

**Birkbeck BA History of Art, Nineteenth Century
Landscape, Year 3**

Laurence Shafe

**Discuss some of the issues surrounding
representation and meaning in mid-nineteenth
century England landscape by comparing Ruskin's
view of Holman Hunt's "The Scapegoat" with John
Brett's "Val d'Aosta".**

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Discuss some of the issues surrounding representation and meaning in mid-nineteenth century England landscape by comparing Ruskin's view of Holman Hunt's "The Scapegoat" with John Brett's "Val d'Aosta".

Representation can be interpreted as "re-presenting" the original scene or idea as an image that conveys new aspects of meaning to the viewer whether intended by the artists or not. By comparing Ruskin's view of Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat* (1854-55, first displayed Royal Academy 1856, Port Sunlight, Lady Lever Art Gallery) and John Brett's *Val d'Aosta* (1858, first displayed Royal Academy 1859, collection of Lord Lloyd-Webber) with some recent views of these paintings I shall show that meaning is constructed by the viewer and is determined by the cultural myths of the period.

One cultural issue of the 1850s was the contradiction between religious timescales and the latest theories of geology.¹ The artists of the period frequently represented religious and geological subjects, sometimes in the same painting. I shall consider the religious and geological imagery in Hunt's *The Scapegoat* and Brett's *Val d'Aosta* from the point of view of contemporary critics, particularly John Ruskin, and modern art historians.

*"The tenacity involved in the production of works such as William Holman Hunt's The Scapegoat and John Brett's Val d'Aosta has become enshrined in the mythology of the movement."*²

This suggests an important characteristic of a Pre-Raphaelite painter is the tenacity required to give the same attention to, for example, the detail of a foreground rock as to the expression of a central character. This tenacity gives rise to an attention to detail that has caused some people to describe Pre-

¹ Different religious groups attached different degrees of importance to the literal interpretation of the bible. The strictest interpretation of biblical timescales placed the beginning of the creation of the universe at noon on 23 October 4004 BCE. This was calculated by Bishop Ussher in the 17th century, see P. Aitkins, *Galileo's Finger: The Ten Great Ideas of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2003), p. 247

² A. Smith discussing the nature of Pre-Raphaelite painting in 'The Enfranchised Eye', in A. Smith and C. Newall (eds.), *Pre-Raphaelite Vision: Truth to Nature* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), p. 11

Raphaelite paintings as photographic in their realism but as we shall see they involved artistic conventions as studied as in any work of art.³

The Innocent Eye

But why did this mimetic style become popular among avant garde artists at this time? It has been suggested that it was directly related to Ruskin's promotion of "truth to nature" in the second volume of *Modern Painters* published in 1846, but we shall see that this is unlikely.⁴ It is perhaps a response to a variety of Victorian interrelated cultural myths such as the work ethic, the honesty of *plein air* painting, the progress and control associated with close scientific observation and categorization, the glorification of God through the representation of Nature, a response to the detail of photographic images and a desire to escape from the conventional rules of academic painting at a time when revolution was in the air.⁵

The Victorian middle classes looked at the world intensely—everything seemed possible to understand if only it was observed closely enough. The sense of sight was thought to penetrate to the essence of nature and reflect God; so Ruskin, for example, wrote that the proper use of art is "to be the witness of the glory of God."⁶ To achieve this aim Ruskin thought the artist required *innocence of the eye* which he described as a childish perception of flat stains of colour without consciousness of what they signify, "as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight."⁷

³ A. Smith (2004), p. 15

⁴ "Truth to nature" is a phrase often associated with Ruskin but not often used by him. It is used in *Modern Painters Part Two* (Massachusetts: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), p. 145 in the context "We shall be able to prove that truth and beauty, knowledge and imagination, invariably are associated in art; and we shall be able to show that not only in *truth to nature*, but in all other points, Turner is the greatest landscape painter who has ever lived." (my italics)

⁵ John Ruskin's letters to *The Times*, 13th and 26th May 1851, defending the Pre-Raphaelites mentions some of these myths, see C. Harrison, P. Wood, J. Gaiger, *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), pp. 442-446

⁶ M. Werner, *Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 24

⁷ A phrase usually ascribed to Monet but used by Ruskin in *The Elements of Drawing* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971, first published 1857), p. 27

