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SELECTIONS FROM RUSKIN

CHILDHOOD

Praeterita (1). Vol. xxxv, pp. 43-46.

I WILL first count my blessings (as a not unwise friend once recommended me to do, continually; whereas I have a bad trick of always numbering the thorns in my fingers and not the bones in them).

And for best and truest beginning of all blessings, I had been taught the perfect meaning of Peace, in thought, act, and word.

I never had heard my father's or mother's voice once raised in any question with each other; nor seen an angry, or even slightly hurt or offended, glance in the eyes of either. I had never heard a servant scolded; nor even suddenly, passionately, or in any severe manner, blamed. I had never seen a moment's trouble or disorder in any household matter; nor anything whatever either done in a hurry, or undone in due time. I had no conception of such a feeling as anxiety; my father's occasional vexation in the afternoons, when he had only got an order for twelve butts after expecting one for fifteen, as I have just stated, was never manifested to *me*; and itself related only to the question whether his name would be a step higher or lower in the year's list of sherry exporters; for he never spent more than half his income, and therefore found himself little incommoded by occasional variations in the total of it. I had never done any wrong that I knew of—beyond occasionally delaying the commitment to heart of some

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improving sentence, that I might watch a wasp on the window pane¹, or a bird in the cherry tree; and I had never seen any grief.

Next to this quite priceless gift of Peace, I had received the perfect understanding of the natures of Obedience and Faith. I obeyed word, or lifted finger, of father or mother, simply as a ship her helm; not only without idea of resistance, but receiving the direction as a part of my own life and force, and helpful law, as necessary to me in every moral action as the law of gravity in leaping. And my practice in Faith was soon complete: nothing was ever promised me that was not given; nothing ever threatened me that was not inflicted, and nothing ever told me that was not true.

Peace, obedience, faith; these three for chief good; next to these, the habit of fixed attention with both eyes and mind—on which I will not further enlarge at this moment, this being the main practical faculty of my life, causing Mazzini to say of me, in conversation authentically reported a year or two before his death, that I had “the most analytic mind in Europe.” An opinion in which, so far as I am acquainted with Europe, I am myself entirely disposed to concur.

Lastly, an extreme perfection in palate and all other bodily senses, given by the utter prohibition of cake, wine, comfits, or, except in carefulest restriction, fruit; and by fine preparation of what food was given me. Such I esteem the main blessings of my childhood;—next, let me count the equally dominant calamities.

First, that I had nothing to love.

My parents were—in a sort—visible powers of nature to me, no more loved than the sun and the moon: only

¹ Here in his copy Ruskin wrote: “I used to watch flies drowning in the ink-bottle with complacence, but saved them if they fell into the milk!”

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I should have been annoyed and puzzled if either of them had gone out; (how much, now, when both are darkened!)—still less did I love God; not that I had any quarrel with Him, or fear of Him; but simply found what people told me was His service, disagreeable; and what people told me was His book, not entertaining. I had no companions to quarrel with, neither; nobody to assist, and nobody to thank. Not a servant was ever allowed to do anything for me, but what it was their duty to do; and why should I have been grateful to the cook for cooking, or the gardener for gardening,—when the one dared not give me a baked potato without asking leave, and the other would not let my ants' nests alone, because they made the walks untidy? The evil consequence of all this was not, however, what might perhaps have been expected, that I grew up selfish or unaffectionate; but that, when affection did come, it came with violence utterly rampant and unmanageable, at least by me, who never before had anything to manage.

For (second of chief calamities) I had nothing to endure. Danger or pain of any kind I knew not: my strength was never exercised, my patience never tried, and my courage never fortified. Not that I was ever afraid of anything,—either ghosts, thunder, or beasts; and one of the nearest approaches to insubordination which I was ever tempted into as a child, was in passionate effort to get leave to play with the lion's cubs in Wombwell's menagerie.

Thirdly. I was taught no precision nor etiquette of manners; it was enough if, in the little society we saw, I remained unobtrusive, and replied to a question without shyness: but the shyness came later, and increased as I grew conscious of the rudeness arising from the want of social discipline, and found it impossible to acquire, in advanced life, dexterity in any bodily exercise, skill in any pleasing accomplishment, or ease and tact in ordinary behaviour.

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Lastly, and chief of evils. My judgment of right and wrong, and powers of independent action¹, were left entirely undeveloped; because the bridle and blinkers were never taken off me. Children should have their times of being off duty like soldiers; and when once the obedience, if required, is certain, the little creature should be very early put for periods of practice in complete command of itself; set on the barebacked horse of its own will, and left to break it by its own strength. But the ceaseless authority exercised over my youth left me, when cast out at last into the world, unable for some time to do more than drift with its vortices.

