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SELECTIONS *from* RUSKIN

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*from*  
RUSKIN

*Edited by*  
A. C. BENSON  
C.V.O., LL.D.



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## PREFATORY NOTE

THIS selection from the works of Ruskin is designed to illustrate the development of his personality and literary style rather than his critical methods, or his economic principles, or his social theories. It is on his merits as a writer and a moralist that his ultimate fame will probably be based, and it is as a literary artist that he is represented here.

My thanks are due in the first place to Messrs George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., and to the Ruskin Trustees for permission to include extracts from volumes which are still in copyright; and further to Mr Percy Lubbock and to Mr S. C. Cockerell for their kindness in reading the volume, and making many useful suggestions.

A. C. BENSON

MAGDALENE COLLEGE,  
CAMBRIDGE  
*June 29, 1923.*

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[*N.B.* The references throughout this volume are to the *Library Edition of Ruskin's Works*, in thirty-eight volumes, published by Mr George Allen, 1903-1909.]

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## INTRODUCTION

JOHN RUSKIN was born at 54, Hunter Street, near Brunswick Square, on February 8, 1819. His father and mother were first cousins, and the family took its origin from the Lowlands of Scotland, the native home of great prose-writers. It was a curiously secluded household, ill adapted, one would think, for the nurture of genius, a reserved and restricted little circle, intensely preoccupied with its own concerns. The father was a wine-merchant, who slowly amassed wealth, "an entirely honest merchant" as his son described him in the epitaph he wrote for him. He was a man of great integrity, laborious and shrewd, and had a strong taste for travel and art; he bought Turner's pictures, when Turner was only scantily recognised as a great artist. And he wrote a beautiful style of his own; his letters are at once moving and dignified: and though Ruskin was himself one of the most vivid of letter-writers, the father's letters have a quality of restrained beauty which the son's did not always attain. The mother appears as a grim and austere figure, intensely devoted to her husband and her son, and with a deep-seated contempt for the sloppiness of the world in general. Yet the home atmosphere was a peaceful one; Ruskin says that he never saw his parents lose their tempers, or heard their voices raised in anger, or saw even a glance of irritation pass between them.

Ruskin as a child was brought up ostensibly on precise and rigid lines; he was formally disciplined and chastised: but as a matter of fact his parents idolised him, and he was really much petted, guarded and indulged. In later life he wrote, "whenever I did anything wrong or stupid or hard-hearted—and I have done many things that were all three

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—my mother always said, ‘it is because you were too much indulged.’” But he was encouraged to write poetry, to collect minerals, to draw, to read, and in the absence of games and play-fellows, probably dangerously pressed. The family migrated to Herne Hill, and later on to a mansion at Denmark Hill, where Ruskin lived until his mother’s death. The whole story of his childhood and Oxford days is told with such inimitable grace and delicacy in *Praeterita* that it is only spoilt by being summarised. Yet it is clear that the training had its drawbacks. Ruskin was combative enough in later life, he was outspoken, courageous, even Quixotic; but he was not masculine; he had a touch of something like old-maidishness about him.

He went to Christ Church as a fellow-commoner, his mother going into lodgings in Oxford to look after him. He lived in fashionable society, half tolerated and half petted. He won the Newdigate Prize for an English poem, but he did not distinguish himself academically, and then his health broke down. He was hurried abroad; for a time his literary activities were suspended, and he spent his time in observing and drawing.

He had no formal training in composition, but he had been brought up on the strictest biblical lines, and knew the Bible from end to end, a fact which emerges in every page of his writings, not only in the constant quotations, but in the restrained economy and sedate limpidity of the long sentences, as well as in the sharp-edged invective, which is often cruel indeed, but never vulgar.

