely necessary, in the production of which Invention has no share. Never demand an exact finish for its own sake, but only for some practical or noble end. Never encourage imitation or copying of any kind, except for the sake of preserving records of great works.”²³ As Ruskin later managed to show in his *Arts and Crafts Movement* in Britain,²⁴ the lesson of Gothic architecture is valid mainly in its non-reductive vision of labour as participation in creating a bigger whole, or on the common fate of the architects and builders of cathedrals in terms of dynamic social and spiritual process.

Such an idea of labour which celebrates such a deep personal and spiritual meaning is also related to Ruskin’s model of sustainable economy which, as he reiterates at the end of his long essay, is and ought to remain the “law of the house” respecting the fundamental conditions of life:

For us, at all events, her work must begin at the entry of the doors: all true economy is “Law of the house.” Strive to make that law strict, simple, generous: waste nothing, and grudge nothing. Care in nowise to make more of money, but care to make much of it; remembering always the great, palpable, inevitable fact – the rule and root of all economy – that what one person has, another cannot have; and that every atom of substance, of whatever kind, used or consumed, is so much human life spent; which, if it issue in the saving present life, or gaining more, is well spent, but if not, is either so much life prevented, or so much slain. In all buying, consider, first, what condition of existence you cause in the producers of what you buy; secondly, whether the sum you have paid is just to the producer, and in due proportion, lodged in his hands; thirdly, to how much clear use, for food, knowledge, or joy, this that you have bought can be put; and fourthly, to whom and in what way it can be most speedily and serviceably distributed: in all dealings whatsoever insisting on entire openness and stern fulfilment; and in all doings, on perfection and loveliness of accomplishment; especially on fineness and purity of all marketable commodity: watching at the same time for all ways of gaining, or teaching, powers of simple pleasure, and of showing [...] – the sum of enjoyment depending not on the quantity of things tasted, but on the vivacity and patience of taste.²⁵

This “Law of the house” respects the fragile net of relations between human beings and between humanity and the environment. In that sense, it shares the basic insight defined by

23 “Let me not be thought to speak wildly or extravagantly. It is verily this degradation of the operative into a machine, which, more than any other evil of the times, is leading the mass of the nations everywhere into vain, incoherent, destructive struggling for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature to themselves. Their universal outcry against wealth, and against nobility, is not forced from them either by the pressure of famine, or the sting of mortified pride. These do much, and have done much in all ages; but the foundations of society were never yet shaken as they are at this day. It is not that men are ill fed, but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread, and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure. It is not that men are pained by the scorn of the upper classes, but they cannot endure their own; for they feel that the kind of labour to which they are condemned is verily a degrading one, and makes them less than men. Never had the upper classes so much sympathy with the lower, or charity for them, as they have at this day, and yet never were they so much hated by them: for, of old, the separation between the noble and the poor was merely a wall built by law; now it is a veritable difference in level of standing, a precipice between upper and lower grounds in the field of humanity, and there is pestilential air at the bottom of it.” John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*. Volume II (Lovell: New York, 1900), 164.

24 More on the topic can be found in Thomas, David Wayne, *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and Aesthetics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 49, ff.

25 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 126–127.

Haeckel in his concept of the “new” science of “ecology.” In fact, the otherness of the environment is a constant reminder that “nature” is to be taken with respect and a sense of awe: things must be consumed, but responsibly, or “nobly”: “The final object of political economy, therefore, is to get good method of consumption, and great quantity of consumption: in other words, to use everything, and to use it nobly.”²⁶

This concept of nobility includes a sense of personal responsibility and the need to cultivate oneself: one has to develop an acute sensitivity to the needs of the “house,” i.e. to the complex framework of relations defining the human world in terms of interpersonal relations as well as the relations to the environment incorporating an awareness of its inimitable value. As Mark Frost points out, the unique contribution of John Ruskin to the “ecological impulse” is precisely this awareness of the complexity of the net of relations that bind the human race to the environment:

