

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00851-8 - The Works of John Ruskin, Volume 3: Modern Painters I

John Ruskin

Excerpt

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# MODERN PAINTERS

## VOLUME I

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION<sup>1</sup>

[1843]

1. THE work now laid before the public originated in indignation at the shallow and false criticisms of the periodicals of the day on the works of the great living artist to whom it principally refers. It was intended to be a short pamphlet, reprobating the manner and style of those critiques, and pointing out their perilous tendency, as guides of public feeling. But, as point after point presented itself for demonstration, I found myself compelled to amplify what was at first a letter to the editor of a Review,<sup>2</sup> into something very like a treatise on art, to which I was obliged to give the more consistency and completeness, because it advocated opinions which, to the ordinary connoisseur, will sound heretical. I now scarcely know whether I should announce it as an Essay on Landscape Painting, and apologize for its frequent reference to the works of a particular master; or, announcing it as a critique on particular works, apologize for its lengthy discussion of general principles. But of whatever character the work may be considered, the motives which led me to undertake it must not be mistaken. No zeal for the reputation of any individual, no personal feeling of any kind, has the slightest weight or influence with me. The reputation of the great artist to whose works I have chiefly referred, is established on

<sup>1</sup> [Retained in all subsequent editions of the book. The numbering of the paragraphs was first introduced in the ed. of 1888.]

<sup>2</sup> [Cf. the letter to Osborne Gordon in Appendix iii., p. 666. The reference here is not so much to the "Reply to *Blackwood*," written in 1836 (see Appendix i.), as to the hostile criticisms, in the press, of Turner's pictures in 1842: see above, Introduction, p. xxiv.]

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too legitimate grounds among all whose admiration is honourable, to be in any way affected by the ignorant sarcasms of pretension and affectation. But when *public* taste seems plunging deeper and deeper into degradation day by day, and when the press universally exerts such power as it possesses to direct the feeling of the nation more completely to all that is theatrical, affected, and false in art; while it vents its ribaldry on the most exalted truth, and the highest ideal of landscape that this or any other age has ever witnessed, it becomes the imperative duty of all who have any perception or knowledge of what is really great in art, and any desire for its advancement in England, to come fearlessly forward, regardless of such individual interests as are likely to be injured by the knowledge of what is good and right, to declare and demonstrate, wherever they exist, the essence and the authority of the Beautiful and the True.

2. Whatever may seem invidious or partial in the execution of my task is dependent not so much on the tenour of the work, as on its incompleteness. I have not entered into systematic criticism of all the painters of the present day; but I have illustrated each particular excellence and truth of art by the works in which it exists in the highest degree, resting satisfied that if it be once rightly felt and enjoyed in these, it will be discovered and appreciated wherever it exists in others. And although I have never suppressed any conviction of the superiority of one artist over another, which I believed to be grounded on truth, and necessary to the understanding of truth, I have been cautious never to undermine positive rank, while I disputed relative rank. My uniform desire and aim have been, not that the present favourite should be admired less, but that the neglected master should be admired more. And I know that an increased perception and sense of truth and beauty, though it may interfere with our estimate of the comparative rank of painters, will invariably tend to increase our admiration of all who are really great; and he who now places Stanfield and

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Callcott above Turner, will admire Stanfield and Callcott more than he does now, when he has learned to place Turner far above them both.

3. In three instances only have I spoken in direct depreciation of the works of living artists,<sup>1</sup> and these are all cases in which the reputation is so firm and extended, as to suffer little injury from the opinion of an individual, and where the blame has been warranted and deserved by the desecration of the highest powers.

Of the old masters I have spoken with far greater freedom ; but let it be remembered that only a portion of the work is now presented to the public, and it must not be supposed, because in that particular portion, and with reference to particular excellences, I have spoken in constant depreciation, that I have no feeling of other excellences of which cognizance can only be taken in future parts of the work. Let me not be understood to mean more than I have said, nor be made responsible for conclusions when I have only stated facts. I have said that the old masters did not give the truth of nature ; if the reader chooses, thence, to infer that they were not masters at all, it is his conclusion, not mine.

