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The Geological Sublime in Victorian Landscape Painting

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Geoffrey Prendergast

20th November 2019

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SUMMARY

I began my research by examining traditional concepts of the sublime, principally those derived from the work of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, as these laid the foundations for the Romantic sublime from which the Victorian sublime developed. This is particularly important for the artists under consideration here, as all of them were directly or indirectly influenced by the sublime as it found expression in the work of JMW Turner. This is a necessary starting point when considering the ways in which this traditional sublime was reformulated in the mid nineteenth century.

The second intellectual framework which has informed my research is the landscape theory of John Ruskin. Since Ruskin's view of landscape art was shaped by his admiration of Turner, the Romantic conception of the sublime guided his thinking. The artists whose work I have studied, principally Alfred William Hunt, John Brett and John William Inchbold, were, in their formative years, greatly influenced by the ideas Ruskin set out in *Modern Painters*. My approach to their work has, as a result, been underpinned by a close reading of Ruskinian landscape theory. The geological sublime in their art must always be considered in terms of Ruskin's writing, as they strictly adhered to his precepts, at least in the 1850s. Geological knowledge in the mid nineteenth century was rapidly evolving and this change is reflected in Ruskin's thinking and also in the works of art themselves.

I have therefore examined landscape paintings with this shifting intellectual framework in mind. In the first half of the nineteenth century many geologists attempted a harmonisation of geological knowledge with theology but as the century progressed this became increasingly untenable, particularly with the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. In order to provide a background for the cultural climate in which geological landscapes were produced I have studied a wide range of contemporary geological texts and the religious responses to these. I have also looked at articles in the art press in order to gauge the extent to which artists and their public thought about landscape in geological terms.

Finally, I have examined many of the original sketchbooks and watercolours of Alfred William Hunt. Hunt's artistic technique was heavily indebted to Turner and a greater knowledge of his working methods has contributed to my understanding of the levels of sublime meaning which can be found in his art. Archival material at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool has also provided invaluable information concerning Hunt's early years.

My research indicates that the sublime continued to shape landscape painting in the Victorian period. Artists who painted sublime geological scenes touched on many of the intellectual debates which embroiled mid-nineteenth-century Britain. This Victorian geological sublime was marked by a desire to explore new kinds of sublime meaning and, with it, new templates for human existence in an age which was both supremely self-confident and plagued by doubt.

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INTRODUCTION

I have examined the Pre-Raphaelite landscape art produced in the 1850s and later by Alfred William Hunt, John Brett and John William Inchbold, along with a number of related artists. I began by looking at Hunt's work in an attempt to establish the extent of his implementation of Ruskinian theory as well as exploring developments which feed into this, such as the influence of the work of Turner, the science of geology and related religious controversies. Ultimately, my research evolved into an investigation of the ways in which these strands of enquiry feed into the sublime, as utilised by Hunt and others in mid-century landscape paintings. My research has focused overwhelmingly on what I have called the 'geological sublime', a sub-category of the multi-faceted approach to the sublime in Victorian art, a broad subject which has itself received little scholarly attention. Over the course of this thesis I will attempt to introduce the various strands of the sublime as they developed in Victorian landscape art, proceeding to an examination of the geological sublime – a manifestation of the sublime in landscape painting which unites many of the most pressing concerns of the age with all their anxieties, tensions and contradictions. I will explore the philosophical potential of the geological sublime in its various guises, culminating in a discussion of what could be seen as the apotheosis of the geological sublime – the artistic engagement with the mountain landscapes of Switzerland, a country which, for Ruskin, took on a divine significance. However, I will argue that, even here, the paradoxes and disquiet which are the hallmarks of a geologically-informed landscape painting are ever present and never find a satisfactory resolution.

Ruskin's own ideas about art were deeply influenced by the precedent set by J. M. W. Turner; I will argue that it was in his very self-conscious emulation of Turner, as well as his utilisation of a distinctly Victorian form of the geological sublime, which developed from Turner via Ruskin, that Hunt was the most successful exponent of the geological sublime as informed by Ruskinian landscape theory. Hunt's respect for Turner's art is demonstrated by the

artist's own paintings as well as documentary evidence such as his writings on landscape art and the opinions of contemporary commentators on art who often likened Hunt's work to that of Turner in reviews and newspaper articles. In addition, Hunt managed to retain Ruskin's friendship over the course of his life, as indicated by their long correspondence and Hunt's visit to Ruskin at his home in the Lake District in 1873. Brett and Inchbold were strongly criticised by Ruskin for what he saw as deficiencies in their work. Direct links can be made between many of Hunt's paintings and ideas contained in successive volumes of *Modern Painters* (1843-60), as well as *The Elements of Drawing* (1857). I have attempted to establish in my research whether Hunt's possible exposure to geological theories during his education, his lifelong study of Turner's work and his early experience of the artistic freedom offered by his training in Liverpool, gave him the kind of artistic resources necessary to fully explore a geological sublime informed by Ruskinian landscape theory. Inchbold and Brett took a more literal-minded approach to painting the Ruskinian landscape and their failure to meet the critic's expectations is documented in Ruskin's letters and *Academy Notes*, a series of commentaries Ruskin published on the exhibitions at the Royal Academy between 1855 and 1859, and again in 1875.

The correspondence between Alfred William Hunt and Ruskin carried on over a period of decades and indicates that Hunt made the implementation of Ruskinian ideas about landscape a central tenet of his artistic practice. In his own published writings Hunt was at pains to stress the importance of the imaginative and poetic faculties to the landscape painter, as well as alluding to the advantages of a scientific understanding of the landscape. This builds on ideas contained in both Ruskin's own writings and the example set by Turner, who himself took a keen interest in scientific matters. Hunt was also responding to a wider current in mid-nineteenth-century thought which sought to bring a new geological and botanical truth to bear on the representation of the landscape in art. This is something that Brett and Inchbold responded to as well, as is abundantly clear in some of their best-known paintings, but their work fails to achieve the kind of poetry and sense of

the landscape pervaded by divine providence that is found so often in Hunt's work and gives much of his art a profound sense of sublimity. I feel that it was in the successful depiction of a Romantic or Turnerian 'immanence' in geological landscapes, coupled with a strong sense of the sublime, that brought Hunt closest to achieving the Ruskinian ideal.

My research involves a detailed analysis of Alfred William Hunt's engagement with Ruskinian ideas and his use of the geological sublime as a vehicle for the expression of those ideas. Alison Smith, in an essay for the Tate website, explores the notion of the 'Victorian sublime'. The Victorian sublime took a number of forms which it is worth outlining in order to provide a context for the emergence of a geological sublime. In its application to Hunt this Victorian sublime can be broken down into several subcategories. These are Hunt's engagement with Ruskinian theory and the art of Turner, along with the impact of geological developments and related religious controversies on his work. In this introduction I will outline each of these key areas and assess how they relate to Hunt's work and, to a lesser extent, the work of Brett and Inchbold. I have used a variety of primary and secondary sources in my application of these ideas to Hunt's work; the most significant of these are referred to in the text, with others listed in my bibliography.

Over the course of my studies I have focused my research on developing a deeper understanding of these key strands. I would like to address each of these areas in turn in an attempt to demonstrate the ways in which they feed into Hunt's use of the geological sublime in his Ruskinian practice.

First, it will be useful to outline Hunt's engagement with Ruskinian theory and Turnerian landscape, which Ruskin championed in *Modern Painters*. Even before Hunt's friendship with Ruskin began in earnest, it is evident from his early works that he was impressed with many of the ideas Ruskin set out in successive volumes of *Modern Painters*. Works from the 1850s such as *Cwm Trifaen* (1856, fig. 1), *Snowdon, after an April Hailstorm* (c. 1857, fig. 2) and

Rock *Study: Capel Curig – The Oak Bough* (1857, fig. 3) all show an obvious debt to ideas contained in *Modern Painters* or *The Elements of Drawing*.

Fig. 1: Alfred William Hunt: *Cwm Trifaen*, 1856, watercolour, 26.7 x 38.7 cm, The Robertson Collection, Orkney.

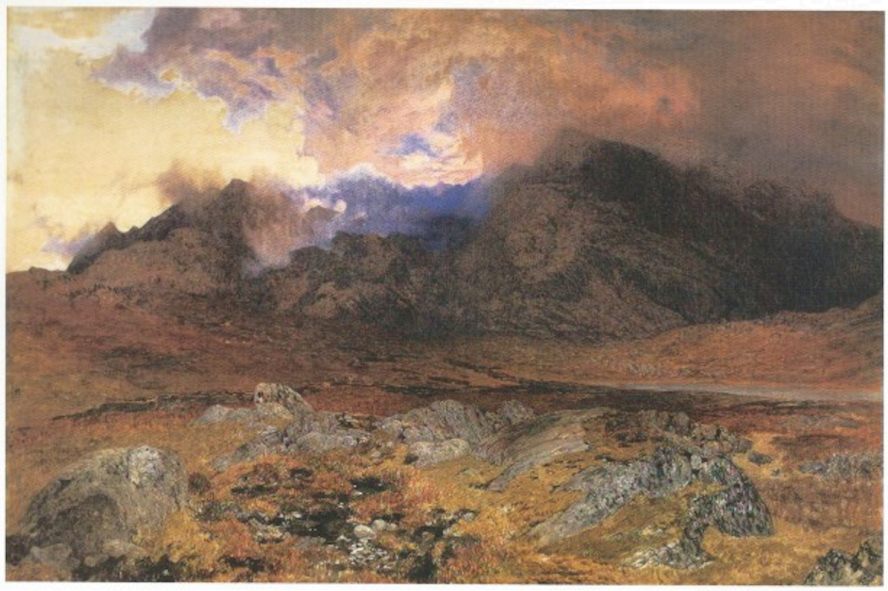

Fig. 2: Alfred William Hunt: *Snowdon, after an April Hailstorm*, c. 1857, watercolour, 34 x 50 cm, Private Collection.

Fig. 3: Alfred William Hunt: *Rock Study: Capel Curig – The Oak Bough*, 1857, watercolour, 25.7 x 37.2 cm, Private Collection.

Hunt inherited his love of Turner from his father, Andrew Hunt, also a landscape painter, and this interest must have developed through his knowledge of Ruskin's work. The foundational idea of the first volume of *Modern Painters* was that Turner's landscape painting was more faithful to nature than that of any other painter. This single idea informed the development of much of Alfred William Hunt's work. For Ruskin, all art was, in a sense, symbolic: paint and pencil marks could only ever approximate reality or capture it in a fragmentary way. The artist could not simply reproduce reality like a photograph; he had to devise his own visual language with which to interpret the world he saw around him.[1] However, the task of the artist was not simply to record an impression of the visible world, it was also imperative to produce paintings which were infused with his emotional and imaginative response to a world which Ruskin believed was a visible manifestation of the divine.

[1] Shields, Conal; 'Ruskin as Artist: Seeing and Feeling' in Newall, Christopher et al., *John Ruskin: Artist and Observer*; p. 50.

In many ways, Hunt's work represents a continuation of the Romantic approach to the natural world found in the poetry of Wordsworth and the art of Turner, both enormously important to Ruskin. An extract from Wordsworth's *Excursion* is included at the beginning of each volume of *Modern Painters* and underscores Ruskin's essentially Romantic notion that the intelligent observer could, through engagement with the natural world, come to a profound understanding of the divine spirit which pervaded it.[2]

Ruskin's thinking was deeply influenced by his evangelical upbringing, in particular the tendency to see the created world as an expression of the word of God, a kind of extension of the revelations contained in the Bible. Robert Hewison outlines the system of biblical typology which Ruskin also applied to the landscape. Just as figures in the Bible could be seen as real people whose lives and actions prefigured the events of the life of Jesus Christ, so the real, physical world contained revelations of the continuing presence of God in his creation.[3] Ruskin could see in the forms of the Alps 'the great truths which are the basis of all political science; how the polishing friction which separates, the affection that binds, and the affliction that fuses and confirms, are accurately symbolized by the processes to which the several ranks of hills appear to owe their present aspect'.[4]

Much of Ruskin's thinking was dominated by the need to achieve a kind of unity between the demands of truthful representation, on the one hand, and the importance of expressing through this representation the engagement of the imagination with the religious and moral truths which underpinned the physical world, on the other. This same desire is present in Alfred William Hunt's work and is alluded to in two essays Hunt published in the journal *The Nineteenth Century*: 'Modern English Landscape-Painting' of 1880 and 'Turnerian Landscape – An Arrested Art' of 1891. As Robert Hewison has put it, Ruskin saw the landscape as 'the repository of the values of God' and in the

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[2] Hewison, Robert; *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye*; pp. 17-18.
[3] Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye,* pp. 26-28.
[4] Ibid., p. 27.

work of three of his protégés – Hunt, Brett and Inchbold – he sought to bring a new kind of landscape art to fruition.[5] I will argue that it was in the work of Hunt that this was most successfully achieved. Christopher Newall has succinctly outlined Ruskin's reaction to Brett's attempt to paint a supremely Ruskinian landscape, the *Val d'Aosta* of 1858 (fig. 4).

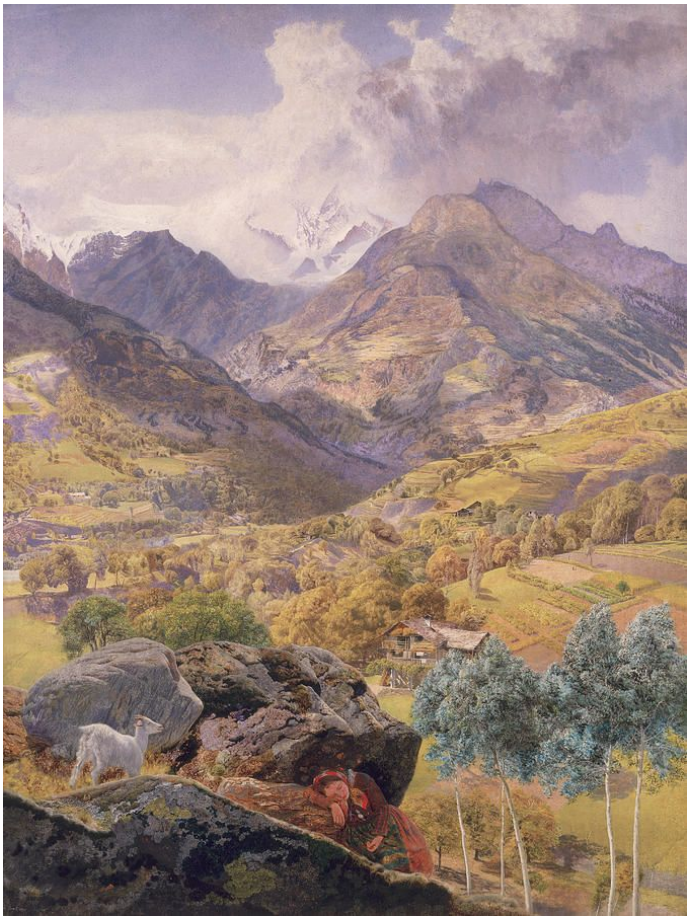

Fig. 4: John Brett: *Val d'Aosta*, 1858, oil on canvas, 87.6 x 68 cm, Private collection.

Newall draws attention to the modernity and innovative nature of the painting which eschews the antiquarian approach an older artist such as Turner would have taken to this kind of scene; Brett instead paints the valley in such a way that we are given clues to its geological past and present, as well as the ways in

[5] Hewison et al.; *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites*; p. 15.

which its current human population exploit the landscape.[6] Nevertheless, Ruskin criticised the finished work for its total lack of emotional and imaginative engagement with its subject, writing to Brett: 'Neither you, nor I, could ever paint a picture, properly so called [...] Neither you nor I will ever have an idea. We have nothing better than thoughts'.[7] For Ruskin, *Val d'Aosta* functioned simply as an unthinking transcript of the landscape and therefore failed as a work of art. Brett faithfully reproduced every detail of the scene in the most minute Pre-Raphaelite precision but the painting records nothing of what the artist felt when confronted with the grandeur of an alpine valley. Ruskin also began to feel increasing disappointment with Inchbold's work as the painter strayed further and further from the Ruskinian ideal.

John D. Rosenberg provides an insightful analysis of Ruskin's intentions in *Modern Painters*, describing key aspects of the Ruskinian approach to depicting the natural world which are lacking in the work of Brett and Inchbold but clearly present in many of Hunt's watercolours. Ruskin's criticism of Brett's output, *Val d'Aosta* being a good example, was that it attempted in a very literal-minded way to capture the multiplicity of nature but succeeded only in achieving a sterile, almost photographic mimesis.[8] Brett had misunderstood Ruskin's thinking with regard to the recording of the facts of nature. Ruskin viewed nature as being 'infinitely various, infinitely potent' and any artist, even the most gifted, could only hope to partially capture this infinite variety – Turner was the painter who had done this most fully.[9]

Ruskin discusses this concept in the chapter 'Of Truth of Space' in the first volume of *Modern Painters*, giving a detailed analysis of the way the eye perceives near and far objects. As an object recedes and the details which distinguish it fade, there will nevertheless always be a hint of surface pattern

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[6] Newall, Christopher; ' 'Val d'Aosta': John Brett and John Ruskin in the Alps, 1858' in *The Burlington Magazine*, March 2007; p. 168.
[7] Newall, ' 'Val d'Aosta': John Brett and John Ruskin in the Alps, 1858', p. 170.
[8] Cook, E.T. and Wedderburn, Alexander (eds.); *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin, Vol. IV*; pp. 234-238.
[9] Rosenberg, John D.; *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius*; pp. 11-12.

which will mark the object out from empty space. Conversely, even if an object, such as a friend's face, is directly before the viewer there will still be 'a thousand things in his face which have their effect in inducing… recognition, but which you cannot see so as to know what they are'.[10]

Ruskin elaborates: 'And thus nature is never distinct and never vacant, she is always mysterious, but always abundant; you always see something, but you never see all.' There is present in nature 'a finish which no distance can render invisible, and no nearness comprehensible… And hence in art, every space or touch in which we can see everything, or in which we can see nothing, is false'.[11] This ability to express the fundamental truth that nature is 'never distinct and never vacant' is present in much of Alfred William Hunt's work.

Ruskin describes in detail the workings of the imaginative faculty in the second volume of *Modern Painters* and Hunt's essays could be seen as a personal interpretation of Ruskin's theory, which frequently cites the work of Turner as embodying the most developed imaginative and inventive faculties. This imaginative power was necessary to any artist seeking to express something of the infinite variety of nature which I have outlined. The idea of intense imaginative power being channelled in the production of true landscape paintings seems to have been particularly important for Hunt and is the element of Ruskinian theory which is most readily apparent in Hunt's art and his writings about his own art. In Ruskin's theory the imagination is composed of three faculties: the penetrative, the associative and the contemplative faculties.

The penetrative imagination first perceives an object or idea fully, seeing both its outward aspect and its inner nature. The associative imagination allows the artist to communicate this perception through a form of creative expression such as painting. Finally, the contemplative imagination is concerned with

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[10] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin, Vol. III*; pp. 327-330.
[11] Quoted in Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass*, p. 12.

ideas and enables the artist to construct metaphors.[12] The penetrative aspect of the imagination seems to have been particularly important for Hunt and he stressed that the ability to express the profound spiritual truth present in the landscape was paramount to the practice of any landscape painter. The true painter of landscape must capture 'the life and power, calm, beautiful, or terrible, of nature', making it 'really paramount in his work, and the strong affection which can do this will give its own life to the likeness of wildest glen or dreariest shore'.[13] Like Ruskin, Hunt holds up Turner as the supreme example of truthful but imaginative engagement with nature.

Aside from the evidence of his art, Hunt's debt to Turner is most obviously expressed in his essay 'Turnerian Landscape – An Arrested Art' of 1891. Hunt praises Ruskin for his enormous contribution to the arts in Britain but regrets that even Ruskin failed to instill in modern British painters a lasting understanding of Turner's art and a willingness to carry on and develop the Turnerian tradition.[14] Hunt seems to have seen himself as being largely alone in continuing the tradition established by Turner and this essay, along with 'Modern English Landscape-Painting', could be seen as constituting Hunt's manifesto for his art.

In his essay Hunt echoes some of the sentiments expressed by Ruskin about Turner in his 1851 pamphlet *Pre-Raphaelitism*. Ruskin discusses the 'forgetfulness of self' which pervades Turner's work and goes on to describe him as 'a man of sympathy absolutely infinite – a sympathy so all-embracing, that I know nothing but that of Shakspeare [sic] comparable with it'.[15] Ruskin argues that Turner's ability to grasp any subject or engage with humanity on every level of society also equipped him to respond to the natural world with

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[12] Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye*, p. 69.
[13] Hunt, Alfred William; 'Turnerian Landscape – An Arrested Art' in *The Nineteenth Century*, February 1891; p. 216.
[14] Hunt, 'Turnerian Landscape', p. 214.
[15] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XII*; p.370.

unparalleled feeling and delicacy.[16] Hunt makes a similar point in his essay on Turnerian landscape when discussing the qualities which make a true landscape painter – chief among them is 'a certain strong sympathy with natural forces and phenomena, those of light and atmosphere especially, which insists on having its own expression at any cost, as against all other elements of the picture'.[17]

In terms of technique, my research indicates that Alfred William Hunt's working practices display parallels to those of Turner. John Gage has comprehensively examined Turner's life and career and points out that Ruskin promoted the Turnerian technique of gradation and stippling – a means of achieving greater truth to nature – in *The Elements of Drawing*.[18]At least one of Hunt's watercolours, *Rock Study: Capel Curig – The Oak Bough* of 1857, strongly suggests that Hunt was familiar with that book and the kinds of subject matter Ruskin was promoting. The technique of extremely subtle gradation characterizes much of Hunt's output in watercolours. As Gage has explained, the practice was employed by Turner in order to achieve 'infinite gradations of tone and texture, and for optical, and hence more luminous, colour-mixtures of a refinement hitherto unknown'.[19] Thus, through the writings of Ruskin there is evidence to suggest that Hunt very consciously strove to emulate Turner, not just in terms of his intellectual process but also in the manner in which he applied paint to paper.

There is one further, crucial, aspect of Turner's practice which was mirrored in Hunt's work of the 1850s. This is the science of geology and, as Ruskin demonstrated, many of Turner's paintings show a deep knowledge of the structures of the landscapes he depicted. James Hamilton has drawn attention to this aspect of Turner's practice which Hunt must have been aware of.

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[16] Ibid., pp. 370-1.
[17] Hunt, 'Turnerian Landscape', p. 215.
[18] Gage, John; *J.M.W. Turner: 'A Wonderful Range of Mind'*; p. 6. Gradation is discussed in the section 'Colour' of Letter III of *The Elements of Drawing* – see Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin, Vol. XV*; pp. 133-161.
[19] Gage, *J.M.W. Turner*, p. 89.

Hamilton has pointed out that Chares Lyell (1767-1849), the botanist and father of the better-known geologist of the same name, knew of Turner's 'superb' drawings of glaciers.[20] There is strong evidence that the geologist William Buckland likewise was a great admirer of the truth of Turner's work.[21] As well as the visual evidence of Turner's paintings, some of his poetry reveals a familiarity with geological terms. In the Devonshire Coast No. 1 Sketchbook there is a poem which includes the lines 'Horizontal strata, deep with fissure gored', 'bristled front Basaltic like or ranged / Rock piled on rock in many forms arranged' and 'beach of stone / Of Granite Marble Slate and Lime stone formd [sic]'.[22] As Hamilton explains, these lines suggest that Turner may have gleaned this knowledge from his own personal reading, or possibly through acquaintance with contemporary geologists and attending lectures on the subject.[23] Hunt's work of the 1850s shows a keen interest in geology and in his exploration of geologically-informed landscapes there is good reason to suppose that he was responding to the precedent set by Turner as well as the growing interest in the subject in mid-Victorian society.

The science of geology was central to Ruskin's thinking on landscape and had a profound influence not only on the work produced by Hunt in the 1850s but on many other landscape artists, including John Brett and John William Inchbold. Ruskin himself commented that the sections of *Modern Painters IV* (1856) which dealt with geology were 'the most valuable and least faultful part of the book'.[24]

In the art press a variety of articles appeared relating to the application of geology to landscape art and more general articles appeared in other publications dealing with such phenomena as the processes of glaciation. In the *Art Journal* a series of articles entitled 'Science and Art' by Professor D. T.

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[20] Hamilton, James; *Turner and the Scientists*; p. 115.
[21] Hamilton, *Turner and the Scientists*, p. 115.
[22] Ibid., p. 118.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Gully, Anthony Lacy; 'Sermons in Stone: Ruskin and Geology' in Casteras, Susan P. et al.; *John Ruskin and the Victorian Eye*; p. 163.

Ansted underlined the growing belief that landscape art could not be properly practised or appreciated if the history and structure of the landscapes depicted were not understood. In this sense they echo the sentiments expressed by Ruskin and Alfred William Hunt himself. In his article on 'Mountains', published in 1863, Professor Ansted discussed the 'modernity' of the appreciation of mountain scenery, remarking that previous generations saw sublime mountain scenes of the kind painted by Hunt and others 'simply as terrible difficulties, either to be surmounted as best they might be, or evaded, if that were possible'.[25] An indication that Hunt's ideas concerning artistic expression and the importance of the Turnerian tradition were more widely shared is provided by Ansted's brief discussion of Turner's unique genius and Ruskin's role in furthering a new understanding of landscape.[26] Popular articles such as these are an important component of my research as they help to establish an idea of the wider climate in which Hunt and the other artists under consideration were working in.

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of great speculation, as the evolving understanding of geology changed perceptions of the earth's history and man's place in it. However, it was still possible for many to wholeheartedly believe that the study of the physical world led to an enhanced appreciation of the workings of the divine and this is a concept which pervades Hunt's work. Unlike John Brett, Hunt does not seem to have struggled with religious difficulties in spite of the fact that some of his works from the 1850s deal with subjects which explicitly allude to immense geological processes, indirectly raising questions about the veracity of the Biblical account of creation and, perhaps, by implication, the entire Christian faith.

Hunt's *Cwm Trifaen* of 1856 (fig. 1, p. 10) shows mountainous terrain in north Wales which has been very obviously subjected to the processes of glaciation and is a landscape very similar to the one in which Darwin first came to

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[25] Ansted, D. T.; 'Science and Art: III. – Mountains' in *The Art-Journal*, August 1863; p. 149.
[26] Ibid.

understand the full implications of glaciation, aided by the theories of Louis Agassiz and William Buckland.[27] This and other works painted by Hunt in the 1850s show an awareness of the theories of uniformitarianism and glaciation put forward by Lyell and Agassiz which suggested that the earth was at least hundreds of millions of years old. It is possible that Hunt was exposed to geological theories from a young age – as a teenager he attended the Liverpool Collegiate School where the principal was the Revd. William John Conybeare. William John Conybeare was the son of the geologist William Daniel Conybeare who in 1822 had published the comprehensive *Outlines of the Geology of England and Wales*. Hunt may have imbibed some of William Daniel Conybeare's interest in geology through the influence of William John.

A number of art historians writing in recent years have drawn attention to the implications of geology for the study of mid-nineteenth-century landscape art. Rebecca Bedell in particular discusses the work both of Hunt and John Brett in her essay 'The History of the Earth: Darwin, Geology and Landscape Art'. Brett's painting *The Glacier of Rosenlaui* (fig. 5), like Hunt's *Cwm Trifaen*, appears to illustrate aspects of the theory of glaciation put forward by Agassiz in the 1830s. Agassiz formulated the theory of an ice age to account for much of the world's present appearance and, he argued, the mechanisms of glaciation could be shown to have caused phenomena such as smoothly polished rocks, erratic boulders and moraines that had previously been seen as evidence of the Biblical flood.[28] Bedell argues that the depiction of the erratic boulders shown at the base of the glacier in Brett's painting provides evidence that he understood and accepted Agassiz's theories.[29] The same analysis could be applied to Hunt's *Cwm Trifaen* in which the foreground shows a landscape of granite rocks which have been left striated and polished by the movement of ancient glaciers. Hunt's picture was painted in the same year Ruskin published

[27] Bedell, Rebecca; 'The History of the Earth: Darwin, Geology and Landscape Art' in Donald, Diana and Munro, Jane (eds.); *Endless Forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts*; p. 71.
[28] Bedell, 'The History of the Earth: Darwin, Geology and Landscape Art', p. 70.
[29] Ibid., p. 71.

Volume IV of *Modern Painters* which dealt with just such mountain subjects and it echoes passages in that volume which explore the subject of glaciation.[30]

Fig. 5: John Brett: *The Glacier of Rosenlaui*, 1856, oil on canvas, 44.5 x 41.9 cm, Tate Britain, London.

The theories put forward by Lyell and Agassiz required a vast timescale in which to operate and challenged the Mosaic account of the earth's history. This 'deep' time can be seen as an essential component of the Victorian geological sublime and a number of landscapes painted by Hunt and Brett engage with the idea that the earth had been shaped by immense physical forces over an almost unimaginably long period of time. Marcia Pointon has dealt with this issue in her essay 'Geology and Landscape Painting in Nineteenth-Century England'. An important feature of Pointon's essay is an analysis of William Dyce's painting *Pegwell Bay, Kent – A Recollection of October 5th, 1858* of 1858-

[30] See the chapter 'Of the Sculpture of Mountains – Secondly, the Central Peaks' in Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin, Vol. VI*; pp. 197-215.

60 (fig. 6) and John Brett's *The Stonebreaker* of 1858 (fig. 7). Both these paintings explore the idea of time on a number of levels, juxtaposing the short period of time spanned by human life with that of geological time and, in Dyce's painting, the even vaster timescale on which the universe operates is alluded to by the presence of Donati's comet in the heavens. The very compositional structure of Dyce's painting seems to reinforce these ideas – the painting could be read as three successive bands, with the timescale of human life occupying the lower band of the image, followed by the cliffs which symbolise geological time and finally the upper band, the sky, representing cosmic time. Pointon argues that though many geologically-inspired landscape paintings were becoming more and more 'sterile' by about 1850, works such as Brett's and Dyce's overcame this problem and managed to express 'visual metaphors for metaphysical concerns centred on man's knowledge of himself and the world about him'.[31] As I have indicated, many of Hunt's works from the 1850s display the same concerns, implying a sound knowledge of the forces which shaped the present features of the earth. However, the presence of human figures in the two works by Brett and Dyce give rise to a disquieting sense of man's fragility and mortality whereas human figures are absent in the geological works painted by Hunt, perhaps reflecting his relatively robust faith.

[31] Pointon, Marcia; 'Geology and Landscape Painting in Nineteenth-Century England' in Jordanova, L.J. and Porter, Roy, S. (eds.), *Images of the Earth: Essays in the History of the Environmental Sciences*; p. 95.

Fig. 6: William Dyce: *Pegwell Bay, Kent – A Recollection of October 5th, 1858*, ?1858-60, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 88.9 cm, Tate Britain, London.

Fig. 7: John Brett: *The Stonebreaker*, 1857-8, oil on canvas, 49.5 x 67.3 cm, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

These related strands of enquiry all inform the concept of the geological sublime, a phenomenon which has not received much scholarly attention. A series of essays available on the Tate website attempts to address the development of the sublime in Victorian art, the most relevant to my research

being Alison Smith's 'The Sublime in Crisis: Landscape after Turner'. Smith takes a group of paintings from the collection of Tate Britain and uses them as the basis for exploring the application of the sublime in the Victorian period, since so little has been written on the subject. Of particular importance to my research is Smith's outline of the Ruskinian concepts of 'poetic' Pre-Raphaelitism and 'prosaic' Pre-Raphaelitism. Poetic Pre-Raphaelitism (which could be applied to Hunt) is characterised by imaginative engagement with subject matter, whereas prosaic Pre-Raphaelitism (which could be applied to the work of Brett and Inchbold) is typified by a more matter-of-fact, scientific engagement with the landscape. Ruskin was of the opinion that the prosaic branch of Pre-Raphaelitism was by far the most influential, the spirit of the age being dominated by a scientific hankering for facts. Brett and Inchbold, in their rather cold, almost documentary style of recording a scene could be seen to fulfil Ruskin's wish that these 'prosaic' artists should strive to record accurately scenes which were in danger of being swept away by 'modern progress or improvement'.[32] Smith briefly discusses Alfred William Hunt and his 1880 essay 'Modern English Landscape-Painting', characterising the work of Hunt and others like him as representing 'a retreat back to Romantic notions of the natural sublime, particularly in terms of scale, facture and choice of location'.[33] I argue that, within the wider phenomenon of the Victorian sublime, it is possible to identify a distinct Ruskinian geological sublime with Hunt representing a more Romantic 'poetical' approach and Brett and Inchbold epitomizing a harder, scientific, 'prosaic' sublime. My research has led me to the conclusion that Hunt's engagement with the Turnerian tradition enabled him to achieve a more authentic Ruskinian practice and a more authentic form of the Ruskinian geological sublime than either Brett or Inchbold.

