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# Nailing Down Truths: Evental Historiography in Fors Clavigera

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Nailing Down Truths: Evental Historiography in *Fors Clavigera*

Sari Lynn Carter

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Nailing Down Truths: Evental Historiography in *Fors Clavigera*

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Master of Arts

The theoretical framework of this study is intended to explore the potential Alain Badiou's theory of event, truth, and faithful subject may provide for understanding literature. This study applies this framework to John Ruskin's late and lesser-known work *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (1871-1884). Both Ruskin's fragmented style in *Fors Clavigera* and his notion of historical truth developed therein have been read as madness and as reactionary romanticism. I examine key metanarrative moments in *Fors Clavigera* where Ruskin reflects on his historiographical choices and methods. Through my analysis, I show how Badiou's theory provides a way of better understanding Ruskin's historiography as deliberately purposeful and philosophically engaging.

Keywords: John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, Alain Badiou, event, historiography, metanarrative

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Nailing Down Truths: Evental Historiography in *Fors Clavigera*

## Introduction

“Friends,—We begin to-day another group of ten years, not in happy circumstances” (27: 11). So John Ruskin writes in January 1871, beginning the first letter of *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, a series he would publish monthly (though with some interruption) until 1884. After listing “political divisions,” foreign wars, and “beggary” as some of the manifestations of that unhappiness, he declares his intention of confronting it “by explaining to you, once for all, in the shortest English I can, what I know of its causes; by pointing out to you some of the methods by which it might be relieved” (27: 13-14).

The ninety-six letters that make up *Fors Clavigera*, however, are not Ruskin’s “shortest English.” E. T. Cook, in his introduction to the library edition, calls them “wildly discursive,” even for Ruskin (27: xxviii). Ruskin’s explanations seem to deliberately flout the “once for all” conventions of the structured Aristotelian essay of arguments and proofs, such as he had used in *Modern Painters* or *The Stones of Venice*. As in these earlier works, he turns to the past, presenting himself as a bearer or witness of “eternally true” principles that had become lost to the modern industrial age (28: 656). However, the way he uses past stories and legends in *Fors* seems at times to obscure rather than clarify these truths. The dense allusive network he weaves throughout *Fors* frustrated most of his few readers, ranging as it does from Etruscan bas-reliefs to Venetian fruit market laws, from Plato to Marmontel, from canonized pillars of biblical and classical culture to childhood nursery rhymes and newspaper clippings. Contemporaries objected that the letters were too far above the heads of their intended audience—workmen and laborers—to which objection Ruskin retorted that the educated were too quick to assume that the lower classes were mentally inferior, “needing to be written down to, with condescending simplicity”

(27: 182).<sup>1</sup> He continued his discursive style, leading Frederic Harrison to declare of *Fors*, “Nothing so utterly inconsequent, so rambling, so heterogeneous exists in print” (*John Ruskin* 184). Frequently Ruskin introduces a new subject then breaks it off with the promise of future continuation, which he did not always fulfill.<sup>2</sup> One of the first reviews in the *Daily News* commented, “it is entirely too fragmentary as to its main object to be completely dealt with” (4).

Other critics saw *Fors* as a distraction from Ruskin’s “real” calling as art critic and Oxford Slade Professor of Fine Art; he was squandering his time in an approach too fantastic and impractical to contribute to issues apparently so far removed from the sphere of art.<sup>3</sup> The criticism that he was transgressing the bounds of his expertise had already been leveled against Ruskin upon his first excursion into political economy, the essays that would form *Unto This Last* (1860). But this criticism seemed to find added justification in *Fors*, which joins its discussions on art—Carpaccio’s paintings, heraldic symbols, and calligraphy, etc.—with politically valanced commentary on Venetian steam whistles, Yorkshire goose pie recipes, and Egyptian history. Ruskin wrote of one friend who had “remonstrated sorrowfully with me, the other day, on the desultory character of *Fors*” (28: 254). Cook and Wedderburn indicate that the friend was probably Harvard professor Charles Eliot Norton (28: 254n), whose letters to Ruskin lament the “waste” of his genius in writing *Fors* (Bradley and Ousby 298; cf. 133, 325).

The fragmented form of the letters was taken biographically by some to reflect the fragmentation of Ruskin’s mind, positioning him as a type of tormented romantic genius.<sup>4</sup> Judith Stoddart points out that even “most modern treatments of Ruskin’s late work leave him isolated as one of ‘the last Romantics’” (18).<sup>5</sup> Such readings see Ruskin as aligning himself, whether consciously or not, with the early traditions of English romanticism—the self-isolated lover of a spiritualized nature, the individualistic prophet attuned to sublime flashes of inspiration,

profoundly skeptical of industrial modernity.<sup>6</sup> In his condemnation of the modern age's materialism, many also see him as falling into an indulgent romanticizing of an idealized past against a sordid modernity.<sup>7</sup> In her introduction to the essay collection *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*, Dinah Birch writes, "The autobiographical impulse of much of Ruskin's later writing, together with his fiercely anti-progressive views, made it easy to see him as a writer enmeshed in the Victorian age, looking backwards rather than forwards. This was another reason for the neglect of his late work. It was interpreted as a denial of the modern world, if not as mere self-indulgent melancholy" (2).

Perhaps, if such denial were all that was motivating Ruskin's readings of the past, he would be merely reactionary, inadvertently reinscribing the logic of progress by holding up the past as the new teleological goal.<sup>8</sup> What is important to recognize is not necessarily that the perception of Ruskin as exemplifying these romantic types is wholly ungrounded—he is, after all, an icon of the prophetic sage tradition, isolating himself from the comprehension of many readers and in many ways idealizing the past<sup>9</sup>—but rather that these romantic perceptions describe only one facet of a complexly nuanced work. As Judith Stoddart explains, "if Ruskin's letters recur to such a figure [of the romantic sage], they do so with considerable alteration. To cast *Fors Clavigera* as a Wordsworthian diatribe penned from the seclusion of the Lake District (much of the work was written at Ruskin's residence in Brantwood) is to miss the formal implications of the project" (18). Stoddart's study examines the "formal implications" of *Fors* in its cultural context, putting it in dialogue with contemporary texts and political projects.

My purpose is to build on Stoddart's approach, examining how Ruskin uses form to intervene in contemporary methods of reading the past. I will examine in detail how, throughout *Fors*, he critiques modern progressive ideology and its construction of history. This progressive



approach to history traces back to the stadial theory of history defended by Adam Smith and others (Amrozowicz 151), a theory eventually associated with social Darwinism: teleological evolution or progression from primitive to technologically advanced societies. Because of the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution, the privileging of fact and experiential evidence over other ways of knowing was, to many, proof of technological and scientific advancement. Progress was indexed by materialist development.<sup>10</sup> Ruskin is not opposed to progress in factual science or natural history per se; his interest in zoology, geology, and botany finds outlets in books such as *Love's Menie* (1873-81), *Deucaulion* (1875-83), and *Proserpina* (1875-86), as well as in tangential passages scattered throughout *Fors*, ranging from glacier theory to observations on the nest-building of bees. Factual evidence, the backbone of the scientific method, is useful for understanding nature as well as, to a certain extent, history. Over and over throughout *Modern Painters* he insists on the necessity of accurately observing factual evidence (Birch, *Education* 136).

But Ruskin insists in *Fors* that there are other ways of knowing, reflective of the affective and ethical dimensions of human experience, that can be ignored by a factually-oriented historiography.<sup>11</sup> The past can become fixed, static and meaningless, to a present that judges its progress by scientific or technological advancement alone. Ruskin denounces the blindness of this progressive self-complacency in an 1876 letter to Charles Eliot Norton: "The entire school of you moderns judge hopelessly out [*sic*], of these older men, because you never admit the possibility of their knowing what we don't. The moment you take that All [*sic*] knowing attitude, the heavens are veiled" (Bradley and Ousby 379). Self-complacency narrows the ability to judge and discern knowledge. Stoddart contrasts the two perspectives: "For Ruskin's scientifically minded contemporaries, looking critically at the past was an effort of factual documentation. For

Ruskin it was a hermeneutic exercise in recovering the elementary structures of human society” (102)—the truths that he saw as independent of particular historical configurations.<sup>12</sup>

Essentially, Ruskin’s form in *Fors* models how he wants readers to read. Brian Maidment calls *Fors* “a work which steps beyond traditional literary genres” in its effort to rework Ruskin’s connection with his readers. He writes, “Ruskin has made a crucial shift from regarding the book as a kind of internal monologue [...] to a notion of the book as the exploration of the relationship between writer and reader” (199).<sup>13</sup> Building on Maidment’s claim, I will review some of the approaches Ruskin used in his earlier works, then contrast them with the fragmentation employed in *Fors*. I will show how Ruskin revises the stylistic method by which he tries to help his readers understand what he sees as eternal truths.<sup>14</sup> He essentially moves from seeking to transfer truths as so many antique possessions to his readers, to seeking to involve them in an active process of discerning truths.

