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Ruskin's Romantic Triangle

Neither Wealth Nor Beauty but Life*

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1.1 Ruskin the Romantic

John Ruskin's (1819–1900) vast amount of work roughly consists of two groups on art and economy.¹ We may locate a watershed dividing his life and career at about 1860. He was engaged in the aesthetics of painting and architecture in his early years through the celebrated publication of *Modern Painters* (five vols., 1843–60), *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), and *The Stones of Venice* (three vols., 1851–3), and then he turned to the controversial criticism of economy and society in his later years through the publication of *The Political Economy of Art* (1857), *Unto This Last* (1862), and *Munera Pulveris* (1872). In addition to these major publications, there are a variety of discourses on art and economy in the forms of university and public lectures, and also the series of open letters on public affairs addressed to the British labour class.

Let me clarify my approach to reading Ruskin. First, in past studies of Ruskin, his thoughts on art and economy were treated separately by the specialists in each field, so that they were never discussed as an integral whole in any satisfactory way. By and large, the ways in which specialists in art discussed economy and society were less convincing, while specialists in economy and society paid the least attention to Ruskin's thoughts on art. The object of this paper is to present a way in which Ruskin's thoughts on art and economy can be interpreted in a unified manner. My

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¹ Quotations from Ruskin are cited in the text by volume and page number in Cook and Wedderburn (1903–12).

framework for interpretation is a reference to romanticism, or the romantic world view.

Second, Ruskin's thoughts on art and economy are historically given, allowing us to apply two different approaches: rational reconstruction (i.e., logical, theoretical, and methodological interpretation) and historical reconstruction (i.e., biographical, psychological, and historical interpretation). My approach is an attempt at a rational reconstruction of Ruskin by means of the conceptual framework of romanticism, in which I emphasize the key notions of the 'entire human nature', covering 'reason, feeling, and will', on the one hand, and of the 'organism' of 'nature, mind, and society', on the other. In other words, romanticism is construed from both sides of multiple humanity and organic objects.

Third, I construct this framework by the image of 'Ruskin's triangle', integrating 'Wealth, Life, and Beauty' by reformulating the central concept of Life in terms of 'capability, composition, and labour'. This framework should enable Ruskin to be revived in the present world, transcending the historical circumstances of Victorian Britain. In other words, the purpose of the present paper is not only to discover Ruskin's link between art and economy but also to explore the possibility of economic thought, which will be an alternative to the mainstream economic doctrines.

Regarding Ruskin's work on art (but not his work on economics), the following appraisal seems to have been accepted among art scholars: 'Modern Painters is the last great statement of the English romantic renovation of sensibility as the *Lyrical Ballads* is the first. Nature is the central term in both, Wordsworth equating it with "simplicity" in his attack on Augustan poetry, Ruskin with the "truth" in his attack on the Grand Style in art' (Rosenberg 1986, 7). *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), co-authored by Wordsworth and Coleridge, is regarded as an epoch-making monumental work in the birth of British romanticism. In 1798 in Germany too, the *Athenäum*, the core organ of the early German romantic movement, was published by the Schlegel brothers. The limitation of space in this paper does not allow me to discuss the philosophical and aesthetical dimensions of German romanticism. The picture of Ruskin as a romantic will be drawn in the course of my argument without imposing a rigid conceptual frame of German romanticism.

Romanticism, in the sense of the philosophical world view as well as the style of art, is the overall criticism of the Enlightenment and classicism. The fundamental thesis of classicism claims that the grasp of truth by reason provides invariable ideals even in art and morality. In Britain, aesthetics underwent a shift from classicism to romanticism concerning

the criteria of taste or beauty. In Britain, however, there was no radical change from the classical thesis to the romantic notion that art is the product of the human soul, feelings, and imaginations and that the judgements of tastes are intuitive and relative. Under the influence of the British empirical philosophy the shift was mediated by the idea of 'association' (Bate 1946).

