

# 'J after J. Ruskin': line in the art teaching of John Ruskin and Ebenezer Cooke

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Throughout his active life John Ruskin concerned himself with the composition of images both from a theoretical and from a practical point of view. A skilled draughtsman, from early youth he taught others to draw. A constant in his eruptive career, his teaching of drawing nevertheless passed through many phases and embraced many registers: the individual tuition of amateurs of his own or higher social class, advice to professional artists and the formal instruction of 'artisans' at the Christian Socialists' Working Men's College in London and of students attending the University at Oxford.<sup>1</sup> Understood broadly as comprehending all forms of graphic art – of which the paradigm came to be seen as the 'art of scratch' or elementary engraving process<sup>2</sup> – drawing took on a central role in his work, its manual activity emblematic of all forms of 'doing' that were guided by 'thinking'. Its value as an epitome of reflective industry was further accentuated by the expanding market for prints and photographs; for in Ruskin's view this issued in a disorienting surfeit of often laboriously produced images that, if variously informative or entertaining, were nevertheless devoid of ethical significance.<sup>3</sup>

In Ruskin's later theoretical and historiographical schemes of art, devised during the period of his Oxford Professorship, the theological, moral and social concerns informing earlier conceptualizations – and providing the framework of *Modern Painters* (1843–1860) and his first drawing manual, *The Elements of Drawing* (1857) – gave way to the formal elements or 'divisions' of artistic expression as such: line, light, mass and colour. In a lecture of 1870 these were visualized in a hexagonal diagram\* illustrating the universal 'schools' and historical development of art (Fig.

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\* The illustrations to this text may be found by clicking this link: [Illustrations](#).

<sup>1</sup> Ruskin held drawing classes at the Working Men's College more or less regularly between 1854 and 1858 and then more sporadically until 1862. He was nominated Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford in 1869 and held the post until 1879, and again between 1883 and 1885. For an overview of Ruskin's activities as a teacher of drawing see Donata Levi and Paul Tucker, *Ruskin didatta. Il disegno tra disciplina e diletto*, Venice: Marsilio, 1997. On his classes at the Working Men's College see in addition Ray Haslam, "'According to the requirements of his scholars": Ruskin, drawing and art education', in Robert Hewison, ed., *Ruskin's Artists. Studies in the Victorian Visual Economy. Papers from the Ruskin Programme*, Aldershot and Brookfield: Ashgate, 2000, 147–67 and Chiaki Yokoyama, 'Teaching art to the working class: John Ruskin and the meaning of "practical" art', *ACDHT Journal*, 2, 2017, 79–88.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds, *The Works of John Ruskin*, London: George Allen / New York: Longman, Green, and Co, 1903–12, 39 vols, XXII, 320.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. 'The black arts: a reverie in the Strand' (1888), *Works of John Ruskin*, XIV, 357–64.

1).<sup>4</sup> This formal/practical set of principles, though itself subject to variation as Ruskin's sense of the scope and significance of art expanded, dominates his final period and informs the conceptual structure of his second (unfinished) drawing manual.<sup>5</sup>

Line thus came to assume a central role in Ruskin's thinking and teaching,<sup>6</sup> to understand which it is necessary to consider his opposition to the didactic methods promulgated by the Department of Science and Art. What became known as the 'South Kensington system' was primarily linear in character. However, in this method line was essentially a means of almost mechanically acquired dexterity of hand.<sup>7</sup> Ruskin, on the other hand, viewed it as a sign replete with ethical and cultural value. His concern in particular with outline further raises the question of his influence on a younger generation of teachers and educational theorists – poorly understood and 'certainly underestimated', as Ray Haslam has justly remarked<sup>8</sup> – and above all on Ebenezer Cooke (1837-1913), the possibility of assessing the degree of Ruskin's influence on whom Haslam himself perhaps underestimates.<sup>9</sup> The son of a Norfolk village schoolmaster who had been apprenticed to a lithographer, Cooke began attending Ruskin's drawing classes at the Working Men's College in 1855. From 1865 he was responsible (under Ruskin's supervision) for the drawing classes at the recently founded Working Women's College.<sup>10</sup> In Cooke's subsequent work a Ruskinian concern with outline absorbed and channelled new forms of knowledge: the psychology of vision and of infant development, the nature of

<sup>4</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XX, 128.

<sup>5</sup> *The Laws of Fésolo. A Familiar Treatise on the Elementary Principles and Practice of Drawing and Painting. As Determined the Tuscan Masters. Arranged for the Use of Schools (Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 335–485). The second volume was to have dealt with colour and to have looked to Venice rather than to Tuscany, as seen from its projected title, *The Laws of Rivo Alto* (see *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, xxvii, 495–501).

<sup>6</sup> See Donata Levi and Paul Tucker, "'A line of absolute correctness": Ruskin's enlargements from Greek vases and the drawing classes at Oxford', in Dinah Birch, ed., *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999, 87–110; "'The hand as servant": John Ruskin, Professor of the Manual Arts', *Predella, rivista semestrale di arti visive* 29, 2011, *Chirurgia della Creazione. Mano e arti visive*, ed. Annamaria Ducci (online edition: [[http://predella.arte.unipi.it/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=181&catid=65&Itemid=94](http://predella.arte.unipi.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=181&catid=65&Itemid=94)]); "'Drawing is a kind of language": la didattica artistica in John Ruskin e nel dibattito inglese coevo', *Annali di critica d'arte* 10, 2014, 215–56

<sup>7</sup> R. Cardoso Denis, 'Teaching by example: education and the formation of South Kensington's Museums', in M. Baker and B. Richardson, eds, *A Grand Design: the Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London 1997, 107–16; S. Owens, "'Straight lines are a national want": South Kensington and art education reform', in Julius Bryant, ed., *Art and Design for All. The Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2011, 75–81.

<sup>8</sup> Haslam, "'According to the requirements of his scholars'", 147.

<sup>9</sup> Haslam, "'According to the requirements of his scholars'", 158.