This active process may be understood as a sort of “evental historiography,” Colin Wright’s term for the perspective on history offered through Alain Badiou’s theory of events, truths, and “faithful” subjects. Drawing upon Badiou’s mathematical philosophy, I intend to show how he affords a theoretical framework by which to read *Fors* outside of the structures familiar to more traditional literary and historical criticism. Through Badiou’s theory, we may better perceive the subject position Ruskin creates through his revised rhetorical approach to truth in *Fors*. In rethinking this subject position, I will specifically examine Ruskin’s metanarrative comments on his method of historiography. Both Ruskin’s fragmented style in *Fors* and his notion of historical truth have been misread as madness and as reactionary romanticism. Badiou’s theory may provide a way of better understanding Ruskin’s historiographical choices as deliberately purposeful and philosophically engaging.

## Ruskin's Early Methods

The important turning point in Ruskin's style is most often identified not with *Fors Clavigera* but with *Unto This Last* (1860-62). Frederic Harrison writes that, in contrast to the flowery word painting of *Modern Painters* and other earlier works, *Unto This Last* contains "almost all that is noble in Ruskin's written prose, with hardly any, or very few, of his excesses and mannerisms" (*Estimates* 69). Ruskin himself said of *Unto This Last*, "I had taken not a little pains [*sic*] with the Essays, and knew that they contained better work than most of my former writings, and more important truths than all of them put together" (17: 143). *Unto This Last* seeks to define "the first principles of political economy" in opposition to "the modern *soi-disant* science of political economy" (17: 4, 25). However, despite its precise, definitional style, and perhaps even because it is so unmistakably clear in its denunciation of the prevailing economic system, *Unto This Last* was violently rejected by the press and public. Most reviews focused on the unscientific impracticality of defining these economic principles in moral terms.<sup>15</sup> Refusing to change his holistic view, Ruskin followed these essays with others organized in the same orderly style, those that form *Munera Pulveris* (1862-3). He called this work, in its 1872 preface, "the first accurate analysis of the laws of Political Economy which has been published in England" (17: 131). Yet it was no better received (Henderson 1).

Faced with such rejection, Ruskin began to shift his style away from his systematic approach with *Time and Tide, by Weare and Tyne* (1867). *Time and Tide* foreshadows the more fragmentary epistolary form that would find fruition in *Fors*, being composed of letters to a specific workman, Thomas Dixon. Herein Ruskin explains his growing preference for the affordances of the epistolary form: "There is this great advantage in the writing real [*sic*] letters, that the direct correspondence is a sufficient reason for saying, in or out of order, everything that

the chances of the day bring into one's head, in connection with the matter in hand" (17: 333). This openness to chance would motivate his continuance of the epistolary form in *Fors*, even when he would no longer be writing them as "real letters" addressed to a specific person. Yet despite its letter format and more randomly organized subject matter, *Time and Tide* bears more affinity with the definitional style of *Unto This Last* and *Munera Pulveris* than with the fragmentation of *Fors*. Its subtitle declares its purpose clearly—to define the "Laws of Work" (17: 298). To do this, Ruskin organizes it around concepts such as "Co-operation," "Legislation," "Expenditure," "Trade-Warrent," and "Per-Centage" (17: 309-10). Harrison does not except it, as he does *Fors*, when he speaks of Ruskin's later style as being "more measured, more mature, more practical, more simple" (*Estimates* 69).

Despite Ruskin's attempts to communicate the need for moral reform in the economic world through these definitional works, he felt that no one heeded his ideas any more than they had heeded his ideas about the interdependence of art, architecture, and morality that he had tried to convey through the evocative word paintings of *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*. By the time he began writing *Fors*, Ruskin viewed his early works as failures (17: 144), the essential ideas being lost in their pleasing delivery (27: 400). Not even the more "measured" and "simple" style of his carefully constructed essays on political economy was enough to make his readers really listen to him. He wanted to help them change their perspectives and move them to act, to bring about concrete change. But his sense of defeat was almost enough to make him stop writing altogether: "They read the words, and say they are pretty, and go on in their own ways. And the day has come for me therefore to cease speaking, and begin doing" (28: 425-26).

Though it was not in his nature to cease speaking, he did turn to a different method of speaking, or writing, when he began *Fors*. The shift is hinted even in his choice of chapter titles.

For example, *Munera Pulveris* is divided into chapters with titles that clearly forecast the contents of each chapter, such as “Definitions:—Economy, Usefulness, Wealth, Value, Money, Riches” (17: 129). In contrast, he did not place titles on the letters of *Fors* until he had written all but the last seven (29: 423), and even then those titles were provocatively allusive: “The Great Picnic,” “Switches of Broom,” “On the Dordogne,” “The Labyrinth,” “Cradle Song,” etc. Often the connection between letter title and content is oblique. Such titles do not seem to reflect the clear goals set forth in the first letter, to address the current political and economic problems in England. Whereas Ruskin’s earlier economic essays function as cohesive arguments, *Fors* cannot be outlined into any semblance of logically argumentative order.<sup>16</sup> The following section will examine in more detail how, though his overall purpose to teach truth and effect social reform remains unchanged, his method in *Fors* becomes radically different.

#### Ruskin’s Method in *Fors*

It is revealing to learn that while writing *Fors*, Ruskin finds his earlier attempts at effecting change in political economy useful primarily “as a body of definitions, which I now require for reference in the course of my *Letters to Workmen*” (17: 144). These earlier essays and letters had employed a definitional approach, critiquing the existent economic system by building an opposing structure of concise definitions of wealth and economy. The rhetorical shift in *Fors* implies that he felt that such a definitional system could not truly persuade people or effectively help them to see in new ways beyond their received experience. Thus he turns to a different method, which he reflects on at key metanarrative moments throughout *Fors*.

Perhaps the best place to begin analyzing these metanarrative moments would be the title. As a review of its first issue asked in London’s *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, “What on earth is the meaning of *Fors Clavigera*?” (“Mr. Ruskin’s *Fors*” 13). Despite

this review's jaunty declaration that "We have of course penetrated the mystical meaning, for are not all journalists omniscient?" (13), the question continues to haunt readers. Ruskin did not always take time to explain his "enigmatical" titles ("Mr Ruskin as a Social Prophet" 1157). Thus it is significant that he repeatedly defines, either directly or through allusions, how his chosen title of *Fors Clavigera* frames the purpose and method of his letters. *Fors* is Latin for *force*, *fortitude*, and *fortune* or *fate* (27: 28).<sup>17</sup> Allusions to these meanings echo throughout the work. He often refers to the "Third Fors," or fortune, as determining both the content and form of his letters by chance: "Of the many things I have to say to you, it matters little which comes first; indeed, I rather like the Third Fors to take the order of them into her hands, out of mine" (27: 323; cf. 28: 443). He has so much he wants to say that cannot be grounded in a traditionally organized essay; the truths he has to teach are "flitting in my mind, like sea-birds for which there are no sands to settle upon" (28: 460). In speaking of "all their connection and cooperation being dependent on the real harmony of my purpose" (28: 461; cf. 29: 383), Ruskin does paradoxically imply that though the whims of fortune play with the flitting fragmentation of his thoughts, he knows his end from the beginning. Still, this purpose remains largely undefined: "I can no more, now, polish or neatly arrange my work than I can guide it" (28: 461).

In a certain sense, though, Ruskin's end *is* his fragmentary method. Aware of his readers' frustrations, he nevertheless feels that if his method were grounded by his former treatise-like approach, his readers would too hastily assume they understood his meaning and either dismiss it or be "vexed" by not finding it to lead in the direction they expect (28: 106). Ruskin wants to help his readers break out of these assumptions and expectations that, he feels, are dictated by the terms of nineteenth-century progressivist ideology:

Some kindly expectant people are waiting for “details of my plan.” In the presentment of which, this main difficulty still lets me; that, if I told them, or tried to help them definitely to conceive, the ultimate things I aim at, they would at once throw the book down as hopelessly Utopian; but if I tell them the immediate things I aim at, they will refuse to do those instantly possible things, because inconsistent with the present vile general system. (28: 254-55)

Rather than use a method that would undermine his purpose by turning readers away unchanged, he opts for fragmentation. He wants to bring his readers to stand on the cliffs and watch those flitting sea-birds, so to speak. This experience will open up space so they can reason for themselves in new ways, completely outside of their familiar, comfortable patterns of thought:

I write in words you are little likely to understand, because I have no wish (rather the contrary) to tell you anything that you can understand without taking trouble. You usually read so fast that you can catch nothing but the echo of your own opinions, which, of course, you are pleased to see in print. I neither wish to please, nor displease you; but to provoke you to think; to lead you to think accurately; and to help you to form, perhaps, some different opinions from those you have now. (27: 98-99)

The desire to lead people to think “accurately,” for Ruskin, has as much to do with *how* as with *what* people think. Even with so much careful work already accomplished in his earlier critique of the existent materialist system, Ruskin seems to sense the futility of opposing one system by merely constructing its ideological opposite. Thus he revises his approach, turning to the fragmentary, allusive style of *Fors*, hoping that this method would help attune his readers to

truths he feels they had hitherto ignored as outside of their received experience. In short, he wants to help them revise their subjective perception of truths.

