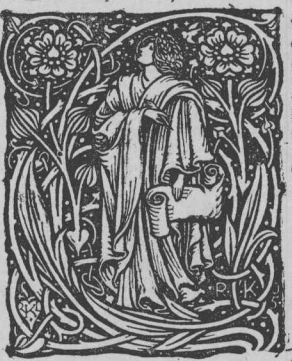
THE ETHICS OF THE DUST

By John RUSKIN



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INTRODUCTION

It is characteristic of Ruskin that he should choose to lock up so much depth and beauty of thought in a series of playful lectures to young girls. In this little book, simple as it appears, we may catch many a glimpse of the ancient *Sophia*, or heavenly wisdom, going robed, not in a nun's dress, but in all the gorgeous colours in which the jewels of the rock are dyed.

The sure instinct of the seer led Ruskin to consider not only the lilies of the field but the dust under his feet; he considered and studied for half a life-time, and then, with a perfect instinct, he took and re-created and vivified the dead knowledge of forms and processes, which is apt to lie as so much useless lumber in the unreflecting mind. He had come to believe that all knowledge is only of use when it has a substantial bearing upon life; and it is the very material of life that he here presents to young girls—knowledge transformed by thought, feeling, fancy, wit and art into a scheme of life both delicately beautiful and attainable.

It is not the least virtue of his method that where this scheme of his provokes criticism, it does so by calling out original powers of thought, by suggesting further complexities of life, greater dignities and nobilities of character. A modern Socrates, with maidens for disciples, he debates in a playful freedom the sermons that the wise may find in stones. Nothing comes amiss as an illustration—the cat's hairs, the Crystal Palace, needle and thread, the bulls of Nineveh, a Byzantine crucifix. It is this wide freedom of allusion, joined to the fascination of his subject of crystals and crystallisation, and the pictures of graceful girl-life, that give its peculiarly original charm to the book.

In reading these essays in the development of young girls, it will be well to bear in mind the order of Ruskin's own development. He was first an artist and art-lover; he was a scientist because, in order to observe truly and render faithfully, he felt he must first understand the nature of that which he observed; last of all, after years of observation and reproduction, he became a teacher of the art of life.

In his dealings with his human creatures he followed the same lines as when dealing with rock crystals or a wild rose branch; and this way of his is particularly interesting, because directly opposed to the Puritan method. The Puritan considered the young girl as an immortal soul with an immortal destiny hampered in its proper fulfilment by intolerable vanities and follies of the lower nature, which he called the flesh. He therefore set himself to thwart nature and reform her purposes; he clothed the young maidens who came under his jurisdiction in sad-coloured garments, pinned up their hair under caps, and, forbidding laughter and tears, taught them a godly control of the inclinations.

Ruskin's way was delightfully different. The young girl appealed to him first as a lovely object in nature. He wished her above all things to be natural. He liked her to be beautiful and happy and to diffuse beauty and happiness through all her surroundings. He liked her to dance and sing and laugh; to be, in fact, a spring of natural joy causing joy within all the circle of her influence. He wished her to be beautifully dressed, not expensively, but with a graceful simplicity. Travelling a step further, he thought of the soul within, and wished to see that also adorned in fair colours and lights; furnished too with as much knowledge as was needed for a right appreciation of the values of its surroundings and for the necessary selection from among these values in after life. It was from this point of view that he wrote "Ethics of the Dust," a book which was followed nine years later by the essay "Of Queens' Gardens" in "Sesame and Lilies." This essay forms

a natural sequel to the lessons given in "Ethics of the Dust" and should be so read. The passionate pleading for an exalted ideal of womanhood follows naturally after this beautiful picture of girlhood learning deep lessons in a wise sport.

