

RUSKIN AS CRITIC

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HOWEVER difficult it may be at this early hour to judge of the final merits of Victorian literature, one may safely say that the period which produced it was an age of great and varied minds. It is doubtful indeed if any era in English literature, save only the Elizabethan, can boast of a like array of vigorous and fruitful intellects—of men whose varied talents and aptitudes enabled them to excel not only in one chosen field, but in several. It is but necessary to call to mind such names as Matthew Arnold, Carlyle, Morris, Rossetti and Ruskin, to realise how frequently genius expressed itself not merely within narrow limits, but in a variety of ways often embracing the most diverse phases of life. Matthew Arnold, first poet of depth and originality, later critic of life and of literature; Carlyle, philosopher-historian, critic and man of letters; Morris and Dante Rossetti, alike painters and poets of distinction; and Ruskin, who combined in his complex individuality the attributes of writer, artist, political-economist, moralist and critic of art, literature and life—such men as these indicate a period rich indeed in the most brilliant and varied minds.

Of the great figures mentioned, no other exhibited quite so universal a grasp or such a variety of endeavour as did John Ruskin. In early life he achieved fame as an art critic; his later days he devoted to the somewhat feverish preaching of a new and enlightened political economy. But in his voluminous works—they number thirty-nine volumes in the best edition—are to be found treatises on botany, geology, ornithology, drawing, morals, aesthetics, and—not by any means the least important—a vast amount of literary criticism scattered without stint through all his works from first to last. Ruskin's early training at home, as well as that subsequently received at Oxford, was almost exclusively literary. His father, a cultivated man with the artistic temperament, was also blessed with pronounced literary tastes, and well-read in the English classics. He took delight in reading aloud to his wife and son. Thus Ruskin at an early age became a fervent admirer of Byron and other writers of the Romantic School—above all, of Sir Walter Scott. At Oxford he steeped himself in the works of Plato, and later, while travelling in Italy, he formed a deep and abiding love for Dante. Ruskin's works have indeed

been referred to as "one of the greatest commonplace books in the world." His literary criticism, however, is not comprised merely in isolated citations and references. These are in reality of far less importance than the carefully conceived discussions of critical matters relating to literature, found perhaps above all in *Modern Painters*, but in other works as well. Enough has perhaps been said to show how Ruskin "by his whole instinct, taste and early training was incontestably, incurably, literary." Artists might indeed complain with a show of justice that he has given painting too literary a treatment, and that he has at times applied the dicta of literary criticism to matters purely artistic.

I

In examining the main trends and dominant characteristics of Ruskin's literary criticism, one is first of all impressed by certain abiding influences of his early training—the continued sway of literary tastes and opinions formed in early life and inextricably woven into the warp and woof of all his subsequent thought. Ruskin himself was well aware of this fact. This "pervicacity and unchangeableness"—to quote his own words—was not characteristic of his literary criticism merely, but of his nature and opinions as a whole. As has been well said: "His was a mind that never altered violently either its faith or its opinions; the matured fruit is not so dissimilar to the bud and flower but that the process of growth can be clearly traced without need of dissection or twisting of logic." Even though he may have altered certain of his views—notably those about religion—the main tendencies of his mind remained unaltered until his death.

The influence of Scott's works—above all of the *Waverley Novels*—impressed itself deeply upon a number of his literary theories. It is writ large on the treatise on Modern Landscape in the third volume of *Modern Painters*, and it formed, apparently for good and all, Ruskin's conception of the novel. In emending a list of the hundred best books, drawn up by Sir John Lubbock, Ruskin wrote after Scott, "every word", having put his pen through Thackeray, George Eliot and Kingsley. It would seem indeed that he had a touch of Scott-mania, but he must be given credit for having done a great deal to perpetuate the veneration of the great Scottish novelist.