Throughout *Fors*, Ruskin's desire that readers look and think for themselves, beyond their habitual, given structures of knowledge, stands in tension with his subject position as teacher of what is "eternally true" (28: 656). The whims of *fors* playing with the text, opening space for readerly engagement, still require his witness. Thus he reiterates the significance of the second half of his title: *clavigera* means *club-*, *key-*, or *nail-bearer*.<sup>18</sup> He specifies his purpose for choosing this word: "By calling it the 'Nail bearer,' I mean [...] that it fastens in sure place the truths it has to teach" (29: 14). Ruskin's letters, then, are more than a collection of past truths. They become a truth process, fixing fast, like so many nails, eternal truths that had become obscured by nineteenth-century modernity. Readers need to let their unexamined assumptions be broken open, actively engaging with his text, however fragmentary, in order to follow through the implications of his hammering. By following through the work to its end, they will understand the place of those truths, resurrected and incontrovertible, in the modern world. He writes, "You and your children will one day find every word of my direct statements in *Fors Clavigera* to be [...] fastened, each with its nail in its sure place" (28: 463). His formal image of the process necessary to nail truths down, to fix his words as "assuredly true, [...] however strange" (28: 107), recurs throughout the work. This controlling image of fate as nail bearer—utter chance allied with fidelity to unchanging truth—can be better understood by thinking about *Fors* in conjunction with Badiou's theory of events, eventual truths, and faithful subjects.

#### Ruskin and Badiou

It may seem incongruous to speak of Badiou and Ruskin in the same place. An atheist, Maoist revolutionary, mathematician philosopher seems to have little in common with a deeply



Christian art and social critic who styles himself an “Illiberal,” a “Communist of the old school,” and a “Tory of the old school” (27: 14, 116, 167).<sup>19</sup> It is true that Ruskin would disagree with Badiou on several crucial points, most specifically, the source of truth. Badiou claims that truth is not in any way connected to the traditional concept of God, a concept he demonstrates to be mathematically incoherent; thus “there is no heaven of truths” (*Ethics* 43). In contrast, truth for Ruskin has a divine source (28: 500, 651). At a turning point in his career, Ruskin did go through a crisis in respect to the Evangelicalism of his childhood (29: 89), and for a time he focused his social writings on “the religion of Humanity” (29: 90), trying to connect more broadly with an audience swiftly losing its faith in God. Yet he never turned to atheism; in fact, he recovered much of his belief.<sup>20</sup> As he continued the letters, *Fors* became “much more distinctly Christian in its tone” (29: 86), and he admitted, by the end, that their ultimate weakness came from not more explicitly directing his readers to God:

Looking back upon my efforts for the last twenty years, I believe that their failure has been in very great part owing to my compromise with the infidelity of this outer world, and my endeavour to base my pleading upon motives of ordinary prudence and kindness, instead of on the primary duty of loving God,— foundation other than which can no man lay. I thought myself speaking to a crowd which could only be influenced by visible utility [...] (29: 527)

Yet the question arises, if he felt he was speaking to such a utilitarian, materialist audience, why would he have adopted the fragmentary method of *Fors* in the first place, which presents its truths in a way that often highlights their inutility or irrelevance in a materialist system? Badiou gives a possible direction by which to think more deeply about Ruskin’s methods of engaging with truth in *Fors*.

Badiou's theories provide a method of reading that goes beyond the structures approved by postmodern ideology, which is, in essence, "suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity, and objectivity" (Eagleton vii). Badiou trenchantly critiques postmodernism, or, as he calls it, "democratic materialism," for its refusal to acknowledge any idea of truths (*Logics* 1, 4; *Second Manifesto* 20-23). He sees postmodernism's dismissal of any discourse's claim to truth as foreclosing any possibility for change (*Logics* 510). Reading literature, or the past, from the postmodern viewpoint is safe because it can explain away, as just one of so many culturally specific narratives, anything it finds uncomfortable or disruptive to its viewpoint. But Badiou wants change, not comfortable stagnation, and for him, change means events.

Badiou's idea of an event is drawn from what he calls mathematical ontology, which relies on set theory. Not being a mathematician, my purpose is not to investigate the mathematical apparatus by which Badiou elaborates his ideas.<sup>21</sup> Rather, I am interested in seeing what his theory may offer in terms of understanding literature. In basic terms, then, Badiou uses set theory to intervene in the old philosophical debate about being and beings by turning ultimate authority away from the one. In Euclidian mathematics, the number one has a "supra-numeric being" whence "unity is derived" (*Number* 7). It is the denomination of the system by which everything else becomes measurable—the declaration that all numbers reiterate units of one. There is a tension between the system of number and the agent of its installation—an incoherent self-reflexivity. Badiou focuses in on this tension, declaring, "there is no one, only the count-as-one" (*Being* 24). Any given set or situation is such because it brings its units or "multiplicities" under the structure of this count-as-one, under the regime of its presentation.

But the fact that the one is a *result* of the operation of the count-as-one “leaves a phantom remainder”; it “marks out, before the operation, a must-be-counted” (53). This remainder is nothing from the standpoint of the set or situation, in which all multiples have been counted:

By itself, the nothing is no more than the name of unpresentation in presentation. Its status of being results from the following: one has to admit that if the one results, then “something”—which is not an in-situation term, and which is thus nothing—has not been counted, this “something” being that it was necessary that the operation of the count-as-one operate. (55)

Badiou calls this nothing, this unpresentation, the void. Any given set, or situation, is built implicitly on this void, which brings instability to that set (93-98). Thus, Badiou is trying to install a system that he also presents as unstable. An event happens when the set is broken open; when the “void of a situation becomes retroactively discernible” (56), when the uncounted assert their right, in a sense, to be counted, forcing the terms of the set maintained as the status quo to be reconfigured (175). Truth emerges through the event. If any given set is like an encyclopedia, to use Badiou’s term (328), with every knowledge-constructing term defined and accounted for, then “a truth is always that which makes a hole in knowledge” (327), truth being something that is not accounted for by the encyclopedia.<sup>22</sup>

After an event cuts across an established, encyclopedic status quo, its truth survives through a subject’s fidelity, or choice to defend that truth. A subject thus becomes “the bearer [*le support*] of a fidelity, the one who bears the process of truth. [...] We might say that the process of truth *induces* a subject” (*Ethics* 43, italics original). As Peter Hallward writes in the introduction to his translation of Badiou’s *Ethics*, “*Truth* for Badiou thus evokes the logic of *being true* to something, of *holding true* to a principle, person, or ideal” (x, italics original).

Truth is inseparable from the process of fidelity by which the subject identifies it as truth, as something that cuts across the established system of knowledge.

A subject wagers on the truth of the event, choosing to be “faithful” to it by declaring how it changes the situation (*Being* 393). The wager is the element of chance by which the subject acts; Badiou says the subject’s process of fidelity is aimed at establishing the truth, though that process is fragmentary: “The procedure is thus ruled in its effects, but entirely aleatory in its trajectory” (394). Thus the element of chance inherent in the wager is what defines the subject’s process of deciding how to identify and defend the terms or conditions of a truth: “a condition is useless if it already prescribes, itself, a stronger condition; in other words, if it does not tolerate any aleatory progress in the conditioning” (364). This wager of subjective fidelity is almost a future perfect description of how the resurrected evental truth will have reconfigured the status quo, for the subject has to speak from outside the encyclopedia of established knowledge (395-98). The subject’s “truth-process is heterogeneous to the instituted knowledges of the situation” (*Ethics* 43). This heterogeneity, governed only by the aleatory process of the subject’s wager, often looks like arbitrary madness to those standing inside these “instituted knowledges.” From the perspective of this constructed status quo, the subject’s wager on “truth” will be seen as fragmented, illegal, outside the accepted and accounted-for terms or conditions of knowledge-making (*Logics* 510).