<sup>10</sup> The college was founded by Elizabeth Malleison in 1864. On Cooke's life and work see the biographical sketch by his son Arthur Ebenezer Cooke, 'Ebenezer Cooke', in Foster Watson, ed., *The Encyclopaedia and Dictionary of Education*, 1, London: Pitman, 1921, 385; Herbert Read, *Education through Art*, revised edition, London: Faber, 1958, 116–18, 169–70; Gordon Sutton, *Artisan or Artist? A History of the Teaching of Art and Crafts in English Schools*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1965, 137, 139, 153, 158–60, 162, 165, 169, 207, 217, 221–23, 228, 267. Cooke's papers are in the Archive of the Institute of Education, University of London.

primitive art and the origins of the artistic impulse, the vital interconnection (and no longer just the analogy between) visual and linguistic expression.

### **The elements of drawing in Ruskin and at South Kensington**

A useful starting-point is offered by a heated exchange, conducted in private and in public, between Ruskin, Cooke and an old acquaintance of the former, the painter William Bell Scott (1811-1890).<sup>11</sup> Himself a teacher and examiner and, for a period of twenty years, master at the Newcastle School of Design (later School of Art), Scott was an official representative of the South Kensington system, of which Ruskin was an increasingly outspoken critic.<sup>12</sup>

The exchange was triggered by a negative review by Bell Scott of *Our Sketching Club*, a sort of drawing manual by the Revd Richard St. John Tyrwhitt (1827–95).<sup>13</sup> Like Ruskin a graduate of Christ Church, Tyrwhitt had been vicar of St Mary Magdalen's Church in Oxford until 1872. He had corresponded with Ruskin since the mid-1860s and would subsequently act as his salaried secretary.<sup>14</sup> A writer on art and amateur artist, Tyrwhitt had himself been a candidate for the Slade Professorship,<sup>15</sup> and, perhaps with this end in view, in 1868 had published *A Handbook of Pictorial Art* in part collaboration with Alexander Macdonald, then Master of the Science and Art Department's School of Art at Oxford.<sup>16</sup> Though heavily indebted to Ruskin's work on art and design of the 1850s, the *Handbook* was often awarded as a Prize and even used as a Textbook by the Department of Science and Art.<sup>17</sup> This appears especially paradoxical in the light of the fact that in 1871

<sup>11</sup> William Bell Scott, 'Mr. Tyrwhitt's Sketching Club', *The Examiner*, 2 January 1875, 20–22.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 79 (July 1877), *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIX, 154: 'the Professorship of Sir Henry Cole at Kensington has corrupted the system of art-teaching all over England into a state of abortion and falsehood from which it will take twenty years to recover'. On the relationship between Cole and Ruskin, see Robert Hewison, 'Straight lines or curved? The Victorian values of John Ruskin and Henry Cole', in Peggy Deamer, ed., *Architecture and Capitalism. 1845 to the Present*, London: Taylor and Francis, 2014, 8–22.

<sup>13</sup> Richard St. John Tyrwhitt, *Our Sketching Club: Letters and Studies on Landscape Art ... with an Authorised Reproduction of the Lessons and the Woodcuts in Professor Ruskin's 'Elements of Drawing'*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1874.

<sup>14</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XXVIII, 632.

<sup>15</sup> He had withdrawn his candidature, however, in favour of Ruskin (George Clement Boase, 'Tyrwhitt, Richard St. John', in *Dictionary of National Biography*, 63 vols, London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1885–1900, vol. 57, 444–45).

<sup>16</sup> Richard St. John Tyrwhitt, *A Handbook of Pictorial Art... with a Chapter on Perspective by A. Macdonald*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1868. A second edition was published in 1875. Alexander Macdonald (1839–1921) had studied at the Science and Art Department's central Art Training School at Somerset House in London and had begun to take classes in local branch schools already in his first year. He was appointed Master of the Oxford School of Art in its inaugural year, 1865. For an overview of the School of Art's activities in the year of Ruskin's appointment as Slade Professor, see *Sixteenth Report of the Science and Art Department of the Committee of Council on Education*, London: Printed by Eyre and Spottiswoode for Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1869, 231.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Macdonald, *The History and Philosophy of Art Education*, London: University of London Press, 1970, 151: "approved by the Government". Tyrwhitt, *Handbook*, preface to the second edition, xi.

Ruskin recruited Macdonald as first incumbent of his newly established and personally funded Drawing Mastership.<sup>18</sup>

Ruskin's own manual, *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), the fruit of his teaching experience at the Working Men's College, had been out of print since 1861. He had repeatedly thought to revise it and improve his drawing system.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, another attempt to 'fill the gaps' in the manual was abandoned in the summer of 1874 itself.<sup>20</sup> It was perhaps for this reason that Ruskin gave permission to Tyrwhitt to re-use parts of the text of *Elements*, together with some of the illustrations he had himself prepared for that book, in *Our Sketching Club*.<sup>21</sup>

In his review of Tyrwhitt's book Scott seems at pains, not to criticize, but rather to defend Ruskin, while yet managing to disparage him and the woodcuts borrowed from *Elements*. Tyrwhitt, on the other hand, is unreservedly attacked:

His own incompetence to do anything in the art he undertakes to teach is at once apparent to the reader in his lithographic frontispiece of two men riding on animals [Fig. 2] resembling mules, ludicrously bad in manner of drawing, called 'Like Going' ... Otherwise, throughout the book he [Tyrwhitt] is saved from exposure by having borrowed the trifling cuts from the 'Elements of Drawing' by the 'Fessor, as he flippantly calls his master, the erratic and philanthropic Mr. Ruskin.<sup>22</sup>

Scott criticizes Tyrwhitt's approach and, by implication, that of what he pointedly calls the Oxford Training School, probably compromised in Scott's eyes by Ruskin's enlistment of Macdonald (who continued to teach at the School of Art). His criticisms regard both the models held up for imitation and the method proposed by Tyrwhitt. With regard to the former, Scott ridicules the reverence shown to Turner throughout the book:

<sup>18</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 475; XXI, 165n; Robert Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford. The Art of Education*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 21 May–15 September 1996, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 21–22.

