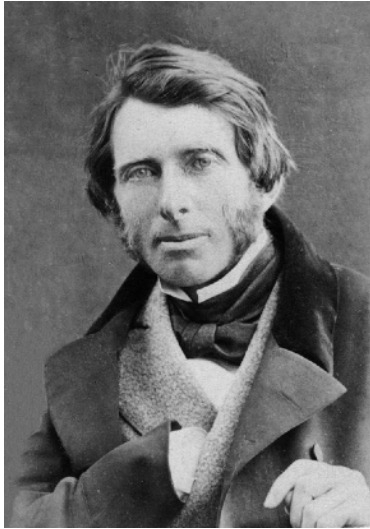


Psychopathology in Criticism: The Case of Ruskin

Don Kunze



Ruskin in 1863

Is it fair or useful to use a psychological diagnosis in criticism? Certainly critical theory in general uses psychopathology, both as a science and a strategy of identifying the causes and effects of creativity, in useful ways. The genius of artists has been associated with various kinds of madness since antiquity, most notably put forward in the “Problemata XXX.1” attributed to Aristotle, where melancholy not only coincided with but was inseparable from artistic mentality.

Specifically, however, it is reductive and unfair to claim to explain artistic or intellectual production as solely the result of “mental problems” which are then elaborated as a kind of toxicology report. The work of genius is not pathological in the sense of an ill that should be or can be cured. It is set within a mental and emotional structure shared by all humans, even if the forms of these structures are highly differential. Saying that an artist or thinker is psychotic, neurotic, perverse, or pointing out cases of delusion, obsession, or megalomania is nothing more than an exercise in correlation. Given that “anything can be compared to anything,” it is worthless.

The question also arises: “who are we?” Just who *is* the critic who promotes or denounces a work or genius or the genius him/herself on the basis of a psychopathological condition? There are no “normal” humans, at least not according to Freud, who when asked when neurosis might be cured, answered, “when you die.” We all, as “animals who speak,” speak *under the conditions of* being neurotic, psychotic, or perverse. Our human subjectivity, which is never otherwise, can claim to be objective but this claim is itself a symptom of being a human subject. In other words, such a claim cannot be taken completely seriously. In science, objectivity is an ideal that is impossible to meet but equally impossible to deny. Approximations are made in the shadow of this impossibility by employing the principle of corroboration. Experiments are done under conditions that must be tested by others, elsewhere, for a claim to have any validity whatsoever. Even then, as Thomas Kuhn famously argued, subjectivity is cushioned by paradigms that group together the implicit but unprovable assumptions shared by groups of researchers until a better paradigm comes along.¹ There is no ruling out intuition or “gut feelings,” even in the hard sciences; and these generic predispositions are both impediments and advantages. Discourse is impossible without shared assumptions or world views, even if these color and limit the truth.

¹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962).

Ruskin's Talent

In the case of John Ruskin, there was from the beginning the coloration of genius which convinced the young author that his subjective uniqueness was capable of opening up special “channels of truth,” which for him were inspirational, reliable, and even unquestionable. He compared his artistic experiences to religious revelations. Like a mystic whose intentional fasting and strict meditations lead to convincing unions with the divine, Ruskin used his subjective isolation as a privileged intimacy; his questions become passwords admitting him into the inner sanctum of the object, which confessed its truth to him and only him.

We should consider these claims in context. They are not unique to Ruskin; they are common symptoms of narcissistic megalomania, belief that one is singled out by the uniqueness one's thoughts and feelings, given special powers thanks to the suffering of this isolation, but that the benefit of revelation, often in the form of ecstatic experiences of “pure truth,” make the suffering worthwhile.² Everyone has some version of these feelings, though rarely in such a productive way as Ruskin, whose literary output was nothing short of prodigious. If it is true that Ruskin's delusions qualified him as psychotic, he was, like many artists/writers suffering from psychosis, all the more productive. His “affliction” came with lucidity, profligacy, and charm. Psychotics, in general, must learn how to appear to be appealing and sympathetic, and, like those who learn a foreign language so well that they speak it better than natives, they frequently are able to come across as *exceptionally* subjective — compassionate, unselfish, dedicated to higher goals — even though these qualities are impossible for the psychotic. The tip-off is that the psychotic can simulate the ideal, while the poor neurotic always bungles efforts to be compassionate, unselfish, or dedicated. The psychotic doesn't make such mistakes. Psychotics are so expert at simulation that they over-achieve. They are not only appear to us to be sympathetic, we say they are “the most sympathetic person we have ever met.” They are not simply bright, they appear to be brilliant geniuses, exceptional, world-class. What are natural qualities for neurotics, imperfectly presented, are for psychotics a form of art.

