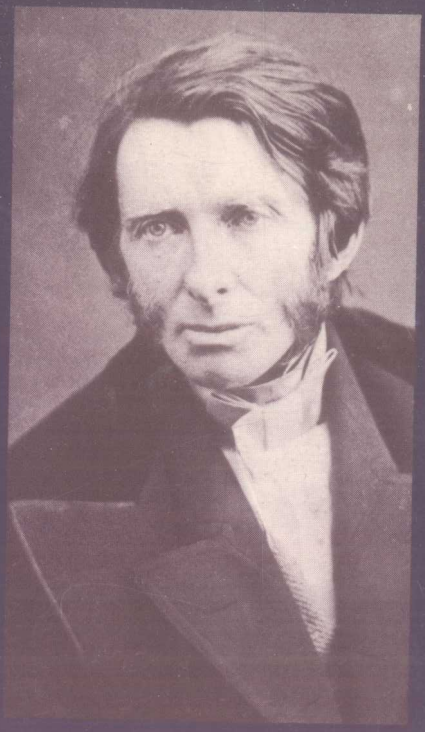

The Genius of JOHN RUSKIN

Selections from his writings
edited with an introduction
by John D. Rosenberg

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INTRODUCTION

John D. Rosenberg

At the turn of the century a young littérateur in Paris and an Indian lawyer in Johannesburg discovered Ruskin, and in so doing discovered themselves. "He will enable my spirit," Proust wrote in the first fervors of discipleship, "to enter regions to which formerly it had no access, for he is the gate." Gandhi wrote in his autobiography that reading *Unto This Last* had awakened some of his deepest convictions and transformed his life. The list might be extended—William Morris and Ezra Pound, Tolstoy and Clement Attlee, Bernard Shaw and Frank Lloyd Wright—but the additions only heighten one's perplexity that a single mind could so decisively influence such diverse men.

At the age of nine Ruskin began an epic "Poem on the Universe." His subject remained the world, to which he responded with a baffling multiplicity of judgments. In the 1840s he saw in Turner, and taught a visually retarded generation to see, a revolutionary truth to the visible world which had never before been rendered on canvas. But in the 1870s his prejudices blinded him to the achievement of the French impressionists, although they exemplified the very principles he had discovered in Turner thirty years earlier. Modern architects unwittingly borrow his vocabulary—"organic form," harmony of function and design, frank display of structure and materials—and often build upon his principles. Yet he opposed the use of the new materials which have made architecture the most vital of modern

arts.* As an economist and social critic, he succeeded more than any other English writer in moderating the barbarisms of nineteenth-century *laissez faire* and persuading his countrymen that starvation in the streets of their prosperous capital was not a "law of nature" but an affront to humanity. Yet he despised parliamentary reforms, ballot boxes, labor unions, indeed the whole egalitarian structure of the Welfare State that he helped bring into being. "I am, and my father was before me, a violent Tory of the old school;—Walter Scott's school, that is to say, and Homer's." So begins *Præterita,* the autobiography of this great nineteenth-century radical who, with equal justice, described himself as "the reddest also of the red." One cannot read Ruskin for very long without a sense of bafflement, perhaps of rage, but always of revelation.

His works are as burdened with contradiction as experience itself. Perhaps that is what Shaw meant when he said that few men have embodied our manifold nature more markedly than Ruskin. Endowed with a great mind yet retaining the emotions of a child, noble and narrow, dogmatic and yielding, immoderate both in delight and despair, arrogant and gentle, self-obsessed and self-sacrificing, compulsively communicative yet solitary, prophetic and blind, Ruskin was always changing and always himself. Even his contradictions have a certain consistency. At different stages of life he reacted differently to the same things; yet each response was absolute in its integrity, reflecting a unity of sensibility rather than of system. Throughout his career his mind was capable of change, and hence of growth; but the change, as he once remarked, was that of a tree, not of a cloud.