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[32] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin, Vol. XIV*; p. 468.

[33] Smith, Alison; 'The Sublime in Crisis: Landscape Painting after Turner', in Llewellyn, Nigel and Riding, Christine (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/alison-smith-the-sublime-in-crisis-landscape-painting-after-turner-r1109220, accessed 20 May 2015.

In her essay, Smith gives a perceptive analysis of Brett's *The Glacier of Rosenlaui* (fig. 5, p. 21). Although she identifies it as being an example of the 'prosaic' branch of Pre-Raphaelitism she asserts that 'it is the first Pre-Raphaelite work of any ambition to engage with the mountain sublime as represented by Turner and defined by Ruskin in *Modern Painters*'.[34] Smith goes on to argue that 'the precise delineation of form in the foreground gives way to a Burkean sense of obscurity in the distance relayed through 'sad and fuscous' colours, as if Brett were attempting to harmonise the indefinite Turnerian with the precise Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic'.[35] Brett's painting is in this respect again comparable with Alfred William Hunt's *Cwm Trifaen* (fig. 1, p. 10), painted in the same year. Brett was working in a more prestigious medium and his painting is larger than Hunt's but it is arguable that Hunt achieved what Smith claims for Brett much more successfully. Hunt's subject in many ways forms a British counterpart to Brett's alpine scene; it too depicts a wild and remote piece of mountain terrain composed of a foreground which has been subjected to the processes of glaciation with a distant peak in the background partly obscured by mist. Both paintings have similar compositional structures; the viewer enters each picture from the bottom left hand corner and the eye is guided diagonally towards the jagged peak across carefully lit features of the landscape which highlight the effects of glaciation. As Smith points out in relation to *The Glacier of Rosenlaui*, there is a marked contrast between the rigorously observed foreground and the indistinct background – an effect visible in Hunt's painting too. This juxtaposition of contrasting effects could be read as an attempt to marry the empirical spirit of the 1850s with older Romantic conceptions of the sublime as being characterised by obscurity, ideas which had their roots in the work of Burke. However, Hunt, perhaps because he was working in watercolour, was able to produce a picture which both captures the scene accurately while simultaneously expressing a sense of the infinite multiplicity of nature with a 'poetic' and Turnerian technique of subtle gradation.

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[34] Smith, 'The Sublime in Crisis'.
[35] Ibid.

It will be useful to outline further the strands of thought which I have identified as feeding into the Ruskinian sublime and ultimately the geological sublime. George Landow provides one of the most perceptive accounts of the Ruskinian sublime in *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*. As Landow points out, Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime informed Ruskin's development of the idea. For Burke, ideas of horror and terror were important components of the sublime, something which Ruskin did not recognize. For Ruskin, as I have discussed, the study of nature was an opportunity to come to a deeper knowledge of a benevolent creator and he therefore struggled to accept that a profound immersion in the grandest beauties of the natural world could inspire feelings of fear and terror. Alfred William Hunt, in 'Modern English Landscape-Painting', discusses the natural world with a deep sense of love and affection but, in what appears to be a reference to the Burkean sublime, acknowledges 'that beauty in its highest forms is linked with shapes of fear and trembling as often as with those of perfect loveliness'.[36]

Nevertheless, Ruskin eventually came to accept many aspects of the Burkean sublime as *Modern Painters* developed and Hunt's work shows an engagement with qualities of the Burkean sublime such as obscurity, magnificence and power.[37] Hunt's practice also demonstrates an interest in the immersive aspect of the Romantic sublime found in the paintings of Turner and the poetry of Wordsworth. This is verified by the description of Hunt's working practices by his daughter Violet in which it is made clear that he was willing to put himself through great physical hardship in order to fully capture the experience of being in the landscape in a manner almost comparable to Turner's claim to have immersed himself in a storm in order to paint *Snow Storm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth* of 1842.[38] Hunt himself commented: 'Outdoor study of any worth is a weariness of the flesh and a trial of the spirit beyond a point which is

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[36] Hunt, Alfred William; 'Modern English Landscape-Painting' in *The Nineteenth Century*, May 1880; p. 788.
[37] Landow, George P.; *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*; p. 201.
[38] Newall, Christopher; 'Alfred William Hunt: The Parabola of Pre-Raphaelitism' in Newall, Christopher et al.; *The Poetry of Truth: Alfred William Hunt and the Art of Landscape*; p. 31; see also Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*, p. 201.

very soon reached by most students'.[39] This immersive Romantic sublime is fundamental to Ruskin's understanding of the sublime as a deep, spiritual experience which, at its most profound, involved a total loss of self-consciousness and an absorption into the all-pervading benevolent God.[40]

This Romantic sublime which is present in Hunt's work owes much to his knowledge of the Turnerian tradition. In *Turner and the Sublime* Andrew Wilton has identified many key aspects of Turner's version of the sublime which can be applied to much of Hunt's work. As with Burke and Ruskin, Wilton identifies indistinctness as a key element of the sublime, embodied by Turner's *Hannibal Crossing the Alps*.[41] Wilton's analysis of Turner's ability to use particular techniques to convey an intense sense of the sublime even in relatively small watercolour paintings is comparable to the effects achieved in many of Hunt's watercolours. An extended quote from Wilton's analysis will illustrate this more clearly:

> Thanks to his [Turner's] highly sophisticated watercolour technique, developed by his repeated exercises in depicting the mountains first of Wales, then of Scotland and Switzerland, he was able to present, even on the modest scale of a small sheet of paper, a vividly convincing likeness of immense spaces, panoramic views and infinitely receding vistas seen in all kinds of atmospheric conditions… If the place to be depicted did not admit of … theatrical treatment, he would nevertheless endow it with those qualities of light, air and space which all scenery possesses in reality, thereby rendering the most commonplace spots grand… And he would not hesitate to add drama to a view by breaking a violent storm over it, or arching a rainbow in the air above it. Air, sunshine, shadow, storm clouds, the wind itself, he could render; not, as we should expect, by the free use of a wet brush, spreading broad washes across the paper, but by carefully building up the very substance of these

[39] Hunt, 'Turnerian Landscape', p. 222.
[40] See Helsinger, Elizabeth K.; *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*; pp. 117-120.
[41] Wilton, Andrew; *Turner and the Sublime*; p. 72.

> insubstantialities with minute touches of a fine brush… By a strange contrariety of matter, in order to obtain effects on a small sheet of paper which on canvas he would get by means of breadth, he needed to apply a miniature touch to every separate part of the composition.[42]

It is my contention that this analysis could equally be applied to Hunt's work and that in doing this Hunt successfully captured something of the infinite multiplicity of nature that Ruskin had described. The source of Hunt's sublime lies in Turner's Romantic practice but in its utilisation of Ruskinian theory and exploration of geological concerns it develops the concept in a way which could only have been possible in the mid-Victorian period.

Over the course of my research I have also been examining religious developments in the mid-nineteenth century in order to gain a clearer understanding of the theological climate Hunt was working in. I feel this is vitally important given that Hunt, Brett and to a lesser extent Inchbold all produced work in the 1850s which, as I have indicated, treated geological themes which indirectly raised disquieting questions concerning the Christian faith. The period in which these artists were working witnessed a rapidly evolving understanding of the earth's pre-human history and in the 1850s a number of writers directly addressed the issues of faith and doubt thrown up by the geological record. As well as this, leading religious thinkers such as John William Colenso published progressive works which called for a more nuanced understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith. Hunt was a deeply religious man and an examination of these issues may provide some indication of the deeper philosophical ideas which underpinned his thinking.

I have consulted a number of contemporary sources which attempt to address the doubts and questions raised by the ever-expanding knowledge of the geological record. The primary sources I have seen indicate that it was still possible for a well-known geologist such as Hugh Miller to give a lecture in 1852 in which he maintained that the geological record in no way disproved

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[42] Wilton, *Turner and the Sublime*; p. 78.

the existence of God or indicated that the Bible was fundamentally flawed. Miller argued that the succession of progressively more advanced 'creations' revealed by geology gave good reason for humanity to anticipate the perfect creation to come suggested by the Bible.[43] More popular works on geology published in the period also give useful insights into the religious climate. A work such as Gideon Mantell's *Thoughts on a Pebble; or, a First Lesson in Geology*, intended for children and published in 1849, fully upholds the notion that a close study of the earth will lead to a greatly enhanced understanding and appreciation of its divine creator. Other commentators whose work I have consulted, such as two treatises on 'Genesis and Geology' by the Revd. John Cumming and Denis Crofton, published in 1852 and 1853 respectively, seek to argue that Genesis and the geological record to do not in fact contradict each other; if they appear to do so this can be attributed to a faulty reading of one or the other which can be remedied by more attentive study. Crofton, for example, provides detailed biblical evidence to support a more nuanced interpretation of Genesis.

John William Colenso's series of treatises *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua, Critically Examined* caused significant controversy over the course of their publication from 1862 to 1879. Colenso's work is relevant to my research as it was one of the most high-profile attempts to address the possibility that many aspects of the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua could not be taken as accurate or literal accounts of the early history of the earth and humanity. As Colenso himself put it, he found the Pentateuch 'full of unsuspected flaws, of "difficulties, contradictions, improbabilities, impossibilities"'. [44] Colenso ridicules some contemporary attempts to deny that geology and the fossil record contradict the traditional Biblical account of the history of the world and marshals a range of facts which prove, for example, that a global deluge, as suggested in the Bible, would be a scientific impossibility. Colenso instead

[43] Miller, Hugh; 'Geological Evidences in Favour of Revealed Religion', a paper read before the Royal Physical Society of Edinburgh in 1852, published in Miller, Hugh; *The Old Red Sandstone*; pp. 273-283.
[44] Colenso, John William; *The Pentateuch & Book of Joshua, Critically Examined*, *Part IV*; p. 80.

sought to promote these books of the Bible as sources of spiritual knowledge, rather than hard facts.

In outlining these principal strands of enquiry I have sought to demonstrate the key issues raised by my research and the ways in which I have attempted to apply the ideas generated by my reading of primary and secondary sources to the artists under consideration, principally Alfred William Hunt.

My reading of primary sources is ultimately informed by a close study of the paintings produced by Hunt, Brett, Inchbold and a number of other artists who came under Ruskin's influence. In this introduction I have attempted, through a discussion of a number of key works, to elucidate the interrelationships between the works of art themselves, textual primary sources and secondary sources. As I have argued, there are key areas in which the works of Hunt and Brett, particularly, can be both compared and contrasted and, as my thesis develops, I will attempt to identify clearer patterns of interconnection as well as divergence in the works of these artists. It is already clear that the art of Hunt, Brett and Inchbold shared many common concerns in the 1850s but as their careers progressed their art became increasingly individual, with Hunt being the only one of the three who remained relatively faithful to the principles of Ruskinian landscape throughout his life. Therefore, it was Hunt who most successfully articulated a Victorian geological sublime underpinned by Ruskinian theory.

Although religious issues are only indirectly suggested by the work of Hunt, Brett and Inchbold, they caused considerable controversy at the time when many of these geologically-inspired landscapes were being produced and artists must have been aware of the implications of their increasing knowledge of the ancient history of the landscapes they depicted.

These geologically-informed landscapes were produced for the most part in the 1850s and as Hunt's career advanced his work became dominated by the wish to develop a Turnerian and Ruskinian landscape practice which built on

the Romantic tradition but incorporated more recent mid-century developments in the arts. In the following chapters I have also endeavoured to build on the knowledge I have gained of the Turnerian and Ruskinian approaches to the sublime in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the intellectual processes which motivated Hunt, Brett and Inchbold.

In this introduction I have also attempted to give an outline of the ways in which art historians have commented on many of the issues my research raises. Alison Smith points out that very little has been written on the wider subject of the sublime in Victorian art, hence her use of the works of art themselves as the starting point for her essay. Since Smith examines in relative detail two works by Brett and, more briefly, Hunt's essay 'Modern English Landscape-Painting', I felt that the most fruitful avenue of research for my project would be to explore the idea of the Victorian geological sublime further and its application to Hunt and the other artists whose work I am considering. I have come to the conclusion that this is the most original way I can contribute to the understanding of the innovative paintings produced by these artists. Their work, particularly Hunt's, embraces strands of thought that stretch back to the eighteenth century, taking in Romantic ideas embodied by the work of Turner and culminating in a uniquely Victorian synthesis of these earlier achievements and contemporary developments in geology and Ruskinian theory.

OUTLINE OF THESIS

The following provides a summary of the argument of the thesis, as it develops chapter by chapter.

CHAPTER ONE: COMPETING VICTORIAN SUBLIMES

In this chapter I attempt to introduce the sublime as it applied to British art in the mid nineteenth century – the year 1850 being seen as the point at which the sublime embodied a tension between older Romantic definitions and a

new, confused form of the sublime informed by developments in science, industry and religion. The thesis begins with a setting out of traditional definitions of the sublime, with Burkean and Turnerian ideas providing the foundation for what follows. Although the sublime as employed by Hunt, Brett and Inchbold departs significantly from these eighteenth-century formulations, they constitute the cornerstone of the Victorian geological sublime. Burke's categories of obscurity and light, as well as the experience of fear and physical privation, in turn inform Turner's picturesque, architectural and immediate sublime. All the artists I consider were deeply influenced by Ruskinian theory and Ruskin's own thought on the phenomenon owed a debt to Burke and Turner while incorporating his own difficulties in reconciling the notion of terror with that of a benevolent God. The sublime as explored by landscape painters also drew on industrial developments and developments in geology which gave rise to disturbing possibilities unique to the mid Victorian period. This confusing mix is the beginning of the Victorian geological sublime. The following chapters will explore its internal tensions and contradictions.

CHAPTER TWO: THE GEOLOGICAL SUBLIME – SPIRITUAL DEATH OR THE PROMISE OF LIFE

This chapter sets out the fundamental dichotomy at the heart of the geological sublime: a negative, atheistic sublime versus a positive divine sublime, embodied principally by the work of Brett on one hand, and Hunt on the other. As the nineteenth century progressed, developments in geology, industry and religion began to chip away at the certainties of the Romantic period in which Ruskin's worldview was rooted. Victorian scientists took an increasingly

materialistic approach to interpreting the world around them and, as they did so, the idea that the natural world could also be read as a kind of spiritual text was challenged profoundly. However, Hunt and others continued to build on the inheritance of Turner, mediated through Ruskin. Ruskin saw nature, particularly mountains, as shadows of eternity, representing the intersection of the divine and the human. This becomes clearer when seen through the prism of the eschatological types of Symmetry, Infinity and Repose, all of which form part of Ruskin's 'science of the aspect of things'. It is through this 'science' and these types that the divine truth is made apparent on earth and Hunt attempts to express this in his landscape painting. A geologically truthful landscape art adds further layers of meaning to these mutually opposed geological sublimes.

CHAPTER THREE: THE GEOLOGICAL SUBLIME AND 'DEEP' SUBLIMITY

This chapter elaborates further on approaches to the geological sublime taken by mid-Victorian landscape painters. As the period progressed the older Romantic formulations increasingly merged with new manifestations of the sublime brought about by the growing interest in geology. Romantically-inclined artists such as Hunt employed Turnerian techniques to suggest illimitability or infinity, with an underpinning philosophical framework building on eighteenth-century theories, particularly Kant's mathematical and dynamic sublime. This kind of sublime continued to emphasise the idea of the divine in nature whereas Brett painted landscapes which suggested the idea of a new Darwinian sublime – a natural world in which grandeur and awe were generated by knowledge of the vast systems and physical laws which governed

it, without any need to refer to a benevolent god. Nevertheless, Hunt and others incorporated new developments into their work, reflecting the ideas promoted by religiously-minded geologists such as Hugh Miller the elder and his son Hugh Miller the younger as well as Archibald Geikie. This understanding of geologically-informed landscapes saw the grand ideas and trains of association thrown up by geological knowledge as a source of joyous wonder, echoing the poetry of Wordsworth, so fundamental to Ruskinian theory and the art of Turner.

CHAPTER FOUR: LIGHT AND THE GEOLOGICAL SUBLIME

This chapter examines the implications of different types and intensities of light for the geological sublime. It begins with the philosophical background, including Ruskin's own experience of light, Burke's view of sublime light effects and Wordsworth's idea of the spiritualising role of light in the landscape. These foundational ideas lead into the notion of light as providing a unifying force in a painted scene, bestowing a spiritual order on the physical order. The viewer, contemplating these light effects, is brought to a much closer relationship with the divine; in Ruskin's thought sunlight is both the source of physical life and spiritual life. The chapter outlines the different strengths and qualities of light, particularly the light of dawn and twilight or pure blue skies which are highly suggestive of this greater spiritual reality. The argument concludes with an exposition of the role of light in the apocalyptic works of Turner. These different types of light, when seen in geological landscapes, represent a high point of the geological sublime. The features of the landscape are indicative of

the earth's history and the history of the cosmos. The overlaying of spiritualised light effects brings the geological sublime towards the ultimate expression of sublimity: the supreme omnipotent deity.

CHAPTER FIVE: SWITZERLAND AS THE APOTHEOSIS OF THE GEOLOGICAL SUBLIME

Switzerland was the geographical region where the geological sublime could be experienced to its fullest extent. The country was central to Ruskin's understanding of the sacralised landscape and his views had their origin in Turner's artistic engagement with the Swiss Alps. Hunt in particular drew on Turner's visual techniques in a an attempt to harness the moral message Ruskin saw expressed in the features of the Swiss landscape. Ruskin thought of Switzerland as a vast outdoor cathedral and some of the Swiss geological landscapes produced by Hunt and Brett exploit the moral symbolism both directly and indirectly. The chapter concludes with the troubling idea of Switzerland as a place where the darker and more disordered strands of the geological sublime can be found. In the Swiss landscape the same destructive forces at work across Europe seemed to be magnified in Ruskin's mind as the growth of railways, industry and tourism in Switzerland were to him analogous to the vandalism of a church. In Switzerland the conflict between man and nature, spirituality and secularism played out during Ruskin's lifetime, reflecting the confusing tensions within the geological sublime which can never be fully grasped or resolved.

CONCLUSION

The geological sublime, then, reveals itself to be a phenomenon which is difficult to pin down or define satisfactorily. Most of all, the ideas raised by work of the artists I have considered reflect a time of immense cultural change when British society was re-oriented both intellectually and in terms of the material conditions of life.

CHAPTER ONE

COMPETING VICTORIAN SUBLIMES

The sublime is an aesthetic category which, in British art, gained widespread currency during the eighteenth century, reaching its apotheosis in the work of Romantic painters such as JMW Turner. It is often assumed that the use of the sublime in the visual arts largely disappeared during the Victorian period. Nevertheless, as I outlined in my introduction, Alison Smith has made a compelling argument that the sublime continued to influence artists throughout the nineteenth century, albeit sometimes in subtle and nuanced ways. The artists whose work I am considering, particularly Alfred William Hunt and John Brett, often demonstrated a very obvious engagement with the sublime over the course of their careers. Their use of the sublime represents a uniquely Victorian fusion of ideas which have their origins in the eighteenth century and the Romantic period, but also incorporates peculiarly Victorian concerns, reflecting the religious and scientific preoccupations of the period. Hunt's work demonstrates the most sustained engagement with the sublime and is heavily informed by his debt to the Turnerian tradition. The paintings of Brett which fall into the category of the sublime take it in a different direction – where Hunt employs a 'Victorianised' Romantic sublime, Brett's sublime is more directly informed by the scientific developments which were unique to the Victorian period. Hunt and Brett were not the only landscape painters who employed the sublime in the Victorian period – other notable examples include the apocalyptic work of John Martin, the arctic canvases of Edwin Landseer and Briton Rivière and, in a parallel to Hunt, that other inheritor of the Turnerian tradition, the little-known Albert Goodwin. The very diverse work of these artists indicates that the sublime did indeed continue well into the Victorian period and was utilised in multifarious and sometimes surprising ways.

Alison Smith's essay is the only significant commentary on the use of the sublime in the Victorian period. Smith's ideas will form the basis for my own

analysis and it will be useful to outline her view of the development of the sublime by Victorian artists before embarking on a discussion of how the artists whose work I am considering harnessed the sublime in their landscape practices.

Smith identifies a number of key phases in the development of the sublime in the post-Romantic period which built on the theory articulated by Edmund Burke and its subsequent treatment by JMW Turner. Turner's use of the sublime and its articulation in verbal form by Ruskin is of key importance to the work of Alfred William Hunt. As Smith notes, Ruskin initially struggled to accept the Burkean concept of the sublime. The Burkean sublime put particular emphasis on fear and even terror which for Ruskin came uncomfortably close to an acknowledgement of religious doubt or even atheism.[45] Nevertheless, by the early 1850s Ruskin had modified his position and came to accept at least partially that the sublime existed as an aesthetic category distinct from the beautiful. In his published writings Ruskin was one of the first to give literary expression to the use of the sublime in Turner's work but, like Burke, Ruskin believed that ultimately the sublime could not be fully realised in the visual arts though 'it could be recognised in part through symbols or the fragmented and disordered images that accompany but do not in themselves constitute greatness'.[46]

Smith contrasts the broad, painterly work of Turner with the precise and exacting technique employed by artists such as John Brett and John William Inchbold which appears to constitute a kind of 'anti-sublime' with its minute delineation of forms and focus on detail. She cites the year 1851 as the point at which it could be said that the power of the Romantic sublime began to wane and a uniquely Victorian aesthetic took hold. Wordsworth had died in 1850, and Turner in 1851; the Chartist movement had fizzled out and the Great Exhibition of 1851 was indicative of the spirit of self-assurance which would characterise Victorian Britain. As Smith puts it, these events 'have suggested to

[45] Smith, 'The Sublime in Crisis'.
[46] Ibid.

historians that a spirit of equipoise or balance between the claims of the past and the forces of modernity dominated the mid-Victorian period, negating any need for such an extreme aesthetic form as the sublime'.[47] The spread of industry, railways and urban growth could be said to have further undermined the concept of the sublime – they seemed to prove that the natural world could be tamed, brought under control and harnessed by man for his own benefit.[48] Many landscape paintings reflected this, cataloguing the features of the natural world in the spirit of scientific enquiry, suggesting that nature could be rigorously observed and categorized, thereby stripping it of the sense of compelling mystery and overpowering grandeur which the sublime appeared to require.

Nevertheless, as Smith goes on to argue, the sublime continued to play a significant role in Victorian landscape painting, as typified by works such as Brett's *Glacier of Rosenlaui* (1856, fig. 5, p. 21) or Hunt's overtly Turnerian watercolours. Smith argues that the precise detail seen in many Pre-Raphaelite landscapes such as Brett's *Glacier* could, paradoxically, provide 'a new language for evoking the sublime, as science opened up fresh insights on unfathomable concepts such as time, space and existence, which both enthralled and terrified the beholder'.[49] Brett's *Glacier*, with its intensely detailed depiction of rock formations and the processes of glaciation, alludes to the startling notion of an earth many times more ancient than had previously been imagined and the idea of a cold or even callous nature, to which humanity was of no particular significance.

In contrast to this sobering view of sublimity Smith considers the work of Hunt as part of a trend away from a relentlessly scientific view of nature which at times seems incompatible with the sublime; Hunt's work was characteristic of 'the resublimation of nature' and a concern to move back to more traditional conceptions of the sublime from the 1860s onwards:

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[47] Smith, 'The Sublime in Crisis'.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.

> The return to the sublime aesthetic can … be seen as a response to what has broadly been described as a crisis of faith following the spread of Darwinian theories of natural selection and evolution, together with a growing concern about the consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation on the environment. In keeping with Burke's mission to find a secular language for profound human experience, the renewed interest in the sublime could be seen as an attempt to find a new non-religious language for spiritual belief. On the other hand, for those who retained a sense of faith the sublime represented a form of religious experience. Either way, landscape became at this time a metaphysical realm for the projection of emotion – a sort of liminal space that traversed fact and feeling and in which nature functioned as a reflex of the viewing subject.[50]

To begin with, it is worth tracing the development of the theory of the sublime as it influenced Victorian artists. An essential starting point is the outline provided by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* Burke's work fed into the kind of sublime pursued by Turner, which in turn was taken up by Ruskin who formed his own definition of the concept. In the work of Hunt the sublime is reformulated yet again.

It will be useful, initially, to attempt to define what is meant by the term 'sublime', a difficult task, given that the concept is evasive and defies easy categorisation. Philip Shaw provides a useful point of departure for a discussion of the sublime. At its most basic the term 'refers to the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated. Yet through this very defeat, the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language'.[51] The sublime is a problematic term when applied to painting, as attempts to give a 'precise' visual form to that which

[50] Smith, 'The Sublime in Crisis'.
[51] Shaw, Philip; *The Sublime*; p. 3.

evades definition seem to present an insurmountable paradox. Nevertheless, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries artists attempted just that with varying degrees of success. The sublime has been more usually applied to poetry than painting, because of the former's ability to hint, suggest and evoke without giving precise form. In the case of painting the quality of indistinctness is seen as the visual arts' equivalent to poetry's capacity for vague suggestion. This Burkean quality of indistinctness is found in the work of JMW Turner and his Victorian successors Alfred William Hunt and Albert Goodwin. The Burkean sublime provides the foundations on which subsequent Victorian conceptions rest. Burke defined the sublime thus:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.[52]

Burke goes on to outline the centrality of pain in his conception of the sublime. The experience of intense pain and torment, especially when they threaten imminent death, is 'simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience'.[53]

The threat of destruction or imminent danger, then, can provide the viewer with intense pleasure when he or she knows that the danger will be kept at bay. This contrasts with Ruskin's initial view of the sublime as an immersive religious experience. The association of the sublime with pain and terror proved difficult for Ruskin as he struggled to reconcile Burke's conception with his own view of the sublime as offering a path towards closer knowledge of a supremely benevolent God. Alfred William Hunt, however, seems not to have

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[52] Burke, Edmund; *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*; p. 39.
[53] Ibid., p. 40.

been troubled by the idea that the natural world at its most overwhelming could also be associated with feelings of fear and terror.[54]

The idea of obscurity is also of central importance to Burke's conception of the sublime and at first seems to preclude its application to painting. Burke takes the view that 'if I make a drawing of a palace, or a temple, or a landscape, I present a very clear idea of those objects; but then… my picture can at most affect only as the palace, temple, or landscape would have affected in the reality. On the other hand, the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give, raises a very obscure and imperfect *idea* of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger *emotion* by the description than I could do by the best painting'.[55] The capacity of words to produce indefinite suggestions and arouse strong emotions is in Burke's view unrivalled by the visual arts: 'In reality a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever'.[56] As Philip Shaw puts it: 'What words evoke, therefore, with greater force than any other medium, is the entanglement of the objective and the emotional'..[57]

Burke's definition of the sublime, then, appears to militate against its successful application to painting. In spite of this the capacity of the visual arts to embody aspects of the sublime was legitimised by Joshua Reynolds who agreed that obscurity was indeed one source of the sublime. He took the view that an incomplete sketch for a painting could prompt the same kind of sublime response in the imagination which Burke attributed to poetry.[58] Reynolds effectively utilised Burkean obscurity to give a sublime gravitas to portraits such as that of Admiral Viscount Keppel (1780, fig. 8).[59]

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[54] See Hunt, Alfred William; 'Modern English Landscape-Painting' in *The Nineteenth Century*, May 1880.
[55] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 60.
[56] Ibid., p. 60.
[57] Shaw, *The Sublime*, p. 50.
[58] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. cviii.
[59] Riding, Christine and Llewellyn, Nigel; 'British Art and the Sublime', in Llewellyn, Nigel and Riding, Christine (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-

Fig. 8: Sir Joshua Reynolds: *Admiral Viscount Keppel*, 1780, oil on canvas, 124.5 x 99.1 cm, Tate Britain, London.

The application of Burke's sublime to painting, then, was not straightforward, but in the late eighteenth century the key tenets of Burke's conception gained increasing currency and artists began to attempt much more ambitious expressions of the sublime. In particular, painters became increasingly concerned with providing viewers with a visual experience which was overwhelming in its impact. Of fundamental importance were the Burkean categories of terror, obscurity, power, vastness, infinity, and magnificence. Turner was the most successful exponent of the sublime in the Romantic period and many of these qualities can be found also in the sublime work of Alfred William Hunt. Given that Hunt saw himself as a very self-conscious developer of the Turnerian tradition there are two further components to Burke's sublime which are particularly relevant. Perhaps surprisingly, given that Burke sees the sublime primarily in literary terms, he discusses the ways in which both light and colour can produce sublime effects.

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publications/the-sublime/christine-riding-and-nigel-llewellyn-british-art-and-the-sublime-r1109418

Where light is concerned, Burke has this to say: 'Mere light is too common a thing to make a strong impression on the mind, and without a strong impression nothing can be sublime. But such a light as that of the sun, immediately exerted on the eye, as it overpowers the sense, is a very great idea. Light of an inferior strength to this, if it moves with great celerity, has the same power; … a quick transition from light to darkness, or from darkness to light, has yet a greater effect.' These effects of light can be found in many of Alfred William Hunt's works and owe much to the example set by Turner. In his discussion of colour Burke states that 'an immense mountain covered with a shining green turf, is nothing in this respect, to one dark and gloomy; the cloudy sky is more grand than the blue; and night more sublime and solemn than day'.[60] This is more problematic for the kind of art produced by Hunt, many of whose paintings are characterised by very subtle gradations of luminous colour. Nevertheless, Hunt did produce a significant body of work to which Burke's concept of colour can be applied.

In addition to the various categories which fed into Burke's sublime, there was also an important physical component. This is particularly relevant to the work of Hunt who, like Turner, saw something heroic in the physical suffering endured by the landscape painter dedicated to accurately depicting the experience of being immersed in the landscape. The sublime as described by Burke is not merely a mental state; it also consists of 'exacerbated states of contractility [such as] 'pain' and 'labour' as well as 'tensions', 'convulsions' and 'spasms' that 'work up' the body's fibres to a 'pitch' 'beyond their natural tone'.[61] In Burke's sublime, both the mind and the body are stretched to their limits. This is precisely the effect Turner wished to produce in those who viewed his work.

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[60] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 82.
[61] Sarafianos, Aris; 'Stubbs, Walpole and Burke: Convulsive Imitation and 'Truth Extorted'', in Llewellyn, Nigel and Riding, Christine (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/aris-sarafianos-stubbs-walpole-and-burke-convulsive-imitation-and-truth-extorted-r1138672

Turner's sublime was of crucial importance to the work of Alfred William Hunt and influenced Ruskin's understanding of the concept as well. Turner's version of the sublime owes its origins to Burke but was also influenced by the work of the Revd. William Gilpin. Gerald Finley has analysed Turner's landscape sublime and broken it down into three categories: the picturesque, architectural and immediate sublime. The characteristics of each of these categories can be discerned in much of Hunt's sublime work as well. The picturesque sublime is typified by a proliferation of roughness and irregularity together with a rather contrived arrangement of the features of the landscape in terms of light and space. An early work by Hunt, *Wastdale Head from Styhead Pass* (1853, fig. 9) could be seen in this way. The landscape is artificially lit for the optimum dramatic effect and displays sharp contrasts between light and dark typical of the picturesque. Hunt's painting also includes a waterfall tumbling down a precipitous cliff face, reminiscent of Burke's sublime qualities of succession and excessive loudness. Loudness in particular had the ability to 'overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror'.[62]

[62] Finley, Gerald; 'The Genesis of Turner's 'Landscape Sublime'' in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 1979; p. 151.

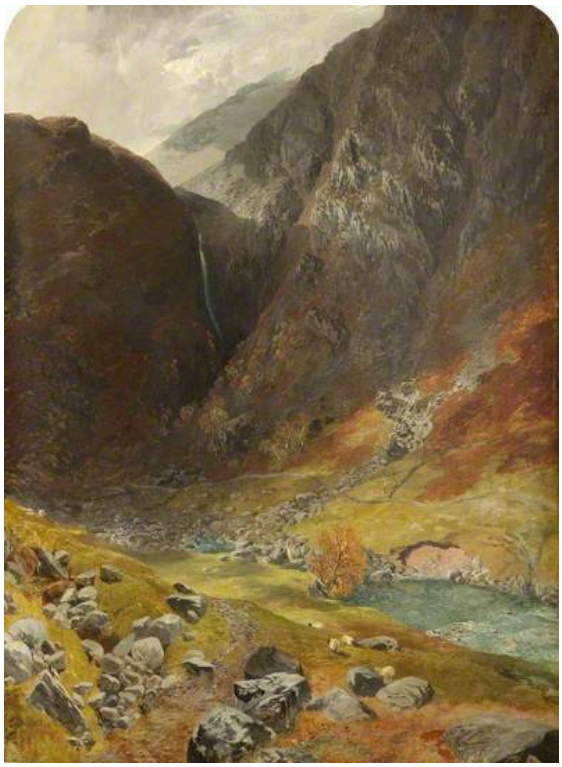

Fig. 9: Alfred William Hunt: *Wastdale Head from Styhead Pass*, 1853, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 71.2 cm, Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston.

