MORE LETTERS FROM ROSE LA TOUCHE

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Letters of Rose La Touche, the Irish girl whom Ruskin loved during the second half of his life, are rare. When I completed my recent account of this tragic romance, I thought I had seen all her surviving letters, for most had been destroyed by her family or by Ruskin's executors after his death. In later study of the Mount-Temple papers, formerly preserved in the archives at Broadlands which the late Lord Mountbatten had transferred to the County Record Office in Winchester, I was surprised to find thirteen letters from Rose to Mrs. William Cowper written between 1866 and 1873, 2 years of Ruskin's deepest despair over his hopes of marrying Rose. Numerous as her letters must have been to the Cowpers, who served as mediators between Ruskin and the La Touches, I know of only one other letter from Rose to Mrs. Cowper, that cited by Derrick Leon in his life of Ruskin and now in private ownership. Still unknown to Ruskin's most recent biographers, Joan Abse and John Dixon Hunt, these letters may not change our picture of Rose but they offer new glimpses of the struggle she endured between her feelings for Ruskin and the opposition of her parents to him as a suitor.

Ten of the letters were written in October and November 1866. Under prodding from Ruskin the Cowpers had gone to Ireland to visit the La Touches in early October at Harristown, their home on the River Liffey some twenty miles south-west of Dublin just off the Mail Road between Naas and Kilcullen. Despite the tensions of his earlier friendship with Rose, which the La Touches had come to distrust because of Ruskin's religious doubts, he had proposed marriage to her in January of 1866 soon after her eighteenth birthday and shortly before his forty-seventh. To his dismay she only promised a reply after three years. The La

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2. 27M60, Broadlands Archives, Hampshire Record Office, Winchester. For permission to cite these and other unpublished letters from the Mount-Temple papers, I am indebted to the Trustees of the Broadlands Archives.
Touches, wishing their daughter to be available to other suitors, soon forbade her to write to Ruskin. It was then that he begged Mrs. Cowper to visit Harristown, “For you alone can find out for me whether Rosie is acting only in childish love and pity, or whether there is indeed any feeling on her side ... deep enough to justify me in persevering ... against the absolute device of both her parents”.¹

The Cowpers had become acquainted with the La Touches only in February of that year through a meeting arranged by Ruskin. Mrs. Cowper was the right person to become a confidante of both Ruskin and Rose. Ruskin in recent years, as is well known, had rediscovered Mrs. Cowper as the beautiful girl he had glimpsed in Rome when he was a youth of twenty-one and she was eighteen. She and her husband, the son of Lord Palmerston’s second wife reputedly by an earlier marriage and future heir of the Palmerston properties including Broadlands, had outgrown (like Ruskin) the Calvinism of their youth but had taken up spiritualism, a cause to which Mrs. Cowper was now trying unsuccessfully to win Ruskin. Rose soon found in Mrs. Cowper, nearly the same age as Mrs. La Touche, a substitute and sympathetic mother. So rapidly had their friendship developed that Rose in her first letter in the Broadlands collection feels that she can address Mrs. Cowper as Φιλη, the pet-name Ruskin recently had given her.

Most of Rose’s letters seem to have been written from her bedroom on the first floor at the rear of Harristown House, its bow windows overlooking the lawns that slope down to the Liffey. With her first letter, which we may date about 4 October 1866, Rose looks back over the events of that sad day when the Cowpers ended their visit. She begins parenthetically: “(I think I shall call you ‘Φιλη’ if I may for that means dear & loving & you know that you are that)”. Rose could not go to bed until she knew that the Cowpers had completed the sea-crossing from Dublin. She had been in the party that morning when the La Touches took them by carriage to the nearby railway station. On the drive home, Rose writes, “I should have liked to have put my head in a corner & forgotten the Naas high-road & have thought it was all a dream.