He exhorted artists to “go to Nature...rejecting nothing, selecting nothing”.⁸ This quote and other similar sentiments are often used to present Ruskin as the inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelite movement. However, if we examine the context of the quote we see that Ruskin only saw this advice as the first step in training a young artist and he makes clear elsewhere that he disliked highly detailed images as he believed they reflected superficiality and moral insufficiency.⁹

The pinning down of the world through sight was an important aspect of scientific study and in the Victorian period the middle-class could actively participate as there was still a role for the amateur scientist. One aspect of observation was natural history and part of this was geology. In the first part of the nineteenth century many observers were encouraged by the thought they were advancing science, proving the literal Bible and glorifying God.

The detailed representation of every aspect of a landscape is one of the defining characteristics of the Pre-Raphaelite school. However, as Ruskin realised, detail is relative as it is not possible to represent every leaf of every tree in a landscape. In *The Elements of Drawing* Ruskin has to tackle this problem head-on as the book is a practical guide for artists. He explains that when sketching from nature “direct imitation becomes more or less impossible.”¹⁰ Ruskin’s aim is to get the student to look rather than draw something as they *think* it looks. So, for example, he expects to be able to recognise the species of every tree in a painting.¹¹

The Victorians believed that the artist by seeing the world afresh, with an “innocent eye”, could cut through all the stereotypes of the past and show things as they really are. This view has now been shown to be an oxymoron as

⁸ L. Lambourne, *Victorian Painting* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), p. 100

⁹ M. Werner (2005), p. 50

¹⁰ J. Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), first published 1857, p. 90

¹¹ A typical comment in his Academy Notes is “I am vexed...because, after long consideration, I am totally unable to form a guess as to the species of tree meant in the group on the left.”, E. Cook (1908), Vol. 14, p. 67

we are active interpreters of what we see and our world is constructed from what we know as much as from what we see.¹²

Ruskin's Religious Conflict

The detailed observation and categorisation of nature was critical to every Victorian amateur scientist and it was not regarded as inconsistent in the early part of the nineteenth century that many of the amateur scientists were clergymen.¹³ The Victorian's view of progress was closely tied in with what they thought was the superiority of the Englishman and this drove their imperialist expansion across the world.¹⁴ Hunt believed that science and specifically the evidence of the geological records showed a continual trend towards perfection that reinforced the teaching in the bible.¹⁵ More significantly, nature in all of its complexity, detail and apparent design was seen to directly reflect God's handiwork.¹⁶ Detailed observation was therefore seen both as a form of appreciating God's works and as a way to advance mankind.

The timescales required by geological processes became longer and longer and these developing geological ideas were presented in laymen terms in Sir Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* first published in 1830-34 and then updated over the years in numerous editions.¹⁷ As more evidence became available a conflict started to arise between geology and religion as indicated by Ruskin's letter of 1851,

"If only the Geologists would leave me alone I could do very well. But those dreadful hammers!—I hear the chink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses."¹⁸

¹² For a full discussion see E. Gombrich, *Art & Illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation* (London: Phaidon, 2002), in particular on p. 251 he claims "The innocent eye is a myth"

¹³ "Country clergymen observed plants and animals; country gentlemen looked at rocks", J. Altholz, 'The Warfare of Conscience with Theology' in G. Parsons (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain: IV Interpretations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 158

¹⁴ P. Calvert, 'History' in P. Burnell (ed.), *Democratization Through the Looking Glass: Comparative Perspectives on Democratization* (Manchester: Manchester University press, 2003), p. 78

¹⁵ For example, Hunt's view "The testimony of science concurs with that of the bible that there is continual trending to perfection, it is traceable in geological records, and in human affairs also the movement must be recognised, the better ever supplanting the less good." In H. Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), Vol. II, p 268

¹⁶ The argument from design is one of those discussed by B. Russell in *Why I Am Not A Christian*, see *Russell on Religion: Selections from the Writings of Bertrand Russell* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 81

¹⁷ C. Lyell, *Principles of Geology* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), first published 1830-34.