As Turner's career progressed he became frustrated with the limitations and artificiality of the picturesque sublime and turned to the possibilities offered by the architectural sublime. As Finley points out, it is not unreasonable to apply this category to landscape painting given that nature in its ruinous state – blasted trees or rock formations, for instance – was treated in the late eighteenth century as the natural world's counterpart to ruined architecture.[63] Like ancient buildings, rock formations could potentially be dangerous and their great age prompted thoughts of past epochs.[64] The architectural sublime was less contrived than the picturesque and allowed a greater degree of expressiveness on the part of the artist. Another early work by Hunt, *Valley and Mountain Landscape* (c. 1853, fig. 10) could be seen as being in the tradition of the architectural sublime. The painting depicts a glaciated u-shaped valley in the Lake District. The rocky slopes of the valley can be compared to the pillars of the aisles of a cathedral, displaying the same kind of succession and

[63] Finley, 'The Genesis of Turner's 'Landscape Sublime'', p. 153.
[64] Ibid.

suggestion of infinity which Burke attributed to sublime architecture. In addition, the forms of the valley possess the great height and magnitude enveloped in gloom that Burke identified as sublime qualities in buildings.[65]

Fig. 10: Alfred William Hunt: *Valley and Mountain Landscape*, 1853, watercolour, 32 x 16 cm, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

In his mature work Turner pursued what Finley calls the immediate sublime. As the term suggests, artists who took this approach sought to abandon the contrivances and artificialities of the picturesque and architectural sublime, providing the viewer with a vivid impression of their immersion in the grandeur of the landscape. Finley describes the salient features of the immediate sublime in the following way:

> While in views of the former two modes, foregrounds tend to be dark and provide a visual barrier between the viewer and landscape, in the latter mode, foregrounds are non-existent or are illuminated and solid as if to invite the visual 'entry' of the observer. Further, while small figures are represented in landscapes of the former two categories, in

[65] Finley, 'The Genesis of Turner's 'Landscape Sublime'', p. 153.

> the third, figures seldom occur, and the spectator himself is brought into a strange new relationship with landscape; a kind of sense of confrontation between the viewer and natural object comparable to that which Burke had implied in his discussions of the Sublime.[66]

Turner's *Snow Storm – Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* of 1842 (fig. 11) is one of his pre-eminent achievements in the field of the immediate sublime. The viewer is instantly sucked into the swirling vortex which consumes the canvas echoing Turner's claim to have lashed himself to the ship's mast in order to experience the full fury of the storm. Hunt made similar comments about the necessity of immersion in nature and many of his greatest works reflect this. If there is an equivalent in Hunt's oeuvre to Turner's *Snow Storm* it must be *Tynemouth Pier – Lighting the Lamps at Sundown* (c. 1865, fig. 12). The viewer is poised precariously on the edge of the incomplete north pier at the mouth of the Tyne. We appear to be in imminent danger of tumbling into a violently foaming sea and the stippling which Hunt has applied to the upper half of the canvas is expressive both of howling wind and air filled with sea spray.

Fig. 11: JMW Turner: *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, 1842, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9 cm, Tate Britain, London.

[66] Finley, 'The Genesis of Turner's 'Landscape Sublime'', p. 156.

Fig. 12: Alfred William Hunt: *Tynemouth Pier – Lighting the Lamps at Sundown*, c. 1865, watercolour and bodycolour, 37.1 x 54 cm, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut.

Sarah Monks has commented on 'the sublimity of drowning' implied by Turner's *Snow Storm* and, given the precarious vantage point of the viewer in *Tynemouth Pier*, it is an analysis which adds to an understanding of the Turnerian sublime of that painting.[67] Monks says of Turner's picture:

> As so often in Turner's work, [the] experience is one in which nature and human culture work across and against each other. In its confrontation with raw unassailable forces beyond human determination, that culture's attempts to organise and cut through the world in its own interests (courtesy of engines, boats and straight-ahead navigation) are cast as a hubris familiar from ancient mythology. And in his desperate attempt to remain upright and proceed through space on his own terms – that is, to resist being stilled, swallowed and negated – man burns out both himself and his resources, the overworked engine that drives the boat's thrashing wheel leaving a foul

[67] Monks, Sarah; ' "Suffer a Sea-Change": Turner, Painting, Drowning' in Llewellyn, Nigel and Riding, Christine (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/sarah-monks-suffer-a-sea-change-turner-painting-drowning-r1136832

> scorch mark across the sky. There, even the systematisation of the visual into language appears futile, the boat's distress signal appearing little more than a transient spectacle already most clearly figured by its own feeble remnants: a rocket and red cinders falling, like Icarus and his feathers into the sea. The vessel's crew… 'go by the lead', plumbing the depths in order to gauge their proximity to the bottom and to death.[68]

This analysis is in may ways applicable to Hunt's painting, representing the collision of sublime nature and man's attempts to control that sublimity. This tension is also at the heart of the geological sublime, as I will argue in subsequent chapters. Hunt's picture shows the construction of one of a pair of piers designed to protect ships at the mouth of the Tyne from gales and hidden reefs. Both the viewer and the wave-battered man to the left seem to be in great danger of being swallowed by the furious sea, while the scaffold-like construction on which we appear to stand looks as though it might not withstand the force of the storm. The yellow beam from the lighthouse hints at those who, like the crew of Turner's ship, may be in peril on the open sea.

The subject matter of *Tynemouth Pier* leads to another aspect of the Turnerian sublime which Hunt employed in a number of his paintings. Turner was keen to incorporate images of industrialisation in much of his work and Alfred William Hunt attempted his own version of the 'industrial sublime' in *Tynemouth Pier* and one other painting, *Iron Works, Middlesbrough* (c. 1863, fig. 13). At least two other industrial subjects by Hunt are recorded – *Drawing the Furnace of a Durham Iron-works* and *Blast Furnaces after Tapping* – but their current whereabouts are unknown. However, a contemporary description of these two latter pictures suggests they were painted in a sublime style comparable to *Iron Works, Middlesbrough*.[69] Turner embraced a huge variety of industrial subjects over the course of his career and seems to have been fascinated by the visual possibilities they afforded. Hunt, on the other hand,

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[68] Monks, ' "Suffer a Sea-Change": Turner, Painting, Drowning'.
[69] *The Athenaeum*, 18 October 1873, p. 501.

rarely tackled the world of industry but, on the occasions when he did, invested the images with a grandeur which is surprising in an artist who tended to shun obvious signs of modernity in his work.

Fig. 13: Alfred William Hunt: *Iron Works, Middlesbrough*, c. 1863, oil on canvas, 43.8 x 64.1 cm, Tate Britain, London.

Images of industry were not new in British art - the first engravings of the iron works at Coalbrookdale appeared in the mid eighteenth century and steam-powered factories were an accepted component of the sublime by the 1780s.[70] At their best, factories could be seen as offering the hope of a better quality of life for the whole of society – symbolic of man's capacity to harness the materials of the earth and thereby revolutionise human life in ways which had not been possible before.[71] Factories and industrial cities were sometimes written about in tones of rapture: one commentator writing about the American city of Pittsburgh in the 1880s advised his readers to 'make your first approach to Pittsburgh in the night time, and you will behold a spectacle which has not a parallel on this continent'.[72] Factories and industry could even be described using the states of mind and categories enumerated by Burke. A

[70] Nye, David E.; *American Technological Sublime*; p. 109.
[71] Ibid., p. 125.
[72] Ibid., p. 124.

painting such as Hunt's *Iron Works* combines Burkean obscurity with blinding light; the figures are likewise obscure – they are mere shadows and seem to be enveloped by the overwhelming power of the industrial processes being carried on around them. The viewer, in keeping with Burke's view of the sublime, may feel a mixture of awe, astonishment and even a vicarious sense of terror as he or she contemplates the intense heat and cacophonous noise which the painting suggests.

David Nye has written perceptively on what he calls the 'technological sublime' within the context of the United States, but many of his arguments could apply equally to industry in Britain. He argues that the sublime in nature depends on an acknowledgement of the limitations of the human observer; technology, in contrast, can be sublime because it suggests that there are no limitations to what humanity can achieve – or at least those who control the technology.[73] Each form of technology will quickly be superseded so the sublime effect is only temporary but it is precisely because of this that the technological sublime 'undermines all notions of limitation, instead presupposing the ability to innovate continually and to transform the world. The technological sublime proposes the idea of reason in constant evolution'.[74] As I have outlined, the history of the industrial sublime in Britain goes back to the mid-eighteenth century and depictions of Coalbrookdale. Hunt's *Iron Works* can be seen as part of that tradition, possibly influenced by Turner's industrial subjects. A description of Coalbrookdale from 1776 could almost have been written about the scene shown in Hunt's picture: 'the noise of the forges, mills, &c. with all their vast machinery, the flames bursting from the furnaces with the burning of the coal and the smoak [sic] of the lime kilns, are altogether sublime, and would unite well with craggy and bare rocks, like St. Vincent's at Bristol'.[75]

Hunt, then, can be shown to have engaged with various modes of the sublime, which he may have developed through his knowledge of Turner's work. Along

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[73] Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, p. 60
[74] Ibid.
[75] Klingender, Francis D.; *Art and the Industrial Revolution*; p. 77.

with Turner, the defining influence on Hunt's artistic style came from the writings of Ruskin, who developed his own understanding of the sublime which must have had a considerable influence on Hunt as well as on John Brett, John William Inchbold and Albert Goodwin.

Like much of his thought, Ruskin's ideas of the sublime evolved over the course of *Modern Painters* as he attempted to grapple with the significance of emotion in art. In the first volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin denies that there is any need at all for a theory of the sublime, since his theory of beauty encompasses that which previous thinkers had categorised as sublime:

> The fact is, that sublimity is not a specific term, - not a term descriptive of the effect of a particular class of ideas. Anything which elevates the mind is sublime, and elevation of mind is produced by the contemplation of greatness of any kind… Sublimity is, therefore, only another word for the effect of greatness upon the feelings; - greatness, whether of matter, space, power, virtue, or beauty… The sublime is not distinct from what is beautiful, nor from other sources of pleasure in art, but is only a particular mode and manifestation of them.[76]

Ruskin's denial of the sublime can be attributed to his belief in a natural world pervaded by a divine, providential force. He struggled to accept that the creation of a benevolent God at it grandest could inspire feelings of fear and terror. However, his desire to conflate the sublime and the beautiful was also a product of his belief that both art and nature were sources of unalloyed pleasure, reflecting 'the unity of the human spirit' which, for him, pervaded aesthetic theory.[77] This unified theory was ultimately unsustainable and manuscripts for the second and third volumes of *Modern Painters* indicate that Ruskin had by then accepted that the sublime and the beautiful were discrete but interlinked categories. The texts contained in these manuscripts were not

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[76] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. III*; p. 128. Quoted in Landow, George P.; *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*; p. 183.

[77] Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*, p. 184.

included in the published volumes but the ideas they expressed are alluded to over the course of the second and subsequent volumes of *Modern Painters*.

The surviving manuscripts indicate that Ruskin had returned to a more traditional conception which reflects aspects of the Burkean sublime. He begins with a very orthodox summary of the sublime as anything which raises the human spirit to a point where it is capable of contemplating that which is greater than itself, lifting the mind above anything that is petty or transient to a state where it can ponder 'the great laws and masses of being.'[78] Ruskin goes on to discuss in detail the importance of the supernatural in his conception of the sublime, as well as the nature of awe. His outline of the supernatural reinforces his insistent belief in a divine presence in the natural world and is important when considering the work of Alfred William Hunt, who expressed very similar thoughts in his own essays on landscape painting. Ruskin writes of the ways plants respond to the weather conditions around them as being reminiscent of the mixture of suffering and joy which humans experience in life; he sees this as evidence of a sympathy, a supernatural force communicating with humanity through 'insentient things'.[79] Even in nature at its most furious Ruskin writes that

> With every manifestation of destruction or overwhelming power, there are addressed to the senses such accompanying phenomena of sublime form and sound and colour that the mind instantly traces some ruling sympathy that conquers the apathy of the elements, and feels through the inanimation of nature the supernatural unity of God.[80]

Alfred William Hunt's essay 'Modern English Landscape-Painting' indicates his debt to this aspect of Ruskin's thinking. He defines a true landscape painting as 'a picture which seeks to give expression by means of representation of certain aspects of external nature to the feelings which those aspects have excited in

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[78] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin, Vol. IV*; p. 369.
[79] Ibid., p. 370.
[80] Ibid., pp. 370-371.

our minds, especially and most commonly to the feelings which are excited when we are led to contemplate nature as possessed of a life which in a sense comprehends, or is in close parallelism with, our own'.[81]

As far as awe is concerned, Ruskin argues that in a 'thoughtful and sensitive person' the capacity to feel awe is indicative of 'the apprehension of power superior to our own, and of the great perpetual operations of death and pain in the system of the universe – both which perceptions… are either impossible, or so far as possible, repulsive to a mean mind; but both possible, and in a certain kind attractive, to a great one'.[82] A person with a noble mind delights in perceiving his own littleness, enhancing, as it does, his awareness of the 'mighty system… all about him'.[83]

Elizabeth Helsinger, in her discussion of Ruskin's approach to the sublime, cites two contrasting occasions when Ruskin experienced a positive, even exhilarating, sublime and a negative, terrible sublime. The latter example is particularly instructive as it illustrates the process by which Ruskin came to accept terror as part of the sublime experience. In the first example Ruskin describes an evening at Chamounix in 1842 when, in stormy conditions, amid a mass of tumultuous clouds, the peaks of a nearby chain of mountains were suddenly revealed as the clouds parted around them: 'the mighty pyramids stood calmly – in the very heart of the high heaven – a celestial city with walls of amethyst and gates of gold – filled with the light and clothed with the Peace of God'.[84] Ruskin goes on to describe how the experience brought about a profound understanding of how the absorption of self-consciousness into the glory of God 'is in the pure and right sense of the word BEAUTIFUL'.[85] Although Ruskin recorded the experience at a time when he did not recognise the sublime as a distinct category, it is nevertheless consistent with Romantic

[81] Hunt, 'Modern English Landscape-Painting', pp. 787-788.
[82] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 374.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., p. 364. Quoted in Helsinger, Elizabeth K.; *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*; p. 118.
[85] Ibid.

notions of the sublime and reminiscent of Wordsworth's accounts of sublime experience. In lines which are believed to have been written for the episode of *The Prelude* which dealt with Snowdon Wordsworth describes

> a mighty Mind
> That while it copes with visible shapes hears also
> Through vents and openings in the ideal world
> The astounding chorus of infinity
> Exalted by an underconsciousness
> Of depth not faithless, the sustaining thought
> Of God in human Being.[86]

The 'underconsciousness' has been described as an act in which 'the mind does not constitute its own nature or activity as a direct object of consciousness. It has instead only an "underconsciousness" – a more or less indirect sense of the mind's own activity as that activity permeates every act of perception'.[87] Ruskin included an extract from Wordsworth's *Excursion* at the beginning of each volume of *Modern Painters* and his own account of a positive sublime experience seems to closely mirror that of the poet, who was a major influence on Ruskin's thought. Ruskin, too, experienced the 'sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused'.

In 1853 Ruskin underwent another, similar sublime experience but on this occasion the effect produced was one of terror, described in *The Stones of Venice*. Again, it is a thunderstorm but this time the description is almost apocalyptic in tone:

> The preparation for the judgment, by all that mighty gathering of clouds; by the questioning of the forest leaves, in their terrified stillness, which way the winds shall go forth; by the murmuring to each other, deep in the distance, of the destroying angels before they draw forth

[86] Quoted in Wlecke, Albert O.; *Wordsworth and the Sublime*; p. 47.
[87] Ibid.

> their swords of fire; by the march of the funeral darkness in the midst of the noon-day, and the rattling of the dome of heaven beneath the chariot wheels of death.[88]

Ruskin overcomes the terror of the storm by associating it with the last judgement. The furious forces of nature are, then, not suggestive of a callous world without God; they are symbolic of a world which will ultimately see the triumph of a supremely benevolent deity.[89] The dramas of the natural world reflect the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

As successive volumes of *Modern Painters* progressed Ruskin tended to use the term 'sublime' in ways which accord with eighteenth-century definitions. Central to Ruskin's conception was the idea that the sublime in art depended on an 'imagined human presence' to provide an emotional conduit.[90] From the references to the sublime which occur in *Modern Painters* it seems that Ruskin eventually came to consider as sublime all emotions which could inspire profound reflection – for instance, sorrow, pain, horror, terror, awe or admiration. And as the last quotation shows, even apparently terrible aspects of nature could be seen as illustrative of great moral truths. Alfred William Hunt's thoughts on landscape painting appear to be consistent with this – he accepted that 'beauty in its highest forms is linked with shapes of fear and trembling' while nevertheless expressing an abiding love for the natural world as an expression of the divine will.[91]

As Ruskin grew older the mountain scenery which had seemed so sublime during his youth took on a darker and more sinister appearance to his mind. In volume four of *Modern Painters* (1856), a chapter entitled 'The Mountain Gloom' presents the great Alpine valleys as places ruled by a kind of spiritual stupor – perhaps reflecting his weakening faith. In 1851 he famously wrote: 'If

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[88] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. II*; p. 163-164. Quoted in Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*, pp. 120-121.
[89] Helsinger, p. 121.
[90] Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*, p. 209.
[91] Hunt, 'Modern English Landscape-Painting', p. 788.

only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses'.[92] On another occasion he wrote that he felt 'a terrible sense of the shortness and darkness of life – and dread of death'.[93] 'The Mountain Gloom', while still acknowledging the sublime natural beauty of the Alpine regions, paints a picture of their inhabitants as leading lives which are characterised by a suffocating ennui, devoid of any thought or understanding of anything beyond the most basic aspects of day-to-day life. The villages in which the peasants live are described as places of 'gloomy foulness' if not abject poverty. Ruskin concludes the chapter with a dark warning that though these places are where God is most clearly revealed, they also communicate the power of his wrath and the bleak consequences of sin. The chapter reflects an increasing tendency on Ruskin's part to see the harshness of the natural world. Ruskin could even see this in the work of Turner: where once he saw an expression of divine nature he now saw 'impoverished farmyards, stagnant streams, rotting trees, and fever-struck children'.[94]

This development in Ruskin's thought dovetails with the developments in geology which proved so disconcerting to the religious mind. Alison Smith argues that geology provided a new vehicle for the sublime in the mid-nineteenth century, but it was a deeply troubling sublime. This geological sublime suggested a world almost unimaginably ancient and governed by vast forces, utterly indifferent to the fate of man. These concerns are particularly evident in William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay – A Recollection of October 5th, 1858* (1858-60) and John Brett's *Glacier of Rosenlaui*. They became even more pressing with the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. It was the vast timescale revealed by the geological record which provided Darwin with the framework on which to hang his theory of evolution. Ruskin felt that the kind of materialistic theories proposed by Darwin and

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[92] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXXVI*; p. 115. Quoted in Rosenberg, John D.; *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius*; p. 30.
[93] Ibid., p. 126. Quoted in Rosenberg, The Darkening Glass; p. 30.
[94] Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass*; p. 27.

others were dangerous in that they stripped both the natural world and humanity of their spirituality; they were representative of a wider and, in Ruskin's view, very sinister trend in Victorian society. Ruskin saw this relentlessly materialistic science as a contributing factor in the breakdown of a healthy society and the natural environment on which it depended.[95] Charles Kingsley articulated Ruskin's worst fear when he wrote that 'I have long ago found out how little I can discover about God's absolute love, or absolute righteousness, from a universe in which everything is eternally eating everything else… The study of nature can teach no moral theology. It may unteach it, if the roots of moral theology be not already healthy and deep in the mind'.[96]

Two of John Brett's works illustrate the change that came about as a result of rapid developments in science. The *Glacier of Rosenlaui* was painted when Brett was still a fervent believer, in spite of the implications of its subject. Alison Smith identifies the *Glacier* as a picture which employs this troubling geological sublime but it has been convincingly argued that the painting has a significant religious element which would place it in the context of a more traditional, even Ruskinian sublime. Michael Hickox points out that Brett's *The Stonebreaker* (1857-8) had an obvious religious dimension to it and this, along with Brett's own written expressions of religiosity, makes it very likely that the *Glacier* had a religious element as well. Hickox contends that the juxtaposition of uncompromising scientific detail with religious symbolism makes this painting one which is effectively a comment on the doubt which plagued many thinkers in the mid-Victorian period. Hickox quotes the following lines from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* which, there is reason to believe, may have influenced Brett in painting the *Glacier*:

> Are God and Nature then at strife
> That Nature lends such evil dreams

[95] Smith, Jonathan; *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*; p. 27.
[96] Brooke, John Hedley; 'The natural theology of the geologists: some theological strata' in Jordanova, L.J. and Porter, Roy S.; *Images of the Earth: Essays in the History of the Environmental Sciences*; p. 39.

So careful of the type she seems
So careless of the single life

So careful of the type? but no;
From scarped cliff and quarried stone
She cries 'A thousand types are gone
I care for nothing; all must go[97]

Hickox argues that the glacier could represent the Biblical deluge, especially since its appearance is suggestive of a surging torrent, about to engulf all before it. The five fir trees perched at the very top of the precipice in the top left corner might symbolise Noah's ark which came to rest on the summit of Mount Ararat in the Biblical account of the flood. These trees and the lichen visible on the rock face are the only forms of life depicted in the painting and, in accordance with Victorian typological symbolism, Hickox argues that they may represent the Resurrection – Noah prefigured Jesus Christ who was the 'Ark of the New Covenant'. The subject of the painting also suggests that Brett was familiar with Louis Agassiz's catastrophist theories which reconciled the demands of science and religion, though the theories of Darwin put an end to any sense of harmony between the two only a few years later. Brett continued this religious symbolism in his *Val d'Aosta* of 1858 in which a cross-shaped formation is visible on the slopes of one of the mountains.[98]

As far as scholars are aware, Brett was the only Pre-Raphaelite to lose his faith; he evidently found the demands of religion incompatible with those of science. In her essay, Alison Smith describes Brett's *The British Channel seen from the Dorsetshire Cliffs* (1871, fig. 14) as a secular, post-religious manifestation of the sublime. During the period when *The British Channel* was painted Brett's

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[97]Tennyson, Hallam (ed.); *Enoch Arden and In Memoriam annotated by Alfred, Lord Tennyson*; p. 92. Quoted in Hickox, Michael; 'Science and Religion in the Pre-Raphaelite Work of John Brett' on the Victorian Web: http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/brett/paintings/hickox1.html (Paper originally given at a conference at Tate Britain, 2004).
[98] Ibid.

scientific interests were rapidly expanding. In 1874 he included twenty-seven scientists on his list of those invited to a private view of his work, as opposed to fourteen guests in the field of art. There is an openness to Brett's painting which seems to suggest a feeling of optimism; we are presented with a wide expanse of open sea, sun rays streaming down from above, illuminating the waters in a pattern which forms a meandering 'path' right in the centre of the picture. Smith argues that this is suggestive of 'freedom and hope for the future', as well as a patriotic sense of the reach of Britain's vast empire, linked by the seas.[99] She analyses the picture in terms of its relation to more traditional manifestations of the sublime and it is worth quoting her argument here:

> significantly, perhaps, the intense blue admits a transcendental dimension lacking in the *Rosenlaui* picture. The rays which spotlight the centre and push back the horizon propose the idea of the sea as a space for contemplating the variants of existence, as in the poetry of Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold and Algernon Charles Swinburne, all of whom wrote in symbolic terms about the sea and seashore… However, in confronting a void saturated with glowing light and colour, [Brett's] image evokes the sublime effects created in Baroque trompe l'oeil painting, as if he intuitively sought to recast traditional religious modes of the sublime into a modern secular language. This approach could be described as a post-religious condition of emotional transcendence, aimed at eliciting a sense of exaltation and release rather than fear or anxiety.[100]

In this analysis, then, Brett's painting is seen as a version of the sublime repackaged for a modern, rational world, free from the terrors of an all-powerful and potentially wrathful God, of the type encountered in passages of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*. As Smith points out, Brett's canvas, which is suffused with light and radiant colour, seems to inspire a mood of buoyancy and even

[99] Smith, 'The Sublime in Crisis'.
[100] Ibid.

exhilaration – a marked change from the kind of sublime encountered in the *Glacier of Rosenlaui* which reflected the intellectual agonies of the decade in which it was produced.

Fig. 14: John Brett: *The British Channel seen from the Dorsetshire Cliffs*, oil on canvas, 106 x 212.7 cm, Tate Britain, London.

Alfred William Hunt, on the other hand, never lost his faith and, in spite of painting a number of geological subjects, does not appear to have suffered from 'Victorian Doubt'. Hunt also painted a picture in 1871 which is comparable to Brett's. This is *Sunset off the Morea* (fig. 15) which was one of the results of Hunt's travels around the Mediterranean from 1869-70. Like Brett's picture Hunt's work also depicts a broad expanse of sea and features a wide horizon. However, looming over Hunt's scene is a roiling, turbulent mass of storm clouds which do not bode well for the three tall ships proceeding through the choppy waters. Hunt's work is firmly in keeping with the traditional conception of the sublime as traced from Burke, through Turner and into the writings of Ruskin. Indeed, Hunt's stormy sky is particularly suggestive of the sublime as experienced by Ruskin: a natural world which reflects the divine mind at work on earth, revealing both its beneficence and its capacity to judge harshly those who have failed to live moral lives.

Fig. 15: Alfred William Hunt: *Sunset off the Morea*, 1871, watercolour, 32 x 16 cm, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

These works by Brett and Hunt are indicative of the confused nature of the sublime in the Victorian period, which sought to reconcile traditional conceptions with the unsettling implications of rapid scientific progress. As one scholar has put it: 'nature as presented by Darwin was without mind or purpose'.[101] For Ruskin and Hunt this was unacceptable but Brett, in his painting of *The British Channel*, managed to achieve a kind of resolution: in his Victorian sublime, the absence of a judgemental God appears to create a sense of freedom and delight in pure reason.

In this chapter I have attempted to outline the origins and development of the sublime in the Victorian period, specifically as it influenced the work of Alfred William Hunt and John Brett. However, as Alison Smith and a number of other scholars have shown, the sublime in nineteenth-century British art was employed by a much wider range of artists and to greater effect than has often been supposed. As well as Hunt and Brett, Smith has identified aspects of the sublime in works by John Everett Millais, William Dyce, William Holman Hunt, Thomas Seddon and George Frederic Watts. Diana Donald has examined the arctic canvases of Edwin Landseer and Briton Rivière with regard to the disquieting questions they raised about the Darwinian natural order. In

[101] Woodring, Carl; 'Nature and Art in the Nineteenth Century' in *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, March 1977; p. 198.

addition to these artists, a number of other painters such as John Martin and Albert Goodwin carried on the Romantic tradition of the sublime into the Victorian period and beyond. Albert Goodwin, like Hunt, saw himself as working very much in the Turnerian tradition and was also influenced by Ruskin.

The Victorian Sublime was, then, a multifaceted phenomenon that encompassed traditions which reached back to the mid eighteenth century, while also incorporating developments in industry and the natural sciences. This fusion of ideas created a new philosophical language which at times departed radically from the sublime as formulated by Burke and other eighteenth-century thinkers. Paintings such as those by Hunt and Brett indicate that the use of the sublime in the Victorian period in a constant state of flux. These manifestations of the sublime, which sometimes seem mutually exclusive and contradictory, ultimately informed the geological sublime as painted by Hunt, Brett and others.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GEOLOGICAL SUBLIME: SPIRITUAL DEATH OR THE PROMISE OF LIFE

The Ruskinian 'geological sublime' provided artists with a platform for the engagement with ideas ranging from outright atheism at one end of the spectrum to an intensely felt spirituality at the other. Ruskin did not often write about the sublime overtly but several of his essays and many passages of *Modern Painters*, particularly *Modern Painters II*, discuss geology and the wider natural world in language which is unmistakeably sublime. Ruskin was a passionate advocate of a scientifically-informed landscape art, but only within the context of what he called the 'science of the aspect of things'. The landscape artist should understand the structure and 'anatomy' of the natural world with the aim of developing a kind of landscape grammar which would ultimately provide the tools to express much deeper truths than anything materialistic science could hope to discover.

Ruskin's thinking on science was very much in the mould of early nineteenth-century natural theology which interpreted the physical world as a manifestation of the word of God. Ruskin tended to approach scientific activity from the point of view of visual observation and classification. He was deeply suspicious of the ruthlessly logical analysis of the natural world which gathered force in the mid nineteenth century and was expressed visually in the paintings of John Brett. In the scientific tradition that shaped Ruskin's world view 'the harmony between art and science was easier to sustain because that

scientific culture was in its methodology much closer to that of the painters and poets, in that it was principally one of observation and classification. The early nineteenth-century scientist observed and recorded the phenomena of the natural world, like a painter, and, like a poet, named them'.[102]

In an attempt to rescue science from the atheistic path it seemed intent on going down, Ruskin elaborated his ideas on various scientific matters in the 1870s and 1880s. He developed what he called three 'grammars', all of which are incomplete and somewhat incoherent. *Love's Meinie* was written between 1873 and 1881 and deals principally with birds; *Deucalion* was written between 1875 and 1883 and sets out his thoughts on geology; the last, *Proserpina*, deals with flowers and was written between 1875 and 1886. None of these texts are in a finished state but they are the best expressions of Ruskin's science of the aspect of things. This science of appearances is the key to understanding the sublime elements of Ruskin's thought.

These three 'grammars' set out to describe, classify and name natural phenomena based on rules devised by Ruskin, with the ultimate goal of restoring the kind of imaginative engagement with nature that Ruskin felt was being ignored by modern science. Ruskin saw the relentless empiricism of contemporary scientists as indicative of a wider malaise in society; he called this empirical science 'half-witted because never entertained by any person possessing imaginative power'. [103] In Ruskin's view, the kind of all-

[102] Hewison, Robert; ' "Paradise Lost": Ruskin and Science', pp. 30-31.
[103] Ibid., p. 40.

encompassing theories put forward by Darwin were fatally flawed because of this complete lack of imaginative engagement with the natural world. Imagination filled in the gaps left by empirical science. Mid-Victorian science was devoid of 'the power of myth, the unifying, harmonizing system of ideas, images and values which synthesised all the disparate creative activities of mankind'.[104]

In this chapter I will attempt to develop further the idea of a Ruskinian geological sublime using passages from volumes I, II and IV of *Modern Painters*, as well as *Deucalion*, *The Eagle's Nest* and *The Storm-cloud of the Nineteenth Century*. Together these texts make a case for the natural world, underpinned by geology, as providing a gateway to divine truth, as well as signalling the disastrous dislocation between nature and human society which Ruskin felt defined the nineteenth century – in his view, one of the darkest periods in European history.

The introduction of Ruskin's 'grammar' of geology, *Deucalion*, provides a useful starting point for a further exploration of the notion of a geological sublime. If there is a geological sublime in Victorian landscape painting, then one of its principal components is the tremendous sense of intellectual, religious and emotional insecurity which geological discoveries engendered. In paintings such as William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay* or John Brett's *Glacier of Rosenlaui* (fig. 1, p. 10) it seems that humankind's very conception of itself and sense of place within a divine universe is being mercilessly torn down, to be replaced with

[104] Hewison, p. 40.

nothing but uncertainty and anxiety. Ruskin expresses this sense of despair very clearly in the introduction to *Deucalion*:

> It chanced, this morning, as I sat down to finish my preface, that I had, for my introductory reading, the fifth chapter of the second book of Esdras; in which, though often read carefully before, I had never enough noticed the curious verse, 'Blood shall drop out of wood, and the stone shall give his voice, and the people shall be troubled'. Of which verse, so far as I can gather the meaning from the context, and from the rest of the chapter, the intent is, that in the time spoken of by the prophet, which, if not our own, is one exactly corresponding to it, the deadness of men to all noble things shall be so great, that the sap of trees shall be more truly blood, in God's sight, than their heart's blood; and the silence of men, in praise of all noble things, so great, that the stones shall cry out, in God's hearing, instead of their tongues; and the rattling of the shingle on the beach, and the roar of the rocks driven by the torrent, be truer Te Deum than the thunder of all their choirs. The writings of modern scientific prophets teach us to anticipate a day when even these lower voices shall be also silent; and leaf cease to wave, and stream to murmur, in the grasp of an eternal cold.[105]

Paintings such as Brett's *Glacier of Rosenlaui* or *Etna from Taormina* appear to be the artistic confirmation of Ruskin's worst fears, though the spiritually

[105] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXVI*; p. 99.

charged works of Alfred William Hunt, John William Inchbold and Albert Goodwin offer the possibility that Ruskin's concluding hopes may come to pass:

> But it may be, that rather out of the mouths of babes and sucklings a better peace may be promised to the redeemed Jerusalem; and the strewn branches, and low-laid stones, remain at rest at the gates of the city, built in unity with herself, and saying with her human voice, 'My King Cometh'.[106]

These opening words from *Deucalion* provide a concise outline of the tension between a Ruskinian geological sublime based on atheistic despair and one based on hope and the possibility of redemption.