The faithful subject’s defense reconfigures the situation, pointing to how the truth opens up new spaces not previously acknowledged by the existent system of knowing (391-94). Knowledge is thus changeable, but truths are eternal (*Handbook* 55). As Badiou says, “all truths without exception are ‘established’ through a subject [...] But [...] their creation is but the appearing of their eternity” (*Logics* 513). Subjects can choose to react against or obscure evental

truths;<sup>23</sup> but new events and faithful subjects can resurrect those obscured truths and enable change to happen (62-67). It is thus also because obscured truths can be resurrected, when defended by faithful subjects, that Badiou calls truths eternal (66). Since a truth was once void, according to the terms of the original set, the subject must actively show how its terms must be reconfigured to count the emergent truth. For example, Badiou considers the slave rebellion led by Spartacus in 73 B.C. as an event wherein subjects were seeking to be faithful to the truth, “We slaves, we want to *and can* return home” (51, italics original). That the uprising was crushed does not ultimately matter. It was an event capable of potentially reconfiguring the set of Roman society: “This institution of the possible as present is typically a subjective production” (51).

This model of change—making “the possible as present”—that is central to Badiou’s theories provides a useful schematic for thinking about Ruskin’s methodology in *Fors*, specifically how he creates his subject position in relation to the truths that he felt were uncounted by the set, or status quo, of nineteenth-century historical progressivism. The sea-birds flitting in his mind, unable to connect to any recognizable grounding, are sorts of unstable multiplicities requiring his wager on their significance or truth. They are not represented or counted as significant in the encyclopedic status quo of modernity. The form of *Fors* implies that Ruskin felt the need to be faithful to these truths in a way that was not already appropriated by the very utilitarian, progressive way of narrating history that he wanted to break from.

Ruskin describes his breaking away as “nailing down scarecrows of idiotic soul” in order to reconfigure the whole structure, “to drive home the fastenings of sacred law” or eternal truth (29: 200). Ruskin’s own index note explains the above phrase: “*Idiotic* is used in this place in the accurate Greek sense, ‘self-contained’” (29: 200). The problem with nineteenth-century

progressivist history, in Ruskin's view, is that its whole approach is complacently self-contained, or encyclopedic in the sense that Badiou uses the word. It rigorously keeps itself independent of anything outside of its terms, unwilling to acknowledge the possibility of any ideas or truths beyond its own particular definition of materialist progress. Ruskin's image of nailing down this idiotic self-containment can be understood as his process of fidelity—piercing through or cutting across this accepted status quo.

Thinking back to the tension between the *fors* and the *clavigera* elements of Ruskin's work, between his desire to open the text to chance and let his readers think for themselves on the one hand, and his position as teacher of eternal truth on the other, one may be inclined to consider Ruskin as resorting to constructivism in *Fors*. For Badiou, constructivist thought is opposed to the event, seeking to take refuge against the instability of the void by securing sets in a "well-made language" or contained encyclopedia of knowledge (*Being* 283). From this perspective, "within the constructivist vision of being, [...] *there is no place for an event to take place*" (289, italics original). Rather, ideas evolve progressively under the regime of "linguistically controllable new connections" (290). Badiou gives specific examples: "the constructivist orientation underpins [...] *positivist* epistemologies and *programmatic* politics" (291, italics original).

In most of his earlier works, Ruskin often resorts to definitional language, citing etymologies when trying to communicate his ideas, and he does not abandon this approach in *Fors*. For example, he adamantly opposes positivist ideology as it was developing in his day, partly because he feels it vaguely defined.<sup>24</sup> He blames the Comtean positivist Frederic Harrison for "not knowing the meaning of the word Positive, and confusing pono with scio, and both with sapio, until you even translate positio into sapientia" (29: 568-69).<sup>25</sup> He insists, "All debate *must*

be FIRST about words” (29: 569, italics and capitals original). Yet Ruskin also undercuts the linguistic control of his etymological approach by resorting to fragmented wordplay throughout *Fors*. Following is just one example from the letter titled “Vale of Lune,” culminating a discussion about education and teaching children the different species of bees:

[I]f you put R for Right, before ex, you have “Rex”; if you put L, for Love, before ex, you have “lex”; if you put G, for George, and R, for Rural, before ex, you have “grex”; and then if you put S, for Speculation, P, for Peculation, and H, the immortal possessor of Pie, before ex, you have “Sphex”; pleasing and accurate type of the modern carnivorous Economist, who especially devours of his British public, “the eyes, and small filament that serves as a brain.” (28: 309-10)

The letter ends here, but the passage is liberally sprinkled with Cook and Wedderburn’s notes explaining its layered allusions to previous letters and outside sources. And this is just one example. Ruskin’s wordplay throughout *Fors* is anything but methodically contained and “linguistically controllable” (Badiou, *Being* 290).

As for programmatic politics, though he does try to establish a new societal structure in the Guild of St. George, Ruskin emphasizes rather the essential irrelevance of any advantage to be gained by one particular governmental structure over another: “only in a remote degree does it [a community’s prosperity] depend on external matters, and least of all on forms of government” (27: 14). For him, instituting externally structured reform could not address the moral needs of individuals. Though *Fors* tries to document the building of the Guild of St. George, whose “general principles [...] are clear enough” (27: lviii), his final letter is not a call to join the Guild, but a grateful acknowledgment of the general influence of “good and holy persons” (29: 527). At least in these linguistic and political respects, then, some of the most identifying idiosyncrasies

of *Fors* keep it from being easily designated as maintaining a “constructivist orientation” (Badiou, *Being* 291).

Besides these characteristics, understanding how the work done by the self-contained constructivist subject differs from the evental subject’s aleatory process of fidelity casts further doubt on Ruskin’s being merely the former. Badiou spends quite some time explaining this difference.<sup>26</sup> In the constructivist approach, subjects are seen not as agents wagering on the change-bringing event, but as keepers of a system. Anything perceived to be new from the perspective of the constructivist status quo is always already defined by established terms in the circular, self-perpetuating system (*Being* 286-87). Nothing can cut across this encyclopedia from the outside; everything is appropriated into the existing ideology of this system.<sup>27</sup> Ruskin’s metanarrative moments defy this kind of appropriation. They present himself, not as maintaining a progressive narrative of history, but as seeking to point to truths obscured or not counted by that materialist progressivism.

#### Ruskin’s Historiography

Ruskin’s metanarrative moments highlight the fragmentary truth process he is resurrecting through his own form, the process through which he then attempts to resurrect what he sees as other truths of the past. The chance-driven method of *Fors* is a subjective wager enacting fidelity to a truth about reading history, to a method of opening oneself to truths of the past from other perspectives besides that privileged by progressive, factually objective, triumphalist narratives. Ruskin attempts to help his readers see obscured truths in a way that itself had been obscured by progressive historiography.<sup>28</sup>

One of these metanarrative moments follows upon a legend Ruskin uses several times in *Fors*: Cincinnatus, the Roman nobleman who ploughed his own fields. He had already briefly



invoked the legend as illustrative evidence in his 1869 lecture “The Future of England,” but in *Fors*, the story’s rhetorical function changes. Ruskin pauses to reflect on his use of the story, emphasizing that the truth he sees manifest in it (a truth about the nobility of working the land) is accessible only through another truth about reading history, a truth currently ignored by the materialist status quo. He begins with a brief allusion to “the fields where Cincinnatus was found ploughing, according to Livy;” then he launches into a discussion of the historical merits of the story: “you will find, in Smith’s Dictionary, that Mr. Niebuhr ‘has pointed out all the inconsistencies and impossibilities in this legend;’ and that he is ‘inclined to regard it as altogether fabulous’” (27: 357). Barthold Georg Niebuhr is known for his analytic method of historiography, a method which sought “to discard the worthless and thereby lay bare the material from which historical facts could be reconstructed” (“Barthold Georg Niebuhr”).

Ruskin goes on to juxtapose two methods of reading history—the eventual, open to the radical implications of truth, versus the constructivist, bent on maintaining factual knowledge. He acknowledges the probable factual verity of Niebuhr’s interpretation of the story as being a mere legend, along with most idealized stories of the past: “it is fatally certain that whenever you begin to seek the real authority for legends, you will generally find that the ugly ones have good foundation, and the beautiful ones none” (27: 357). Yet Ruskin cuts across the accepted terms of this situation, pointing to a truth about reading history that is ignored as void by the system that acknowledges only its own definition of “real authority”: “Be prepared for this; and remember that a lovely legend is all the more precious when it *has* no foundation. Cincinnatus might actually have been found ploughing beside the Tiber fifty times over; and it might have signified little to any one;—least of all to you or me” (27: 357, italics original).

Truthfulness, in the sense of mere factuality, cannot alone make the past relevant to the present; in fact, the valorization of factuality makes the past in a way irrelevant because such an approach fixes the past as a cultural artifact, not as something presently significant. But Ruskin does not want his readers to regard the past as fixed. He wants them to see the pertinence, not the void, of past truth in the present:

But if Cincinnatus never was so found, nor ever existed at all in flesh and blood; but the great Roman nation, in its strength of conviction that manual labour in tilling the ground was good and honourable, invented a quite bodiless Cincinnatus; and set him, according to its fancy, in furrows of the field [...]; *this* fable, which has no foundation;—this precious coinage of the brain and conscience of a mighty people, you and I—believe me—had better read, and know, and take to heart, diligently. (27: 357-58, italics original)

Ruskin thus describes a way of reading the past that is regarded as void from within the set of factual historiography. This way is, in turn, open to truths that are excluded as meaningless because their sources stand outside the encyclopedia that counts and ascribes cultural significance only to provable factual evidence.