And so he plunged with an easy assurance into his first great book, *Modern Painters*, the first volume of which was actually published only three months after his twenty-fourth birthday. He knew a good deal of Turner and the later English painters, very little of Italian art, and next to nothing of medieval art. But he had views and principles, and his aim was ethical rather than purely artistic. His

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father had cherished a hope that he might take holy orders and be a bishop; and he had his desire fulfilled by the fact that Ruskin, in and behind all he wrote, is a moralist above everything. He was keenly alive to beauty, and even more interested in the moral basis of beauty and the effect of art upon character. But these early writings, for all their maturity of expression and logical outline, show a narrow range of artistic experience, and an almost virginal ignorance of the world and human character: indeed it may be said that their value lies in the splendid eloquent passages, when he is not arguing his case but simply expressing impassioned appreciation.

The book had an instantaneous success, though published anonymously; but in 1844 he made acquaintance in Paris with the Venetian school of painters—Titian, Veronese, Bellini—and became aware that he had been shouting in a mist. He rushed off to Italy and discovered Tintoretto, and experienced a profound moral and artistic shock in realising, brought up as he had been in the strictest evangelicism, that art based upon or springing out of Catholic traditions need not be inherently degraded.

The second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846) reflects his conversion. He drew out an elaborate theory of beauty, as the bread of the soul, and traced the moral ascent of the spirit from what is brilliant to what is pure. And it is this which has perhaps done something to discredit Ruskin's teaching, that he began to teach before he had hardly done more than begin to learn; and that while he was learning and changing his mind with great rapidity, he was still all the time teaching with gay and confident dogmatism; and thus though his work has a real consistency, his generous recantations and his eagerness to point out his own mistakes create a false impression of pliability in a mind which was as a matter of fact singularly tenacious and immutable; he changed his methods, he changed his point of view, but he

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never changed his principles; he only gave contradictory reasons for adhering to the same opinions. But for all this, though his art judgments cannot be regarded as in any sense final, and though his criticisms are to a large extent little more than a judicial presentment of preferences, yet he did a great work in raising the status of art in England from the position of an elegant accessory into a matter of serious concern and impassioned enthusiasm, and in shewing that the instinct for beauty was one of the deepest and strongest of psychological forces. Ruskin's father was very anxious that *Modern Painters* should be rapidly completed. But this was never Ruskin's way. His mind was extraordinarily divergent, and though he had both industry and concentration, there were always so many great subjects at hand that he could seldom carry out a protracted piece of work; in fact, as the years went on, his utterances became more and more spasmodic, and even inconsequent.

It was nearly ten years before he resumed his work on *Modern Painters*; but it will be convenient to summarise briefly at this point the subsequent volumes. The third volume, published in 1856, begins by attempting to provide a solution for some of the apparent contradictions of volumes one and two, as when, for instance, he attacked Dutch painting for being too realistic, and yet censured Claude for not being realistic enough. Then follows a historical survey of the development of the emotions aroused in human minds by natural scenery. Volume four is devoted to Mountains. Volume five discusses Clouds and Trees, and as Ruskin said in his preface to the volume, "declares the perfectness and eternal beauty of the work of God, and tests all work of man by concurrence with or subjection to that."

In 1848 he had turned aside to write *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, which was an attempt to penetrate, so to speak, the psychology of architecture, the effect of life upon art and art upon life, the initial motive of art and the

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counteracting and debasing influences which thwarted it. The Seven Lamps, which Ruskin confessed he had great difficulty in not making into eight or nine, are great moral qualities, Truth, Beauty, Power, Sacrifice, Life, Obedience and Memory. The one cardinal principle is that buildings ought to look what they are and serve their purpose, and that an artist must decorate construction not construct decoration.

It was at this time his parents arranged for him a marriage with a beautiful girl, Euphemia Gray, the daughter of old friends, for whom he had some years before written his charming allegory, *The King of the Golden River*<sup>1</sup>. It was a marriage only in name, and bride and bridegroom had little in common. Five years later the marriage was annulled, and Mrs Ruskin afterwards married Millais.