The psychotic's artistry cannot be discredited on this basis. Looking and sounding *like* a genius is more difficult than being a genius “naturally,” if there in fact is such a thing. (An actual genius would always be goofing up, seeming many times to be an idiot, etc.).³ Simulation, the work of *appearing* to be a genius, is actually itself a work of genius, and it is possible that this work is impossible without psychosis.

² Sigmund Freud (1917) “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 16: 241–463. See also Sigmund Freud (1914), “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 14: 67–102.

³ An example of the too-good-to-be-true psychotic is the character of Roger “Verbal” Kint, the con-man of the 1995 film, *The Usual Suspects*. Kint appears to be a victim of a massacre but in fact has engineered the massacre, inventing details of his cover-story while looking at a bulletin board in the police office. His alibi is so convincing that it is suspicious only because it is *too perfect*. Is this not Ruskin's charm, his seeming access to a unique and self-realized “theory of everything”?

I am using psychosis to talk about Ruskin as a critic, and in criticizing criticism itself there is an unavoidable redundancy to begin with. How is any criticism possible? Criticism is judgment, and judgment presumes some acceptable and reliable set of standards. But, in the case of judging genius or art, there are none; we have only “rules of thumb,” meaning accepted practices and “reasonable ideas,” such as the rule that audiences generally, over time, are the best deciders of what is or isn’t a work of art. In the course of time, ideas prove themselves to be durable or superficial, meaningful or trivial, as they encounter new contexts and new tests. Each generation has its own concerns, each will demote or promote well-known ideas or works of art. Those ideas and artworks that survive have “passed the test of time,” meaning that the best works must *suffer* in a maximal way, with time forcing exposing them to any and every objection to their genius.

Ruskin has not stood this test well. In his time, Ruskin was exceptionally popular. *Wikipedia*: “From the 1850s Ruskin became an increasingly popular public lecturer. His first public lectures were given in Edinburgh, in November 1853, on architecture and painting. His lectures at the Art Treasures Exhibition, Manchester in 1857, were collected as *The Political Economy of Art* and later under Keats’ phrase, *A Joy For Ever*.” But, today there is no serious popular appeal outside academia; his books are rarely read by the “ordinary public,” and even then rarely used as a basis for further research. His theories are inspirational on a personal level but there is no “Ruskinian school of thought.”⁴ At best, he is respected and quoted; at worst, he is relegated to an outmoded Victorian way of thinking. His personal life damaged his already precarious position as a thinker. Some claim that he was a misogynist; his family life was frequently a shambles. He was in the opinion of many a selfish spoiled snob whose unshakable confidence in his opinions was only added evidence of his isolation as a thinker. Compared to the more public Pugin, Ruskin comes across as elitist, cultist, unbending. Yet, his writing is superb. His methods of interrogating an artwork are so original that no one dare imitate them. His mastery of nuance is dizzying. Even while disagreeing with this or that point, the reader of Ruskin is mesmerized, enchanted. There is simply nothing like a Ruskin essay, which forces a reader to accept emotionally what he/she might reject intellectually.

Psychopathology as criticism thus seems unfair, if only for the reason that Ruskin is so vulnerable. Yet, it is clear that Ruskin himself employs psychopathology in the most negative sense when he deals with romantic art:

When a highland cottage roof is covered with fragments of shale instead of slates, it becomes picturesque, because the irregularity and rude fractures of the rocks, and their grey and gloomy colour, give to it something of the savageness, and much of the general aspect, of the slope of a mountain side. But as a mere cottage roof, it cannot be sublime,

⁴ There are, however, many admirers and followers. Ruskin never lacked for an enthusiastic readership. The point is that there are none who can “out Ruskin Ruskin.” His methods and manners are singular and unreproducible.

and whatever sublimity it derives from the wildness or sternness which the mountains have given it in its covering, is, so far forth, parasitical.⁵

The lower picturesque is eminently a heartless one; the lover of it seems to go forth into the world in a temper as merciless as its rocks. All other men feel some regret at the sight of disorder and ruin. He alone delights in both; it matters not of what. Fallen cottage — desolate villa — deserted village — blasted heath — mouldering castle — to him, so that they do but show jagged angles of stone and timber, all sights are equally joyful. Poverty, and darkness, and guilt, bring in their several contributions to his treasury of pleasant thoughts.⁶

