

THE UTOPIA OF JOHN RUSKIN

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IN order to understand John Ruskin's ideas as an economist and sociologist, it is necessary to relate them first, to his religious inheritance, and secondly, to his aesthetic principles. For Ruskin was first of all a deeply religious man; and, closely allied to this aspect of his nature, there was in him a profound belief in the value of art in all its forms. He was an extraordinary combination of a Hebrew prophet and a Greek aesthete. In this connection one thinks of the lines of John Keats:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

But Ruskin would never have subscribed to the theory of "art for art's sake." Art was for him not an end but rather a means, the end being moral perfection. Therefore, art was not simply to be enjoyed in a detached way, as by the connoisseur or dilettante. It must be made a vital factor in the life of mankind, and it must lead to the redemption of the world from all that is sordid and ugly, so that at last we should have a purified and glorified humanity worthy of its intrinsic divinity. In other words, art must "get religion," and religion of a rather puritanical brand in its moral fervor. Then we should have at last the New Jerusalem on earth. This, in brief, was Ruskin's gospel.

Ruskin was brought up in an intensely evangelical religious environment. "The creed of his home was puritanic and Calvinistic," says Burgess in *The Religion of Ruskin*. But as he grew to manhood, theology lost its hold upon him, as it did upon many of the finest spirits of his generation. By 1858, when Ruskin was thirty-nine years old, the change had become complete. Burgess says that it was "a revolt: a tearing up of his entire religious faith by the roots. It made so deep an impression upon him that it formed

the subject of correspondence with his friends and resulted in announcements discrediting what he had written of religion in his earlier days."

But although Ruskin parted forever from theology, his fervent evangelical spirit remained. Forced underground, it had to find an outlet through other channels than theology and the historic creeds of the churches. While Ruskin was popularly regarded as an agnostic, as a matter of fact God continued to be for him a supreme reality, undefined as it might be; and to the end of his life he constantly had recourse to the Bible for inspiration and illustration. He stood outside the churches, like a John the Baptist calling mankind to repentance and reformation. When it was rumored that he was likely to become a Roman Catholic, he wrote:

"I can no more become a Roman Catholic, than again an Evangelical Protestant. I am a 'Catholic' of those Catholics to whom the Catholic Epistle of St. James is addressed—'the Twelve Tribes which are scattered abroad'—the literally or spiritually wandering Israel of all the Earth."

The other basic element in Ruskin's nature—the Greek love for and appreciation of line, form, color, and harmony—was to take the place of the theology which he had lost, as the way to God. The new Trinity was the Good, the True, and the Beautiful—and these three are One. Through cultivation of art, he believed that men and women might become truly godlike, that life might be given a meaning and made worth-while. "His taste for art," says G. Mercer Adam, "was manifested at an early age, and after passing from the university he studied painting under J. D. Harding and Copley Fielding; but his masters, as he tells us in 'Praeterita,' were Rubens and Rembrandt."

Ruskin made his appeal to the public of England in language of such an exquisite texture that to-day it stands unrivaled in English literature. He owed his superb mastery of English very largely to thorough study of the King James Bible. "Knowing the Song of Moses and the Sermon on the Mount by heart and half of the Apocalypse besides," he wrote, "I was in no need of tutorship either in the majesty or simplicity of English words."

But what was the connection between Ruskin's preoccupation with moral earnestness and art on the one hand, and the economic and social system of mid-nineteenth century England on the other?

The answer is not far to seek. He was not content with saving his own soul, for his evangelical inheritance had given him the missionary spirit. Born to wealth and leisure, with full opportunity to enjoy for himself the beauties of art and of nature, he still was unhappy. He wanted to save the world, to share his own salvation with his fellow-men.

Hence, it was inevitable that he should have fallen foul of the actual conditions of life, as lived by the masses, which he saw all about him. Growing up, as he did, in a time when the machine age was first getting England into its iron grip, he saw working-class humanity huddled together in the slums of the great cities, in frightful poverty and degradation, while enormous wealth was being piled up in the hands of the few. Political economy, in the form which was dominant at that time, was based on the doctrine of *laissez-faire*. The result was a ruthless race for wealth and material possessions, "each for himself and the devil take the hindmost." The poor, the unfortunate, frail women, and even little children, were sweated and exploited for the benefit of their masters—vulgarians whose only object in life was to accumulate more wealth. And it was taught and believed that all this misery and futility was necessary and unavoidable under "the laws of political economy," which had become a fetish for the preservation of the *status quo*.

Against this devil's philosophy the soul of Ruskin rebelled. "His humanity and moral sense were outraged," says Adam, "by the manner in which the mass of his countrymen lived, and trenchant was his castigation of this, and eager as well as righteous his desire to amend their condition and elevate and inspire their minds." He summed up the fundamental philosophy of the modern industrial age in one devastating sentence: "No matter how much you have, get more; no matter where you are, go somewhere else."

In *Fors Clavigera* (a collection of Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain), we find the most explicit statements of Ruskin's indictment of industrial society and mechanistic civilization.

"Modern science," he writes, "economic and of other kinds, has reached its climax at last. For it seems to be the appointed function of the nineteenth century to exhibit in all things the elect pattern of perfect Folly, for a warning to the farthest future." He

insisted that men and women "will neither be so good nor so happy as without the machines." Even if the benefits of machine production were fairly distributed, it would, he reasoned, merely compel the masses to spend a large part of their time in unprofitable idleness.