It was during his early married life that he spent many laborious months in Venice making his studies for the *Stones of Venice*, observing, measuring, drawing, all day and day after day, as long as the light lasted, and spending the evenings in elaborating his jotted notes. The most famous chapter in the book—perhaps the best-known section in all his early writings—is the chapter on the Nature of Gothic, the purport of which is best summed up in the words of William Morris:—

“The lesson,” he wrote, “which Ruskin here teaches us, is that art is the expression of man’s pleasure in labour; that it is possible for man to rejoice in his work, for, strange as it may seem to us to-day, there have been times when he did rejoice in it; and lastly, that unless man’s work once again becomes pleasure to him, the token of which change will be that beauty is once again a natural and necessary accompaniment of productive labour, all but the worthless must toil in pain and therefore live in pain. . . if this be true. . . it follows that the hallowing of labour by art is the one aim for us at the present day.”

In the *Stones of Venice* then, Ruskin maintains the thesis

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that all human art and edifice depend upon the happy life of the workman, and he went further and maintained that “fidelity to the legible laws of an undoubted God” was the mainspring of art. But in this he was running a theory violently against all facts. The Parthenon, the Pantheon, St Sophia’s, for instance, all sprang from periods conspicuous for moral and social corruption, and from periods, too, when the workman was mercilessly sweated and coerced.

The *Stones of Venice*, dealing as it mainly did with Italian fourteenth-century Gothic, had a strong practical influence, and not a very wholesome one, on contemporary architecture. But we see in the book, of which the first volume was published in 1851, and the second and third volumes in 1853, that his own interests were widening; he was moving in fact from artistic preoccupation into the study of social reform. His own unquestioning Calvinistic faith had failed him, and he was becoming aware that the entire absence of artistic taste and artistic interest in the bulk of the English nation was a symptom of some grave defect, either of nurture or nature. He was about to enter on a new phase of life, an unhappy period, full of hurried and discursive work, of broken purposes and incomplete designs, of harsh invective and vehement impeachment. Let us take a backward glance before we enter upon the new period, and consider what he had done and on what the great reputation he had won was based. What was the quality and range of the mind from which this prodigious stream of language flowed? What was Ruskin’s point-of-view, his aim, the impulse which lay behind this immense volubility? It is not an easy question to answer, because there was a real duality of instinct at the back of it all. But it was not so much a complex mind as a contradictory mind. The man of all others whom in certain respects he most resembled was Carlyle. Both Ruskin and Carlyle had in the first place a supreme power of concentrated observation.

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In both of them the faculty of vision, the power of the eye, was the predominant factor in their consciousness. They both had the power of perceiving and recording with amazing fidelity and minuteness whatever their eyes rested upon; but while Ruskin was more attracted by nature and scenery, by the forms and colours of visible things, Carlyle's faculty of vision was more concerned with the appearance and demeanour of human beings. And further, the chief concern of both was the preaching of morality and righteousness.

For the first forty years of Ruskin's life, while the eye and brain were unwearied, his chief preoccupation was with nature, with pictures, with architecture. Every evening, as his father once shrewdly noticed, he went out to observe the sunset as a priest might attend vespers, or as a man of business might hurry to the Stock Exchange. It was partly devotional and partly business-like. And then, too, he added to this intense zest of perception an almost incredible industry, as attested by the record of the days he spent in Venice, rising with the dawn, drawing, as he said, one half of a building while the masons were employed in pulling down the other half, taking measurements, drawing details, for ten hours of the day, and then spending the evening in literary work. He was not a great reader; he knew a few great authors well—the Bible, Shakespeare, Plato, Byron, Walter Scott; but the wonder is, not that he read so little, but that he could find time to read at all.

Then at home he wrote, talked, lectured, and wrote endless letters to friends and strangers alike. I do not suppose he ever willingly left a letter unanswered, and he threw the full current of his energy into the most trivial correspondence. Indeed his familiar letters are some of the most charming and delightful in the English language, while his letters of disapproval and criticism are so full of disdain and invective that it was once said of him that he

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kept the worst of himself for his letters, and the best of himself for his talk.