<sup>19</sup> See J. Ruskin to M.A. Bell, 18 February 1865 and 23 November 1867, in Van Akin Burd, ed., *The Winnington Letters. John Ruskin's Correspondence with Margaret Alexis Bell and the Children at Winnington Hall*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969, 539, 605.

<sup>20</sup> See letters from Ruskin to his assistant and publisher George Allen which mention 'Drawing Instructions to be issued in form of "Folio Plates"' and an 'Introduction'. This project was put aside in late May because 'so many questions and difficulties occur to me for which I am as yet unprepared; and which need the review of all the knowledge I have to give a general answer' (J. Ruskin to G. Allen, 22 May 1874, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, MSS. Eng. Lett, c. 39\*, 505). Ruskin's uncertainties specifically concerned 'simple matters of colour' (J. Ruskin to G. Allen, 16 May 1874, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, MSS. Eng. Lett, c. 39\*, 498). We are grateful to The Ruskin, Lancaster University and the Bodleian Library for permission to quote from this and other transcripts of Ruskin's correspondence.

<sup>21</sup> Not long afterwards Ruskin similarly allowed his friend Susan Beever to edit a collection of extracts from *Modern Painters*, with the title of *Fronde Agrestes*, (Orpington: George Allen, 1875).

<sup>22</sup> Scott, 'Mr. Tyrwhitt's Sketching Club', 20.

as for the set of mezzotint prints by Turner, it seems to stand supreme as 'The Liber'. To be able to copy one of them, or even a part of one, is almost the finishing accomplishment of education. Like all imperfectly-educated landscape painters, he [Tyrwhitt] holds these trifles to be supremely difficult and the highest efforts of art, and Turner's name occurs on nearly every page ...<sup>23</sup>

Scott makes particular sport of a prominent example he inaccurately calls 'Turner's bough'. Tyrwhitt's expression – the 'Turner bough' – refers to one of a characteristically Ruskinian triad of examples (Fig. 3), comprising representations of boughs after Turner and in the manners of the Carracci and Titian, thus illustrating the varying treatment of tree-forms in the European pictorial tradition – a lesson in visual education whose point is blurred by Tyrwhitt in so far as he presents only two of Ruskin's examples.<sup>24</sup> With regard to method, Scott criticizes another woodcut borrowed from *Elements*. He seems to think this fails to demonstrate the method and value of the pen and sepia wash technique sanctioned by Turner (and Claude): Ruskin's woodcut is 'a sort of pencil-etching' and moreover, in his view, incomprehensible, a 'whirligig of brushwood' (Fig. 4).<sup>25</sup> Lastly, the use of compasses and magnifiers and tracing paper, encouraged by Tyrwhitt, are emphatically 'not drawing' in Scott's opinion.<sup>26</sup>

A week or so after its appearance Ruskin published a reply to Scott's review in the *Pall Mall Gazette*,<sup>27</sup> in which he implied that Scott had found fault with Tyrwhitt's book out of resentment at Ruskin's lack of support of him as an artist (in which capacity indeed the critic openly questioned his ability). This provoked a public letter from Scott containing a violent, direct attack on Ruskin's 'system':

Mr. Ruskin's letter ... will not assist to save the system of niggling with fine pens and points in month-long imitations of the shine on single ivy-leaves, or of miniature woodcuts of 'whirligigs of brushwood', as an education in drawing. The system must be stamped out of existence, and it appears I am to take the ostensible responsibility.<sup>28</sup>

Scott's aggressive reaction, like his rejection of the use of compasses etc., may also be explained by his adherence to the South Kensington method, first established in connection with the original School of Design (founded in 1837) by William Dyce (1806–1864), whose *Drawing Book* inaugurated a long series of official manuals and

<sup>23</sup> Scott, 'Mr. Tyrwhitt's Sketching Club', 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Elements of Drawing*, figs 26–28 (*Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 121–22). The 'Turner bough' is taken from the mezzotint *Æsacus and Hesperie* in the *Liber Studiorum*.

<sup>25</sup> *Elements of Drawing*, fig. 16 (woodcut by Miss Byfield after Ruskin, 'Leafage at the Root of a Pine') (*Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 88).

<sup>26</sup> Scott, 'Mr. Tyrwhitt's Sketching Club', 22.

<sup>27</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 491–92.

<sup>28</sup> William Bell Scott, 'Messrs. Tyrwhitt and Ruskin's teaching of drawing', *The Examiner*, 23 January, 1875, 100. See also W. Minto, ed., *Autobiographical Notes of the Life of William Bell Scott*, 2 vols, London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine and Co., 1892, II, 10.

handbooks produced by the Department.<sup>29</sup> This method, which aimed to improve the quality of industrial design,<sup>30</sup> prescribed geometrical drawing based on straight lines and arcs and their combination and the mechanical exercise of the hand. The practice of what was inaptly termed 'Freehand drawing' forbade the use of measuring instruments but was rigidly constrained.<sup>31</sup> It presented simple lines as elements of what another exponent, George Wallis (1811–1891), termed an 'Alphabet of the Primitive form':

Let the student remember that to draw forms well, he must first learn to draw lines well, either singly or in combination; that to attempt to shade a drawing without having first obtained a true outline, is very like attempting to write without knowing how to read ...<sup>32</sup>

*The Elements of Drawing* had adopted an entirely different approach. In Ruskin's teaching of the 1850s the use of outline was in the main explicitly vetoed, on the grounds that there is no such thing as an outline in nature. The point was brought home to students first entering his classes at the Working Men's College, by requiring them to draw a plaster or white leather ball by means of shade alone.<sup>33</sup> In

<sup>29</sup> *The Drawing Book of the Government School of Design*, London: Chapman & Hall / Edinburgh: J. Menzies / Glasgow: A. Rutherglen / Dublin: S. J. Machen, 1842. The introductory text was republished in *The Introduction to the Drawing-Book of the School of Design Published in the Years 1842-1843, under the Direction of W. Dyce Esq. R.A.*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1854.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Redgrave, 'An introductory address on the methods employed by the Department, to impart education in art to all classes' (27 November 1852), in *Addresses of the Superintendents of the Department of Practical Art, Delivered in the Theatre at Marlborough House*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1853, 41–81.

