The Letters of John Ruskin to Lord and Lady Mount-Temple
Introduction

Although the tragic relationship of Ruskin and Rose La Touche tends to dominate the Mount-Temple correspondence, there are a number of attendant themes and motifs informing this edition; some of them will be briefly mentioned here. For instance, Ruskin came, through Lady Mount-Temple, to a growing awareness, in the sixties, of spiritualism, and he devotes a number of letters to questions, doubts, and comments upon psychic phenomena. He also says a good deal about the composition of his works, and letter after letter dwells on the Lectures on Art, given in Oxford in 1870, as well as on those university lectures eventually published as Aratra Pentelici and The Eagle's Nest. One also finds Ruskin touching upon such important writings as Fors Clavigera and Proserpina; his plans for the latter work are revealing of his methods of composition. Approximately a dozen letters concern the early stages of the St. George's Guild. And, as is customary in Ruskin's other letters, Victorian figures of considerable importance pass through this correspondence. Thus there are brief but illuminating references to Laurence Oliphant, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Carter Hall, William and Mary Howitt, Stopford Brooke, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and a number of others. Furthermore, the correspondence teems with cursory remarks upon his Chaucerian studies, his interest in Egyptology, his sense of mission over the Slade professorship,
his relations with Carlyle, his family problems, his recollections of occasions both pleasing and trying, his sense of urgency, and, in the closing letters, his terrible loneliness and appalling isolation manifest by pathetic recourse to the vocabulary of the child. Thus this correspondence is a treasury of information about the multifarious interests and activities of the harassed Victorian prophet.

But in any consideration of the Mount-Temple letters it is first to the Ruskin-La Touche tragedy—and the chief persons concerned—that one inevitably turns. At the vortex of that tragedy is, of course, Ruskin himself. Unavoidably, the question arises: What sort of man was he? What was this Ruskin of the '60's and '70's like, this man in his middle age who, overshadowed by a marriage that had terminated catastrophically—even scandalously—in 1854, had become hopelessly enmeshed in an amatory relationship with a girl nearly thirty years his junior? What was the state of mind of this man who so painfully unburdened himself to Lady Mount-Temple, a woman whose close confidence he had not enjoyed prior to the growth of his affection for Rose La Touche? While such questions cannot be completely answered, the figure of the Ruskin of these years can, perhaps, be brought out of the gloom and seen a little more clearly in relation to the tragedy in which he is the chief actor.

Most apparent about the Ruskin of the '60's is a growing discursiveness, an almost maniacal tendency to dart from one lecture hall to another, from one town to the next, to talk, and to write as well, on strikingly varied subjects. With this in mind it is illuminating to see the process starting, slowly at first, and gradually gathering momentum. From 1860-63 Ruskin's productivity was, for him, relatively modest. The last volume of *Modern Painters*—completed only under parental prodding—appeared in 1860, the same year as *Unto this Last*; shortly thereafter came the *Essays on Political Economy* (later known as *Munera Pulveris*). There are also a few newspaper letters, some scattered lectures, and some remarks on Giotto and Turner, on Reynolds and Holbein. For an ordinary man this is a most respectable array of publications and appearances. But not for Ruskin. Then, with the death
of his father in 1864 and the intensification of his passion for Rose La Touche, he casts himself into one activity after another. From 1864 until 1870 there is a storm of letters to newspapers, articles in technical journals, public lectures—in London (at the Royal Institution, at Camberwell, and at Woolwich), Dublin, and Cambridge—as well as speeches on public affairs such as the Eyre Defence Fund. During these years he also publishes *Sesame and Lilies, The Ethics of the Dust, Time and Tide,* and *The Queen of the Air.* On the threshold of the new decade he becomes Slade Professor at Oxford and commences the *Lectures on Art.* Cook and Wedderburn characterize this period in the following terms:

He talks and writes of books and how to read them; of the sphere and education of women; of soldiers and their duties; architects and their functions; servants and their loyalties; masters and their duties. He discusses now the elements of crystallisation or the denudation of the Alps; and now the merits of the manner in which the Jamaica insurrection was suppressed or the policy of non-intervention in European quarrels. He treats of the mythology of Greece and of Egypt and devotes much attention to Greek art, but touches also upon the designs of Burne-Jones, the pictures of Phil Morris, the porches of Abbeville, the tombs of Verona. The laws of work divide his attention with the limitations of engraving; and he passes from the designs upon Greek coins to the management of railways and the prospects of co-operative industry. ... His literary work, now as throughout his life, was accompanied, it should be remembered, by corresponding activity with the pencil and the brush.¹