Ruskin attributes heartlessness to romantics, but it is Ruskin who is being heartless.⁷ In other words, are we not justified in applying a psychopathological criticism to someone who, himself, employs psychopathological criticism? When Ruskin calls romantics heartless, isn't he being too heartless himself? At least we can promise that any psychoanalytic criticism should be neither "heartless," nor expressly "compassionate," in order to get a clear picture of what Ruskin is thinking and why. To begin with basics, Ruskin was narcissistic. What does this mean? We must distinguish between what Freud called "primary narcissism," where the infant's libido is directed primarily at his own body, producing a state known as auto-eroticism, from "secondary narcissism," in which the subject's libido withdraws from objects — in disgust *or* admiration — to create a state of imperious mastery (megalomania). The secondary narcissist isolates an experience, view, or vision to create within it a condition of *gnosis*: an exceptional conduit of truth meant only for the viewer who then becomes the "spokesperson" for what has happened in this experience. His/her descriptions take the form of ecstatic revelation. His/her encounter with what others have typically overlooked and found unexceptional is akin to a magical epiphany, where the privileged judge has received instruction and been given special powers.

Finish as the Subjectivity of the Object and the Objectivity of the Subject

It is natural and perhaps even necessary that anyone practicing criticism must to some extent be a secondary narcissist. What authority can a critic claim without conviction that their insights are valid, justified, and credible? There are many ways to experience the world; a critic's view of something must claim a certain exceptionalism, and such a claim requires the critic to assert a special, privileged relation to what he/she is describing. Is Ruskin not simply like any other critic, who, to be a critic in the first place, must assume, unavoidably, the pathology of narcissism?

⁵ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*. vol. 11, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903–1912), 159.

⁶ John Ruskin, "Of the Turnerian Picturesque," *Modern Painters*, *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 6, (London: George Allen, Orpington, 1888), 19–20.

⁷ John Macarthur, "The Heartlessness of the Picturesque: Sympathy and Disgust in Ruskin's Aesthetics," *Assemblage* 32 (April 1997): 126–141.

Negar Goljan has concentrated on the phenomenon of the surface, where the “finish” aspect of the object coincides in a one-to-one manner with both Ruskin’s task of completing a critical circuit: bringing thought a full turn, from start to conclusion, meeting the literary standard that the ending must answer to the beginning.⁸ Just as good fiction must obey the 360° rule of the *récit fort*, good criticism of the subjective work of art must do the same. With Ruskin’s obsession with surface effects — evident in his rejection of photography in favor of his own watercolors — the *récit fort* is taken to the objects of criticism themselves. The finish is a kind of conclusion that goes beyond the simple consecutive status of being the last. It is not simply terminal, it *terminates*. The finish is noticed by the critic whose special sensibilities and (accidental or intentional) encounter with the work is a “match made in heaven.” The finish is something that is unfinished until it connects with a genius on par with its own, and in some sense — the only valid sense for Ruskin — finishing does not happen until the objective genius of the artwork and the subjective genius of the critic finally meet.

This is where psychopathology must step in to clarify the contingency-with-necessity aspect of this encounter. There is on one side, Ruskin’s side, the enormity of the *import* of the work of art, no matter how small, or how out of the way, or how neglected. In a tiny fragment or detail, Ruskin finds a means for drawing far-reaching conclusions. This is megalomania *par excellence*. The aspect of withdrawal is evident in role played by contingency. Ruskin sees what others have not seen and would have difficulty in seeing. He artfully finds the secret hidden within dark shadows or layers of dust or patina. He, and he *alone*, realizes the value of this 1:1 situation. “There is no Ruskin but Ruskin” in this encounter. As Goljan quotes, “[T]he individual work is a coherent part of a greater whole, and as such all art, but particularly architecture, expresses social history.”⁹

Like the priest of ancient religion cutting open a sacrificial victim in order to read the auspices, Ruskin seizes on an experience in its absolute particularity and contingency, making these “aleatory” circumstances the basis of an absolute and incontestable truth. The priest’s claim to power — his/her readings of the auspices became the laws of those over whom they ruled — were no less and no more than what Ruskin claimed in his accession of universal truth from the smallest detail in the darkest corner of the most neglected chapel down the least-traveled street in the most forgotten part of Venice. Without isolation the megalomaniac cannot use inverse geometry to convert the smallest detail into the greatest and most universal principle. Ruskin’s narcissism is his rhetorical stance as a lone critics: “I and only I can see this” is the implicit claim. No Ruskin, no encounter; no encounter, no revelation; no revelation, no resurrection of the dead object into the living imagination of the critic and his readers. Like the priest of yore, Ruskin has