In psychology, 'association' is the process of forming mental connections between sensations, perceptions, or memories. Hume argued that association of ideas was derived by imaginations, and he attributed to imaginations the primary status in mental activity, comparable to the law of gravity. Although in aesthetical judgements the subjectivity or relativity of tastes is often emphasized on empirical grounds, the theory of association was applied to the coordination of various ideas emerging from individual experiences. Thus, the combination of empiricism and intuition yielded a particular type of aesthetics in British romanticism, in which although imaginations, intuitions, and feelings were emphasized as the source of life, they were incorporated into the mould of ideas, or intellect, so that ideas might become the conceptualization of experience. British romanticism under the influence of the empiricist tradition is sometimes characterized as 'intuitive empiricism' or 'poetic realism' and was able to avoid the extreme positions of idealism, subjectivism, and transcendentalism of German romanticism that stemmed from the philosophical climate of German idealism. It is possible to mention two names among the British romantics who directly affected Ruskin: William Wordsworth (1771–1855) and Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881).

1.2 Wordsworth, Carlyle, and Ruskin

Ruskin started writing *Modern Painters* in defence of the work of J. M. W. Turner, who was criticized by the Establishment in the artistic circle. On the title pages of its five serial volumes published over seventeen years, Ruskin quoted lines from poems on nature and truth in Wordsworth's *Excursion*. This indicates his sympathy for and devotion to Wordsworth. Moreover, when Ruskin designed an extensive treatise on art and beauty in general apart from the analysis of Turner's painting, he often quoted Wordsworth's poems and statements on poetry to support his points of argument. This is because Ruskin found common intention with Wordsworth with regard to his core approach to the truth of nature. The truth is pursued not by mere realism or imitations of

nature but speculations or imaginations of subjects. Creative imaginations, the romantic emphasizes, are best displayed by extracting symbolic images from experiences and observations of reality. The British romantics approach the internal, the illusory, and the infinite through the external, the visible, and the finite, with the infinite being religious or moral. The characteristic of British romanticism consists of realism and the dailiness of moments in artistic activities. Ruskin was most directly affected by Wordsworth among the British romantics.

Wordsworth defines the purpose of poetry to be:

[T]o illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement. But speaking in less general language, it is to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature [I]ts object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives strength and divinity to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. Poetry is the image of man and nature. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 2006 [1798], 231, 247)

For Wordsworth, poetry must be written in ‘the real language of men’ about ‘the incidents of common life’. In terms of ‘association of ideas’ referred to here, feelings of sensations from the outside world are coordinated and directed by ideas of the inner perceptions of the poet in order to get to the truth of man and nature. Wordsworth asks: ‘What then does the Poet?’ His answer is:

[The Poet] is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love. . . . The Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 2006 [1798], 249)

Ruskin’s key notion of ‘the entire human nature’ accepts Wordsworth’s idea of ‘the complex scene of ideas and sensations’ as the source of pleasure and sympathy caused by art.

Ruskin was generally admitted to be Carlyle’s disciple. Carlyle had no interest in art, and their intellectual friendship emerged solely from Ruskin’s awakening to social issues during the course of his writing on art and his sympathy with Carlyle’s scathing social criticism. Ruskin had gained a reputation as an art critic, but faced almost uniform hostility from the conservative circle of society after he converted to social criticism. As an honourable exception, Carlyle praised and encouraged him. Ruskin felt that Carlyle was the only sympathetic reader in the world; his loyalty to Carlyle was unquestioning.

Unlike Wordsworth and Ruskin, Carlyle had a clear contact with German thought through his study of Kant, Fichte, Goethe, and Schiller. His central theme was how to acquire the belief in the transcendental order which forms the basis for approaching the phenomenal world. The best work that represents his philosophical position is *Sartor Resartus*, in which, he argues, social rules and customs are, as it were, visible emblems or clothes that represent invisible spiritual ideas, so that it is necessary to get at the transcendental basis for perceiving the phenomenal world, including nature, man, and society. His grand propositions are: 'Society is founded upon Clothes' (Carlyle 1987 [1833], 41); 'Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea' (56); and 'The philosophy of Clothes attains to Transcendentalism' (193). His idea of 'natural supernaturalism' (the title of bk. 3, ch. 8) is the philosophical core of German romanticism.