For Ruskin, environment represented a resource of multiple value and wider cultural significance. His insistence on the personal, cultural, social, spiritual, and material importance of landscape gained much strength from his simultaneous immersion in a range of influences, including Romanticism, Evangelicalism, Natural Theology, art, architecture, and science, but the positions he reached as a result make him one of the key nineteenth-century forbears and parents of ecology. He anticipated, and to some extent participated in, ecological thought not simply in his tendency to make connections (between natural phenomena and elements of an ecosystem, between observer and observed, between subjects and discourses), but also in his desire to dissolve boundaries between these things, to combine rather than divide. In his understanding of nature narratives, of organismic functionality, and of the role of process and interaction (in organisms and natural systems) Ruskin helped shape ecological approaches, while also finding a method of seeing and feeling the world that went beyond environment and that continues to be relevant today.²⁷

Curiously enough, Frost and several other contemporary scholars of ecocriticism (e.g. S. Attwood and D. W. Hall) tend to dismiss the importance of *Unto This Last*, since it arguably deals predominantly with economic thought. Nevertheless, it is precisely this connection between economics, ecology and artistic endeavour that makes the essay stand out as one of the earliest examples of what later came to be called “ecocriticism,” i.e. a critical discussion of cultural phenomena as regards their relation to the environment. Until his death Ruskin himself saw *Unto This Last* as his “the truest, rightest-worded, most serviceable” set of essays.²⁸ In an age obsessed with the notion of an unrestricted growth and the power of the capital (both in capitalism and in Marxism), Ruskin knew that the basis of every economy is not money, but “Pure Air, Water and Earth.”²⁹ A sound “Law of the house” must be aware of the fundamental presupposition of the house: its concrete and inimitable eco-logical reality.

26 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 113.

27 Mark Frost, “Reading Nature: John Ruskin, Environment and the Ecological Impulse,” in *The Victorians and Environment: Ecocritical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 27.

28 Linda C. Forbes, “The Legacy of John Ruskin and an Introduction to *Unto This Last*,” *Organization and Environment* 13, no. 1 (2000): 86.

29 Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991), 59. See also Linda C. Forbes, “The Legacy of John Ruskin and an Introduction to *Unto his Last*,” 86.

Conclusion: “*There is no Wealth but Life*”

Contemporary ecocriticism attempts to trace the development of environmental consciousness in literature and other forms of art. Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* represents an early document in which the vital symbiosis of the human and non-human is seen as one of the basic prerequisites of a dignified, “honourable” human life. Indeed, this consciousness is not merely scientific: the environment is not just an object of exploration or, indeed, of protection. As Ruskin suggests, it is the ultimate space of imagination which transforms the sheer givenness of life and lends it a profound spiritual quest for meaning.

The dilemma of the modern age for Ruskin and some other Victorian critics (namely W. Pater) was that it created a world in which “change” often represents “progress.” The eco-logical context, however, disproves the thesis. Ruskin’s ecocritical lesson can thus acquire a new significance: “reading” as well as “describing” nature is a spiritual quest for meaning where the aesthetic, cultural “pleasures” of the environment inform the sober (scientific) knowledge of current ecological issues.

In that sense, the eco-logical must necessarily be eco-critical and vice versa: “nature” and “culture” may thus cease to be opposites (similarly to Ruskin’s “masters” and “operatives”), but, in fact, just two sides of the same coin. The one and only true wealth is life itself.

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Tomáš Jajtner is Assistant Professor of English literature and British and American Studies at the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice. He studied English and Czech at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague and at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. He completed his Ph.D. at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague in 2006 (dissertation *Concepts of Harmony in Five Metaphysical Poets*). In 2008 he was an Assistant Professor at New York University, Prague. In 2013 he completed his Th.D. at the Faculty of Catholic Theology, Charles University, Prague. He has published a monograph on the English metaphysical poets (*Concepts of Harmony in Five Metaphysical Poets*, 2012) as well as several book reviews and articles on English and Czech literature. Jajtner has also translated numerous historical, musicological and theological studies from English, German and French. His research interests include early modern English literature (drama and poetry) as well as contemporary British conservatism and ecocriticism.