My present verdict, therefore, on the general tenor of my education at that time, must be, that it was at once too formal and too luxurious; leaving my character, at the most important moment for its construction, cramped indeed, but not disciplined; and only by protection innocent, instead of by practice virtuous. My mother saw this herself, and but too clearly, in later years; and whenever I did anything wrong, stupid, or hard-hearted,—(and I have done many things that were all three,)—always said, “It is because you were too much indulged.”

FIRST WRITINGS

Praeterita (1). Vol. xxxv, pp. 224–227.

IT had been well for me if I had climbed Ben Venue and Ben Ledi, hammer in hand, as Scawfell and Helvellyn. But I had given myself some literary work instead, to which I was farther urged by the sight of Roslyn and Melrose.

¹ *Action*, observe, I say here: in *thought* I was too independent, as I said above. Ruskin's Note.

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The idea had come into my head in the summer of '37, and, I imagine, rose immediately out of my sense of the contrast between the cottages of Westmoreland and those of Italy. Anyhow, the November number of Loudon's *Architectural Magazine* for 1837 opens with "Introduction to the Poetry of Architecture; or, The Architecture of the Nations of Europe considered in its Association with Natural Scenery and National Character," by Kataphusin¹. I could not have put in fewer, or more inclusive words the definition of what half my future life was to be spent in discoursing of; while the nom-de-plume I chose, "According to Nature," was equally expressive of the temper in which I was to discourse alike on that and every other subject. The adoption of a nom-de-plume at all, implied (as also the concealment of name on the first publication of *Modern Painters*) a sense of a power of judgment in myself, which it would not have been becoming in a youth of eighteen to claim. Had either my father or tutor then said to me, "Write as it is becoming in a youth to write,—let the reader discover what you know, and be persuaded to what you judge," I perhaps might not now have been ashamed of my youth's essays. Had they said to me more sternly, "Hold your tongue till you need not ask the reader's condescension in listening to you," I might perhaps have been satisfied with my work when it was mature.

As it is, these youthful essays, though deformed by assumption, and shallow in contents, are curiously right up to the points they reach; and already distinguished above most of the literature of the time, for the skill of language which the public at once felt for a pleasant gift in me.

I have above said that had it not been for constant reading of the Bible, I might probably have taken Johnson for my model of English. To a useful extent I have always done

¹ κατὰ φύσιν, according to nature.

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so; in these first essays, partly because I could not help it, partly of set, and well-set, purpose.

On our foreign journeys, it being of course desirable to keep the luggage as light as possible, my father had judged that four little volumes of Johnson—the *Idler* and the *Rambler*—did, under names wholly appropriate to the circumstances, contain more substantial literary nourishment than could be, from any other author, packed into so portable compass. And accordingly, in spare hours, and on wet days, the turns and returns of reiterated *Rambler* and iterated *Idler* fastened themselves in my ears and mind; nor was it possible for me, till long afterwards, to quit myself of Johnsonian symmetry and balance in sentences intended, either with swordsman's or paviour's blow, to cleave an enemy's crest, or drive down the oaken pile of a principle. I never for an instant compared Johnson to Scott, Pope, Byron, or any of the really great writers whom I loved. But I at once and for ever recognized in him a man entirely sincere, and infallibly wise in the view and estimate he gave of the common questions, business, and ways of the world. I valued his sentences not primarily because they were symmetrical, but because they were just, and clear; it is a method of judgment rarely used by the average public, who ask from an author always, in the first place, arguments in favour of their own opinions, in elegant terms; and are just as ready with their applause for a sentence of Macaulay's, which may have no more sense in it than a blot pinched between doubled paper, as to reject one of Johnson's, telling against their own prejudice, —though its symmetry be as of thunder answering from two horizons.

I hold it more than happy that, during those continental journeys, in which the vivid excitement of the greater part of the day left me glad to give spare half-hours to the study of a thoughtful book, Johnson was the one author accessible

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to me. No other writer could have secured me, as he did, against all chance of being misled by my own sanguine and metaphysical temperament. He taught me carefully to measure life, and distrust fortune; and he secured me, by his adamant common-sense, for ever, from being caught in the cobwebs of German metaphysics, or sloughed in the English drainage of them.

I open, at this moment, the larger of the volumes of the *Idler* to which I owe so much. After turning over a few leaves, I chance on the closing sentence of No. 65; which transcribing, I may show the reader in sum what it taught me,—in words which, writing this account of myself, I conclusively obey:—

Of these learned men, let those who aspire to the same praise imitate the diligence, and avoid the scrupulosity. Let it be always remembered that life is short, that knowledge is endless, and that many doubts deserve not to be cleared. Let those whom nature and study have qualified to teach mankind, tell us what they have learned while they are yet able to tell it, and trust their reputation only to themselves.