Sartor Resartus contains many characteristic claims of Carlyle in the subsequent years, the essence of which is the insight that 'Liberals, Economists, and Utilitarians' (177) tear down and destroy the society. His prophetic concerns include: hatred towards free competition and utilitarianism, the maximization of capability instead of happiness, the moral values of labour, the religious foundation of society, misgivings about class disintegration, advocacy of cooperation instead of competition, and the need for heroes. For Carlyle, a hero is a leader who discerns the spiritual reality of the age hidden behind material appearances and poses it as the problem which now confronts us. He is regarded as belonging to a wide range of 'anti-rationalism, anti-empiricism, and anti-Enlightenment' (Le Quesne 1998).

In view of the general periodization of British romanticism as 1785–1825, the romantic movement had already been started by Wordsworth and Coleridge a few decades before Carlyle's writing activity. However, there is no evidence that Carlyle inherited some elements of the British romantic literary movement. He essentially depended on German philosophy. Ruskin comprehended romantic artistic thought from Wordsworth's poetry and literary theory, on the one hand, and grasped romantic social thought from Carlyle's social criticism, on the other. Ruskin himself evaded a reference to German philosophy. The skeleton of his romantic thought was constructed by the combination of Wordsworth and Carlyle, though he needed Turner to develop Wordsworth's theory of poetry into the art of painting.

Ruskin wrote a short article, 'German Philosophy' (appendix to *Modern Painters*, vol. 3), in which he ridiculed statements such as 'a finite realization of the infinite' in German metaphysics as pure nonsense and not suited to the British people. He mentioned that those who want philosophy

not for show but for practical use are advised simply to read Plato, Bacon, Wordsworth, Carlyle, etc. (vol. 5, 424–6). This happens to reveal Ruskin's intellectual source and propensity.

1.3 Ideas of Truth, Beauty, and Relation

The unique characteristics of Ruskin's thoughts on art include, among others, devotion to Wordsworth, praise of Turner, defence of pre-Raphaelitism, and admiration of Gothic architecture. In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin regards Turner as 'the father of modern art' and aims to establish the principles of landscape painting to demonstrate the modernity of Turner's art. For Ruskin, Turner's landscape was a major innovation in the nineteenth century. The following exaggerated passage almost deifies Turner:

Turner – glorious in conception – unfathomable in knowledge – solitary in power – with the elements waiting upon his will, and the night and the morning obedient to his call, sent as a prophet of God to reveal to men the mysteries of His universe, standing, like the great angel of the Apocalypse, clothed with a cloud, and with a rainbow upon his head, and with the sun and stars given into his hand. (vol. 3, 254)

At the outset of the first volume, he raises a serious question about what is greatness in art, and replies without hesitation:

It is not by the mode of representing and saying, but by what is represented and said, that the respective greatness either of the painter or the writer is to be finally determined. . . . I say that the art is greatest which conveys to the mind of the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas. (vol. 3, 88, and 92)

Ruskin calls the mental and psychic faculty of artists that produces the great works of art 'excellent', whilst the terms 'beautiful', 'useful', or 'good' are applied to the great works as such.

He defines the subject matter of *Modern Painters* as the investigation of three grand ideas: truth, beauty, and relation. They represent the methods, criteria, and aims of great art respectively. The essentials of each idea may be summarized as follows:

1.3.1 Ideas of Truth

The first volume of *Modern Painters* discusses ideas of truth by dealing with Turner. Ruskin challenges the classical view of art, then

dominant, that the task of art is to imitate and represent natural objects faithfully. For him, the end of art is not merely 'representation of fact' but rather 'expression of ideas' shaped by imaginations; art must pursue the 'truth' of nature by combining fact and ideas. 'Ideas of truth are the foundation, and ideas of imitation, the destruction, of all art' (vol. 3, 108).