Doubtless, Ruskin was driven by some 'man within,' compelling him to abnormal endeavor. As one notes this frantic activity one also realizes—when the letters to Lord and Lady Mount-Temple are read as an accompaniment to such frenzied actions—that Ruskin is caught between his hopeless passion, from which he tries to escape by work, and the unnatural activity imposed by that work. Such a situation of intense emotional and intellectual pressures can only effect dire harm upon a nature imbued with superabundant energy. The out-

¹ *Works,* XVIII, xviii-xix.
come is inevitable. And in July, 1871, Ruskin falls dangerously ill at Matlock.

The illness of 1871—diagnosed as a form of "internal inflammation"—has been variously ascribed to the domestic responsibilities attendant upon his father's death, to the marriage of his cousin, Joan Agnew (who came to Denmark Hill in 1864, upon the death of Ruskin senior, to manage the household), to the extraordinary amount of work he did in the later sixties, to the sudden death of Anne, his old nurse, and, finally, to the slow death of his domineering and egotistical mother. All doubtless contributed to the collapse of 1871 and the "acute mental pain" of which Ruskin speaks in Fors Clavigera. But the main reason, as the letters to the Mount-Temples show, surely lies in the emotional crises of the sixties through which Ruskin passed in his desperate longing for Rose. Time after time, with a deadening regularity, the affair breaks in upon his work to disturb him, to drive him to rash outbursts and wild expressions of passion and pain, and, ultimately, to be-devil him into physical debility and mental disorder.

Never can Ruskin escape his mental anguish. Awake, it tortures him into writing the letters to Lady Mount-Temple; asleep, he is plagued by dreams suggestive of emotional unrest. In his work, the affair intrudes; rose metaphors, puns upon roses, and drawings of roses abound. Awake or asleep, working or resting, in private or in public, Ruskin has not a moment of peace, and, to the dismay of the reader, his obsessions only seem aggravated after the Matlock illness.

Recuperating from the illness, Ruskin plunged into work again, and the same pattern recurred almost immediately: hectic work interrupted by emotional disturbance and culminating in a cruel climax. In the summer of 1872 Ruskin rushed back from a Continental tour to enjoy a brief interlude of happiness with Rose—an interlude painfully terminated a few weeks later, in the autumn. From that time forward, the letters to Lady Mount-Temple become more infrequent, with

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2 Works, XXVII, 222.
3 See, for instance, the title page of Fors Clavigera (Works, XXVII, 3).
even Rose's death, in the spring of 1875, apparently eliciting no letter from Ruskin to his faithful friend. Then, from 1876 until the last letter in 1888, one witnesses the disastrous spectacle of a mind crumbling under incessant attacks of madness. Gradually, Ruskin moves inexorably toward the darkness that, in 1889, is to engulf him wholly. As he does so he reverts to pet names, childish imaginings, and pathetic longings. The concluding letters are a poignant record of emotional and intellectual bankruptcy.

Such is the Ruskin of the Mount-Temple correspondence—at first, immensely energetic, feverishly alert, and, for a brief time, capable of living two demanding lives—the emotional and the intellectual—simultaneously. But the sixties have to be paid for, and after the Matlock illness the decline hastens. At the end, one faces the despondent picture of the prophet in his ruin, pathetically disconsolate, surrounded by shadows, lonely, isolated, forlorn, and clinging to any wreckage of friendship. It is—as one looks back upon the courage, fervor, and nobility of Ruskin's earlier life—an appalling conclusion.