It is impossible for me now to know how far my own honest desire for truth, and compassionate sense of what is instantly helpful to creatures who are every instant perishing, might have brought me, in their own time, to think and judge as Johnson thought and measured,—even had I never learned of him. He at least set me in the straight path from the beginning, and, whatever time I might waste in vain pleasure, or weak effort, he saved me for ever from false thoughts and futile speculations.

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HIS OWN WRITINGS

The Eagle's Nest. Vol. xxii, pp. 514-516.

Now the intense fault of all my early writing is that you know in a moment it is my writing; it has always the taste of me in it. But that is the weakness of me, or the insincerity. As I advance in life, and get more steady and more true, you don't see the manner so distinctly, but you will see the matter far more.

Now I will read you two very short but quite characteristic passages, fifteen years apart, for the one of which, at the time, I was much applauded; the second, nobody, that ever I heard of yet, cares about:—

He who has once stood beside the grave, to look upon the companionship which has been for ever closed, feeling how impotent *there* are the wild love and the keen sorrow, to give one instant's pleasure to the pulseless heart, or atone in the lowest measure to the departed spirit for the hour of unkindness, will scarcely for the future incur that debt to the heart, which can only be discharged to the dust¹.

Now, that is a true saying, and in the measure of me at that day a sincere one. But with my present knowledge of literature I could tell in an instant that the person who wrote that *never had so stood beside the dead*. I could be perfectly sure of it, for two reasons—the first, that there was in the passage feeling, and the melody that comes of feeling, enough to show that the writer was capable of deep passion; and the second, that being so capable, if he had ever stood beside his dead before it was buried out of his sight, he would never, in speaking of the time, have studied how to put three *d*'s one after another in *debt*, *discharged*, and *dust*.

¹ *Modern Painters*, vol. III, p. 86.

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Next, I will read you the passage nobody has cared about, but which one day many will assuredly come to read with care, the last paragraph, namely, of that central book of my life:—

And if, on due and honest thought over these things, it seems that the kind of existence to which men are now summoned by every plea of pity and claim of right, may, for some time at least, not be a luxurious one;—consider whether, even supposing it guiltless, luxury would be desired by any of us, if we saw clearly at our side the suffering which accompanies it in the world. Luxury is indeed possible in the future—innocent and exquisite; luxury for all, and by the help of all; but luxury at present can only be enjoyed by the ignorant; the cruellest man living could not sit at his feast, unless he sat blindfold. Raise the veil boldly: face the light; and if, as yet, the light of the eye can only be through tears, and the light of the body through sackcloth, go thou forth weeping, bearing precious seed, until the time come, and the kingdom, when Christ's gift of bread, and bequest of peace, shall be "Unto this last as unto thee"; and when, for earth's severed multitudes of the wicked and the weary, there shall be holier reconciliation than that of the narrow home, and calm economy, where the Wicked cease—not from trouble, but from troubling—and the Weary are at rest¹.

Now, first, that passage is better than the other because there's not any art of an impudently visible kind, and not a word which, as far as I know, you could put another for, without loss to the sense. It is true that *plea* and *pity* both begin with *p*, but *plea* is the right word, and there is no other which is in full and clear opposition to *claim*.

But there is still affectation in the passage—the affectation of conciseness. Were I writing it now I should throw it looser, and explain here and there, getting intelligibility at the cost of concentration. Thus when I say—

Luxury is possible in the future—innocent and exquisite—luxury for all and by the help of all—

¹ *Unto this Last* (vol. xvii, p. 114).

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that's a remains of my old bad trick of putting my words in braces, like game, neck to neck, and leaving the reader to untie them. Hear how I should put the same sentence now:—

Luxury is indeed possible in the future—innocent, because granted to the need of all; and exquisite, because perfected by the aid of all.

You see it has gained a little in melody in being put right, and gained a great deal in clearness.

Then another and worse flaw in this passage is that there is a moment's incontinence in it—loss of self-command, and with that, of truth. "The cruellest man living could not sit at his feast, unless he sate blindfold." That is not true. There are persons cruel enough to eat their dinners whatever they see, but not many; and you may generally give such lively speakers as the Bishop of Manchester, at the Manchester banquet the other day, the full credit of not seeing much¹.

But putting by these remains of the errors of my old manner, this writing of my central life is in all serious ways as good as I can do, and it contained at once the substance of all that I have had since to say. And it is good chiefly in this, that being most earnest in itself, it will teach you to recognize with greater clearness the truth of noble words.

FIRST SIGHT OF THE ALPS

Praeterita (1). Vol. xxxv, pp. 114–116.

THE road got into more barren heights by the mid-day, the hills arduous; once or twice we had to wait for horses, and we were still twenty miles from Schaffhausen at sunset;

¹ At a banquet held at Manchester in September 1877 Bishop Fraser, whom Ruskin often criticised, censured Queen Victoria for not visiting Manchester, and said that she might live to regret it.