

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00852-5 - The Works of John Ruskin, Volume 4

John Ruskin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART III
OF IDEAS OF BEAUTY

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00852-5 - The Works of John Ruskin, Volume 4

John Ruskin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SECTION I

OF THE THEORETIC FACULTY

CHAPTER I

OF THE RANK AND RELATIONS OF THE
THEORETIC FACULTY *

ALTHOUGH the hasty execution and controversial tone of the former portions of this essay have been subjects of frequent regret to the writer, yet the one was in some measure excusable in a work referred to a temporary end, and the other unavoidable in one directed against particular opinions.¹ Nor is either of any necessary detriment to its availableness as a foundation for more careful and extended survey, in so far as its province was confined to the assertion of obvious and visible facts, the verification of which could in no degree be dependent either on the care with which they might be classed, or the temper in which they were regarded. Not so with respect to the investigation now before us, which, being not of things outward, and sensibly demonstrable, but of the value and meaning of mental impressions, must be entered upon with a modesty and cautiousness proportioned to the difficulty of determining the likeness, or community, of such impressions, as they are received by different men; and with seriousness proportioned

§ 1. *With what care the subject is to be approached.*

* This sounds very like the "peerage and baronetage" of the Theoretic Faculty; but must stand as it stood, meaning, of course, the place of said faculty with respect to others. [1883.]

¹ [See Vol. III. pp. 3, 7, 668.]

to the importance of rightly regarding those faculties over which we have moral power, and therefore in relation to which we assuredly incur a moral responsibility. There is not the thing left to the choice of man to do or not to do, but there is some sort or degree of duty involved in his determination; and by how much the more, therefore, our subject becomes embarrassed by the cross influences of variously admitted passion, administered discipline, or encouraged affection, upon the minds of men, by so much the more it becomes matter of weight and import to observe by what laws we should be guided, and of what responsibilities regardful, in all that we admit, administer, or encourage.

Nor indeed have I ever, even in the preceding sections, spoken with levity, though sometimes perhaps with rashness. I have never treated the subject as other than demanding heedful and serious examination, and taking high place among those which justify, as they reward, our utmost ardour and earnestness of pursuit. That it justifies them must be my present task to prove; that it demands them has never been doubted. Art, properly so called, is no recreation; it cannot be learned at spare moments, nor pursued when we have nothing better to do. It is no handiwork for drawing-room tables, no relief of the ennui of boudoirs; it must be understood and undertaken seriously, or not at all.* To advance it men's lives must be given, and to receive it, their hearts. "Le peintre Rubens s'amuse à être ambassadeur,"¹ said one with whom, but for his own words, we might have thought that effort had been absorbed in power, and the labour of his art in its felicity. "E faticoso lo studio

§ 2. *And of what importance considered.*

* I wish the "must" were indeed imperative. The violently increasing number of extremely foolish persons, who now concern themselves about pictures, may be counted among the meanest calamities of modern society. [1883.]

¹ [In 1628 Rubens made a journey to Madrid, at the invitation of the King of Spain. It was on this occasion that he was discovered by a courtier busily painting. "Ho!" cried the latter, "does his most Catholic Majesty's representative amuse himself with painting?" "No," was the reply, "the painter Rubens amuses himself with diplomacy."]

CH. I OF THE THEORETIC FACULTY 27

della pittura, e sempre si fa il mare maggiore,"¹ said he, who of all men was least likely to have left us discouraging report of anything that majesty of intellect could grasp, or continuity of labour overcome.* But that this labour, the necessity of which, in all ages, has been most frankly admitted by the greatest men, is justifiable from a moral point of view, that it is not a vain devotion of the lives of men, that it has functions of usefulness addressed to the weightiest of human interests, and that the objects of it have calls upon us which it is inconsistent alike with our human dignity and our heavenward duty to disobey, has never been boldly asserted nor fairly admitted;² least of all is it likely to be so in these days of despatch and display, where vanity, on the one side, supplies the place of that love of art which is the only effective patronage, and, on the other, that of *the incorruptible and earnest pride which no applause, no reprobation, can blind to its shortcomings, or beguile of its hope.*†

And yet it is in the expectation of obtaining at least a partial acknowledgment of this, as a truth decisive³ both of aim and conduct, that I enter upon the second division of my subject. The time I have already devoted to the task I should have considered too great, and that which I fear may be yet required for its completion would have been cause to me of utter discouragement, but that the object I propose to myself is of no partial nor accidental importance.⁴ It is not now to distinguish between disputed degrees of ability in individuals, or agreeableness in canvases; it is not now to

* Tintoret. (Ridolfi, Vita.)