<sup>31</sup> *The Introduction to the Drawing-Book*, 35 ('[the teacher] must carefully prevent the students from using any of those artificial contrivances for measuring, dividing, &c., which experience shows that the youngest scholar is always ingenious enough to discover for himself') and Part I, Section II, devoted to Freehand Design ('The term *Freehand* has been adopted from the German, to signify that kind of drawing which is executed by the unassisted hand, as distinguished from drawing by means of a ruler and compass, or some other such mechanical contrivance'). See also John Charles Robinson, *A Manual of Elementary Outline Drawing: to be used with the Course of Flat Examples*, London: W.B. Simpson 1853, 15; and Sutton, *Artisan or Artist?*, 54.

<sup>32</sup> George Wallis, *Introductory Instructions to the Birmingham School of Art Drawing Book. Elementary Series for the use of Artizans and others Learning Drawing for Useful and Practical Purposes*, London: Chapman and Hall, [1855], 7.

<sup>33</sup> See the recollections of J.P. Emslie, a student of Ruskin's: 'Mr Ruskin's method of teaching somewhat surprised me, used as I had been to the Government School of Design, where one [had] to go through a long course of drawing from the flat before being permitted to draw from the round. Mr. Ruskin, on the contrary, did not give his students printed works to copy, but set them at once to draw from objects. On his entry into the class, a student was set to make a drawing from a plaster cast of a sphere' ('Art teaching in the College in the early days. II', in J. Llewellyn Davies, ed., *The Working Men's College 1854–1904. Records of its History and its Work for Fifty Years, by Members of the College*, London: Macmillan, 1904, 39). Cf. *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 14: 'The system followed in this work [*Elements of Drawing*] will ... at first, surprise somewhat sorrowfully those who are familiar with the practice of our class

*Elements* this initial exercise was replaced by one in which the aim was to draw a simple stone and 'to get the stone to look solid and round, not much minding what its exact contour is': 'For you can *see* no outline; what you see is only a certain space of gradated shade; with other such spaces about it and those pieces of shade you are to imitate as nearly as you can, by scrawling the paper over till you get them to the right shape, with the same gradations which they have in nature' (Fig. 5).<sup>34</sup> The key and the aim was the 'roundness' common to all vital forms:

For all drawing depends, primarily, on your power of representing *Roundness*. If you can once do that, all the rest is easy and straightforward ... For Nature is all made of roundnesses; not the roundness of perfect globes, but of variously curved surfaces ...<sup>35</sup>

It was Cooke who alerted Ruskin to Scott's second and more viciously personal attack on his 'system'.<sup>36</sup> Scott added insult to injury by asserting that, except among young ladies, this was 'already discredited': the students at the Working Men's College, he said, were now drawing from casts of the human figure, and those at the Working Women's College were about to follow suit. Long-standing pupils, he reported, acknowledged their inability to draw and so compete with graduates of the 'artistic and universal' South Kensington system. As master of the drawing classes at the Working Women's College Cooke evidently felt that this was an attack on him too. He thus wrote to the *Examiner*, prompting yet another letter from Scott,<sup>37</sup> who justified his accusations by recounting an investigative visit to both colleges. Meanwhile, in his letter to Cooke Ruskin defended his 'system', but with the significant qualification, 'I never doubted or changed my system of teaching except in one comparatively unimportant particular – the use of outline'.<sup>38</sup>

This remark strangely downplayed the polemical thrust of the use Ruskin had made of outline in *Elements*, albeit strictly limited: in one exercise, for example, the forms of the letters of the alphabet, of which the South Kensington method had made conspicuous use (Fig. 6), were to be outlined *only after* the shape had been

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at the Working Men's College; for there, the pupil, having the master at his side to extricate him from such embarrassments as his first efforts may lead into, is at once set to draw from a solid object, and soon finds entertainment in his efforts and interest in his difficulties. Of course the simplest object which it is possible to set before the eye is a sphere; and, practically, I find a child's toy, a white leather ball, better than anything else; as the gradations on balls of plaster of Paris, which I use sometimes to try the strength of pupils who have had previous practice, are a little too delicate for a beginner to perceive.'

<sup>34</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 49 (Fig. 5), 52.

<sup>35</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 50.

<sup>36</sup> J. Ruskin to E. Cooke, 12 [February 1875]. The letter (marked 'AF No. 75') was seen and transcribed in the archive of the Working Men's College, London, in the mid-1990s, when this was still at the College. It was subsequently deposited in the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA/4535).

<sup>37</sup> William Bell Scott, 'Mr. Ruskin's system at the Working Man's College', *The Examiner*, 13 February 1875, 184.

<sup>38</sup> See the letter cited in note 34.

obtained by 'tinting' (Fig. 7).<sup>39</sup> More importantly, the remark also understated the extent to which, in the intervening two decades, Ruskin had reflected on the virtues of outline and had accordingly modified his method.

Even when starting out at the Working Men's College he had considered getting his pupils to begin by producing 'all lines with the brush – a quarter of an inch thick'.<sup>40</sup> And around the same time he had positively commended the 'great beauty and infinite variety', firmness and 'veracity' of 'faithful' outline to art-workers and sign-letterers in lectures delivered at the Architectural Museum.<sup>41</sup> In the later 1850s this sense of the truthfulness, veracity and ethical force of outline had been enhanced by attraction towards the graphic economy and symbolical power of the 'conventional' linear art of, say, medieval illumination or ancient Egypt. In a lecture given at the inauguration of a new School of Design at Bradford in 1859, he had declared:

For my own part, I should always endeavour to give thorough artistic training first; but I am not certain (the experiment being yet untried) what results may be obtained by a truly intelligent practice of conventional drawing, such as that of the Egyptians, Greeks, and thirteenth century French, which consists in the utmost possible rendering of natural form by the fewest possible outlines ... The animal and bird drawing of the Egyptians is in their fine age, quite magnificent under its conditions; magnificent in two ways – first, in keenest perception of the main forms and facts in the creature; and, secondly, in the grandeur of line by which their forms are abstracted and insisted on, making every asp, ibis, and vulture a sublime spectre of asp or ibis or vulture power.<sup>42</sup>

