

RUSKIN[2]

I do not think anyone could find any fault with the way in which Mr. Collingwood has discharged his task, except, of course, Mr. Ruskin himself, who would certainly have scored through all the eulogies in passionate red ink and declared that his dear friend had selected for admiration the very parts of his work which were vile, brainless, and revolting. That, however, was merely Ruskin's humour, and one of the deepest disappointments with Mr. Collingwood is that he, like everyone else, fails to appreciate Ruskin as a humourist. Yet he was a great humourist: half the explosions which are solemnly scolded as "one-sided" were simply meant to be one-sided, were mere laughing experiments in language. Like a woman, he saw the humour of his own prejudices, did not sophisticate them by logic, but deliberately exaggerated them by rhetoric. One tenth of his paradoxes would have made the fortune of a modern young man with gloves of an art yellow. He was as fond of nonsense as Mr. Max Beerbohm. Only ... he was fond of other things too. He did not ask humanity to dine on pickles.

But while his kaleidoscope of fancy and epigram gives him some kinship with the present day, he was essentially of an earlier type: he was the last of the prophets. With him vanishes the secret of that early Victorian simplicity which gave a man the courage to mount a pulpit above the head of his fellows. Many elements, good and bad, have destroyed it; humility as well as fear, camaraderie as well as scepticism, have bred in us a desire to give our advice lightly and persuasively, to mask our morality, to whisper a word and glide away. The contrast was in some degree typified in the House of Commons under the last leadership of Mr. Gladstone: the old order with its fist on the box, and the new order with its feet on the table. Doubtless the wine of that prophecy was too strong even for the strong heads that carried it. It made Ruskin capricious and despotic, Tennyson lonely and whimsical, Carlyle harsh to the point of hatred, and Kingsley often rabid to the ruin of logic and charity. One alone of that race of giants, the greatest and most neglected, was sober after the cup. No mission, no frustration could touch with hysteria the humanity of Robert Browning.

But though Ruskin seems to close the roll of the militant prophets, we feel how needful are such figures when we consider with what pathetic eagerness men pay prophetic honours even to those who disclaim the prophetic character. Ibsen declares that he only depicts life, that as far as he is concerned there is nothing to be done, and still armies of "Ibsenites" rally to the flag and enthusiastically do nothing. I have found traces of a school which avowedly follows Mr. Henry James: an idea full of humour. I like to think of a crowd with pikes and torches shouting passages from "The Awkward Age." It is right and proper for a multitude to

declare its readiness to follow a prophet to the end of the world, but if he himself explains, with pathetic gesticulations, that he is only going for a walk in the park, there is not much for the multitude to do. But the disciple of Ruskin had plenty to do. He made roads; in his spare moments he studied the whole of geology and botany. He lifted up paving stones and got down into early Florentine cellars, where, by hanging upside down, he could catch a glimpse of a Cimabue unpraisable but by divine silence. He rushed from one end of a city to the other comparing ceilings. His limbs were weary, his clothes were torn, and in his eyes was that unfathomable joy of life which man will never know again until once more he takes himself seriously.

Mr. Collingwood's excellent chapters on the art criticism of Ruskin would be better, in my opinion, if they showed more consciousness of the after revolutions that have reversed, at least in detail, much of Ruskin's teaching. We no longer think that art became valueless when it was first corrupted with anatomical accuracy. But if we return to that Raphaelism to which he was so unjust, let us not fall into the old error of intelligent reactionaries, that of ignoring our own debt to revolutions. Ruskin could not destroy the market of Raphaelism, but he could and did destroy its monopoly. We may go back to the Renaissance, but let us remember that we go back free. We can picnic now in the ruins of our dungeon and deride our deliverer.

But neither in Mr. Collingwood's book nor in Ruskin's own delightful "Præterita" shall we ever get to the heart of the matter. The work of Ruskin and his peers remains incomprehensible by the very completeness of their victory. Fallen forever is that vast brick temple of Utilitarianism, of which we may find the fragments but never renew the spell. Liberal Unionists howl in its high places, and in its ruins Mr. Lecky builds his nest. Its records read with something of the mysterious arrogance of Chinese: hardly a generation away from us, we read of a race who believed in the present with the same sort of servile optimism with which the Oriental believes in the past. It may be that banging his head against that roof for twenty years did not improve the temper of the prophet. But he made what he praised in the old Italian pictures--"an opening into eternity."

FOOTNOTES:

[2] "The Life of John Ruskin." By W.G. Collingwood. London: Methuen.