The thinking behind a work such as *Deucalion* provides the foundation upon which the ideas developed in this chapter are based. Ruskin's own words hint at the deeper truths he wished to uncover; he wrote that he wanted 'to see the Alps in a simple, thoughtless, and untheorising manner; … to *see* them, if it might be, thoroughly'.[107] These words encapsulate the essential nature of the Ruskinian geological sublime: the physical landscape, in particular its geological structure, is the starting point from which the observant artist or viewer can glimpse eternity. As Anthony Gully has pointed out, the very title

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[106] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXVI*; p. 99.
[107] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. VI*; p. 475. Quoted in Gully, Anthony Lacy; 'Sermons in Stone: Ruskin and Geology', p. 164.

'Deucalion' is indicative of the layers of meaning Ruskin ascribed to the proper study of geology. In ancient Greek mythology Deucalion is a figure comparable to the biblical Noah. He survives a great deluge and afterwards is told by Zeus to throw his mother's bones down a mountainside in order to restore the earth's human population. For Ruskin, the bones of Deucalion's mother are comparable to the stones and rocks studied by the geologist; in Gully's words, they become 'tokens of man's fall and redemption. The study of geology becomes a moral parable'.[108]

Contemporary scientists, in Ruskin's view, effectively could not see the wood for the trees. Scientists and literal-minded artists like Brett could not 'appreciate the beauties of nature, and they regard the imaginative man – one who can feel the poetry of life – as a donkey regards his rider: as an objectionable person whom he must throw off if he possibly can… The real scientific man is one who can embrace not only the laws that be, but who can feel to the full the beauty and truth of all that nature has to show, as the Creator made them'.[109]

Ruskin always denied the validity of the geologically-inspired theory of evolution put forward by Darwin, but his abiding interest in the Alps meant that he was often drawn into the controversies surrounding theories of glaciation; the subject of glaciers crops up again and again in his writings. However, in spite of this manifest interest in the physicality of the world

[108] Gully, 'Sermons in Stone', p. 164.
[109] Ibid., p. 165.

around him, mere physical facts in themselves did not constitute a full understanding of the world or humanity's place in it. Darwin's theory of evolution represented the zenith of the idea that science could explain everything. Empirical science was, in Ruskin's opinion, just one component of a mature understanding of the world; a complete world view could only be achieved when mythology, history and art were also taken into account. As Ruskin put it: 'In modern days, by substituting analysis for sense in morals, and chemistry for sense in matter, we have literally blinded ourselves to the essential qualities of both matter and morals'.[110] No account of humanity's place in the universe could be complete without a grasp of the spiritual significance of the material world – art and geology played a key role in this: 'The feeblest myth is better than the strongest theory: the one recording a natural impression on the imaginations of great men, and of unpretending multitudes; the other, an unnatural exertion of the wits of little men, and half-wits of impertinent multitudes'.[111]

The study of glaciers had long been the subject of scientific, literary and artistic interest; glaciers were seen as representing a particularly terrible manifestation of the sublime. A number of British poets and writers in the early nineteenth century made references to Alpine glaciers in their work and, of particular importance here, they were painted repeatedly by Turner. Dorothy Wordsworth, describing the point where the Arveiron glacier became a river, wrote that 'no spectacle that I ever beheld – not even the ocean itself – has had

[110] Gully, p. 167.
[111] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXVI*; p. 99.

an equal power over my mind in bringing together thoughts connected with duration and decay – eternity, and perpetual wasting – the visible and *in*visible power of God and Nature'.[112] Around the same time, in her novel *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley described the Mer de Glace, near Chamonix, as 'the most desolate place in the world'.[113]

The Mer de Glace was a site of immense importance to Ruskin, to which he returned again and again. Ruskin viewed the Mer de Glace as a divine place where the 'great Spirit' was uniquely palpable in both its benign and apocalyptic manifestations.[114] In 1842, he wrote to one of his tutors at Oxford and described the feelings which the glacier prompted within him:

> Nor can you ever forget for an instant either the gentleness or the omnipotence of the ruling Spirit. Though the whole air around you may be undulating with thunder, the rock under which you are sheltered is lighted with stars of strange, pure, unearthly flowers, as if every fissure had had an angel working [there?] all spring; and if the sky be cloudless, and you bury your head in a bank of gentians, and forget for an instant that there is anything round you but gentleness and delight, you are roused by the hollow crash of the advancing glacier, or the long echoing

[112] Flint, Kate; *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, p. 119.
[113] Ibid., p. 122.
[114] Gully, p. 170.

> fall of some bounding rock, or the deep prolonged thrilling murmur of a far-off avalanche.[115]

In a single year, 1849, Ruskin produced about fifty drawings of the area around Chamonix, exploring the vast physical forces which characterised the district. John Brett's painting of the glacier at Rosenlaui can be seen as a direct successor to the sublime Alpine paintings of Turner, mediated through Ruskin. Another, little-known, artist who also painted a number of glacial subjects under Ruskin's influence was the Revd. Richard St. John Tyrwhitt. Tyrwhitt painted two versions of the Mer de Glace for the Oxford University Museum of Natural History in 1859 (fig. 16) and these were very likely heavily supervised by Ruskin, as were Brett's Alpine pictures. Turner visited the Chamonix region in 1802 and sketched the glacier while he was there (fig. 17). Ruskin extolled the unparalleled truthfulness of Turner's depiction of the source of the Arveiron and his description of Turner's pictures could easily be applied to the images produced by Brett and Tyrwhitt. Turner, according to Ruskin:

> has, with his usual unerring perception of the main point in any matter, fastened on this means of relating the glacier's history. The glacier cannot explain its own motion; and ordinary observers saw in it only its rigidity; but Turner saw that the wonderful thing was its nonrigidity. Other ice is fixed, only this ice stirs. All the banks are staggering beneath its waves, crumbling and withered as by the blast of a perpetual storm.

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[115] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. II*; p. 223. Quoted in Gully, p. 170.

He made the rocks of his foreground loose – rolling and tottering down together; the pines smitten aside by them, their tops dead, bared by the ice wind.[116]

Fig. 16: The Revd. Richard St John Tyrwhitt: *Mer de Glace*, c. 1859, oil on canvas, 77.5 x 130 cm, Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

Fig. 17: Joseph Mallord William Turner: *Mer de Glace*, 1812, etching and mezzotint on paper, 179 x 257 mm, Tate Britain, London.

[116] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. VII*; p. 105.

The *Pall Mall Gazette* noted in 1887 another layer of apocalyptic meaning which Ruskin attributed to Turner's depiction of the Mer de Glace and which we could, by extension, apply to the images created by Brett and Tyrwhitt:

> Here is another note on a Turner drawing. Mr. Ruskin had often been struck with Turner's mythological treatment of the Mer de Glace as a dragon – the 'glacier's restless mass' is, as it were, the serpent-coil, the water at the glacier's mouth is the dragon's venom, and the scattered rocks are what the beast discharges. There can be no doubt of the interpretation, for on one of the stones in Turner's drawing Mr. Ruskin has noticed a serpent. This is just one of those small indications which Turner was wont to give of his meanings.[117]

The images of Alpine glaciers created by Brett and Tyrwhitt are Victorian interpretations of the tradition begun by Turner and continued through Ruskin. The fact that the *Pall Mall Gazette* drew attention to Ruskin's observation of a serpent in Turner's drawing of the Mer de Glace is highly significant. Given that, in the 1850s, Ruskin was attempting to continue the Turnerian tradition through artists like Brett and Tyrwhitt, it is reasonable to suppose that he must have seen similar layers of meaning in their pictures. The idea of the glacier being linked to the form of the serpent uncovers hidden depths of sublime and apocalyptic meaning in these pictures.

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[117] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXXIV*; p. 726.

In 1856 Ruskin had seen exhibited a number of Turner's apocalyptic and mythological canvases. Of particular importance to his later thought were Turner's *Jason* (1802), *The Goddess of Discord Choosing the Apple of Contention in the Garden of the Hesperides* (1806) and *Apollo and Python* (1811). These paintings were important in shaping one of the myths which came to dominate Ruskin's perception of his own period in history - 'the lizard and the serpent in the ideal dragon' which he believed had come to pollute nineteenth-century European culture.[119] Turner figured prominently in this myth. For Ruskin, Turner was a 'mythic hero' and 'England's unacknowledged Apollo in combat with the plague of greed in the nineteenth century'.[120] Linked to this was Ruskin's own mythical view of himself as 'a critical St George, locked in combat with a loathsome creature that was everywhere insinuating itself into the cultural fabric of Victorian England.'[121] Ruskin saw evidence of this apocalyptic serpent everywhere in the society around him, especially in scientific and industrial developments. For example, following the successful Great Exhibition of 1851 the Crystal Palace was moved to Sydenham and a number of cement models of extinct animals were created for the education of the public. One of these was an iguanodon and Ruskin was struck by 'the resemblance between the guardian dragon in *The Goddess of Discord* and that model now guardian of the Hesperidian Gardens of the Crystal Palace.'[122]

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[119] Hanley, Keith; 'The Discourse of Natural Beauty', p. 30.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XIII*; p. 118. Quoted in Hanley, p. 30.

The serpent form which Ruskin saw in Turner's drawing and which indirectly manifests itself in the images produced by Brett and Tyrwhitt, influenced as they were by the precedent set by Turner, came to symbolise the disastrous avarice of nineteenth-century society. Brett's painting in particular invokes the ruthless scientific materialism which Ruskin despised. As I have discussed previously, Ruskin included an engraving of Turner's dragon in Volume V of *Modern Painters*, seeing it as emblematic of the destructive and damning capitalism which he saw around him. As he put it:

> In each city and country of past time, the master-minds had to declare the chief worship which lay at the nation's heart; to define it; adorn it; show the range and authority of it. Thus in Athens, we have the triumph of Pallas; and in Venice the Assumption of the Virgin; here, in England, is our great spiritual fact for ever interpreted to us – the Assumption of the Dragon.[123]

Ruskin saw Turner's dragon as an incarnation of Mammon as described by the poet John Milton, associating the serpent form with 'the infernal circularity of the process of manufacturing ugliness'.[124] Ruskin seemed to see evidence of this mythic serpent all around him, including in the formations of gneiss rock, which he studied often. In 1875 he wrote 'the undulations of gneiss rock… where they are seen, seem to form the world'.[125] On another occasion he

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[123] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. VII*; p. 408. Quoted in Hanley, p. 30.
[124] Wheeler, Michael; 'Environment and Apocalypse'; p. 30.
[125] Gully, p. 159.

described how the patterns seen in gneiss rock in the Black Forest were 'coiled like knots of passionate snakes'.[126]

The intellectual turmoil suggested by Brett's *Glacier* was mirrored in Ruskin's thought and informed his views on the sublime. From the late 1850s on, Ruskin moved away from traditional Christian belief towards 'a shaky affirmation of the existence of God, and ethical beliefs in social kindness and justice'.[127] He began to question the once-sacred biblical scriptures and took the position that ethical choices should be based on 'the laws and facts of nature'.[128]

However, as Brett's painting suggests, it was by no means certain in the second half of the nineteenth century that nature could be trusted as a guide to ethics. Ruskin had once viewed science as a tool with which to elucidate great moral truths contained in the natural world; he increasingly came to see it as the driver of soul-crushing industrialisation and materialism. He even began to detest optical instruments which he saw as undermining his science of the aspect of things and thereby destroying the belief that the human soul could learn moral truths from nature.[129] Ruskin suffered terrible mental anguish as he ruminated over the possibility that the spiritualised Romantic view of nature might be a mere fantasy. Nature no longer presented a smiling, benevolent and divine face to him.

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[126] Gully, p. 159.
[127] Fuller, Peter; *Theoria: Art and the Absence of Grace*; p. 113.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid., pp. 113-114.

Industrialisation and science seemed to be destroying this benign natural world that Ruskin had cherished in his youth and he saw evidence of it everywhere. Once-exhilarating thunderstorms were now 'like railway luggage trains – quite ghastly in [their] mockery of them – the air one loathsome mass of sultry and foul fog like smoke.'[130] He fretted over the atmospheric pollution spewed out by factories and began to suspect that this pollution was infecting his beloved Alps.[131] He cited Greek, Christian and Jewish prophets who associated spiritual darkness with physical darkness; in the nineteenth century 'the Empire of England, on which formerly the sun never set, [had] become one on which he never rises'.[132]

Although art historians have ascribed both religious and atheistic interpretations to Brett's *Glacier of Rosenlaui*, this is not necessarily problematic – the painting very neatly encapsulates the agony of Victorian doubt and the inner struggles which many thinkers like Ruskin experienced as their faith was tested. Certainly, there are many elements in the painting which can be linked to the phenomena which Ruskin saw as indicative of the moral decline or even spiritual death of the nineteenth century. The entire surface of the canvas is painted with the kind of precision which comes from the myth-destroying optical instruments which Ruskin came to detest; the forms of the glacier and the surrounding rock types suggest the 'knots of passionate snakes' – and by extension, the mythic serpent – which Ruskin saw in gneiss rock; the

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[130] Viljoen, Helen Gill (ed.); The Brantwood Diary of John Ruskin; p. 191. Quoted in Fuller, p. 115.
[131] Fuller, p. 116.
[132] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXXIV*; p. 41. Quoted in Fuller, p. 117.

whole desolate scene is overshadowed by slate-grey clouds and dense mists which are reminiscent of the awful manufacturing pall which seemed to hang ominously over nineteenth-century England. At the time Brett's *Glacier* was painted, neither the artist nor Ruskin seriously questioned their faith, but it is tempting to see the image as heralding the idea of the moral gloom and plague cloud which gripped Ruskin's mind as he grew older. Given the terrible religious doubts which the subject of Brett's painting indirectly raises, the gloom-filled sky of the *Glacier of Rosenlaui* carries all the associations of Ruskin's sulphurous plague wind which 'looks… as if it were made of dead men's souls – such of them as are not gone yet where they have to go, and may be flitting hither and thither, doubting, themselves, of the fittest place for them'.[133] Since Ruskin came to see Brett's work as representing the deadening effects modern science could have on art, surely Brett's output can also act as a stand-in for the deadening effects of atheistic science on society as a whole. As Michael Wheeler has pointed out, for Ruskin 'the heavens were sacred, pure, unsullied – the dwelling place of God; and the clouds and the rain, like the angels themselves, mediated between heaven and earth, providing signs to those who could read them, of God's covenant with mankind'.[134] Ruskin later identified the year 1831 as the time from which ominous changes in the skies and weather patterns were detectable; the gathering gloom in Brett's glacier presages the wider physical and moral gloom which Ruskin saw descending on nineteenth-century Europe.

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[133] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXIV*; p. 33. Quoted in Birch, Dinah (ed.); *John Ruskin: Selected Writings*; p. 270.
[134] Wheeler, 'Environment and Apocalypse', p. 169.

If the work of Brett can be seen as symbolic of an atheistic apocalyptic vision of the human condition in the mid-nineteenth century, then the work of Alfred William Hunt, John William Inchbold and Albert Goodwin, represents a much more optimistic strand of Ruskin's sublime thinking. At the beginning of this chapter I noted that Ruskin's introductory remarks in Deucalion conclude on a more hopeful note and this mode of thinking is continued in the series of ten lectures which comprise *The Eagle's Nest* (1872). A number of passages in particular set out what could be thought of as a much more positive 'divine' sublime, beginning with another critique of contemporary science. Ruskin recalls a conversation in which a 'great physiologist' had expressed the opinion that sight was 'altogether mechanical', simply the act of processing visual information, much as a telescope would.[135] This view of sight is very much in keeping with the approach to landscape painting which Brett adopted – the emotionless recording of visual facts. Ruskin, by contrast, saw the act of seeing and the mode of sight as the starting point from which to begin a profound encounter with the natural world, which is described in sublime terms. As Ruskin expresses it:

> Sight is an absolutely spiritual phenomenon; accurately, and only, to be so defined; and the 'Let there be light', is as much, when you understand it, the ordering of intelligence, as the ordering of vision. It is the appointment of change of what had been else only a mechanical effluence from things unseen, to things unseeing,-from stars that did not

[135] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXII*; p. 194.

> shine to earth that could not perceive;-the change, I say, of that blind vibration into the glory of the sun and moon for human eyes; so rendering possible also the communication out of the unfathomable truth, of that portion of truth which is good for us, and animating to us, and is set to rule over the day and night of our joy and sorrow.[136]

Ruskin goes on to criticise sharply the tendency of modern science to investigate the world and claim that in explaining the material workings of nature all that can be known about the world is therefore known. In Ruskin's view, modern science perversely ignores great spiritual truths and instead presents the mere physical machinery which underpins spiritual truth as though the knowledge of that physical machinery constitutes in itself the ultimate truth. According to Ruskin it is human sight which acts as the bridge from the material to the spiritual:

> the noble human sight, careless of prey, disdainful of minuteness, and reluctant to anger, becomes clear in gentleness, proud in reverence, and joyful in love. And finally, the physical splendour of light and colour, so far from being the perception of a mechanical force by a mechanical instrument, is an entirely spiritual consciousness, accurately and absolutely proportioned to the purity of the moral nature, and to the force of its natural and wise affections.[137]

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[136] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXII*; p. 195.
[137] Ibid., p. 208.

Ruskin goes on to outline the proper ways in which an artist should look at the natural world in order to access and communicate spiritual truths – this is Ruskin's 'science of the aspects of things'. For Ruskin (in contrast to the older Brett) the 'faculty of sight, disciplined and pure, is the only proper faculty which the graphic artist is to use in his inquiries into nature'.[138] The artist must accurately interpret the appearance of the natural world and while some knowledge of the science behind this appearance may be useful 'it is always at his peril, that he knows more'.[139]

By implication, the literalist works produced by Brett, which create an atheistic and materialistic sublime, are not true works of art in the sense that Ruskin understands that term. In what could be an indictment of Brett's work, Ruskin writes that if art '*knew* anything of what she was representing, she would exhibit that partial knowledge with complacency; and miss the points beside it, and beyond it'.[140] The last two words here are important: in the final analysis, true art represents the ultimate spiritual reality beyond the physical reality which is ostensibly the subject of the painter's brush. Alfred William Hunt, John William Inchbold and Albert Goodwin seemed to understand Ruskin's injunction and this was where Brett failed. Ruskin describes two scientifically-minded artists painting a glaciated mountain scene:

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[138] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXII*; p. 209.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid., p. 211.

> Two painters draw the same mountain; the one has got unluckily into his head some curiosity about glacier marking; and the other has a theory of cleavage. The one will scratch his mountain all over; - the other split it to pieces; and both drawings will be equally useless for the purposes of honest science.[141]

Turner on the other hand and, by implication, those who attempted to build on his legacy, produced true art which was freighted with divine meaning.

> In Turner's 'Valley of Chamouni' the mountains have not a fold too much, nor too little. There are no such mountains at Chamouni: they are the ghosts of eternal mountains, such as have been, and shall be, for evermore.[142]

A true artist, once he has conquered the task of representing the physical appearance of the natural world, finds that 'visionary appearances will take place … which will be nobler and more true than any actual or material appearances; and the realization of these is the function of every fine art, which is founded absolutely, therefore, in truth, and consists absolutely in imagination'.[143] The artist must express the 'shadows' which form a gateway to the spiritual realm.

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[141] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXII*; p. 211.
[142] Ibid., p. 220.
[143] Ibid., p. 221.

In the chapter 'Mountain Glory' of Volume IV of *Modern Painters* (1856), Ruskin further develops this idea of the mountains as a place where the human and the divine intersect. He speculates that the great civilisations of Greece and Rome developed in part due to their proximity to elevating mountain landscapes, although the truth of this theory 'could only be tested by placing for half a century the British universities at Keswick and Beddgelert, and making Grenoble the capital of France'.[144] Ruskin believed that a region such as England's Lake District, removed from the worst excesses of industrialisation, would provide the ideal environment for learning; the setting alone would elevate the mind, while at the same time providing the student with a huge store of natural objects which would in effect form part of the curriculum.[145]

Ruskin was horrified by what he saw as the emergence of a society which appeared to him to be dominated by ruthless competition in the pursuit of material gain, a society in which spirituality seemed to have retreated to the margins. He believed that areas like the Lake District or the Swiss Alps were increasingly important, spiritually-charged 'books of nature' that functioned as refuges from a Europe criss-crossed by railways and besmirched by industry.
His spiritual interpretation of the landscape was dominated by the Evangelical typology he had imbibed as a child and young man. The second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846) develops a number of 'types' which are particularly significant when viewed against the background of the kind of landscape painting produced by Hunt, Inchbold and Goodwin. These types facilitate a

[144] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 439. Quoted in Hanley, pp. 18-19.
[145] Hanley, pp. 18-19.

much more positive sublime than that found in the work of Brett. As has been noted, *Modern Painters II* is overtly religious in tone and in it Ruskin sets out in detail the potential for moral meaning in landscape. He explores issues which build on those developed in geological landscape paintings: in particular the juxtaposition of limited human existence with the vast concepts of deep time and infinity. The influence of Wordsworth again looms large, particularly part five of the *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* which Ruskin uses as a foundation for his examination of 'the influence of external things upon the pure human soul'.[146] Part five of the *Ode* encapsulates much of Ruskin's thinking on the connection between landscape and the destiny of the eternal human soul:

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
> The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting,
> And cometh from afar:
> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home:
> Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy,
> But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy;

[146] Finley, C. Stephen; *Nature's Covenant: Figures of Landscape in Ruskin*, p. 196.

> The Youth, who daily farther from the East
> Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
> And by the vision splendid
> Is on his way attended;
> At length the Man perceives it die away,
> And fade into the light of common day.[147]

Ruskin gives his own very concise summation of Wordsworth's sentiments in *Modern Painters II*: 'Imagination is a pilgrim on the earth – and her home is in heaven'.[148] In *Modern Painters II* Ruskin develops three eschatological types: Symmetry, Infinity and Repose. Of these, Symmetry is the least significant; Ruskin describes it as 'the type of Divine Justice' and the antithesis of 'the violence and disorganization of sin'.[149] The type of Repose takes on greater significance in Ruskin's mind; Finley describes it as 'Ruskin's central statement, in *Modern Painters II*, concerning the doctrine of sanctification'.[150] The types of Repose and Infinity are particularly important when attempting to understand the sublime resonances in the work of Hunt, Inchbold and Goodwin. Ruskin explains 'Repose' as follows:

> It is the 'I am' of the Creator opposed to the 'I become' of all creatures; it is the sign alike of the supreme knowledge which is incapable of

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[147] Gill, Stephen (ed.); *Wordsworth: The Major Works*, p. 299.
[148] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 288. Quoted in Finley, p. 197.
[149] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p 125 and 127. Quoted in Finley, p. 221.
[150] Finley, p. 222.

surprise, the supreme power which is incapable of labour, the supreme volition which is incapable of change; it is the stillness of the beams of the eternal chambers laid upon the variable waters of ministering creatures.

Repose, as it is expressed in material things, is either a simple appearance of permanence and quietness, as in the massy forms of a mountain or rock, accompanied by the lulling effect of all mighty sight and sound, which all feel and none define or else it is repose proper, the rest of things in which there is vitality or capability of motion actual or imagined: and with respect to these the expression of repose is greater in proportion to the amount and sublimity of the action which is *not* taking place, as well as to the intensity of the negation of it. Thus we do not speak of repose in a pebble, because the motion of a pebble has nothing in it of energy or vitality, neither its repose of stability. But having once seen a great rock come down a mountain side, we have a noble sensation of its rest, now bedded immovably among the fern; because the power and fearfulness of its motion were great, and its stability and negation of motion are now great in proportion. Hence the imagination, which delights in nothing more than in the enhancing of the characters of repose, effects this usually by either attributing to

> things visibly energetic and ideal stability, or to things visibly stable and ideal activity or vitality.[151]

Infinity is a type which is to be found in dawn or evening light; such delicate effects of light occur frequently in the work of Hunt, Inchbold and Goodwin:

> It is of all visible things the least material, the least finite, the farthest withdrawn from the earth prison-house, the most typical of the nature of God, the most suggestive of the glory of His dwelling-place. For the sky of night, though we may know it boundless, is dark; it is a studded vault, a roof, that seems to shut us in and down; but the bright distance has no limit, we feel its infinity, as we rejoice in its purity of light.[152]

Even a narrow band of this light can communicate sublime meaning:

> But although this narrow portal of escape be all that is absolutely necessary, I think that the dignity of the painting increases with the extent and amount of the expression.[153]

In his analysis of the Infinite, what Ruskin ultimately describes is what Finley has called the 'co-presence, the hidden pressure, of the heavenly [world]'

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[151] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; pp. 113-115. Quoted in Barrie, David (ed.), *Modern Painters by John Ruskin*, pp. 213-214.
[152] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 81. Quoted in Barrie, p. 201.
[153] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p.83. Quoted in Barrie, p. 202.

beyond the beautiful physical world we see before us.[154] This type of analysis is typical of Ruskin's science of the aspect of things in which a material phenomenon in the natural world, such as a dawn sky, is found, through the vision of the artist, to be indicative of a greater spiritual truth. Ruskin is drawing not only on his own thoughts and responses but on those of others he has questioned on the subject. Ruskin concludes that many people react in a particular way to a 'bright distance' – often a profound emotional response or, as he puts it, 'the love, namely, of a light distance appearing over a comparatively dark horizon'. [155] Ruskin recognises that there are many comparable, though more transient, effects of light in nature but maintains that the quality of light seen in a clear sky at dawn or in the evening exercises a peculiar hold on the human mind – there is something in it which calls out to the soul:

> [T]here is yet a light which the eye invariably seeks with a deeper feeling of the beautiful, - the light of the declining or breaking day, and the flakes of scarlet cloud burning like watch-fires in the green sky of the horizon: a deeper feeling, I say, not perhaps more acute, but having more of spiritual hope and longing.[156]

Ruskin believes that the effect created in the mind by a 'calm and luminous distance' is much more than a mere aesthetic pleasure; it speaks to something

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[154] Finley, p. 222.
[155] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 79. Quoted in Finley, p. 222.
[156] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; pp. 79-80. Quoted in Finley, p. 222.

deep and profound within the human soul. There are many things in art and in life which may attract the eye or cheer the mind but, for Ruskin, there is something much more significant in this peculiar light. It is an effect which can be seen in many works produced by Hunt, Inchbold and Goodwin: 'the still small voice of the level twilight behind purple hills, or the scarlet arch of dawn over the dark, troublous-edged sea'.[157] Ruskin firmly believes that many people react strongly to this kind of light because on some level the soul recognises that the source of the light is its true home – divine eternity. In keeping with the evangelical tradition of seeing nature as an extension of the word of God contained in the Bible, the 'still small voice' described by Ruskin finds a parallel in the voice of the Lord that Elijah hears on Mount Horeb.[158] This light, then, forms a kind of portal which links this world with the infinity of the deity.

Or as Finley expresses it: 'Men and women must look to nature, to the "infinite hope of light", in order to raise up their eyes beyond the gloom of the earth-cloud, the shadow of the earth prison-house. Nature's covenant is a promise of deliverance'.[159] Finley's use of terms such as the 'gloom of the earth cloud' or the 'earth prison-house' are highly resonant when applied to the work of the artists under consideration here. The murky atmospheric gloom of Brett's *Glacier of Rosenlaui* and the geological subject itself suggest a vision for humanity in which there is no hope of anything beyond the dull materiality of daily existence.

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[157] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 80. Quoted in Finley, p. 222.
[158] Finley, p. 223.
[159] Ibid.

The types of Symmetry, Repose and Infinity, as applied to the work of Hunt, Inchbold and Goodwin, add to the layers of sublime meaning which can be found in works by those artists which have a strong geological content. The geological information in such works opens up the possibility of vast timeframes and natural forces at work behind seemingly still landscapes – landscapes which often demonstrate Ruskin's type of Repose. When Ruskin's type of Infinity is laid over the geological components of these paintings 'humanity gets a glimpse of the restored Eden, wherein the curse upon Adam and Eve, delivered upon their expulsion from the first paradise, will be lifted, and where the perfected spirits of men and women, gathered to Christ in his peaceable kingdom, will render the completed meanings and the consummate antitypes of a final harvest of human endeavour and natural forms'.[160]

It is particularly revealing that Ruskin quotes Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality* in his discussion of the type of Infinity. Ruskin associates the ability to detect these intimations of the divine with the mind of a child, as yet unspoilt by the 'bitter decline' brought on by 'the cares and weight of manhood'.[161] It is tempting to see in John Brett the man who gradually loses his ability to see the light and joy; Hunt, Inchbold and Goodwin are among those who, as Ruskin puts it, 'look… back to their youngest and least-learned days' as revealing 'the most intense, superstitious, insatiable, and beatific perception of

[160] Finley, p. 227.
[161] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 78. Quoted in Barrie, p. 199.

[Nature's] splendours'.[162] Ruskin asserts that this light exercises a hold over the human mind because it echoes 'the great call of Christ' and holds out the promise of eternal rest and freedom from the earth 'prison-house.' For Ruskin, these eschatological types are supremely important because they allow us a glimpse of the redeeming divine love even while we remain physically bound to the earth. As Finley puts it:

> both earthly and heavenly worlds are equally vital and real, united not by any emptying out of the meaning of the one into the other, but by an anagogical co-presence, in which human homelessness and eternal habitation are both signed in the abode of the 'scarlet arch' of dawn.[163]

The luminous light of dawn and twilight then, often represented by Hunt, Inchbold, and Goodwin, takes on an almost urgent sublime significance. Ruskin's type of Infinity recalls Wordsworth's phrase 'spots of time', brief moments which allow the observer to grasp something much greater than himself, something which calls out to his soul – the 'sense of something far more deeply interfused.'[164]

A consideration of the qualities of infinity present in the light of dawn or twilight leads to another more intense form of the sublime which Ruskin discusses in Volume I of *Modern Painters* and which is of particular relevance

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[162] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 77. Quoted in Barrie, p. 199.
[163] Finley, p. 227.
[164] McGrath, Alister E., *Re-imagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology*, p. 111.

to the work of Alfred William Hunt and Albert Goodwin. Ruskin saw Turner as a kind of mediator between God and humankind; Hunt and Goodwin, self-conscious in their attempts to build upon Turner's legacy, must have seen themselves as occupying that role in a small way. For Ruskin, Turner's work was:

> Glorious in conception – unfathomable in knowledge – solitary in power – with the elements waiting upon his will, and the night and the morning obedient to his call, sent as a prophet of God to reveal to men the mysteries of His universe, standing, like the great angel of the Apocalypse, clothed with a cloud, and with a rainbow upon his head, and with the sun and stars given into his hand.[165]

Inchbold often painted what Ruskin called the 'calm and luminous' light of dawn or twilight but it is the work of Hunt and Goodwin which comes closest to the Turnerian apocalyptic sublime which, in its intensity, moves beyond the type of Infinity. Ruskin's analysis of Turner could be directly applied to much of their work:

> There is but one master whose works we can think of while we read this, one alone, has taken notice of the neglected upper sky; it is his peculiar and favourite field; he has watched its every modification, and given its every phase and feature; at all hours, in all seasons, he has

[165] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. III*; p. 254. Quoted in Wheeler, p. 170.

> followed its passions and its changes, and has brought down and laid open to the world another apocalypse of heaven.[166]

As with the biblical echoes in Ruskin's type of Infinity, Michael Wheeler sees this passage as an application of Evangelical typology, drawing parallels between Ruskin's conception of Turner as a kind of divine messenger and the account of Moses carrying the tablets of the covenant down from Mount Sinai in the Book of Exodus.[167]

Wheeler quotes a passage from Volume I of *Modern Painters* in which Ruskin describes the scenery around Albano in overtly apocalyptic tones; the encounter with nature becomes an experience of revelation which permits 'the uncovering of the glory of God'.[168] Ruskin's description of the natural scene as a 'conflagration' is a vivid word picture, and a verbal equivalent of the works of Hunt and Goodwin.