And this had further stimulated reflection on didactic 'experiments' based on such art. By the mid-1860s, in an unfinished series of articles enigmatically entitled *The Cestus of Aglaia*, which aimed to establish 'some fixed' theoretical and practical 'principles for the teaching of art to our Youth', Ruskin had professed agreement 'that the first thing to be taught to a pupil is how to draw an outline of such things that can be outlined'. This raised more than one question, however: what things was it possible to represent in outline? or indeed right to draw at all? which kind of outline was best employed, the 'hard' and 'black' or the 'soft'? how thick should the lines be? and how varied?<sup>43</sup> Ruskin declared his own preference for the 'black outline':

my own idea of an elementary outline is that it should be unvaried; distinctly

<sup>39</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 38–39. Cf. Robinson, *A Manual of Elementary Outline Drawing*, 16–24; Richard Redgrave, 'On the methods employed for imparting education in art to all classes', in *Addresses of the Superintendents of the Department of Practical Art Delivered in the Theatre at Marlborough House*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1853, 39–81: 54.

<sup>40</sup> J. Ruskin to G. Richmond, 10 October [1854], Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, MSS. Eng. Lett. c. 33, 339.

<sup>41</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XII, 482.

<sup>42</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, 330.

<sup>43</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XIX, 69. See also Levi and Tucker, "'The hand as servant'".



visible; not thickened towards the shaded sides of the object; not express any exaggerations of aerial perspective ... Nay, I think it may even be a question whether we ought not to resolve that the line should never gradate itself at all, but terminate quite bluntly!<sup>44</sup>

He instanced the 'entirely equal line' of a Dürer engraving and commended this artist's (engraved) work generally, together with the woodcuts of Holbein, as standards of 'rightness in use of the graver and pen'.<sup>45</sup>

In the early 1870s at Oxford fifteenth-century line engraving (for instance the so-called Tarocchi of Mantegna) assumed a still more paradigmatic role within the revised system of teaching drawing which Ruskin put into practice as part of his professorial duties. Line was accorded primary importance among the elements of art, in theoretical, historical and also practical terms; and the brush was actually given the role he had contemplated assigning it nearly twenty years previously. Thus, in an introductory lecture he told the Oxford students, 'from the very beginning ... you shall try to draw a line of absolute correctness with the point, not of pen or crayon, but of the brush, as Apelles did, and as all coloured lines are drawn on Greek vases'.<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, the most elementary exercise in the so-called *Educational Series* of examples (1874) involved copying with the brush an enlarged (and somewhat straightened up) outline of the branch of laurel held by Apollo in one of the Mantegna Tarocchi:

Measure and copy this, with thick dry colour in your brush. It will show you in the outset that refinement in design does not depend on the minuteness or fineness of work, but on its precision and care. These lines look coarse, but you will find they cannot be altered in the curvature even by a small fraction of an inch without losing grace, and that it is very difficult to follow their curvatures without altering them, owing to their continual subtlety of change.<sup>47</sup>

Scott's attack proved a turning point for Ruskin. It seems to have shown him the radical importance of his gradually evolved change of attitude towards outline and to have determined him to resume the task of revising *Elements*, abandoned, as we saw, the year before. In *Fors Clavigera*, towards the end of 1875, his treatment of outline in the manual was acknowledged as 'a vital mistake ... doing great damage to all the rest'.<sup>48</sup> And the following month he announced his intention to 'recast' *Elements*, cutting it, like other earlier writings on art, all 'to pieces'.<sup>49</sup>

Over the next two years this plan for a new edition of *Elements* was replaced by one for a new work, *The Laws of Fésole*, defined on its title-page as a 'familiar

<sup>44</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XIX, 69.

<sup>45</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XIX, 70.

<sup>46</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XX, 132. See also Levi and Tucker, "'A Line of Absolute Correctness'".

<sup>47</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XXI, 109–10. Ruskin's enlarged drawing of 'Apollo's laurel sceptre' is in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (WA.RS.ED.008; see <http://ruskin.ashmolean.org/collection/8979/object/13814>)

<sup>48</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XXVII, 444 (November 1875).

<sup>49</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XVII, 461.

treatise on the elementary principles of drawing and painting', the first number of which appeared in September 1877. *Laws* was to have comprised at least two volumes, the first mainly devoted to elementary drawing in outline, the second (*The Laws of Rivo Alto*) to that of colour. Only the first volume was completed and published, in 1879.<sup>50</sup>

*Laws* incorporated passages of *Elements*, but was quite a different sort of book. Not only is the system it teaches dominated by outline; it also argues explicitly against the practice adopted at South Kensington and insists polemically on 'accuracy of measurement' by ruler and compass. This may be seen in the very first exercise, where the beginner is instructed to draw a 'straight line' with a ruler between two points fixed with the compass (Fig. 8).<sup>51</sup> The unprecedented analogy with the purely linear exercises of the South Kensington system, despite reinigorated polemic, is palpable if we compare Ruskin's plate with two from a late revision, by Edward Poynter, of Dyce's original *Drawing Book* (Figs 9 and 10).<sup>52</sup> However, *The Laws of Fésole* and the South Kensington system remained worlds apart. At the Working Men's College and in *Elements* drawing had been taught in order to educate the eye to attentive discrimination of phenomenal conditions, received and read as manifestations of the 'laws of arrangement' or 'composition' regulating nature, art and society. *Laws* reiterates the principle that drawing is to be understood as an instrument of general education: 'every exercise in the book has the ulterior object of fixing in the student's mind some piece of accurate knowledge, either in geology, botany, or the natural history of animals.'<sup>53</sup> And the status of the eye as an organ 'both metaphysical, and moral' is explicitly asserted. 'Accuracy of measurement' is required as a means of ensuring and testing 'precision of sight' and hand, but above all as a moral and cognitive discipline. This permits a course of practical geometry, largely founded on the circle, whose object is the empirical rehearsal of universal laws of formal coherence and equilibrium, such as are found in elementary inorganic and organic structure, architectural and heraldic ornament, the constellations and the earthly globe itself. The concrete and phenomenal 'roundness' that is so prominent a principle in *Elements* is here replaced by the more abstractly 'perfect' forms of circle and globe. Formally simple but semantically dense outline exercises devoted to the primal groups of the circle culminate in the cultural and cosmological implications of Ruskinian 'map-drawing'.<sup>54</sup> This involves the construction of a sphere seen in perspective, which the preliminary exercises in

<sup>50</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 340–485 and (for its various editions) 337–38. Some fragments of MS intended for the continuation of the work are published in *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 495–501.