Lady Mount-Temple, both as Ruskin's intermediary with the La Touche family and as recipient of his letters, is a significant figure in Ruskin's complex life. But it is her portion to appear only fleetingly in Victorian memoirs, so that it is not easy to draw a satisfactory portrait of her. It is apparent that she enjoyed a generous circle of friends, that she was an admired hostess, that she followed contemporary literary and artistic movements, and that she was greatly interested in a variety of religious attitudes, beliefs, and manifestations. To the latter end she initiated the Broadlands Conferences in 1874 where one might find, at the same gathering, a preaching Negress, a Quaker, a Shaker, an atheist, a spiritualist, an East End Socialist, and a prophet of any sort at all. That such persons sometimes caused confusion is illustrated by the following:

The universality of the invitation to Broadlands did not, however, go so far as one of the housemaids supposed when on going into a bed-room, which she believed to be untenanted, she saw a mysterious black head appearing from beneath the bed-clothes,
and rushed away screaming out that the Devil was there. It turned out that the guest was only a good negro who had arrived late the night before.\(^4\)

In spite of the disparity of the visitors, Broadlands—the country seat her husband inherited from his stepfather, Lord Palmerston—seems to have been suffused with heavenly light, divine grace, and similar celestial luminescence. Such a variety of interests suggests, unfortunately, the capricious, and, in reading, albeit fragmentarily, about this well-intentioned woman, one receives here and there a hint of the sanctimonious as well.

Lady Mount-Temple was born Georgiana Tollemache in 1822; she was the daughter of Admiral Tollemache and the youngest of several sisters. She apparently received the conventional upbringing of her class, marrying, in 1848, the Hon. William Cowper, who became Cowper-Temple in 1869 and Lord Mount-Temple in 1880.\(^5\) She spent her life doing good deeds—giving, working among the needy, and, when not busy with her devotions, nursing endless numbers of people. She survived her husband by thirteen years, dying in 1901.

Lady Mount-Temple's friendship with Ruskin passes through several phases. She first appears in his life in 1840, which winter he passed in Rome ostensibly recovering from consumption and, perhaps, from a blighted love affair. Ruskin recorded in *Praeterita* his initial awareness of the slender, gray-eyed English girl, whom he first saw at the Church of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli:

\[\text{But the fact was, that at services of this kind there was always a chance of seeing, at intervals, above the bowed heads of the Italian crowd, for an instant or two before she also stooped—or sometimes, eminent in her grace above a stunted group of them,—a fair English girl, who was not only the admitted Queen of beauty in the English circle of that winter in Rome, but was so, in the kind of beauty which I had only hitherto dreamed of as possible,}\]

\(^5\) Subsequent to the Introduction, whichever name is appropriate to the specific year is used.
Characteristically, Ruskin idealized her from afar and did not meet her until many years later—in 1854 in London. And it is not until ten years after that—at the end of 1863—that their friendship assumes any closeness or continuity. Then, through a mutual interest in spiritualism, they exchanged letters and attended séances; it would seem, too, that Lady Mount-Temple developed Ruskin’s interest in occult phenomena, for some years later—in the seventies—we find him writing about the occult and also reading papers to the Metaphysical Society.

But while spiritualism may have developed their friendship beyond the stage of pleasing acquaintance, it was the La Touche problem that cemented it. In the middle sixties Ruskin introduced her to the La Touche family and then Lady Mount-Temple became truly his confidante, his “tutelary power” in his great sorrow. It was during those years, too, that the pet names, invariably a sign with Ruskin of emotional involvement, are used. Thus he addresses her as “Philè,” “Isola Bella,” and, in later years, “Mama” or “Grannie.” She, on the other hand, adheres to “St. C.” (St. Chrysostom, the “golden-mouthed”). Slowly though the friendship started, it developed speedily in the middle and late sixties.

After Rose’s death in 1875 Lady Mount-Temple and Ruskin sustained their close association for a short time, as the letter of August 10, 1875 (Letter 210) indicates. Also in the seventies they exchanged visits between Broadlands and Brantwood, the latter becoming Ruskin’s permanent residence in 1871. But with encroaching years, the death of Lord Mount-Temple, and Ruskin’s frequent attacks of madness and attendant withdrawal from mundane matters, the correspondence tapered off even if their mutual affection did not.

The Lady Mount-Temple of these letters is not easy to evoke. Unquestionably, she possessed some receptive quality, some sympathetic appeal, that made the sensitive, distraught

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6 *Works*, XXXV, 277.
Ruskin turn to her. And while in some letters she could chide him, the majority suggest that she remained staunch and loyal, especially through the times of greatest strain. She went to Ireland on his behalf, spoke candidly to Rose's parents, tried to represent Ruskin justly and to pour oil on extremely agitated waters. Sometimes, however, she seems misguided—because of inadequate or biased information—in her advocacy of his case. And this, perhaps, has caused some Ruskin critics to be a little hard on her. But the pre-eminent picture of her, so far as this correspondence is concerned, is of a patient, well-meaning, earnest guide and counselor.