¹⁸ Ruskin's letter to Henry Ackland 24 May 1851 in E. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of*

The chinking hammers took their toll on his mind and by 1861 he wrote “how Puritan—monk—Brahmin—churchman—Turk—are all merely names for different madneses and ignorances...I looked for another world, and find there is only this...what message I have given is all wrong: has to be all re-said...our preachers drive me mad with contempt...I am working at geology”¹⁹

This loss of faith is confirmed by Hunt’s autobiography where he reports a conversation with Ruskin in 1869 during which Ruskin admits that he had lost his faith ten years previously.²⁰ This all suggests that Ruskin was questioning his faith as early as 1851, if not before, and had lost his faith by 1859, precisely during the period that Hunt painted *The Scapegoat* and Brett painted *Val d’Aosta*.²¹

Because of Ruskin’s religious crisis I shall focus on his views about the religious symbolism in Hunt’s *The Scapegoat* and Brett’s *Val d’Aosta* and compare them with the views of modern art historians so we can better understand the intention of the artists and the role of these paintings in Victorian society. We shall see that a factual idiom was used in very different ways to illustrate a symbolic vision and Ruskin viewed both paintings as in many ways failures, but for very different reasons.

Hunt’s *The Scapegoat*

In 1848 revolution took place across Europe and in the UK a small group of painters including Holman Hunt, Dante Rossetti and John Millais formed a brotherhood to rebel against the “stereotyped, meaningless and insecure art” of the Royal Academy.²² Pre-Raphaelitism has been seen as an anti-scientific movement that in the end failed, but this over simplifies the objectives and different beliefs of the group.²³ Along with other Victorians they shared an

John Ruskin (London: George Allen, 1908), Vol. 35, pp. 115

¹⁹ Ruskin’s letters in E. Cook (1908), Vol. 36, p. 381

²⁰ H. Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), Vol. II, p 265

²¹ Of course, nothing about Ruskin is straightforward and in 1859 he was writing weekly religious “Sunday letters” for his “birds” (school girls) at Winnington, see T. Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Later Years* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 6-9

²² J. Hunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination: 1848-1900* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 1

²³ J. Hunt (1968), p. 1, quoting C. Brooks, 1939

“interest in the authority of factual description”, it was even claimed that “photography and Pre-Raphaelitism were distinguished by the same response to indiscriminate detail” and their aim was to “translate symbolic vision into factual idiom.”²⁴ Albert Boime maintains that the very formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood arose from the crisis in British Christianity caused by the challenge of scientific thought and the “Pre-Raphaelite artist sought to combine religious aims with an objective scientific method.”²⁵

Hunt suffered from an “Oriental mania” and following the poor reception his *The Light of the World* (1853, Keble College, Oxford) received he left for the Holy Lands in 1854 planning to move from allegory to the direct representation of biblical events.²⁶ He returned in 1856 having completed *The Scapegoat* and it was displayed at the Academy in the Summer Exhibition. Ruskin wrote,

*“This singular picture, though in many respects faultful, and in some wholly a failure, is yet the one of all in the gallery which should furnish us with most food for thought.”*²⁷

In his Academy Notes Ruskin is clearly torn between praising the dedication required to paint the picture and the eventual result. He describes Hunt as journeying like a “mediaeval pilgrim, to do a certain work in the Holy Land” and work which requires the “utmost strength of heart.”²⁸ To emphasize the dedication shown by Hunt he describes a hostile environment whose air is “stagnant and pestiferous” with “decaying vegetation” and the waters contain the “bones of the beasts...swollen and wasted” with “swarms of flies” covering everything. Conditions were so bad that “the Arabs themselves will not encamp for a night” but Hunt’s “object was one worthy of such an effort”.

However, after praising his dedication he criticizes the subject matter. “No one but Mr. Hunt himself would ever have dreamed of making [a goat] the subject of a close pictorial study” and as “the subject of the picture is wholly

²⁴ J. Hunt (1968), p. 30

²⁵ A. Boime, ‘William Holman Hunt’s “The Scapegoat”: Rite of Forgiveness/Transference of Blame’, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (Mar., 2002), p. 105

²⁶ See A. Boime (2002), p. 1 and W. Vaughan, *The Franklin D. Murphy Lectures X, Art in the Natural World in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Three Essays* (Kansas, Spencer Museum of Art, 1990), p. 47

²⁷ Ruskin’s review of *The Scapegoat* in E. Cook (1908), Vol. 14, Academy Notes 1856, pp. 61-66

²⁸ E. Cook (1908), Vol. 14, Academy Notes, 1856, p. 62

incapable of explaining itself” Ruskin concludes that the painting will be unsaleable as “we are apt to refuse a painting if the subject is not immediately intelligible.”

