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THE EDUCATIONAL THEORIES OF JOHN RUSKIN: A REAPPRAISAL

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Although John Ruskin is still accorded a paragraph or two in the general Histories of Education in England, and in similar text-books, such perfunctory references as are often found serve only to emphasize the lack of current interest in the educational theory of the man who inspired the Victorian public so much with the vigour of his prose writings and the moral fervour of his public lectures. It may be argued that our indifference to the social and moral aspects of his work is, in fact, a more appropriate reaction than were the overawed references to Ruskin's 'teachings' so prevalent in early biographical and critical writings: we no longer buy suede-bound editions of *Gems from Ruskin*, nor are we interested in collections of letters addressed to 'a working cork-cutter of Sunderland' and the like, but we are content to think of Ruskin, if we think of him at all, as the man who did much to establish a critical framework for the visual arts, as a brilliant propagandist, or perhaps as a Victorian whose mind was clouded with a neurosis peculiarly characteristic of his age.

There are, in my view, a number of reasons why the comparative neglect of Ruskin's ideas and theories about education is unfortunate: the first is that, like Matthew Arnold, Ruskin is a writer who displays the breadth of culture and of interests characteristic of the Victorian man of letters, and that this scope makes the examination of any particular facet of the work illuminating as well as difficult; Ruskin's view of education is essentially a view of the nature of art, or of political economy, in just the same sense as his approach to Geology is determined in part by his moral code. The work of the latter half of his life represents the comment of a literate and sensitive man, deeply involved with and concerned for his own society, upon a number of aspects of that society, and as such deserves the same kind of attention we would accord the 'criticism of life' of, for example, John Aubrey or Dr. Johnson. In the second place, although J. C. Garrett claims that 'the Victorian man believed in progress'[1]—and, if this is the case, then Ruskin is certainly no Victorian—he can, I think, be said to be typical in the bitterness of his attack on contemporary social institutions of what may be considered to be a persistent undercurrent of nineteenth-century thought: an undercurrent manifest in the Toryism of Scott and Carlyle, in some aspects of the satire

of Dickens, and in the melancholy of Tennyson. If this is so, then Ruskin's social, and especially his educational writings have a claim to be considered as the major statement during the period by a writer who fundamentally rejected the dominant Liberal middle-class ethic, and who yet was no mere traditionalist of the kind of Moberley and his associates. It is interesting, too, to note how Ruskin, despite the apparent appeal to traditional values, is preoccupied with educational issues which are of considerable present-day interest: the nature of moral education and its relationship to other forms of education; the philosophy of the curriculum; the function of vocational training and of adult education; and the relationship between educational institutions and the state.

Ruskin's concern with education, as both teacher and theorist, was a life-long preoccupation, developing from the time of his teaching at the Working-Man's College in Red Lion Square in October 1854—where, he reports, his efforts were directed 'not to making a carpenter an artist, but to making him happier as a carpenter'—until the time shortly before his death when he reflects upon his own upbringing and schooling in *Praeterita.* In the meantime, he had spent thirty years in giving and publishing lectures, had written at least a dozen text-books for schools and night-classes on subjects ranging from mineralogy to music,[2] had translated stories for children[3] and initiated a number of museum projects.[4] In addition he had directly involved himself in the running of at least four educational institutions,[5] had written extensive criticisms of the trend of nineteenth-century educational thought and practice, and had outlined his own educational ideas with some precision. In the context of this substantial involvement, the sharp decline in interest in Ruskin's writing on educational matters may appear surprising; but it may on the other hand be seen as being indicative of a number of particular difficulties in seeking an approach to his work. In the attempt to define an appropriate approach, I begin by trying to isolate one or two aspects of the modern attack upon his works of social criticism.