The fragmentation of Ruskin's method is evident partly within this passage—we are given no background or full narration, but only this passing reference—and partly through the tangential nature of the passage itself, coming as it does in the middle of a discussion about the excavations of the wall of Tullius and about the slope of land beneath it being “sold on ‘building leases’” (27: 358). It is not overtly clear how the passage relates to the overall point of the letter, which is titled “Dividend” and goes off into architecture and usury and Marmontel. Later in the letter he attributes his choice of material to chance: “It has chanced, by help of the Third Fors (as

again and again in the course of these letters the thing to my purpose has been brought before me [...]” (27: 360). The seemingly arbitrary choice of this tangent on Cincinnatus highlights the element of chance that imbues his wager on the importance of this story.

Ruskin does not clearly define what he sees as the important truth connected to the story of Cincinnatus itself. From the context of the letter, that truth would seem to be the nobility of leaders willing to till the ground to earn their own bread, as opposed to “the vanity and lust of the middle classes, all of them seeking to live [...] with the airs of great people” (27: 360). But the main truth he wants to resurrect for his readers goes deeper than that. It has to do with an ability to open oneself to a work of art, essentially—the “precious coinage of the brain and conscience of a mighty people” (27: 358). It is a recognition that the different ways people choose to read history reflect who they are and what they value, and what they value affects their present way of life. Because a truth about the nobility of working the land emerges through legend, not factual evidence, it is all the more timelessly relevant to the present. It is also all the more inaccessible to a historiography that does not count legend as meaningful within its encyclopedic system.

Ruskin critiques this progressive historiography through many more examples, often interweaving his stories and allusions in a rich textual web that, read together, illuminates his purpose more clearly than any individual strand seen alone.<sup>29</sup> He later connects the story of Cincinnatus to that of Theseus, telling his readers to go to the British Museum and look at the statue of Theseus simply because “the Greeks imagined it to have something better than a Lion’s Heart beneath its breadth—a hero’s heart, duly trained in every pulse” (27: 399). The implicit question arises, what purpose did such mythic imagining serve the Greeks? And why is it in *Fors*? What purpose could it serve the modern world, driven by its desire for material progress, measured through gain? He answers, “They imagined it so. Your modern extremely wise and

liberal historians will tell you it never was so:—that no real Theseus ever existed then; and that none can exist now, or, rather, that everybody is himself a Theseus and a little more”—consistent with modern narratives of societal evolution and progress (27: 399). But again, the past is so much more than a collection of factual, objectified artifacts:

All the more strange then, all the more instructive, as the disembodied Cincinnatus of the Roman, so this disembodied Theseus of the Ionian; though certainly Mr. Stuart Mill could not consider him, even in that ponderous block of marble imagery, a “utility fixed and embodied in a material object.” Not even a disembodied utility—not even a ghost—if he never lived. An idea only; yet one that has ruled all minds of men to this hour, from the hour of its first being born, a dream, into this practical and solid world. Ruled, and still rules, in a thousand ways, which you know no more than the paths by which the winds have come that blow in your face. (27: 399-400)

This influence of Theseus—enduring through the Greek imagination that was first faithful to the idea manifest through this legend—is no longer consciously acknowledged as meaningful by the present system that determines what is useful or valuable, as a “utility.” Thus its eternal truth is in a state of unconscious potential, “which you know no more.” Learning from this manifestation of truth—discerning what Badiou calls the “appearing” of eternal truth, choosing “to live for an Idea” (*Logics* 513, 510)—this is what is missed by a present that acknowledges only its own definition of value or of historical reality.

In a labyrinthine chain of fragments, Ruskin creates his truth procedure to lead his readers to discern the central truth—deeper than any simple romanticized heroism—that he sees emerging through the story of Theseus. He begins with the traces his readers meet with daily, if

unknowingly, discussing the pattern of the Greek fret used on ancient coins and in modern ornamentation, the curving lines of Ionic and Corinthian capitals, and the symbol of the labyrinth carved in the porches of many cathedrals. He compares three Greek judges, Æacus, Minos, and Rhadamanthus. He journeys through the circles of Dante's *Inferno* and of Theseus' labyrinth. Finally, he comes to the central truth he wants to resurrect and drive home to his readers: "the right interweaving of Anger with Love, in criminal justice, is the main question in earthly law, which the Athenian lawgiver had to deal with" (27: 414).

However, just as he leaves the truth of *Cincinnatus* more implicit than explicit, here he does not spend time elaborating how this truth about the legend of Theseus fits into the overall issues of social reform that *Fors* is implicitly driving at. He lets the truth stand where he leaves it, supported by the haphazard conjunction of mythic and literary sources. He is enacting his apparently arbitrary wager of fidelity partly to the truth about Theseus, but mostly to the truth about how to read the story of Theseus. One who reads with a progressive mindset, looking only for visible utility, will not understand why the Thesean truth of anger and love, so tangentially built up to, has any significance. One must break with this mindset of visible utility and read the fragmentary tangents seeking to understand the significance of each element in its support of this truth. Thus one can participate in Ruskin's process of fidelity, as it were casting his or her own wager on the importance not just of the truth, but of the process by which that truth is reached.

Ruskin continues this truth process as he repeatedly invokes two of his favorite legends—the stories of St. George and St. Ursula. He calls St. George's story "true," clarifying, "how far literally true is of no moment" (27: 481). Though St. George appears throughout the letters, St. Ursula seems to become the patron saint of *Fors* itself. Ruskin had sought the factuality of her existence, of course finding none, which only makes her story that much more pertinent in his

mind as an artistic creation embodying the appearing of an eternal truth: “Of [...] St. Ursula, by no industry of my good scholars, and none has been refused, can I find the slightest material trace. Under scholarly investigation, she vanishes utterly into the stars and the æther [...] Not a relic, not a word remains of her, as what Mr. John Stuart Mill calls ‘a utility embodied in a material object’” (28: 733-34).

Ruskin’s comments on St. Ursula in Letter 20, titled “Benediction,” create an added layer of urgency by juxtaposing two of his experiences: first, studying Carpaccio’s 1495 painting *The Dream of St. Ursula*, and second, riding in a railway carriage from Venice to Verona seated opposite two American girls who were presumably pursuing the grand tour (27: 342-46). His study of the painting enables him to conduct a close reading of its details and thus discern the truths about the source of happiness emergent through this artistic creation: the saint has “Royal power over herself, and happiness in her flowers, her books, her sleeping, and waking, her prayers, her dreams, her earth, her heaven” (27: 344-45). His observation of the tourists leads to an opposite reading. Though they are “specimens of the utmost which the money and invention of the nineteenth century could produce” (27: 345), they have no such happiness, rather traveling “with sealed eyes and tormented limbs, their numbered miles of pain” (27: 346). He wraps together the juxtaposition in what at first seems a simple moralistic conclusion: “There are the two states for you, in clearest opposition; Blessed, and Accursed. The happy industry, and eyes full of sacred imagination of things that are not [...] and the tortured indolence, and infidel eyes, blind even to the things that are” (27: 346-47).

Yet there is more to this statement than a simple moral about appreciating a beautiful landscape. Ruskin is implicitly commenting on his seemingly arbitrary and fragmentary approach, repeated throughout *Fors*, of juxtaposing his own experience of old legendary stories,

on the one hand, with self-absorbed materialism on the other. Through these juxtapositions Ruskin traces a fidelity to the truth that history as a progressive, teleological narrative is self-imposed blindness, not enlightenment. He puts his readers through the exercise of reading his difficult material to enable them to perceive the possibility of other realities beyond their own, realities not acknowledged by the modern self-complacent and self-isolated blindness to the past. His whole method is for the reader's benefit, to infuse "power over [one]self." Birch comments on this benefit in her introduction to *Fors*: "An astonishing spectrum of knowledge is called into play [...] But the erudition is not displayed for its own sake. Indeed, erudition is the wrong word for it. [...] The last thing it intends is to exclude the reader" (xxxiv). He is inviting each reader to participate in his fidelity.

