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John Ruskin

Excerpt

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# MODERN PAINTERS

VOLUME III

## PREFACE

1. As this preface is nearly all about myself, no one need take the trouble of reading it, unless he happens to be desirous of knowing—what I, at least, am bound to state—the circumstances which have caused the long delay of the work, as well as the alterations which will be noticed in its form.

The first and second volumes were written to check, as far as I could, the attacks upon Turner which prevented the public from honouring his genius, at the time when his power was greatest. The check was partially given, but too late; Turner was seized by painful illness not long after the second volume appeared; his works, towards the close of the year 1845, showed a conclusive failure of power; and I saw that nothing remained for me to write, but his epitaph.<sup>1</sup>

The critics had done their proper and appointed work; they had embittered, more than those who did not know Turner intimately could have believed possible, the closing years of his life;<sup>2</sup> and had blinded the world in general (as it appears ordained by Fate that the world always *shall* be blinded) to the presence of a great spirit among them, till the hour of its departure. With them, and their successful work, I had nothing more to do; the account of gain and loss, of gifts and gratitude, between Turner and his

<sup>1</sup> [The second volume appeared in 1846. In the Academy of that year Turner had several pictures; in 1847, only one; in 1848, none; in 1849, two; and in 1850, four; but all these latest works showed clear signs of failing powers: in 1846 both his mind and his sight partially failed—see Ruskin's outline of Turner's period in the *Notes on the Turner Collection*, 1856 (Vol. XIII.).]

<sup>2</sup> [See, again, the *Notes on the Turner Collection* (No. 530), where Ruskin gives a personal reminiscence to this effect.]

countrymen, was for ever closed. *He* could only be left to his quiet death at Chelsea,—the sun upon his face;<sup>1</sup> *they* to dispose a length of funeral through Ludgate, and bury, with threefold honour, his body in St. Paul's, his pictures at Charing Cross, and his purposes in Chancery. But with respect to the illustration and preservation of those of his works which remained unburied, I felt that much might yet be done, if I could at all succeed in proving that these works had some nobleness in them, and were worth preservation. I pursued my task, therefore, as I had at first proposed, with this only difference in method,—that instead of writing in continued haste, such as I had been forced into at first by the urgency of the occasion, I set myself to do the work as well as I could, and to collect materials for the complete examination of the canons of art received among us.

2. I have now given ten years of my life<sup>2</sup> to the single purpose of enabling myself to judge rightly of art, and spent them in labour as earnest and continuous as men usually undertake to gain position, or accumulate fortune. It is true, that the public still call me an “amateur”; nor have I ever been able to persuade them that it was possible to work steadily and hard with any other motive than that of gaining bread, or to give up a fixed number of hours every day to the furtherance of an object unconnected with personal interests. I have, however, given up so much of life to this object; earnestly desiring to ascertain, and be able to teach, the truth respecting art; and also knowing that this truth was, by time and labour, definitely ascertainable.

It is an idea too frequently entertained, by persons who

<sup>1</sup> [See *Lectures on Architecture and Painting*, § 106 (Vol. XII. p. 133). For particulars of the controversy which arose on Turner's will, see Introduction to Vol. XIII.]

<sup>2</sup> [*i.e.*, from 1845; from the study of Italian art during his tour of that year Ruskin dated the beginning of his “man's work”: see Vol. IV. p. xxxiv. With § 2 here compare a similar passage in “The Mystery of Life and its Arts” in *Sesame and Lilies*, § 101.]

