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Foreword: In-Sight

‘Well in sight’ and ‘out of danger, as it were’ are how, in a letter to his father, John Ruskin, Victorian theorist and polymath, aspires to render his work on Turner.¹ As evidenced by the burgeoning project of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin was explicitly concerned with the pitfalls that faced a theorist of Turner’s paintings. Indeed, for Ruskin to champion what were, for many contemporary commentators, Turner’s indefensibly idiosyncratic images in paint was ‘burdensome’ when it remained an interior process. Brought within sight, however, ‘all down on paper’ and ‘out of mind’, Ruskin felt his work, comprising drawings as well as text, was miraculously saved from peril: made safe. Yet what might it mean to want to make writing visible for these reasons, to realise the visible existence of language, in its relation to visual images, as a form of refuge from the invisible?

There is perhaps more than meets a metaphoric eye in Ruskin’s desire for the object to be rendered visible in order for it to escape the ‘danger’ of the mind. On another occasion he voices a striking wish to stain his pages ‘blood red’ in an attempt to lend to writing the visual intensity of painting, but also perhaps to keep a corporeal connection to the kind of plenitude that figures the process of rendering visible itself: the very movement that creates an image. In presenting the perilous status – the danger – of invisible thoughts (interior images) Ruskin articulates a metaphysics of presence, reciprocally one of absence, that confronts those enduring questions of what it might mean to make visible, to create an image. In larger terms, we might further question Ruskin’s identification of visibility, as itself a form of safety, as producing the very condition of an image. Is it indeed the case that for an object to be *in* sight is invariably in some sense for it to be *out* of mind?

The image seems to be a way of marking such a potential separation between exterior and interior while belonging to both. Moreover, that condition of holding ‘in sight’, as a means of externalisation as belonging to the image, is realised in the easy conceptual slippage from ‘in sight’ to ‘insight’- originally ‘internal sight’ or seeing with the eyes of the mind, that later becomes a seeing into a thing or subject. To bring an object within sight is to affect the ‘inner eye’, to re-formulate the relationship of the visible to the invisible, presence to absence. Such a movement recalls Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis upon the excursive power of visualisation, whereby ‘our power to *imagine* ourselves elsewhere [. . .] borrows

¹ E.T.Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., *The Complete Works of John Ruskin (Library Edition)*, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12), X, p. xxvii.

from vision and employs means we owe to it'.² But in a different way it anticipates Emmanuel Levinas's theorisation of a concept of 'transparency' in the phenomenology of images. Levinas focuses on the term 'resemblance' to show how in theories of the image 'resemblance' itself emerges 'not as the result of a comparison between an image and the original, but as the very movement that engenders the image'. For Levinas, the contemplation of an image does not involve 'a movement through' it 'into the world it represents'. Instead, 'representation expresses just that function of an image that remains to be determined.'³

Levinas's designation of representation as articulating that function of an image that remains to be realised retrospectively throws light on what Ruskin believes the promise of rendering visible might hold. For to *want* to have the object 'in sight', to visibly represent it, is in a vital sense to approach representation as 'that function of an image' yet to be determined.

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² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964, revised edition 1982), p.187.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', *The Levinas Reader* ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 135.