<sup>51</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 365 and pl. I ('The Two Shields').

<sup>52</sup> Poynter's *Drawing for the Standards. A Series of New Designs, with Selections from Dyce's Drawing Book. Simplified for Class Teaching*, London: Blackie and Son [1887].

<sup>53</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 440.

<sup>54</sup> See Denis E. Cosgrove, 'John Ruskin and the geographical imagination', *Geographical Review*

69:1, January 1979, 43–62; 'John Ruskin: vision, landscape and mapping', in *Geography & Vision. Seeing, Imagining and Representing the World*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008, 119–134.

light and shade concluding the volume transform into the primal Day and Night of Creation (Fig. 11).<sup>55</sup>

### 'The child needs outline': Cooke and the 'method of Nature'

It was on the system set out in *Elements* that Cooke had been taught by Ruskin at the Working Men's College. In a late essay on 'The teaching of design' he reveals that he had previously attended the 'Head School of Design' (from 1853 the National Art Training School) at Somerset House and had come away disappointed: after two years he had 'not received one hint' on how to design or on how to learn to design, 'nor one exercise in invention' and had had to teach himself. 'There was no study of natural objects, no colour, no exercises in invention or design'.<sup>56</sup>

Not long, it seems, after the publication of Scott's review, Cooke gave up his work at the Working Women's College and began to teach drawing and natural science at a boys' school in Surrey. He later acknowledged the importance of this experience, paying tribute to the 'profound knowledge of psychology' and 'educational principles' of the school's headmaster, Charles Henry Lake. He particularly remarked Lake's affinity of spirit with the educational theories of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), with which Cooke himself may already have had some familiarity.<sup>57</sup> According to his son Arthur, as a boy Cooke had attended a school at Neatishead in Norfolk of which the master had been a disciple of the Swiss educationalist.<sup>58</sup> Another source from which he probably assimilated Pestalozzi's ideas was his elder brother, the botanist and mycologist Mordecai Cubitt Cooke (1825–1914), who in the late 1840s had 'acquainted himself with Pestalozzian principles' at the invitation of an uncle and aunt who ran an infants' school at Stockton-on-Tees.<sup>59</sup>

The Pestalozzian principle of accordance with Nature wholly informed the teaching method Cooke now began to develop. This is evident from the title of the paper he gave to the recently formed Education Society<sup>60</sup> in 1877: 'The method of Nature as the type of all method, considered in reference to drawing'.<sup>61</sup> It also

<sup>55</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, pl. X ('Appellavitque Lucem Diem, et Tenebras Noctem'), facing 463.

<sup>56</sup> Ebenezer Cooke, 'The teaching of design', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 58 (1909–10), 414.

<sup>57</sup> See the Preface to his edition of a translation of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's *Wie Gertrud ihre Kinder lehrt* (1801): *How Gertrude Teaches her Children. An Attempt to Help Mothers to Teach their own Children and an Account of the Method. A Report to the Society of the Friends of Education, Burgdorf*, London: Sonnenschein and Co., 1894, xi.

<sup>58</sup> Arthur Cooke, 'Ebenezer Cooke', 385.

<sup>59</sup> J. Ramsbottom, 'Mordecai Cubitt Cooke (1825–1914)', *Transactions of the British Mycological Society*, 5, 1914–16, 169–85: 171. In the present context it is also of interest that Mordecai entered the Science and Art Department as a student of botany and drawing, and that he also conducted botanical classes there (Ramsbottom, 'Mordecai Cubitt Cooke', 172).

<sup>60</sup> First known as the Society for the Development for the Science of Education, this had been founded by C. H. Lake in 1875; see Kevin Joseph Brehony, *The Froebel Movement and State Schooling 1880–1914: A study in Educational Ideology*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. The Open University, 1988, I, 148.

<sup>61</sup> Cooke, 'Ebenezer Cooke'.

transpires from his subsequent public disparagement of the South Kensington method and its results, exemplified in a pair of woodcuts – after drawings of a sow-thistle and of a derivative design – included in the *Manual of Design* compiled from the writings of Richard Redgrave (1804–1888), one of the principal exponents of the system (Figs 12 and 13).<sup>62</sup> 'It may be a new ornamental form,' Cooke commented,

but it is obtained by violence, in defiance of all observed fact, and by subverting the history and nature of this and all flowering plants. The designer would not plead the incapacity of a child. He is trained to accuracy, claims to be scientific, see the analysis. Yet, a great principle is told and pointed out to him, and he refuses or neglects it ...<sup>63</sup>

– where the appeal to 'observed fact' signals Cooke's elsewhere explicitly asserted sense of the link between Pestalozzi's teaching, with its emphasis on observation (*Anschauung*), and Ruskin's.<sup>64</sup>

The 'great principle' ignored in Redgrave's design was the quintessentially Ruskinian one of the vital, organic unity of the plant: 'The parts of a plant are modifications of a simple unit infinitely varied, a living lesson, a delightful enigma'.<sup>65</sup> The link between drawing, learning and delight, moreover, shows Cooke's affinity with Ruskin's broad conception of drawing as a practical mode of morally inflected general education. The specific remark anticipates, as we shall see, Cooke's later concern with the 'general forms' that forge a link between historically and developmentally 'primitive' design and nature.