¹ *The Letters of John Ruskin to Lord and Lady Mount-Temple*, ed. John L. Bradley (Columbus, Ohio, 1964), pp. 77-8. Other citations from this source will appear in the text within parentheses, abbreviated as *LMT* with page number.
And whenever I have thought of you since, it has been with such an ache, for I have longed so to have been with you in Dublin only I thought Papa wd not like it. ... & oh it [has been] so long now since the morning when you were sitting here in the very chair beside me". After tea she had gone out for a walk with her married sister Emily, but, when her husband tried to join them, Rose confesses, "I said something about 3 being no company & suggested that he might go off with [her dog] Bruno. And he was hurt & walked off, & I was too sad to say how sorry I was, & Emily was hurt too & ended by going after him". Rose realizes that Mrs. Cowper would say that she was wrong. "So I went on alone into the dark walk by the river & could not go home & bye & bye Bruno slunk after me. ... And I came back in the twilight ... & with just one star out, & wondered where you were, & was near you". Dressing for bed, she took from her treasure box a rose which Mrs. Cowper had left. "I don't know when I have missed anybody as much as you", she declares. With the letter she enclosed a few petals of the rose as a sign of her love, only the first of several floral exchanges or allusions that carry symbolic meaning.

Although the La Touches during this visit had urged the Cowpers to persuade Ruskin to forget their daughter, Rose had sent him reason to hope, and he persisted in writing letters which Rose sometimes hid from her parents. Discovering this fact in late October, Mrs. La Touche had a furious quarrel with Rose. "She would not let me speak, though I told her how sorry I was", Rose writes Mrs. Cowper on the 29th. "Last night she said I need never come into her room, & that there'll be no affection between us". In her anger she had been "unloving and unfair" to Rose as well as Ruskin. "I wonder if I have shown you, why I did not show the letters", Rose asks Mrs. Cowper. "I told my Mother how I had burnt two of them, sooner than have St. C. [Crumpet, her pet-name for Ruskin] ... totally misconstrued—(oh it was so horrible to hear them calling him 'dishonourable' ...)"). The quarrel had been like a chord out of tune, Rose asserts, but by morning her mother's anger had abated, as she told Rose they would be friends again. Rose knew that she had been wrong in accepting Ruskin's letters, she admits to Mrs. Cowper. "And for all the unhappiness I have caused everybody, I am very sorry ... & it is not St. C's fault at all. Dearest @thq you will make him happy. I wish he knew the Love that makes always happy". The letter gives substance to Ruskin's suspicion that Mrs. La Touche was jealous of his
affection for Rose and his fear that Rose, like Cordelia (as he would say), would prove loyal to her father and his evangelical views, beliefs which Ruskin had set aside.

Two nights later Rose told Mrs. Cowper of her fretting that some of her letters may have sounded “hard”—a probable reference to her letter of 18 October, cited in Leon, in which she had said she would not answer Ruskin’s marriage proposal sooner even if she could. If bits of her letters sounded hard, she writes Mrs. Cowper in a letter dated All Hallow’s Eve, “they were not meant so, & I wish the little angels would tell you the rest”. She was happier today with her mother. “Mama & I are nearer together than we have been for a long time”, and Mrs. Cowper could think of her “as a little rose again in a happy garden” who will try to keep it worthy of the golden sunshine. She enclosed for Mrs. Cowper a story she had written on that theme, the fable of a lonely flower in a woodland who has no heart to be happy because she feels she is of no use to anyone. How do you know that, asks the Sunshine penetrating the forest. Looking up, the little flower feels her heart grow larger as she sees the glittering sunlight and the deep blue sky beyond. “The great Heaven does not think you too small to look upon”, the happy Sunshine whispers to her. Ruskin from time to time was obliged to read Rose’s moral tales, some of which she later gathered in her Clouds and Light (1870), a slender volume which he would criticize privately for its narrowness of thought. As Rose bade good night to Mrs. Cowper she included an ivy leaf as a symbol of her trust.

In four letters, all undated, Rose continues her brooding over her quarrel with her mother. “Don’t think me hard & unloving—”, she pleads again in a letter written on a Thursday night, “it is so hard to be thought so, at home—& yet I pray so often ‘Teach me to show them I am not—’ And I would be obedient, in the true sense. ... Only trust me”. She had been wrong in accepting Ruskin’s letters, she repeats in her next letter. “But I think the wrongness was in taking them when I knew I could (would) not show them. Not in the not showing them afterwards”. Writing this letter from the guest room which the Cowpers had used at Harristown, Rose tells Mrs. Cowper, “I think there feels a little bit of you, about—(if this is not grammatically expressed you’ll understand—)”. She supposes it better for her to be a rose with thorns than a “cold, passionless” camellia which she admires so much. “Mama said long, long ago that I was born in the depth of
winter & called Rose that I might brighten the winters, & the wintry years. I wish ϕιλη it was true". Thanking Mrs. Cowper for a sprig of jasmine which she had sent, a symbolic reminder of her need for amiability, Rose tells her friend that she shares her love for the hymns in the “dear” Lyra Germanica, a popular translation of German hymns.  