> 'The noonday sun came slanting down the rocky slopes of La Riccia, and their masses of entangled and tall foliage, whose autumnal tints were mixed with the wet verdure of a thousand evergreens, were penetrated with it as with rain. I cannot call it colour, it was conflagration. Purple, and crimson, and scarlet, like the curtains of God's tabernacle, the rejoicing trees sank into the valley, in showers of light, every separate

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[166] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. III*; p. 363. Quoted in Wheeler, p. 172.
[167] Wheeler, p. 172.
[168] Ibid.

> leaf quivering with buoyant and burning life; each, as it turned to reflect or to transmit the sunbeam, first a torch and then an emerald.'[169]

Ruskin's reference to the tabernacle builds on the previous extract in which Moses and the covenant were invoked. In Ruskin's mind, nature become analogous to the biblical tabernacle; his use of the term 'conflagration' adds further layers of apocalyptic meaning to this, recalling the Book of Revelation, which describes the curtains of the tabernacle being drawn away. In Wheeler's words, 'in the Albano passage, each separate leaf which quivers with 'buoyant and burning life' reflects the light of the sun as the angels in Revelation joyfully reflect the light of the Son'.[170]

Turner famously said the sun was God and Ruskin also developed his own mythology of the sun. In the chapter 'Of Truth of Colour' Ruskin describes vividly the sublime and apocalyptic heights nature can reach in the minutes before the evening sun dips below the horizon:

> The whole sky from the zenith to the horizon becomes one molten mantling sea of colour and fire; every black bar turns into massy gold, every ripple and wave into unsullied shadowless crimson, and purple, and scarlet, and colours for which there are no words in language, and

[169] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. III*; p. 279. Quoted in Wheeler, p. 172.
[170] Wheeler, pp. 172-173.

> no ideas in the mind,-things which can only be conceived while they are visible. [171]

Ruskin calls Turner's depictions of the skies 'another Apocalypse of heaven' and, as Wheeler puts it, 'places them within his own Evangelical scheme in which the 'pure and holy hills' – 'a link between heaven and earth' – and the rain-cloud's 'columnar burden of blessing' mediate between heaven and earth, signifying God's covenant with man, and in which every single leaf on this earth quivers with buoyant and burning life'.[172]

Fig. 18: John William Inchbold: *Cuillin Ridge, Skye, from Sligachan*, 1855, oil on canvas, 51 x 69 cm, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

[171] Wheeler, p. 173.
[172] Ibid., p. 174.

Fig. 19: Alfred William Hunt: *Loch Maree – A Lifting of the Mists at Sunset*, 1876, pencil and watercolour, 33 x 52.7 cm, The Fuller Collection.

Fig. 20: Albert Goodwin: *The Sermon in the Hayfield, Simplon*, date unknown, oil on canvas, 81.5 x 112 cm, Wolverhampton Art Gallery.

The works of Hunt, Inchbold and Goodwin (figs. 18, 19 and 20) often demonstrate direct engagement with the kind of positive sublimity which I have outlined. The three works illustrated all depict the kind of geological

subject matter which Ruskin advocated and the types of Repose and Infinity can be detected in all three. Inchbold's painting of extinct volcanoes suggests the violence which formed the conical peaks, as well as the rock forms in the foreground; Hunt's, picture of a glaciated valley conjures up images of the vast river of ice which carved it out and Goodwin's painting also depicts a region subject to the forces of glaciation. All three, then, suggest past epochs of great geological activity which has now come to an end. Moving beyond this, each painting features mountain ridges above which luminous and hazy skies illustrate the type of Infinity, suggesting the 'still small voice' of the Lord; indeed, Goodwin's picture shows a priest and small congregation directly exploiting the full religious potential of their mountain setting. Of the three paintings, Hunt's takes these Ruskinian resonances the furthest: his blazing sunset and the shimmering foreground vegetation recall Ruskin's Turnerian 'conflagration', with its biblical overtones of Moses and the tabernacle of the covenant.

In this chapter I have set out to develop further the sublime resonances contained in the geological works of Brett, Hunt, Inchbold and Goodwin. These works are profoundly suggestive of the intellectual turmoil which gripped many in mid-Victorian society as they grappled with the implications of geological discoveries, culminating in Darwin's theory of evolution. The two strands of the Ruskinian geological sublime that I have identified go down widely divergent paths and both leave the viewer with great unanswered questions of different kinds. The geological sublime of Hunt, Inchbold and Goodwin is ultimately more in keeping with the spirit of Ruskin's writings, the

visual expression of 'the desire to efface the image of the self… bound up with Ruskin's belief that the modern disease was a form of subjectivity that was harmful to the religious sense.'[173] The poetry of Wordsworth courses through Ruskin's work and this positive, divine sublime is the artistic manifestation of the poet's sentiments in *The Excursion*. Hunt, Inchbold and Goodwin attempted a Wordsworthian engagement with nature in their artistic practice and, like Ruskin, they believed that it was by 'deeply drinking-in the Soul of Things / We shall be wise perforce'.[174]

[173] Bate, Jonathan; *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, p. 71.
[174] Bushell, Sally; Butler, James A. and Jaye, Michael C. (eds.); *The Excursion*, p. 164. Quoted in Bate, pp. 83-84.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GEOLOGICAL SUBLIME AND 'DEEP' SUBLIMITY

Victorian artists developed the concept of the sublime in a multiplicity of ways which often upend received wisdom on the history of the sublime in the post-Romantic period. The Victorian age began with a form of the sublime which was very much in the tradition of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, epitomised by the work of J.M.W. Turner, but it evolved in surprising ways, particularly in the 1850s, when the temporary union of geology and landscape painting allowed landscape art in Britain to explore new permutations of the sublime. The art of Alfred William Hunt marries both the earlier Romantic strand of the sublime and a uniquely Victorian focus on observation, often of geological features. However, the geological Victorian sublime was taken up by a number of other artists to varying degrees and in this chapter I will attempt to develop further layers of sublime meaning unearthed by mid-century geological British landscape painting.

The sublime as it impacts on the visual arts is usually associated more with the Romantic period than with the Victorian age. However, the concept continued to evolve in the mid-nineteenth century and it will be useful to outline here further aspects of this development, as well as earlier conceptions of the sublime which continued to be relevant in the Victorian period. The work of Alfred William Hunt is very directly inspired by the Romantic sublime but simultaneously took the concept in a direction which was thoroughly Victorian.

It is probable that, through the two greatest influences on his artistic life, Turner and Ruskin, Hunt must have imbibed a good deal of the Wordsworthian sublime, reflected in Turner's paintings and Ruskin's prose. As it was for Wordsworth, in the work of Hunt, for example, the sublime is very much seen as an elevating and ennobling force which allows the mind to experience something of the divine power and benevolence which he believed pervaded the universe. Hunt was often drawn to the mountain regions of Britain and, like Wordsworth, appears to have seen these wild and forbidding places as ideal environments in which to experience the 'shock of awful consciousness' which permitted a 'visitation from the living God'.[175] For Hunt, the sublime, even when accompanied by an exploration of geological phenomena, is very much a positive and ultimately life-affirming experience.

However, as discussed previously, the exploration of geological themes in landscape art also gave rise to disquieting questions about man's place in the universe and cast doubt on the existence of the benevolent God so beloved of Hunt, Ruskin and Wordsworth. The sublime as touched upon in the work of John Brett and William Dyce is more troubling and is reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche's attempts to formulate a theory of the sublime. The unsettling absence of a benevolent Biblical God which these works appear to suggest raised the spectre of a nihilistic world in which there is no ultimate meaning and in which man must therefore find his own meaning amid the absurdity. A geological work such as Brett's *The Glacier of Rosenlaui* (fig. 1, p. 10) suggests

[175] Kirwan, James; *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics*; p. 124.

the Nietzschean idea of the sublime as a state 'in which nauseous thoughts about the dreadful and absurd character of existence, as human beings encounter it, are transformed into mental images with which it is possible to live'.[176] In Brett's painting, there is no reassuring human presence or anything to suggest human scale – instead, the viewer is presented with the stupendous forces of geology and glaciation which are completely impersonal and indifferent to human life. Somewhat ironically, an answer of sorts to this bleakly nihilistic view is suggested by Darwinian theory, as I will argue.

Some geological landscapes of the mid century could be divided into two camps: many of those painted by Hunt and other Romantically-inclined artists (including Ruskin) which envisioned the sublime as overwhelmingly powerful but ultimately benevolent, and images produced by artists like Brett and Dyce which raise the unsettling prospect of a world without God. John William Inchbold often simply presented the landscape and left the viewer to formulate his or her own interpretation. The ongoing discoveries in mid-nineteenth-century geology engendered fierce debate among those who argued for a literal interpretation of the Bible and those who pressed for a non-literal reading of the texts. For John Brett, scientific developments brought about a complete loss of faith. For Ruskin, the Swiss Alps were the supreme locus of the sublime and he attempted to instill this enthusiasm in younger artists. However, even for

[176] Ansell-Pearson, Keith; 'Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy: An Interpretation of *Dawn*' http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/people/pearson/012_ansellpearson.pdf

Ruskin, the once glorious sublimity of the Alps seemed to evaporate as he grew older and the mountains instead took on a more terrible aspect.

In this chapter I will examine further theories and strategies of the sublime and the ways in which they can be applied to the works of these artists, particularly Hunt. Before discussing ideas of the sublime it is worth considering how Hunt may have developed visual techniques to convey sublimity in landscapes with geological components. Painting had traditionally been held to be inferior to poetry in terms of its ability to convey something as indefinite as the sublime and this is particularly relevant to Hunt who worked in minute detail. Hunt employed some pictorial strategies which are consistent with those used by Turner and Constable in their attempts to suggest 'illimitability' in their works.[177] It has been noted that in the work of these and other British Romantic artists attempts were made to dissolve the hard edge of the pictorial space and create vortex-like compositions or compositions dominated by indefinite atmospheric effects. In the work of these artists foregrounds also lost their former significance. They 'gradually became subservient to the rest of the composition [and] were compounded by their explorations of shapeless and impermanent configurations, such as clouds, atmospheric formations, or stormy seas that could be neither fixed nor contained'.[178] All these strategies combined to produce images which were much less defined than those of previous generations of artists.[179] These techniques can be observed in many

[177] Ibata, Hélène; 'Beyond the "narrow limits of painting": strategies for visual unlimitedness and the Burkean challenge'; p. 39.
[178] Ibata, 'Beyond the "narrow limits of painting" ', p. 38.
[179] Ibid.

of Alfred William Hunt's works, including some of those which explore geological features.

A work such as Hunt's *Bay of Naples – A Land of Smouldering Fire* (1871) (fig. 21) displays several of these characteristics. The watercolour depicts the volcanoes of Vesuvius and Somma, seen from the city of Naples. The mountains are shrouded in low-lying, swirling clouds, which darken into sublime obscurity on the left hand side. There is a foreground of sorts, but not in a conventional sense. Hunt's view was painted from the Vómero, a steep hill to the west of the medieval city. The ground beneath the viewer appears to drop away suddenly; this, together with the indefinite forms of the volcanic peaks, adds to the sense of destabilising sublimity.

Fig. 21: Alfred William Hunt: *Bay of Naples – A Land of Smouldering Fire*, 1871, watercolour and bodycolour, 49.5 x 75.3 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Before describing some of the theories of the sublime which can be applied to Hunt's work, and particularly works which deal with mountainous regions or

rock formations, it is worth considering how the very act of physically traversing difficult mountainous terrain could have an impact on an artist's perception of the sublime. Ann Colley has discussed this in relation to Ruskin's explorations of the Alps and, given Hunt's adherence to Ruskinian principles, it seems reasonable to suppose that these ideas could also be applied to Hunt's travels in the upland regions of Great Britain. Colley argues that as the climber makes his way up the mountain 'the lack of any stable point of reference for the eye as it guides the body's ascent – a source of anxiety, as well as an affective element of perception during his climbs – and his anxious search for the "governing lines" of mountains exemplifies Kant's mathematical sublime. Reason has to fill in what perception cannot grasp as a whole'.[180] A mountainous region, in which the climber is at the mercy of treacherous terrain and unpredictable weather, becomes a 'fugitive landscape', reminiscent of artistic efforts to suggest the vague and indefinite sublime on canvas.[181] Colley's description of Ruskin's attempts to put down on paper the governing lines of the mountains as he explored the Alps echoes accounts of the sublime as an experience in which the limited human mind tries to grasp and pin down that which is fundamentally nebulous and illimitable: 'surrounded by a vista that does not hold still, and subjected to the elements that can turn upon one and wipe out a perspective, a person needs to identify some mark of orientation, some stability, in order to find the way and not slip into error'.[182]

[180] Colley, Ann C.; *Victorians in the Mountains: Sinking the Sublime*; p. 145.
[181] Colley, *Victorians in the Mountains*, p. 154.
[182] Ibid.

Since the sublime of Ruskin and Hunt was Romantic in its origins, many eighteenth-century conceptions of sublimity could be applied both to the kinds of landscape they sought out and the ways in which they transferred their impressions of those landscapes onto paper or canvas. Many eighteenth-century theorists were united in their view that, on a fundamental level, an encounter with the sublime had the effect of enlarging the soul and temporarily allowing it to expand to encompass an understanding of greatness which is usually impossible.[183] This is certainly consistent with the accounts given by Ruskin and Hunt of experiences in great landscapes which led to a sense of communion with the divine. These eighteenth-century theorists also raised the problem which was at the heart of the conundrum of the sublime and proved difficult for Ruskin, though not Hunt. The sublime was often terrible or even horror inducing, as in Burke's theory, but paradoxically accompanied by sensations of pleasure. As I have discussed in my first chapter, Ruskin found it difficult to reconcile terror with the idea of a benevolent God, though Hunt does not seem to have been troubled by this apparent contradiction. For many of the mid-Victorian generation, however, the questions raised by the science of geology may have given this strange combination of horror and pleasure a new meaning.

The conception of the sublime put forward by Kant provides a useful framework on which to hang the responses of Ruskin, Hunt and other Victorian artists who were interested in a geological and religious approach to the

[183] Kirwan, *Sublimity*, p. 9.

landscape, an experience which could be called a 'negative pleasure[184]'. According to Kant, an experience of the sublime constitutes, in its essence, a '*movement* of the mind connected with the judging of the object'. This manifests itself as 'the feeling of the momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them'.[185] To the person undergoing the sublime experience, this is felt as a moment of supreme importance in the imagination; paradoxically, the pleasure which is felt is dependent on a significant element of discomfort, perhaps even terror.[186]

The Kantian sublime manifests itself in two distinct ways: if it is connected to the process of cognition it is defined as the 'mathematically sublime' and if it stems from desire Kant defines it as the 'dynamically sublime'.[187] As Colley has suggested, it seems that in their explorations of mountainous regions, Ruskin, and probably Hunt, came closest to experiencing the mathematical sublime.

According to Kant's definition, the mathematical sublime is triggered by anything which, from the viewer's point of view, is characterised by 'absolute greatness', that is to say, greatness which cannot be calculated by a relative mathematical estimate but is instead defined by 'a magnitude that is equal only to itself'.[188] In Kant's view, the sublime is subjective: it consists of the perception of 'absolute magnitude' to the extent that the human mind can comprehend that magnitude in one act of perception. The sublime is to be found in nature when the perception of a natural object suggests to the mind

[184] Kirwan, *Sublimity*, p. 53.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid., pp. 53-4.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid., p. 54.

the concept of infinity. This idea of infinity is prompted by the mind's inability to fully comprehend the sheer immensity of the object being perceived. There is a kind of futility to this act of comprehension and in doing so 'the imagination fruitlessly expends its entire capacity for comprehension'.[189]

Kant's mathematical sublime could very easily be applied to many mid-Victorian geological landscapes which directly or indirectly prompt thoughts of the great age of the earth and sometimes the universe itself. According to Kant, these are exactly the kinds of ideas which will cause the viewer to encounter the mathematical sublime. If the artist or viewer tries, for example, to comprehend the age or extent of the universe, they must do this by forming a kind of successive estimate. First, the subject might begin by imagining the height of a person, then a mountain, then the size of the earth, then the expanse of the solar system; the mind must generate successively larger and larger units of measurement.[190] The mathematical sublime could also be generated by an object which is itself not infinite (for example, a mountain), but which cannot be taken in in its entirety by the mind when seen from a single viewpoint. This is particularly relevant to landscape artists who sought to paint great geological features: when attempting to represent a mountain range or even a single mountain, the artist's mind could only comprehend one portion of the whole at any given moment and by the time he had successively examined all the components of the object the components he examined first had been

[189] Kirwan, p. 54.
[190] Ibid.

pushed out of his mind; therefore, it was impossible for the artist to comprehend the whole in its entirety in a single moment.[191]

The dynamically sublime is related to the mathematically sublime, in that it produces a similar mental state but, in the context of art, would apply more to a person viewing a finished painting than the artist who witnessed the sublime scene at first hand. This form of the sublime is experienced when the subject attempts to comprehend a terrible object or an immense concept, such as God, without being in any immediate danger of being overwhelmed by it themselves. The mind's perception of the object, in this case, consists of 'wishing to offer some resistance to the force displayed and recognizing that all resistance would be "completely futile" '.[192]

However, in the case of the mathematical sublime this is taken further. The mind, in its effort to take in and understand the object, is propelled towards 'an abyss in which it fears to lose itself'.[193] Nevertheless, the mind is capable of tolerating this possibility as the rational faculty of the mind is what impels the imagination to endeavour to understand the object in the first place. This act of attempting to understand that which cannot be understood produces a revelation that the rational mind contains 'that very infinity under itself as a unit against which everything in nature is small.' Paradoxically, the mind's inability to understand the sublime or infinite object gives the subject an awareness of a 'supersensible faculty', or an ability to comprehend objects

[191] Kirwan, *Sublimity*, p. 54.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.

beyond the information provided by the senses. This realisation creates in the imagination a sense of 'a superiority over nature itself even in its immeasurability.' Through this process, the mind loses its fear of the abyss as it is this very abyss which has given rise to an awareness of the mind's supersensible faculty.[194]

That these ideas were current in the mid-nineteenth century is indicated in an article by J.B Atkinson on Alpine scenery which appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1857. Atkinson discusses the experience of sublimity in the mountains in a manner which echoes Kant's mathematical sublime:

> the sublime in nature, in man and in God, is essentially one, an identity of power originating in God, and reflected from him in his works. Thus both man and nature become sublime, just in proportion as they are Godlike, according to the measure in which the finite becomes the abode or manifestation of the infinite. Hence, as we have said before, the sublime is rightly a source of strength, not of weakness; or rather a strength begotten out of weakness, a communicated force and courage which prevent the access of fear.[195]

This is reminiscent of Kant's sublime, in which the 'abyss' is overcome in a moment of supreme insight and revelation. The mathematical sublime provides a lens through which to view a work such as William Dyce's *Pegwell*

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[194] Kirwan, *Sublimity*, p. 55.
[195] Atkinson, J.B.; 'Aesthetics among the Alps' in *Blackwood's Magazine*, March 1857; p. 271.

Bay (fig. 6, p. 23). If, as in the case of Dyce's painting, the artist or viewer tries to comprehend the age of the earth or the extent of the universe, they must do this by forming the kind of successive estimate Kant described, which mirrors the successive bands of Dyce's painting. In Dyce's image, the viewer moves from the contemplation of a human lifespan in the foreground to the geological time indicated by the cliffs, and finally to cosmic time and the extent of the universe suggested by the presence of Donati's comet in the heavens.

Fig. 22: Alfred William Hunt: title unknown, photograph taken by me of painting in storage at the Ashmolean Museum, watercolour.

This watercolour by Hunt (fig. 22) could also be said to display characteristics which can be seen in terms of the Kantian sublime. The small human figure in the left foreground can be interpreted as a stand-in for the artist or the viewer, clambering, like Ruskin, through a misty, 'fugitive landscape', as described by Colley. As is the case with Dyce's *Pegwell Bay*, the painting can be analysed as a

Kantian succession leading towards an experience of the mathematical sublime. The image depicts a majestic mountain valley, which may very well have been subject to the processes of glaciation. The diminutive figure appears to be contemplating the wild upland wilderness and if we see this man as representing ourselves then we begin our own contemplation of the scene with the scale of this figure in mind. The man is standing amid a foreground of large boulders, possibly deposited by a glacier, which leads us to the valley which the ancient glacier would once have occupied and then to the even more ancient mountains, through which the ice would have advanced inexorably, both of which suggest vast geological forces and prompt thoughts of the age and history of the earth. The distant mountains are swathed in mist and turbulent cloud which adds to the sense that we are in the presence of forces which are almost unknowable and at the limits of human comprehension. A painting such as this embodies the idea, as Blackwood's Magazine put it (with reference to the Alps), that 'creative nature seems, in special districts of the earth, to have set herself the task of completing and carrying out in exclusive supremacy some one idea. In the Alps, as it appears to us, that idea is power. The handwriting on the mountainside, the natural language, the hieroglyphics, all speak of power'.[196]

Linked to this is what has been described as 'Darwin's sublime' by Benjamin Sylvester Bradley. This is particularly pertinent to a mid-Victorian exploration of a sublime characterised by an engagement with geology. According to Bradley, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* makes use of aspects of both the

[196] Atkinson, 'Aesthetics among the Alps', p. 265.

Romantic and the Kantian sublime. In his analysis, the *Origin* offers a compelling alternative to the 'natural-theological' approach to viewing the natural world. If sublime nature had previously been seen as almost overwhelming, Darwin turned this on its head – he envisioned a natural world which was still grand and majestic, but governed by laws and systems which were all ultimately discoverable and capable of being fully understood by the human mind.[197] The Darwinian sublime, then, could offer the mid-Victorian mind a way out of the unsettling abyss into which geology seemed to have plunged it.

Darwin's theory of evolution allowed him to impose on nature a vast, all-encompassing explanatory system which, though not stripping it of its magnificence, seemed to take away the sense of unknowable mystery which had characterised earlier attitudes to the natural world. Everything we see is governed by laws which give the world a kind of regular mathematical order:

> Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless

[197] Bradley, Benjamin Sylvester; 'Darwin's Sublime: The Contest Between Reason and Imagination in *On the Origin of Species*'.

> forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.[198]

Bradley characterises Darwin's sublime as being fundamentally Kantian. As discussed, Kant argued that a powerful mind could impose its supersensible faculty on natural phenomena, thereby gaining some control over the overwhelming forces of nature. Darwin's system is comparable to this but takes it further: the theory of evolution enables the mind to impose a conclusively rational and well-reasoned system on the enormity of nature. In Darwin's view, this cosmic regularity serves only to magnify the majesty of the natural world.[199] In this conception nature does not depend on God for its sublimity; that sublimity can be provided by a sweepingly comprehensive system of laws which govern every aspect of life, no matter how big or how small.

A painting such as John Brett's *Etna from the Heights of Taormina* (1871) (fig. 23) exemplifies a more rational, scientific way of painting grand landscapes with a significant geological element, far removed from the transcendental approach favoured by Hunt or Ruskin. By the 1870s Brett had abandoned his once fervent Christian faith and he worked on this composition while also studying the volcanic activity of Mount Etna on behalf of Norman Lockyer. Lockyer was leading a group of scientists who had travelled to Sicily to observe a solar eclipse, a group comprised of astronomers, chemists, mathematicians

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[198] Bradley, 'Darwin's Sublime', p. 218.
[199] Ibid., p. 226.

and naturalists. Brett acted as draughtsman for the scientists, notably recording the sun's corona which 'proved to be of great assistance in solving the problem of the location of that mysterious halo'.[200] Brett studied Mount Etna with great care over the course of a week and it is arguable that this methodical, scientific approach to a geological landscape subject makes Brett the artistic equivalent of the Darwinian naturalist. In Hunt's image of Vesuvius, the volcano is shrouded in mysterious Romantic mists which obscure its features. In Brett's painting, Mount Etna and the surrounding landscape are meticulously observed; every cleft and crevice is described. The scene still possesses a certain grandeur, but there is no mystery. In Brett's scientific landscape everything is observed, analysed and understood.

Fig. 23: John Brett: *Etna from the Heights of Taormina*, 1870, oil on canvas, 84.4 x 121.9 cm, Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust.

[200] Newall, Christopher; *Pre-Raphaelite Vision: Truth to Nature*; p. 168.

However, in spite of the impact of science, and specifically Darwinism, many Victorian landscape painters, such as Hunt and Inchbold, continued to paint geological subjects in a manner which was still rooted in Romanticism, though incorporating more recent ideas. This idea of an artistic geology linked to Romanticism persisted until the end of the century. In their exploration of geological features these artists were simply continuing a tradition which had begun in Britain in the eighteenth century and continued into the early nineteenth century. Victorian artists could therefore draw on a direct visual tradition as well as the indirect philosophical one provided by thinkers like Kant or Burke. Joseph Wright of Derby, Philip James de Loutherbourg and others had all painted landscapes which contained significant geological elements. In the case of Wright of Derby, for instance, there is evidence to suggest that at least two of his landscapes were informed by a genuine interest in the science of geology. In the 1780s Wright painted Matlock Tor and Matlock Dale in Derbyshire, depicting the rock formations faithfully. It has been noted that Wright was acquainted with John Whitehurst, who had published *Inquiry into the Original State and Formation of the Earth* in 1778 and in the early 1780s Wright painted Whitehurst examining a diagram of the rock strata at Matlock High Tor.[201] Later artists continued this interest in geological formations, notably Turner. However, Turner, unlike his great admirer Hunt, did not always paint geological features with the fidelity demanded by mid-Victorian landscape artists and their audiences. A case in point is Turner's *Lulworth Cove, Dorsetshire* of 1812 (fig. 24). The geology of the scene is only

[201] Freeman, Michael; *Victorians and the Prehistoric: Tracks to a Lost World*; p. 98.

reproduced accurately in the foreground – the other aspects of the landscape are treated with a certain degree of licence which helps to unify and add drama to the composition. This approach was not at all unusual for an artist of the period; Victorian artists simply built upon these eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century foundations.[203]

Fig. 24: After J.M.W. Turner: *Lulworth Cove, Dorsetshire*, 1814, etching on paper, 146 x 218 mm, Tate Britain, London.

Eighteenth-century theorists such as Burke had classified wild mountain regions and precipitous rock formations as sublime, though they could have had no understanding of the implications of geological study which so troubled the Victorians. William Wordsworth's approach to geology provides a bridge between eighteenth-century conceptions and the troubled sublime of the

[203] Freeman, *Victorians and the Prehistoric*, p. 107-8.

Victorian period. In the work of Hunt in particular, Wordsworthian ideas continued to have an influence into the 1890s. Scholars have detected an understanding of geological processes in some of Wordsworth's poetry and one passage from *The Prelude* has been considered particularly significant:

> The immeasurable height
> Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
> The stationary blast of waterfalls,
> And everywhere along the hollow rent
> Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
> The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
> The rocks that muttered close upon our ears –
> Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
> …
> Were all like workings of one mind, the features
> Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
> Characters of the great apocalypse,
> The types and symbols of eternity,
> Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

John Wyatt argues that these lines contain 'echoes of a geological theory which is cyclical and renewing. *The Prelude*, a document of a relationship between the developing inner life of a man and the "active universe" of the earth's various forms, presents here a world in torment, expressing itself in human terms. …

The very rocks "mutter" and speak. What they pronounce is about first and last and "midst" but also about the never ending'. [204]

Wordsworth's view of his role as a poet was similar to the ways in which mid-Victorian landscape painters viewed themselves. Like the landscape painter, Wordsworth was aware that our tangible, material world could also be tumultuous, incomprehensible and utterly mysterious. For both the poet and the landscape painter, traditional approaches to the landscape were no longer adequate; it no longer made sense to view the natural world according to preconceived notions of the picturesque or sublime and build up a landscape composition based on a formula.[205] But as Wordsworth and some landscape artists recognised, many of the features of the 'real' landscape we see around us are transient and unreal too. As Wyatt puts it, 'what endures is both the original 'primary' earth and the everlasting forces that erode that old form'.[206] Underlying geology is ultimately the most constant and stable feature of the landscape.

For Wordsworth, Ruskin and artists like Hunt, engagement with nature was not simply a matter of mere observation or aesthetic categories; for them and for many geologists in the first half of the nineteenth century, the study of the earth could also be profoundly emotional. As Wyatt points out, geologists often used emotionally significant terms like 'joy', 'pleasure' or 'delight' when writing about landscapes and they associated such emotions with the very condition of

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[204] Wyatt, John; *Wordsworth and the Geologists*; pp. 160-1.
[205] Wyatt, *Wordsworth and the Geologists*, p. 162.
[206] Ibid.

being a geologist. Wyatt argues that this can be compared to the Wordsworthian use of the term 'joy' and suggests that when used by geologists the term is certainly indicative of something greater than the kind of joy associated purely with the acquisition of knowledge.[207] A quotation from James Hutton's (1726-97) medical dissertation illustrates this idea of joy as being a fundamental element running through the entire natural order:

> Nature, everywhere the most amazingly and outstandingly remarkable producer of living bodies, being most carefully arranged according to physical, mechanical, and chemical laws, does not given even the smallest hint of its extraordinary and tireless workings and quite clearly points to its worth as being alone worthy of a benign and omnipotent God: and carries this bright quality in all of its traces, in that, just as all of its general mechanisms rejoice, so also do all of their various smallest component parts rejoice in the depth of wisdom, in the height of perfection, which lie far beyond every investigation of the human mind.[208]

Many geologists in the nineteenth century seemed to feel this kind of Wordsworthian joy for the world around them. Humphry Davy commented in 1822:

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[207] Wyatt, *Wordsworth and the Geologists*, pp. 174-5.
[208] Ibid., p. 175.

> If we look with wonder upon the great remains of human works, such as the columns of Palmyra, broken in the midst of the desert,… or the mutilated fragments of Greek sculpture… in our own Museum… with how much deeper a feeling of admiration must we consider those grand monuments of nature, which mark the revolutions of the globe.[209]

As this quotation indicates, geology could be understood in terms not only of a deep and spiritual joy, it also overlapped with various conceptions of the sublime. Indeed, geologists made much of the fact that their science allowed its adherents to become intimately acquainted with the most sublime landscapes.[210]

In his essay 'Modern English Landscape-Painting' (1880) Hunt too talks of 'the modern spirit of Nature-worship, in right of which alone landscape-painting as a distinct branch of the Fine Arts has any claim to exist – the worship of which Wordsworth is and always will be the High Priest'.[211] As the geologists did, Hunt underscores the importance of a 'deep and reverent love of nature' and the necessity to impose a kind of order on artistic interpretations of landscapes, an order 'stamped upon [the artist's] mind by sympathy with some quality, which for a moment made nature a living thing to him'.[212]

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[209] O'Connor, Ralph; 'Hugh Miller and Geological Spectacle'; p. 239.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Hunt, Alfred William; 'Modern English Landscape-Painting'; p. 784.
[212] Ibid., pp. 785-6.

Hugh Miller, the Scottish geologist (1802-1856), was typical of those who took this joyously religious view of the science. Miller was an evangelical Christian and his religion heavily informed his geological thinking. Miller represented a school of geology which was discredited as the nineteenth century progressed but he was influential in his lifetime and many of his ideas find parallels in the kind of thinking employed by Ruskin, Hunt and other religiously-minded landscape artists.

However, it is Hugh Miller's son, also Hugh Miller (1850-1896) who is of particular importance when considering the links between geology and the visual arts. Miller the younger inherited a passion for the subject from his father and became a member of the British Geological survey. Although not as prolific as his father, Miller the younger published one book which is directly relevant to the works of art and ideas of a geological sublime under consideration here. This was *Landscape Geology: A Plea for the Study of Geology by Landscape-Painters* which appeared in 1891. It is difficult to gauge the extent to which this book made an impact upon the artistic community and it could be legitimately argued that Miller's impassioned call for geologically-informed landscape painting came forty years too late. Nevertheless, it is instructive to cast an eye over the main strands of Miller's argument and I would suggest that some artists did indeed paint the kind of pictures he called for, though he seems to have been unaware of their work.

