INTRODUCTION

(i) EARLY INFLUENCES

To understand Ruskin's literary criticism, almost all that need be known of his life is in his childhood and youth. His characteristic powers of genius had already ripened in 1843 when he began the publication of *Modern Painters*. There were changes after that—the setting-in of sobriety and restraint, and the mental depression of later years—but all his chief powers had flowed in by 1843. Subsequent changes were against the current. The making of his mind, which is reflected in *Praeterita*, was determined largely by the unusual combination in his father of artistic temperament and business efficiency; and the main factor in its development was a quiet and refined home, stored with culture and untroubled by care, presided over by two devoted parents whose interests in life were focussed on the genius of their only son.

He was born in London in the year 1819, and was educated mainly at home by his father and mother. John Ruskin, Senior, was a strange mixture of man of romance and man of business. During the day he was an honest and industrious wine merchant, but his nights he devoted to the poets and painters, and read every evening to his wife and child, usually in the garden. He had good taste, in literature as in sherry, and he put before his son only the best models. Both father and son, however, had a sense of being "profane and rebellious characters" compared with Mrs Ruskin, a stern Scotch Puritan, a woman of great power, indomitable will, and almost saturnine religious faith, who considered contact with the world a desecration and chil-

dren's toys a sinful frivolity. It is easily seen whence the boy derived that peculiar combination of the Greek and the Hebrew spirit, the puritan attitude towards art mingled with intense appreciation of beauty, the capacity for careful and patient work, piercing analysis, and the all-pervading poetic gift.

Mrs Ruskin had qualities which endeared her to the boy. He owed to her his grounding in that model of models—the English Authorised Version. Together they read the whole book once every year, his mother "watching every intonation, allowing not so much as a syllable to be misplaced, until every word slipped into its place unnoticed as a familiar guest, unchallenged as a household friend". The discipline was hard, but Ruskin was ever after grateful for it. "These readings", he said, "established my soul in life, and were the one essential part in all my education." At the same time, his father, whom he described as "an absolutely beautiful reader of the best poetry and prose", was reading to him "all Shakespeare, comedy and historical plays, again and again, all Scott and all Don Quixote, Pope, Spenser, Byron, Goldsmith, Addison and Johnson". A little later with his cousin Mary he "got through the evenings over 'Pilgrim's Progress', Bunyan's 'Holy War', Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs', Mrs Sherwood's 'Lady of the Manor', and Bingley's 'Natural History'". All this in the first decade of his life! At first he showed little inclination towards the classics, and after a few incursions into light literature, he turned all the more seriously to Scott and Wordsworth, Miss Edgeworth, Marryat, Isaac Walton, and Fenimore Cooper. Thus commenced "forty years of desultory yet careful reading", which covered all the best of ancient and modern literature.

At the same time another equally important part of his education was being carried on. His parents loved travelling, and his father's business took him from one end of the

country to another. They travelled by coach, visiting all the old country houses, stored in those days with the spoils of Italy, and his father took care that he should see every good picture, and no bad ones. Once a year also for thirty years they journeyed to the continent and visited most of the picture galleries of Europe. These tours not only cultivated Ruskin's aesthetic tastes, but they first revealed to him the beauty and spiritual qualities of nature, and gave him that sympathy and intimacy with the greatest source of all poetry, which is his peculiar gift.

Such a training seems suitable for the work Ruskin was to do, but it had its disadvantages. The strictness of the home discipline, the lack of toys and playmates, produced the "dangerous and lonely pride", which he acknowledged himself. The restraining force of early associations remained long with him, and his views were always conservative. Moreover, the comparative luxury of his life left him out of sympathy with those brute facts and forces that make up so much of the average experience. He noted later his inability to regard life with the gross relish of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Fielding, and Hogarth.

Ruskin early embarked on his literary career, both in poetry and prose. His poetry, large in bulk, and modelled upon Scott, Byron, and Wordsworth, is good imitative work, but nowhere reaches a very high level. As juvenilia, however, it shows merit, and his parents believed that he would write "poetry as good as Byron's, only pious". The hope was vain. He won the Newdigate, and acquired a certain facility and accuracy in the use of verse; but he himself was the first to perceive that he was on the wrong track, coming to "the extremely wholesome conclusion that in poetry I could express nothing rightly that I had to say". He turned his attention all the more seriously to prose, and at once proved that he had found his natural medium. It is interesting to note that among his

early essays for his tutor was one comprising a glowing defence of Scott and Byron, and an attempt to set out the comparative advantages of music and painting.

In 1837 he went to Oxford, where he was a fellow-commoner of Christ Church. The life here brought him into contact with his fellows, and broadened his mind. He worked quietly and well, not confining his interests to literature, but spending much time on sciences, botany, geology, and mathematics. After he left the university his life is the story of increasing concentration, now on this study, now on that; but always with the same thoroughness and care. At the age of twenty-four he presented to the world a book giving ample evidence of the richness of his mind, attacking boldly the most universally established reputations, and reasoning acutely on subjects which usually take a lifetime to master.