This is borne out by Hunt’s own report of the painting’s reception by Gambart and other critics. Gambart refused to buy the painting as he felt no one would understand the significance of the goat. Hunt in a xenophobic comment accused the French of being unaware of the bible. However, Gambart called in two English ladies who also had not heard the story so Hunt had finally to admit that “the dealer was proved right, and I had over-counted on the picture’s intelligibility.”²⁹

Other critics reinforced this view; one wit is reported as saying the picture was an excellent portrait of “Lord Strafford de Redcliffe”.³⁰ The *Athenaeum* felt that although it did not need a bishop to explain its meaning “the goat is but a goat” and the *Art Journal* is more critical as it feels “there is nothing allusive to the ceremony of Atonement, save the fillet of wool on the goat’s horns, and this is not sufficiently important to reveal the story of the scapegoat.” “A goat is here, and that is all...It is useless for any good purpose, meaning nothing, and therefore teaching nothing.” This is an interesting comment on what contemporary critics expected of an artist using symbolism—it had to be clearly signalled, the “fillet of wool” was not enough.

Ruskin goes on to criticise the technique used in the painting, for example, he points out that a reflection in water is never brighter than the sky above it. His comment on the distant mountains does not speculate on their geology but simply describes them as a failure. He concludes Hunt should “paint a few pictures with less feeling in them, and more handling.”

So why did Hunt paint such an obscure subject? Hunt was deeply religious, an evangelical Christian, and he had journeyed to the Holy Land as he felt that he could honestly and accurately paint what he saw as a background to

²⁹ H. Hunt (1905), pp. 106-108

³⁰ H. Hunt (1905), pp. 110-113, gives extracts that include *The Times*, May 5, 1856, *Athenaeum*, 1856, p. 589 and the *Art Journal*, 1856, p. 170

biblical stories and religious allegories. He had already had a confused reaction to his religious allegories such as *Hireling Shepherd* (1851-52, City of Manchester Art Galleries) and *The Light of the World* which convinced him he had to address a wider public by moving from allegory to the direct representation of biblical events.³¹ His initial plan was to paint *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* (1860, City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham) but he could not find the models for the figures because of distrust among the locals and he did not complete it until 1860.³² Instead Hunt decided on the Jewish scapegoat as a type for Christ and "as a symbol of the Christian Church, thus teaching both them [the Apostles] and their followers submission and patience under affliction."³³ He thus chose another allegorical subject despite the reception he had received for less obscure biblical allegories.

The subject chosen also enabled Hunt to depict a geologically interesting rift valley enclosed by a mountain range which is also an important religious symbol as it is the chain of Abarim on which Moses died. The mountains run for several miles east to west at a height ranging from three to four hundred feet and they are composed of rock salt, capped with a bed of gypsum and chalk. The diary of William Beaumont records that the mountains shone crimson and gold at the time of Hunt's visit and "a rainbow...spanned the wide but desolate space of intervening sea and land—symbol of God's covenant of mercy above the most memorable scene of wrath."³⁴

Despite its deep religious significance and Hunt's dedication to the task Ruskin was in the end dismissive and felt that "while Mr. Hunt...attaching too great an importance to the externals of the life of Christ, separated himself for long years from all discipline by the recognised laws of his art; fell into errors which woefully shortened his hand and discredited his cause."³⁵

³¹ W. Vaughan (1990), p. 47

³² A. Boime (2002), p. 103

³³ A. Boime (2002), p. 107

³⁴ A. Boime (2002), p. 107. The rainbow was painted by Hunt in an early version

³⁵ E. Cook (1908), Vol. 34, p. 168

We therefore find that a painting which the artist clearly regarded as full of religious meaning was regarded by even the sophisticated viewers at the time as a picture of a goat. Later historians, such as Vaughan and Boime, have probed the religious significance and background of the painting but have done little to clarify the refusal of contemporary critics to see the painting as allegory.

The geological aspects of the painting are hardly mentioned by contemporary critics except in terms of their colour and accuracy. However, *Val d'Aosta* more clearly exhibits significant geological features.