Ruskin's praise of Turner is based on an appraisal of his excellence in presenting the truth of nature. The inspiration or revelation he got from Turner's work is that it is the task of art to discover the divine attributes hidden in nature through a display of the whole human nature. His view that art is a tool that represents and contributes to life follows Wordsworth's theory of poetry. Ruskin analyses Turner's landscape in terms of techniques of 'tone, colour, chiaroscuro, and space', on the one hand, and in terms of objects of 'sky, earth, water, and vegetation', on the other. He concludes that Turner is the only painter who has ever drawn the changing skies with various forms of clouds; that he is the only painter who has ever drawn a mountain or a stone on the earth; that he is the only painter who has ever drawn the stem of a tree; that he is the only painter who has ever represented the surface of calm, or the force of agitated, water; and that he is the only painter who has represented the effects of space on distant objects or who has rendered the abstract beauty of natural colour (vol. 3, 252).

Turner restrained the use of various colours and made the contrast between light and shade predominant over colour, keeping tones of blue, brown, and grey. It is due to this treatment of light that Turner is often regarded as the pioneer of the Impressionists. According to Ruskin, the highest attainment of Turner's technique is 'light without colour' (vol. 3, 234). Abstraction of light from colour is based on the painter's power of imagination aimed at 'expression of ideas'.

In a pamphlet entitled *Pre-Raphaelitism* (1851), Ruskin defended, along with Turner, the movement of the young painters who were then called the Pre-Raphaelites. They rebelled against the art education of classicism in the Royal Academy of Arts and urged a return to the Medieval Italian painters before Raphael who was a representative of Renaissance art. The pamphlet of the defence, though titled *Pre-Raphaelitism*, is largely devoted to the admiration of Turner and the disparagement of Raphael. In 'Pre-Raphaelitism' (1853b), one of his public lectures in Edinburgh, he says: 'Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle, that of absolute, uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature, and from nature only' (vol. 12, 157).

Turner is ‘the first and greatest of the Pre-Raphaelites’. Pre-Raphaelitism is nothing but Turnerism.

1.3.2 Ideas of Beauty

In the second volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin turned to the second subject of art, in other words ideas of beauty. Already in the first volume he made explicit an aspect of his fundamental position of art, that is, beauty as morality:

Any material object which can give us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful. . . . Perfect taste is the faculty of receiving the greatest possible pleasure from those material sources which are attractive to our moral nature in its purity and perfection. . . . Ideas of beauty, then, be it remembered, are the subjects of moral, but not of intellectual perception. By the investigation of them we shall be led to the knowledge of ideal subject of art. (vol. 3, 109–11)

He asks about the relation between beauty and pleasure, that is, whether the end of art is practical for life or spiritual as it is related to the end of life itself. He distinguishes between ‘practical’ and ‘theoretic’ art in accordance with Aristotle’s distinction between *praxis* and *theoria*. The two kinds of art are compared with the distinction between carpenter and architect, or between plumber and artist.

I wholly deny that the impressions of beauty are in any way sensual; they are neither sensual nor intellectual, but moral: and for the faculty receiving them, whose difference from mere perception I shall immediately endeavour to explain, no term can be more accurate or convenient than that employed by the Greeks, ‘Theoretic’, which I pray permission, therefore, always to use, and to call the operation of the faculty itself, *Theoria* The mere animal consciousness of the pleasantness I call *Aesthesis*; but the exulting, reverent, and grateful perception of it I call *Theoria*. For this, and this only, is the full comprehension and contemplation of the Beautiful as a gift of God. (vol. 4, 42, and 47)

We should remember that from ‘*Theoria*’ arise ‘Joy, Admiration, and Gratitude’, Ruskin’s key words for art and economics (vol. 4, 47). In using these words, he explains how the idea of beauty is essentially moral:

It is necessary to the existence of an idea of beauty, that the sensual pleasure which may be its basis should be accompanied first with joy, then with love of the object, then with the perception of kindness in a superior intelligence, finally, with thankfulness and veneration towards that intelligence itself; and no idea can be at all considered as in any way an idea of beauty, until it be made up of these emotions. (vol. 4, 48)

Ruskin uses the term 'Theoria' (or theoretic) in place of the term 'aesthetic', commonly employed in art theory, in order to challenge the traditional conception of beauty, which denies intellectual pleasure and is biased towards sensual pleasure. For him, the perfect conception of beauty is neither mere intellectual faculty nor mere sensual faculty but the faculty of Theoria that consists in moral will. The meaning of art as morality is that by the pursuit of true beauty one should raise human capacity and character so as to approach from an animal-like aesthetic towards divine Theoria. Morality for evaluating human capacity and character is the ethics of virtue. Ruskin's beauty is inseparable from virtue.