The remainder of his career does not concern us in its details. His criticisms of books are scattered over the whole of his literary work, and whatever the subject, he usually found occasion for a few remarks on literature. A chronological list of his books is given on page 35. Up to 1860 they comprise the great works on art and architecture, with a gradually increasing concentration on moral and social issues. From 1860 to 1870 he was occupied with disputes on political economy, from which he emerged tinged with considerable bitterness, "an old man, always impatient and often tired". From 1869 to 1885 he divided his activities between the publication of his lectures and addresses on art and kindred subjects, and the issue of *Fors Clavigera*, a kind of prose *Don Juan*, but this differs from its predecessor in that it records the journey of a great and bitter mind through Vanity Fair. In 1885 he began *Praeterita*, which has taken its place among the few really great autobiographies of the world. He shakes off his cares, his sorrows, and his disappointments, and broods, still sadly,

but serenely, over a life in which he had done what he could.

(ii) RUSKIN AS A LITERARY CRITIC

The multiplex products of the many-faceted genius of Ruskin have aroused storms of controversy. On any subject that interested him he let his mind stream out in all its great variety of moods and thought, and it flows with the energy and caprices of a rippling brook. He wrote on art, architecture, political economy, natural history, morals and ethics, geology, mineralogy, biography, fairy tales, military tactics, and all kinds of literature. The comprehensive mind of a Goethe could not have dealt infallibly with them all. And yet it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the tendency of recent years has been to justify many of the main issues of his writings, especially in political economy and art. His minor themes, however, have received less attention than they deserve, and particularly is this evident with regard to his work on education, theology, and literature. Most critics and biographers of Ruskin find room for a few lines of praise, usually with reservations, of his views on books, regarding them as a rule as more or less interesting diversions from more important themes. But a careful reading of his books reveals a mass of literary criticism by no means inconsiderable in itself, and which, when collected, merits more than a few passing remarks.

"Ruskin's remarks on books", says Professor Saintsbury, "are delightful literature, but they are never criticism." Modern criticism is less conservative, and tends to modify this judgment. In the latest and best balanced appreciation of Ruskin, the author speaks enthusiastically of his incursions into literature. "A small volume might with profit be put together containing his criticism of books.

His dislikes are not always interesting or safe, but safety is not everything in a critic. Where he is at home with his author, his critical judgments are among the best to be found anywhere."[1] Professor Saintsbury's attitude is somewhat difficult to understand, and good criticism may be a more literary thing than he seems to make out. Ruskin's life was "persistently literary"; he trained himself to that end with infinite industry and assiduity. The views of such a man on literature at any time deserve attention, and, when sufficiently extensive, may even claim a place in the history of criticism. However much we may disagree with particular judgments or deductions, it is always valuable to study the opinions of a highly cultured man on his contemporaries, and on those spheres of literature which he is particularly qualified to discuss. Moreover, Ruskin's critical equipment was by no means inadequate. Practice was not its least feature, and if we define criticism simply as the faculty of passing a judgment on anything, then Ruskin possessed the faculty in the highest degree. His own age complained chiefly of his summary methods of passing judgment on everything. Nothing less than definite assertion ever satisfied him, and it often proved a matter for lamentation when, as *Punch* had it, "savage Ruskin dug his tusk in". But his criticism was based on more than this. In analysis, interpretation, and description, the power to awaken fresh and vivid currents of ideas and emotions, his genius was unequalled; and he imparted to all his works something personal and distinctive. It is dogmatic to say that any criticism is right or wrong; there are degrees of right, and degrees of wrong. Points of view must vary; and it is particularly necessary in Ruskin's case to look at things from his standpoint and in complete realisation of his standard of judgment, before we can fully appreciate his criticisms. He made mistakes, as did others before him.

[1] Oliver Elton, *Survey of English Literature*, 1830–70.

Blindnesses and antipathies have marred the judgments of greater critics. We cannot judge Sainte-Beuve by his attitude to Balzac, Landor by his dislike of Shelley, Emerson by his distaste of Poe and Shelley, or Matthew Arnold by his antipathy to Victor Hugo's poetry. Where great ends are reached we overlook minor defects.

Whatever his achievement, Ruskin had a never-swerving nobility of aim. He wrote "neither for fame, nor for money, but of necessity". He felt that he had a message for mankind, and he delivered it to the best of his ability. At the close of his life he could speak honestly of his books as "the thoughts of a man, who, from youth up, and during a life persistently literary, has never written a word either for money, or for vanity, nor even in the careless incontinence of the instinct for self-expression, but resolutely spoke only to teach, and to praise others". The rare and superb gift of absolute sincerity is stamped on every sentence he wrote. He wrote exactly what he thought, extenuating nothing and setting down nought in malice. He spent the whole of his life in the spirit of devotion to great men, and in endeavouring to communicate this love to others. His mission in an iron age, and to a materialistic nation, was "to declare and to demonstrate, wherever they exist, the essence and authority of the beautiful and the true". All his work was an effort to hold men to the things which are lovely and of good report.

