There are two ways of revitalizing a historical figure. One is to expand the study of his or her relationship with contemporaries, to find more links and with any luck make unexpected discoveries, and to see whether you can reconstruct the person's main inventions in another light – in short, to make the person more historical. The other is to wrest the figure from history, to see whether you can filter out the typical statements of the day and discover what is left on the table, and, out of these parts, construct a creature we can recognize as one of our own, while hoping you are not creating a ghost version of the original.

The book before you attempts to do the latter. It takes John Ruskin and places him primarily in the context of historical figures that have appeared after him. It is like a history written backwards. While the technique is not uncommon among those seeking to prove a particular subject should be viewed as an influence on others who followed, that is not my aim here. My ambition is to update Ruskin, not to see him diluted in the countless streams of diverging trends. Many of the figures I have him meet on his way to the present never referred to him, nor can they be characterized as followers, though I make them forge alliances with Ruskin because of deep theoretical affinities. This is quite an ahistorical approach, one that looks more like a design or construction project, certainly if we understand a project in the literal sense, as a projectile. Think, for instance, of the animated diagrams of the Voyager probe's launch into space: we see the projectile sweeping around Mars – not landing there but merely using the planet's gravitational
field to increase its own speed – and then, some years later, around Jupiter and Saturn, ever faster; then, it makes one more turn around Neptune before being ejected from the solar system, at a speed now approaching that of light, and straight into the dark beyond. In the same way, I let Ruskin encounter William James, revolve around him, and absorb some of his thought, but not enough to slow him down; sweep around Henri Bergson, acquiring more speed; and again around a few Germans (Theodor Lipps, Wilhelm Woringer, and even Martin Heidegger); eject him over the twentieth century (which at several points in the book I call the dark age of the sublime), with its world wars, its minimalism and its deconstructivism; and stop him so that he appears suddenly in our own age, like Doctor Who, meeting the likes of Bruno Latour and Peter Sloterdijk. One could hardly call this project historiographic – but it is not pure science fiction either, since we are bound to make the creature from the past speak in words both he and we understand.

Though we do see Ruskin encountering some of his contemporaries – less affectionately in the cases of Charles Babbage and Charles Darwin but much more so in that of William Morris – this project follows a tradition in which every twenty or thirty years a new Ruskin is sculpted out of his huge volume of work. The Ruskins of Marcel Proust, Patrick Geddes, the Guild Socialists, Kenneth Clark, Raymond Williams, Richard Sennett – to name just a few, dispersed over the breadth of the spectrum – are all shaped according to what they saw as the needs of the times. In this sense, this book fits an established custom: to create a Ruskin object, a probe sent from the past to shine light on our own times. It should come as no surprise that has happened with Ruskin more than with other historical figures, since he was so outspoken and often so angry that his voice was fated to be heard for centuries. More than a cultural commentator or art critic, he was an agitator, even a castigator at times, and a merciless one at that.

My Ruskin will be a rather confusing one to many, since the version I create does not condemn machinery – digital machinery, to be exact. This must sound awkward at best, if not completely illegitimate. How can one make the aesthetic philosopher (as Edmund White correctly qualifies him) of variation, imperfection and fragility into one of machinery? This question brings me to my second project: I will argue that our contemporary tools of design and production should be understood in a framework not of modern times but of premodern ones – not only of Ruskin's age of the picturesque and ornament but also of the pre-Renaissance era his own century tried to recreate: the age of the Gothic. John Ruskin's Gothic, either misjudged as sheer ethics or aesthetically not taken entirely seriously, turns out to be such a radical concept of design that I do not hesitate to call it a Gothic ontology, a notion that fuels the rest of the book.

In Chapters One and Two, Gothic ontology is defined as a special relationship between figures and configurations, in which the figures are active parts that have a certain freedom to act, though only in relation to others and in order to form collaborative entities. This concept transcends the aesthetic opposition of structure and ornament, making the Gothic "a beauty that works," one that leads to a much broader notion of an aesthetics based on sympathy. Sympathy, in my briefest definition, is what things feel when they shape each other. In Chapters Three and Four, sympathy is first elaborated in the context of the work of James and Bergson; then inserted back into aesthetic theory via the German category of Einfühlung, which we develop through Lipps and Woringer; and returns to Ruskin's hands in the fourth chapter. It is here that he fights his duel with Heidegger over care and concern, but also over sacrifice and gift, veiling and unveiling, and beauty and the sublime. For Ruskin, the sublime is what things grow away from as they take on the form of flourishing beauty, while for Heidegger it is what things open up towards. Finally, in Chapter Five, I arrive at an ecology of design in which sympathy becomes part of a universal aesthetics, involved not only in the production of artworks but that of all beings, animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman. So, to summarize the book, what seems to begin as a history of art quickly becomes an aesthetic theory and, step by step, turns into an aesthetic ontology.

I will discuss how we might adopt Ruskin's concepts from a digital perspective in only a few instances, refraining from exploring it further. I believe the transformation of history into theory must be limited by rigor; if the exercise were taken too far, it would turn the book into one with a double agenda – transforming a historical Ruskin into a theory of digital design –
and would degrade his position into a mere legitimization of our own. When we stop at the moment of transformation itself, his way into a future becomes our way back into a past, and, instead of visiting our times, Ruskin lures us into his own. I think that if there is one thing we can learn from John Ruskin, it is that each age must find its own way to beauty, and in our case, this means finding our way back to beauty, since we seem to have lost sight of it completely. One cannot simply hope to survive a hundred-year obsession with fracture and fragment by accident. As I say at one point in this book, so much has been destroyed that to have any hope of repairing it, we must learn a forgotten language, make it new and speak up until we are heard.

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chapter one

the digital nature of gothic

Ruskin’s *The Nature of Gothic* is inarguably the best-known essay on Gothic architecture ever published; argumentative, persuasive, passionate, it’s a text influential enough to have empowered a whole movement, which Ruskin distanced himself from on more than one occasion. Oddly enough, given that the chapter we are speaking of is the most important in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, it has nothing to do with the Venetian Gothic at all. Rather, it discusses a northern Gothic with which Ruskin himself had an ambiguous relationship his whole life, sometimes calling it the noblest form of Gothic, sometimes the lowest, depending on which detail, transept or portal he was looking at. These are some of the reasons why this chapter has so often been published separately in book form, becoming a mini-bible for true believers, among them William Morris, who wrote the introduction for the book when he published it with his own Kelmscott Press. Morris’s is a precious little book, made with so much love and care that one hardly dares read it.

Like its theoretical number-one enemy, classicism, the Gothic has protagonists who write like partisans in an especially ferocious army. They are not your usual historians – the Gothic hasn’t been able to attract a significant number of the best historians; it has no Gombrich, Wolflin or Wittkower, nobody of such caliber – but a series of hybrid and atypical historians such as Pugin and Worringen who have tried again and again, like Ruskin, to create a Gothic for the present, in whatever form, revivalist, expressionist, or, as in my case, digitalist, if that is a word. Each of them bends, distorts, and