

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00855-6 - The Works of John Ruskin, Volume 7: Modern Painters V

John Ruskin

Excerpt

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PART VI
OF LEAF BEAUTY

CHAPTER I

THE EARTH-VEIL

§ 1. "To dress it and to keep it."

That, then, was to be our work. Alas! what work have we set ourselves upon instead! How have we ravaged the garden instead of kept it—feeding our war-horses with its flowers, and splintering its trees into spear-shafts!

"And at the East a flaming sword."¹

Is its flame quenchless? and are those gates that keep the way indeed passable no more? or is it not rather that we no more desire to enter? For what can we conceive of that first Eden which we might not yet win back, if we chose? It was a place full of flowers, we say. Well: the flowers are always striving to grow wherever we suffer them; and the fairer, the closer. There may, indeed, have been a Fall of Flowers, as a Fall of Man; but assuredly creatures such as we are can now fancy nothing lovelier than roses and lilies, which would grow for us side by side, leaf overlapping leaf, till the Earth was white and red with them, if we cared to have it so. And Paradise was full of pleasant shades and fruitful avenues. Well: what hinders us from covering as much of the world as we like with pleasant shade, and pure blossom, and goodly fruit? Who forbids its valleys to be covered over with corn till they laugh and sing? Who prevents its dark forests, ghostly and uninhabitable, from being changed into infinite orchards, wreathing the hills with frail-floreted snow, far away to the half-lighted horizon of April, and flushing the face of all the autumnal earth with glow of clustered food? But Paradise

¹ [Genesis ii. 15; iii. 24.]

was a place of peace, we say, and all the animals were gentle servants to us. Well: the world would yet be a place of peace if we were all peacemakers, and gentle service should we have of its creatures if we gave them gentle mastery. But so long as we make sport of slaying bird and beast,¹ so long as we choose to contend rather with our fellows than with our faults, and make battlefield of our meadows instead of pasture—so long, truly, the Flaming Sword will still turn every way, and the gates of Eden remain barred close enough, till we have sheathed the sharper flame of our own passions, and broken down the closer gates of our own hearts.

§ 2. I have been led to see and feel this more and more, as I considered the service which the flowers and trees, which man was at first appointed to keep, were intended to render to him in return for his care; and the services they still render to him, as far as he allows their influence, or fulfils his own task towards them. For what infinite wonderfulness there is in this vegetation, considered, as indeed it is, [as] the means by which the earth becomes the companion of man—his friend and his teacher! In the conditions which we have traced in its rocks, there could only be seen preparation for his existence;—the characters which enable him to live on it safely, and to work with it easily—in all these it has been inanimate and passive; but vegetation is to it as an imperfect soul, given to meet the soul of man. The earth in its depths must remain dead and cold, incapable except of slow crystalline change; but at its surface,² which human beings look upon and deal with, it ministers to them through a veil of strange intermediate being: which breathes, but has no voice; moves, but cannot leave its

¹ [On this subject, see below, pp. 340–341.]

² [The following passage was much rewritten; the first draft stood thus:—

“ . . . ; but at its surface, when human beings are to touch and look upon it, it is permitted to minister to them through a veil of strange intermediate being; and the plant, with its root in the cold rock, and the rough and strange substance that has life without consciousness, death without bitterness, is neither alive nor dead, which moves and cannot leave its appointed place: has this message of life and death—a youth without expectation, and age without sorrow.”]

appointed place; passes through life without consciousness, to death without bitterness; wears the beauty of youth, without its passion; and declines to the weakness of age, without its regret.

§ 3. And in this mystery of intermediate being, entirely subordinate to us, with which we can deal as we choose, having just the greater power as we have the less responsibility for our treatment of the unsuffering creature, most of the pleasures which we need from the external world are gathered, and most of the lessons we need are written,¹ all kinds of precious grace and teaching being united in this link between the Earth and Man; wonderful in universal adaptation to his need, desire, and discipline; God's daily preparation of the earth for him, with beautiful means of life. First, a carpet to make it soft for him; then, a coloured fantasy of embroidery thereon; then, tall spreading of foliage to shade him from sun heat, and shade also the fallen rain, that it may not dry quickly back into the clouds, but stay to nourish the springs among the moss.