† One of the best short statements of a true artist's mind which I have ever given. [1883. The passage was first italicised in that edition.]

¹ [Ruskin himself had been drawn into this greater sea. "Tintoret swept me away at once," he says, in recalling his impressions at Venice in 1845, "into the 'mare maggiore' of the schools of painting which crowned the power and perished in the fall of Venice" (*Præterita*, ii. ch. vii. § 140). See also the closing passage of the lecture on "The Unity of Art" in *The Two Paths*, where "those great words of the aged Tintoret" are again quoted.]

² [See again the Letters to Gordon and Liddell, in Vol. III. pp. 665, 670.]

³ [Ed. I reads "influential" instead of "decisive."]

⁴ [See once more the Letters to Gordon and Liddell, in Vol. III., as cited above.]

expose the ignorance or defend the principles of party or person; it is to summon the moral energies of the nation to a forgotten duty, to display the use, force, and function of a great body of neglected sympathies and desires, and to elevate to its healthy and beneficial operation that art which, being altogether addressed to them, rises or falls with their variableness of vigour, now leading them with Tyrtæan fire, now singing them to sleep with baby murmurings.

Because that with many of us the recommendation of our own favourite pursuits is, I fear, rooted more in conceit of ourselves, than in affection towards others, so that sometimes in our very pointing of the way we had rather that the intricacy of it should be admired than unfolded, whence a natural distrust of such recommendation may well have place in the minds of those who have not yet perceived any value in the thing praised; and because, also, men in the present century understand the word Useful in a strange way, or at least (for the word has been often so accepted from the beginning of time) since in these days they act its more limited meaning farther out, and give to it more practical weight and authority; it will be well in the outset that I define exactly what kind of Utility I mean to attribute to art, and especially to that branch of it which is concerned with those impressions of external Beauty, whose nature it is our present object to discover.

That is, to everything created pre-eminently useful, which enables it rightly and fully to perform the functions appointed to it by its Creator. Therefore, that we may determine what is chiefly useful to man, it is necessary first to determine the use of Man himself.

Man's use and function (and let him who will not grant me this follow me no farther,* for this I purpose always to assume) are, to be the witness of the glory of God, and to

* Many readers in old times, *did* follow me no farther; the passage being indeed offensively aggressive in its pietism, and rude in its brevity. For its better explanation see the preface to this edition (p. 7). [1883.]

CH. I OF THE THEORETIC FACULTY 29

advance that glory by his reasonable obedience and resultant happiness.¹

Whatever enables us to fulfil this function is, in the pure and first sense of the word, Useful to us: pre-eminently, therefore, whatever sets the glory of God more brightly before us. But things that only help us to exist are, (*only*)² in a secondary and mean sense, useful; or rather, if they be looked for alone, they are useless, and worse, for it would be better that we should not exist, than that we should guiltily disappoint the purposes of existence.

And yet people speak in this working age, when they speak from their hearts, as if houses and lands, and food and raiment were alone useful, and as if Sight, Thought, and Admiration* were all profitless, so that men insolently call themselves Utilitarians, who would turn, if they had their way, themselves and their race into vegetables; † men who think, as far as such can be said to think, that the meat is more than the life, and the raiment than the body,³ who look to the earth as a stable, and to its fruit as fodder; vinedressers and husbandmen, who love the corn they grind, and the grapes they crush, better than the gardens of the angels upon the slopes of Eden; ‡ hewers of wood and drawers of water,⁴ who think that it is to give them wood to hew and water to draw, that the pine-forests cover the mountains like the shadow of God, and the great rivers move like His eternity. And so comes upon us that Woe of the preacher, that though God “hath made everything beautiful in his time, also He hath set the

* “We live by admiration, hope, and love.”—*Excursion*, book iv.

† I ought to have said, vegetable manure. [1883.]

‡ All the same, I wish, myself, that the angels gave us some clearer notion of them. [1883.]

¹ [A reminiscence of the answer to the first question in the Shorter Catechism (which Ruskin learnt when a child): “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever:” see *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 75, Notes and Correspondence, iv.]