4. Whatever I have asserted throughout the work, I have endeavoured to ground altogether on demonstrations which must stand or fall by their own strength, and which ought to involve no more reference to authority or character than a demonstration in Euclid. Yet it is proper for the public to know that the writer is no mere theorist, but has been devoted from his youth to the laborious study of practical art.

Whatever has been generally affirmed of the old schools of landscape painting is founded on familiar acquaintance with

<sup>1</sup> [As this passage occurred in ed. 1, it must refer to criticisms contained therein. Presumably, therefore, the reference is to (1) Maclise ; see pp. 32, 619. The latter reference occurred only in eds. 1 and 2 ; in ed. 2 there was a further reference, in pref. § 45 *n.* (2) Holland ; see p. 529. (3) A painter unnamed ; see p. 126. If we were to include references introduced in the second and later editions, we should have to add Martin (pp. 36, 38), Cattermole (pp. 220, 461), and Pyne (p. 479).]

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every important work of art, from Antwerp to Naples.<sup>1</sup> But it would be useless, where close and immediate comparison with works in our own Academy is desirable, to refer to the details of pictures at Rome or Munich; and it would be impossible to speak at once with just feeling, as regarded the possessor, and just freedom, as regarded the public, of pictures in private galleries. Whatever particular references have been made for illustration have been therefore confined, as far as was in my power, to works in the National and Dulwich Galleries.<sup>2</sup>

5. Finally, I have to apologize for the imperfection of a work which I could have wished not to have executed but with years of reflection and revisal. It is owing to my sense of the necessity of such revisal, that only a portion of the work is now presented to the public; but that portion is both complete in itself, and is more peculiarly directed against the crying evil which called for instant remedy. Whether I ever completely fulfil my intention will partly depend upon the spirit in which the present volume is received. If it be attributed to an invidious spirit, or a desire for the advancement of individual interests, I could hope to effect little good by farther effort. If, on the contrary, its real feeling and intention be understood, I shall shrink from no labour in the execution of a task which may tend, however feebly, to the advancement of the cause of real art in England, and to the honour of those great living Masters whom we now neglect or malign, to pour our flattery into the ear of Death, and exalt, with vain acclamation, the names of those who neither demand our praise, nor regard our gratitude.

THE AUTHOR.

<sup>1</sup> [See above, Introduction, p. xx.; and for further illustration of the notes on pictures in Ruskin's diaries, see *Stones of Venice*, vol. iii. ch. v. § 5.]

<sup>2</sup> [The pictures in the Dulwich Gallery have since 1892 been renumbered. In notes to the following pages the new numbers are supplied.]

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION<sup>1</sup>

[1844]

1. IT is allowed by the most able writers on naval and military tactics, that although the attack by successive divisions absolutely requires in the attacking party such an inherent superiority, in quality of force, and such consciousness of that superiority, as may enable his front columns, or his leading ships, to support themselves for a considerable period against overwhelming numbers; it yet insures, if maintained with constancy, the most total ruin of the opposing force. Convinced of the truth, and therefore assured of the ultimate prevalence and victory of the principles which I have advocated, and equally confident that the strength of the cause must give weight to the strokes of even the weakest of its defenders, I permitted myself to yield to a somewhat hasty and hot-headed desire of being, at whatever risk, in the thick of the fire, and began the contest with a part, and that the weakest and least considerable part, of the forces at my disposal. And I now find the volume thus boldly laid before the public in a position much resembling that of the *Royal Sovereign* at Trafalgar, receiving, unsupported, the broadsides of half the enemy's fleet; while unforeseen circumstances have hitherto prevented, and must yet for a time prevent, my heavier ships of the line from taking any part in the action. I watched the first moments of the struggle with some anxiety for the solitary vessel, an anxiety which I have now ceased to feel; for the flag of truth waves brightly through the smoke of the battle, and my antagonists, wholly intent on the destruction of the

<sup>1</sup> [Retained in all subsequent editions of the book. The numbering of the paragraphs was first introduced in the ed. of 1888.]