In thus trying to help his readers to see, Ruskin wants them to become the kind of subjects who could be open to discerning eternal truths, who could choose to be faithful to these truths in the present, however they may have been manifest through the past. They are not particular to any one constructed set or historical context; factuality is not the only privileged passport to truth. For example, Ruskin deliberately contrasts two different historians' methods of telling the same story—that of Edward III's generous treatment of his enemy Ribault after a battle at Calais. He begins with the medieval historian Froissart's account, full of legendary details. Then he launches into metanarrative commentary:

Now, if you have not enjoyed this bit of historical study, I tell you frankly, it is neither Edward the Third's fault, nor Froissart's, nor mine, but your own, for not having cheerfulness, loyalty, or generosity enough in you to understand what is going on. But even supposing you have these, and *do* enjoy the story as now read, it does not at all follow that you would enjoy it at your Literary Institute. There

you would find, most probably, a modern abstract of the matter given in polished language. You would be fortunate if you chanced on so good a history as Robert Henry's [...], which I always use myself, as intelligent, and trustworthy for general reference. But hear his polished account of this supper at Calais:—(27: 464)

The passage from this modern historian is finely worded, smoothly written, recounting the facts of the experience. Yet it is devoid of the details that illustrate the personalities of the characters—the details that Ruskin sees as containing truths about cheerfulness, loyalty, and generosity—but that, according to modern terms of historical accuracy, discredit Froissart's history by lending it the flavor of legend. Ruskin continues,

Now, supposing you can read no other history than such as this, you had—with profoundest earnestness I say it—ininitely better read none. It is not the least necessary for you to know anything about Edward III.; but quite necessary for you to know something vital and real about somebody; and not to have polished language given you instead of life. (27: 465)<sup>30</sup>

This last example is crucial because it makes explicit what Ruskin has been building up to in his other examples: there is nothing inherently valuable in amassing facts about the past, like so much cultural capital. Nor is the past arbitrarily better than the present, simply because it is past. The truth Ruskin wants to defend here is that for people living in the present, their ability to read truths manifest in the past has an impact on who they are and how they act in their present. They can choose to become faithful subjects, defending the implications and the potentialities of those truths in the present.

Evental Historiography and the Faithful Subject



Having considered these examples of Ruskin's methods of engaging with the past, enacting what he sees as the way to access its truths, we must reconsider the romantic impulse that Ruskin was accused of indulging in throughout *Fors*. For many of his readers, Ruskin's allusive readings in "history," along with his undermining of the triumph of fact and the inevitability of progress, were seen as arbitrary valorizations of an illusory, sentimentalized, static past over the progressive reality of modernity (28: 81). Harrison criticizes him as not taking into consideration "the whole" of the past, ignoring its "dark side" in nostalgic romanticism (28: 663). But Ruskin spends many passages in *Fors* describing the dark side of the biblical, classical, and medieval past, the robbery of barons and the injustice of kings.<sup>31</sup> His purpose is not to merely valorize the past, setting up a simplistic binary between past truth and present degeneration. *Fors* shows, arguably more than any other of Ruskin's works, his awareness that there is much in past cultures that is well abandoned. He does not want simply to reinstate the status quo of a past age as somehow inherently better than the modern age (16: 341). Rather, as emerges in his metanarrative commentary on his method of reading history, he wants to help his readers see truths as distinct from their past settings, eternally relevant in the present. In his turning to these stories, he is doing more than objectifying the past for its own sake.

In modern progressive historiography, the past is read as fixed, museum-like, full of cultural artifacts whose stasis modernity had outstripped in its progress. Romantic, purposeless dreaming over the past is labeled as such by a society that values progressive narratives, opposing romanticism in a simplistic binary against "real" factual history. Such a binary ends up distracting from the real issue; as Stoddart explains:

What made Ruskin's reading of modern history so provoking for readers like Harrison and Stephen was not that it was hopelessly nostalgic, but that it

demonstrated the currency of political alternatives that were unacceptable in the new liberal program. [...] He built a utopia not around historical evidence, but around powerful symbols of family and of mythological virtues. (105)

Ruskin models the fidelity he wants his readers to choose as they experience *Fors*. He wants them to move beyond the binary of romantic nostalgia versus factual evidence. Amassing objectified, commodified knowledge, cultural capital as proof of one's own advancement over the past and of one's own progressive status in the present, can effect no real change. Change can happen only through openness to past truth. Such openness to the past creates new possibilities for the present. Entering into the truth process of *Fors* helps the reader to gain this new vision.

Badiou describes the subject's process of fidelity to an emergent truth, or as he also calls it, a "generic part," as it operates outside of the existent encyclopedia of knowledge: "Every subject can thus be recognized by the emergence of a language which is internal to the situation, but whose referent-multiples are *subject to the condition* of an as yet incomplete generic part. A subject is separated from this generic part (from this truth) by an infinite series of aleatory encounters" (*Being* 398-99, italics original). Ruskin frames his work in such a way that readers have to assume this sort of subject position to accept as meaningful its series of aleatory encounters with the past. As Birch puts it, "*Fors* gestures towards a process which only the reader can complete" (*Fors* xliv).<sup>32</sup>

Confronted with new terms in which to think about truth, seemingly random tangents and explorations of the past not overtly relevant to any overall purpose, the reader must become a faithful subject and wager on the importance of those terms to Ruskin's work and purpose. As Badiou describes this process of fidelity, "It is only possible to say: *if* this or that term, when it will have been encountered, turns out to be positively connected to the event, *then* this or that

name will probably have such a referent, because the generic part [truth], which remains indiscernible in the situation, will have this or that configuration” (*Being* 399, italics original). Ruskin’s process invites readers to act, to work out the relevance of these truths for their own present. They must think outside of the accepted terms of the “realm of knowledge” and open themselves up to the responsibility of truth, the “realm of decision” (Hallward xxv). In *Fors*, readers are faced with the choice, in Badiou’s words, of “being *faithful to a fidelity*” (*Ethics* 47, italics original).

Ruskin revises his subject position in relation to truth by requiring his readers, through his fragmentary, aleatory form, to revise their own subject positions in relation to truth. Ruskin felt that his earlier works were restricted by their narrow-minded conception of truth, and as such were insufficient to effect change in the modern world. All his books written before 1858, he said, were “so mixed with Protestant egotism and insolence, that [...] I won’t republish, in their first form, any of those former books” (29: 90; cf. 28: 444n). He turns to a new form to reflect a broader engagement with truth: “No great truth is allowed by nature to be demonstrable to any person who, foreseeing its consequences, desires to refuse it” (28: 761). If people encounter truths through structures that do no more than permit them to judge those truths from within these received constructions of knowledge, they are not likely to desire to be faithful to them. *Fors* seeks to embody an answer to the question, how does one engage the past in a way that would resurrect its eternal truths and make them relevant to readers in the present, helping them desire to be faithful to them, without falling into romanticized yet (in all essentials) disconnected tourism of a fixed, museum-like past?

Such an alienated objectification of the past results from a culture closed to ideas of truth. Badiou describes this situation as being the current state of postmodernism: “Democratic

materialism proposes to call ‘thought’ the pure algebra of appearing” (*Logics* 509)—mere factual existence—the way of knowing privileged by progressive narratives of history even in Ruskin’s time. “This atonic [static, eventless] conception of the present results in the fetishization of the past as a separable ‘culture.’ Democratic materialism has a passion for history; it is truly the only authentic historical materialism” (509). Such static memorialization of history makes it profoundly irrelevant to the present. Yet such memorialization is not the only option; fidelity to truth can change the status quo: “To break with the cult of genealogies and narratives means restoring the past as the amplitude of the present” (509).

This amplitude is possible when one is open to truth, when one lives for an idea, as before mentioned. Badiou continues,

In democratic materialism, [...] the fetishism of history is accompanied by an unrelenting discourse on novelty, perpetual change and the imperative of modernization. The past of cultural depths is matched by a dispersive present, an agitation which is itself devoid of any depth whatsoever. There are monuments to visit and devastated instants to inhabit. Everything changes at every instant, which is why one is left to contemplate the majestic historical horizon of what does not change. (509-10)

Such agitated dispersiveness is closed to any sense of how eternal truth, emergent through the past, could reconfigure the present. It does not summon a subject to fidelity. However, when one reads history as a series of events allowing eternal truth to shine through, the past becomes full of potential meaning for the present: “one reconstitutes a different past, a history of achievements, discoveries, breakthroughs, which is by no means a cultural monumentality but a legible

succession of fragments of eternity” (510). It is this way of seeing truths emerging through the past that emerges as the central truth procedure enacted in *Fors*.