In spite of the fact that he was not an artist himself, Miller appears to have had a very nuanced understanding of landscape painting and was fully aware of the

dangers of viewing landscape exclusively through the lens of a science like geology. In the 1850s Ruskin had condemned John Brett's intensely observed *Val d'Aosta* as being 'Mirror's work, not Man's'[213] and Miller's idea of geologically-informed landscape painting echoes that of the great critic:

> The human mind… is not a mere clinometer or measurer of angles; nor are the hills, even to the geologist, masses solely consisting of beds of rock laid at ascertainable angles, with divisions and breaks called joints and faults, and having certain cognisable outward shapes, the result of denudation. Geology is not what we look for in landscape. We look for the soul of the truth, not the whole body, still less the skeleton.[214]

Miller, like Ruskin, sees geology as being an essential part of the landscape painter's understanding of his subject, just as a sculptor or painter of the human body must be thoroughly acquainted with anatomy, if he is to do justice to his subject. Miller fully understood, however, that a landscape which consists purely of closely observed detail will ultimately fail as art and cannot convey the kind of elevated feeling or emotional truth which Ruskin looked for. As Ruskin did, Miller saw knowledge of geology as forming the basis for the expression of great, even sublime, truths. In Miller's view, a geological foundation for landscape painting will 'vivify, and fertilise [the artist's] mind every conscious moment, lending to the eye a deeper insight and a more

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[213] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XIV*; p. 237.
[214] Miller, Hugh (the younger); *Landscape Geology: A Plea for the Study of Geology by Landscape-Painters*; p. 18.

"precious seeing" '.[215] The language Miller uses in his exhortation to artists is at times vividly reminiscent of the kind of language used by theorists of the sublime; a landscape painter whose practice is underpinned by knowledge of geology will, says Miller, 'stand upon the supreme attainable altitude of the vantage ground of truth, from which alone he can command all the visible horizon, ascending, as if at will, to the purest heights, or revelling amid the gloom and the cross-lights of the most shadowy recesses'.[216]

By way of illustrating exactly how geology can add to the sublimity of a work of landscape art, Miller provides an analysis of part of Turner's *The Goddess of Discord Choosing the Apple of Contention in the Garden of the Hesperides*. In Volume Five of *Modern Painters* Ruskin had illustrated the section of the painting which shows the dragon perched on a precipitous rocky outcrop and it is this image to which Miller was referring (fig. 25). The form of the dragon appears to emerge from the gneiss rock and the pattern contained in the structure of the rock is reflected in the contours of the dragon's body. Miller writes that

> the rock and the dragon are *as if of one kind and one age*. The rock is of that primary kind which all through the century has been taken as the product and almost the type of mysterious fiery processes carried on in the very depths of the earth; and the dragon is – "that *old* dragon." It is a

[215] Miller, *Landscape Geology*, p. 21.
[216] Ibid. p. 22.

strange touch of genius. But there are in geology the materials for a thousand touches of symbolism as effective as this. [217]

Fig. 25: Illustration of the dragon from J.M.W. Turner's *The Goddess of Discord Choosing the Apple of Contention in the Garden of the Hesperides*, 1806, taken from Volume Five of *Modern Painters* by John Ruskin, published 1860.

As can be seen in well-known geological paintings of the Victorian period, such as William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay*, Miller recognises the potential of geology to set in motion a train of associations which takes the viewer back into the almost unimaginably distant past of the planet. Far from being inimical to the poetry of landscape painting, as was the case with Brett's work, Miller sees geological science as only adding to the 'wonder and imagination' of great landscape art.[219]

[217] Miller, *Landscape Geology*, p. 26.
[219] Ibid.

Later in the book Miller develops the notion of sublimity in connection with geology further, though he does not use the term 'sublime'. He urges the artist to 'open his mind to ideas of strange vicissitudes and awful age in connection with rocks and mountains'.[220] Theorists of the sublime traditionally considered ancient ruins to be sources of elevating and ennobling states of mind and Miller argues that this kind of thinking can be even more effectively applied to the features of the earth. To illustrate this point, he discusses the ruins of Heidelberg Castle in Germany, more than once depicted by Turner and part of which had been destroyed by French forces in 1689. At the time Miller was writing one of the corner towers lay in a state of collapse, its stonework suggestive of 'sloping strata of rock'.[221] However, even a centuries-old ruin such as this is 'a mere incident, if you compare it with the racked and writhing forms of rock to be seen in some of those regions where the crust of the earth has suffered the stress and convulsion of its earlier ages – a stress so enormous, a convulsion so terrible, that they might well seem to have produced, in solid mass of stone, the agonies of an Inferno itself'.[222]

Miller expresses reservations about Ruskin's approach to geology, criticising it as 'too much the geology of Turner… a kind of transcendental or transfigured geology'.[223] While he believes there is a place for a spiritualised view of mountain scenery, Miller argues that the geology contained in Ruskin's works does not adequately provide the aspiring artist with a sufficiently rigorous and

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[220] Miller, *Landscape Geology*, pp. 35-6.
[221] Ibid., p. 41.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid., p. 47.

consistent grounding in the science. In Miller's opinion, the artist must already have a solid geological education behind him if he is to successfully grasp the ideas contained in Ruskin's writings and Miller recommends a number of contemporary works on geology which might provide artists with a more thoroughgoing, though prosaic, introduction to the science.

Miller concludes the book with a final exhortation to landscape artists which again is very much couched in terms of the sublime:

> No longer hemmed in by the wall of the Mosaic chronology, - part of that "wall of ordinances" that was to be broken down – we can lift our eyes to a distance so extreme, that we cannot in the dimness distinguish land from cloud, or sea from haze – the mind's eye losing itself, wondering, in the supreme firmament of God's eternity. I would fain have the painter, of whatever school he may be, more cognisant of that distance, as well as of much that lies nearer… And I would fain point him to one door that up to the present he has allowed to remain closed, and ask him if he will not try to enter therein – into a region where there are other shadows, and a vast haze and vast silence – that he may come forth, and, if it be possible, show us in new and exquisite ways things that we have not known concerning the poetry of the past and the truth that has been since the beginning. Then may he have power to give to the rocks more of their strength, more of their vast age, more also of their evanescence. He may show us something of the *secret* of the hills and the mystery which their depths embosom; and we shall perhaps see more clearly

> what at present we are able only to divine, that as Paul said to the Galatians concerning another matter – 'These things *also* are an allegory'.[224]

John William Inchbold produced one Scottish landscape which represents geological features very much in the way Miller advocated. Inchbold's *Cuillin Ridge, Skye, from Sligachan* (1856) (fig. 18, p. 97) is an atmospheric study which consists largely of rock formations. In the foreground the Sligachan Burn tumbles over a faithfully observed rocky stream bed and the background is dominated by the jagged peaks of the Cuillin Hills, the remains of ancient volcanoes. In *Landscape Geology*, as I have outlined, Miller warned against the treatment of landscape painting as if it were simply another branch of science; in the preface of the book Miller goes so far as to say that it is 'in no sense an attempt to advocate realism in rock-painting' as he prefers 'idealism to realism, breadth to detail, the best French art to the best recent English' (although it must be borne in mind that Miller was writing in the 1890s).[225] What Miller advocates is a poetic form of landscape painting underpinned by a sound grasp of geology. Miller discusses in some detail his ideas of mountain form and mountain truth and notes approvingly that recent British artists have grasped these concepts much more successfully than earlier painters. Modern British artists, in his view, paint mountains

[224] Miller, *Landscape Geology*, pp. 52-4.
[225] Ibid., p. 5.

> as having a connection – graceful, or noble, or majestic – with the earth itself. They may be clad with soil and alluvium, with screes, or peat and drift, as the bones are clothed with flesh; or covered with vegetation as the body is clad with robes; but they are on every hand recognised as the protuberances and unbarings of a structural framework below. And in general, also, they are depicted with perfect truth of feeling – not as rent and torn by disrupting forces from within, but as wasted and sculptured by the forces of "denudation" at work without.[226]

Inchbold's painting would appear to anticipate the requirements set by Miller. To a geologically-informed eye, the landscape in every way reflects the processes by which it was formed and continues to develop, and an observant viewer seeking to find evidence of the earth's sublime history will find it. Nevertheless, there is nothing laboured about Inchbold's treatment of geological forms; as Miller recommends, they are treated primarily as the 'bones' of the landscape, as a good sculptor would treat the anatomy of a human model. To the untrained eye, Inchbold's landscape is a sensitive portrayal of a limpid autumn evening in the Scottish highlands, in which the details are observed closely but not to the extent that the observation gives the landscape the air of having been reproduced in an unthinking mechanical way, a charge which was levelled against Brett's painting of Mount Etna. This was something Miller warned against: 'repetition of idea and loss or absence of touch with Nature tend to result in conventionality… [and this danger will] be most effectively surmounted by increasing the breadth of idea with which the

[226] Miller, *Landscape Geology*, pp. 33-4.

artist approaches this part of his subject'.[227] Inchbold achieves this sense of breadth by giving the impression that his closely observed landscape is pervaded a soft twilight atmosphere which prevents the scene becoming a mere transcript of nature.

One of the geological authors whose work Miller advised landscape artists to consult was Archibald Geikie (1835-1924) and there is a passage in Geikie's essay 'Landscape and the Imagination' (1893) which is applicable to Alfred William Hunt's 1876 watercolour *Loch Maree – A Lifting of the Mists at Sunset* (fig. 19, p. 98).

Geikie had developed his interest in geology as a result of the influence of the older Hugh Miller and appears to have taken the same kind of transcendental approach to the subject. As Miller the younger had done, Geikie's essay discusses the trains of association which can be opened up by geologically significant landscapes. Geikie describes in detail the geological importance of the area around the glaciated valley of Loch Maree in the Scottish Highlands, which is characterised by three distinctive rock types, revealing much of the landscape's ancient history. As Geikie argues, a knowledge of these processes not only prompts thoughts of ancient geological epochs but also suggests humanity's distant past when the area was inhabited by the early Celts who hunted now-extinct mammals such as the urus (or auroch), the wolf and the brown bear.[228]

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[227] Miller, *Landscape Geology*, p. 35.
[228] Geikie, Archibald; *Landscape in History and Other Essays*; pp. 73-4.

Like Miller, Geikie uses the traditional language of the sublime in his essay, describing the elevating effect knowledge of geology can have on the mind when gazing upon a great landscape:

> In a memorable and often-quoted passage, Johnson wrote, 'To abstract the mind from all local emotion would be impossible, if it were endeavoured, and would be foolish if it were possible. Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses, whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings'. If this be a just judgment, surely we may further maintain that whatever heightens our interest in the landscapes around us, whatever quickens the imagination by presenting new views of what has long been familiar, whatever deepens our reverence by teaching us to recognise the proofs of that long orderly progress through which the land has been fashioned for our use, undoubtedly raises us in the dignity of thinking beings [and] stimulates the emotional side of our nature… Science even in her noblest inspirations, is never poetry, but she offers thoughts of man and nature which the poet, in the alembic of his genius, may transmute into purest poetic gold.[229]

It is known that Alfred William Hunt took an interest in geology in his early years and it is not improbable that he may have painted this remote Scottish landscape partly with its geological significance in mind. In Hunt's painting the

[229] Geikie, *Landscape in History*, p. 74.

monumental slopes of the u-shaped valley dominate the picture; below them a seemingly vast plain stretches towards the sun-filled horizon, populated only by a herd of cattle, driven by humble peasants – recalling the Celts and the aurochs conjured up by Geikie. The upper reaches of the valley dissolve into a Burkean obscurity. In his essay Geikie followed his invocation of the sublime with a rapturous word-picture of Loch Maree which suggests an image in the mind not unlike the one Hunt has painted:

> But we have lingered by the side of this northern lake, with its noble curtain of mountains, and the sun meanwhile has sunk in a glory of flame beneath the faint outline of the Hebrides; the last flush of crimson has faded from the sky and the twilight is deepening into night adown the valley.[230]

Miller concludes his description of Loch Maree with a Wordsworthian sense of appreciation of the ways in which geology gives us 'an added sense and an increased power of gathering some of the purest enjoyment which the face of Nature can yield'.[231]

Both Miller the younger and Geikie took an approach to geology which was still influenced by the thinking of earlier geologists such as Hugh Miller the elder, though with the religious element more muted. In their insistence that great geological landscapes and mountainous regions can be sources of the sublime,

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[230] Geikie, *Landscape in History*, p. 74-75.
[231] Ibid., p. 75.

they are direct inheritors of a tradition extending back into the mid century and earlier.

Landscape painting in the mid-Victorian period was often criticised by contemporaries for its minute detail, seen as antithetical to expressions of the sublime. As *Blackwood's Magazine* put it in its discussion of the Alps:

> In the present day it seems to be forgotten that imagination is essentially the art-faculty; a faculty insatiable in its thirst, in flight untiring, which even amid the Alps, still soars, still demands something more vast and grand. Imagination creates that for which the mind hopes, and peoples the future of its longings with visions, of which the earth gives only the symbols. The Alps themselves are but the portals by which she enters on the mansions of infinity, and the snow-white pinnacles the minarets which rise from out the celestial city.[232]

It is my contention that the artists under consideration here did, in their various ways, succeed in expressing a uniquely Victorian form of sublimity through an exploration of geological phenomena which seems to have gone unnoticed even by those of their contemporaries who called for just such an approach to landscape painting. Artists such as Hunt, Brett, Dyce and Inchbold drew on a philosophical and artistic inheritance which stretched back to the eighteenth century and was developed further in their own time by the consequences of far-reaching geological discoveries, producing a distinctive

[232] Atkinson, 'Aesthetics among the Alps', p. 279.

Victorian geological sublime. This sublime generates a depth of meaning in mid-century landscape painting in which traditional sublime theory, scientific knowledge and religious feeling all coalesce to create a new kind of visual and intellectual complexity.

CHAPTER FOUR
LIGHT AND THE GEOLOGICAL SUBLIME

Light, particularly certain kinds of light, was heavily freighted with religious meaning for Ruskin. The kind of spiritualised light effects described by Ruskin sometimes find visual expression in the paintings of Alfred William Hunt, John Brett and other artists who worked in a more or less Ruskinian style. When these light effects coincide with geological subject matter it can be legitimately argued that they add further layers of sublime meaning to the sublimity implied by the paintings' geological content. The most well-known example of this is Marcia Pointon's analysis of William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay*, with three successive 'bands of sublimity', culminating in the evening sky with Donati's comet passing over the landscape. Dyce's geological painting is suffused with the kind of spiritualised evening light which Ruskin described as appealing to the human mind because it represented the 'still small voice' of the Lord calling the soul to its eternal home. This chapter will explore a number of works by Brett, Hunt and others which fuse significant geological content with Ruskinian light, taking the Victorian geological sublime to a more profound level.

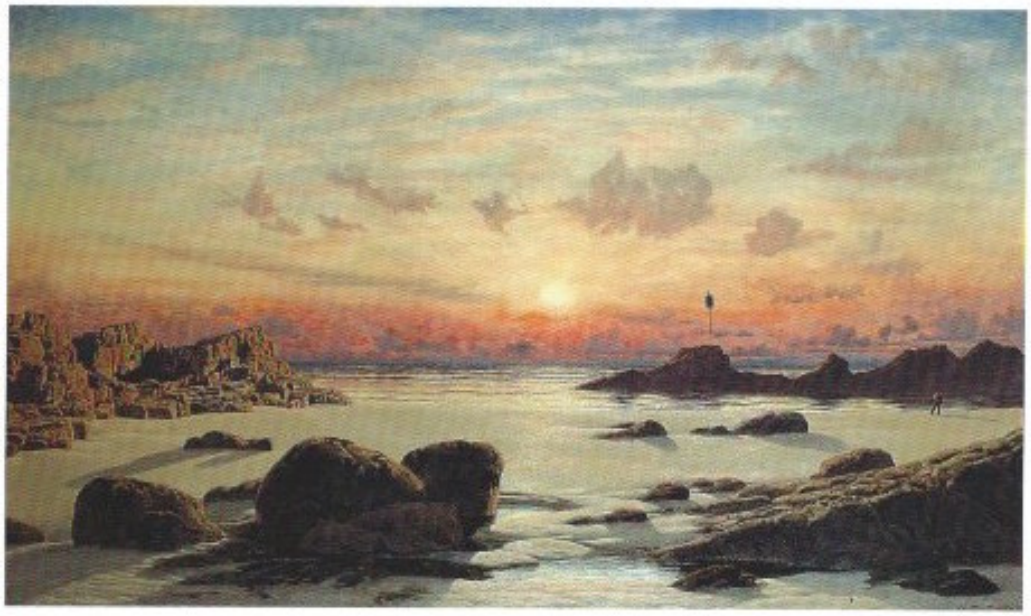

Fig. 26: John Brett: *Bude Sands at Sunset,* 1874, oil on canvas, 74 x 124 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, United States.

By way of introduction to the themes of this chapter it will be useful to look briefly at one work by Brett and one by Hunt, both of which encapsulate many of the issues which I will examine in more depth. Brett's painting *Bude Sands at Sunset* of 1874 (fig. 26) bears a number of uncanny similarities to Dyce's *Pegwell Bay* and this has been remarked upon by Christiana Payne in her monograph on Brett. In Brett's image we can see exposed rock formations at low tide strikingly lit by an almost Turnerian setting sun. Payne writes that

> The tide was often seen as a metaphor for the relentless passage of time and the inevitability of death and bereavement. … The tide marker is an echo of Dyce's famous picture, *Pegwell Bay*… which would have had particular appeal for Brett because of its inclusion of Donati's comet. The rocks look primeval, the figure on the left is dwarfed by his

> surroundings, and the setting sun acts as a further reminder of the ephemeral nature of human life.[233]

Brett's painting, with its all-pervading evening light, stark rock formations and central Turnerian sun descending below the horizon amid fiery, blood-red swirling clouds seems to combine in one image all the concerns Ruskin develops when writing about the spiritual and apocalyptic potential of light and the drama of cloud formations played out against that light.

Fig. 27: Alfred William Hunt: unknown subject – probably a Scottish glen, watercolour, unknown date and dimensions, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

These concerns also find expression in a little-known watercolour by Hunt, held in the Ashmolean Museum (fig. 27). Hunt's painting depicts what appears to be a remote Scottish valley, though its treatment is reminiscent of Ruskin's drawings of the Swiss Alps. Two thirds of Hunt's painting is taken up by

[233] Payne, Christiana; *John Brett: Pre-Raphaelite Landscape Painter*; pp. 117-8.

soaring mountains which dissolve in a whirl of Turnerian drama into Burkean obscurity, finally giving way to a sky convulsed by restless clouds. The central point of this drama is provided by a light-filled break in these clouds directly over peaks which are almost alpine in appearance. The scene is heavily reminiscent of Ruskin's ecstatic descriptions of the snow-covered peaks at Chamounix where he seemed to experience a sublime encounter with the divine which has been analysed by Elizabeth Helsinger.

As outlined in previous chapters, Ruskin's views on the sublime changed between the early 1840s and early 1850s, with his initial accounts of sublime experience interpreted as euphoric encounters with the deity. In later years he appears to have accepted that the sublime could also involve an element of fear.

In *Modern Painters II*, Ruskin describes an encounter with alpine sublimity at Chamounix in 1842. Significantly, it has been noted that the passage bears similarities to Wordsworth's description of the Simplon Pass.[234] Ruskin intended his description to illustrate the concept of 'typical beauty' – beauty which is 'in some sort typical of Divine attributes'.[235] The account begins with a description of an evening in July overshadowed by an impending storm. It is worth quoting some of Ruskin's account here, as his description echoes the effects we can see in Hunt's Scottish glen:

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[234] Payne, *John Brett*, p. 117.
[235] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 64.

It was as if the sun had been taken away from the world, and the life of the earth were ebbing away, groan by groan. Suddenly, there came in the direction of Dôme du Goûter a crash – of prolonged thunder; and when I looked up, I saw the cloud cloven, as it were by the avalanche itself, whose white stream came bounding down the eastern slope of the mountain, like slow lightning. The vapour parted before its fall, pierced by the whirlwind of its motion; the gap widened, the dark shade melted away on either side, and like a risen spirit casting off its garment of corruption, and flushed with eternity of life, the Aiguilles of the south broke through the black foam of the storm clouds. One by one, pyramid above pyramid, the mighty range of its companions shot off their shrouds, and took to themselves their glory – all fire – no shade – no dimness. Spire of ice – dome of snow – wedge of rock – *all* fire in the light of the sunset, sank into the hollows of the crags – and pierced through the prisms of the glaciers, and dwelt within them – as it does in clouds. The ponderous storm writhed and moaned beneath them, the forests wailed and waved in the evening wind, the steep river flashed and leaped along the valley; but the mighty pyramids stood calmly – in the very heart of the high heaven – a celestial city with walls of amethyst and gates of gold – filled with the light and clothed with the Peace of God.[236]

[236] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 364. Quoted in Helsinger, p. 118.

> With all that I had ever seen before – there had come mingled the associations of humanity – the exertion of human power – the action of human mind. The image of self had not been effaced in that of God. It was then only beneath those glorious hills that I learned how thought itself may become ignoble and energy itself become base – when compared with the absorption of soul and spirit – the prostration of all power – and the cessation of all will – before, and in the Presence of, the manifested Deity. It was then only that I understood that to become nothing might be to become more than Man; - how without desire – without memory – without sense even of existence – the very sense of its own lost in the perception of a mightier – the immortal soul might be held for ever – impotent as a leaf – yet greater than tongue can tell – wrapt in the one contemplation of the Infinite God. It was then that I understood that all which is the type of God's attributes – which in any way or in any degree – can turn the human soul from gazing upon itself - … this and this only is in the pure and right sense of the word BEAUTIFUL.[237]

Ruskin's vision of this alpine phenomenon, the revelation of mountain peaks bathed in light surrounded by storm clouds is dominated by one central experience: his feeling of absorption into the deity and the consequent effacement of the self.

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[237] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 364. Quoted in Helsinger, pp. 118-119.

Ruskin's encounter with the natural world at Chamounix changes both his perception of the scene before him and his own self-perception. The natural drama that he witnesses is transformed into a visual religious revelation. As Elizabeth Helsinger puts it, 'this language is not his own: recognizing it, he recognizes a mental power not his own'.[238] Ruskin believes that through the divine natural world he has experienced a temporary and blissful union with God, and much of this bliss is rooted in the temporary forgetfulness of his own sense of self. Significantly, Ruskin writes that 'to become nothing might be to become more than Man', surely another way of expressing a sense of the soul being united with Christ. For Ruskin, this experience of sublime nature is one of unalloyed happiness. Helsinger calls it 'a sublime of participation in which there is an eventual recognition of self that comes through an initial complete self-absorption in external power… Ruskin is able to shift to an exceptional way of seeing and successfully grasp the scene imaginatively'.[239] For Ruskin, this sublime experience, prompted by light, is entirely without fear; it is a temporary union with the fullness of God's love. In this respect, he differs from Edmund Burke, Wordsworth and even Hunt, all of whom associate the sublime grandeur of nature with an element of fear.[240]

Before continuing it is worth considering the role of light in the sublime, as put forward by Burke, since Burke's formulation of the sublime is critical in understanding the concept as developed by Turner and, by extension, the artists under Ruskin's influence. Burke took the view that the sublime is best

[238] Helsinger, p. 119.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Ibid., p. 120.

facilitated by darkness and obscurity and that light in its more commonplace manifestations is antithetical to the sublime. A 'strong impression' is what is important. In Burke's opinion 'such a light as that of the sun, immediately exerted on the eye, as it overpowers the sense, is a very great idea. Light of an inferior strength to this, if it moves with great celerity, has the same power; for lightning is certainly productive of grandeur, which it owes chiefly to the extreme velocity of its motion. A quick transition from light to darkness, or from darkness to light, has yet a greater effect'.[241]

If we are to begin our examination of the sublime potential of light with the foundational Burkean sublime then the phenomena described by Burke can be found in Brett's *Bude Sands* and Hunt's unknown Scottish glen. In Brett's painting the viewer is confronted with a powerful central sun reminiscent of the blinding sun we see in many of Turner's canvases. In Hunt's watercolour, the mountains themselves dissolve into Burkean obscurity and, in the mind's eye, the restless and dark cloud formations move rapidly and create the impression of bursts of briefly glimpsed light. The central part of the image is dominated by obscure, misty peaks which then give way to a light-filled break in the clouds – Burke's 'quick transition… from darkness to light'.[242]

The sublime light effects seen in geological works such as these, as well as the more famous example of Dyce's *Pegwell Bay*, create a kind of unifying effect which enables a single image to express successively greater levels of sublime

[241] Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 80.
[242] Ibid.

meaning ranging from the awe generated simply through the contemplation of the scene itself, through to thoughts of the age and formation of the earth, and finally to considerations of the cosmos and the divine suggested by the light effects of the sky. One nineteenth-century commentator on Ruskin, Peter Bayne, wrote of *Modern Painters I* showing 'the facts of nature'. *Modern Painters II*, he suggested, described 'their consecration through the Divine light falling on them'.[243]

Alfred William Hunt himself, in his essay 'Modern English Landscape-Painting' appears to echo this view of the sanctifying effect of light on the landscape and humanity. He wrote that:

> The story of our human life may or may not be visibly interwoven with the rocks and trees and stones which we are whirled round with – rocks, trees, and stones themselves may be the objects of a love so keen, may seem at times to be possessed of a life which so mocks our own, may be so transfigured by the light which enkindles, - so servile to the skyey influences which overshade, that the painter may well find in them alone sufficient grounds of noble emotion.[244]

In Hunt's essay, 'Turnerian Landscape: An Arrested Art' this sense of the unifying power of light is touched on again, albeit in a consideration of painterly technique:

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[243] Bayne, Peter; *Lessons From My Masters: Carlyle, Tennyson and Ruskin*; p. 397.
[244] Hunt, 'Modern English Landscape-Painting', p. 788.

> No landscape, however simple in subject, quiet in tone, and uneventful in effect, admits, so to speak, of all-round realisation; but a poetical-landscape painter is bound to deal with every truth which suits his imaginative purpose, and the moment that light and colour and that quality of perfect relation between them which we call 'tone' have become essential to that purpose, then the interdependence of every part in relation with the whole, and the delicate portioning out, conscious or unconscious, of the most subtle means of effect, become vital to him.[245]

We can see this consideration of imaginative use of light and tone at play in Hunt's painting of the Scottish glen, though to the informed viewer, with both the legacy of Turner and the Ruskinian view of landscape in mind, Hunt's painting becomes a vehicle for an intense sublime experience.

As discussed in previous chapters the poetry of Wordsworth informs much of Ruskin's thinking on the divine in *Modern Painters* and, once again, Ruskin turns to Wordsworth's *Excursion* to illustrate the core aspects of his theory on the spiritualised inter-relationship between cloud formations and light:

> But rays of light,
> Now suddenly diverging from the orb
> Retired behind the mountain tops, or veiled

[245] Hunt, 'Turnerian landscape – An Arrested Art', p. 219.

By the dense air, shot upwards to the crown
Of the blue firmament aloft and wide:
And multitudes of little floating clouds,
Through their ethereal texture pierced ere we,
Who saw, of change were conscious had become
Vivid as fire; clouds separately poised
Innumerable multitude of forms
Scattered through half of the circle of the sky;
And giving back, and shedding each on each
With prodigal communion, the bright hues
Which from the unapparent fount of glory
They had imbibed, and ceased not to receive.
That which the heavens displayed the liquid deep
Repeated; but with unity sublime.[246]

The last two words here are particularly significant and recall both the words of Alfred William Hunt and aspects of the sublime as defined by Burke. In the work of painters such as Hunt, informed by Ruskinian theory, a profound attempt to create an overarching sense of unity based on light and tone is obvious, a visual expression of Burke's words that 'every thing great by its quantity must necessarily be, one, simple and entire'.[247] Burke takes the view that the mind can only really focus its attention on 'one thing at a time' and a number of other little objects cannot engage the attention; the mind is bounded

[246] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. III*; p 363.
[247] Burke, p. 139.

by the bounds of the object; and what is not attended to, and what does not exist, are much the same in the effect'.[248]

It could be argued that in a work such as Hunt's Scottish glen, there is an overall sense of Burkean unity and vastness created by the foreground which seems to melt into the steep mountain slopes which in turn dissolve into the swirling cloud and light effects. The composition is characterised by vague, indistinct forms, unified both by the lack of any clear edges and by the overall effects of tone and light. There is not much in the way of 'little objects' to divert the mind from the primary effect.

Before proceeding further it is worth considering the ways in which geology and light intersect in the kind of landscape painting promoted by Ruskin. In advocating a landscape art informed by knowledge of geology, Ruskin was not, as we have seen, advocating a literalist style of the kind so often seen in Brett's work. The true Ruskinian artist, which Hunt aspired to be, filtered the facts of nature through his imagination. As Anne MacLeod has pointed out, many of the pictures Turner painted of the Scottish highlands were more abstract than literal, 'losing all sense of fixed, enduring forms in a great tidal wave of atmosphere and matter', a description which can be applied to many of Hunt's works.[249]

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[248] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 139.
[249] MacLeod, Anne; *From an Antique Land: Visual Representations of the Highlands and Islands 1700-1880*; p. 162.

Professor D.T. Ansted had written that all the components of a landscape constituted 'one great and connected history'.[250] I examined many of the parts of this 'history' in previous chapters, including glaciation which, it has been argued, gave a new kind of order to landscapes which had once been seen as disordered or composed of fundamentally random elements. Light of the kind seen in paintings such as Inchbold's *Cuillin Ridge* (fig. 27, p. 138), for example, could be seen as conferring spiritual order over the physical order of the landscape.

The light effects in geological landscapes can also be seen as an extension of Kant's mathematical and dynamic sublime. In many geological landscapes there is some indication of human activity or influence over the landscape. A consideration of the landscape's geology suggests to the observer the insignificance of humanity when seen in the context of the great age of the earth. Geological landscapes with Ruskinian light effects take this further. The divine eternity suggested by the sun or light-filled heavens makes even the ancient earth appear insignificant.

Hunt's Scottish glen provides a useful starting point for a more thorough examination of the sublime potential of Ruskinian sky, light and cloud effects. F.W. Farrar wrote that Ruskin was 'striving, constantly, to lift the veil, and taking us by the hand, to enter with us into the Temple'.[251] Indeed, in Hunt's watercolour a veil is lifted from the mountains before our eyes, in a parallel to

[250] Quoted in MacLeod, p. 170.
[251] Farrar, F.W.; *Ruskin as a Religious Teacher*; p. 2.

Farrar's words and Ruskin's own view that physical truths had spiritual analogues. Ruskin might have viewed Hunt's pictures as an imaginative interpretation of the revelation of God's love in nature. Hunt's image is a visual expression of Ruskin's view that:

> in the midst of the material nearness of these heavens, God means us to acknowledge His own immediate presence, as visiting, judging, and blessing us. As the Creator of all the worlds, and the Inhabitor of Eternity, we cannot behold Him; but as the Judge of the earth, and the Preserver of men, those heavens are indeed His dwelling place. And all those passings to and fro of fruitful shower and grateful shade – all those visions of silver palaces built about the horizon – and voices of moaning winds and threatening thunders – and glories of coloured robe, and cloven ray – are but to deepen in our hearts the acceptance and dearness and distinctness of the simple words, 'Our Father, which art in Heaven.'[252]

For Ruskin, as Farrar explains, the lesson to be learnt from any engagement with the natural world is the 'lesson of God's love'.[253]

Before proceeding to a more detailed examination of Hunt and Brett's engagement with Ruskinian ideas about the sublime and apocalyptic significance of the sky above the material earth, it is worth considering what

[252] Farrar, pp. 4-6.
[253] Ibid., p. 7.

the term 'apocalypse' would have meant to Ruskin and others of his generation. Michael Wheeler notes that Ruskin described Turner's depictions of the sky as 'another apocalypse of heaven'.[254] As Wheeler points out, in the twenty-first century there is a tendency to understand the word 'apocalypse' as having connotations of destruction and obliteration. However, this was not the case for Ruskin, for whom the word carried its original Greek meaning of 'uncovering or unveiling'.[255] Even in a consideration of a watercolour like Hunt's Scottish glen, an awareness of Ruskin's religious thinking can add to our understanding of the sublime potential of the image.

In a passage which has a direct bearing on the theological meaning implicit in Ruskinian landscape painting, Michael Wheeler draws attention to the tradition in Christian thinking of understanding the notion of apocalypse as something which takes place both in the physical world and in the human soul. In this view, the apocalypse – the beginning of a renewed creation and a uniting of each person with Christ – takes place not in a spiritual state yet to come but in the soul of the individual here on earth.[256] This view of the apocalypse as an event both in the external physical world and in the internal spiritual world of the individual is typical of the evangelical theology in which Ruskin was immersed as a youth.[257]

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[254] Wheeler, Michael; *Ruskin's God*; p. 264.
[255] Wheeler, *Ruskin's God*, p. 265.
[256] Ibid., p. 266.
[257] Ibid.