"Not one word of any book is readable", he wrote in *Fors Clavigera*, "except so far as your mind is at one with the author, and not merely his words like your words, but his thoughts like your thoughts." Sympathy, the soul of criticism, Ruskin possessed in a peculiar degree: a deep, sensitive and imaginative sympathy, which naturally became more intimate as he grew older. The writers he loved entered into his life; he knew their works by heart; he studied even the single words they wrote; and above all he

practised their principles. He looked at them from every side with a range of sympathies almost unequalled in literature, accepting their weaknesses and their faults, but so placing and harmonising them with their merits as to form one noble whole. This is the origin of the invaluable chapters on Dante, Shakespeare and Scott.

For breadth of vision and comprehensiveness of knowledge Ruskin is rarely equalled among literary critics. He hardly ever wrote of what he did not know. His opinions came from a mind stored with varied and curious knowledge. Behind every judgment was "much thought and much strong emotion, brought to the subject by years of thinking over subjects full of pain. It constantly needed examination and thought, prolonged during many days, to form opinions which the reader may suppose to be dictated by caprice, and will hear only to dispute". Thoroughness was the very essence of his method. He never spared himself in his analyses; no detail was too inconsiderate, no labour too great, to get at the truth. His reading of literature, if not wide beyond that of the average man of his class, was sound and deep. Moreover his learning extended to all the fine arts, and while the close correlation of the arts is not always safe, Ruskin saw them all as the expression of the order and sweetness which make life beautiful. Thus he was unusually successful in indicating the relation of the fine arts to one another and to life.

To the gift of long and patient study Ruskin added an inherited power of keen insight and observation, and the combination made his intuitions, both on books and on life, deep and piercing. "Ruskin", said Mazzini, "possesses the most analytical mind in Europe." In *Praeterita*, the author modestly disclaimed any special power or capacity except "that patience in looking, and precision in feeling, which afterwards, with due industry, formed my analytical power". And this analysis is often set out in words with

a keen eye for effect. It is usual to deny him the power of close and logical presentation of facts, what Arnold calls the "ordo concatenatioque veri", and it must be admitted that at times his habit of digression causes confusion; but Ruskin can always rise to the occasion and at times advances his views with scientific precision. No proposition of a great argument could be more close in presentation or more subtle than the second volume of *Modern Painters*; no technical matters could be treated with greater simplicity of argument than the essays on the pathetic fallacy and landscape in literature; and his definitions are often masterly.

If Ruskin's treatment of literature were destitute of any other qualities, it would be studied for these alone. But when we add to the interest of subject matter and skill in exposition a gift of language unsurpassed in an age of great stylists, Ruskin occupies almost a unique position in literary criticism. Even those who thought he wrote nonsense admitted that he wrote it beautifully. His judgments are those of a man who knew what it was to write, both in prose and verse. He was a master of literary swordsmanship, and this served him well or ill according as he applied it to fields of reality which were or were not congenial. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his criticism of literature and of art. When he deals with a great subject his style is distinguished by eloquence and imaginative richness; at times it catches the note of prophetic authority and spiritual glow; elsewhere he dons the whole armour of controversy, and supports calm and unimpassioned reasoning with clear-cut, incisive sentences, and shattering epigram. The style varies with the matter in hand; but there is always the same abundance of picturesque illustrations and powerful metaphors, the same melodious cadence of words. And it is all couched in a diction stately and plain; characterised by a fine lucidity of expression. We never have to read a paragraph

twice to ascertain its meaning. The eloquence is perfectly combined with the body of critical and expository matter.

Ruskin's limitations are well known. Professor Saintsbury has accomplished the somewhat easy task of extracting from their context in Ruskin's work various contradictory remarks, and by placing them in juxtaposition has proved that he was no critic. There is no doubt that Ruskin's enthusiasm and earnestness often led him to assert what he thought and felt at the moment, chance preferences and dislikes, irrespective of what had gone before. That he was "continually learning" made this worse. "True taste", he says, "is for ever growing, learning, reading, worshipping, laying its hand upon its mouth because it is astonished." One might answer that change should at least be from variety to unity of opinion. But there is less inconsistency in Ruskin's literary criticism than is usually alleged, and the rash assertions are usually inconsequent sentences. In fact, this department of his work is peculiarly free from hasty and unthinking apportionment of praise and blame, and the important passages are careful and considered statements of settled opinions.

Goethe once said that a loving interest in the person and works of an author, amounting to a certain one-sided enthusiasm, alone leads to reality in criticism; all else is vanity. In this sense Ruskin is a very real critic, for he is always in danger of personal absorption in his subject. He makes a cult of certain authors, approaches them with humility and free giving of himself, and takes up their work and characters as bits of nature. Such a view is penetrating and valuable, but it is only a partial one. His sympathies are intense, but narrow. And the natural corollary is the tendency to condemn petulantly and sometimes unfairly those who are not acceptable to Ruskin the man, or who fail to satisfy Ruskinian values. So Ruskin does not rank with the great impartial historians and critics. He lacks the distinctive power