In the late 1870s Cooke became associated with the educational movement inspired by the writings and work of Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) and in particular with the recently (1874) formed *Froebel Society for the Promotion of the Kindergarten System* and he himself began teaching drawing and nature study at Kindergartens in London.<sup>66</sup> From this time on he focused especially on the drawing of very small children and was much influenced by the work of the psychologist James Sully (1842–1923), with whom he came into personal contact. Evoking the Ruskinian principle of 'going to Nature', Cooke followed Pestalozzi and Froebel in stressing that the Nature to which the teacher of children should go must include the nature of the child and that the teacher was to observe and be guided by that nature so as to nurture it. A watchword of this phase, explicitly opposed to the principle of

<sup>62</sup> Gilbert Richard Redgrave, *Manual of Design Compiled from the Writings and Addresses of Richard Redgrave, R.A.*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1876, 166–67.

<sup>63</sup> E. Cooke, 'Our art teaching and child nature', *Journal of Education*, 1 December 1885, 462–65; 1 January 1886, 12–15.

<sup>64</sup> *How Gertrude Teaches her Children*, x-xi: 'Among [F.D. Maurice's] associates [at the Working Men's College], Mr. Ruskin, who may have been influenced by Rousseau, maintained the supremacy of Nature, and insisted as strongly as Pestalozzi himself on to "see" and on "seeing" as the beginning of art and thought.'

<sup>65</sup> Cooke, 'Our art teaching', 14.

<sup>66</sup> In particular at Camden House School, founded and run by Fanny Franks, which also functioned as a training school (see P. Woodham-Smith, 'History of the Froebel movement in England', in Evelyn Lawrence, ed., *Friedrich Froebel and English Education*, London and New York: Routledge, 1969, 34–94).

'accuracy' (which Cooke associated not only with South Kensington but with Ruskin too) is that of 'interest': 'The choice', he would write, 'is between accuracy and interest'.<sup>67</sup>

Cooke's specific focus on a naturally derived method for teaching drawing to children led to intense and original speculation, from the later 1880s, on the true character of the 'elements of drawing'.<sup>68</sup> In these reflections the South Kensington orthodoxy was again opposed to the teaching of Pestalozzi, Froebel and Ruskin, and Ruskin, moreover, was now seen as indicating a way beyond the 'unnatural' definitions of the elements offered by the former. The search was for an alphabet of form sanctioned by nature, thus necessarily linear in character; for 'the child needs outline', he asserted in an important paper on the 'Neglected elements in art teaching'.<sup>69</sup> It was necessary to understand why Pestalozzi and Froebel, who had both attempted to formulate such an alphabet, had failed in their attempts. The reason, Cooke concluded, was that the elements they prescribed were none other than those proposed by South Kensington: the straight line and the arc. And yet, he argued, 'not a plant, or animal [could] be drawn accurately' employing these elements alone.

The search for 'ultimate elements' in accordance with nature entailed close consideration of natural forms, specifically, as with the Ruskin of the late 1850s, the 'curves and forms characteristic' not of inorganic nature but of 'living things': 'birds and buds, and bees and flowers'.<sup>70</sup> Cooke's suggested 'essential element' was the curve forming the quadrant of the ellipse: 'nearly straight at one end, and pass[ing] by gradual and increasing curvature to the other, every point changing regularly, gradually'.<sup>71</sup> Whereas the corresponding component of the square 'has a name [the straight line], this line has none, a proof how little it has been noticed; yet it seems the line most characteristic of living things, of motion, and perhaps the most beautiful of all simple lines, an element of primary importance, neglected, unnamed'.<sup>72</sup>

Cooke distinguished two variants of this element. The form of the quadrant as such he likened to the letter 'j'. The other – the form assumed by the curve when set free from 'service' – was the spiral, in which the 'j' line 'curves more and more quickly towards the end' (see diagram 6 in Fig. 16).<sup>73</sup> As Cooke explicitly states in an article of 1886,<sup>74</sup> in which he first names the 'j' element, this was intended as a

<sup>67</sup> Cooke, 'Our art teaching', 15.

<sup>68</sup> On this phase see especially Donna Darling Kelly, *Uncovering the History of Children's Drawing and Art*, Westport, Conn. and London: Praeger, 2004.

<sup>69</sup> Ebenezer Cooke, 'Neglected elements in art teaching', *Transactions of the Teachers' Guild of Great Britain and Ireland (with which is incorporated the Education Society)*, 1887, London [1888-1890], 74. This was the text of a lecture read before the Education Section of the Teachers' Guild on 12 December 1887. The lecture also appeared in the *Journal of Education*, 1 July 1888, 338-42, 1 August 1888, 375-79, and it was published as a 28-page pamphlet by the London printer C. F. Hodgson (who was the printer of the *Transactions*) in 1888.

<sup>70</sup> Cooke, 'Neglected elements' [1888-1890], 76.

<sup>71</sup> Cooke, 'Neglected elements' [1888-1890], 78.

<sup>72</sup> Cooke, 'Neglected elements' [1888-1890], 78.

<sup>73</sup> Cooke, 'Neglected elements' [1888-1890], 79.

<sup>74</sup> Cooke, 'Our art teaching', 13.

tribute to Ruskin: 'J after J. Ruskin', he specified in manually revising 'Neglected elements in art teaching', while also noting that the line had probably been suggested to him by his former teacher.<sup>75</sup> In a later publication he further acknowledges his debt to Ruskin:

In the 'Elements of Drawing,' published 1857, Prof. J. Ruskin emphasised this curve and its gradation (p. 267, ed. 1892) [Fig. 14]. His authority confirmed in me the conclusion I had already come to, probably through him, for he had given us branches of trees to draw in which the line is frequent and clear. This line was my starting point; it was clear more than twenty years before its general form was found.<sup>76</sup>