² [The word “only” in brackets and italics was here inserted in the 1883 ed.]

³ [Matthew vi. 25.]

⁴ [Joshua ix. 21.]

world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.”¹

This Nebuchadnezzar curse, that sends men to grass like oxen,² seems to follow but too closely on the excess or continuance of national power and peace.³ In the perplexities of nations, in their struggles for existence, in their infancy, their impotence, or even their disorganization, they have higher hopes and nobler passions. Out of the suffering comes the serious mind; out of the salvation, the grateful heart; out of endurance, fortitude; out of deliverance, faith: but when they have learned to live under providence of laws and with decency and justice of regard for each other, and when they have done away with violent and external sources of suffering, worse evils seem to arise out of their rest; evils that vex less and mortify more, that suck the blood though they do not shed it, and ossify the heart though they do not torture it. And deep though the causes of thankfulness must be to every people at peace with others and at unity in itself, there are causes of fear, also, a fear greater than of sword and sedition: that dependence on God may be forgotten, because the bread is given and the water sure; that gratitude to Him may cease, because His constancy of protection has taken the semblance of a natural law; that heavenly hope may grow faint amidst the full fruition of the world; that selfishness may take place of undemanded devotion, compassion be lost in vainglory, and love in dissimulation; * that enervation may succeed to strength, apathy to patience, and the noise of jesting words and foulness of dark thoughts, to the earnest purity of the girded loins and the burning lamp.⁴ About the river of human life there is a wintry wind, though a heavenly sunshine; the iris colours its

* Rom. xii. 9.

¹ [Ecclesiastes iii. 11. See also Psalm lxxx. 7-10: “Turn us again, O God of hosts, and cause thy face to shine. . . . The hills were covered with the shadow of it.” The whole passage is a good instance of Ruskin’s use of Biblical words and phrases (see Vol. III. p. 674). See further, Matthew vi. 25; Luke xii. 23; Joshua ix. 21.]

² [Daniel iv. 25.]

³ [On the effect of long peace on a nation, see *Crown of Wild Olive*, App., § 161.]

⁴ [Luke xii. 35.]

CH. I OF THE THEORETIC FACULTY 31

agitation, the frost fixes upon its repose. Let us beware that our rest become not the rest of stones,¹ which, so long as they are torrent-tossed and thunder-stricken, maintain their majesty, but when the stream is silent, and the storm passed, suffer the grass to cover them and the lichen to feed on them, and are ploughed down into dust.*

And though I believe that we have salt enough of ardent and holy mind amongst us to keep us in some § 7. *How to be* measure from this moral decay, yet the signs of it *averted.* must be watched with anxiety, in all matters however trivial, in all directions however distant. And at this time, when the iron roads are tearing up the surface of Europe, as grapeshot do the sea; when their great net² is drawing and twitching the ancient frame and strength³ together, contracting all its various life, its rocky arms and rural heart, into a narrow, finite, calculating metropolis of manufactures; when there is not a monument throughout the cities of Europe that speaks of old years and mighty people, but it is being swept away to build cafés and gaming-houses;⁴ when the honour of God is thought

* I have suffered these passages to remain unaltered, because, though recent events have turned them into irony, they are, perhaps, not undeserving of attention, as having marked, during a period of profound and widely extended peace, some of the sources of the national debasement which, on the continent of Europe, has precipitated its close, and been manifested alike in the dissolution of authority, the denial of virtue, and the unresisted victory of every dream of folly and every shape of sin.⁵

¹ [*Cf.* below, sec. i. ch. vi. § 2, p. 93, “not like the dead and cold peace of undisturbed stones,” etc.]

² [Eds. 1 and 2 read “sagene” (Greek *σαγήνη*, Italian *sagena*, French *seine*)=a large drag net.]

³ [Eds. 1 and 2 had “of England.”]

⁴ [A long note was here appended in the earlier editions, but was cancelled in that of 1883. It is here, for better convenience, printed, with various elucidatory passages from Ruskin’s diaries, at the end of the chapter, p. 37. *Cf. On the Old Road*, 1899, i. § 265.]

⁵ [In the ed. of 1883 Ruskin added the following further note:—

“Note of 1856, alluding to the Crimean and other wars. The words ‘denial of virtue’ refer to the physical philosophy of automatic necessity, which has become every day more absurd and mischievous since this was written.”