In a letter headed Friday night (but endorsed 9 November 1866) Rose sits before her fire rereading one of Mrs. Cowper’s letters, “one where you spoke of my ‘beautiful young golden life’—ah ϕιλη, you do not know how unhappy I am”. Every day, Rose writes, she sees “how much my Mother misunderstands me—how hard it is to live without the love of those one wants it most from. ... I thought ... she had forgiven me—but it is worse than I ever thought. ... It is not merely in this last affair but in everything that she looks at me so wrongly”. She could not sleep after the party from which they had just returned. It was not what her mother said that hurt so much “as the feelings that made them. You know ϕιλη I can’t cry when I am hurt, only grow silent & pale or red”. Because of a headache and cold Rose had not gone to church, she explains in a letter headed Sunday afternoon, but after reading the lessons she had decided to paint a bookmark for Mrs. Cowper, illustrating her favorite Bible verse. “I chose blue (some of St. C’s ultra marine) because it looks the deepest most abiding colour—& gold, because it is always bright where He is”. How sorry she felt for a poor man she had seen on a walk that day who was suffering from cancer in his eye. “Is it not horrible to see pain, you cannot help?” A young lady in years but a hypersensitive child in maturity whose feelings fluttered among the thorns of pity, guilt, self-abasement, resentment, destructive piety, and a kind of love for Ruskin, she shows in these letters a fragile balance of emotions that could not withstand the nervous disease leading to her death in less than a decade.

A shower of meteorites, probably that reported by the Times for 14 November, leads Rose to this vignette of herself. “I have been sitting in the midst of shooting stars”, she begins her letter that Wednesday morning,  

—that is to say my window is wide open & I have been sitting curled up at the windowsill looking out—and ϕιλη the meteors have been so

Lyra Germanica. Hymns for the Sundays and Chief Festivals of the Christian Year, trans. Catherine Winkworth. Several editions were in circulation by 1866.
beautiful! I began to wonder if you could by chance be looking at them. ...
I went down-stairs in the dark about an hour ago to let in Mama's little dog who was howling at the door, & met her just coming out on the same errand, but I was rewarded for my pains by such a beautiful show of meteors, white, green, & golden. They dart across the heavens & almost before you have time to look there is another & another! Mama & I have been looking at them together out of my window for more than half an hour, in the cold starlight. I hope a little sunshine got in too.

The whole heavens seem moving. Oh Φυλη they are so beautiful! You will see all about them in the paper tomorrow, only I wish I was where I cd call you & we cd look at them together. My hands are stiff with cold, but I must wait up & see them & I shall think about you, & what you said, when the starlight gets too cold. Your loving Rose.

The other two letters in this group of 1866 were written in close sequence, probably in late November following a visit to London of Percy La Touche, Rose's brother, who was courting Ruskin's cousin, Joan Agnew. Her father had left on a business trip to London, and Rose is sitting up on a Wednesday night (as the letter is dated) until the hour when he should make a safe arrival.

"While I am writing this Papa is half-way between Kingston & Holyhead. ... I wish I was with him if I thought he wd see you". The Cowpers having recently returned to their house on Curzon Street after some absence Rose would like to be their dog "'Tiff to lick yr hand & get stroked. How pleased he will be! And I like to think of you in the rooms where I have been, & the two arm-chairs in the back-drawing room by the fire where we sat once & looked into each other, silently". How glad the servants "& St. C" will be to see them—perhaps the visit which Ruskin would record in his diary for 23 November with the comment, "had long talk".6

Writing again on Saturday night, Rose tells of the family fright when Mr. La Touche failed to return from England on time that day. When her mother had gone to meet him at the station, "there was not a sign of anyone. We were all puzzled, but thought he'd certainly be back by the late train. So we waited till evening. ... Still not a sign of Papa. I walked up & down ... in the darkness, watching & listening but cd hear nothing but the steady pouring rain. And I began to think of you, perhaps just arriving in London & hovered very near you for a long time. Did you know it, I

wondered?" An hour later her father arrived, the train having met with an accident out of London. "Perhaps St. C. will come & see you on Sunday. ... good night dearest Mrs. Cowper. You know I must get the little angels to thank you for yr goodness, & try & be what you would have me".