During the half century since Ruskin's death in 1900, his

* And also, at times, the most sterile. The blank glitter of the lifeless slab flashed on Ruskin's mind almost a century before it was to rise in reduplicated regularity: "You shall draw out your plates of glass," he predicted, "and beat out your bars of iron till you have encompassed us all . . . with endless perspective of black skeleton and blinding square."

genius lay buried under the bulk of his own words. The standard edition of his *Works* contains thirty-nine oversized volumes; most modern readers are less aware of their contents than of the psychological aberrations of their author. He has never regained the reputation he held among his contemporaries, nor has he attracted the widespread critical attention that has recently illuminated the achievement of Dickens or Hopkins. Ruskin's early critics were for the most part pious eulogists who portrayed him as far tidier and less vital than he is. Between the world wars everything Victorian was so patently repugnant that it was an easy leap to equate the platitudes of the disciples with the perceptions of the master, and to reject them both. At the time of Ruskin's death, few men would have doubted the justice of Tolstoy's praise; until recently few would have believed it: "Ruskin was one of the most remarkable men, not only of England and our time, but of all countries and all times. He was one of those rare men who think with their hearts, and so he thought and said not only what he himself had seen and felt, but what everyone will think and say in the future."

Now that the revaluation of the Victorians is solidly under way, we can recognize their creative exuberance as matched only by that of the Elizabethans. As they recede from us in time, they come closer to us in spirit, until the generation of stern prophets and self-assured dogmatists appears strangely perplexed, less certain of themselves and their world than they cared to admit, and far more like ourselves than we ever suspected. But the rush of reawakened sympathy has lacked true discernment. If we recognize that Gerard Manley Hopkins is a great poet, we have yet to acknowledge that Matthew Arnold is often a bad one. Dickens and Meredith, Mill and Macaulay, Ruskin and Morris are studied in our universities as equal eminences. Thirty years from now such pairings may seem as indiscriminate as those of Shakespeare and Kyd, Blake and Gray.

Of all the Victorians, Ruskin has least found his deserved

place among his contemporaries or in our literature at large. The great Library Edition of his *Works* has served as his monument in a sense unintended by its editors, and the selections available to the general reader have not made resurrection seem especially worthwhile. In our century Ruskin has been read in outdated, truncated fragments in which the sustained sweep, eccentricity, and uniquely personal voice of his genius are altogether obscured. The result has been a popular image of Ruskin at once absurd and contradictory: the arch-aesthete and word-painter who somehow fostered wedding-cake Gothic, Walter Pater, and *l'art pour l'art;* and the puritanical preacher, an effete appendage of Carlyle who overmoralized art and vainly castigated society. Perhaps the present volume will replace the caricature with an authentic portrait. Ideally, it may accomplish for Ruskin what Arnold's edition of Wordsworth did in the late nineteenth century—put in the hands of the educated reader some of the finest work of an author encumbered at his death by uncritical reverence and then eclipsed by undeserved neglect.

Ruskin's genius was a unique fusion of the capacity to see with the amazed eyes of a child and to reason with a mind as swift and penetrating as any that England has produced. He once praised the artist's ability to recover "*innocence of the eye* . . . a sort of childish perception of flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify,—as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight." Anyone who has read Ruskin closely has known that moment when the veil of familiarity abruptly lifts and one feels, as Charlotte Brontë did on first reading *Modern Painters,* that he has been given a new sense—sight. This incapacity to become habituated to the world was the one talent on which all his others depended.

The intensity of Ruskin's perceptions imprisoned him in a private universe where each glance was a revelation but there were no eyes other than his own. In Benjamin Jowett's

phrase, "Ruskin never rubbed his mind against others." He had two masters—Turner and Carlyle—and many disciples, but no colleagues. His intellectual isolation was very nearly absolute; to it he owed his occasional arrogance and frequent eccentricity.

Ruskin faltered away from himself only in some of his early prose, which is marred by a self-conscious literary gesticulation. At times the first two volumes of *Modern Painters* bog down in stretches of starchy rhetoric. But the same volumes contain passages which, despite their massed splendor, dazzle the reader less with their magnificence than with their truth. Nonetheless, it was the chief provocation of Ruskin's life to be praised merely for putting words together prettily; since he is best known today for his virtuoso pieces, the illusion persists that he was a fine writer who said foolish things.