What was, then, the effect of all this early art-teaching and criticism? Certainly not to establish a technical school of artistic principles. Ruskin had no exhaustive acquaintance with art; his knowledge was thorough but narrow. He had a few strong preferences for certain painters and certain types of architecture, and he had certain deadly animosities. He broke in pieces the old traditions, but he did not establish a new one. Indeed his influence on the architecture of the time was decidedly baneful. Architecture was feeling its way towards a certain classical solidity; but Ruskin gave it a violent wrench back to Gothic, and what was worse, to a highly ornate Gothic, with a liberal use of colour, well adapted for a land of sunshine and calm weather; but entirely at variance with our cold and rain-swept skies.

But what Ruskin did do was to break utterly to pieces the old leisurely feeling about art as a pleasant and dignified adjunct to life. He taught men and women to look close, to compare, to discriminate, to wonder, and above all to care for art as the most passionate expression of one of the deepest and strongest of human qualities, the love and worship of beauty. Ruskin never remained on the surface of art; he dived below it into the depths of human personality, and his real interest in art was not only the superficial pleasure in harmonious colour and graceful form, but the much larger question of what it all meant, where the artistic impulse came from, and how it revealed and betrayed the innermost secrets of the human soul.

And then when Ruskin was in his fortieth year there came the great change of his life—his conversion we may call it—though it was a logical and inevitable development, when an over-wearied brain, a pent-up passion, a natural revolt against the strict evangelicalism of his childhood, a

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sense of the dull indifference of the vast majority of human beings to the things which he held most dear, and a sudden perception of the base influences and devastating tyrannies under which so many men and women were content to live, came upon him with overwhelming force. He withdrew into solitude and sad reflection. "Intense scorn of all I had hitherto done or thought, still intenser scorn of other people's doings and thinkings, especially in religion," swept the old confidence away. He wrote of himself that he was "tormented between the longing for rest and lovely life, and the sense of the terrific call of human crime for resistance and of human misery for help—though it seems to me as the voice of a river of blood which can but sweep me down in the midst of its black clots helpless."

What made it worse was that his friends, and above all his parents, could not follow him into the Inferno. They could not understand why he should throw his powers away, and imperil his reputation.

It was then that he turned definitely to social reform, and in 1860 wrote his book *Unto this Last*—the title being taken from the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. He set out to analyse the nature of wealth, and produced a theory of the state regulation of wages, as helping to put an end to the accumulation of wealth by commercial competition, which he held was as injurious to those who profited by it as to those who were enslaved by it.

The remarkable thing is that though much of his art criticism has hardly stood the test of time, the social theories, at the time both novel and distasteful, have become ideas so familiar that we forget how profound and clear-sighted Ruskin's foresight was. All these, translated into modern English, are but the principle of the living wage, the old age pension, public education, improved housing. No one who reads the book from the point of view of the present day, can easily form an idea of the novelty and originality

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of the conclusions there stated at the time of its appearance. It was viewed as an advanced and pernicious kind of socialism. Thackeray, the editor of the *Cornhill*, where the book appeared, was a personal friend of Ruskin's; but he felt obliged to write, after three numbers had appeared, to say that the book was so universally disliked and condemned that no more must appear. The same fate befel a similar book, *Munera Pulveris*, which a little later, in 1862, began to appear in *Fraser's Magazine*.

Ruskin's parents were deeply distressed at the reception of the book; his father thought the theories expressed absurd and perverse; of all his friends only Carlyle stood by him, discerning in *Unto this Last*, as he wrote, "a high and noble truth...salutary in the extreme, and pressingly needed in England above all." Ruskin himself fell into extreme despondency. He had grown so used to telling the public what to think and believe, and to receiving praise and gratitude in return, that he was both chagrined and mystified, but he did not lose faith in his theories.