Brett's *Val d'Aosta*

Ruskin described Brett as "one of my keenest minded friends" and his relationship with Brett's *Val d'Aosta* started in 1858 when he wrote in his Academy Notes, "What would he [Brett] not make of the chestnut groves of the Val d'Aosta! I heartily wish him good-speed and long exile."³⁶ Brett went to the Val d'Aosta in the summer of 1858 when Ruskin was in Turin and we know they discussed the project as Ruskin reported in a letter he wrote on the 26th August 1858:

"I mentioned that Mr. Brett was with me at La Tour. He has been here a week to-day. I sent for him at Villeneuve, Val d'Aosta, because I didn't like what he said in his letter about his present work, and thought he wanted some lecturing like Inchbold: besides that, he could give me some useful hints. He is much tougher and stronger than Inchbold and takes more hammering; but I think he looks more miserable every day"

The result was exhibited in the Royal Academy of 1859 and Ruskin bought the painting and kept it in his drawing-room for the rest of his life.³⁷ Ruskin therefore had a strong influence on, was inspiration for and helped in the creation of the painting yet he had mixed feelings about the final result.³⁸

He is full of praise for the accuracy of the painting, in fact he even says that "standing before this picture is just as good as standing on that spot in Val

³⁶ E. Cook (1908), Vol. 7, p. 360, the comment on Brett's keen mind was made in 1860 but referred to their relationship in 1858; also see E. Cook (1908), Vol. 14, Academy Notes, 1858, p. 172.

³⁷ E. Cook (1908), Vol. 14, xxiv

³⁸ E. Cook (1908), Vol. 14, pp. 234-238

d'Aosta."³⁹ He compliments the painting, writing it is "a notable picture truly" but he adds a sting in the tail "Yet not, in the strong essential meaning of the word, a noble picture."⁴⁰ He goes on to explain that it has "a strange fault" in that "it seems to me wholly emotionless." He expands on this idea of emotion in art:

"I cannot find from it that the painter loved, or feared, anything in all that wonderful piece of the world. There seems to me no awe in the mountains there—no real love of the chestnuts or the vines."

Ruskin believes Brett is capable of the highest emotion but he has not put it in the painting and he explains "I never saw the mirror so held up to Nature; but it is Mirror's work, not Man's." In other words Ruskin is not looking for photographic realism but for awe and love. Perhaps he was thinking of Turner's *The Glacier and Source of the Arveiron* of 1803, a painting of close observation but a scene that has been dramatized to create a sublime sense of awesome scale that threatens to destroy man.⁴¹

In trying to explain the "absence of sentiment" Ruskin mentions the "feeble anger of the sky" and complains that the clouds, rather than being awesome, will simply wake the sleeping girl with "hailstones in a quarter of an hour". In an interesting comment regarding the mimetic technique and photorealism he says that although it is "a wonder of toil...he took to mere photography of physical landscape."⁴²

So, Ruskin has criticised Hunt for having too much feeling and Brett for having too little. What is Ruskin saying? Is he looking for an exaggerated imposing mountain? Is he looking for the sublime, for awe and majesty? Brett has not exaggerated the perspective; the mountains are their correct size in relation to the perspective used.⁴³ Ruskin asks for precision and accuracy in representation but he says he does this simply to stop the painter painting by

³⁹ E. Cook (1908), Vol. 14, Academy Notes, p. 234

⁴⁰ E. Cook (1908), Vol. 14, Academy Notes, p. 236

⁴¹ I am grateful here for the analysis in K. Bendiner, John Brett's "The Glacier of Rosenlauri", *Art Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 241-288

⁴² E. Cook (1908), Academy Notes, Vol. 14, p. 238

⁴³ C. Newall (2004), p. 140, points out that *The Glacier at Rosenlauri* is today regarded as an invaluable source of documentary information for scientific purposes

rules, he wants the painter to look but not to record photographically; he wants majesty based on close observation of the details. He is looking for the *innocence of the eye* that shows the artist is really observing the world but he is also looking for boldness in execution and feels the Pre-Raphaelites overwork themselves.⁴⁴

It is as if Brett and Hunt are demonstrating “truth to nature” but as Ruskin made clear truth to nature had to be combined with truth, beauty, knowledge and imagination.