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are not much interested in art, that there are no laws of right or wrong concerning it; and that the best art is that which pleases most widely. Hence the constant allegation of “dogmatism” against any one who states unhesitatingly either preference or principle, respecting pictures. There are, however, laws of truth and right in painting, just as fixed as those of harmony in music, or of affinity in chemistry. Those laws are perfectly ascertainable by labour, and ascertainable no otherwise. It is as ridiculous for any one to speak positively about painting who has not given a great part of his life to its study, as it would be for a person who had never studied chemistry to give a lecture on affinities of elements; but it is also as ridiculous for a person to speak hesitatingly about laws of painting who has conscientiously given his time to their ascertainment, as it would be for Mr. Faraday to announce in a dubious manner that iron had an affinity for oxygen, and to put the question to the vote of his audience whether it had or not.<sup>1</sup> Of course there are many things, in all stages of knowledge, which cannot be dogmatically stated; and it will be found, by any candid reader, either of what I have before written, or of this book, that, in many cases, I am *not* dogmatic. The phrase, “I think so,” or, “it seems so to me,” will be met with continually; and I pray the reader to believe that I use such expression always in seriousness, never as matter of form.

3. It may perhaps be thought that, considering the not very elaborate structure of the following volumes, they

<sup>1</sup> [So in a letter to Dr. Furnivall, Ruskin writes:—

“VEVAY, June 9th, 1854.— . . . I don't say I wouldn't care for reputation if I had it, but until people are ready to receive all I say about art as 'unquestionable,' just as they receive what Faraday tells them about chemistry, I don't consider myself to have any reputation at all worth caring about.”

The letter, from which this is an extract, is among (pp. 30–33) the privately-printed (1897) *Letters from John Ruskin to Frederick J. Furnivall*, and is reprinted in a later volume of this edition. For the respect in which Ruskin held “good Professor Faraday” (1791–1867), see *Deucalion*, ch. iii.; and *Mornings in Florence*, § 33. Faraday was on the National Gallery Commission of 1857, before which Ruskin gave evidence (see Vol. XIII.).]

might have been finished sooner. But it will be found, on reflection, that the ranges of inquiry engaged in demanded, even for their slight investigation, time and pains which are quite unrepresented in the result. It often required a week or two's hard walking to determine some geological problem, now dismissed in an unnoticed sentence; and it constantly needed examination and thought, prolonged during many days in the picture gallery, to form opinions which the reader may suppose to be dictated by caprice, and will hear only to dispute.<sup>1</sup>

A more serious disadvantage, resulting from the necessary breadth of subject, was the chance of making mistakes in minor and accessory points. For the labour of a critic who sincerely desires to be just, extends into more fields than it is possible for any single hand to furrow straightly. He has to take *some* note of many physical sciences; of optics, geometry, geology, botany, and anatomy; he must acquaint himself with the works of all great artists, and with the temper and history of the times in which they lived; he must be a fair metaphysician, and a careful observer of the phenomena of natural scenery.<sup>2</sup> It is not possible to extend the range of work thus widely, without running the chance of occasionally making mistakes; and if I carefully guarded against that chance, I should be compelled both to shorten my powers of usefulness in many directions, and to lose much time over what work I undertook. All that I can secure, therefore, is rightness in main points and main tendencies; for it is perfectly possible to protect oneself against small errors, and yet to make great and final error in the sum of work: on the other hand, it is equally possible to fall into many small errors, and yet be right in tendency all the while, and entirely

<sup>1</sup> [See the "Notes on the Louvre," given in Vol. XII. pp. 448-473, in order to exemplify the detailed studies of pictures on their technical side which Ruskin was in the habit of making.]

<sup>2</sup> [See in this connexion Ruskin's letter to Mrs. Carlyle, given in the Introduction, above, p. xlix.]

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right in the end. In this respect, some men may be compared to careful travellers, who neither stumble at stones, nor slip in sloughs, but have, from the beginning of their journey to its close, chosen the wrong road; and others to those who, however slipping or stumbling at the wayside, have yet their eyes fixed on the true gate and goal (stumbling, perhaps, even the more because they have), and will not fail of reaching them. Such are assuredly the safer guides: he who follows them may avoid their slips, and be their companion in attainment.

Although, therefore, it is not possible but that, in the discussion of so many subjects as are necessarily introduced in the following pages, here and there a chance should arise of minor mistake or misconception, the reader need not be disturbed by the detection of any such. He will find always that they do not affect the matter mainly in hand.