At this time, on March 3, 1864, to his inexpressible grief, his father died; and his grief was not lightened by the thought of the pain he had given to the careful and tender-hearted old man in his last years. He left his son a great fortune of some £7000 a year; and it at once began to melt away.

It was now, in 1866, that he wrote *Ethics of the Dust*, dialogues between himself and a little group of school-girls, perhaps the only one of his books which may be regarded as wholly unsuccessful. In 1866 Ruskin, writing to Carlyle, who had just lost his wife, received a noble benediction. "You are yourself very unhappy," wrote Carlyle, "as I too well discern—heavy laden, obstructed, and dispirited; but you have a great work still ahead, and will gradually have to gird yourself up against the *heat of the day*, which is coming on for you, as the Night too is coming. Think valiantly of these things."

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He did. He wrote in 1867 and published a set of letters to Thomas Dixon, a working cork-cutter of Sunderland, entitling them *Time and Tide by Weare and Tyne*. The book is a pretty and fanciful Utopia, and it was mercilessly derided. But if his later work had brought him busy mockers, it also had begun to make for him passionate champions and grateful adherents; and his correspondence began to multiply. Many of his charming, wise, and yet often whimsical and even pettish letters are published, many of them pathetic enough, but saved from solemnity and self-pity by their delicate humour, often at his own expense.

In these sad years he plunged, deliberately and wisely, into a close though somewhat erratic study of geological problems, and crystallography in particular. But after this date, though he planned and even collected material for large and comprehensive books, he never really embarked upon one; though when he remitted his economical and sociological studies and went back to literature, ethics, and art, he produced some of his most interesting and attractive work, such as *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866), three lectures on Work, Traffic, and War. But *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) is probably the most widely read of all his books. There has been much speculation as to the meaning of the title. The lilies stand for beauty; and as for sesame, he was no doubt thinking of a rich kind of grain, used by the Greeks for cakes and biscuits, and standing here for the solid nurture of the mind. The book was delivered as three lectures, and in the first he deals in his best manner with reading, banning more books than he blesses, and making a clean sweep of theology, history, and philosophy, as well as of most modern novels. The second lecture is a beautiful and idealistic picture of heroic womanhood and how it may be attained; and the third lecture, on the Mystery of Life and its Arts, is an impassioned revelation of his own hopes and ideas.

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In 1869 he was made the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, and he lived there on and off for many years, giving lectures which were generally more eloquent and discursive than technical, mixing freely with older and younger men, and doing more than he was perhaps aware in enriching the thought of his generation by the charm of his talk and personality, and by the disinterestedness and generosity of his ideals. How he appeared to one of the ablest of his disciples, Mr Mallock, may be read in that intensely witty and audacious book, *The New Republic*, where Ruskin, under the name of Mr Herbert, is the hero of the scene.

He was in great demand during these years as a lecturer, and responded generously to the call. His lectures were singular in this, that they consisted of rather solemn and rhetorical passages, read aloud in a somewhat monotonously beautiful voice, with interludes of animated talk and dramatic action.

It was in 1871 that he bought Brantwood, a picturesque house with a few acres of wood and moorland, above Coniston Lake, which was his home for the rest of his days. He bought it without even seeing it, enlarged it, and eventually transferred all his art treasures there, and lived a patriarchal life with his cousin Joanna Severn, her husband and children, and innumerable visitors.

And then in 1871 there began to appear his most characteristic and in many ways his most interesting book, *Fors Clavigera*—the title means roughly the fate that governs human life—in the form of monthly letters addressed to the working-men of England. Into this he flung an amount of personality—vivacity, idealism, art-interpretation, humour, and melancholy—which has no parallel in literature. It is incredibly diffuse and even formless; but he had by this time learnt to express exactly what he meant to say and as he meant to say it: and thus to read *Fors* is like

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looking straight into the very current of the mind of a man of genius. It is full of invective and, as an appendix to the monthly instalments, he printed many interesting and touching letters that he received, as well as many letters both insolent and vituperative, adding in many cases his own replies. *Fors* is a difficult book to read; but its incidental judgments are some of the most incisive things he ever penned, while, as I have said, in its deadly earnestness, lively humour, and sustained charm, it is like no other book in the world.

