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978-1-108-00972-0 - The Life of John Ruskin, Volume 2: 1860-1900

Edward Tyas Cook

Excerpt

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Volume II

(1860-1900)

CHAPTER I

UNTO THIS LAST

(1860)

“Government and co-operation are in all things and eternally the laws of life; anarchy and competition, eternally and in all things the laws of death.”—*Modern Painters*, vol. v.

AMONG the lectures which as an undergraduate I heard Ruskin deliver at Oxford, one has more particularly stayed in my memory. I had gone to the lecture-room in good time, for otherwise there was no chance of getting a good place; and some minutes before the appointed hour, the Professor's servant came in and deposited five large and sumptuously bound volumes upon the right hand of the table, the lettering on them carefully turned towards the wall. Presently Ruskin entered, to the usual accompaniment of applause, carrying a small volume in faded green cloth. He was an adept in the art of exciting curiosity; and after transferring the pile of the large volumes to the left-hand side of his desk, he laid down the little green book on his right hand—looking up at the audience thereafter, with a genial smile, as much as to say, “Now, don't you wonder what the books are and what I am going to tell you about them?” He did not keep us long in doubt. The subject of the course to which the lecture belonged had been first announced as “Landscape Painting”; but it never much mattered what Ruskin's lectures were called, and the course was in fact an informal commentary at large upon his books and teaching. From 1845 to 1860, he said, he had gone on writing with more or less public applause; and then in 1860 people saw a change come

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CHAMOUNI · 1860

CHAP. I. over him, of which they highly disapproved. For fifteen years precisely his writings had been thought praiseworthy; and for fifteen precisely, thought the reverse.¹ “These volumes on my left” (turning them round and pushing them from him) “are the volumes of *Modern Painters* which were praised; this volume on my right is the one which changed praise into blame. I got a bound copy of the fifth volume of *Modern Painters* at St. Martin’s in the summer of 1860, and in the valley of Chamouni I gave up my art-work and wrote this little book” (taking it up in his hand)—“the beginning of the days of reprobation. But it is written in a better style; it is the central work of my life; and it contained at once the substance of all that I have had since to say.” The little book was *Unto this Last*.

I

The completion of *Modern Painters* left the author exhausted, and suffering in some measure from the effects of reaction after a long spell of concentration upon a particular task. “I am more tired out,” he wrote to Dr. John Brown (Lausanne, Aug. 6, 1860), “than the bulk of that last volume would apparently justify, but not half the work I did is in it. I cut away half of what I had written, as I threw it into the final form, thinking the book would be too big.” One of the chapters crowded out of *Modern Painters* was a paper upon “Sir Joshua and Holbein,” which Ruskin sent accordingly for publication in one of the early numbers of the *Cornhill Magazine*, which had been launched by his publisher, under Thackeray’s editorship, in January 1860.² The sheets of the book were passed in May, and leaving his father to see the work finally through the press, the author set out for Chamouni. “My father well pleased,” he says, “with the last chapter and the engraved drawings from Nuremberg and Rheinfelden.

¹ He was speaking in 1877. The fifteen years take us only to 1875; in which year he noted yet another change, but that does not at present concern us.

² Ruskin’s paper appeared in March; it was reprinted in *On the Old Road*; and, in the Library Edition, vol. xix.

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SABBATARIANISM

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On the strength of this piece of filial duty I am cruel enough to go away to St. Martin's again, by myself, to meditate on what is to be done next. Thence I go up to Chamouni—where a new epoch of life and death begins.”¹ CHAP. I.

Of Ruskin's sojourn abroad in this year (May–Sept.) there is no detailed record. He kept no diary, for this was doubtless written in the form of the usual daily letter to his father, but the letters of 1860 have not been preserved. His companion was an American, Mr. W. J. Stillman—then a young artist, whose acquaintance he had made nine or ten years before, and of whose studies of landscape he hoped great things. Mr. Stillman, who was Ruskin's guest, says that “more princely hospitality than his no man ever received, or more kindly companionship.” They spent much time in sketching together, Ruskin sometimes sitting over his pupil and directing his work so closely that, as another pupil said, “he wanted me to hold the brush while he painted.”² “Every day,” says Mr. Stillman, “we climbed some secondary peak, five or six thousand feet, and in the evenings we discussed art or played chess, mainly in rehearsing problems, until midnight.” On Sundays no work was done, and once they fell into a discussion of Sabbatarianism. Stillman pointed out the critical objections to the identification of the weekly rest with the first day of the week. “To this demonstration,” he says, “Ruskin, always deferent to the literal interpretation of the Gospel, could not make a defence; the creed had so bound him to the letter that the least enlargement of the structure broke it, and he rejected the whole tradition—not only the Sunday Sabbath, but the authority of the ecclesiastical interpretation of the texts.”³ Mr. Stillman exaggerates the effect which this one “demonstration” had upon the course of his friend's thoughts; but the reminiscence agrees with the sceptical mood into which Ruskin was now entering. “So you have been seeing the Pope and all his Easter performances!” (he wrote to Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe,

¹ *Præterita*, vol. iii. § 12.