¹ [Ruskin here curtailed in revising. The MS. has the following additional passage:—

“ . . . are written. Animals are wayward teachers; we cannot always tell what they are meant to say to us; it looks as if the bee rather overdid her pattern things of industry: and one would be glad if the sheep were a little more intelligent in her innocence, and knew a little better what she was about. But a tree can do no wrong, cannot fall short in any way of being what it ought to be: if it fails in any wise, we know it is its misfortune, not its fault: and we can learn of it nothing but the truth and right, under any circumstances. So also we need not be under any troublesome remorse in putting it to our service. We may ill-treat it, forget it, starve it, overwork it, and yet have no weight of misery laid at our door, and if we waste its goodness, we shall in the end suffer for it ourselves only, which it is satisfactory to generous people to know—when they have ill-treated any creatures. And the more we think of it, the more wonderful appears this link between the Earth and Man; wonderful in its universal adaptation to his need, desire, and discipline. To his need—for it is his food, his clothing, his shade, and his heat. Of serviceable animals, those are most necessary to him which feed most on plants—which are, in fact, little more than vital transferring powers, turning the pasture into milk, or refining the mulberry leaf into thread. But supposing no animals existed at all, so long as man has corn, wine, fruit, flax, cotton, and wood, of which coal is only a compressed and undecaying form, his life is possible to him, and may be pleasurable. Plants are, in fact, the visible, beautiful means of life—God's preparation of the Earth before him daily. First, a carpet . . .”]

Stout wood to bear this leafage : easily to be cut, yet tough and light, to make houses for him, or instruments (lance-shaft, or plough-handle, according to his temper); useless it had been, if harder; useless, if less fibrous; useless, if less elastic. Winter comes, and the shade of leafage falls away, to let the sun warm the earth; the strong boughs remain, breaking the strength of winter winds. The seeds which are to prolong the race, innumerable according to the need, are made beautiful and palatable, varied into infinitude of appeal to the fancy of man, or provision for his service: cold juice, or glowing spice, or balm, or incense, softening oil, preserving resin, medicine of styptic, febrifuge, or lulling charm: and all these presented in forms of endless change. Fragility or force, softness and strength, in all degrees and aspects; unerring uprightness, as of temple pillars, or unguided wandering of feeble tendrils on the ground; mighty resistances of rigid arm and limb to the storms of ages, or wavings to and fro with faintest pulse of summer streamlet. Roots cleaving the strength of rock, or binding the transience of the sand; crests basking in sunshine of the desert, or hiding by dripping spring and lightless cave; foliage far tossing in entangled fields beneath every wave of ocean—clothing, with variegated, everlasting films, the peaks of the trackless mountains, or ministering at cottage doors to every gentlest passion and simplest joy of humanity.

§ 4. Being thus prepared for us in all ways, and made beautiful, and good for food, and for building, and for instruments of our hands, this race of plants, deserving boundless affection and admiration from us, becomes, in proportion to their obtaining it, a nearly perfect test of our being in right temper of mind and way of life; so that no one can be far wrong in either who loves the trees enough, and every one is assuredly wrong in both who does not love them, if his life has brought them in his way. It is clearly possible to do without them, for the great companionship of the sea and sky are all that sailors need; and many a noble heart has been taught the best it had to learn between

dark stone walls. Still if human life be cast among trees at all, the love borne to them is a sure test of its purity. And it is a sorrowful proof of the mistaken ways of the world that the "country," in the simple sense of a place of fields and trees, has hitherto been the source of reproach to its inhabitants, and that the words "countryman, rustic, clown, paysan, villager," still signify a rude and untaught person, as opposed to the words "townsman" and "citizen."¹ We accept this usage of words, or the evil which it signifies, somewhat too quietly; as if it were quite necessary and natural that country-people should be rude, and townspeople gentle. Whereas I believe that the result of each mode of life may, in some stages of the world's progress, be the exact reverse; and that another use of words may be forced upon us by a new aspect of facts, so that we may find ourselves saying: "Such and such a person is very gentle and kind—he is quite rustic; and such and such another person is very rude and ill-taught—he is quite urbane."