It was through the medium of *Fors* that he made what was the most daring experiment and, alas, the most pronounced failure of his life—the foundation of St George's Guild. It was a direct appeal for definite adherents. He nominated himself Master, by a kind of divine right, he claimed a tithe of his disciples' incomes, and the right to dispose of the income of the Guild as he chose. Each member was to assent to a comprehensive little creed, to work for his living, and to obey the orders of the Master. He himself gave a tenth of his remaining capital—£7000; a few bits of land were bought and farmed at heavy loss; a museum was established, and one or two local industries set on foot. But it came to little enough, owing, I believe, to the immense mass of charming and absurd enactments dealing with food, drink and costume which he promulgated, more fanciful than real, which created a grave suspicion of inveterate eccentricity in the homely Anglo-Saxon mind.

They were years of strain, of incessant industry, of profound and bitter disappointment; and in 1878 the crisis came. He was at Brantwood, working at *Fors* and the Catalogue of a Turner Exhibition; and he had just penned a sentence of extraordinary pathos and beauty about the morning mists on Coniston, when he was taken ill with inflammation of the brain, the first of many similar attacks. He recovered, but resigned his professorship, and spent three

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years in retirement, writing a little, working at his many subjects, and entertaining friends; but he was never the same man again, though he was to write what is undoubtedly the most beautiful of all his writings, the unfinished autobiography *Praeterita*. Meanwhile he was by no means idle. He went to Amiens in 1880, and began a book, *The Bible of Amiens*, which is full of beautiful passages. In 1882 he went to Italy again, and in 1883 he was re-elected to the Slade Professorship, Sir W. B. Richmond retiring in his favour. But his lectures had not the old force: they were vehement and denunciatory, with much bitter criticism of modern tendencies, and full of fantastic warnings and prohibitions; it was a relief when his two courses were over; and when a proposal was carried at Oxford to endow physiological research, involving vivisection, he resigned the Professorship, feeling that his work had been in vain and that the world was running headlong to ruin.

His mind went back to the old days; and he was persuaded by a friend to write a full autobiography, *Praeterita* (1886–1888), embodying the beautiful reminiscences which had appeared in *Fors*. He told his story very simply, and neither philosophised nor prophesied, and the result is one of the most beautiful fragments in the English language, full of tender recollections and subtle perception; it makes no attempt to be pathetic—indeed the mood is often one of delicate ridicule of his own particular pretensions and vanities. But at last the end of his work came suddenly in sight. He turned from one subject to another, and could concentrate on none; one last chapter he wrote, *Joanna's Care*, in which he told with loving gratitude the story of his long friendship with his cousin Mrs Severn, and all that she had done for him through the years of despondency and bitter recrimination, and then he laid down his pen and wrote no more.

The ten years that followed were years of quiet family

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life, friendly gatherings and quiet contemplation. Many honours came to him, and his writings became known to an ever-increasing circle of readers. He protested and censured no more; and thus the essential part of his message made itself more and more felt, and it was seen how pure and noble it had all been. He himself became gradually weaker, more and more withdrawn from the world, reading and re-reading the old books, talking little, kind and gentle, and with something of the happiness of a tired child; and at last died quietly without pain or struggle on January 21, 1900, having reached his eighty-first year. He was buried at Coniston by his own wish, and there he lies.