Colin Wright examines the implications for new methods of reading history arising from Badiou’s theories. The term “evental historiography,” he says, may seem contradictory, given that the event is that which breaks with statist history (74). But Wright considers how Badiou’s idea of the “resurrection” of truths, as well as his unique methods of “philosophical exposition,” foreshadow “a form of evental historiography which [...] is faithful to the radical implications of a truth” (73). That is, one can read history as a series of events, of fragments of eternity that break with established conceptions of reading history. Wright seeks to articulate a “non-conventional concept of historiography which is concerned not with a ‘history of history writing’ nor with the evolution of its methodologies and so on, but rather with the circulation of evental statements which, despite being distilled from historical material, actively *undermine* the transcendental function of historicist reductionism within a given present” (74, italics original). Quentin Meillassoux explains the reason behind this undermining effect:

[For Badiou,] truths are eternal and historical, eternal because they are historical: they insist in history, tying together temporal segments across the centuries, always unfolding more profoundly the infinity of their potential consequences, through captivated subjects, separated sometimes by distant epochs, but all equally transfixed by the urgent eventality that illuminates their present. (4)

Thus we come back to Ruskin’s methods of reading the past, of engaging with legends, myths, and history in a way that undermines the methods of progressive historiography. Stoddart claims that *Fors*’ resistance to progressive narratives of history takes the shape of a forward-looking allegorical capacity: “*Fors Clavigera* encapsulates competing modes of historical

narrative in a decade marked by zealous efforts to tell the story of modern England. [...] Ruskin resists positivist reconstructions of the past, while pursuing an allegorical approach that looks forward to versions of postmodern historicism” (101).<sup>33</sup>

Comparing postmodern historicism with evental historiography helps us understand more clearly the type of historiography Ruskin creates in *Fors*. Jurgen Pieters discusses postmodern historicism and how Stephen Greenblatt’s new historicist methods inform it:

The anecdote is the supreme example of Greenblatt’s analytical logic of unity in difference: it offers a view of history as a site of potential conflict between a culture and its so-called representatives, a site which presents a culture as a dynamic, structural system of rules of in- and ex-clusion. As such, it allows the historian to interpret historical materials as simultaneously representative and non-representative. (37)

As Linda Hutcheon similarly explains, postmodernism makes it a point “to question *whose* truth gets told” (123). In *Fors*, Ruskin may seem to be engaged in rescuing the ignored other, juxtaposing obscure with better-known legendary anecdotes—as with the examples of Cincinnatus and Theseus and St. Ursula—much like Greenblatt’s juxtaposition of Peter Martyr’s *De Orbe Novo* with *Othello* in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Pieters 31).

However, there is this difference; in giving these anecdotes, Ruskin does not see himself as a historian. He is not concerned with outlining an interpretation of the past and its structures of representation, nor with “conjuring” a vision, albeit acknowledged as necessarily illusory, of its reality, both of which are features of postmodern historicism (Pieters 38; Hutcheon 122). We have seen that he asserts repeatedly that the fictional status of an anecdote makes his use of it in *Fors* all the more effective for his purpose—not of merely constructing an oppositional narrative

to the perceived status of fact—but of resurrecting truths. He wants to help his readers encounter truths in such a way that they desire to be faithful to them in the present, not to fix them as past artifacts. Ruskin models for his readers the way a faithful subject reads the past. This way is not a distanced tourism to amass cultural capital as so many figures in the bank of modern progressive enlightenment. Nor is it a collection of so many fragmented, hence paradoxically more “authentic,” perspectives available to the self-awareness of postmodern historiography. Rather, it is an intense, reverential faithfulness to past truths, to their potential for transforming the present.

### Conclusion

Ruskin’s idiosyncratic method of engaging with the past in *Fors Clavigera* seems best understood as enacting fidelity to the truths available to an eventual historiography. Ruskin is trying to nail down and elucidate the truths of the past, the “fragments of eternity,” that he sees as obscure to his modern readers because those truths are uncared for within the status quo of nineteenth-century progressive ideology. He wants to help them count those truths—to make them pertinent to their lives. Ruskin’s subject position thus becomes clearer in light of Badiou’s conception of the faithful subject who, induced by his fidelity to truth, shows how it changes the state of the situation. The injunction *Fors* lays upon its readers is to be faithful to the truth established through its own process—a truth about understanding the truths of the past and their vital implications for how one lives in the present. Badiou describes this injunction: “We might put it like this: ‘Never forget what you have encountered.’ [...] Not-forgetting consists of thinking and practising the arrangement of my multiple-being according to the Immortal which it holds, and which the piercing through [*transpercement*] of an encounter [with truth] has composed as subject” (*Ethics* 52; French brackets translator’s; other brackets mine).

*Fors* is Ruskin's enactment of fidelity, through which he extends an invitation to fidelity. It is not merely a nostalgic or "redemptive historiography, whereby bodies buried in the (text of the) past are somehow brought to life," but the Badiouian "subject-body in the present" or eventual historiography oriented by truths (Wright 85). *Fors* emerges, in Badiou's words, not as a process of "cultural monumentality," easily contained by interpretation or canonization,<sup>34</sup> but as "a legible succession of fragments of eternity" (*Logics* 510), resisting efforts to account for it except on its own terms of fidelity. Its fragmentary form reinforces the call to the aleatory wager, the invitation to the process of fidelity, the injunction to open oneself to the eternity of truths in such a way that they can emerge and effect change in the highly structured modern world. We may now better understand Ruskin's words:

I wonder if Fors will let me say any small proportion, this year, of what I intend. I wish she would, for my readers have every right to be doubtful of my plan till they see it more defined; and yet to define it severely would be to falsify it, for all that is best in it depends on my adopting whatever good I can find, in men and things, that will work to my purpose; which of course means action in myriads of ways that I neither wish to define, nor attempt to anticipate. Nay, I am wrong, even in speaking of it as a plan or scheme at all. It is only a method of uniting the force of all good plans and wise schemes: it is a principle and tendency, like the law of form in a crystal; not a plan. If I live, as I said at first, I will endeavour to show some small part of it in action; but it would be a poor design indeed, for the bettering of the world, which any man could see either quite round the outside, or quite into the inside of. (28: 235)



## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Even for years after Ruskin finished *Fors*, the critique of its eclecticism continued; an 1898 review in the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* declares, “Whether the ‘workmen and labourers of Great Britain’ will give much heed to its teachings we know not. The professor, we fear, fires far over their heads, notwithstanding all that has been done for popular education in the last 20 years” (“Literary Notices” 2).
- <sup>2</sup> See *Fors* 27: 41, 92, 108, 237, 267, 357, 375, 453, 485, 580; 28: 308, 373, 453, 559, 560, 583, 614, 672; 29: 82, 351, 360, 365, 415, 435, 500, 511.
- <sup>3</sup> An 1878 review of *Fors* in the *Dundee Courier* comments, “It is a pity that Mr Ruskin, with all his marvellous acuteness as an art critic, and all his benevolence and many good social qualities, should let his aesthetic faculty run away into fields where it must be subordinate” (“Mr Ruskin on the Depression of Trade”). The *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle* concurs: “his mistake consists in judging political and social questions from an art standard” (3).
- <sup>4</sup> See Frederic Harrison’s biography *John Ruskin* (181, 402); E. T. Cook’s *Life of John Ruskin* (319); and Leslie Stephen’s “Mr. Ruskin’s Recent Writings” (689).
- <sup>5</sup> See for example Elizabeth Helsinger’s *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*; John D. Rosenberg’s *Elegy for an Age: The Presence of the Past in Victorian Literature*; and Jeremy Tambling’s “*Fors Clavigera*: Outside Chances, Posthumous Letters.”
- <sup>6</sup> Examples of Ruskin’s critique of “the faithless and materialized mind of modern Europe” (7: 327), with its worship of the “Goddess of Getting-on” (18: 452), may be found in nearly every one of his later works.
- <sup>7</sup> For older criticisms of Ruskin along these lines, see Tommaso Marinetti’s “Futurist Speech to the English” (1910) and Ezra Pound’s essay “The City” (1928). Cianci and Nicholls have since cited these examples and argued that Ruskin “was not as uncomplicatedly *passéiste* as they assumed” (xv). See Sara Atwood’s recent book *Ruskin’s Educational Ideals*: “*Fors* is suffused by nostalgia, reflecting Ruskin’s tendency to locate his social ideal in the past” (127).
- <sup>8</sup> For a reading of Ruskin’s own criticism of the reactionary subject in connection with authors he frequently commented on, Scott and Dickens, see Ian Duncan’s essay “‘Reactionary Desire’: Ruskin and the Work of Fiction.”