² Mr. Rowse: see Stillman's *Autobiography*, vol. i. p. 264.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

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FROM ART TO ECONOMICS

CHAP. I. whose acquaintance he had made in Switzerland on an earlier tour); "I congratulate you, for I suppose it is something like 'Positively the last appearance on any stage.' What was the use of thinking about *him*? You should have had your own thoughts about what was to come after him. I don't mean that Roman Catholicism will die out so quickly. It will last pretty nearly as long as Protestantism, which keeps it up; but I wonder what is to come next. That is the main question just now for everybody."

II

"I have been chiefly drawing Alpine roses, or rather Alpine rose-leaves," Ruskin wrote to Dr. John Brown. But his real occupation was the "Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy" which he called *Unto this Last*. His diversion to economic inquiries was not so much a change as a development. His æsthetic criticism had from the first been coloured throughout by moral considerations. His study of architecture had convinced him that art is the expression of national life and character. He who would raise the flower must cultivate the proper soil. "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever"; yes, added Ruskin, but a joy which is to be for ever, must also be a joy for all.¹ His love of beauty, his study of art, had brought him up full front to an examination of the principles of national well-being. His exquisite sensibility to impressions of beauty in the world of nature thus became also

"a nerve o'er which do creep

The else unfelt oppressions of mankind."

"It is the vainest of affectations," he afterwards wrote, "to try and put beauty into shadows, while all real things that cast them are in deformity and pain."² He was in debate within himself, as passages in the last volume of *Modern Painters* show, how far he could honestly or with any inward satisfaction pursue the cultivation of the beautiful in art, without first endeavouring to realise the good and beautiful

¹ *Aratra Pentelici*, § 17.

² Prefatory Remarks to the *Catalogue of the Educational Series*.

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UNTO THIS LAST

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in the world of social and political life. It was with such thoughts surging in his brain and such feelings burning in his heart that he had gone, in this summer of 1860, to the mountains; and there, under the same "cloudless peace of the snows of Chamouni" that had inspired and sanctified his earlier essays in art, he now turned his mind to theories of national wealth and social justice. Into these essays Ruskin put the results of much long and earnest thought, and to them he brought all the resources of a now matured and chastened style. Every word of *Unto this Last* was written out twice, he tells us, and "in great part of the book, three times."¹ His views ran counter to accepted beliefs, and he expected reprobation; but he looked for the sympathy of friends, and, from the world at large, for at least a serious hearing.

CHAP.
I.

By the end of June Ruskin had his first essay, or perhaps more, ready for the printer, and he offered it to the new magazine—the *Cornhill*. He sent the paper to Mr. Smith Williams, the literary adviser of Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co., warning him that editorial "notes of reprobation" might be necessary, but desiring "to get it into print, somehow." A copy was sent at the same time by Ruskin to his father. When others attacked his son, the father's combative instincts were aroused; yet his support was given with a heavy heart and a doubtful mind. The essays were accepted, and the first of them appeared in the August number of the Magazine. The following notes from Ruskin's father to Mrs. John Simon disclose the old city-merchant's anxiety:—

"7 BILLITER STREET, 21st July, 1860.—I addressed just now the August *Cornhill Magazine*—not out, but obtained by favour—to Mr. Simon. John was obliged to put 'J. R.,' as the Editor would not be answerable for opinions so opposed to Malthus and the *Times* and the City of Manchester. Please tell Mr. Simon I begged of John to spare his brain and write nothing for a year or two, but he said it only amused him and gave no thought, as it was a subject long thought of."

"DENMARK HILL, 25th October, 1860.—I send you the *Cornhill*

¹ *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 48.

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6 OUTCRY AGAINST THE ESSAYS

CHAP. *Magazine*, finding John's paper liked by Mr. Simon. Early in July,
 I. John sent me from abroad his first paper, kindly saying I might suppress it if the publishing it would annoy me. I sent to Smith and Co., saying I thought them twelve of the most important pages I had ever read. Immediately on seeing them in print, Dr. John Brown of Edinburgh, a good writer and able reviewer, wrote to me, wondering I had published the article, and saying the *Scotsman* had fallen on this *unlucky* paper. I replied I meant to publish any more that might come, let Scotch or English reviews say what they might; and I am glad these speculations have gone out, though I confess to have suffered more uneasiness about his newspaper letters on Politics and his papers on Political Economy than about all his books. These Political and Political Economical papers throw up a coarser and more disagreeable dust about one. The wrath of the Manchester School will be delivered in worse terms than the anger of certain Schools of Painting."

