

Introduction

'You must either make a tool of the creature or a man of him' asserted John Ruskin. For Ruskin, it was, as usual, a matter of morality.¹

The prophet of the Arts and Crafts Movement was born in London on 8 February 1819, the only child of John James Ruskin, sherry merchant, and his wife, Margaret. It was to be expected that young John would inherit the strict moral code of the Victorian middle class, with the assistance of an occasional whipping from his Calvinist mother, and heavy Bible reading. Young people were taught that hard work was a solemn duty, and that if they sweated at the tiresome business long enough, they would eventually enter heaven, and leave their heirs a tidy sum.

Young John, after a wide aesthetic education touring ancient churches and the Swiss mountains with his parents, and learning to draw and paint from Copley Fielding and J.D. Harding, graduated at Oxford University in 1842, and in the following year published his first book, *Modern Painters*, but it was not until 1851 that his first volume of *The Stones of Venice* appeared and expanded his view given in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* that art is the expression of a people's religion and morality. His belief that work should be pleasure, rather than solemn and miserable duty was a revolutionary tenet held by his disciples in the Arts and Crafts Movement. 'It is not that men are ill fed,' Ruskin wrote, 'but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread, and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure.'²

Today in our tower office, tower flat, university, and poly, which have growed an' growed an awful size, and awfully similar; or tonight as the nation squat passive round the glowing oracle, which tempts us with the promise of prizes of huge sums of money, we may experience unease at the degradation of the creative human individual, the same unease experienced by mankind when herded into factories on the promise of a regular pittance, indeed the same unease which stimulated the moral foundation of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

One April day in 1830 William Cobbett was in Boston, Lincolnshire, brooding on the recent departure of some barge loads of young emigrant

craftsmen. He recalled that previously, at Great Yarmouth, there had been

four hundred persons, generally young men, labourers, carpenters, wheelwrights, millwrights, smiths and bricklayers; most of them with some money, and some farmers and others with good round sums. These people were going to Quebec by land into the United States.³

The rural communities were breaking up. The days of the self-sufficing village with its own creative craftsmen and cottage industry were numbered. Those artisans who still had the funds to preserve their independence were emigrating.

The Arts and Crafts movement was primarily a moral movement, most clearly expressed by Ruskin. Fertile ground had been provided by 'the nonconformist conscience,' roused by the degradation and dehumanisation of our craftsmen. In the early years of the 19th century the British took pride in the delusion that their Protestant Jerusalem was inhabited by sturdy independent yeoman farmers and craftsmen, as opposed to the slaves on the Continent. The delusion was shattered and the conscience roused by Cobbett's reports of the degradation of the English countryman, his farm swallowed up by the park and domain of the aristocrat and stock-jobber, his station reduced to servile labourer or parish pauper, his sons deprived of their natural right to hunt wild game, and his daughters 'very pretty girls, but ragged as colts and pale as ashes.'⁴ Poverty for the farming classes ensured no business for the country craftsman. If one had funds, emigration was the answer. The alternative for many of the youth of Albion was the factory:

...wheel without wheel

To perplex youth in their outgoings & to bind to labours in Albion
Of day and night the myriads of eternity: that they may grind
And polish brass & iron hour after hour, laborious task,
Kept ignorant of its use: that they might spend the days of wisdom
In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread,
In ignorance to view a small portion & to think that All.⁵

It seems fitting that it was a craftsman, William Blake who expressed so forcibly the deprivation of his class, when separated from personal work and an intelligent interest in it '...ground in our rumbling Mills, for bread of the Sons of Albion.'⁶

The same images of the grinding of men and the mindless polishing of metal were used by Ruskin half a century later in *The Stones of Venice*. He wrote of

men – broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin . . . if we could only see with what crystal sand their points were polished – sand of the human soul.⁷

Blake's onslaught on 'Wheels rising up poisonous against Albion' made little impact on his contemporaries. For them, his Albion was a phantom of the overheated brain. Cobbett's first-hand reporting was a different matter. What particularly upset Englishmen was his evidence of the human degradation in the southern counties. Satanic mills in the North and starvation in Ireland involved classes of people that the upper and middle classes had no time for. The distress and exodus of the traditional classes of yeoman farmer and country craftsman caused deep concern, for it was an article of faith, a moral fact, for the 19th century English, particularly for the Nonconformist, that a skilled, industrious, and Protestant artisan was assured of material success.

Another link in the chain of printed protest was the *Contrasts* of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin published in 1836 and 1841. The beauties of the Gothic town are illustrated alongside the horrors of the industrial. The latter include the New Jail, the Gas Works, the Lunatic Asylum, the Iron Works, and the Poor House (containing a master with a knout, and 'a variety of subjects always ready for medical students').⁸

Pugin anticipated Ruskin's moral view of architecture and craftwork, in short that they reflect the morals and creative spirit of their makers. '. . . I feel thoroughly convinced,' he argued, 'that it is only by similar glorious feelings, that similar glorious results can be obtained.'⁹ But Pugin was not the man to persuade Protestant England to start a moral crusade for the creative craftsman. He had come to the conclusion that the common man had been in happier circumstances before the Reformation. 'Catholic England was merry England, at least for the humbler classes. . . ' wrote Pugin.¹⁰ Cobbett had come to the same conclusion on his rural rides to Beaulieu and Ely, but had been careful to describe himself as 'a monstrous good Protestant.' Pugin's conversion to the Roman Catholicism limited his influence.