Going into the Cowpers' guest room at Harristown, Rose writes in the morning an undated note, perhaps a postscript to the preceding letter.

So here I am sitting where you used to sit. I like that so, & its a nice Φιλη- like room, only "The spirit of your happier life Alone is wanting there". Perhaps a little of it is still here & might make me like it. I wish it wî. The Sunlight is walking in at my four windows & begs to be remembered to you, but I think it is with you always. ... I feel as if I ought to be standing in my evening dress by the armchair at the fireside with you sitting on the other side in the fire light & Mr. Cowper standing beside you as of old.

Rose, aware that Mrs. Cowper often allowed Ruskin to read her letters, tries again to reassure him of her feelings for him.

I do not think I can put it more truly for you. ... I have said this to you because I feared, I through you, or you through me, might hurt St. C. if we did not quite understand. And whatever I have said to you (at Harristown in any of our talks—or letters) is in accordance with this, you must remember. Only I think St. C. wd be happier if he did not look into & examine all my minor feelings—or different ways of expressing my feelings, which were meant for you.

So dearest Φιλη, I trust you perfectly. ...

With this letter she sent a geranium leaf, a lowly flower of emblematic importance in Ruskin's botanical scheme, here probably a token of steadfast piety.

Two of the most important letters were written in June 1868 on mourning stationery, primarily to tell the Cowpers about the death of Rose's sister Emily at sea, returning with her husband and two children from Mauritius. They also reveal Rose's attitude on Ruskin following Mrs. La Touche's recent exchange of letters with Ruskin's former wife, now married to John Everett Millais. Although those letters are lost, later correspondence shows that Mrs. Millais threatened to publicize the Decree by which her marriage to Ruskin had been annulled in 1854 on grounds of his alleged impotence, publicity which might deny Ruskin the free-

7 Unidentified verses.
dom to make a legal second marriage. This exchange occurred during the fortnight of Ruskin's visit to Dublin in mid-May to give a lecture and (so he hoped) to see Rose. The LaTouches, who had already forbidden any meeting between the two, immediately told Rose what they had learned from EffieMillais. Staying with friends of the LaTouches, Ruskin may have suspected what had happened even before he left Dublin, since he wrote Mrs. Cowper on the 25th that he had heard "very grave things" of Mrs. La Touche which would throw "fire-light of the city of Dis" on all her ways (LMT, 163). Effie's views of her former husband's conduct soon reached the Cowpers, probably in part through Rose's letters in which she shared her parents' condemnation of Ruskin. In the letter to Mrs. Cowper dated Monday night [8 June 1868], Rose, after telling of the loss of Emily whom she now regards as an angel, declares with obvious reference to Ruskin:

Nothing is, but Sin.... This is not a time for reproaches. I am not hard but this I must say that the suffering of 'another' at this time, I cannot pity. Every day brings to my ears more of the untrue & utterly inexcusable things he has said of me. He has broken all laws of honour & I do not think there is a man living who wd not have respected Truth & my name more.

All Dublin, she believes, has heard the gossip, and her name is in everyone's mouth. "I know God redeems from Sin & comforts in Sorrow", she concludes. "I can but trust Him".

To their credit the Cowpers rejected this desperate endplay of the LaTouches to win their struggle for their daughter. Ruskin, apparently hearing of these letters from Rose, wrote the Cowpers early in June that he had believed that he at least had lived down partly the event of 1854, that whatever there was of good in him would yet have some office. "Of all things hateful, expressions of repentance, on discovered sin—are to me the most so. What I was, and what I am—can in no wise be altered. ... If you believe enough in me to desire to understand me—in the darkness as in the light—first consider whether if the worst things that men ever had done in their lives were all laid utterly bare—how all would be likely to stand" (LMT, 165). In a follow-up letter he pleaded for the Cowpers' help with Rose. "Tell her—will you not—to make

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8 For these letters see Mary Lutyens, "The Millais-La Touche Correspondence", Cornhill, clxxvi (1967/8), 1-18.
one effort more—to trust—not me—but her own heart. And there yet may be light” (LMT, 167).