There is little more that need be said. He was a man of high genius, but he was not one of those serene and dispassionate natures whose temperament and preferences can only be inferred from their writings. On the contrary, there was probably no English writer whose work from first to last yields a more frank and impassioned self-revelation; he wrote directly and vehemently alike of what he loved and hated, adored and despised. He made no secret of his preferences and repulsions, and no lightest or minutest fancy passed through his mind without being embalmed in his books. In all this there is something childlike, and that perhaps gives the key to his character. His faults, such as they were, were childish faults, vanity, self-confidence, impatience; but of meanness, malice, hardness, there was never a trace. And his virtues were mature enough, generosity, industry, perseverance, enthusiasm. He served his generation in many ways by kindling a love of beauty, a reverence for art, a proud disgust for all that was luxurious and vile. It is easy to point out many things which he did not do, and things which might have been done differently; but in spite of suffering, misunderstanding and derision, no one ever lived more consistently day by day in a noble region of thought, and in deep-laid plans for the welfare of



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mankind. He loathed the great cruel faults of the world—its selfishness, its cruelty, its harsh complacent judgments; but he did not, as he might so easily have done, separate himself from the world in a dream of beauty and delight—“to walk all day like the Sultan of old in his garden of spice.” No, he came to close quarters with the world; he toiled for it, he desired to leave it better than he found it; and though neither wholly a hero nor a saint, he holds a secure place by his genius, by his love of things beautiful and pure, by his passionate idealism, among the greatest men of a great age.

## THE STYLE OF RUSKIN

RUSKIN'S style is a difficult one to summarise, because of its immense range and variety. It was at first, as we can see from *Modern Painters*, strongly affected by his familiarity with Dr Johnson's writing, stately, formal, and verbose, logical in manner, full of antithesis, and resembling perhaps a species of cogent and dignified oratory. He admits this freely himself, and he also confesses how large a part his study of Richard Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity* had played in the conscious formation of his style. But even so it is all interspersed with episodes of a highly poetical order, luminous and pure in expression, and full of perception and delicacy, as in the following:

The old masters, content with one simple tone, sacrificed to its unity all the exquisite gradations and varied touches of relief and change by which nature unites her hours with each other. They give the warmth of the sinking sun, overwhelming all things in its gold, *but they do not give those grey passages about the horizon where, seen through its dying light, the cool and gloom of night gather themselves for their victory*<sup>1</sup>.

But there are also sections of exalted moral emotion, where the sentences have a scriptural tinge—for Ruskin had as a child learned much of the Bible by heart; and then, too, there is much humorous invective and ironical analysis. Yet in these earlier writings it can hardly be called an equable and a personal style. It is strongly reminiscent, and the mood changes sharply and swiftly; but the general effect may be called declamatory rather than intimate or persuasive.

Very gradually, as Ruskin became more confident, and

<sup>1</sup> *Modern Painters* (1), vol. III, p. 274.

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more aware of his power to charm and sway the minds of his readers, the oratorical element became less strident and emphatic, and the whole mood more conversational and indulgent. The early writings had created both disciples and admirers, but the more confidential and personal method which he now employed—which was to a certain extent developed by his discovery that as a public lecturer he was able to hold and influence an audience—began to win him devoted adherents. This outspokenness at the same time increased the range both of his humour and his pathos, and added pungency to his irony.

In 1869 he wrote in *The Queen of the Air* an analysis of his own style. He said that he had three ways of writing:

One, with the simple view of making myself understood, in which I necessarily omit a great deal of what comes into my head; another, in which I say what I think ought to be said, in what I suppose to be the best words I can find for it;...and my third way of writing is to say all that comes into my head for my own pleasure, in the first words that come, retouching them afterwards into approximate grammar.

(*Queen of the Air*, § 134.)

This is not perhaps a very exact analysis; but it is clear that when he was enunciating principles, or describing processes, or enumerating details, he aimed at giving the most direct and concise statement that he could, repressing his strong tendency to allusiveness, and refraining from any luxury of expression.

As an instance of the second method, we may take *Unto this Last* as a good instance. He was here making out a case, from a strong sense of duty and conviction, against what he considered the erroneous, because impersonal and mechanical, theories of Political Economy, and endeavouring to substitute the true principles upon which social life and labour should be based. For directness and cogency of

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statement there can be little doubt that *Unto this Last* is his best work.