These shrewd apprehensions were abundantly fulfilled. The publication of the papers in the *Cornhill Magazine* raised a storm of indignant protest; even a theological heresy-hunt could not have been more fast and furious. The essays were declared to be "one of the most melancholy spectacles, intellectually speaking, that we have ever witnessed."¹ "The series of papers in the *Cornhill Magazine*," wrote another critic,² "throughout which Mr. Ruskin laboured hard to destroy his reputation, were to our mind almost painful. It is no pleasure to see genius mistaking its power, and rendering itself ridiculous." The papers were described by the *Saturday Review* as "eruptions of windy hysterics," "absolute nonsense," "utter imbecility," "intolerable twaddle"; the author was "a perfect paragon of blubbering"; his "whines and snivels" were contemptible; the world was not going to be "preached to death by a mad governess." The last passage of the book in particular filled the *Saturday* reviewer with indignant disgust. Let us hear the passage, for the author considered it one of the best he ever wrote, and it has reached many a mind and touched

¹ *Literary Gazette*, Nov. 3, 1860.

² H. H. Lancaster, *Essays and Reviews*, p. 299.

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RICH AND POOR

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many a heart. He had been pleading for wiser consumption, for fairer distribution, for a more thoughtful direction of labour, for a simpler mode of life, and then continued thus:—

CHAP.
I.

“And if, on due and honest thought over these things, it seems that the kind of existence to which men are now summoned by every plea of pity and claim of right, may, for some time at least, not be a luxurious one;—consider whether, even supposing it guiltless, luxury would be desired by any of us, if we saw clearly at our sides the suffering which accompanies it in the world. Luxury is indeed possible in the future—innocent and exquisite; luxury for all, and by the help of all; but luxury at present can only be enjoyed by the ignorant; the cruelest man living could not sit at his feast, unless he sat blindfold. Raise the veil boldly; face the light; and if, as yet, the light of the eye can only be seen through tears, and the light of the body through sackcloth, go thou forth weeping, bearing precious seed, until the time come, and the kingdom, when Christ’s gift of bread, and bequest of peace, shall be ‘Unto this last as unto thee’; and when, for earth’s severed multitudes of the wicked and the weary, there shall be holier reconciliation than that of the narrow home, and calm economy, where the Wicked cease—not from trouble, but from troubling—and the Weary are at rest.”

“Even more repulsive,” said the *Saturday* reviewer, “is the way in which Mr. Ruskin writes of the relations of the rich and poor.” It was incredible that anybody should listen to such appeals, except that “people like for some reason to see a man degrade himself.”

Ruskin himself was not a man to be browbeaten by such bludgeoning; but the attack was carried, in newspapers all over the country, into a more vulnerable quarter. What did Thackeray mean by committing himself to such nonsense? ¹ What was Mr. Smith thinking of when he admitted into a magazine, which had still to establish itself in popular favour, such loud attacks on the popular creed? The blow

¹ See, for instance, the *Manchester Examiner and Times*, October 2, 1860: “For some inscrutable reason, which must be inscrutably satisfactory to his publishers, Mr.

Thackeray has allowed,” etc., etc.; and the *Scotsman*, August 9: “If Mr. Thackeray had not failed to feel ashamed to print such frenzies,” etc., etc.

CHAP. I. went home; and after three of the essays had been published, the conductors of the *Cornhill Magazine* bowed before the storm. Ruskin afterwards told the story in the Preface to *Munera Pulveris*, where he describes how the editor's sentence of excommunication was conveyed "with great discomfort to himself, and many apologies to me." Though the editor was the vehicle of communication, it appears from the Memoir of Mr. George Smith that the edict was the publisher's. Ruskin's papers were "seen," we are told, "to be too deeply tainted with socialistic heresy to conciliate subscribers," and Mr. Smith decided to stop "so dangerous a contributor."¹ The intimation was conveyed to Ruskin after the receipt of the third paper, which appeared in October: the Magazine, he was informed, could admit only one Economical Essay more, which, accordingly, he made (by permission) longer than the rest. Also, stronger. "I'm so glad," he wrote to William Ward on October 1, "you like those economy papers. The *next* will be a smasher,—I'm only afraid they won't put it in. If they don't, I'll print it separate."