Answering Rose’s letter about the death of Emily, Mrs. Cowper, it seems, did make this appeal for her understanding. Rose’s reply of 11 June, preserved in the Broadlands collection, is more conciliatory. Signing her letter with her usual “y’r loving Rose”, she apparently thought with some contrition of her harsh refusal to pity Ruskin, adding by way of postscript: “(I do not feel as if that ought to be my name any more.) ... I do pray for God’s love & blessing on all (as much as for myself—more.) I do pity all that suffer”. Till God forgives all sin and comforts all sorrow, those who live must suffer and seek God’s pity, she reasons. Earlier in this letter she reflects her despair, drawn as she is on the rack between her parents and Ruskin. “Oh Ψυχή, What is life? To me it is merely a waiting time wherein nothing matters but to be good & look forward to Christ’s coming or the eternal Rest through Death. But nothing seems left. The days go on ... but it seems as if it was the end of life (to me) & not the beginning—as though no troubles to come could have much power over me”.

The last letter in this group, dated 9 October [1873] and incomplete, shows the destructive course of the disease from which Rose was now suffering, diagnosed variously by the biographers as a form of hysteria or anorexia nervosa. Describing the intense pain in her head, she cries, “Oh how gladly I would close my quarter century”. She could envy a poor man near their gate dying painlessly from consumption. “But I with my strong vitality have such terrible power of bearing & feeling suffering”. Yesterday she had observed the birthday of Mrs. Cowper-Temple (the name taken by the Cowpers in 1869) by a reading of the Psalter for that day and would try now to paint for her friend the sentence, “The Lord careth for me”.

The allusions in her final paragraph to some of the Cowper-Temples’ friends, especially two who had followed closely what the Cowper-Temples called their “spiritual quest”, suggest Rose’s intimacy with the Broadlands cénacle and the probability that Mrs. Cowper-Temple had discussed with Rose her interests in spiritualism. Rose may have been with some of these people during her visit at Broadlands in August of that year. Her inquiries include questions about the novelist George MacDonald, who had recently returned from a lecture tour in America and who was sympathetic to Ruskin and Rose; and Mrs. Russell Gurney,
who had left for America with her husband, the Recorder of London, on government business. Mrs. Gurney was among those who had given the most intent hearing to Mrs. Cowper-Temple’s talk about spiritualism. Among her unpublished letters to Mrs. Cowper-Temple in the Broadlands papers is one dated only 26 July in which she declares that she wishes to keep herself open to light but declines to join Mrs. Cowper-Temple for a séance with a medium. “I prize all that comes to me thru you”, Mrs. Gurney writes. “I love the thought of the stirring of the spirits as He prepares to arise & come amongst us”. She was acquainted with Ruskin’s love for Rose. “Indeed I do not wonder that St C wants that beautiful Daughter of Consolation in his hour of need & one must not grudge her to such a fine sad being as he is!”, she writes in an undated letter. Whether Rose took any interest in spiritualism is not known, but she had the temperament and other worldly yearnings that could have made her heed the belief of the Cowper-Temples that spiritualism might yield proof of personal immortality. When Ruskin had written Mrs. La Touche two years earlier of his dismay with the simple phenomena produced in the séances he was attending, she had asked him in a letter whether their “very childishness [does not] connect them with that which is hid from the wise and prudent, and revealed unto babes? With that which professes that we must become ‘as little children’ to receive it?”

Ruskin was denied the union with Rose which Mrs. Gurney hoped for him, Rose wasting away until her death on 25 May 1875, leaving him broken in a mind haunted by her memory.

This packet of letters preserved by Mrs. Cowper-Temple, as noted earlier, does not seem to change our impression of Rose’s personality. Particularly her earlier letters in this group reveal again her spontaneity and charm, her poetic instinct to emblematize nature, her fierce piety, her compassion for others, her capacity to love. A precocious child denied the independence of her emotional life by a domineering mother, she was a classic target for anorexia. Nor do the letters explain why Ruskin, believing at this stage of his life he had outgrown the evangelical views of his family, should choose to love a woman of much the same piety as his mother. In making Effie Gray his wife, he said

9 27M60, Broadlands Archives.
10 The Letters of a Noble Woman (Mrs. La Touche of Harristown), ed. Margaret Ferrier Young (London, 1908), p. 42.
afterwards, he had planned to reshape her character. His failure to
do so had not deterred his hopes of shaking Rose from her
evangelicism. His destiny, so Ruskin wrote William Cowper-
Temple in 1873, was “never to fall in love when I should have a
chance of success” (*LMT*, 348).