4. I refer especially in these remarks to the chapters on Classical and Mediæval Landscape. It is certain, that in many respects, the views there stated must be inaccurate or incomplete; for how should it be otherwise when the subject is one whose proper discussion would require knowledge of the entire history of two great ages of the world? But I am well assured that the suggestions in those chapters are useful; and that even if, after farther study of the subject, the reader should find cause to differ from me in this or the other speciality, he will yet thank me for helping him to a certain length in the investigation, and confess, perhaps, that he could not at last have been right, if I had not first ventured to be wrong.

And of one thing he may be certified, that any error I fall into will not be in an illogical deduction: I may mistake the meaning of a symbol, or the angle of a rock-cleavage, but not draw an inconsequent conclusion. I state this, because it has often been said that I am not logical, by persons who do not so much as know what logic means. Next to imagination, the power of perceiving logical relation

is one of the rarest among men: certainly, of those with whom I have conversed, I have found always ten who had deep feeling, quick wit, or extended knowledge, for one who could set down a syllogism without a flaw; and for ten who could set down a syllogism, only one who could *entirely* understand that a square has four sides. Even as I am sending these sheets to press, a work is put into my hand, written to prove (I would, from the depth of my heart, it could prove) that there was no ground for what I said in *The Stones of Venice* respecting the logical probability of the continuity of evil. It seems learned, temperate, thoughtful, everything in feeling and aim that a book should be, and yet it begins with this sentence:—

“The question cited in our preface, ‘Why not infinite good out of infinite evil?’ must be taken to imply—for it else can have no weight,—that in order to the production of infinite good, the existence of infinite evil is indispensable.”<sup>1</sup>

So, if I had said that there was no reason why honey should not be sucked out of a rock, and oil out of a flinty rock, the writer would have told me this sentence must be taken to imply—for it else could have no weight,—that in order to the production of honey, the existence of rocks is indispensable. No less intense and marvellous are the logical errors into which our best writers are continually falling, owing to the notion that laws of logic will help them better than common sense. Whereas any man who can reason at all, does it instinctively, and takes leaps over intermediate syllogisms by the score, yet never misses his footing at the end of the leap; but he who cannot instinctively argue, might as well, with the gout in both feet, try to follow a chamois hunter by the help of crutches, as to follow, by

<sup>1</sup> [*On the Duration of Evil: an Essay*, 1855. The writer states in his preface (pp. iii., iv.) that among the reasons inducing him to restate the arguments for the finiteness of evil “is the circumstance—noticed by several friends—that a layman of admired ability, in whose cordial respect for religion they truly rejoice, has stepped aside, when treating of other topics, to cast a weapon at those opinions.” He then quotes from *The Stones of Venice* the last words of vol. iii. ch. iii. § 42 and the author’s footnote thereto (Vol. XI. p. 165).]

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the help of syllogism, a person who has the right use of his reason. I should not, however, have thought it necessary to allude to this common charge against my writings,<sup>1</sup> but that it happens to confirm some views I have long entertained, and which the reader will find glanced at in their proper place,<sup>2</sup> respecting the necessity of a more *practically* logical education for our youth. Of other various charges I need take no note, because they are always answered the one by the other. The complaint made against me to-day for being narrow and exclusive, is met to-morrow by indignation that I should admire schools whose characters cannot be reconciled;<sup>3</sup> and the assertion of one critic, that I am always contradicting myself, is balanced by the vexation of another, at my ten years' obstinacies in error.

5. I once intended the illustrations to these volumes to be more numerous and elaborate, but the art of photography now enables any reader to obtain as many memoranda of the facts of nature as he needs; and, in the course of my ten years' pause, I have formed plans for the representation of some of the works of Turner on their own scale; so that it would have been quite useless to spend time in reducing drawings to the size of this page, which were afterwards to be engraved of their own size.\* I have therefore here only given illustrations enough to enable the reader,

\* I should be very grateful to proprietors of pictures or drawings by Turner, if they would send me lists of the works in their possession; as I am desirous of forming a systematic catalogue of all his works.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [See above, Introduction, pp. liii.–liv.]