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leading ship, have lost their position, and exposed themselves in defenceless disorder to the attack of the following columns.

2. If, however, I have had no reason to regret my hasty advance, as far as regards the ultimate issue of the struggle, I have yet found it to occasion much misconception of the character, and some diminution of the influence, of the present Essay. For though the work has been received as only in sanguine moments I had ventured to hope,<sup>1</sup> though I have had the pleasure of knowing that in many instances its principles have carried with them a strength of conviction amounting to a demonstration of their truth, and that, even where it has had no other influence, it has excited interest, suggested inquiry, and prompted to a just and frank comparison of art with nature; yet this effect would have been greater still, had not the work been supposed, as it seems to have been by many readers, a completed treatise, containing a systematized statement of the whole of my views on the subject of modern art. Considered as such, it surprises me that the book should have received the slightest attention. For what respect could be due to a writer who pretended to criticise and classify the works of the great painters of landscape, without developing, or even alluding to, one single principle of the beautiful or sublime? So far from being a completed essay, it is little more than the introduction to the mass of evidence and illustration which I have yet to bring forward; it treats of nothing but the initiatory steps of art, states nothing but the elementary rules of criticism, touches only on merits attainable by accuracy of eye and fidelity of hand, and leaves for future consideration every one of the eclectic qualities of pictures, all of good that is prompted by feeling, and of great that is guided by judgment; and its function and scope should the less have been mistaken, because I have not only most carefully arranged the subject in its commencement, but have given frequent references throughout to the essays by which it is intended to be succeeded, in which I shall endeavour to

<sup>1</sup> [For criticisms of vol. i. on its first appearance, see above, Introduction, pp. xxxv.-xxxvii., xliii.]

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point out the signification and the value of those phenomena of external nature which I have been hitherto compelled to describe without reference either to their inherent beauty, or to the lessons which may be derived from them.

3. Yet, to prevent such misconception in future, I may perhaps be excused for occupying the reader's time with a fuller statement of the feelings with which the work was undertaken, of its general plan and of the conclusions and positions which I hope to be able finally to deduce and maintain.

Nothing, perhaps, bears on the face of it more appearance of folly, ignorance, and impertinence, than any attempt to diminish the honour of those to whom the assent of many generations has assigned a throne; for the truly great of later times have, almost without exception, fostered in others the veneration of departed power which they felt themselves; satisfied in all humility to take their seat at the feet of those whose honour is brightened by the hoariness of time, and to wait for the period when the lustre of many departed days may accumulate on their own heads, in the radiance which culminates as it recedes. The envious and incompetent have usually been the leaders of attack, content if, like the foulness of the earth, they may attract to themselves notice by their noisomeness, or, like its insects, exalt themselves by virulence into visibility. While, however, the envy of the vicious, and the insolence of the ignorant, are occasionally shown in their nakedness by *futile* efforts to degrade the dead, it is worthy of consideration whether they may not more frequently escape detection in *successful* efforts to degrade the living; whether the very same malice may not be gratified, the very same incompetence demonstrated, in the unjust lowering of present greatness, and the unjust exaltation of a perished power, as, if exerted and manifested in a less safe direction, would have classed the critic with Nero and Caligula, with Zoilus and Perrault.<sup>1</sup> Be it remembered, that the spirit of detraction is

<sup>1</sup> [For Zoilus, see the "Reply to *Blackwood*," below, p. 638. Charles Perrault (1628–1703), French Academician, author of the *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes*, which set on foot the famous literary quarrel of ancients and moderns, summarised in Hallam's *Literature of Europe*, vol. iv. pt. iv. ch. vii.]