It is also interesting to consider whether the painting had any symbolic significance and various historians have looked for the symbolic significance of the glacial erratics in the foreground.⁴⁵ Glacial erratics are a geological puzzle as they can appear miles from where they naturally occur.⁴⁶ Initially it was claimed they were evidence of the biblical flood which had swept them along. However, it was clear that floods do not carry boulders that far and Lyell’s early view was that they were transported inside icebergs which had floated them to their present position before melting. In 1837 Louis Agassiz attributed them, correctly, to glacial action which had picked them up as the glacier flowed downhill and left them behind miles further on as the glacier melted. These ideas became accepted and by 1853 Lyell had revised his *Principles of Geology* to include this explanation and to support some sort of ice age. By the 1850s the conflict between these geological views and those that took the bible literally were reaching a peak and it was during this decade that Brett painted *The Glacier at Rosenloui* and *Val d’Aosta*, both showing glacial erratics.

Mike Hickox has commented on the religious symbolism in three of Brett’s works including *Val d’Aosta*.⁴⁷ However, his analysis relies on accepting a meaning that is poorly supported by the representation.

⁴⁴ M. Werner (2005), pp. 48-49

⁴⁵ An erratic is a boulder transported and deposited by a glacier having a lithology different than the bedrock upon which it is sitting. In Val d’Aosta the light grey stone in the foreground and the rock on which the girl rests have a different composition from the other rocks so are likely to be erratics.

⁴⁶ These ideas are discussed in K. Bendiner (1984), pp. 241-288

⁴⁷ M. Hickox, ‘Science and Religion in the Pre-Raphaelite Work of John Brett’, Victorian Web,

He starts by pointing out that the foreground of Val d'Aosta clearly shows Brett's interest in glacial activity. Although Hickox does not mention it the scene shows a valley carved out by the glacier in the distance and its fertility, and the resulting vineyards and farms, are dependent on alluvial deposits from the retreating glacier and its associated river as the glacier slowly retreated since the end of the last ice age over 10,000 years ago.

Hickox focuses on the foreground and mentions,

"The pure white (ie without sin) goat relates to Hunt's The Scapegoat ie the scapegoat (Leviticus) was seen as a type or forerunner of Christ[.] Thus it is interesting to note that Boyce records Brett's presence at a meeting of painters at Hunt's house shortly before his departure for the Italian Alps."

It is difficult to know what to make of his use of the word "relates", they are obviously both goats, and the word "Thus" implies a logical connection that is tenuous at best. Brett did not need to be at Hunt's house to be aware of his painting *The Scapegoat* as it had been thoroughly lambasted by the press two years previously. The implication is that Brett's goat is also a type but Hunt indicates his goat is a symbol by means of a scarlet ribbon and there is no indication in Brett's painting that it is anything other than a goat. We have seen that even Hunt's goat was not regarded at the time as allegorical.

Hickox then points out that the sleeping girl may reflect the sleeping disciples in Gethsemane. The girl is wearing a crucifix and a scarlet scarf so the symbolism would indicate that the girl/Apostle was sinful in sleeping while the sinless goat, staring at the girl, prefigured Christ. This is a possible interpretation but the only clear religious reference is the crucifix. Another interpretation is that it is a moral allegory related to *Hireling Shepherd* and the girl is failing in her duties and, according to Ruskin, will suffer a shower of hailstones in a quarter of an hour. However, the moral is weak as the goat we see has not strayed and is not in any trouble. It is possible the sleeping girl and the goat were added simply to provide scale and a sentimental aspect to the scene. A more interesting interpretation is provided by Christopher Newall who

<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/brett/paintingsd/hickox1.html> (accessed 7 January 2006)

suggests the sleeping girl represents the simple-minded Catholic peasant insensible to the stupendous past events arrayed around her.⁴⁸

Finally, Hickox discusses the five silver birch trees and their religious significance. He claims certain species of birch tree were used in the preparation of oil of balsam and this was used to anoint Old Testament Kings. He also feels the central tree is "propelled by an invisible wind pointing towards the goat and forming a cruciform pattern with its neighbour." Whether the tree is bending naturally or from the force of the wind is unclear although the upper branches are not bending as they would in the wind which indicates it is a natural leaning perhaps for compositional reasons. The tree is leaning towards the left but is not pointing at the goat and the trunk of the tree forms more of an inverted "V" shape with its neighbour rather than a cruciform pattern.