⁸ Negar Goljan, “Ruskin and the Importance of Emotion in Architectural Finishes,” *Finishing: The Ends of Architecture*, Conference held at the Washington-Alexandria Architecture Center, Alexandria, Virginia, April 2023; Roland Barthes, “Deux Femmes,” *Œuvres complètes* vol. 3 (ed) É. Marty. Paris: Seuil, 1995), 1052–1054.

⁹ Robert Hewison, “Artist and Society,” Chapter 5 in *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1976). <https://victorianweb.org/authors/ruskin/hewison/5.html>

powers over the life and death of the objects of the past. Without him they suffer eternal ignominy. Thanks to him and his special vision, they are reborn.

In this process involving resurrection and prophecy, Ruskin is enjoying himself in a particularly Lacanian manner. When the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan undertook the rehabilitation of Freudian theory, his prime target was the role of language in the central functioning of what Freud had called the death drive. This was the impulse to “start over,” to find the reset button of experience and restore a zero condition that, forgiven of all past sins, allowed for a fresh start. Because the death drive had two faces, one seemingly in search of stasis as an achievable, livable Nirvana, the other as an intentional sabotage of one’s own chances of happiness, it was simultaneously creative and destructive. *Either way*, the death drive produce a pleasure that was distinctive from the “pleasure principle” (seeking and securing some obvious source of enjoyment). Unlike the obvious enjoyment, which almost immediately proves to be less enjoyable close up than it was at a distance, the death drive finds that, to sustain itself, it must enjoy both the positive and negative, but to be truly durable, truly indestructible, it must enjoy failure *especially*. Lacan named the feeling associated with the death drive after the kind of pleasure specifically used to describe sexual climax: *jouissance*. Why? Because the this pleasure is, clinically, nothing more than a release from painful stimuli. However, the language-being, experiencing pain, has fantasized and reported it as pleasure, ironically claiming that the termination of this pleasure is *even more pleasurable*.

If the death drive is, as Lacan claimed, the king and principle of all the drives (oral, anal, phallic, scopic, acoustic), it was on the basis of the *jouissance* it produced as a self-sustaining energy. And, as a *feeling*, the affect of *jouissance* was a master-affect. Behind both pleasure and pain, both fright and attraction, depression and manic joy, *jouissance* was the structural key to the effectiveness of feeling, and the one thing that for Lacan justified looking at affect in terms of this inside-out, upside-down structure. Melancholy in particular revealed the duplicity of *jouissance*, with its combination of joy and sadness, hope and despair, idiocy and genius. While the other emotions of the humoristic system (sanguinity, lethargy, manic aggression) sought the satisfaction of a balance between harmful extremes, melancholy was pathological from the first moments of infection. It developed from sniffles to pneumonia in seconds, thanks to the formula of *jouissance* that worked whether its cause was pain or pleasure, gain or loss, joy or fear. Behind all these and in fact allowing for their variety and unpredictability, was *jouissance*, more of a structure than a feeling.

Why this discursus on such a difficult psychoanalytic concept? Unless we find the energy source behind Ruskin’s prodigious output, which was the same as the spontaneity that ignited the interests of audiences all over Victorian England, we cannot explain how Ruskin’s pathology became such a force in the public view of art. Goljan has characterized Ruskin’s “emotion” as the factor that stirs the viewer, and collectively the community of viewers, to go beyond “simplistic appreciation of form, materiality, or structure.” To bring something into prominence, to endow it

with magical powers of inspiration and revelation, there must first be an indifferent ground, created by habits of looking and neglect. Such is the effect of everyday life: in the words of William Wordsworth:¹⁰

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

It is possible to generalize the Victorian sentiment, that the value of life was being increasingly eroded by the Industrial Revolution, the mass manufacture of objects formerly painstakingly produced by craft, and the compulsive streamlining of work into rigid schedules. It was not difficult to anticipate the robot workers of Fritz Lang's 1927 fantasy, *Metropolis*, or the micro-managed dystopia of Orwell's *1984*. In this context, anything of value was whispered *sotto voce*. Ruskin could then become the spokesperson for whatever had lost its voice amidst this gray din and plain background. How could he not? Again we have justification for the theme and structure of megalomania and secondary narcissism.