The subject for these lessons Ruskin found in his favourite study of geology. From a boy he had delighted in geology. In the introduction to "Deucalion" he writes: "I began, when I was only twelve years old, a Mineralogical Dictionary . . . and year by year have endeavoured, until very lately, to keep abreast with the rising tide of geological knowledge; sometimes, I believe, pushing my way into little creeks in advance of the general wave." From babyhood, mountains were his delight. There is a story told of him that, after having been taken to stay in Scotland when a child under four years of age, he begged for a background of blue hills to be painted into his portrait. During his boyhood, mountains near and far, their beauty in distance, their paths and crags and precipices, their rocks and the wonderful forms and cleavages of these rocks, were his ceaseless study. "In all mountain ground and scenery," he says, "I had a pleasure as early as I can remember, and continuing till I was eighteen or twenty, greater than what has been possible to me in anything." This pleasure is wonderfully reflected from the pages of "Modern Painters," a book amazing as the work of a young man of three-and-twenty. In one passage of signal eloquence he describes the lifting of the lowland plains upon the flanks of the great mountains. After painting in vivid words all the beauty of the lowlands, the green fields, the different-coloured foliage of the trees, the flowing streams that reflect the blue and purple skies, farm and cottage, hedgerow and field of corn, he bids the reader imagine the lifting of all this various beauty upon the skirts of a great mountain. "Let him conceive," he says, "all this great plain with its infinite treasures of natural beauty, and happy human life, gathered up in God's hands from one edge

of the horizon to the other, like a woven garment, and shaken into deep falling folds, as the robes droop from a king's shoulders; all its bright rivers leaping into cataracts along the hollows of its fall, and all its forests rearing themselves aslant along its slopes, as a rider rears himself back when his horse plunges; and all its villages nestling themselves into the new windings of its glens, and all its pastures thrown into steep waves of green sward . . . with a cloud here and there lying quietly, half on the grass, half in the air; and he will have as yet, in all this lifted world, only the foundation of one of the great Alps. And whatever is lovely in the lowland scenery becomes lovelier in this change; the trees which grew heavily and stiffly from the level line of plain assume strange curves of strength and grace as they bend themselves against the mountain side . . . the flowers which on the arable plain fell before the plough, now find out for themselves unapproachable places . . . and the streams, which in the level land crept in dark eddies by unwholesome banks, now move in showers of silver, and are clothed with rainbows, and bring health and life wherever the glance of their waves can reach."

This is the writing of Ruskin the artist, who takes a delight far greater than common in easily visible external beauty. Ruskin the scientist goes a long step further and considers and analyses this beauty that so moves him. He takes his beloved mountains to pieces as it were; studies their crags, the broken edges of their fractures, searches for the laws that rule their being, and while endeavouring to reproduce the shapes that he loves, refuses to set down on paper a single vacuous pencil-line; each stroke of pencil or brush must make plain the mountains' ribs; its skeleton must be known, bone for bone, before it can stand aright in the picture. The same laws that shape the small have charge over the shaping of the great; so Ruskin found that the great mountain crest follows the same laws of form that shape the crystal of the broken rocks. Jagged

and rude as the lines of a mountain crag must be, they yet are subject to the universal law of beauty. An inner curve runs through that mountain bulk, animating those broken forms; the trained eye will detect amid the wildness of the mountains vast curves like the breaking waves of a storm; round curves like the rising waves of a sea; leaf shapes, wind shapes, shapes that follow the lines of the plumage of a bird's wing, or the lines of a Greek crest.

If Ruskin was already so wise when as a young man he wrote "Modern Painters," as a man of forty, after sixteen more years of labour and of observation, he was wiser still. It was when forty years of age that he went to Manchester to give a lecture on "The Unity of Art." In a letter written to his father on this occasion he mentions a "Miss Bell and four young ladies" who had come from Chester to hear him. He was evidently pleased with Miss Bell and her four young ladies, for he consented to pay them a visit at Winnington Hall, Cheshire, on his way home. So interested was he on his first visit that he returned again and again; he was allowed to try many experiments in education at this most fortunate of girls' schools. During the nine years between 1859 and 1868 these experiments were carried on, and the result of Ruskin's influence on these girls was, I have been told, happy in many respects. Some of them were the daughters of remarkable men, and grew up to fill high stations nobly. Even the little ones, who only perhaps joined his singing games for a year or two, were influenced in their after lives by Ruskin's personality and teaching.