The third method covers the innumerable passages of impassioned description and concentrated emotion throughout his writings, where he wrote for his own pleasure. Some of these, as for instance the famous description of Calais Church, or the last voyage of the *Téméraire*, are of amazing beauty and perfect proportion: but in other cases, in which he exercised less control, there is a cloying and even wearying effect of excessive exuberance, beautiful as the individual sentences are, passages in which, as he himself said, art “of an impudently visible kind” is obvious.

But it is probably on these great bursts of word-music that Ruskin’s preeminence as a writer will ultimately be based. They exhibit perhaps the most magnificent effort ever made to paint a scene in words, and to emphasise its poetical and moral significance. Through sentence after sentence of exquisite detail and delicate observation, the mood rises to a profound and impassioned climax of lofty emotion.

It is strange that few things in later life angered Ruskin so much as to be described as a word-painter, because that was precisely what he was. But he was obsessed by the idea that his readers, in their enjoyment of the literary art of his writings, left his teaching unheeded. His eloquence and his power over words came so easily to him that he belittled the supreme beauty of his artistic creations. Yet he was undoubtedly the best English writer of a certain kind of high and noble poetical prose; and those qualities are seen at their perfection in his earlier books.

So far as purely technical methods go, the art employed in these famous passages is of a uniform kind, with their linked rhythms and melodious cadences. There is no great variety or contrast, the progression stately and slow, the sentences often very long, but never unwieldy. He employs

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characteristic devices, assonance of vowels, alliteration of consonants; and one contrivance in particular, by which he linked his long paragraphs together, when he selects some telling phrase from the conclusion of a section, and repeats it at the beginning of the next section. This occurs many hundreds of times in his writings.

In 1871, in *Fors Clavigera*, he went one stage further, and did what no other writer has perhaps ever attempted, in allowing his thought, however discursive and fantastic, to crystallise direct into words, until in reading it one feels that one is almost perusing the very substance of the mind that gave it utterance. But being what it is, a sort of reverie, with but little attempt to check the spontaneous movement of the mind, it displays not only the aspiring spirit and the beauty-loving mind of the writer, but also his waywardness, his petulance, his vehement repulsions, as well as the deep and morbid disappointment which clouded his later years—for Ruskin over-estimated the contemptuous opposition to his direct teaching which he detected in the minds of the public, and underestimated the cumulative effect of his work and the immense range of his indirect influence. *Fors Clavigera* is a book which is difficult for anyone to read who is not well acquainted with his books and published letters, and who is not familiar with the strange contrasts and inconsistencies of his character. And further, its allusiveness and discursiveness betray the fact that the grip of his mind was now much weakened by his severe and successive illnesses.

But his last book of all, *Praeterita*, which was never finished, is on the whole the most perfectly beautiful of all his writings. It is an autobiographical retrospect of his early years, and is written in a mood of tranquil tenderness, tinged with regret, but never with either despondency or recrimination. The style of this is exquisite in its simplicity and apparent artlessness. It is full of pathos, but saved from

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sentimentality by its touches of admirable humour; the expression is clear and luminous from end to end, and the impression which it gives is that of perfect ease; but it is the ease which comes of gigantic industry carried to the point at which the laborious processes of writing, selecting, balancing the sentence, perceiving the right word among a number, avoiding the least touch of over-emphasis, filling the space exactly without any divergence or overflow, have become absolutely instinctive and almost unconscious.

It must be remembered that Ruskin was a great corrector and reviser. Most of his best passages, he says himself, were re-written four or five times, and if one studies the earlier and later drafts which exist of many of his books, there is hardly a change which is not an improvement, and of which one does not perceive the reason. But it must not be concluded that a weak piece of writing can be made good by correction. Ruskin's own theory was that a piece of troublesome and laborious writing was seldom a real success; he was equally emphatic that such pains were not thrown away, and that it enabled one to write better next time.