§ 5. At all events, cities have hitherto gained the better part of their good report through our evil ways of going on in the world generally; chiefly and eminently through our bad habit of fighting with each other. No field, in the Middle Ages, being safe from devastation, and every country lane yielding easier passage to the marauders, peacefully-minded men necessarily congregated in cities, and walled themselves in, making as few cross-country roads as possible: while the men who sowed and reaped the harvests of Europe were only the servants or slaves of the barons. The disdain of all agricultural pursuits by the nobility, and of all plain facts by the monks, kept educated Europe in a state of mind over which natural phenomena could have no power; body and intellect being lost in the practice of war without purpose, and the meditation of words without meaning. Men learned the dexterity with sword and syllogism, which they

¹ [In writing to his father from Lucerne (October 28, 1861) Ruskin says:

"In the first chapter of my fifth volume, in speaking of the names of country people which have a reproachful signification, I believe I missed 'villain.' It should be put in the margin."]

mistook for education, within cloister and tilt-yard; and looked on all the broad space of the world of God mainly as a place for exercise of horses, or for growth of food.

§ 6. There is a beautiful type of this neglect of the perfectness of the Earth's beauty, by reason of the passions of men, in that picture of Paul Uccello's of the battle of Sant' Egidio,* in which the armies meet on a country road beside a hedge of wild roses; the tender red flowers tossing above the helmets, and glowing between the lowered lances. For in like manner the whole of Nature only shone hitherto for man between the tossing of helmet-crests; and sometimes I cannot but think of the trees of the earth as capable of a kind of sorrow,¹ in that imperfect life of theirs, as they opened their innocent leaves in the warm spring-time, in vain for men; and all along the dells of England her beeches cast their dappled shade only where the outlaw drew his bow, and the king rode his careless chase; and by the sweet French rivers their long ranks of poplar waved in the twilight, only to show the flames of burning cities on the horizon, through the tracery of their stems; amidst the fair defiles of the Apennines, the twisted olive-trunks hid the ambushes of treachery; and on their valley meadows, day by day, the lilies which were white at the dawn were washed with crimson at sunset.

§ 7. And indeed I had once purposed, in this work, to show² what kind of evidence existed respecting the possible influence of country life on men; it seeming to me, then, likely that here and there a reader would perceive this to

* In our own National Gallery. It is quaint and imperfect, but of great interest.³

¹ [Compare *Time and Tide*, § 166, where Ruskin quotes this "dreaming fancy of long ago."]

² [The first draft reads:—

"§ 7. Thus far I had written long ago; it then presenting itself strongly to my mind, as an integral part of my task, to show . . ."]

³ [No. 583. The picture has been supposed to represent the battle of Sant' Egidio, July 7, 1416, in which Carlo Malatesta and his nephew, Galeazzo, were taken prisoners by Braccio di Montone, Lord of Perugia; but this identification of the subject is open to some doubt (see an article in the *Monthly Review*, October 1901). Ruskin refers again to the picture below (p. 368).]

be a grave question, more than most which we contend about, political or social, and might care to follow it out with me earnestly.

The day will assuredly come when men will see that it *is* a grave question; at which period, also, I doubt not, there will arise persons able to investigate it. For the present, the movements of the world seem little likely to be influenced by botanical law; or by any other considerations respecting trees, than the probable price of timber.¹ I shall limit myself, therefore, to my own simple woodman's work, and try to hew this book into its final shape, with the limited and humble aim that I had in beginning it, namely, to prove how far the idle and peaceable persons, who have hitherto cared about leaves and clouds, have rightly seen, or faithfully reported of them.