In a letter from Winnington Hall, dated March 12, 1859, Ruskin speaks of the "enormous old-fashioned house." The drawing-room he describes as "a huge octagon, I suppose at least forty feet high, like the tower of a castle (hung half-way up all round with large and beautiful Turner and Raphael engravings) and with a baronial fireplace. The girls assembled there in the evening when it was brightly lighted up, "a quite

beautiful scene in its way." These are the surroundings that we are to imagine as a setting for these wonderful lessons in crystals. Here in this old house Ruskin attempted to carry out his ideas on education; here he tried to give shape and colour and clearness to the souls of young girls, as a jeweller might cut and polish his precious stones. Apparently playful in his method, he was really nothing if not philosophical; the French axiom "On n'apprend qu'en s'amusant" had early interested him, and his method was at bottom that of the philosophical teachers—Froebel and Pestalozzi. Himself the most accurate and faithful of workers, his immense tasks brought him so much delight that he instinctively presented learning to his little disciples in the most joyous of guises; and not learning only, but the whole scheme of your duty towards God and your duty towards your neighbour most wonderfully outlined in this brightest of catechisms. Ruskin was an ardent believer in the duty of each individual to cleanse and direct his own way; he had no great faith in salvation by reforms from the outside, political or religious; he believed in a regeneration from within of each several human soul, and this doctrine he teaches and preaches with the aid of every charming illustration. Never were such wonderful sermons found in stones before.

When "Ethics of the Dust" was first published, Carlyle wrote of it as "a most shining performance. Not for a long while have I read anything a tenth part so radiant with talent, ingenuity, lambent fire (sheet —and *other* lightnings) of all commendable kinds! Never was such a lecture on Crystallography before, had there been nothing else in it, and there are all manner of things. In power of expression I pronounce it to be supreme. Never did anybody who had such things to explain, explain them better."

In the last lecture on the Crystal Rest there may be found a few lines which are the key to the teaching that runs through the whole book. "You may at least earnestly believe," says Ruskin to his little disciples,

"that the presence of the spirit which culminates in your own life shows itself in dawning, wherever the dust of the earth begins to assume any orderly and lovely state." Here is a very deep truth, simply expressed and tucked away in a paragraph addressed to Dora and Jessie, who are clapping their hands with joy over the spirits of the mountains. The thoughtful mind that lights on such a truth may explore further still, and think on the undiscovered country of the human soul and the mysterious laws that reign there over its crystallisations, its hidden efforts after order and beauty, its desire to create lovely shapes, each soul afresh. The youngest and simplest mind may carry away a clear picture of the crystal of the rock, its strange efforts after loveliness of form and transparency of colour, its final beauty attained through obedience to law.

GRACE RHYS.

December, 1907.

The following is a list of Ruskin's published works:—

Ruskin's first printed writings were contributions to the "Magazine of Natural History," 1834–6, and poems in "Friendship's Offering," 1835, Oxford prize poem, "Salsette and Elephanta," 1839.

"Modern Painters," Vol. I., 1843; 2nd ed., 1844; 3rd ed., 1846—later ones followed; Vol. II., 1846; Vol. III., 1856; Vol. IV., 1856; Vol. V., 1860. Selections from "Modern Painters" have been published under the titles of "Frondes Agrestes," 1875; "In Montibus Sanctis," 1884; "Cœli Enarrant," 1885.