In a pointed parallel between his own process of discovery and the child's development Cooke found the neglected 'j' element to be the starting point of the child too. Its initial 'scribbles' were 'continuous, graduated curves, which suggest[ed] spirals, ellipses and ovals, as the hand [became] controlled'; and 'as ideas [were] formed separate scribbles [were] made, which [were] associated with the child's ideas' (Fig. 15).<sup>77</sup> Several pedagogical principles were at stake here. One regarded the free and natural action of the hand, swinging from the shoulder, as opposed to the cramping discipline of passively copying ready-made models of accuracy, of the kind promoted at South Kensington. Cooke developed this method under the name of Free-Arm drawing.<sup>78</sup> Another principle emphasized the importance of encouraging and guiding the natural process of drawing from knowledge and imagination, as a means of *developing* knowledge, as opposed to the Ruskinian doctrine of the Innocence of the Eye.<sup>79</sup>

The primal 'j' element further provided the key that brought together under one law of formal development the child's progression from scribbling to drawing; the general ovate forms of nature in different stages of growth and evolution and in different states of motion and the history of primitive art. The latter aspect was illustrated most elaborately in a composite plate accompanying 'Neglected elements in art teaching' and referring to the linear geometric Greek vases in the (then) first

<sup>75</sup> Cooke, 'Neglected elements' [1888-1890], 79, in the copy with MSS notes by Cooke among his papers in the Archive of the Institute of Education, University of London (CO 2/1).

<sup>76</sup> Ebenezer Cooke, 'The ABC of drawing', in *Special Reports on Educational Subjects 1896-7*, London 1897, 141. In addition to the passage in *Elements of Drawing* cited by Cooke (*Works of John Ruskin*, XV, Ruskinian precedents for his appraisal of the 'j' line may be found in *Modern Painters II* (*Works of John Ruskin*, IV, 139-40) and the discussion of 'abstract lines' in *Stones of Venice* (*Works of John Ruskin* IX, 265-67 and Plate VII; XI, 8-9). On the importance of Ruskin's example and specifically of his teaching at the Working Men's College, Cooke would further comment in 1905, 'The new methods of teaching drawing, which began at the College, and still more the principles involved, have now spread all over the world, and are influencing the drawing teaching in most schools of this country' ('The Early Art Classes (part I)', *Working Men's College Journal* 19 [1905-1906], 88; quoted in Haslam, "'According to the requirements of his scholars'", 158).

<sup>77</sup> Cooke, 'The teaching of design', 417.

<sup>78</sup> See Sutton, *Artisan or Artist?*, 212; and Haslam, "'According to the requirements of his scholars'", 158.

<sup>79</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 27n.

vase room of the British Museum (Fig. 16):

The forms of animal and ornament in this early Greek art, like those in nature, are ovate ... they here follow in the same order; fish, bird, animal man. The Greek decorator has the child's conception; and free handling; to this, to interest, invention, pliant instrument and plastic material he is indebted for his decoration. He has perfected those scribbles of the 'naughty boy', has shown what is in them, but not exhausted them. The boy will help us further to understand him; the cycle is incomplete without this commentator.<sup>80</sup>

In 1895 Cooke was invited by the Department of Science and Art to provide a drawing syllabus alternative to (but not replacing, as Cooke himself was careful to point out) that based on Dyce. This was a sign of recognition that marked the onset of the late international phase of his career as teacher and lecturer on elementary drawing. It was also a sign of the more liberal attitude prevailing at South Kensington at this time, probably to be taken as a sign of the imminent reconstitution, in 1896–97, of the National Art Training School as the Royal College of Art and the 'phasing out' of the National Course of Instruction by the Technical Instruction Act of 1899.<sup>81</sup>

Cooke's *Alternative Syllabus* was based on the ovate and elliptical forms (Figs 17 and 18) he had found to be produced naturally by the unconstrained hand moving freely from the shoulder, and even to be traced in the first uncontrolled movements of the baby:

the child working with free action from the shoulder will produce some such form as this. (The object being to obtain control of the hand, the motion round and round should be repeated until the hand can follow in the same track ...<sup>82</sup>

These forms were to be combined (not copied) by the pupils. He considered their combination as 'the beginning of Design', suggestive of common natural forms (leaves, insects).

While the South Kensington system had from the start been based on line, in

<sup>80</sup> Cooke, 'Neglected elements' [1888-1890].

<sup>81</sup> J. Craig Stirling, 'Postsecondary art education in Quebec', in Harold Pearse, ed., *From Drawing to Visual Culture: A History of Art Education in Canada*, Montreal, Kingston, London and Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006, 51–52. This more liberal attitude may perhaps already be seen in the Department's adoption in 1890 of the plates from Turner's *Liber Studiorum* as models and of Ruskin's comments on and appraisals of Turner generally, an unforeseen development that would have scandalised Scott (see *The South Kensington Drawing-Book. A Selection from the Liber Studiorum by J.M.W. Turner, R.A. for Artists, Art Students, and Amateurs. A Drawing-Book Suggested by the Writings of Mr. Ruskin. With a Historical Introduction by Frederick Wedmore, Practical Notes by Frank Short, and Extracts from the Writings of Rev. Stopford A. Brooke, M.A., and Others*, London: Blackie and Son, 1890).

<sup>82</sup> *Drawing in Elementary Schools: Illustrated Syllabus of the Course of Instruction in Drawing Under the Department of Science and Art: Together with a Scheme of Instruction in Drawing for Small Schools and an Alternative Illustrated Syllabus of Instruction in Drawing in Elementary Schools*, London: H. M. Stationary Office, 1895, Standards I and II.

Cooke's alternative instructions this was used as a constructive element derived from spontaneous natural movements. Line was moreover here charged with a new meaning, having to do with the interaction between mind in its initial development and a world of forms in part at least a mental projection. Outline was seen as one of the means whereby this formative interactional process can occur. It thus necessarily constituted the basis of any educational development of that process. Outline was also the formal means of interconnection between drawing and other educational disciplines. This interdisciplinary principle, together with the role of drawing – latterly, in particular of outline – in realizing it, was one that Ruskin had championed since the mid-1850s, largely in terms of the capacity of drawing to record natural phenomena and to convey ethical witness. In Cooke's work, in still closer conjunction with outline, this principle was grounded in primary modes of cognition and signification, in a way redolent of numerous disciplinary horizons now opening up, such as those of semiotics, phenomenology, the psychology of form and psychoanalysis.

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