Next to Scott, the most important influence in the formation of Ruskin's critical opinions would seem to have been Plato. This is rather interesting in view of the fact that throughout life professed the greatest scorn for philosophers and highly ab-

stract thinkers. But all his denunciations of metaphysics will not convince the reader that Ruskin was indulging in a mere pleasantry when he confessed that he himself had too much of an "inclination that way." He would be blind indeed who did not discern the influence of Plato in many of Ruskin's principal works. It is significant that he should first have become interested in the great Greek philosopher at the very time when he was beginning to take an active interest in literature and art. Such was his instinctive nobility that he seized upon Platonism as a philosophy in all respects harmonious with his temperament. One feels constantly that Ruskin was but seeking with heart and soul for the good, the true and the beautiful. In his quest for this divine trilogy he was entirely uncompromising. Throughout his long life he would have nothing to do with materialistic conceptions of literature and art. A morbid shrinking from the ugly and diseased aspects of life, however, conjoined with an ardent love of all that is noble, gave to many of his judgments an unwarranted severity. The search for beauty, goodness and truth seems to have become an obsession with him in his later years. It led him to forget the chains that bind men's feet to the ground, and the limitations imposed on the soul by the iron necessities of life in the flesh. He failed to make allowance for human imperfection, and his visions for the improvement of mankind transcended all bounds. Inevitable disappointment led to hopeless pessimism in old age, and the story of the declining years of the once brilliantly successful critic of art is dolorous and tragic.

Such an unmeasured love of the ideal, nourished as it had been by Plato, went hand in hand with a strong tendency to elaborate abstract theories. Ruskin's definition of literature as "the modification of Ideal things by our Ideal Power", with its emphasis on the "unspoken conceptions", is a case in point. This extremely abstract definition, which takes no cognizance of the form which the modification is to assume, illustrates Ruskin's perpetual emphasis on the spirit rather than the letter. The soul of literature, he contends, can exist without the body, but not the body without the soul. He thus takes issue with materialistic rhetoricians who lay much emphasis on literature as a mechanical contrivance of words.

True, Ruskin dispels much of the vagueness of his definition by emphasising the importance of careful selection of words, and by recognizing that it is not always easy to determine where the influence of language ends and that of thought begins. He is right, too, in placing the emphasis on the content rather than on the form. But literature is a complex art, and its technique—

one is disposed to think—is not sufficiently recognized in this conception. Ruskin's definition of poetry—"the suggestion by the imagination of noble grounds for the noble emotions", with the subsequent addition of the words "in musical form"—is similarly idealistic and abstract. The fact that, as originally stated, it contained no reference to the medium of expression made it possible for its author to confuse painting with poetry most egregiously.

I think it is apparent from the above that Ruskin's attitude towards many important questions of art and literature was largely determined by his philosophic habit of mind, a habit of mind formed and nourished by the works of Plato. Not only did he feel a spiritual kinship with this pre-Christian thinker, but he had much in common with the early Romanticists and the poets of the Lake School in particular. He was bound to Wordsworth not merely by ties of sympathy—for they both shared the same sensitiveness to natural beauty—but by community of thought. He seems to have agreed in the main with the Lake poet's ideas about poetic diction, the distinction between Imagination and Fancy, and the superior wholesomeness of country as compared with city life. In his conception of poetry, as also in that of Imagination and Fancy, he treads closely on the heels of such critics as Coleridge, Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt. Ruskin was clearly of his own day and generation. Many of his critical theories seem to be expansions and developments of hints thrown out by his predecessors in the domain of English literary criticism—the writers of the Lake and Cockney schools. These—along with Plato and Scott—seem to have been the chief dynamic forces in Ruskin's literary criticism. But over and above all exterior agencies there remains still to be considered the character of the man himself.

II

However erroneous many of his theories may have been—and there can be little doubt that as a critic of art and literature he was frequently in the wrong—Ruskin was undeniably one of the most astoundingly versatile and productive geniuses that modern times have seen. In sheer variety and multiplicity of aim, in breadth of interest and activity, he challenges comparison with such writers as Voltaire and Goethe. In moral purpose he probably surpasses even these mighty figures, but in intellectual force he was, it can scarcely be doubted, notably inferior to them. Genius and intellect are not synonymous terms. A high degree of creative power may be accompanied by less striking intellectual qualities. A man may also be endowed with almost supernatural

powers of analysis, and nevertheless be deficient in certain other essential qualities of mind.

That Ruskin possessed genius in striking measure, can hardly be denied. He was himself aware of an irresistible impulse to draw and describe the things he loved—"a sort of instinct like that for eating and drinking", as he himself described it—something very different from mere cleverness. So intense was this impulse that he was compelled in later life, at the time when most successful writers are content to rest on their laurels, to take up the task of setting a wrong world right. The ill-starred attempt ended in tragedy and mental break-down. Ruskin was the servant rather than the master of the daemon that possessed him, and in this is found the clue both to his strength and to his weakness.