Cathexis

What value does this have for us, as critics of the critic, critics who do not want to descend into a reductionistic pejorative diagnosis of Ruskin, if we wrongly judge him to be nothing more than a well-read, culturally informed psychotic? Let me divert this analysis to the question of investment, which in psychoanalysis is called by the Freudian term, *cathexis*.

Cathexis, as a psychopathology, is: (1) The investment of subjective values, including emotions, in objects in the external world, which cannot "logically" or independently have these values; (2) belief in a "secret sympathy" linking subjective states to objective objects and conditions; (3) investment of causal powers in independent objects that will make them contingent on personal behavior or subjective states, a kind of "if/then" relation: "If it is raining, it must mean that my depression is justified"; the psychotic form of this is "misplaced concrete perception," which makes external conditions decisive: "If every light turns red on my drive to see X, I must give up my love for X."

This kind of reification was first formally described by the mathematician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who called it "fallacy of misplaced concreteness."¹¹ Ruskin developed the concept under the heading of the "pathetic fallacy."¹² Objects do not have emotions, if by

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, "The World Is Too Much With Us," a sonnet composed around 1802 and published in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807).

¹¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, Simon & Schuster, 1925/1997), 52.

¹² Ruskin's coinage occurred in the third volume of his work *Modern Painters* (1856). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pathetic_fallacy

emotions we mean the only emotions that only *speaking* beings can have, human emotions, which differ from animal emotions by being symbolic, presentational. Emotions themselves are not the measure and proof of authenticity; in fact research has shown that emotions are, consciously or unconsciously, *selected* for effect. We are not simply sad, we *believe and see ourselves to be sad* and then we have the *public* experience of sadness, which seems for us to be completely authentic, thanks to the fact that we have suppressed the selection process. This is not to say that we literally choose to be happy, sad, or any emotion; rather, the emotion we *choose* to express at the same time we *suppress* the factor of choice, is always secondary. The emotion that dominates has had to contend with rival emotions; a selection was made but afterwards we “know nothing about it,” and our ignorance then becomes the basis of our claim that the emotion is “really what we feel.”

Objects, if they have emotions, would not have emotions in this way because objects do not have the ability to suppress and therefore do not have an unconscious. Even if we magically attribute them with having thoughts, a consciousness, they lack this device of suppression that makes human emotion the result of a selection process, the inner workings of which we are required to keep secret from ourselves, so that the emotions can appear to be authentic and informative. We accept that someone crying is really sad, or someone laughing is happy. Yet, we have ample evidence that nothing of the sort is really true. The hysteric is the key example, and hysteria is the earliest mental diagnosis in history. People regularly cry at weddings and laugh at funerals. Most famous clinical example is that the hysteric reports pain but feels pleasure.¹³ At the same time, pain is reconfigured as enjoyment. These conversions would be impossible for a being without language, because the reversal is a matter of the otherness of the body that comes about with the subject's membership in the network of symbolic relationships afforded by language and language alone.

Within the Symbolic of language, one gives up control over one's identity. It is supplied by others, who name, define, and assign roles to the subject within language. In the midst of this misrecognition process, the subject is forbidden to know who he/she is, for the very possibility of being is eclipsed by the obligation to signify, to behave *meaningfully*. Our objections as subjects can only take place at the level of structure, where the re-assignment process can be subverted by inserting a division between appearance and reality although neither of these exist without the other, because both are “categories” within the Symbolic. At the structural level, the message that comes with the hysteric's inverted claim (of pain, while experiencing pleasure) is that “she” (hysterics are most often those who call themselves women) is “The Other is Wrong.” This is often localized in the person who represents authority, a father-figure most typically; but the aim is broader, what the father represents, i. e. the whole *system* of the Symbolic order, without which neurotics cannot sustain the fantasies involved in creating a meaningful, reliable world.

¹³ In this sense, the conversion function of *jouissance* could be given credit for the founding of psychoanalysis and, by extension, the creation of modernity. In other words, the unintuitive substitution of pleasure for pain and pain for pleasure is not a minor point. It affects any and all discourses about modernity.



Ruskin as a young child, painted by James Northcote.