"Seven Lamps of Architecture," 1849; second edition, 1855. "The Scythian Guest," 1849 (from "Friendship's Offering"); "Poems," 1850 (from "Friendship's Offering," "Amaranth," "London Monthly Miscellany," "Keepsake," Heath's "Book of Beauty," with others not previously printed). "Stones of Venice," Vol. I., 1851; second edition, 1858; Vol. II., 1853; second edition, 1867; Vol. III., 1853; second edition, 1867. "The King of the Golden River," 1851; "Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds," 1851; "Examples of the Architecture of Venice," 1851; "Pre-Raphaelitism," 1851; "The National Gallery," 1852; "Giotto and his works in Padua," 3 parts, 1853, 1854, 1860; "Lectures on Architecture and Painting," 1854, 1855; "The Opening of the Crystal Palace," 1854; Pamphlet for the preservation of Ancient Buildings and Landmarks, 1854; "Notes on the Royal Academy," No. I., 1855 (three editions); No. II., 1856 (six editions); No. III.

(four editions), 1857 (two editions); Nos. IV., V. and VI., 1858, 1859, 1875; "The Harbours of England," 1856, 1857, 1859; "Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House," 1856–7 (several editions in 1857); "Catalogue of the Turner Sketches in the National Gallery," 1857 (two editions); "Catalogue of Turner's Drawings," 1857–8; "The Elements of Drawing," 1857 (two editions); "The Political Economy of Art," 1857, published in 1880 as "A Joy for Ever"; "Inaugural Addresses at the Cambridge School of Art," 1858; "The Geology of Chamouni," 1858 "The Oxford Museum," 1859; "The Unity of Art," 1859; "The Two Paths," 1859; "Elements of Perspective," 1859; "Tree Twigs," 1861; "Catalogue of Turner Drawings presented to the Fitzwilliam Museum," 1861; "Unto this Last," 1862 (from the "Cornhill Magazine"); "Forms of the Stratified Alps of Savoy," 1863; "Of Queens' Gardens," 1864; "Sesame and Lilies," 1865 (two editions); "The Ethics of the Dust," 1866; "The Crown of Wild Olive," 1866 (two editions); "War," 1866; "Time and Tide," 1867; "Leoni, a legend of Italy," 1868 (from "Friendship's Offering"); "Notes on the Employment of the Destitute and Criminal Classes," 1868; "References to Paintings in illustration of Flamboyant Architecture," 1869; "The Mystery of Life and its Arts" (afternoon lectures), 1869; "The Queen of the Air," 1869 (two editions); "The Future of England," 1870; "Samuel Prout," 1870 (from "The Art Journal"); "Verona and its Rivers," 1870; "Lectures on Art," 1870; "Drawings and Photographs illustrative of the Architecture of Verona," 1870; "Fors Clavigera," 1871–84; "Munera Pulveris," 1872; "Aratra Pentelici," 1872; "Instructions in Elementary Drawing," 1872; "The Relation between Michael Angelo and Tintoret," 1872; "The Eagle's Nest," 1872; "Monuments of the Cavalli Family," 1872; "The Nature and Authority of Miracle" (from the "Contemporary Review"), 1873; "Val D'Arno," 1874; "Mornings in Florence" (in parts), 1875–7; "Proserpina" (in parts), 1875–86; Vol. I., 1879; "Deucalion" (in parts), 1875–83; Vol. I., 1879; Vol. II. (two parts only), 1880, 1883; "Ariadne Florentina," 1876; "Letters to the 'Times' on Pre-Raphaelite Pictures in the Exhibition of 1854," 1876; "Yewdale and its Streamlets," 1877; "St. Mark's Rest" (3 parts), 1877–9, 1884; "Guide to Pictures in the Academy of Arts, Venice," 1877; "Notes on the Turner Exhibition," 1878; "The Laws of Fésole" (four parts, 1877–8), 1879; "Notes on the Prout and Hunt Exhibition," 1879–80; "Circular respecting the Memorial Studies at St. Mark's," 1879–80; "Letters to the Clergy" (Lord's Prayer and the Church), 1879, 1880; "Arrows of the Chace," 2 vols., 1880; "Elements of English Prosody," 1880; "The Bible of Amiens," 1884 (first published in parts); "Love's Meinie" (Lectures delivered at Oxford, 1873–81), 1881; "Catalogue of Drawings and Sketches by Turner in the National Gallery," 1881; "Catalogue of Silicious Minerals at St. David's School, Reigate," 1883; "The Art of England," 1884 (originally published as separate lectures); "The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century," 1884; "Catalogue of Specimens of Silica in the British Museum," 1884; "Catalogue of Minerals given to Kirkcudbright Museum," 1884; "The Pleasures of England" (Lectures delivered), 1844–5; "On the Old Road," contributions to Periodical Literature, 2 vols., 1885;

