'Bawling the right road': Morris and Ruskinian Social Criticism

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At Exeter College, Oxford, in 1853, those two remarkable Victorian undergraduates William Morris and Burne-Jones, living 'in undivided intimacy and unremitting intellectual tension', discovered John Ruskin. The result, to quote Mackail again, was that 'Ruskin became for both of them a hero and a prophet'. Ruskin's later patronage of Burne-Jones was a decisive factor in that artist's career. For Morris, the abiding inspiration Ruskin provided came primarily through his writings; firstly in his approach to art and the function of the artist; secondly, and inevitably, in his understanding of the society of which both art and artist were products.

The tradition of social thinking that links Morris and Ruskin forms a major part of Jeffrey L. Spear's study, Dreams of an English Eden. Spear identifies Romance as the informing mythos of Ruskin's intellectual and creative development, interpreting his successive critical stances as 'resolutions of inner conflicts as well as engagements with genuine external artistic and social problems' (p. 34). This view is persuasively argued and Spear makes extensive use of biographical material to show how Romance provided Ruskin with an imaginative strategy that served to integrate the private and public sides of his complex career. The outcome of the Romance model for Ruskin was an Edenic vision which had at its centre the creative life of the individual and the community—the true wealth of any political economy. Such a vision was, however, complicated to the point of being compromised by Ruskin's inability to abandon a concept of order that could recognise authority only in the conservative forms of a hierarchical social structure. The origins of this impasse, Spear argues, were to be found in Carlyle. Spear traces a similar preoccupation with Romance in the life and work of Morris, through whom the deadlock of Carlylean authoritarianism was broken. It was Morris's eventual willingness to embrace the socialist overthrow of hierarchy as the precondition to rebuilding the Earthly Paradise that redeemed the Romance paradigm, a redemption that found its most evocative literary expression in
News from Nowhere. This, in Spear’s phrase, is ‘Revolution as Realized Romance’ and its advocacy is, of course, implicit in Morris’s whole practice as a craftsman.

The revolutionary consequences of Ruskin’s artistic and social theories—so clear to Morris—were not lost on his contemporaries, though their response was very different. It is to this public reception of Ruskin that J. L. Bradley’s Ruskin: The Critical Heritage addresses itself. Bradley’s choice of material is disappointingly restricted both in number and in scope: there are less than fifty items in over four hundred pages, the emphasis is rather limitingly literary, and the architectural press in particular is poorly represented. The reviews of The Seven Lamps of Architecture and The Stones of Venice in The Builder are noticed only briefly in the ‘Introduction’, and the long and enthusiastic reviews of both works in The Ecclesiologist are not even mentioned. Nevertheless, there is much important material in the reviews Bradley does choose to reprint: John Brown’s perceptive piece on Modern Painters II from North British Review; the three Times articles on The Stones of Venice, probably written by the young George Meredith; Trollope, writing in Fortnightly Review, and sounding like a latter-day Pangloss in his attempts to dismiss the socio-economic heresies of The Crown of Wild Olive. Especially revealing is the astonished indignation with which reviewer after reviewer responds to Ruskin’s development from aesthetic to social critic—an indignation which precisely measures the cultural gap between the consumption of art and the social and economic bases of its production, the very disjunction that Ruskin perceived so clearly and set himself to remedy.

In such company, William Morris’s ‘Preface’ to the Kelmscott edition of ‘The Nature of Gothic’—which Bradley includes—is telling indeed. It is Morris, virtually alone, who recognises Ruskin’s political and social views as consequent upon, and integral to, his earlier aesthetic. In so doing, he both announces his debt to Ruskin and establishes his independence from the consumerist assumptions inherent in so much of the cultural debate of his day—and, indeed, of ours. The critical relationship which Morris identifies is that between art and labour: ‘John Ruskin ... has done serious and solid work towards that new-birth of Society, without which genuine art, the expression of man’s pleasure in his handiwork, must inevitably cease altogether.’ The passage is famous enough; in terms of the present discussion, however, it merits some further exploration. Very clearly, Ruskin is here presented as both hero and prophet; but the premium that Morris places upon ‘work’ serves to explicate the imaginative relationship between the two men in a revealing way—particularly in the context of Spear’s argument, considered earlier. The steadfastness with which Ruskin has worked for the cause he has himself defined, becomes both a guarantee and a precondition of his heroism, for work is the medium through which the Victorian Romantic quester pursues the quest. Moreover, in defining Ruskin’s achievement Morris is also describing his own: the very fact that he could translate the Ruskinian social gospel into a lifetime of personal and public labour allows Morris to assume a heroic role in the revolutionary process that he, in his turn, has identified and of which Ruskin had been the prophet.