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- <sup>9</sup> See Gill G. Cockram's *Ruskin and Social Reform*, discussing Ruskin's idealization of medieval society in *The Stones of Venice* (19), as well as Dinah Birch's *Our Victorian Education*, on Ruskin's awareness that "medieval builders were hardly egalitarian" (140).
- <sup>10</sup> See Mary Poovey's book *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*, in which she investigates western evolutions in knowledge making: "Indeed, as 'a history of the categories of facticity, evidence, objectivity, and so forth,' historical epistemology is the methodological label I consider most appropriate for this book" (7). One of the acknowledged assumptions underwriting her investigation is of particular interest to my reading of *Fors*: "*how an argument is conducted constitutes the argument itself*: there are no ideas apart from their articulation" (17, italics original).
- <sup>11</sup> See Dinah Birch's *Our Victorian Education* for an excellent study of Ruskin's and others' defense of these other dimensions of human experience in education—the need "to bring together the layers of human identity—imaginative, intellectual, creative, emotional—into an experience of wholeness" (130). In an 1875 lecture, Ruskin acknowledges the importance of facts, but he expresses skepticism over any historian's claim to be able to "get at the facts." He attributes the only "four bits of perfect history" to Shakespeare (22: 500).
- <sup>12</sup> Cockram examines how, for Ruskin, changing the exterior structures of a society matters less than refining the interior character of its people: "Ruskin was convinced that the only method of 'practical' change was through the moral reformation of society" (204). See *Fors* Letter 1 (27: 14) and Sara Atwood's *Ruskin's Educational Ideals* (2).
- <sup>13</sup> Some work has been done comparing *Fors* with possible predecessors in epistolary periodicals such as Cobbett's *Political Register*, Coleridge's *The Friend*, and Carlyle's *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (Stoddart 23-45). E. T. Cook devotes forty pages of the library edition introduction to defining how *Fors* fits into six generic categories (27: xxxiii). Paul L. Sawyer's *Ruskin's Poetic Argument: The Design of the Major Works* describes the difficulty of assigning *Fors* to any existing genre (292).
- <sup>14</sup> Despite the noticeable shift occurring between Ruskin's earlier and later methods, it has been recognized that even his early methods were never extremely static; see the first chapter in Rachel Teukolsky's *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics*.
- <sup>15</sup> For a more detailed examination of the critical reception of *Unto This Last*, see chapter 3 in Cockram's study *Ruskin and Social Reform: Ethics and Economics in the Victorian Age*.

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- <sup>16</sup> The index Ruskin wrote for the letters attempts to impose some retrospective semblance of order on them (29: 13, 138, 600). Yet an 1887 reviewer for *The Pall Mall Gazette*, announcing the publication of a new index to *Fors*, calls it “a truly monumental work. To make an elaborate index of any book in eight octavo volumes is no light task; but when the volumes are as discursive and disjointed as ‘Fors Clavigera’ the task would appal [*sic*] any but the veriest glutton of literary toil” (“A Ruskin Index” 5).
- <sup>17</sup> When first introducing his title, Ruskin explains his associations with these meanings as follows: “‘Force’ (in humanity), means power of doing good work. [...] ‘Fortitude’ means the power of bearing necessary pain, or trial of patience, whether by time, or temptation. ‘Fortune’ means the necessary fate of a man: the ordinance of his life which cannot be changed. To ‘make your fortune’ is to rule that appointed fate to the best ends of which it is capable” (27: 28).
- <sup>18</sup> Ruskin explains these meanings by referring to Greek myth: “Clavigera may mean, therefore, either Club-bearer, Key-bearer, or Nail-bearer. Each of these three possible meanings of Clavigera corresponds to one of the three meanings of Fors. Fors, the Club-bearer, means the strength of Hercules, or of Deed. Fors, the Key-bearer, means the strength of Ulysses, or of Patience. Fors, the Nail-bearer, means the strength of Lycurgus, or of Law” (27: 28). Ruskin’s engagement with myth has been well examined by Dinah Birch in *Ruskin’s Myths* and more recently in Michael Wheeler’s *Ruskin’s God*.
- <sup>19</sup> Most casual references to Ruskin’s political ideas label him not uniquely any of his own designations, but a Christian Socialist, yet his influence on the movement was more complicated than is often acknowledged, given his rejection of democratic ideology (Cockram 36, 184; Harrison, *Estimates* 95). As Ruskin writes, “The laws which at present regulate the possession of wealth are unjust, because the motives which provoke to its attainment are impure; but no socialism can effect their abrogation, unless it can abrogate also covetousness and pride, which it is by no means yet in the way of doing” (17: 144).
- <sup>20</sup> In her introduction to her edited selections from *Fors*, Dinah Birch points out, “Modern commentators have sometimes been reluctant to acknowledge the continuing and fundamental importance of his religious faith, and this has engendered careless and anachronistic interpretations” (xli). See also Michael Wheeler’s book *Ruskin’s God*, wherein he discusses Ruskin’s ongoing “personal struggle to relate facts to truth, and truth to God” (278).
- <sup>21</sup> For a critique of Badiou’s mathematical apparatus and for his and others’ replies, see *Critical Inquiry* 38 (2012): 362-64, 365-80, 381-87, and 583-614.

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- <sup>22</sup> Badiou reiterates in his *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* how truths are not conscripted in systemic knowledge (22).
- <sup>23</sup> See *Logics of Worlds* for a more complete explanation of the differences between the reactionary, obscure, and faithful subjects (50-67).
- <sup>24</sup> Despite the appeals to the “religion of humanity” in his works of the 1860s, Ruskin roundly critiques positivism for investing all motivations for change in its own notion of progressive humanism. Ruskin’s critique of positivism’s self-containment is especially evident in a series of letters written to the Comtean positivist Frederic Harrison in 1876, several of which were published in *Fors* (28: 618-25, 701; 29: 565-69; Cockram 110-12). In 1884, he wrote another letter to Harrison wherein he called positivism “meology,” asking, what “is Positivism but the Everlasting me?” (qtd. in Cockran 123).
- <sup>25</sup> Ruskin distinguishes between laying down or positing an opinion (*pono*) and actually knowing something (*scio*), neither of which yet reaches to wise understanding (*sapio*). Just because a position is held (*positio*) does not necessarily mean that the position is one of wisdom (*sapientia*).
- <sup>26</sup> Meditations 28-29 in *Being and Event* investigate the difference between a transformative event and the mere opposition and appropriation that happens in constructivist thought (286-314).
- <sup>27</sup> For example, Badiou considers the ideology of postmodernism as itself an example of such a constructivist system; it prides itself on its ability to take into account as relative all cultural discourses and viewpoints, little heeding the fact of its own privileged position over other ways of seeing that it has categorized as less enlightened for admitting outmoded ideas of eternal, non-relative truth “for all” (*Ethics* 32).
- <sup>28</sup> Ruskin comments in further detail on the meaning of his title in connection with his way of reading history at the beginning of his second volume of *Fors* (27:230-1).
- <sup>29</sup> As Cook says in the introduction to *Fors*, “If a work, so heterogeneous and often so obscure, is to be read so as to reach the author’s real meaning, it must be read as a whole. [...] as he says, ‘if any patient or candid person cares to understand the book, and master its contents, he may do so with less pains than would be required for the reading of any ordinary philosophical treatise on equally important subjects’” (27: 333; 28: 650).
- <sup>30</sup> In another place, it may be interesting to consider how Ruskin’s desire to give his readers “life” instead of mere “polished language” in his engagement with the past contrasts with Thomas Carlyle’s romantic historiographical methods of reviving the past in works such as his *French Revolution* and *Frederick the Great*. The two authors

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are often compared; Ruskin did claim Carlyle as his “master” in many things (28.568). See John D. Rosenberg’s *Carlyle and the Burden of History*, which positions Carlyle as mediator “between the older, transcendental order and the newer world of process” in his engagement with history (39). See also Rosenberg’s *Elegy for an Age: The Presence of the Past in Victorian Literature*. Its chapter on Carlyle and history examines his Wordsworthian “drive to escape the prison-house of time and reach those islands of consciousness in which the past coexists with the present” (16).

<sup>31</sup> See *Fors* 27: 52-59, 125, 178, 236-41, 272, 310-11; 28: 71, 81, 562-63, 595-96; 29: 109, 294-95, etc.

<sup>32</sup> Some work has been done examining the requirements Ruskin places on his readers through the form of *Fors*; see Francis O’Gorman’s essays “Ruskin and Peculiarity: *Fors Clavigera* and the 1870s,” and “‘Do Good Work Whether You Live or Die’: *Fors Clavigera*, Usefulness, and the Crisis of the Commune.” See also Sarah Atwood’s excellent book *Ruskin’s Educational Ideals*, wherein she examines “what *Fors* was designed to do and still does, its unique form forcing the work to operate dynamically rather than as a passive exposition of Ruskin’s ideas. [...] readers are transformed into active learners through the very act of penetrating Ruskin’s richly allusive, associative, multi-layered text” (149).

<sup>33</sup> For an excellent discussion of postmodern historicism and its relation to “historiographic metafiction,” see Linda Hutcheon’s book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. In chapter seven, she writes, “It is part of the postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past” (106). She speaks of the “postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s), truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture” (108). And finally, “Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (110). This certainly seems an apt description of Ruskin’s approach. But *Fors* also resists unqualified categorization into postmodern historicism by defying that sense of dispersion, that impulse to structure truths as culturally and spatially specific.

<sup>34</sup> Brian Maidment discusses the resistance Ruskin’s works present to the impulse of canonization (204). Ruskin’s elusiveness to easy categorization or interpretation as his work continually evolved shows how his work, specifically *Fors* as the most mutable, was his subjective wager, his procedure of fidelity to truth.

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