¹ [Here, again, the first draft is different:—

“ . . . price of timber. Having been now three years diverted from my work, and had occasion in the meantime to examine into a few of the main-springs of the world's motions, I perceive that those motions are by no means likely to be influenced by Vegetation—nor by any considerations arising out of the contemplation of it. The world will probably for a few years set little store by any sort of leaves; and by leaves of the tree of life, least of all; and will accordingly gather not many, needing rather for its healthy medicine—it may cheerfully be hoped—leaves of nettle and thistle than such as are for the healing of the nations.”

These passages are of value in fixing the date of composition; see above, Introduction, p. lvii.]

CHAPTER II

THE LEAF-ORDERS

§ 1. As in our sketch of the structure of mountains it seemed advisable to adopt a classification of their forms, which, though inconsistent with absolute scientific precision, was convenient for order of successive inquiry, and gave useful largeness of view;¹ so, and with yet stronger reason, in glancing at the first laws of vegetable life, it will be best to follow an arrangement easily remembered and broadly true, however incapable of being carried out into entirely consistent detail. I say, “with yet stronger reason,” because more questions are at issue among botanists than among geologists; a greater number of classifications have been suggested for plants than for rocks; nor is it unlikely that those now accepted may be hereafter modified. I take an arrangement, therefore, involving no theory; serviceable enough for all working purposes, and sure to remain thus serviceable, in its rough generality, whatever views may hereafter be developed among botanists.

§ 2. A child’s division of plants is into “trees and flowers.” If, however, we were to take him in spring, after he had gathered his lapful of daisies, from the lawn into the orchard, and ask him how he would call those wreaths of richer floret, whose frail petals tossed their foam of promise between him and the sky, he would at once see the need of some intermediate name, and call them, perhaps, “tree-flowers.” If, then, we took him to a birch-wood, and showed him that catkins were flowers, as well as cherry-blossoms, he might, with a little help, reach so far as to divide all flowers into two classes; one, those that grew

¹ [See Vol. VI. pp. 128–133.]

on ground; and another, those that grew on trees. The botanist might smile at such a division; but an artist would not. To him, as to the child, there is something specific and distinctive in those rough trunks that carry the higher flowers. To him, it makes the main difference between one plant and another, whether it is to tell as a light upon the ground, or as a shade upon the sky. And if, after this, we asked for a little help from the botanist, and he were to lead us, leaving the blossoms, to look more carefully at leaves and buds, we should find ourselves able in some sort to justify, even to him, our childish classification. For our present purposes, justifiable or not, it is the most suggestive and convenient. Plants are, indeed, broadly referable to two great classes. The first we may, perhaps, not inexpediently call *TENTED PLANTS*.¹ They live in encampments, on the ground, as lilies; or on surfaces of rock, or stems of other plants, as lichens and mosses. They live—some for a year, some for many years, some for myriads of years; but, perishing, they pass as the tented Arab passes; they leave *no memorials of themselves*,² except the seed, or bulb, or root which is to perpetuate the race.

§ 3. The other great class of plants we may perhaps best call *BUILDING PLANTS*. These will *not* live on the ground, but eagerly raise edifices above it. Each works hard with solemn forethought all its life. Perishing, it leaves its work in the form which will be most useful to its successors—its own monument, and their inheritance. These architectural edifices we call “Trees.”

It may be thought that this nomenclature already involves a theory. But I care about neither the nomenclature, nor about anything questionable in my description of the classes. The reader is welcome to give them what names he likes, and to render what account of them he thinks fittest. But to us, as artists, or lovers of art, this

¹ [In the MS. Ruskin had called them “Ground Plants,” living “either on the ground or on surfaces which are ground to them, as lichens . . .”]

² [See Ecclesiasticus xlv. 9.]