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detected only when unsuccessful, and receives least punishment where it effects the greatest injury; and it cannot but be felt that there is as much danger that the rising of new stars should be concealed by the mists which are unseen, as that those throned in heaven should be darkened by the clouds which are visible.

4. There is, I fear, so much malice in the hearts of most men, that they are chiefly jealous of that praise which can give the greatest pleasure, and are then most liberal of eulogium when it can no longer be enjoyed. They grudge not the whiteness of the sepulchre, because by no honour they can bestow upon it can the senseless corpse be rendered an object of envy; but they are niggardly of the reputation which contributes to happiness, or advances to fortune.<sup>1</sup> They are glad to obtain credit for generosity and humility by exalting those who are beyond the reach of praise, and thus to escape the more painful necessity of doing homage to a living rival. They are rejoiced to set up a standard of imaginary excellence, which may enable them, by insisting on the inferiority of a contemporary work to the things that have been, to withdraw the attention from its superiority to the things that are. The same undercurrent of jealousy operates in our reception of animadversion. Men have commonly more pleasure in the criticism which hurts than in that which is innocuous; and are more tolerant of the severity which breaks hearts and ruins fortunes, than of that which falls impotently on the grave.

5. And thus well says the good and deep-minded Richard Hooker:<sup>2</sup> “To the best and wisest, while they live, the world is continually a froward opposite; and a curious observer of their defects and imperfections, their virtues afterwards it as much admireth. And for this cause, many times that which deserveth admiration would hardly be able to find favour, if

<sup>1</sup> [The tragedy of vindications that come too late—of building memorials only to the dead—was a recurrent theme with Ruskin throughout his books. See, e.g., in this vol., ch. i. § 5; and in *Modern Painters*, vol. iv., Appendix i.; vol. v. pt. vi. ch. viii. § 20. And cf. *A Joy for Ever*, § 70; *Fors Clavigera*, Letter xvi.]

<sup>2</sup> [Ruskin had at this time been reading with care—by the advice of his old tutor, Osborne Gordon—Hooker’s *Ecclesiastical Polity*; for its influence on his style, see *Præterita*, ii. ch. x. § 184, and *Modern Painters*, vol. ii. Addenda n.]

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they which propose it were not content to profess themselves therein scholars and followers of the ancient. For the world will not endure to hear that we are wiser than any have been which went before.”—Book v. ch. vii. 3. He therefore who would maintain the cause of contemporary excellence against that of elder time, must have almost every class of men arrayed against him. The generous, because they would not find matter of accusation against established dignities; the envious, because they like not the sound of a living man’s praise; the wise, because they prefer the opinion of centuries to that of days; and the foolish, because they are incapable of forming an opinion of their own. Obloquy so universal is not likely to be risked, and the few who make an effort to stem the torrent, as it is made commonly in favour of their own works, deserve the contempt which is their only reward. Nor is this to be regretted, in its influence on the progress and preservation of things technical and communicable. Respect for the ancients is the salvation of art, though it sometimes blinds us to its *ends*. It increases the power of the painter, though it diminishes his liberty; and if it be sometimes an incumbrance to the essays of invention, it is oftener a protection from the consequences of audacity. The whole system and discipline of art, the collected results of the experience of ages, might, but for the fixed authority of antiquity, be swept away by the rage of fashion, or lost in the glare of novelty; and the knowledge which it had taken centuries to accumulate, the principles which mighty minds had arrived at only in dying, might be overthrown by the frenzy of a faction, and abandoned in the insolence of an hour.

6. Neither, in its general application, is the persuasion of the superiority of former works less just than useful. The greater number of them are, and must be, immeasurably nobler than any of the results of present effort, because that which is the best of the productions of four thousand years must necessarily be, in its accumulation, beyond all rivalry from the works of any given generation; but it should always be remembered that it is improbable that many, and impossible