The emotional power, the sustained eloquence and the lambent versatility of Ruskin's writings are qualities arising from his irresistible genius. He was held in thralldom willy-nilly by the phenomenal universe in all its aspects of beauty. He lacked the power to limit his interests, but lavished them without stint on all the panoply of nature—the mountains and the rocks, the birds and the flowers, and on that reflection or recreation of the world of nature which we call art. Being a true Romanticist, he was interested in human life no less than in nature. The thirty-nine huge volumes of his works bear irrefutable testimony to a breadth of interest astounding as it is rare.

But even if Ruskin's intellectual powers had been equal to the force of his genius, it is doubtful if he could have treated with any degree of finality so many diverse subjects. It is not given to a single mortal man to speak with the tone of absolute authority about every conceivable matter, ranging from the falsity of Claude's landscapes to the iniquity of accepting interest on money. No human oracle has ever arisen with powers on quite so gigantic a scale. Nor does Ruskin's dogmatic tone avail to convince the reader. He had, beyond the shadow of a doubt, far too many irons in the fire. *Fors Clavigera*, an accurate mirror to the intellectual and emotional activities of its author at the time it was written, ranges "from Monmouth to Macedon, from China to Peru, from Giotto to goose-pie." Ruskin—to quote the words of his most distinguished biographer—"in discussing the course of true love in the *Waverley Novels*, had to exercise some self-restraint in not proceeding to show the connection of this topic with 'railways, joint-stock banks, the landed interest, the parliamentary interest, grouse shooting, lawn tennis, monthly magazines, spring fashions and Christmas cards.' " There is evidence to prove that he knew

that he was over-discursive, but was powerless to mend matters. "My work is very complex just now," he wrote to Mrs. Severn. "Birds, *Fors*, flowers, and Botticelli, all in a mess..." He seized on anything and everything as grist for his mill, particularly if he thought that additional force could be lent to his theories. Thus it is patent that much of his criticism, however redeemed by the style in which it is written, however carefully formulated and dogmatically asserted, will not stand close analysis as a final statement of truth. Ruskin was obviously dealing with matters requiring undivided attention, and far more poise and coolness than he was ordinarily capable of bringing to bear on them. Discursiveness and versatility were thus in a sense his bane. But on the other hand, when his works are considered as literature and as an expression of genius, it is difficult to convince oneself that things would have been better had they been otherwise. *Nihil tetigit quod non ornavit*, and the very faults that impair Ruskin's criticism lend vigor and variety to his works as literature. If he had been less dogmatic, he would have been less forceful in his style; and if he had been coldly critical and exercised restraint, he would have left many subjects untouched and many books unwritten.

Other faults that detract from the value of his literary criticism are a certain emotional vehemence which often mars a sound argument by sheer exaggeration, a lack of tolerance for the views of those who differed from him, and a singular absence of the power of self-criticism. Interesting testimony to this last-mentioned fault may be gathered from certain of Ruskin's own utterances. For instance, he assured his friend Gladstone, in all seriousness, that for at least twenty years past he had "made it a rule to know nothing about doubtful and controverted facts—nothing but what is absolutely true—absolutely certain." He did not, he added, "care for opinions, views, speculations, whose truth is doubtful." He wished to know only true things, and there were "enough of them to take a full lifetime to learn." Unfortunately, the modern reader gains the impression from reading his works that the writer had the most serene and unquestioning self-confidence in the truth and substantial correctness of his assertions, and seldom if ever bethought himself whether he might not be in error.

Ruskin's habit of unalloyed didacticism, it must finally be noted, impairs the value of a good deal of his literary criticism. He was always teaching, and very often preaching. As a previous writer has expressed it, "he is never content with stating, explaining and fortifying his ideas. He is persistently engaged in im-

posing them. His attitude is always the attitude of superiority, that of the teacher to the pupil. . . . He can hardly say the simplest thing without commending it to the reader as a rule of action or avoidance, something to be especially pondered, to cherish, to shun, to doubt, to believe, or what not." His hypothetical and highly involved reasoning is frequently imposed on the reader without the slightest consciousness that much of it is altogether *à priori*, and in all probability at least partially wrong. Ruskin had, moreover, the power of decking out his personal likes and dislikes in exact and compelling language. Predilections assumed the aspect of logical reasons, and instinctive dislikes took on the appearance of justly adverse criticisms. He had an irresistible tendency to generalize, to bring things together under a law, to develop principles and make sweeping generalizations. Sometimes he succeeded in his efforts; at other times he failed dismally. His thought—generally original—has at times marvellous vigour, truth and felicity; at others, it borders on sheer nonsense. On this account his work, as Mr. Saintsbury has said, is "as disconcerting as it is stimulating."