For Ruskin, the sky, including the light and cloud effects which play out across its surface, is one of the most direct instances of the divine presence in the physical world. Ruskin laments the fact that what, for him, constitutes obvious evidence of God's love and benevolence, is so neglected by humanity in general. The sky in all its majesty is, as Ruskin wrote in *Modern Painters I*:

> sometimes gentle, sometimes capricious, sometimes awful, never the same for two moments together; almost human in its passions, almost spiritual in its tenderness, almost divine in its infinity, its appeal to what is immortal in us is as distinct, as its ministry of chastisement or of blessing to what is mortal is essential.[258]

The sky, when properly attended to, can lift the human soul above and beyond the weary mundanity of daily life. It is often through contemplation of the light and cloud effects in the sky that the human soul can most effectively engage with the divine and experience the kind of inner revelation that Wheeler describes.

In Ruskin's theory of spiritualised landscape there is a direct connection between physical light and what he calls spiritual light. He goes so far as to draw a moral equivalence between the two, writing that it is impossible to feel any real love for the physical light of the sun 'unless you love the spiritual sun,

[258] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. III*; p. 344.

that is to say justice and truth, rightly'.[259] Immoral or amoral people, in Ruskin's view, are incapable of understanding the true pleasure to be found in physical light precisely because they lack any spiritual understanding.

Ruskin takes great solace in the knowledge that science has proven that the life force that animates living creatures comes ultimately from the sun. Although this knowledge 'has thrown foolish persons into atheism', others take it as a confirmation of their religious faith.[261] Not only is this sunshine a manifestation of the benevolent God in creation, Ruskin goes so far as to say that 'men vitally active are living sunshine, having the roots of their souls set in sunlight, as the roots of a tree are in the earth; not that the dust is therefore the God of the tree, but the Tree is the animation of the dust, and the living Soul, of sunshine'.[262] Light and sunshine, then, are manifestations of the divine in the world; moral human beings, taking their 'mortal strength' from this sunshine, are, therefore, living embodiments of divine goodness. This bears similarities to Hunt's conception of 'nature as possessed of a life which in a sense comprehends, or is in close parallelism with, our own'.[263]

In view of this, it can be argued that Ruskinian painters like Hunt or Brett who painted light effects with the tenets of *Modern Painters* in mind, offer in their geologically-informed landscape paintings a profound comment on the nature

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[259] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXVIII*; p. 614.
[261] Ibid., p. 540.
[262] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXVIII*; p. 540.
[263] Hunt, 'Modern English Landscape-Painting', p. 788.

of the human soul and its place in a divinely arranged universe. In order to apply these ideas to individual paintings produced by Hunt and Brett, it will be useful to look more closely at the exact nature of the kind of spiritualised light that Ruskin described as being particularly expressive of divine meaning.

In *Modern Painters II* Ruskin identifies a very particular type of light as being indicative of the divine presence in the world:

> it is not all light, but light possessing the universal qualities of beauty, diffused or infinite rather than in points; tranquil, not startling and variable; pure, not sullied or oppressed; which is indeed pleasant and perfectly typical of the Divine nature.[264]

Likewise, the colour of the light must be pure and in harmony; no element must be 'overpowered and killed by the rest', all must 'act together, whether side by side, or from pigments seen one through the other'.[265]

This brings us back to the type of purity which Ruskin discussed in *Modern Painters II* and which I have examined earlier in relation to the work of Hunt, Brett and Inchbold.

Ruskin's type of purity is directly applicable to a consideration of the sublime potential of light when correctly utilised by the landscape painter. In Ruskin's

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[264] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 128.
[265] Ibid., p. 133.

view, purity appeals to the moral human mind because it is suggestive of the divine energy which pervades the world and animates every life form on earth. The opposite of purity is 'foulness' which is the consequence of chaos and degeneration, ultimately signifying the absence of God's love.[266]

Of particular importance to the sublime potential of light, then, is the link between purity and divine love – this divine love is what gives spiritual life to things which would otherwise be dead. As Ruskin puts it: 'the essential characteristic of matter is its inertia, whence, by adding to its purity of energy, we may in some measure spiritualize even matter itself'.[267] In 'Modern English Landscape-Painting' Hunt seems to signal his agreement with Ruskin's view, writing that 'this light and life [of nature] are interwoven with every touch, tone, and needle's point of every landscape subject, and must be suggested as so interwoven in any picture which has sympathy with the life of nature for its motive'.[268]

Ruskin, somewhat surprisingly, locates the profoundest manifestations of the sublime not in the kind of dramatic landscape seen in Hunt's Scottish glen. Rather, it is in 'the deep, and the calm, and the perpetual' where we will most clearly hear the 'still, small voice' of the deity within our soul. As examined in previous chapters, this still, small voice can be seen clearly expressed in works such as Dyce's *Pegwell Bay* or Inchbold's *Cuillin Ridge*, where we encounter the

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[266] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 133.
[267] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p.134.
[268] Hunt, 'Modern English Landscape-Painting', p. 787.

kind of soft twilight effects which so appealed to Ruskin's religious sensibilities.

However, Ruskin also identifies a pure blue sky as indicative of sublimity. Once again, he quotes a passage from Wordsworth's *Excursion* to pithily summarize his line of thinking:

> The chasm of sky above my head is
> Heaven's profoundest azure; no domain
> For fickle, short-lived clouds, to occupy,
> Or to pass through; but rather an abyss
> In which the everlasting stars abide,
> And whose soft gloom, and boundless depth, might tempt
> The curious eye to look for them by day.[269]

Ruskin, in his description of the depth and purity of a blue sky tellingly uses the word 'repose' to describe it. I have already discussed the Ruskinian type of repose which can be found in rocks or mountains. There is a kind of sublimity in the memory of the great processes which formed or moved these rocks and mountains; the quality of their repose is likewise great. Turner, more than any other artist, captured the depth of profundity to be found in a pure, limitless blue sky. Even a painting which contains only a 'quarter of a inch' of this pure blue can suggest sublimity; it is:

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[269] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. III*; p. 347.

> still spacious, still infinite and immeasurable in depth. It is a painting of the air, something into which you can see, through the parts which are near you, into those which are far off; something which has no surface and through which we can plunge far and farther, and without stay or end, into the profundity of space.[270]

This sublime blue sky can be seen clearly in Arthur Severn's *Gordale Scar* (fig. 28) and Brett's *Etna from the Heights of Taormina* (fig. 23, p. 116). Severn was a close companion of Ruskin in the critic's final years and his painting bears all the hallmarks of a Ruskinian landscape. Both paintings have an obvious and highly significant geological content and both culminate in passages of sky exactly corresponding to Wordsworth's 'profoundest azure'. In many ways, both images could be read as expressions of Ruskin's type of repose, suggested by the history implicit in the geology of the landscapes depicted and carried on in the featureless blue skies, which in their very blankness provoke thoughts of the infinite 'profundity of space' which we know lies beyond. This profundity can also be read as one of Ruskin's physical analogues for the spiritual truth of the infinite deity.

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[270] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. III*; p. 348.

Fig. 28: Arthur Severn: *Gordale Scar, Yorkshire*, 1877, watercolour touched with bodycolour, 247 x 352 mm, British Museum, London.

The references to Turner and Wordsworth in Ruskin's theories of light are particularly relevant to the work of Hunt, given that he was the Victorian period's most self-conscious promoter and practitioner of the Turnerian tradition. In every aspect of his technique Hunt built upon Turner's legacy and his treatment of sky and light effects was no different. Turner expressed in his work the 'God-written Apocalypse' and Hunt must have seen himself as doing much the same thing.[272] With this in mind it is worth considering the ways in which light in the work of Turner, interpreted by Ruskin, carried apocalyptic meaning, as this would have informed Hunt's practice.

Before analysing the significance of Turnerian light for Ruskin it is important to draw attention to two aesthetic categories set out in volume one of *Modern*

[272] Fitch, Raymond; *The Poison Sky*, p. 64.

Painters which have a bearing on this. Ruskin drew a distinction between art which conveyed truth and art which was merely imitative. These are crucial distinctions when examining the work of Hunt and Brett. For Ruskin, Hunt's work would undoubtedly have conveyed both physical and spiritual truth and this is how Hunt himself viewed his own artistic practice. Brett's art, on the other hand, for Ruskin at least, was mere imitation, given that for most of his career Brett sought only to meticulously record the physical characteristics of landscape without reference to any spiritual truths. This distinction recalls Ruskin's claim that those who could not appreciate the spiritual dimension of physical light were, in important respects, not fully developed human beings or, at least, that their souls were not fully animated. This is reflected in Ruskin's famous comment on Brett's *Val d'Aosta* of 1858 (fig. 4, p. 13) which the critic declared to be lacking any evidence that Brett had loved the valley he painted or felt any emotion at all for a scene which Ruskin saw as having a profound moral content. This in turn recalls Ruskin's distinction, introduced in *Modern Painters I*, between vital and lethal tendencies, the latter of which he began to regard as permeating the culture of the nineteenth century. With regard to art, paintings which conveyed truth were 'vital' and those which only imitated the physical world were lethal, devoid of any spiritual life. This, as I have outlined previously, again seems to neatly reflect the tendencies seen in the art of Hunt and Brett. I will argue that these distinctions are heavily present in their treatment of light and sky effects and therefore inform the kind of sublime meaning found in their work.

For Ruskin, only Turner and Wordsworth fully understood the apocalyptic meaning in nature and Hunt, in his own way, attempted to communicate it in his landscape painting.[273] Ruskin's type of infinity has a direct bearing on this, as it was in his treatment of the sky that the landscape painter could best hope to express something of the 'God-stuff' which infused the natural world.[274] Many of Hunt's skies are swirling masses of light and colour and these reflect Ruskin's view that the natural world was, paradoxically, at its most powerfully expressive in moments which are fleeting and transient, as these are the most expressive of infinity.[275] As Raymond Fitch puts it: 'nature's rare truths are more important than her common ones,' again recalling the distinction I have drawn between Hunt's expressive Romantic technique and Brett's prosaic scientific method.[277] In a passage which is of direct relevance here Fitch draws attention to an ecstatic section in *Modern Painters I* in which Ruskin describes 'vital' Turnerian light. This passage could equally be applied to Hunt's treatment of light and indeed echoes Hunt's own comments in 'Modern English Landscape-Painting'. This living 'dance of light-life' found in the work of Turner and Hunt stands as the 'vital' opposition to the seemingly flat dead light to be observed in much of Brett's output:

> Words are not accurate enough, nor delicate enough, to express or trace the constant, all-pervading influence of the finer and vaguer shadows throughout his [Turner's] works, that thrilling influence which gives to

[273] Fitch, *The Poison Sky*, p. 68.
[274] Ibid., p. 70.
[275] Ibid., p. 71.
[277] Ibid.

> the light they leave its passion and its power. There is not a stone, not a leaf, not a cloud, over which light is not felt to be actually passing and palpitating before our eyes. There is the motion, the actual wave and radiation of the beam: not the dull universal daylight, which falls on the landscape without life, or direction, or speculation, equal on all things and dead on all things; but the breathing, animated, exulting light, which feels, and receives, and rejoices, and acts,-which chooses one thing, and rejects another,-which seeks, and finds, and loses again,-leaping from rock to rock, from leaf to leaf, from wave to wave,-glowing, or flashing, or scintillating, according to what it strikes; or, in its holier moods, absorbing and enfolding all things in the deep fulness of its repose, and then again losing itself in bewilderment, and doubt, and dimness, - or perishing and passing away, entangled in drifting mist, or melted into melancholy air, but still, - kindling or declining, sparkling or serene, - it is the living light which breathes in its deepest, most entranced rest, which sleeps but never dies.[278]

Perhaps more than any other passage in Ruskin, this illustrates the fundamental difference between the religiously sublime potential of Hunt's work – 'the breathing, animated, exulting light' – and the Darwinian sublime of Brett's work – the light which falls 'equal on all things and dead on all things'.

The opposition between this vital light and lethal light can be seen clearly in two works by Hunt and Brett which depict very similar geological subjects:

[278] Fitch, p. 74.

Hunt's *Vesuvius* (fig. 21, p. 105) and Brett's *Etna from Taormina*, both painted in the early 1870s. Hunt's volcano is clearly surrounded by the Turnerian 'dance of light life' and a mass of fleeting cloud forms with bursts of blue light, all of which can be seen as having sublime religious significance. Brett's *Etna*, on the other hand, is presented in a meticulous but coldly observed landscape against the backdrop of a clear blue sky. Although, as I have outlined, Ruskin believed pure blue skies could be sublime, Brett's overall treatment of his subject suggests that, for him, the 'profundity of space' beyond his blue sky is one governed purely by mechanical laws which, though awe-inspiring and grand, are completely without any spiritual significance.

A number of works by artists working in a Ruskinian style, including Brett, as we have seen, take the sublime possibilities of light even further by exploiting the power of direct sunlight in a way similar to the depictions of the sun seen in Turner's landscapes.

In his essay 'The Blinding Light' Jonathan Crary has drawn attention to the ways in which Turner's explorations of sunlight can be very powerfully sublime. Many of the arguments he applies to Turner's work can equally be applied to the work of Hunt, Brett and others.

As a starting point Crary takes Turner's *Regulus* (fig. 29) which more than any other image embodies the sublime potential of sunlight. In Crary's words, 'faced with the brutal incandescence of *Regulus* our direct perceptual engagement with the sun is taken to an absolute limit – the limit at which

optical perception itself is obliterated…. Turner holds us at a threshold between an unimaginable brilliance and irrevocable darkness'.[279] This reading of Turner's painting vividly recalls aspects of the sublime I have explored already, particularly Ruskin's own experience of an effacement of the self when confronted with the power of nature at Chamounix.

Fig. 29: J.M.W. Turner: *Regulus*, 1828, reworked 1837, oil on canvas, 89.5 x 123.8 cm, Tate Britain, London.

A consideration of both Turner and Hunt's approach to depicting light is important here, since both artists used their own specific techniques in their application of paint to express the kind of indefinite and limitless play of light on the landscapes and objects they painted. As has been noted, for Burke, indistinctness and obscurity were essential components of the sublime. In his art, Turner very obviously expressed the kind of indistinctness that reflects the

[279] Crary, Jonathan; 'The Blinding Light' in *J.M.W. Turner: The Sun is God*; pp. 19-20.

physical workings of human sight. In reality the eye can only focus on a small area at one time – everything that registers in our peripheral vision is indefinite and indistinct.[280] Turner and Hunt take this fact of biology and apply it to their treatment of light falling over the landscape.

The sublime potential of intense sunlight had been recognised for centuries. Looking straight into the sun was considered to be a danger to the health of the mind. René Descartes held the view that looking directly at the sun could produce an effect on the mind approaching madness. The mind would be so overwhelmed by the perception of dazzling light that its capacity to function rationally could be endangered. Crary describes this in terms which are once again heavily reminiscent of the language of the sublime. In his words: 'reason becomes overwhelmed by an abyss of solar brightness in which all the objects and relations orientating the mind evaporate'.[281]

The kind of extreme sensory overload brought about by direct observation of the sun is very similar to the effacement of the self described by Ruskin as a manifestation of the divine. A similar effacement of the self can occur in the contemplation of blinding sunlight. As Crary puts it: 'The direct interface of sun and eye is what overturns a stable separation between subject and object, between interior sensation and exterior stimulus'. For Turner, the light of the sun and the registering of that light by the human eye become one and the

[280] Crary, 'The Blinding Light', p. 23.
[281] Ibid.

same thing. The physical human body and the physical world, subject and object are united.[282]

This effect can be observed to great effect in two of Turner's late works: *The Angel Standing in the Sun* (fig. 30) and *Light and Colour: Goethe's Theory* (fig. 31). In both these paintings the sun, the physical world and the human eye are united in one whirling mass of colour and light. Crary describes the effect in a way which once again recalls the temporary loss of self-consciousness in Ruskin's encounter with the sublime: 'a radial conflation not only of subject and object but of self and divinity'.[283]

Fig. 30: J.M.W. Turner: *The Angel Standing in the Sun*, 1846, oil on canvas, 78.5 x 78.5 cm, Tate Britain, London.

[282] Crary, p. 24.
[283] Ibid.

Fig. 31: J.M.W. Turner: *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, 1843, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 78.7 cm, Tate Britain, London.

For Turner, as for Ruskin, the term 'apocalypse' did not carry the modern meaning of destruction or obliteration. It meant rather a revelation of the profound spiritual truth behind the physical facts of the world. The truly insightful artist, therefore, has the power to use his physical capacity for sight to transform the landscape before him into something which communicates the divine foundations of nature to anyone who takes the trouble to examine his art with an informed eye.

The idea of apocalypse as understood by Turner and Ruskin can involve an element of destruction but it is the destruction of the old, corrupted creation which will be superseded by a new and totally purified world.[284]

[284] Crary, p. 25.

Turner, like Alfred William Hunt, often painted scenes such as fires or storms which allowed him to create a sense of turbulence and even chaos. But for both artists it was a kind of ordered chaos. In any apocalyptic vision chaos does not indicate final destruction but rather the beginning of a new, perfect creation. This recalls the speculation of some nineteenth-century geologists that the record of past 'creations' revealed by the geology of the earth constituted an indication of a more perfect creation yet to come.

Jonathan Crary refers to Turner's 'attempt to represent the visionary potential of a newly innocent eye'.[285] Crary's choice of words bears an unwitting similarity to the words of Alfred William Hunt who describes in 'Modern English Landscape-Painting' the importance for landscape artists of a 'recovered innocence of eye'. Both Turner and Hunt sought in their distinctive but closely related techniques to get at the apocalyptic meaning behind the natural world. Their use of light was fundamental to this quest.

Turner, like Ruskin, viewed science as the servant of art. This was also true of Hunt and stands in marked contrast to Brett's artistic practice in which scientific considerations often seem to override the requirements of what Ruskin would have called true art. Although Turner took an interest in optics, as well as the science behind colour and light, this interest was determined by the needs of his art.

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[285] Crary, p. 26.

However, according to Gerald Finley, Turner's study of these sciences proceeded not only from a desire to better understand nature but also from 'a need to understand the universe and the individual's place in it and a need to consider its dynamism, harmony, and unity'.[286]

Documentary evidence for Turner's engagement with the sciences is limited and it is his own art, therefore, which provides the most reliable indication of the level of scientific knowledge he possessed. There is a parallel here with the work of Ruskinian painters like Hunt and Brett. The exact nature of their engagement with the theories set out in the various volumes of *Modern Painters* can never be known other than through the evidence of their own paintings, since the documentary evidence is scarce. All Pre-Raphaelite landscape painters, through the mediation of Ruskin, owed an artistic debt to Turner.

Fig. 32: George Robert Lewis: *Valley of Rocks, Lynton*, 1852-55, watercolour, 332 x 497 mm, British Museum, London.

[286] Finley, Gerald; *Angel in the Sun: Turner's Vision of History*, p. 149.

In 'Modern English Landscape Painting' Hunt wrote that

> The gifts which would enable their fortunate possessor to make a name, and that no mean one, as a painter of the human form, and the Spirit which dwells therein, must in a landscape-painter be combined with a temper which will make Nature, and the Spirit which dwells in Nature, the love, and the imaging of her beauty, the labour, of his life.[287]

Brett's *Bude Sands* (fig. 26, p. 137), Hunt's *Loch Maree* (fig. 19, p. 98) and *Valley of Rocks, Lynton* by George Robert Lewis (fig. 32, p. 167) could all be said to represent the apotheosis of a geological sublime fused with sublime light effects and constitute a visual analogue of Hunt's words. All three are examples of Pre-Raphaelite landscape paintings in which Ruskinian, Turnerian and geological elements can be clearly seen. In each image a blinding Turnerian sun overlooks a geologically significant landscape painted with Ruskinian principles in mind. All three paintings feature human or animal figures which, next to their geological setting, recall elements of the Kantian sublime which I have discussed previously. In light of the Ruskinian and Turnerian view of light which I have analysed in this chapter, both Hunt and Lewis's paintings could be seen as illustrating Peter Bayne's idea of a landscape consecrated by divine light as described by Ruskin. Both landscapes, seen through this religious prism and with Hunt's words in mind, could be read as a visual expression of

[287] Hunt, 'Modern English Landscape-Painting', p. 794.

the Ruskinian apocalypse – the union of the soul with Christ through an engagement with sublime forces of nature, the full bliss of this union symbolised by the bright sunlight. In my analysis, there has always been a dichotomy in the Victorian geological sublime, with Brett's scientific works using a visual language similar to that of Hunt and others to express what Ruskin saw as the nineteenth century's troubling 'lethal' tendencies. Brett would not have seen any spiritual significance in his painting of Bude Sands. In his mind it would have represented merely the facts of the earth and the cosmos and the viewer is free to take his or her own meaning from it. As has been the case in earlier chapters, an analysis of light in the Victorian geological sublime once again reveals unsettling conflict, reflecting the rapidly changing world view of the society which produced it.

CHAPTER FIVE

SWITZERLAND AS THE APOTHEOSIS OF THE GEOLOGICAL SUBLIME

Many of the ideas I have discussed in previous chapters come together in their most developed form in Pre-Raphaelite images of the Alps. Alfred William Hunt, John Brett, John William Inchbold and others all worked in the Swiss Alps under Ruskin's direction. All produced work which can be seen through the prism of the combined influence of Turner's work and Ruskin's criticism. Through these major influences other ideas filtered through, including Kantian and Burkean notions of the sublime. The Alps and current geological theories also received a certain amount of attention in the artistic press and, presumably, conscientious artists such as Hunt, Brett and Inchbold must have been exposed to these printed sources to some degree. In this chapter I will attempt to outline these various layers of meaning, concluding with an analysis of key works which unite them in a Swiss geological sublime.

As Ruskin was well aware, Turner's artistic output was heavily informed by a broad view of human history and with that, a profound understanding of the human condition, from its darkest depths of unhappiness to intimations of the possible divine nature of human life and the human soul.[288] For Ruskin, the Swiss landscape and the artistic engagement with it became an environment where these extremes of the Turnerian view of humanity could be explored and tested.

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[288] Birch, Dinah (ed.); *John Ruskin: Selected Writings*; pp. 9-10.

As I have outlined earlier, Pre-Raphaelite paintings, such as Inchbold's *Cuillin Hills* or Alfred William Hunt's *Loch Maree*, carried divine associations and could even be read as a kind of a portal into humankind's eternal home. And while artists could, through particular types of subject or light effects, communicate a sense of the divine in their work, Ruskin believed that heaven was not something purely abstract to be imagined or conjured up in an artistic vision; it should also be, in the words of John Hayman, 'a realisable state, rather than a stage fiction'.[289] This 'realisable' heavenly kingdom was to be found in the alpine landscapes of Switzerland. In Ruskin's view, humanity's fundamental requirements were 'pure air, water and earth', and these were to be found in abundance in Switzerland.[290] When Ruskin first discovered Switzerland the country was still relatively unspoiled, though from the 1850s on, Ruskin watched with dismay as his earthly paradise succumbed to the degradations of mass tourism. For a time, though, Switzerland represented human life at its most ideal – it offered a life lived in landscapes which were religious lessons writ large, the physical elements of these landscapes united in a literal and metaphorical harmony.

No landscape in Britain, or indeed anywhere else in Europe, seemed so pure and so holy to Ruskin. Therefore one of the missions of the modern landscape painter was to bring back visual lessons from this open-air cathedral to the less fortunate inhabitants of England's more modest landscapes and increasingly

[289] Hayman, John; *John Ruskin and Switzerland*; p. 8.
[290] Ibid.

polluted towns and cities. Turner had begun this process of 'artistic proselytising', bringing to the British public a transcendent vision through which the spiritual content of the alpine landscape was made radiantly clear. In a parallel with my exploration of light effects in geological landscapes, Turner 'shows us a world in which the human mind might find its home'.[291] Turner's paintings, especially his paintings of Switzerland give voice to the spiritual truth of the natural world, and in communicating this fundamental truth 'they almost transcend art, and become facts of nature in themselves'.[292] There was, however, a darker side to life in the earthly paradise of Switzerland, which Ruskin could not shy away from – a deadness which he broods over in 'The Mountain Gloom'. This was something which Turner, too, painted again and again.

Turner's work, with its deeply significant opposition of light and shadow, provides the foundation for this exploration of the Swiss geological sublime. In the course of Ruskin's life Switzerland began as a great open-air cathedral and ended as symbolic of the loss of the sublime and acted as a focus for the materialistic greed which Ruskin felt was catastrophically degrading both the spiritual and natural environments of Europe. As the nineteenth century progressed, the pristine Switzerland painted by Turner gradually disappeared, existing only in the memory of those, like Ruskin, old enough to have experienced the country before railways and holidaymakers brought about a transition from the sublime to the vulgar and ridiculous. Seen in this light, the

[291] Birch, *John Ruskin: Selected Writings*; pp. 9-10.
[292] Birch, pp. 9-10.

work of Pre-Raphaelite painters in the 1850s constitutes the last example of British artists exploring the sublime potential of the alpine landscape.

In terms of communicating the disappearing sublimity of the Swiss Alps, Turner's artistic techniques greatly informed the work of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, above all Alfred William Hunt.

Fig. 33: J.M.W. Turner: *The Pass at Faido, St. Gotthard*, 1843; watercolour, 30.3 x 46.9 cm; The Morgan Library and Museum, New York.

It is in *Modern Painters IV* that Ruskin introduces the concepts of Turnerian topography and the Turnerian picturesque, innovations which were central to the Ruskinian and Pre-Raphaelite idea of conveying deeper spiritual truth. These ideas are most famously set out in Ruskin's analysis of Turner's *Pass of Faido* (fig. 33), where it is clear that the artist has significantly departed from the actual facts of the scene. Nevertheless, Ruskin described Turner's work as

'so certain, so un-visionary… nobody had ever given so many hard and downright facts'.[293]

As Hunt would later try to do, Turner's interpretation of the Pass of Faido, is a kind of kaleidoscopic representation of both physical facts and psychological states. The painting is informed by the experience of encountering the pass after having first journeyed through the St Gotthard Pass and becomes a visual expression of the painter's encounter with some of the most aesthetically and spiritually charged landscapes in Europe. Turner is not simply reproducing visual fact; he is reproducing the much greater spiritual facts which underpin physical reality. For any artist to understand and communicate this he must immerse himself in the landscape, equipped with scientific knowledge, the ability to engage emotionally and imaginatively and, most importantly, an intuitive sense of the landscape's religious significance.[294]

The influence of Ruskin's Turnerian topography and Turnerian picturesque can be seen clearly in a number of Alfred William Hunt's alpine works, particularly in paintings without the multiplicitous detail which characterises Hunt's more finished work. Two paintings in particular are worth analysing with Turner's *Pass of Faido* in mind – an unfinished sketch of the St Gotthard Pass now in the Walker Art Gallery (fig. 34) and another seemingly unfinished watercolour of an unidentified alpine lake (fig. 35) held by the Ashmolean Museum.

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[293] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. III*; p. 174. Quoted in Bevin, Darren; *Cultural Climbs: John Ruskin, Albert Smith and the Alpine Aesthetic*; p. 71.
[294] Bevin; *Cultural Climbs: John Ruskin, Albert Smith and the Alpine Aesthetic*; pp. 79-80.

Fig. 34: Alfred William Hunt: *St. Gotthard*, watercolour sketch, 1859/1860, 18.9 x 27 cm; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. (WAG 4246)

Fig. 35: Alfred William Hunt: Unidentified alpine lake, watercolour, date unknown, dimensions unknown; photograph taken by me of painting in storage at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

Both paintings depict the kind of mountain form seen in Turner's painting and Hunt's St. Gotthard does, of course, depict the very landscape Turner would have passed through before reaching the pass of Faido. In the second painting Hunt appears to have used a similar Turnerian technique to that of the first, though it is in a much more highly finished state. In *Modern Painters IV* Ruskin had said that Turner's *Pass of Faido* was 'an arrangement of remembrances… an act of dream-vision; for in a dream there is just this kind of confused remembrance of the forms of things which we have seen long ago, associated by new and strange laws'.[295] For Ruskin, the true imaginative painter acts as an instrument, in accordance with a kind of guiding vision of which the artist himself may not necessarily be fully conscious. This vision consists of a strong, central impression which is augmented by other thoughts and memories, associated with the central impression, and conveys the full psychological and spiritual force of the artist's experience of the landscape depicted. The true artist submits to the force of the vision and any attempts to consciously compose will lead him astray. The two landscapes by Hunt allow us to see the progression of this form of interpretation at work.

Ruskin had written that true drawings from nature, as Turner's were, should be both 'commemorative' and 'determinant'. Hunt's drawings represent the transition from one of these phases to the other. His *St. Gotthard* quite obviously records some basic facts about the physical arrangement and colour

[295] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin, Vol. VI*; p. 41.

harmonies of the scene without being worked up to a very sophisticated degree, and in that sense is commemorative. In the lake scene, an image with similar sublime mountain forms has been elaborated in a much more dramatic way and the influence of Turner is even clearer. The painting of the lake is determinant in that it is much more obviously a drawing which expresses the artist's psychological impressions and not simply basic facts of form and colour. In this sense it recalls Ruskin's description of Turner's *Passage of Mont Cenis* of 1820:

> a seeming enjoyment of the excitement of the scene, totally different from the contemplative philosophy with which it would formerly have been regarded. Every incident of motion and of energy is seized upon with indescribable delight, and every line of the composition animated with a force and fury which are now no longer the mere expression of a contemplated external truth, but have origin in some inherent feeling in the painter's mind.[296]

Hunt's Turnerian technique – both technical and psychological – forms the basis for a more profound philosophical content. The artistic structure of these works carries visual meaning which is multilayered and expresses the full subtlety of a Ruskinian engagement with the mountain landscape. His painting of the alpine lake develops an element of the sublime which I have explored already, namely the religious significance for Ruskin of high peaks wreathed in

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[296] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XII*; p. 375. Quoted in Birch; *John Ruskin: Selected Writings*; pp. 137-139.

cloud or mist. This is something we have seen in relation to Alfred William Hunt's views of British landscapes but the same phenomenon is observable in his alpine pictures. For Ruskin, and almost certainly for Hunt as well, the sight of mountain peaks rising above clouds and mist provoked, in the words of one author, 'an excitement bordering on delirium'.[297] Once again, as in so many aspects of landscape painting, Ruskin believed that only Turner expressed what he himself felt when confronted with this natural spectacle. Of all the Pre-Raphaelite painters who travelled to the Alps, it was Hunt who came closest to expressing the divine power of mist-wreathed mountain peaks in the manner of Turner.

Hunt's painting alludes to a number of key strands in Ruskin's approach to geology, above all, the 'acuteness of perception' which Ruskin prized more than anything else. The aim of the artist or indeed any intelligent observer was to see clearly and record that vision with absolute truth.

Vision and clarity of vision were to Ruskin the most important ways in which the human mind could appreciate the sublime moral content of the natural world and this gave the true landscape artist a status comparable to that of a prophet. Not every human mind has the capacity or opportunity to fully unlock the meaning in natural scenes and this is where the artist's role is crucial. An artist with the right intellectual tools 'both looks at the phenomena of nature

[297] Clark, Ronald; *The Victorian Mountaineers*; p. 39.

and looks through them'; at this point 'the optical becomes the visionary'.[298] This form of vision is present in many of Alfred William Hunt's alpine landscapes, such as this lake scene, where a landscape which is sublime in itself is crowned with a swirl of mist which is both a physical natural phenomenon and an intimation of a metaphysical truth.[299] Imagery of alpine landscapes crowned with insubstantial celestial mists builds on ideas I have discussed earlier in which various Ruskinian 'types' freighted with divine meaning can be identified in landscape paintings. Both Ruskin and Wordsworth described this effect of mountain peaks wreathed in mist as a revelation of a divine city. This is perhaps where the Swiss geological sublime achieves its greatest profundity. In a work such as Hunt's alpine lake, the artist's brush and the viewer equipped with the right knowledge can transform a physical and meteorological event - 'a commingling of cloud, rock, and turf' - into a sublime moment during which the human soul can connect with its eternal home.[301] Hunt's painting is very much in harmony with the younger Ruskin's often ecstatic view of the Alpine landscape as place of uncontained joy and blissful self-loss when confronted with the divinity of the landscape.

