



PROJECT MUSE®

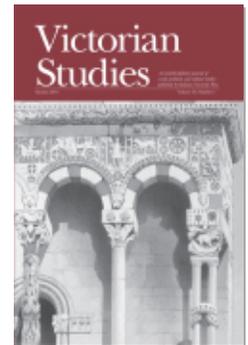
---

Durations of Presents Past: Ruskin and the Accretive Quality of Time

S. Pearl Brilmyer

Victorian Studies, Volume 59, Number 1, Autumn 2016, pp. 94-97 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/649955>

## Durations of Presents Past: Ruskin and the Accretive Quality of Time

S. PEARL BRILMYER

In what consists the present? For the turn-of-the-twentieth-century philosopher Henri Bergson, the present consists in the accretion of experiences past. Think of time like a tape with two spools: one winding, the other unwinding. As a person grows older, she senses one spool becoming thinner, the other thicker—the past becoming “larger and larger with the present it picks upon on its way” (137), the present given dimension by the strata of moments past. Time is contiguous, and it functions additively.

We find a curious precursor to Bergson’s additive theory of time in the work of the Victorian art critic and architectural theorist John Ruskin. In Ruskin, the layers of the present are always getting caked on to the infinite strata of history. Like Bergson’s gradually enlarging spool, Ruskin’s writings on the Gothic gesture toward the accretive quality of time—that is, the extent to which the present keeps on adding to the past, and vice versa: the traumas, the seemingly insignificant incidents of the *then*, shaping and coloring the *now*. Like Bergson, Ruskin too figures time in material terms. That is, he theorizes time in and through descriptions of physical structures that endure.

Where one begins to notice a difference between the two thinkers is on the question of loss: one is hard pressed to find in Ruskin any sign of Bergson’s second tape, the tape unwinding, becoming smaller. In Ruskin, one has the sense that there’s no negation whatsoever. If the Gothic had a mantra, it might be *never less, always more*. For Ruskin, even the processes of weathering and decay—far from forces of destruction—are (ontologically) positive. Construction and

---

**S. PEARL BRILMYER** (brilmyer@upenn.edu) is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. Her work concerns what brings characters—literary and natural historical, human and nonhuman—into existence. She is currently completing a book manuscript about the disarticulation of character from plot at the turn of the twentieth century titled “Character Density: Late Victorian Realism and the Science of Description.”

destruction are not equal and opposite forces, the former positive, the latter negative; rather, they are two modes through which the past persists—is bodied forth—within the present.

The surface of the monument was for Ruskin the place where this accretion could be experienced. I propose that Ruskin's theorization of the surface as a site of the becoming-present of the past can help us to understand what might be strategic about a presentism that would not take the present to be the opposite of the past—nor surface to be the opposite of depth—but which would understand the surface as the site of the inscription of difference and the duration of presents past. Reading architectural surface in Ruskin as a material figure for the present, I thus approach the surface not as pure presence but as a place where the past cannot but endure, a place where the injustices of the past, moreover, can never be erased but only papered over.

In much of his work, though most notably in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53), Ruskin traces the appeal of Gothic architecture to its elaborate ornamentation, which manifests the undulating temporality of history through inscriptions on the surface. The defining qualities of an aesthetic object for Ruskin were thus not structural qualities such as form or outline but rather surface phenomena like color and texture. “Variegation,” Ruskin wrote in a diary entry dated December 20, 1848, “is the arbitrary presence or absence of colouring matter, and the beauty is more in the colour than the outline. Hence stains, blotchings, cloudings, etc., in marble, on skins, and so on, and their beauty of irregularity” (8:178 n2). The surface was for Ruskin a space of lively variability where the essential irregularity of nature could not but erupt—the place where, infamously, the mark of the craftsman's body is bodied forth, stamped by the uniqueness of his desires, his technique.

Ruskin's fascination in his writings on painting with the textural irregularities of skin and hair likewise affirms the value of color and texture in art. In *The Seven Lamps* he explores the representation of fur, grass, and clouds in the paintings of Tintoret (Tintoretto) and Peter Paul Rubens, celebrating how meaning in their paintings inheres not in the structure or essence of an anatomy or a landscape but rather, as he puts it, in “clinging to the surface, to the less essential character” of “folds of shaggy hair, or in the chasms and rents of rocks, or in the hanging of thickets or hill sides, or in the alternations of gaiety and gloom in the variegation of the shell, the plume, or the cloud” (8:240).

Ruskin's oft-repeated analogy in *The Seven Lamps* between skin and architectural surface finds an unlikely analogue in more recent thinking about

skin in both trans theory and critical race studies. I am thinking here of Jay Prosser's work on skin as a record of our body's psychic history or Anne Anlin Cheng's analysis of the black erotic dancer Josephine Baker's performance of her own skin in relation to the modernist architectural fascination with the production of "pure surface" (13). While Ruskin's own views on race are nothing to celebrate, his interest in the surface as the site where history accretes, where variations emerge to index a body's uneven temporality, might help us to understand the extent to which skin in the modern racial paradigm appears a surface phenomenon that nevertheless intricately choreographs social relations.

What I am suggesting is that there is a politics as well as a metaphysics to Ruskin's theory of the surface as something both superficial and yet exacting; that his theory of the surface as a site marked by difference and differentiation in contrast to the supposed ideality of form (coded as "white" in the neoclassical genre of the outline that Ruskin so notoriously despised), points toward the explicit social and political import of accounting for the way that the past endures within the present. As such, his work has implications for contemporary debates about the traumas of slavery and (post) racial subjectivity in which the ability of the past to endure within the present is repeatedly contested, as well as literary-critical debates that turn upon the very distinction between past and present—as well as surface and depth. In Ruskin, one is merely a layer upon the other.

Ruskin's commitment to thinking time accretively—that is, as an additive process rather than one of loss or negation—informs his famous critique of the practice of church restoration. Of the techniques used to maintain a church, the most troubling for Ruskin was the practice of "scraping," in which the surface of the monument was smoothed in order to remove bacterial growth and erase signs of aging. Ruskin believed that the elimination of surface inconsistencies—of particularity, of difference, of signs of the monument's past—was a gross injustice; it destroyed the historical aura of the building by replacing decaying or outdated materials in favor of producing a timeless and ideal form. For Ruskin, in other words, the lichen that papered the surface of the monument were not a desecration of the monument but a sign of its continued life.

In closing, let us not scrape our texts, whether out of a fascination with the past as somehow separable from the present (Historicism) or out of a desire to approach form as distinct from the undulating temporalities that gave rise to it (Formalism). Let us imagine new ways of accounting for the temporality of

both social and literary forms, structures which are neither unchanging outlines nor historical moments entirely past.

*University of Pennsylvania*

---

#### **WORKS CITED**

- Bergson, Henri. *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. Mabelle L. Andison. New York: Dover, 2010.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010.
- Ruskin, John. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture. The Works of John Ruskin*. Eds. Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. Vol. 8. London: Longmans, 1903.