But enough has been said of Ruskin's faults in literary criticism. It now behooves the writer to lay some stress on his virtues. One is constantly impressed with the fact that Ruskin's criticism is—as he himself said of Milton's powers of imagination—"part of iron and part of clay." On the one hand, there is a considerable body of highly original and valuable literary criticism; on the other, a collection of erratic, exaggerative and comparatively valueless material. The presence of the latter has, I believe, been sufficiently indicated. I wish now to consider the former.

The highly original and stimulating manner in which Ruskin has dealt with some of the most important problems connected with literature cannot fail to give value to his theories of inspiration, of the nature of literature, of poetry and style. He approached these difficult problems armed with brilliant powers of analysis and extensive knowledge of authors and literature. He shows a breadth and comprehensiveness of grasp, a psychological insight into the creative mind, and above all, an individuality of treatment which gives one the impression that his attempts to define these matters are at least the fruit of high powers and constitute no mean contribution to our conception of literature. Consistency also—a quality not always found in his works—is present in these discussions. They represent, in fine, a well-balanced and original body of criticism, worthy of consideration among the important literary conceptions of the nineteenth century.

Ruskin, too, revealed exceptional skill in his illuminating analyses of the qualities underlying good poetry. Whether displayed in the chapters on Imagination and Fancy, that on the pathetic fallacy or elsewhere, his sense of the excellent was exceptionally keen, and his analysis of his individual impressions subtle to the last degree. One cannot always agree with his judgments, but generally he displays a skill in analysing the intrinsic merits of his citations which is altogether unusual. As Professor Elton has said: "His dislikes are not always interesting, or safe; but where he is at home with his author, his critical judgments are among the best to be found anywhere." It may be remarked in passing that in his illuminating comments on Scott, Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, and other authors and works, he "has performed a service greater than that of any commentator or editor who ever attempted the task. . . . The debt which modern literary criticism owes to Ruskin can be seen when it is remembered that what he did for hundreds of passages in Shakespeare, he did for a score of other writers." Lastly, Ruskin in the chapters devoted to the history of landscape reveals not only his extensive knowledge of ancient, mediaeval and modern literature, but an exceptional ability in tracing the significant tendencies therein. Few people, it seems to me, can read these chapters without marvelling at the breadth and vigour of Ruskin's knowledge of the literatures with which he is dealing, and his true feeling for what is essential and vital.

Whatever may be thought of his theories concerning Imagination and Fancy, and the pathetic fallacy, they deserve recognition as brilliant and ingenious attempts to reach definite conclusions in matters scarcely treated with any pretence of completeness before. Ruskin's psychological reasoning and plausible explanations of the workings of the human mind may well be open to criticism, but they are suggestive and stimulating to a high degree. The whole conception of the pathetic fallacy seems to have originated in his brain. It has now found a definite place in literary criticism, although the accuracy of the expression has sometimes been impugned.

Ruskin may also lay claim to be recognized as an original interpreter of nature in literature. Despite the fact that his "History of Landscape" rests on a fundamental confusion of the arts, the light that it throws on the treatment of nature in ancient, mediaeval and modern literature gives it high value as a piece of entirely original literary criticism. He was in both literature and art a great exponent of nature, and may with good reason be re-

garded as Wordsworth's true successor as interpreter and prophet of the phenomenal universe.

As a literary critic, Ruskin lacked the sanity and balance necessary for the greatest success in this most difficult field. Foreign to his temperament were those genial qualities, calm of nature and tolerance of judgment. It must be admitted also that a master-critic of his own day spoke with knowledge when he affirmed that the great art critic lacked the *ordo concatenatioque veri*. Yet if vigour of mind, individuality of treatment, and sound and extensive knowledge of literature have aught to do with literary criticism, then Ruskin must surely be given an honoured place among those great spirits of the nineteenth century who strove to shed much needed light on the many vexed questions arising from the life of letters.