

SUSAN TICHY

That the Earth Is Not Only Supported by Their Strength
but Fed by Their Ruin

Jump cut
to his wedding
night—that 'first walk on rock
& under pine'

un-helped by the fantasies

of painters—'workmen
who had not looked at the thing'
its crisp turf
its sun-burned
rock
the 'mountain thus raised'
or the split valleys
'whose vast original depth is proved'

by lake-beds not yet filled.

Or conjure this:

'strange pieces of broken shade, accurately remembered,
 or accurately invented as the case may be,
 cause a condition of un-
 intelligibility, quaint and embarrassing
 almost in exact proportion to
 the amount of truth
 it contains.'

Observe, he said:

'this study of mine
 does not profess
 to be a *picture* at all;
 it is a mere sketch or catalogue
 of all that there is
 on the mountainside'
 for 'you

can only show how light affects the object
 by knowing
 thoroughly what the object is.'

The problem

was how to make a glacier
 emerge from white paper

(as oil will neith-

er dry
nor carry safely):
butter-
flies flit
through the pencil-point,
age-stained,
tea-dark,
as bedding
falls to the northwest:
piles

of Jura-clays
& gneissic rose,
of sandstone, trap, and serpentine—
the first crossed out with three hatch-marks,
the last one labeled

'better
thus'—
the lower hills a scattering
of quick
light
lines, their elegance

just
true
enough
to hold the lovely summits
to the page:
'no one,' he said,

'more averse than I
to the substitution
of knowledge for the outward and apparent fact—'

Scattered woods below forest

scribbled across
an unfinished slope—

judged a failure?
or simply
abandoned
when his eye had followed its logic
long enough?

Summit, with him

never **r** a verb: he carved no steps
in sandstone, paused
for no pleasant chats
of snow slopes or arêtes.
Climbers spread-eagled on vertical rock
like beasts of ill-repute
nailed to a barn

amused him no more

than the ill-joined
anatomy
of a badly drawn ridge.
What climbers discovered,
rock-drunk,

on the single path accessible

through all inaccessibilities—
the additive truth
of pause and step,
muscle and eye—
he sketched one-handed:
that 'strange quiver-
ing substance of rock

itself,' the first **o**bject
of right attention, cataclysm mapped
 in 'the **w**hirls, loops, braids and ropes
 of **m**ineral

matter in a single rock'
muscle matter
 in a **s**ingle step.

'To placidly **d**raw the folded beds
 of Skiddaw and **Cau**-
sey

Pike slate
 without the slightest
 suggestion **n** of bruise in any part of them'—

such wrong seeing the base **i**njustice
 up**o**n which every
human frailty
 depends. And so his shock

at the dizzy **r**avine
 where 'of **c**ourse the paper is to be white'
 & cloud to part convincingly
 (though **h**onestly, on divine heights
 one does not expect a **t**hicket)—

Interject a sketch
of a fossil sea-
urchin, its delicate shell
of black flint
rising
through
layers
of chalk and grey dust
by means of a careful penknife: light
in such
endeavor required
to be unremittingly

mortal. The jumble
of horrors
unearthed
that night
included his own

particular
madness:
'for whether you have one, or ten,
or twenty processes to go through,
you must go *straight* through them,
know-
ingly,
foreseeingly all the way'

—and **j**ustly;
 ‘**f**or if you get
 the **th**ing
once

wrong,
 there is no hope for the **b**usiness
 but in **w**ashing or scraping
 boldly down to the white
 ground, and beginning again.’
 Thus:

‘nearly unable to **s**peak anymore
 except of the natures
 of stones and flowers,’

his sketch
 of the **c**ommon buttercup
 concealing terror

in **j**oy—
 ‘as in the aiguilles
of the great alps, so in this lowest
 field **h**erb:
 where **r**ending is the law of being
 it is the law of loveliness—’

No more, he said,
 than should be put down
 'by any conscientious painter
 for mere guidance before he begins—'
 (In the last years
 wander-
 ing
 what climbers call
 a *blind path*—
 clearly seen
 at any distance
 'but lost to the one who stands upon it.')

'And not one line in all that rock
 that is
 not
 an infinite curve—'

Notes

"That the Earth Is Not Only Supported by Their Strength but Fed by Their Ruin" includes text from John Ruskin's *The Elements of Drawing* and *Modern Painters IV: On Mountain Beauty*, from his letters, and from lecture notes included in exhibits at Brentwood, Ruskin's home. *Climbers spread-eagled on vertical rock . . .* is from *The Playground of Europe*, a climbing memoir by Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen. Before his marriage, Ruskin had seen women's bodies only in paintings. That his wife had hair in a place other than on her head he took as evidence of barbaric abnormality. Assurances by friends that this landscape was normal came too late to mend relations and the marriage dissolved.