Psychoanalysis as a scientific field begins with the figure of the hysteric, and Freud's famous hysteric, "Dora," set the standard by which only Analysis is able to see what the hysteric can't see: symptoms that duplicate and repeat a token connection with the Other.¹⁴ In Dora's case it was a small cough that she acquired unconsciously, copying her father's small cough. Freud called this an *einzigiger Zug*, Lacan renamed it as the "unary trait."¹⁵ The essence of the unary trait is "the more things change, the more they stay the same." It is a machine for converting contingent circumstances and repeated actions or events into evidence of the "firstness" of an identification. Each time Dora coughed her small cough, she restored the image and power of her father, which constituted a traumatic Real, something beyond symbolic representation.

What makes Ruskin a hysteric as much as a narcissistic megalomaniac is the way he recovers an "originary meaning" within things he finds accidentally and then "stakes his reputation" on an interpretation that is simultaneously brilliant and eccentric. His possession of the example is absolute. Only Ruskin can find, in a small detail, a means of discussing the entire course of history and culture. Of course the effect on the reader is overwhelming; but the structure of this effect is pathological.

Like the hysteric, Ruskin reports the "pain" of discovery in terms of the enigma that is covered over by layers of dust and patina. The problem of analysis is laborious, but his act of genius seems effortless. The pain is a cover for the pleasure of the claim, the fact that Ruskin knows he is being brilliant, original, *unique*.

What if Ruskin had been through psychoanalysis? If geography and timing had cooperated, he might have been one of Freud's patients. Possibly, Ruskin was untreatable, as many if not most psychotics are, thanks to their ability to simulate neurosis and mask their complete inability to exercise sympathy. Goljan argues that architecture "emotion is not the ultimate goal of architecture. It is a tool which paves the way for a greater achievement: a platform on which action can be built, eventually leading to an improved society." Emotion is the result when human desire is met with a supportive physical basis in materialized architecture, where, as Ruskin says, it is possible to *act*: "It is not the church we want, but the sacrifice; not the emotion of admiration, but the act of adoration; not the gift, but the giving."¹⁶ The building provides the place where human actions take place, actions which involve and require emotional investments.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud (1893), "Charcot," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 3: 7–23.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, (1957–58). *Le Séminaire-Livre V, Les Formations de l'Inconscient* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

¹⁶ Ruskin, *Works of John Ruskin* 8: 39–40.

This is not the same as saying that objects have emotions, or even that buildings can be happy, sad, anxious, etc. But, in the process of projection and introjection (assuming that buildings are feeling what we are feeling or, the reverse, feeling what we feel the building is “trying to say to us”), there is an unavoidable affective component. Serlio, for example, depicted stage sets showing buildings suitable for tragedies and comedies. We easily sense majesty in formal, classical buildings; elegance and reverence in monuments such as the Taj Mahal; playfulness in Frank Gehry’s museums and auditoriums; arrogance or at least confidence in much of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. The sight of one’s own home can be, over time, the immediate signifier of comfort and protection. The mansard-roof of the house behind the motel in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* in itself produces uncanny dread.

In other words, how can we *not* say that architecture produces/embodies emotions, to the point of saying that the emotions are implicit or intrinsic, a kind of native possession of the architecture itself and not just a quality of our response? I would argue that psychopathology again has an answer. Ruskin’s claim to get into the inside emotionality of the objects and buildings he studied was megalomaniacal in every technical sense. This was correlated with his narcissism, his feeling of having a singular critical talent, a “nose for beauty” and an infallible method for detecting fraud, as in the case of his distaste for romanticism.

My answer comes from what Ruskin might have done if he had undergone Freudian analysis. He would have connected his evangelical upbringing, the possible coldness of his industrialist father, and his mother’s over-presence in terms of his lack of an operable “*nom-du-père*,” the paternal signifier, without which one becomes a psychotic as opposed to a neurotic.¹⁷ Lacking the means of putting distance between himself and his mother, he could only see truth in terms of religious epiphany, a special object in relation to a special subject, connected in a moment of grace divinely given. This is entirely speculative. Without reading Ruskin’s autobiography, *Praeterita* (1885–1889), I have no idea if his father as a signifier was missing or suppressed, or if his mother wasn’t thoroughly modern and permissive. But, I would readily wager that the paternal signifier was either damaged or missing, making Ruskin unable to defend himself from the mother’s over-presence, extending his childhood narcissism to a narcissism of object-withdrawal, expressed both in his contempt for the “expressive object” and magnified sensitivity for and devotion to the “unexpressed object.”