" Præterita," 3 vols., 1885–9; " Dilecta," 1886–87; " Hortus Inclusus," 1887; " Ruskiniana," 1890–92; " Poems " (Complete edition), 1891; " Poetry of Architecture," 1892 (from the " Architectural Magazine ").

" Stray Letters to a London Bibliophile," 1892; " Letters upon Subjects of General Interest to various Correspondents," 1892; " Letters to William Ward," 1893; " Letters addressed to a College Friend," 1894; Separate Collections of Letters, edited by T. J. Wise, were published 1894, 1895, 1896, and 1897; " Letters to Charles Eliot Norton," edited by C. E. Norton, 1897; " Lectures on Landscape," 1897; " Letters to Mary and Helen Gladstone," 1903.

Works, in eleven volumes, 1871–83; Library Edition, edited by E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 1903, etc.

For Life, see W. G. Collingwood: " John Ruskin, a Biographical Outline," 1889; " Life and Work of John Ruskin," 1893; " Life of John Ruskin," 1900; Frederic Harrison: " Englishmen of Letters," 1902.

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DEDICATION

TO

THE REAL LITTLE HOUSEWIVES

WHOSE GENTLE LISTENING

AND THOUGHTFUL QUESTIONING

ENABLED THE WRITER TO WRITE THIS BOOK

IT IS DEDICATED

WITH HIS LOVE

CHRISTMAS 1865

PREFACE

THE FOLLOWING LECTURES were really given, in substance, at a girls' school (far in the country); which, in the course of various experiments on the possibility of introducing some better practice of drawing into the modern scheme of female education, I visited frequently enough to enable the children to regard me as a friend. The Lectures always fell more or less into the form of fragmentary answers to questions; and they are allowed to retain that form, as, on the whole, likely to be more interesting than the symmetries of a continuous treatise. Many children (for the school was large) took part, at different times, in the conversations; but I have endeavoured, without confusedly multiplying the number of imaginary [1] speakers, to represent, as far as I could, the general tone of comment and enquiry among young people.

It will be at once seen that these Lectures were not intended for an introduction to mineralogy. Their purpose was merely to awaken in the minds of young girls, who

[1] I do not mean, in saying "imaginary," that I have not permitted to myself, in several instances, the affectionate discourtesy of some reminiscence of personal character; for which I must hope to be forgiven by my old pupils and their friends, as I could not otherwise have written the book at all. But only two sentences in all the dialogues, and the anecdote of "Dotty," are literally "historical."

were ready to work earnestly and systematically, a vital interest in the subject of their study. No science can be learned in play; but it is often possible, in play, to bring good fruit out of past labour, or show sufficient reasons for the labour of the future.

The narrowness of this aim does not, indeed, justify the absence of all reference to many important principles of structure, and many of the most interesting orders of minerals; but I felt it impossible to go far into detail without illustrations; and if readers find this book useful, I may, perhaps, endeavour to supplement it by illustrated notes of the more interesting phenomena in separate groups of familiar minerals;—flints of the chalk;—agates of the basalts;—and the fantastic and exquisitely beautiful varieties of the vein-ores of the two commonest metals, lead and iron. But I have always found that the less we speak of our intentions, the more chance there is of our realising them; and this poor little book will sufficiently have done its work, for the present, if it engages any of its young readers in study which may enable them to despise it for its shortcomings.

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