Unlike Pugin, John Ruskin had just the right religion and upbringing to appeal to the morality of both the evangelical middle class and the paternal high Tories. He reported of his private education:

my mother having it deeply in her heart to make an evangelical clergyman of me. Fortunately, I had an aunt more evangelical than

my mother; and my aunt gave me cold mutton for Sunday's dinner. . .

Cold Scotch mutton cooled his appetite for a Church career, but a forced diet of great slices of Bunyan and select cuts of the Bible, 'every syllable by heart', nourished the morality which later pervaded his books.¹¹ Additional to evangelical morality, Ruskin's morality included strong romantic concepts of 'the noble' and 'the heroic' derived from Walter Scott and Homer respectively, the authors of his own childhood choice.

His conviction that man should be noble, in search of noble beauty, caused Ruskin to turn his attention to the degraded artisan and to set in motion the Arts and Crafts movement. The workman must be elevated, 'ennobled,' changed to the ideal craftsman. Ruskin had little sympathy with the thoughts of the actual artisan, nor even an interest in such a vulgar business. In October, 1881, writing in defence of Scott's 'heroic and radiantly ideal' characters, he bitterly attacked George Eliot's acute descriptions of ordinary folk in the *Mill on the Floss*. 'There is not a single person in the book of the smallest importance to anybody in the world but themselves,' Ruskin wrote,

There is no girl alive, fairly clever, half-educated, and unluckily related, whose life has not at least as much in it as Maggie's. . . . Tom is a clumsy and cruel lout, with the making of better things in him (and the same may be said of nearly every Englishman at present smoking and elbowing his way through the ugly world his blunders have contributed to the making of); while the rest of the characters are simply the sweepings out of a Pentonville omnibus.¹²

Ruskin could perceive no advantage in dwelling on the common moral defeats of ordinary folk, such as Maggie Tulliver. To him it seemed negative, vulgar, and a waste of time. He could not accept Elliott's view that people were permanently trapped by their psychological make-up and circumstances. No crusader for the artisan could accept this view, the view that has earned Elliott the title of 'the first modern novelist.' Fashionable jargonauts, 'at this moment in time' (now), would judge that Ruskin was possessed by 'middle class elitist values' (any values ever approved by any educated class). An impartial observer of a future era may judge that Ruskin was obsessed with levelling up to the ideal, whereas we were obsessed with levelling down to the vulgar.

Ruskin wrote of his early manhood 'I felt myself somehow called to imitate Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*.'¹³ Had horses not been allergic to Ruskin, he could have written, with equal justification that he rode out to tilt against the mills of England. Like the knight of La Mancha his head was stuffed with idyllic notions derived from books, in Ruskin's case those of Byron, Scott, indeed from Cervantes himself. Ruskin's

moral approach to art was revealed in *Modern Painters* (1843–1860) a defence, and an analysis of landscape, liberally interspersed with preachings on ethics. In the fifth and last volume he wrote, ‘the preference accorded finally to one school over another, is founded on a comparison of their influences on the life of the workman.’¹⁴ In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), this moral criterion is maintained, but is also inverted into the argument that the art, craftwork, and architecture of a people are the expression of their morality.

This train of thought led Ruskin to define ‘the characteristics or moral elements of Gothic’ in Chapter 6 of the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853). This chapter, *The Nature of Gothic*, clearly reveals the moral principle of the Arts and Crafts Movement in education, in short, that personal creative work is essential for the human individual. Carlyle described Ruskin’s book as ‘a sermon in stones’, and some forty years on, Morris wrote in the preface of his Kelmscott Chaucer that Chapter 6 ‘in future days will be considered one of the very necessary and inevitable utterances of the century. To some of us, when we first read it, many years ago, it seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel. . . .’

To sum up Ruskin’s sermon, which appears in paragraphs 12 to 21 of his book, we must make a man of the worker, as in the Middle Ages, when he was given the liberty to decide the form of the stone images they carved on our cathedrals. No article must be manufactured ‘in the production of which *Invention* has no share’. The architect and master-mason must work with their men, and the distinction between one man and another be only in experience and skill, and the authority and wealth which these must naturally and justly obtain.¹⁵

The *Stones of Venice* contained the essential inspiration for all adherents of the Arts and Crafts movement, including educationists. It is clear that his message is primarily moral. The book did not complete Ruskin’s contribution. He had yet to suggest his concept of education for the artisan, and the need for arts and crafts communities. The publication of four essays in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860 marked Ruskin’s new direction. The essays are social as much as moral, being mainly an attack on free-for-all political economics based on supply and demand, the economics put forward by J.S. Mill and especially favoured by the Manchester and Birmingham Liberals.

The essays, to use Ruskin’s words ‘were reprobated in a violent manner’ and Thackeray, then the editor, was forced to discontinue them. Two years later Ruskin had the four essays published together as *Unto This Last* (1862), and in his preface he proposed training schools for youths in connection with workshops ‘for the production and sale of every necessary

of life and for the exercise of every useful art.¹⁶

Ruskin's message for the Arts and Crafts movement was completed by his *Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* entitled *Fors Clavigera*. The fifth letter, of May 1871, suggested that self-sufficing and self-educating rural communities should be established, an endeavour which Ruskin partly and unsuccessfully attempted through the medium of his St. George's Guild.¹⁷

These later ideas of Ruskin are stated in detail in Chapter 2 when consideration is given to the education work of C.R. Ashbee, Ruskin's closest disciple, a man who, unlike Morris, attempted to put these ideas into practice. As one can deduce from the next chapter, Morris was not really interested in education, and was reasonably satisfied with the status quo in that field.

Sources

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