What kind of a hero was John Ruskin, and how conscious was he of being—to use Carlyle’s influential phrase—The Hero as Prophet⁴? Writing to Robert and Elizabeth Browning in January 1859, Ruskin wryly lamented the miseries of his public career as
controvertialist and social critic: 'people were never meant to be always howling and bawling the right road to a generation of drunken cabmen, their heads up through the trap-door of the hansom, faces all over mud...'. The image is revealing in several ways. Firstly, by calling up the city-as-labyrinth tradition of which Dickens was the most powerful exponent, it locates the social disaster that Ruskin sought to avert as primarily urban. Secondly, the metaphor, and with it the coming disaster, is definitively modern: cabs had first appeared in London in 1823, though the hansom was not patented until a decade later; by 1859 there were some 6000 on the streets of the capital. Most importantly, however, it places John Ruskin at the centre of the action: the cab and the lost way are his as well as England’s, and if there is anxiety in the metaphor there is also excitement. Such personal involvement is more intense than the simple acknowledgement that one is implicated in the state of the nation—in Victorian terms, the dark side of Palmerston’s Civis Britannicus Sum. Ruskin’s self-dramatisation is also self-definition, his metaphor inextricably bound up with his own sense of who and what he is. At the same time, the impersonal fact of social crisis is confirmed by the personal urgency that informs his role both as actor and as eyewitness. Significantly though, that role is also ironically undercut by an anti-heroic self-mockery that reduces the rhetoric of prophecy to mere ‘howling and bawling’.

Such self-dramatising places Ruskin in what is perhaps the primary tradition of English social criticism, empirical in method, seeking out the shape of a society—as Protestantism seeks the nature of salvation—through personal witness rather than theory or a priori formulation. Indeed, one thinks of the principal figures in the tradition not as the assemblers of social models, but through anecdote and dramatic image: Cobbett, testy as ever, riding through a countryside already emptying of agriculture and filling with the smooth stucco villas of the stock-jobbers; Mayhew collecting the details of sweatshops and the slop-trade through the back-courts of the East End; Orwell spooning out condensed milk in the kitchen of the Brooker’s lodging house in Wigan. So also Ruskin, in his famous preface to The Crown of Wild Olive, presents his theory of the labour market as a direct consequence of visiting the polluted ponds of Carshalton and contrasting their neglect with the cheap ostentation of a new public house in Croydon. To a large extent, this tradition depends upon vision, upon the writer as literal seer, reading the ethical or spiritual shape of the world through the everyday fabric of physical appearances and social phenomena. It is this enterprise, as Morris was one of the first to recognise, that informs the whole development of Ruskin’s work. From the early days of Modern Painters, Ruskin set himself to teach men to read the world afresh—literally and metaphorically, to see more of it. In this sense, seeing the meaning of the rubbish in the Carshalton ponds and its relationship to the suburban growth of Croydon is a logical development from seeing what a Turnerian sunset means.

Yet there is often more to this technique of social investigation than meets the eye; the Carshalton ponds passage, to pursue the example, takes on a different identity when one realises that Margaret Ruskin, John’s mother, was the daughter of one William Cock, who kept a Croydon public house called The King’s Head. Here is another, broader tradition—that of writers for whom experience of the external world can be constantly converted into the terms of personal myth. Such strategies of consciousness belong most obviously to Romanticism, with Blake and Wordsworth as principal
exemplars, variously re-making reality through the very process of their engagement with it. Thought of in this way, it is easy to see how these same strategies helped to mould the configuration of attack in so much post-Romantic social criticism; they also explain the central, though sometimes disguised, significance of autobiography in that criticism. From Teufelsdrockh ‘toiling along the dirty little Rue Saint-Thomas de l’Enfer’⁵, to Orwell at the end of Homage to Catalonia travelling home through the countryside of his childhood and thinking of the bombs to come, English social critics may be found conducting an exploration of the self and its history co-extensively with their exploration of society. This complex inter-relationship clearly presents the biographer of such a critic with special difficulties—as Froude found with Carlyle—for he is confronted with a subject whose life has been seriously occupied, inter alia, with inventing itself. When that life has also been re-invented by an established biographical tradition the problems are complicated indeed.