He concludes by maintaining that Brett's "intention was to juxtapose the scientific and religious accounts of history but to give pre-eminence to the latter." In the case of *Val d'Aosta* this does not appear to have been demonstrated and the contemporary reviews of *The Scapegoat* made it clear that religious symbolism had to be very clearly signalled.

Conclusion

We have seen that an artist's beliefs are not always represented in their paintings, that there is no such thing as the innocent eye and representation is never photographic but involves conventions that are understood by the artist and the viewer. Meaning arises from the viewer's reading of the painting and the artists may be telling a simple story, presenting a complex allegory or showing a landscape. In addition, we have seen that modern art historians are a particular type of viewer who acts like a detective in a Conan Doyle novel looking for subtle, hidden clues on which substantial theories can be built.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ C. Newall, 'Understanding the Landscape' in A. Staley and C. Newall (eds.), *Pre-Raphaelite Vision: Truth to Nature* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), pp. 141-142

⁴⁹ C. Ginsberg discusses theories of knowledge and compares the art connoisseur and the detective who both discover clues unnoticed by others, see Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method, *History Workshop*, 9 (1980: Spring)

We have looked at Hunt's *The Scapegoat* and Brett's *Val d'Aosta* and both received a mixed reaction from Ruskin. He found that Hunt's work was not only a badly chosen subject but that the technique was poor. Ruskin said this picture regarded merely as a landscape, or as a composition, was a total failure, "like a youth expressing his earnest feeling by feeble verse" and Hunt should have asked himself first whether he could paint a goat at all. Brett's work he bought but his reaction was also mixed, he found it well executed but lacking emotional content.

Both paintings use a similar factual idiom and yet their vision is very different. Hunt gives us a typographical symbol for Christ as the absolver of sins yet his symbolism is heavily criticized for being so obscure as to be meaningless. At the same time those that did understand the symbolism accused him of heresy.⁵⁰ This contemporary criticism should be compared with the detailed analysis that such a complex work elicits from the modern art historian.

Brett gives us few clues as to the symbolic meaning of *Val d'Aosta* and it was seen at the time to be a topographical work, almost a tourist poster, as Ruskin said "as good as standing on that spot". Recently, various interpretations have been suggested regarding its scientific references on the one hand and its religious symbolism on the other, but without consensus.

Ruskin's religious beliefs were in turmoil at this time as a result of his literal interpretation of the bible and the conflict this presented in his mind with recent findings in geology. Although both paintings present geological themes Ruskin does not comment on these directly other than to make the technical point that he thought Hunt had failed in painting the distant mountains.

We find then that Ruskin, unlike modern art historians, does not require or expect a painting to exhibit a religious theme and when it does he only criticizes it because the theme is too obscure or poorly executed. While we search for hidden meaning based on crossed trees and white goats Ruskin's view is best expressed in his final lecture on landscape at Oxford in 1884 where he said "the

⁵⁰ A. Boime (2002), p. 107

entire interest of landscape depends on our sympathy with its history and inhabitants."⁵¹

Thus we find the link between representation and meaning requires the analysis of layers of semiotic reference each of which is influenced by numerous cultural myths and that this applies as much to recent analysis as to the mid-nineteenth century. This means we can analyze the reviews and cultural assumptions of the period or we can interpret a painting based on our current cultural myths but we cannot mix the two without the analysis becoming meaningless. We cannot therefore imply that a meaning we ascribe today, such as Hickox's religious interpretation of *Val d'Aosta* is anything other than a personal view.

(Word count, excluding footnotes and quotes: 3,484)

⁵¹ E. Cook (1908), Vol. 33, p. 534. Both Ruskin and Baudelaire also warned about limiting art by imposing moral strictures, see E. Cook (1908), Vol. 14, Academy Notes, p. 154, Ruskin said "let it always be remembered that it is much easier to be didactic than to be lovely" and E. Prettejohn, *Beauty & Art: 1750-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 11, "Baudelaire directed particular scorn at what he called 'the heresy of "*The Didactic*," the tendency to limit art by imposing moral strictures on it."

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