The diagnosis of megalomania and secondary narcissism might be directed personally, to Ruskin as an individual with psychotic disabilities, or it might be used to think about the structure of a certain way of forming critical insight, as a “disability” that is required to achieve a certain depth and conviction in one’s writing and talking about the world of objects, works of art,

¹⁷ In French, the *nom* is indistinguishable from the word *non*, making the name of the father into the “no” of the father. The name and the injunction are identical in practice as well as phonetic semblance. The paternal signifier is whatever is effective in explaining the mother’s sudden absences. This is a trauma for the young child that must be “clothed” in a fantasy that suppresses the Real of loss, domesticating it into a narrative that can be endured as the child then further submits to the demands of the Symbolic.

and architecture. It is possible to test a thesis, using the null hypothesis: “Is criticism possible *without* employing narcissism and, more generally, megalomania?” Isn’t every critic, to some degree, evidence that there can be a “rhetorical deployment” of these pathologies in the name of critical thinking?

I have no idea what the answer might be. I think that it is a question worth asking, and one that restates the problem of Ruskin’s apparent narcissism. It is likely that Ruskin “had no say in the matter” and was psychotic like other psychotics, because he had no choice because he had no access to the paternal signifier. The father did not demand the son’s separation from the (Oedipal) mother. Lacking this, the son was unable to join the Symbolic as such, and forever after celebrated his independence in a positive way. In fact, Ruskin’s family was upper middle-class but not elite; although he attended Oxford, he was for the most part educated at home, by clerical tutors. His isolation was real, not imagined.

Such analysis doesn’t get us very far. It ends as a kind of “tit for tat” attempt to explain Ruskin in terms of his symptoms. It would be impossible to say, after such an analysis, that we had learned anything other than that two plus two equals four. However, asserting a congruence or even necessity binding Ruskin’s narcissism and megalomania with his critical methodology, and then going one step further, to assert that these are necessary for *any* criticism that, like Ruskin’s, claimed to enter into the very objectivity of the objects of study, would be interesting, even as a failed hypothesis.

Goljan suggests doing this, as she moves from Ruskin’s “evangelical” temperament to architectural situations where materiality — particularly of surface finishes — is center stage. The critical matter is to move beyond psychologism, where motives may be imputed without giving any evidence of structural relations, to psycho-*analytical* and therefore causal theory. This might uncover a signature methodology for Ruskin-style object-intensive criticism. Or, if luck has it, it might say something more general or even universal about the critical attitude itself, as first an *alienation* from the object reflected (introjected) in the subject-critic, then converted into a (magical) line of sympathetic revelation, *like to like*, the subject and object “on equal terms.” This is not preposterous. It is the basis of Gaston Bachelard’s essay on “The Intellectual Surveillance of the Self” (“La surveillance intellectuelle de soi”), where Bachelard claims (of the subject as scientist) that there is a necessary subject *created by the object*, or more accurately the object as defined by the *institution* (structures, practices, techniques, ethics, associations, etc.) of objectivity.¹⁸ When objectivity becomes its manner of being studied, the subject as “the subject supposed to know” becomes necessary, both as a construct and as a moral code that, ironically, frees the subject-knower from duplicity, enabling him/her to be “morally sincere.”

¹⁸ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Brooklyn, NY, and London: Verso, 2015), 26–38. Gaston Bachelard, *Le rationalism appliqué* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949), 65–81. See also Gaston Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

Is this not precisely the attitude Ruskin takes? Isn't Ruskin, the psychotic, liberated from any feelings of guilt or apprehensiveness, any obligation to express doubt or admit fallibility? If this comparison holds, is it not only possible but necessary to reverse the equation and regard Bachelard's "orthopsychic" argument as being, properly, "ortho-*psychotic*"? Again, this is a hypothesis with slim chance of success, but one that promises to reveal more by failing than by succeeding. The "orthopsychic" subject, for Joan Copjec, is the subject as such; but criticality is a special mode, a subjectivity that is defined by something other than the object as institution, as in Bachelard's case of scientific self-surveillance. The scientist as empiricist, after all, examines the natural world. The critic looks at the world of subjects and subjectivities; his self-surveillance is doubly subjective, and in that the critic is deprived of "being" a subject but must "play" a subject, through an artificial re-structuring of one's sensibilities and perception. This is a truly psychotic condition, and the expression, orthopsychotic, is justified. It is at least worth considering.