Supposing the concept of beauty requires the perceptions of 'Joy, Admiration, and Gratitude', how are they produced? Ruskin distinguishes between the two kinds of theoretic beauty which Theoria may yield, in other words Typical Beauty and Vital Beauty:

By the term Beauty, then, properly are signified two things. First, that external quality of bodies already so often spoken of, and which, whether it occur in a stone, flower, beast, or in man, is absolutely identical, which, as I have already asserted, may be shown to be in some sort typical of the Divine attributes, and which therefore I shall, for distinction's sake, call Typical Beauty: and, secondarily, the appearance of felicitous fulfilment of function in living things, more especially of the joyful and right exertion of perfect life in man; and this kind of beauty I shall call Vital Beauty. (vol. 4, 64)

Typical Beauty is the divine attributes inherent in God's creatures, while Vital Beauty is excellence of functions in living creatures. Typical Beauty represents the static and eternal order of an object, while Vital Beauty represents dynamic and disturbing innovation caused by imaginations of an artist. Typical Beauty indicates the objective criteria of great art, while Vital Beauty indicates its subjective criteria such as morality in the choice of subject, love of beauty, sincerity to truth, and imaginative creativity of an artist, all of which involve the whole powers of the human soul. Balancing the two kinds of beauty is the task of the Theoria of an artist.

Ruskin specifies six types of Typical Beauty: Infinity, Unity, Repose, Symmetry, Purity, and Moderation. Characteristic of his argument is that each type presupposes antinomy or paradox caused by the existence of an opposite type of beauty which is mostly classified as Vital Beauty, such as the finite versus infinite, unity versus diversity, statics versus dynamics, symmetry versus irregularity, purity versus impurity, and restraint versus freedom. Ruskin's polygon or *Romantische Ironie* has a secure foothold in the definition of Beauty.

1.3.3 Ideas of Relation

The third subject of Ruskin's project in *Modern Painters*, ideas of relation, was not taken up until the fifth and last volume, published seventeen years after the first one. Under this subject everything relating to the conception of art is arranged and all sources of pleasure are investigated as the synthesis of art theory by the ideas of relation or 'association':

In this last division we have to consider the relations of art to God and man: its work in the help of human beings, and service of their Creator. We have to inquire into the various Powers, Conditions, and Aims of mind involved in the conception or creation of pictures; in the choice of subject, and the mode and order of its history. (vol. 7, 203)

Ruskin formulates the ideas of relation in a general form as the interdependence among parts or elements in the composition of the picture and extends it metaphorically from the picture to mineralogy and social relations by the 'law of help', as will be discussed in Subsection 1.5.2. The concept of 'composition' will become the link between art and economy, both contributing to life. Ruskin's aesthetics has a far-reaching range of application. He provides the definition of the greatest art as producing 'the greatest number of the greatest ideas' (vol. 3, 92), which proves the substitute for the utilitarian definition of 'the greatest number of the greatest happiness'.

1.4 'Air, Water, and Earth' and 'Admiration, Hope, and Love': Nature and Mind

The most famous passage in Ruskin's critical book of economics, *Unto This Last*, reads as follows:

THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others. . . . The maximum of life can be reached by the maximum of virtue. (vol. 17, 105)

In this passage relating to economic and social issues there is no explicit reference to the concept of beauty, but the words of 'love, of joy, and of admiration', defined here as the 'powers of life', are similar to 'joy, admiration, and gratitude', defined above in Ruskin's ideas of art as the perceptions of Theoretic (*Theoria*) beauty. As mentioned above, this conception