Tim Hilton’s John Ruskin: The Early Years 1819–1859 is the first volume of a projected two-volume biography. It seeks to overcome the problems outlined above by returning to what Hilton sees as the primary source material: the letters and diaries, still incompletely published. This involves repudiating much of the laundered version of Ruskin’s life Joan Severn provided for Cook and Wedderburn’s great edition of the Works, and qualifying the autobiographical picture we find in Praeterita. This results in numerous changes in detail and emphasis; far more importantly, two major shifts in interpretation emerge. The first relates to the kind of weighting given to Ruskin’s life as a whole. Joan Severn stressed the importance of the first half of her cousin’s life and work—the Ruskin of Modern Painters and The Stones of Venice—at the expense of the second: by so doing she insulated his reputation both from the overt and unsettling radicalism that characterizes his socio-political writings, and from the psychological catastrophe of his later years. Hilton makes his rejection of this quite explicit: ‘I believe that Ruskin was a finer writer and, if I dare say so, a better man, in the years after 1860 and especially in the years after 1870’ (p. xi). Given the chronological limits of this first volume, we must obviously wait for the second for the full implications of this change of emphasis to be made clear. The effects of the other major interpretative shift are evident, however, throughout the present text. The standard reading of Ruskin’s life has always tended to locate the core of his emotional and imaginative development in his relationship with his mother—not surprisingly in view of the potency with which she combined religious intensity with a no less intense devotion to her son. Without underestimating Margaret Ruskin—and who would dare?—Hilton redresses the biographical balance in favour of John’s relationship to his father. Hilton’s argument for the centrality of John James Ruskin in his son’s development is convincing and has important repercussions for our understanding of some of the pressure that lay behind Ruskin’s work: as he remarks in his final chapter, discussing Ruskin’s struggle to complete Modern Painters in 1858–1859, ‘to conclude it was to conclude . . . that portion of his life that he owed to his father’ (p. 272).

Having said as much, it must also be said that it is in precisely the area of the relationship between the experiences of Ruskin’s personal life and the cumulative corpus of the work that the biography is most disappointing. In part, this results from Hilton’s puzzling reluctance to interpret the very material he has assembled, as if attempting to establish impartiality by the abolition of any point of view. This tends to
make it very difficult for the reader to assimilate individual perceptions into any coherent sense of the development of Ruskin's personality. Elisions of interpretation are even more frustrating when Hilton deals with his subject's intellectual development. For example, we are told that, for the undergraduate Ruskin, 'Geology was pleasure, a wonderful combination of discovery and recreation' in which he was untroubled by 'the bearing of geological research on the literal interpretation of Genesis' (p. 50). A dozen years and a hundred pages later all this has changed.

Hilton quotes Ruskin's famous letter to Henry Acland: "'If only the geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verse'" (p. 167). Although Hilton follows this with a commentary on the state of Ruskin's faith at the beginning of the 1850's, he makes no attempt to explain how such a radical shift in Ruskin's thinking could have taken place. At what point and by what process did pleasure and recreation turn into the very stuff of doubt? and why? The cumulative effect of Hilton's failure to consider such questions is peculiar indeed, for the Ruskin he creates often seems divorced from the intellectual life of his day, an impression exacerbated by the very scant attention that is given to the reception of Ruskin's work. Such one-sidedness is partly, no doubt, a reaction against the official image—though one doubts if that image has received much unqualified assent since the publication of The Order of Release. But to underestimate, or at any rate to under-represent, the public Ruskin is to deny a large part of the man: however solitary or misunderstood in his private life, John Ruskin's public life—as art critic, architectural arbiter, social prophet—was central not only to the special identity granted him by Victorian culture, but also to that complex myth that constituted his sense of himself.

What, finally, of the attempts to convert Ruskin's and Morris's social visions into social action? Ruskin's Guild of St George does not fall within the chronological span of Hilton's first volume. Although Spear considers the Guild and glances briefly at Morris's public political career and at the work of Morris and Co., he stops short of any detailed discussion. Given the terms of Spear's thesis this seems wise. Romance will only take us so far in understanding attempts to turn Edenic social models into the hard stuff of reality. They need to be seen both as the product of locally specific economic and political forces and in terms of the polymorphous tradition of marginalism in English society, from Digger and Leveller communities in the seventeenth century to Owenite utopianism in the nineteenth. The history of such endeavours is almost always the story of ideals defeated by the ironies of actuality, a process exemplified, more fully even than usual, by the way in which the products of Morris and the Art and Crafts movement generally have become either the desirable items of an élite art market, or models for mass production. Yet irony must not be allowed to take everything. As was remarked earlier, Ruskin's search for the just society often expressed itself in the terms of personal myth, dramatised in a sequence of emblematic experiences that are also moments of vision. None seems to me more eloquent than the image of Ruskin, during the making of the Hinksey road, sitting astride a pile of rocks, being taught the art of splitting flints by a stone-breaker. It was an attempted resolution that William Morris, disciple of the prophet and admirer of the hero, would
have recognised. The social passenger of the Browning letter, fifteen years before, has stopped merely yelling instructions; the prophetic social image is now an enactment; Ruskin, for the time at least, had found the right road in the heroic yet communal act of trying to build one.

NOTES

2 ibid., p. 38.