William Francis Cowper—later Lord Mount-Temple—was born in 1811, one of the children of Earl Cowper and his wife, who was a daughter of Lord and Lady Melbourne. She subsequently married Lord Palmerston. William Cowper, after attending Eton, making the Grand Tour, and serving briefly in the army, entered public life and, over many years, occupied numerous governmental positions. Collingwood summarizes his useful career succinctly:

He began life as aide-de-camp to the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland in 1830, and went into Parliament in 1835; he was a Lord of the Treasury in 1845, then a Lord of the Admiralty, then President of the Board of Health, Vice-President of the Board of Trade, Paymaster-General, Chief Commissioner of Works, Vice-President of the Education Department of the Privy Council, Chairman of Mr. Fawcett's Committee on the Enclosure Acts; it was he who saved Epping Forest in 1871, and he was prime mover in the preservation of open spaces and in granting allotments to the poor; he passed the Medical Bill in 1858, the Thames Embankment Bill in 1862-3, and the Courts of Justice Building Bill in 1863; the "Cowper-Temple Clause," to secure the reading of the Bible in Board Schools, was his; he was the great reconstructor of the London Parks and inventor of the scheme for distributing the Park flowers to hospitals, workhouses and schools.7

There is, however, another side to this man. Apart from following his stepfather, Lord Palmerston, so firmly into public life, he was also a man of saintly inclination, a man who seriously considered entering the church to avoid "the immi-

7 *Ruskin Relics* (New York, 1904), pp. 216-17.
nent dominion of the sins which it seemed so difficult to
avoid." Like his wife, he was devoted to piety, good deeds, and Christian charity; like her, too, he was an ardent advocate of the Broadlands Conferences and was constantly opposing cruelty and injustice. The subject of a memorial by his wife, he appears to lack her sanctimoniousness, and his Christianity seems of a more genuine kind than hers.

Lord Mount-Temple played two roles—each of them "practical" and legal—in Ruskin's life. The first came about through an inquiry by Rose La Touche's father in the summer of 1871 as to the circumstances surrounding the annulment of Ruskin's marriage. From Ruskin's recourse to legal documents, medical examination, and the moral support of the Bishop of Limerick, it is clear that the rumors about his sexual inadequacy had reached Rose's ears, for he is extremely anxious that she not be deceived about him or separated from him by means of lies and slander. Mount-Temple apparently assisted Ruskin considerably in the legal negotiations, so that, by the end of July, 1871, Ruskin's mental state—despite his serious illness of that year—seems, temporarily, more tranquil, less agitated.

Mount-Temple again appears in a worldly role in this correspondence as one of the first trustees of the Guild of St. George, which grew out of St. George's Fund. The Guild—a curious blend of the quixotic and the utilitarian—about which Ruskin writes so much in *Fors Clavigera*, came into being in the 1870's. And Mount-Temple is seen as recipient of about a dozen letters concerning Ruskin's plans for the Guild, monetary contributions, the legality and prospectus of the organization, its ideals and aspirations. In all these affairs Mount-Temple played an active role until his resignation as trustee in 1877. There is no doubt, too, that while he was not consistently involved in Ruskin's emotional problems, he was at least a sympathetic and loyal friend to whom the harassed lover could turn.

If Lady Mount-Temple, the recipient of nearly all these letters, is but dimly realized, Rose La Touche (1848-75), the main subject of them, seems singularly elusive and wraithlike.

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8 *Memorials of Lord Mount-Temple* (printed for private circulation, 1890).
when one tries to imagine the sort of person she was. Certainly, some facts are known. She was one of three children born to the well-to-do and socially prominent Mr. and Mrs. John La Touche of Harristown, County Kildare. Her parents seem contrasting personalities, her father essentially the able banker and country gentleman—Master of the Kildare Hunt—and her mother a devotee of artistic pursuits. From Margaret Ferrier Young's *Letters of a Noble Woman* Mrs. La Touche emerges a good linguist, an artist of modest talents, and a novelist—of a distinctly minor order. The letters of Mrs. La Touche reveal a cultured woman fond of traveling, sensitive to artistic beauty, a lover of nature, and, perhaps, not strongly attracted to hunting and similar activities.