It was not, however, a note of 1856, for it appeared in the second (1848) edition of the volume. In the ed. of 1883 the reference to the Crimean War was accordingly omitted by the publisher, and “Note of 1848” substituted; the actual reference was to the political upheavals of that year. For Ruskin’s view on the Crimean War, in the same sense as the above passage, see the next volume, ch. xviii.]

to consist in the poverty of His temple, and the column is shortened and the pinnacle shattered, the colour denied to the casement and the marble to the altar, while exchequers are exhausted in luxury of boudoirs and pride of reception-rooms; when we ravage without a pause all the loveliness of creation which God in giving pronounced Good,¹ and destroy without a thought all those labours which men have given their lives and their sons' sons' lives to complete, and have left for a legacy to all their kind, a legacy of more than their hearts' blood, for it is of their souls' travail;—there is need, bitter need, to bring back into men's minds, that to live is nothing, unless to live be to know Him by whom we live;² and that He is not to be known by marring His fair works, and blotting out the evidence of His influences upon His creatures; nor amidst the hurry of crowds and crash of innovation, but in solitary places, and out of the glowing intelligences which He gave to men of old. He did not teach them how to build for glory and for beauty; He did not give them the fearless, faithful, inherited energies that worked on and down from death to death, generation after generation, that we³ might give the work of their poured-out spirit to the axe and the hammer; He has not cloven the earth with rivers,⁴ that their white wild waves might turn wheels and push paddles, nor turned it up under as it were fire,⁵ that it might heat wells and cure diseases; He brings not up His quails by the east wind only to let them fall in flesh about the camp of men;⁶ He has not heaped the rocks of the mountain only for the quarry, nor clothed the grass of the field only for the oven.⁷

Science and art are either subservient to life or the objects of it.⁸ As subservient to life, or practical, their results are,

¹ [Genesis i. 10.]

² [John xvii. 3.]

³ [Ed. 1 reads, "we, foul and sensual as we are, might . . ."]

⁴ [Habakkuk, iii. 9.]

⁵ [Job xxviii. 5.]

⁶ [Numbers xi. 31: "And there went forth a wind from the Lord, and brought quails from the sea, and let them fall by the camp."]

⁷ [Matthew vi. 30.]

⁸ [Ed. 1 reads, "All science and all art may be divided into that which is subservient to life, or which is the object of it."]

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00852-5 - The Works of John Ruskin, Volume 4

John Ruskin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CH. I OF THE THEORETIC FACULTY 33

in the common sense of the word, Useful. As the object of life or theoretic,* they are, in the common sense, Useless. And yet the step between practical and theoretic science is the step between the miner and the geologist, the apothecary and the chemist; and the step between practical and theoretic art is that between the builder and the architect, between the plumber and the artist; and this is a step allowed on all hands to be from less to greater. So that the so-called useless part of each profession does, by the authoritative and right instinct of mankind, assume the more noble place; even though books be sometimes written, and that by writers of no ordinary mind, which assume that a chemist is rewarded for the years of toil which have traced the greater part of the combinations of matter to their ultimate atoms, by discovering a cheap way of refining sugar; and date the eminence of the philosopher whose life has been spent in the investigation of the laws of light, from the time of his inventing an improvement in spectacles.

§ 8. *Division of the pursuits of men into subservient and objective.*

But¹ the common consent of men admits that whatever branch of any pursuit ministers to the bodily comforts, and regards material uses, is ignoble, and whatever part is addressed to the mind only is noble; and that geology does better in reclothing dry bones and revealing lost creations, than in tracing veins of lead and beds of iron; astronomy

* With juvenile vanity I begin using this word in my own peculiar sense, before it is explained to the reader in any sense at all. He must please remember that Theory, from the beginning to the end of this part of *Modern Painters*, is used in the sense of contemplation, whenever it is used carefully. Passages may perhaps occur in which I have used the word accidentally in its ordinary sense of "supposition;" but I will try to catch these in revising.² [1883.]

¹ [Ruskin in his copy for revision omits § 8 down to this point, and reads here, "And even the common consent . . ." The rest of § 8 is § 3 in *Frondees Agrestes*. For "admits that whatever branch," ed. 1 reads "proves and accepts the proposition, that whatever part . . ."]

² [There were, however, no such passages caught, though a passage on p. 64 might have been noticed. In a later note of 1883, Ruskin inadvertently uses the word "theory" in its ordinary sense: see p. 233.]