Ruskin's style is as varied as his subjects or moods. In youth, when his feeling for physical beauty was keenest, he described nature with an almost audible laughter of delight at his power to make words follow his will. "There is the strong instinct in me," he wrote to his father, "which I cannot analyse—to draw and describe the things I love . . . a sort of instinct like that for eating or drinking." One of his strongest loves was for the "wild, various, fantastic, tameless unity of the sea." For some thirty pages in *Modern Painters* he wrote of the sea with a sustained exaltation unequaled in English, except perhaps for Bunyan's description of the pilgrims crossing the river of death and entering the gates of heaven. The standard excerpts from *Modern Painters* mute the larger rhythms of these prose hymns to nature, destroying the cumulative effect of Ruskin's impassioned precision.

The prose of his middle period gains in subtlety without losing force. The reader still hears sonorous echoes from the King James version of the Bible, but in *Unto This Last* one is less conscious of Ruskin's mastery of the cadenced music of words than of the thrust of his logic and the lucidity of

his rage. More and more he revised in order to be concise instead of eloquent. The counterpoint of balanced clauses becomes less conspicuous; assonance predominates over the more obvious effects of alliteration; sound and sense form a single tissue of expression in which the substitution of a word, the alteration of a vowel, distort both music and meaning.

As Ruskin's sense of the mystery and terror of life deepened, his prose became more intimate, achieving the final eloquence of simplicity. He had always felt the need to record all that he had ever seen or thought or felt. But in his later books, above all in *Fors Clavigera*, he wrote less to register his observations than to voice his perplexity and pain, to escape from an enfolding isolation that found him beloved yet incapable of loving, ever in company yet ever alone. As the inner pressures mounted, he brought to bear upon his own psyche the great gifts of penetration and expression that he had previously focused upon external nature. He became his own subject; simultaneously, the tone of his prose shifted. The stately piling up of clauses, perfectly suited to his Alpine descriptions and towering hopes, yielded to a subtler, quieter style which registers the very pulsations of his grief and is as moving as his earlier prose is magnificent.

His late voice is rich in all the nuances of speech, capable almost of physical gesture. We become oblivious of the printed word and follow instead the elusive soliloquy of a mind so habituated to solitude that we seem to overhear it thinking aloud. Nothing else is quite so daringly inconsequent, so immediate, so capable of communicating the music of consciousness itself. Joyce's interior monologues are, by comparison, contrived declamations. The range and inexhaustible vitality of Ruskin's many styles are unsurpassed in English prose.

In his diary Ruskin describes a nightmare in which a skilled surgeon takes a scalpel to his skull and proceeds to dissect himself. Ruskin's self-anatomizing in his books is no less incisive, but the horror is transmuted into a terrible

beauty. We may for the moment discount the revolutionary importance of his criticism of the world around him. There remains the world he discovered within himself, a world which he delineated on every page he wrote and which constitutes the most animate record of genius ever preserved in words.

A Note on the Selections

In the selections that follow, I have stressed the five books which most richly display the temper of Ruskin's mind. The first, *Modern Painters,* was begun when Ruskin was in his early twenties. The others—*The Stones of Venice, Unto This Last, Fors Clavigera,* and *Præterita*—were written in each of the successive decades of his career, *Præterita* marking his end as a writer. The selections are necessarily fragmentary. But they are designed to preserve, within the limits of a single manageable volume, the integrity of Ruskin's most important books in the order in which they were written.

Nothing has been chosen merely because it is felicitous; nothing has been omitted merely because it contains a prejudice offensive to the modern reader. Several selections are anthologized for the first time. They are included less for their novelty than for their illumination of the patterns of thought linking Ruskin's major works. Such light is especially needful because, with few exceptions, Ruskin's books are fragments of a splendid but shattered design which each reader must ultimately compose in his own mind. My purpose has been to present that pattern as fully as possible and with a minimum of distortion.

The text of the selections is that of the authoritative Library Edition of Ruskin's *Works,* published by George Allen (London, 1903–12). Portions of the editor's introductions have previously appeared in *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius.*