Ruskin had faith in the ultimate vindication of his essays; but at the time the stoppage of them in the *Cornhill*, and the violent reprobation with which they were received, caused him much disappointment and bitterness of spirit. Eighteen months later (June 1862) he collected the essays, unaltered, but with an added preface, into a separate volume. The book not only sold very slowly itself, but its heresies checked the sale of his other books also. "It *will* sell, some day, yet, you'll see," he wrote to his father (Mornex, Oct. 20, 1862); "but is there absolutely no sale yet? It is enough to make one turn knave and try to make money by bad writing." One word of encouragement, indeed, he received, and it was from the man whose good opinion he most valued. He seems to have sent an "advance" copy of the last essay to Carlyle, who replied thus:—

"CHELSEA, October 29, 1860.—You go down through those unfortunate dismal-science people like a treble-X of Senna, Glauber,

¹ *Dictionary of National Biography*, Supplementary Volume I. p. xxvii.

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RETURN HOME

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and Aloes ; like a fit of British cholera, threatening to be fatal ! I have read your paper with exhilaration, exultation, often with laughter, with bravissimo ! Such a thing flung suddenly into half a million dull British heads on the same day, will do a great deal of good. I marvel in parts at the lynx-eyed sharpness of your logic, at the pincer-grip (red-hot pincers) you take of certain bloated cheeks and blown-up bellies. More power to your elbow (though it is cruel in the extreme). If you dispose, stand to that kind of work for the next seven years, and work out then a result like what you have done in painting. . . .”

CHAP.
I.

But other friends, whose opinion also Ruskin valued, were unsympathetic. Dr. John Brown, as we have heard, remonstrated with Ruskin's father for allowing such doctrine to see the light. His old tutor, the Rev. W. L. Brown, was coldly critical, and Ruskin, in a letter of expostulation and defence, confessed himself to be “wild with contempt and anger.”

III

Such was the mood in which Ruskin passed the winter of 1860-61. He had returned from Switzerland in September and rendered account of himself to his friends :—

(*To LADY TREVELYAN.*) “DENMARK HILL, Oct. 1860.—I've just got my last incendiary production (for November) finally revised, and am in for a rest, I believe, which your letter begins pleasantly. My rest at home began badly, six weeks ago, by my mother's falling down the stairs in her dressing-room and breaking the thigh bone ; all has gone on since as well as could be ; and I did not write to tell you, because it was no use your being anxious for her and my father and me. The doctors say now the limb will be quite useful again. The worst of the thing has been the confinement, which my mother has, however, borne admirably (with the help, be it confessed, of some of the worst possible evangelical theology which she makes me read to her, and I'm obliged of course to make no disparaging remarks of an irritating character. You may conceive my state of mind after it !) . . . My father is pretty well—recovering from the shock which my mother's accident caused to him ; and contemplating my *Cornhill* gambols with a terrified

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10 THE COMFORT OF PENGUINS

CHAP. complacency which is quite touching. *I'm* very poorly—philanthropy not agreeing with me, as you very properly say it shouldn't. I. The other thing suits me much better."

(*To* C. E. NORTON.) "Nov. 4.—I had your kind and delightful letter, with Lowell's, on Lake Lucerne, and waited till I could give some tolerable account of myself before answering it. Which time of tolerableness seems hardly likely to come at present, for I am resting now, and find myself in a general state of collapse. I hate the sight of pen and paper, and can't write so much as a note without an effort. I don't think about anything, and feel consequently like Nothing,—my chief sense of existence lately having been in thinking or trying to think. Stillman knows all about me and will tell you whatever you want to know. When I begin to think at all, I get into states of disgust and fury at the way the mob is going on (meaning by mob, chiefly Dukes, Crown Princes, and such like persons) that I choke; and have to go to the British Museum and look at Penguins till I get cool. I find Penguins at present the only comfort in life. One feels everything in the world so sympathetically ridiculous; one can't be angry when one looks at a Penguin. . . ."

Another resource was in drawing from the figure. He noticed in letters of a subsequent date that this practice seemed to have intensified his perceptions of natural beauty. "I cannot imagine how it is," he wrote from Lucerne (Oct. 16, 1861), "that I feel, or see, everything so much more beautiful than even when I was in Switzerland only last year. I suppose, though it did not seem much, the work on the figure which I had last winter was very good exercise for me." In the spring he had some lecturing engagements to perform. On April 2 he gave a discourse at the St. George's Mission; on April 19 he delivered at the Royal Institution the lecture on Tree Twigs. This lecture was, as we have already seen,¹ generally accounted a failure, and Ruskin felt it to be such himself. He was suffering already from some nervous depression, and the sense of failure in this public appearance increased his nervousness. He felt that it was time to take rest, and

¹ See Vol. I. p. 533 *n.*