<sup>2</sup> [See Appendix iii. in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*.]

<sup>3</sup> [See below, ch. x. § 5 n., p. 173.]

<sup>4</sup> [This scheme has been already referred to: see Vol. XII. p. 370 n. The systematic catalogue was never made by Ruskin, though in various places he cast typical works by Turner into various groups: see *Modern Painters*, vol. v. pt. ix. ch. xi. (where the *Liber Studiorum* is thus classified); *Notes on the Turner Gallery*, 1856; *Notes on his Drawings by Turner*, 1878. The plans for the representation of some of Turner's works "on their own scale" were not carried out either; though, a few years later, Ruskin made a beginning towards its realisation, with the assistance of Mr. George Allen: see the reproductions (on a reduced scale) of some of the drawings thus treated in Vol. XIII.]



who has not access to the works of Turner, to understand the principles laid down in the text, and apply them to such art as may be within his reach. And I owe sincere thanks to the various engravers who have worked with me, for the zeal and care with which they have carried out the requirements in each case, and overcome difficulties of a nature often widely differing from those involved by their habitual practice. I would not make invidious distinction, where all have done well; but may perhaps be permitted to point, as examples of what I mean, to the 3rd and 6th Plates in this volume (the 6th being left unlettered in order not to injure the effect of its ground), in which Mr. Le Keux and Mr. Armytage have exactly facsimiled, in line engraving, drawings of mine made on a grey ground touched with white, and have given even the *loaded* look of the body colour. The power of thus imitating actual touches of colour with pure lines will be, I believe, of great future importance in rendering Turner's work on a large scale. As for the merit or demerit of these or other drawings of my own, which I am obliged now for the sake of illustration often to engrave, I believe I could speak of it impartially, and should unreluctantly do so; but I leave, as most readers will think I ought, such judgment to them, merely begging them to remember that there are two general principles to be kept in mind in examining the drawings of any writer on art: the first, that they ought at least to show such ordinary skill in draughtsmanship, as to prove that the writer knows *what* the good qualities of drawing *are*; <sup>1</sup> the second, that they are never to be expected to equal, in either execution or conception, the work of accomplished artists — for the simple reason that in order to do *anything* thoroughly well, the whole mind, and the whole available time, must be given to that single art. It is probable, for reasons which will be noted in the following pages, that the critical and executive faculties are

<sup>1</sup> [On this matter compare *Inaugural Address* at the Cambridge School of Art, § 7: "no man ever was a thorough judge of painting who could not draw."]

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in great part independent of each other; so that it is nearly as great an absurdity to require of any critic that he should equal in execution even the work which he condemns, as to require of the audience which hisses a piece of vocal music that they should instantly chant it in truer harmony themselves. But whether this be true or not (it is at least untrue to this extent, that a certain power of drawing is *indispensable* to the critic of art), and supposing that the executive and critical powers always exist in some correspondent degree in the same person, still they cannot be cultivated to the same extent. The attention required for the development of a theory is necessarily withdrawn from the design of a drawing, and the time devoted to the realization of a form is lost to the solution of a problem. Choice *must* at last be made between one and the other power, as the principal aim of life; and if the painter should find it necessary sometimes to explain one of his pictures in words, or the writer to illustrate his meaning with a drawing, the skill of the one need not be doubted because his logic is feeble, nor the sense of the other because his pencil is listless.

6. As, however, it is sometimes alleged by the opponents of my principles, that I have never *done anything*, it is proper that the reader should know exactly the amount of work for which I am answerable in these illustrations. When an example is given from any of the works of Turner, it is either etched by myself from the original drawing, or engraved from a drawing of mine, translating Turner's work out of colour into black and white, as, for instance, the frontispiece to the fourth volume. When a Plate is inscribed as "*after*" such and such a master, I have always myself made the drawing, in black and white, from the original picture; as, for instance, Plate 11 in this volume. If it has been made from a previously existing engraving, it is inscribed with the name of the first engraver at the left-hand lowest corner; as, for instance, Plate 18 in vol. iv. Outline etchings are either by my