This painting by Hunt and John Brett's *The Wetterhorn, Wellhorn and Eiger* (fig. 36) both constitute examples of the Swiss geological sublime at its most developed, both in terms of the treatment of the landscape and in terms of the moral message contained in each image. Hunt's watercolour is an object lesson

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[298] Bate, Jonathan; *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*; p. 69.
[299] Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, pp. 60-70.
[301] Ibid., p. 70.

in Ruskinian landscape worked out to its fullest extent technically and philosophically. Not only has he expressed the physical truth and character of the alpine scene, but on a metaphysical level the image suggests the 'celestial city' beloved of both Ruskin and Wordsworth and consequently contains an explicit moral message for those who have eyes to see it. The vision of peaks wreathed in cloud communicates to the informed viewer the presence of the benevolent deity, and this knowledge lays the foundations for a truly sanctified and truly moral existence. At its most fundamental level this is what the Swiss geological sublime reveals: the fact that the world is ordered for the supreme good of humankind. It is a manifestation in the physical world of Christ's good news. John Brett's *Wetterhorn, Wellhorn and Eiger* can be read as taking this basic spiritual fact and developing it even further, if it is read through the prism of Ruskinian theory and with the influence of Wordsworth in mind.

Fig. 36: John Brett: *The Wetterhorn, Wellhorn and Eiger, Switzerland*, 1856, watercolour, 25.6 x 36.1 cm; private collection.

If modern artists were to communicate the divine truth which underpinned nature then the landscapes of the Swiss Alps were the greatest repository of that truth. In 'The Mountain Glory', Ruskin wrote 'that the best image which the world can give of Paradise is in the slope of the meadows, orchards, and cornfields on the sides of a great Alp, with its purpled rocks and eternal snows above'.[302]

John Brett's watercolour of the *Wetterhorn, Wellhorn and Eiger* could be an illustration of Ruskin's words and is perhaps the closest any of the Pre-Raphaelites came to depicting Switzerland as a Ruskinian paradise on earth.

In addition to this, Brett's painting builds upon Ruskin's re-evaluation of the alpine sublime, as influenced by the work of Turner and the mid-nineteenth-century interest in geology. Traditionally, the kind of sublime associated with the Alps stressed the value of the mountains as a site where novel sensations and a kind of delicious fear could be experienced. Ruskin wished to depart from this emphasis on sensation to a much more holistic understanding of the alpine sublime. The landscape itself had to be understood in terms of its natural history, along with the religious meaning implicit in the facts of the landscape. The artist and the curious observer were to see the Alps as no different from a book of scripture – 'the beginning and end of all natural

[302] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. IV*; p. 420. Quoted in Hayman; *John Ruskin and Switzerland*; p. 8.

scenery'.[304] The Swiss mountains were a visual equivalent to the Bible, a comprehensive guide to the principles of religious truth and morality.

Ruskin and other contemporaries interpreted even the basic physical facts of the Swiss mountains as evidence of arrangement by a benevolent deity, with the well-being of humanity in mind. One article from 1856, the year Brett's picture was painted, quotes a passage from Volume IV of *Modern Painters* in which Ruskin explains that the higher peaks of the Alps (including the Wetterhorn and Eiger depicted in Brett's image) are always set back from the fertile valleys:

> It can hardly be necessary to point out the perfect wisdom and kindness of this arrangement, as a provision for the safety of the inhabitants of the high mountain regions. If the great peaks rose at once from the deepest valleys, every stone which was struck from their pinnacles, and every snow-wreath which slipped from their ledges, would descend at once upon the inhabitable ground, over which no year would pass without recording some calamity of earth slip or avalanche; while, in the course of their fall, both the stones and the snow would strip the woods from the hill sides.[305]

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[304] Bevin; *Cultural Climbs*; p. 27; and Clark, Ronald; *The Victorian Mountaineers*; p. 35.

[305] Anonymous; 'Review of Modern Painters, Vol. III. containing Part 4. Of Many Things. Vol. IV. containing Part 5. Of Mountain Beauty' in *The New Quarterly Review and Digest of Current Literature, British, American, French, and German*; July 1856; p 262.

Another writer from 1852 echoed this idea of the Alps as a place where everything was arranged in a Panglossian best of all possible worlds:

> It will be seen that by a wise and bountiful arrangement of our Creator, the summer heat, which dries up other sources of water, exerts its mild influence upon the hidden stores of the glacier, and pours them out with a measured hand, to diffuse gladness and fertility over the lower region of the plains.[306]

Brett's watercolour, whether by design or accident, comes very close to being a perfect visual expression of these ideas of the alpine landscape as a heavenly place where every element of the landscape is arranged for a moral purpose, enabling its inhabitants or those who travel through it to live a life which is both physically and spiritually ideal. Ruskin takes this even further in his description of the very structure of the mountains as having a ruling spirit which recalls Wordsworth's philosophy of nature:

> Mountains are to the rest of the body of the earth, what violent muscular action is to the body of man. The muscles and tendons of its anatomy are, in the mountain, brought out with force and convulsive energy, full of expression, passion, and strength; the plains and the lower hills are the repose and the effortless motion of the frame, when its muscles lie dormant and concealed beneath the lines of its beauty, yet ruling those lines in their every undulation. This, then, is the first

[306] Anonymous; 'The Glaciers' in *The Home Friend*; 10th March 1852; p. 240.

> grand principle of the truth of the earth. The spirit of the hills is **action**, that of the lowlands repose; and between these there is to be found every variety of motion and of rest, from the inactive plain, sleeping like the firmament, with cities for stars, to the fiery peaks, which, with heaving bosoms and exulting limbs, with the clouds drifting like hair from their bright foreheads, lift up their Titan hands to heaven, saying, 'I live for ever!'[307]

This extract, with connotations of the kind of scene painted by Brett, encapsulates much of Ruskin's thinking on the link between the human soul and the natural world, brought to its highest pitch of development in his theories of the moral meaning contained within these alpine landscapes. Wordsworth's poems posited that human life and the natural landscape were held together by a kind of spiritual force or union – all expressions of the one indivisible deity. Therefore, if humanity was to be viewed through a moral lens, then the same must apply to nature.[308] This is the 'active principle' developed by Wordsworth: the same moral energy which drives humanity also drives the natural world.[309]

The philosophy of Wordsworth provides the foundations for the geological sublime as it applies to the Swiss Alps. For both Ruskin and Wordsworth, the human mind and imagination give each man 'the power to recognize, in his

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[307] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. III*; p. 427. Quoted in Clark, Kenneth (ed.); *Ruskin Today*; pp. 104-5.
[308] Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p. 66.
[309] Ibid.

contemplation of them, the life of natural objects and hence to enter into a relationship with them in which all their qualities as living things could be experienced – qualities of character, emotional significance and moral reassurance'.[310] To Ruskin and Wordsworth, every component of a natural scene, from a pebble to a mountain, acted as a verse or a chapter of scripture and, if properly read, could bring the human mind to a deep and sublime understanding of moral truth. In this sense, nothing in the natural world was dead or without meaning, not even hard and ostensibly unyielding rock.

The mountains were, then, a place of discovery, not only of God, but also a place in which to come to a deeper understanding of one's own self. As Ronald Clark put it, the Alps 'formed a background not merely to one particular set of experiments but to all worthwhile existence'.[311]

Brett's painting, which strongly echoes many of the key ideas that Ruskin, Wordsworth and their contemporaries associated with mountain scenery, provides a visual blueprint for this 'worthwhile existence' available to all those who could interpret the spiritual lessons contained in the visual facts of an alpine valley. Brett was still a religious man when he painted this scene and, given his enthusiasm for Ruskin's writing at the time, must have seen the landscape in terms of these ideas.

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[310] Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, pp. 65-7.
[311] Clark, *The Victorian Mountaineers*, p. 35.

Fig. 37: Alfred William Hunt: *Lauterbrunnen Valley from Mürren*, watercolour, date unknown, 29.8 x 24.8 cm; sold at Christie's London 'British Art on Paper ' sale, 28th November 2000; present whereabouts unknown.

Alfred William Hunt's painting *Lauterbrunnen Valley from Mürren* (fig. 37) can be read as a bridge between the joyful sublime apparent in Brett's painting and a darker view of the Swiss Alps which developed in Ruskin's mind after the 1850s. A passage from an 1856 article entitled 'The High Alps' expresses the sense of stupendous awe which the image initially inspires but also suggests the fraught struggle to gain mastery over nature which had profound implications for the Swiss geological sublime:

> 'What', inquires Friedrich von Tschudi, 'it may be asked, has man to do there? Is there not some mysterious, inexplicable charm that allures him to tempt the mortal dangers which lurk on all sides, to transport his warm frail being over miles of glacier deserts, often to shelter himself with difficulty against raging storms and deadly frost, in miserable huts raised by himself, hanging between life and death, for the sake of gaining, with short breath and shivering limbs, the narrow footing of some majestic pinnacle of snow? Is it merely the glory of having ascended so high that tempts him? Is this the pitiful reward for which he looks? We can hardly believe it. Surely it is the consciousness of intellectual power which burns within him, and impels him to overcome the dead terrors of material nature; it is the fascination of measuring man's intelligent will against the dull resistance of mere dust; the desire of exploring in the holy cause of science the nature and structure of the earth, and the mysterious inter-connexion of all created things; more than this, it is perhaps a vague longing to realise, on earth's remotest heights, his own connexion with the infinite Creator'.[312]

Wordsworth's poem 'Resolution and Independence' offers a good starting point from which to analyse the imagery in Hunt's watercolour and the word-picture provided by the writer of 'The High Alps'. There is a feeling of awe in the poem which echoes qualities we associate with stone – 'inexplicability, colossal duration, immense size, and primitive form'. This train of meaning is

[312] Anonymous; 'The High Alps' in *The New Monthly Magazine*; November 1856; p. 294.

explicitly sublime, suggesting, as it does, a sense of unfathomability which can be extended to embrace not just the raw material of the earth but the entire universe.[313]

However, there is an implicit tension present in the form of the sublime generated by contemplation of rocks or, by extension, alpine mountains. The rocks can prompt a state in which the mind is overwhelmed by the magnitude of what the rocks represent, while, at the same time, rocks are a mineral resource and also suggest humankind's desire to tame nature and use that mastery for its own benefit, a desire we have already seen in the Victorian industrial sublime. Rocks, therefore, represent both a Burkean or Kantian unfathomable awe and a more modern Darwinian sublime, in which nature, vast as it is, can be seen as a system of laws and structures, all of which can be understood in time.[314]

The lone man in Alfred William Hunt's watercolour can be seen to echo the old man in Wordsworth's poem. Noah Heringman describes Wordsworth's very use of language and interpretation as 'geological'. The man is described as having

' "silent, stony features…" deciphering the revolutions that have given rise to "a huge stone" ' or in this case, the colossal peaks of the Alps.[315]

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[313] Heringman, Noah; *Romantic Rocks: Aesthetic Geology*; p. 39.
[314] Ibid.
[315] Ibid., p. 40.

Wordsworth's poetry also alludes to sea beasts and saurians preserved in the stone – the fossil record which received increasing attention as the nineteenth century progressed. As the momentum of scientific discovery gathered pace rocks were seen less and less as repositories of unknowable mystery and began to be viewed rather as a visual record of the history of the earth which could be decoded if the student was equipped with the right tools. The man in Wordsworth's poem seems to prefigure Ruskin's own vision for human engagement with the rock record and it is tempting to read the peasant in Hunt's watercolour in a similar way. Rock is ultimately a dead material, but through divinely inspired human understanding the profound meaning contained in it can be understood. Heringman once again draws attention to Wordsworth's 'geological' vision of the leech gatherer. The man's 'pain, or rage … long past' carries geological associations – the theory of catastrophism. The poem concludes with the 'decrepit man' giving way to the 'firm mind', strikingly reminiscent of the view of many nineteenth-century geologists that the sometimes confusing rock record, the wrecks of past worlds, can, if studied correctly, communicate a deeper understanding of the religious truths which they believed underpinned our world.[316]

This, of course, finds a direct parallel in Ruskin's vision of a geologically-informed landscape painting. Vision, and the communication of vision were, as we have seen, the ultimate expressions of truth and the mediator of this truth was the landscape painter. In Ruskinian theory, even the most basic of rock structures could be symbolic of great moral truths. Ruskin often used the word

[316] Heringman, *Romantic Rocks*, p. 42.

'crystal' in his descriptions of Alpine scenery and this fundamental building block of the great mountains provided an object lesson in the extraction of religious truth from the Swiss Alps.

To this end, a connection worth looking at with regard to the mountains of Switzerland is the equivalence Ruskin draws between rocks and the abstract qualities of strength and grace. This is developed in detail in a section of *The Ethics of the Dust*, published in 1866.

In one passage Ruskin is having a conversation about crystals with a girl named Lucilla in which he attempts to explain 'what their good and evil consist in':

> they may help us afterwards to some useful hints about our own. I said that their goodness consisted chiefly in purity of substance, and perfectness of form: but those are rather the effects of their goodness, than the goodness itself. The inherent virtues of the crystals, resulting in these outer conditions, might really seem to be best described in the words we should use respecting living creatures —force of heart and — steadiness of purpose. There seem to be in some crystals, from the beginning, an unconquerable purity of vital power, and strength of crystal spirit. Whatever dead substance, unacceptant of this energy, comes in their way, is either rejected, or forced to take some beautiful subordinate form; the purity of the crystal remains unsullied, and every atom of it bright with coherent energy. Then the second condition is,

> that from the beginning of its whole structure, a fine crystal seems to have determined that it will be of a certain size and of a certain shape; it persists in this plan, and completes it. Here is a perfect crystal of quartz for you. It is of an unusual form, and one which it might seem very difficult to build—a pyramid with convex sides, composed of other minor pyramids. But there is not a flaw in its contour throughout; not one of its myriads of component sides but is as bright as a jeweller's faceted work (and far finer, if you saw it close). The crystal points are as sharp as javelins; their edges will cut glass with a touch. Anything more resolute, consummate, determinate in form, cannot be conceived.

Ruskin then goes on to describe a misshapen crystal which

> exhibits a quite human image of decrepitude and dishonour; but the worst of all the signs of its decay and helplessness is that, half-way up, a parasite crystal, smaller, but just as sickly, has rooted itself in the side of the larger one, eating out a cavity round its root, and then growing backwards, or downwards, contrary to the direction of the main crystal. Yet I cannot trace the least difference in purity of substance between the first most noble stone, and this ignoble and dissolute one. The impurity of the last is in its will, or want of will.[317]

[317] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin, Vol. XVIII*; pp. 262-4.

The sapphire-tinged mountain peaks in Hunt's painting echo Ruskin's moral interpretation of the structure of crystals, forming a visual equivalent of the Wordsworthian and Ruskinian literature on rocks and rock structures as sources of moral instruction. The peaks of the mountains in Hunt's image could be read as a lesson in the spiritual health which comes from strong and certain moral purpose.

The view of rocks and mountains as both 'scriptural' records of the earth's history and as repositories of moral truths is in direct contrast to other qualities of the geological sublime – the sense of overwhelming mystery which cannot be grasped by a human mind and which also finds expression in the passages of Ruskin's works where he writes about the loss of a sense of self experienced in the Alps. This tension, which is never resolved, is at its greatest in descriptions and paintings of the Swiss Alps. These rocks and mountains inspire a kind of dumb awe; but it is just this kind of awe which in turn generates a curiosity about the meaning of these rocks and their potential as resources for humanity. As knowledge is gained, another Darwinian kind of awe is the result, as the observer begins to learn the truth of the systems and seemingly immutable laws which govern the earth and the universe.[318]

Nevertheless, Hunt's watercolour of Lauterbrunnen also hints both at the darker side of Wordsworth's vision and Ruskin's own loss of faith in nature as he grew older. We can see on the left-hand side of the picture the 'celestial' peaks reaching for the heavens which are often described in Ruskin's early

[318] Heringman, p. 42.

writings. The right-hand side of the painting, however, suggests a more mundane and perhaps bleaker view of life among the mountains, foreshadowing the themes in Ruskin's 'The Mountain Gloom'. Here, we see what could be a small area of cultivation or pasture and a number of basic wooden structures. The figure of a man reclines outside the structure nearest to us, possibly one of the peasants whose existence of simplicity and toil Ruskin describes as being devoid of any real intellectual or religious life. If this figure is a local farmer then, in some ways, he recalls the Solitary in Wordsworth's *Excursion*, a figure symbolic of both the beauty and the indifference of nature. The man in Hunt's painting, if equipped with an informed eye and mind, could glimpse the heavenly city in the peaks of the mountains opposite his cabin. And although the Solitary experienced this vision, his search for fuel in a powerful storm proved fatal.[319] Ruskin complained about the intrusion of economic life into the pure wilderness of the Swiss Alps, seemingly oblivious to the fact that it was this very economic development which enabled him to approach the region as an individual liberated from toil. Ruskin could take the somewhat luxurious approach of viewing the mountains through the prism of aesthetics and religious insight. Perhaps for the peasant, the daily reality of eking out a living from this unforgiving landscape means there is little room for such thoughts. The younger Ruskin composed ecstatic descriptions of violent meteorological phenomena and avalanches in which there is no awareness of the destructive effects such events could have on the local peasantry.

[319] Bate, p. 71.

A consideration of the realities of life for the man in Hunt's watercolour brings us face to face with the same realities which Ruskin could no longer ignore in 'The Mountain Gloom'. Hunt's painting encapsulates both the intense, almost child-like religious vision which the young Ruskin so enthusiastically promoted and simultaneously hints at the loss of this vision as the individual is confronted with the cares and stresses of everyday existence in such an unforgiving environment. This also recalls Ruskin's view that the child's ability to see beauty in the world is greatly impaired as the wearisome demands of adulthood begin to weigh down on the mind. These realities caused the older Ruskin to see the Alps less and less in terms of a pure, joyful religious sublime. This youthful vision was replaced with a more sombre questioning of the sublimity of the mountains as he became increasingly troubled by the 'deadness' of the lives of those who actually lived among these sublime scenes. This was coupled with a growing horror of the effects of industry and tourism which he paradoxically contributed to in his own travels and writings. The tensions between human agency and natural power in the Swiss geological sublime are never resolved and can be seen in the work of Wordsworth, the thinking of Ruskin, the very lives of the peasants and in a mid-Victorian landscape like this one by Hunt.

Heringman has argued that the Enlightenment and, by extension, the Victorian, 'model of agency' over nature ultimately gave rise to the degradation of the natural world which was the by-product of the industrial revolution and the

effects of which Ruskin saw in the Swiss Alps in his own lifetime.[321] Man's desire to master this great landscape brought about the pollution of the once pure materials of nature as well as the 'pollution' of the landscape's spiritual purity by the growing incursions of modern mass tourism. Over the course of his life Ruskin saw the tragic transformation of the Swiss Alps from a place of sublime grandeur to a site of, at times, physical and moral pollution, a ridiculous playground for the growing numbers of British and continental tourists, oblivious to the sacred meaning their 'playgrounds' contained for an older generation of artists, writers and even scientists.[322]

This degradation of the actual landscape of the Swiss Alps represented a playing out in the real world of the tensions implicit in the geological sublime. Writers like Ruskin, in their deification of the region, were ultimately partly responsible for its growing popularity and despoliation and this was reflected in contemporary magazines and commentaries on the Alps:

> We regret to observe in the author's remarks (IV., 384) on the 'Mountain Glory', a disposition to sneer at tourists in Switzerland, similar to that in which Mr. Macaulay lately indulged respecting our own middle classes in Scotland: both writers having a tendency to imagine that others are less capable of enjoying and appreciating mountain scenery than themselves, and Mr. Ruskin, in his anxiety lest the Swiss people should be deteriorated by English wealth, apparently

[321] Heringman, p. 49.
[322] Ibid., pp. 49-50.

> forgetting, that if mountains are as well worth studying as he describes them to be, we must go to them, for they will not come to us.[323]

Another commentator lamented that:

> The ascent of Mont Blanc has been degraded into an affair of waste and absurdity; of excess in eating and drinking; of salvos of artillery and syndic's certificates. The Chamouni guides, seeing that no honour nor much credit is now to be got out of it, make it an affair partly of lucre and partly of jollity; and it is to the credit of the peasantry that worse scenes than have taken place cannot be quoted, and that the voice of detraction has never been able to record of them a momentary dereliction of responsibility or even a brutal word.[324]

This was then, the playing out of 'a parallel tension between economic value and aesthetic value [contained within] a wide range of geological objects, articulated by naturalists and "improvers", as well as the poets'.[325]

To build upon Heringman's argument, the very Ruskinian 'divinity' of regions like the Swiss Alps can be seen as a direct consequence of industrialisation and improved communications. Before the beginning of the industrial revolution

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[323] Anonymous; 'Review of Modern Painters, Vol. III. containing Part 4. Of Many Things. Vol. IV. containing Part 5. Of Mountain Beauty' in *The New Quarterly Review and Digest of Current Literature, British, American, French, and German*; July 1856; p. 260.
[324] Forbes, James David; 'Pedestrianism in Switzerland' in *The Quarterly Review*; April 1857; p. 320.
[325] Heringman, pp. 55-6.

wild mountain regions were rarely seen in positive terms – rather as places of danger and fear to be traversed only if necessary. The very fact that Ruskin could access the Alps with relative ease was a result of the improvements made in the first phase of industrialisation and the degradations which he lamented were, in reality, merely a continuation of a process which had begun long before he himself was even born. In Heringman's view, the very nature of geological phenomena and mountain regions as areas of aesthetic and divine significance hinges on their economic status, in the sense that this beauty and divinity depends on their opposition to economic and industrial development – 'the metaphysical resistance of mountain scenes, as the last bastions of the purely aesthetic, is constructed from the physical resistance of rock'.[326]

After Ruskin's troubling vision of alpine life in 'The Mountain Gloom', his disillusion with Switzerland became deeper as the demands of tourism eroded the purity of the landscape which had once seemed to him a dazzling portal into immortality. Ruskin began writing *Modern Painters* in 1843 and, at that time, perhaps due to youth and inexperience, saw the Alps only as a place of unalloyed wonder. However, even by the 1850s this mountain paradise was beginning to show signs of degradation.

This decade saw the sacred beauty of the Alps reduced to mere sensationalism by the explorer-entertainer Albert Smith whose popular shows did much to bring the concept of the Alps as an adventure playground to a broad cross-section of the British public. The growth of tourism from Britain and other

[326] Heringman, pp. 55-6.

countries led to the expansion of resort towns with hotels and casinos to cater for the growing masses.[327] Ruskin was inevitably horrified by this despoliation of landscapes which had so profoundly shaped his youth and his entire philosophy of life. For him it was the desecration of a holy land. By 1864 he could write in *Sesame and Lilies*:

> The French revolutionists made stables of the cathedrals of France; you have made race-courses of the cathedrals of the earth. Your one conception of pleasure is to drive in railroad carriages round their aisles, and eat off their altars… [There is no] foreign city in which the speed of your presence is not marked among its fair old streets and happy gardens by a consuming white leprosy of new hotels.[328]

The new enthusiasm for alpine pursuits was commented on in the wider press. In 1856 *The Times* wrote of a 'Mont Blanc mania' among English mountaineers, with the climb becoming so popular *Punch* could joke that Albert Smith planned 'to make another ascent, for the purpose of indicating the best place for lampposts, the government having determined to light Mont Blanc with gas, to the very top'.[329]

Ruskin, perhaps, saw this transformation of the Alps into a playground as yet another manifestation of the spiritual and moral decline which for him was a

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[327] Bevin, *Cultural Climbs*, pp. 124-5.
[328] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XVIII*; p. 89. Quoted in Ring, Jim; *How the English Made the Alps*; p. 145.
[329] Bevin, *Cultural Climbs*, p. 122.

dominant characteristic of the nineteenth century. The utter lack of respect with which many of his contemporaries treated these places seemed to confirm some kind of spiritual death. Ruskin's mentality belonged to that of the Romantic age and the idea that the Alps could be, for some, primarily a place for vigorous exercise or adventurism was anathema. Ruskin had always intended that those who made the journey to come to the Alps should do so in a spirit of deep respect. The mountains were not there to be 'scaled and conquered'[330] but to be contemplated from the valleys almost as one might contemplate a work of religious art. As we have seen, Ruskin viewed this modern attitude towards the mountains as being akin to the vandalism of a church:

> all true lovers of natural beauty hold [the Alps] in reverence so deep that they would as soon think of climbing the pillars of the choir of Beauvais for a gymnastic exercise, as of making a playground of Alpine snow.[331]

The ordinary mid-Victorian British tourist seemed to be devoid of the Romantic reverence which an earlier generation was more inclined to possess and the flow of pleasure seekers increased after 1863 when Thomas Cook began organising packages taking the intrepid middle classes to Chamonix.

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[330] Bevin, *Cultural Climbs*, p. 125.
[331] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XVIII*; p. 27. Quoted in Bevin, p. 125.

It was around this time that Ruskin's former joy in the beauty of the Alpine region began to fade and was gradually replaced by a feeling of growing despair. He now saw clear signs that the moral and environmental decline he detected in the world in general had spread even to this vast outdoor cathedral.

At the end of the 1860s he wrote of this 'strange evil brought upon every scene that I best loved, or tried to make beloved by others'. The light of dawn and sunset – expressive of the type of purity and symbolic of immortality – was now 'umbered and faint'; the once clear blue skies were 'defiled with languid coils of smoke, belched from worse than volcanic fires.' He commented on the retreat of the glaciers; the lakes they fed were now 'dimmed and foul, from deep to deep, and shore to shore'.[332]

With the passing years his sense of foreboding became more profound and he wrote in 'Fors Clavigera' in 1873 that 'more than the life of Switzerland – its very snows, - eternal, as one foolishly called them, - are passing away, as if in omen of evil.'[333] In his later travels in the Alps he increasingly saw sinister signs of an environmental disaster – he claimed that in twenty years one third of alpine ice had disappeared which in turn would affect the whole atmosphere

[332] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XIX*; p. 293. Quoted in Clark, Kenneth; *Ruskin Today*; p. 118.
[333] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin, Vol. XXVII*; p. 635.

of central Europe. His concerns were shared by the scientist John Tyndall who had noticed the same deterioration in the condition of the glaciers.[334]

For Ruskin the 'progress' of the nineteenth century, man's attempt to harness the natural world for his own betterment, had led to a catastrophic loss of the sublime, replaced with oppressive material greed and cheap sensationalism. For him personally, it resulted in a terrible spiritual and personal crisis:

> The deadliest of all things to me is my loss of faith in nature. No spring – no summer. Fog always, and the snow faded from the Alps.[335]

The tension between human agency and the power of nature is present even in an individual's response to mountain scenery as sublime. In one sense, the tendency to see the Alps as sublime and aesthetic objects of awe came about as the result of more developed communications and the expansion of tourism. Nevertheless, the very structure and physicality of rock simultaneously calls into question the extent and potential of man's power over the natural world. Theorists like Ruskin and the landscape artists inspired by him attempted to subsume the Alps into a system of religious, philosophical and aesthetic order, in a parallel to attempts to develop the region economically. Nevertheless, to a large extent, the alpine region can never be fully 'tamed' – Ruskin's own vision of the region as part of an intellectual system fell apart and even today the

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[334] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin, Vol. XXVII*; p. 636.
[335] Cook and Wedderburn; *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, *Vol. XXXVII*; p. 161. Quoted in Clark, Kenneth; p. 119.

wilder districts of the Alps are beyond human control. In this sense the fundamental material of the mountains – the rock – remains unknowable and outside the power of human agency.[336] The geological sublime, culminating in images of the Swiss Alps, is ultimately a swirling mass of conflicting tendencies and competing ideologies, none of which can be satisfactorily resolved into a coherent and conclusive philosophy. In looking at these paintings and the ideas they explore, the mind is, at the end, defeated by the sheer magnitude and of what they represent. There is always something – a dull resistance – which the viewer cannot quite grasp.

[336] Heringman, pp. 55-6.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have attempted to cast light on the development of the sublime in British art beyond the Romantic period. As Alison Smith has demonstrated, this Victorian sublime manifested itself in many branches of landscape painting and sometimes took surprising forms.[337] The potential for research into the Victorian sublime is enormous and I could not hope to explore the phenomenon to its fullest extent here. Since discoveries in the field of geology began to gather pace in the mid nineteenth century, coinciding with a movement in Pre-Raphaelite painting which sought to understand the landscape with a new geological precision, it became clear that examining the impact of the sublime in these terms would be particularly fruitful. As I have discussed, the year 1851 can be seen to symbolically mark the point at which an older Romantic artistic tradition and an older scientific system gave way to both an art and a science which were much more rigorously analytical and this 'collision' is reflected in much of the landscape painting of the 1850s. In the visual arts it was John Ruskin who presided over this state of flux and the resulting fluidity can be seen in his own thinking and in the varying approaches adopted by the artists under his influence, principally Alfred William Hunt, John Brett and John William Inchbold. The interest these artists took in geology was directly inspired by their reading of *Modern Painters* and, as I have sought to demonstrate, their development of a geological sublime in landscape painting was heavily informed by Ruskinian theory.

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[337] Smith, 'The Sublime in Crisis'.

Of the artists I have considered the one who most closely adhered to Ruskinian principles was Hunt. In his geological work the twin influences of Ruskin and Turner are always apparent. In this sense, it is Hunt's work which often carries the most psychological and philosophical depth, giving a richness to his geological sublime which is sometimes lacking in the more literalist work of Brett and Inchbold. However, the geological sublime, much like the intellectual climate surrounding the science of geology itself, is characterised by competing demands, paradoxes and conflicts which defy easy categorisation and this is evident in the paintings of the landscape artists examined here. For this reason, the geological sublime in Victorian painting is open to a host of interpretations, taking in traditional Burkean concepts of the sublime, manifestations of both religious ecstasy and atheistic despair, new ideas of deep geological time, explorations of the self in relation to immense forces and, finally, new Darwinian theories of natural history. These realities constantly confronted humanity in its various attempts to subjugate a natural world which ultimately refused to be subjugated. The geological sublime is at best a confusing and indefinite phenomenon. Perhaps, appropriately, it is difficult to establish a clear beginning, middle or end to any aspect of its development. I have tried to identify relatively clear patterns in the works I have looked at. As noted in the introduction, the work of Hunt can be classified as a branch of 'poetic' Pre-Raphaelitism and the work of Brett and Inchbold falls into the category of 'prosaic' Pre-Raphaelitism. Poetic Pre-Raphaelitism tends towards a more imaginative Turnerian approach to recording a scene, whereas prosaic Pre-Raphaelitism is quite photographic in character. When viewing the geological

sublime through the lens of Ruskinian theory Hunt's is the most successful. However, this categorisation does not always apply. As we have seen, the work of Brett and Inchbold can sometimes be interpreted in rapturous religious terms and some of Hunt's work does, at times, offer a bleaker view of nature.

The mountains of Switzerland represent a convergence point for all of the ideas thrown up by the geological sublime, not only because they were a vital touchstone for Ruskin but also because they were a testing ground for many controversial geological theories and constituted an early lesson in the environmental pressures of overdevelopment and mass tourism. The Swiss geological sublime takes in every extreme of the phenomenon from the landscape as a sacralised earthly paradise to a dark view of natural beauty ravaged by a philistine culture which sees the landscape purely as a resource to be exploited. This transition from one extreme to the other is reflected in the development of Ruskin's thought over the course of his lifetime and the tension between these two polar opposites is expressed in many of the works of art which explore the geological sublime. Between these opposites there are numerous shades of grey.

The geological sublime was, in my view, the one form of the Victorian sublime in which many of the issues found in the wider culture were crystallised. The geological landscape paintings of the 1850s are, as I have argued, the visual result of the clash between the Romantic spirit and the self-confidently materialistic culture which succeeded it. It is for this reason that the geological sublime is such an ambiguous concept – it is a manifestation of a moment of

great cultural change and uncertainty. The sublime at its most basic is an attempt by a limited human mind to gain mastery over something illimitable and therefore the attempt can never be successful – there is always a sense that a full understanding is just out of reach, just over the horizon. Alfred William Hunt achieved this marriage of Romantic tradition and mid-Victorian scientific rigour most successfully. The precise work of Brett, Inchbold and others like them, is, to use Alison Smith's term, a kind of 'anti-sublime' though one which paradoxically still carries sublime associations. Hunt, on the other hand, with his debt to Turner, faithful interpretation of Ruskinian theory and contemporary geological knowledge, produced a geological sublime which is richly multilayered. His most successful geological paintings are multiplicitous in terms of their artistic technique, psychological sophistication, spiritual associations and the long train of ideas generated by their geological content. Ultimately, however, the geological sublime does not have a satisfying conclusion, as befits an attempt by the limited to grasp the illimitable. It remains a mass of swirling nebulous ideas in conflict with hard materiality – the essence of the geological sublime – and this finds expression in both the 'poetic' and 'prosaic' art which attempted to make sense of it.

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