Ruskin pointed out that there are three material things which are essential to the good life; these are Pure Air, Water, and Earth. Besides these, there are three immaterial things which are likewise indispensable; namely, Admiration, Hope, and Love. These six essentials for right living, he believed, will be encompassed by mankind only when Political Economy has become a real science; at present Political Economy is prostituting all of them.

Pure Air, Water, and Earth are given by heaven freely. As to what we are doing to Pure Air, he writes: "Everywhere, all day long, you are vitiating it with foul chemical exhalations; and the horrible nests, which you call towns, are little more than laboratories for the distillation into heaven of venomous smokes and smells." So, too, with Water, the effect of industrial civilization is to "turn every river of England into a common sewer, so that you cannot so much as baptize an English baby but with filth, unless you hold its face out in the rain; and even *that* falls dirty." Again, with the Earth, "meant to be nourishing for you and blossoming," he says, "as far as your scientific hands and scientific brains, inventive of explosive and deathful instead of blossoming and life-giving dust, can contrive, you have turned the Mother Earth, Demeter, into an Avenger Earth, Tisiphone—with the voice of your brother's blood crying out of it in one wild harmony round all its murderous sphere."

In the same way, Admiration, Hope, and Love have been defiled and turned to base uses. "For Admiration, you have learned contempt." Concerning Hope, "You have not so much spirit of it in you as to begin any plan which will not pay for ten years; nor so much intelligence of it in you (either politicians or workmen) as to be able to form one clear idea of what you would like your country to become." In regard to Love, "You were ordered by the Founder of your religion to love your neighbour as yourselves. You have founded an entire science of Political Economy on what you have stated to be the constant instinct of man—the desire to defraud his neighbour."

Of what value the electric telegraph, he asks, if you have no message of any importance or significance to send over it? Of what value your railroad trains, if they only serve the purpose of enabling a fool in one town to be transported to another at break-neck speed?

So Ruskin went up and down the country, preaching his counter-gospel of personal development and social culture. "What he desires for the working-man," remarks Adam, "he desires also for his family, and consequently he urges parents to train their sons and daughters to see and love the beautiful, to cultivate their higher instincts, and call forth and feed their souls."

It meant, in short, a complete turning of our backs upon modern industrial civilization. For Ruskin considered that this prevented mankind from realizing the good life in all its manifold forms. Industrialism, therefore, was the arch-enemy of human salvation. Even if men should be free of human masters, by the spread of democracy, what would that profit their souls if they were to become the slaves of machines?

Accordingly, Ruskin denounced and repudiated nineteenth century industrial society and all its works. He would have none of it. What he proposed as a substitute was the return to a kind of medieval Arcadia, in which virtuous and trustful common people should work with their own hands on little farms, raising all their own food, and making, by simple handicrafts, everything that was needful for their welfare. The government was to be in the hands of a wise and good aristocracy, to which the common people should give unquestioning obedience. He would thus realize Plato's dream of long ago.

In *Fors Clavigera* Ruskin summarizes the leading features of his Utopia as follows:

"We will have no steam-engines upon it, and no railroads; we will have no untended or unthought-of creatures on it; none wretched but the sick; none idle but the dead. We will have no liberty upon it, but instant obedience to known law and appointed persons; no equality upon it, but recognition of every betterness that we can find, and reprobation of every worseness. When we want to go anywhere, we will go there quietly and safely, not at forty miles an hour in the risk of our lives; when we want to carry anything anywhere we will carry it either on the backs of beasts,

or on our own, or in carts or boats. We will have plenty of flowers and vegetables in our gardens, plenty of corn and grass in our fields,—and few bricks. We will have some music and poetry; the children shall learn to dance to it and sing it; perhaps some of the old people, in time, may also.”

To many to-day it may seem incredible that an Englishman of the nineteenth century should seriously believe that the wheels of progress could be turned back in this drastic fashion, and that such a scheme of social organization, even if it could be established, would work. How, for instance, should we secure the wise and good governors; and how replace them, when they passed on? That is the rock on which all Platonic Utopias finally ground. Dr. Will Durant, in his recent *Mansions of Philosophy*, comes perhaps nearest a practical solution in proposing a system in which only the graduates of professional schools of political science, with subsequent creditable records of performance in lower public offices, shall be eligible for election to the higher places in the State. But in that event, might we not get only efficient bureaucrats or inflexible theorists, intent upon enhancing their own power and prestige, out of direct touch with the people, and hostile to initiative and change?

Certainly, in his sociological panaceas, Ruskin was naive and quixotic. If he had had a more practical grasp of the subject, he might have envisaged some plan whereby the good things in modern discovery and invention might be utilized for the benefit of all; and the social injustice, the ignorance, the poverty, and the slums of industrial society eliminated by some effective means of social control. He perversely looked backward, and not forward, to a Golden Age. In this he shared a failing of other nineteenth century dreamers; in the Utopia of William Morris we find our descendants several centuries hence sedately riding about in horse-drawn gigs.

But Ruskin's protest against the deification of Mammon was potent. He compelled the people of England to listen, and his lectures and writings were a factor in freeing the world from the worst evils of industrialism.