Of the three children born to the La Touches Rose seems the most gifted. Her sister Emily (1844-68) shared Rose's artistic interests and, incidentally, greatly attracted Ruskin who, during her short life, exchanged a number of letters with her, letters as yet unpublished and of considerable biographical value. To Ruskin Emily became known as "Wisie" and is so spoken of in the Mount-Temple correspondence. Rose's brother Percy (1846-1921), who inherited Harristown House, was a member of the Turf Club, an honorary member of the Jockey Club, and, in general, best known for equestrian pastimes. His few appearances in this correspondence center on his broken engagement to Ruskin's cousin Joan Agnew (later Mrs. Arthur Severn); their engagement was brief, unhappy, and a complicating factor in Ruskin's relations with Rose.

Sometime in 1858—records do not agree upon exactly when—Mrs. La Touche requested Ruskin to become the family drawing master; to this he agreed and has left, in *Praeterita*, an engrossing, if not wholly accurate, account of his first meeting with Rose, who, apparently, found him "so ugly." Shortly, he was on excellent terms with the family, and the inevitable pet names followed: Emily, as noted, became "Wisie"; Mrs. La Touche was called "Lacerta"—ominous in view of later events—"to signify that she had the grace and wisdom of the

9 London, 1908.
serpent without its poison"; and Ruskin himself was called "Archigosaurus" and, more often, "St. C." or "St. Crumpet," which Emily insisted also stood for "St. Chrysostom." Typically, Ruskin is again reaching out for some sort of closeness, some affection, to quell his emotional starvation.

In 1861 Ruskin paid his first visit to the La Touches at Harristown and pleasing are the records he has left about playing with the children, building a bridge across the Liffey, and reading Marmion to them. Across these merry times, however, falls the strange shadow of Rose—the little red-capped "wild" rose—with her "queer little fits." "She walked," Ruskin says, "like a little white statue through the twilight woods, talking solemnly." In this same year, Ruskin tells Norton that "Little Rose is terribly frightened about me, and writes letters to get me to come out of Bye-path Meadow—and I won't." Then, in the winter of 1861, she falls ill, and, in reporting this to his father, Ruskin reproduces a piece of dialogue sent him by Mrs. La Touche of a conversation between herself and her daughter as to which of them he wishes to see; this brief interchange is suggestive of a further complication—jealousy—in his relations with Rose:

Mrs. L. "Rosie, don't you wish St. C. would come home?"
Rosie. "Yes, indeed I do. How tiresome of him!"
Mrs. L. "Do you think he wants us at all?"
Rosie. "Well, perhaps he does. I think he wants to see me, Mamma."
Mrs. L. "And doesn't he want to see me?"
Rosie. "Well—you know—well Mamma, I think he likes your letters quite as much as yourself, and you write so very often—and I can't write often. So he must want to see me."

Individually, these incidents—her illness, her interest in Ruskin's religious state, her prattle about his visits—seem no more than isolated matters of inconsiderable consequence.

11 Ibid., XXXV, 529.
12 Ibid., XXXV, lxvii.
14 Works, XXXVI, 399.
But, collectively, and falling as they do, within the compass of a few months, they sound the main themes that are to burden Rose and Ruskin to their deaths.

From 1862 until 1865, because of pressure from the La Touche family, the paths of Ruskin and Rose do not cross. There are echoes of other illnesses, of her anxieties over his spiritual condition, but her relations with him remain quiescent. Commencing in 1866, however, Rose's life seems to become a purgatory of confused hopes, religious fanaticism, attacks of delirium, passionate revolt against parental intrusion, and revulsion toward Ruskin countered the next moment by avowals of love for him. Only brief periods of calmness seem to illuminate these harrowing years. Rose visits England, confides in Lady Mount-Temple, writes the novelist George MacDonald of her difficulties, and at intervals sees Ruskin. Her difficulties are echoed by Ruskin—at times most specifically—in his letters to Lady Mount-Temple between 1866 and 1872. Indeed, Rose's agonies are as acute as those of Ruskin himself—so acute, in fact, that her death on May 25, 1875, must have come as the most blessed of reliefs from a terrestrial existence that had ultimately become an appalling complex of mental and physical torture.