One recurrent theme in such criticism is that Ruskin's arguments are not presented in the rational manner which we expect, that they have to be 'extricated'—as Wilenski, for example, puts it—from the text: his books ' . . . are badly arranged and badly written; and the arguments are obscured by digressions and quotations from the Bible'.[6] In a similar vein, Peter Quennell[7] complains that ' . . . to trace any single line through his prophetic utterances is often a bewildering and exhausting task', whilst G. M. Young[8] rather more sympathetically refers to 'the deceptive lucidity of his intoxicating style' and considers his intellect to be 'profound, penetrating and subtle', but nevertheless 'as fanciful, as glancing and as wayward as the mind of a child'. Two basic points emerge from this kind of comment, both of which militate against a clear

assessment of Ruskin's achievement as an educational thinker: he rarely writes about one subject at a time, so that one finds, for example, a powerful discussion of the problem of poverty in the first section of *Sesame and Lilies* (an essay on reading), whilst *A Joy for Ever*, the principal concern of which is the artist's position in society, contains a considerable section on education; and so on. Whilst I would argue that these lectures and essays have a kind of coherence which is dependent upon the very diffuse and digressive nature of the writing which attracts condemnation, it is nevertheless clear that the task of 'tracing an argument' is not in such circumstances an easy one. The second aspect of the criticisms quoted above concerns style rather than content: the 'intoxicating style' was developed in the attempt to shape the responses of an audience who were listening to a public lecture, or of a group of readers receiving a letter of advice and 'illumination'. Consequently the combination of powerful rhetoric and plain statement, the short bursts of closely logical reasoning and the extensive use of homely anecdote, all of which so disconcert the modern reader, have more in common with the traditions of the sermon or of the political pamphlet than with the usual style of the educational treatise. One result is that in the attempt to abstract what Ruskin means by 'moral education', for example, from the whole carefully created context of feeling, one tends to destroy the whole force and balance of the argument; the medium is, at least in part, the message.

Another aspect of recent adverse criticism of Ruskin's theories is summed up by Peter Quennell, who writes[9] that 'Ruskin was a prophet with a decidedly dictatorial turn; and neither prophets nor dictators are much respected in the present day'. A similar comment by G. C. Leroy[10] indicates that he, too, considers that the appeal to authority, the dogmatism, evident in some of Ruskin's statements are signs of inherent weaknesses in his case: 'The dominant point of view is an authoritarian one—and in this fact lies the source of his failure as a constructive critic. The only workable solution for the problems Ruskin faced was increased democracy. In the context in which he wrote, an authoritarian gospel had either to be ineffectual or, as an anticipation of twentieth-century fascism, vicious.' Ruskin's basic assumptions, then, are—as he would himself have been glad to admit—authoritarian, his political bias illiberal to a degree that can prove offensive to at least some modern readers. One may, however, and in my view should, question the validity of the kind of criticism which seeks to judge a nineteenth-century social analysis by the political standards of the mid-twentieth-century: as with Hobbes or Rousseau, we need to read Ruskin's work firstly as it stands, as a self-sufficient body of argument, and secondly in the light of what we know or can deduce of the contemporary context; but not as something to be considered in terms of subsequent political and social experience—he was,

in fact, no prophet! Thus, in considering the educational theories of another period, it seems to me to be essential that we should be aware of rather than irritated by the social assumptions of the writer: we should not, for example, see the rather crude three-fold division of society in Arnold's *Culture & Anarchy* as something which 'spoils' the book in any sense, however little this particular analysis may be to our taste. As I hope to show later on, Ruskin's ideas on general social questions are so enmeshed with his educational theories that it is of particular importance to establish how this framework of ideas is to be regarded.

Before this relationship between social and educational theory in Ruskin's writing is examined in more detail, it would appear reasonable to attempt to determine the writer's own view of the purpose and nature of his work; (it will be evident that I do not accept the suggestion of G. C. Leroy that in Ruskin's case the creative force was totally irrational, an expression of the needs and frustrations of a neurotic nature). Whilst it is clearly not possible to define a set of intentions which is likely to prove equally applicable to series of public lectures, private letters and major prose works written over the course of many years, there are nevertheless two passages which I should like to quote briefly in order to shed a little light on this point: both date from the early 1870s, roughly a central period in Ruskin's 'second career', during which he devoted himself chiefly to questions of political and social concern. Firstly, from impressively honest 1871 *Preface* to *Sesame and Lilies*:

> ... in now looking over these two lectures, I am painfully struck by the waste of good work in them. They cost me much thought, and much strong emotion; but it was foolish to suppose that I could rouse my audiences in a little while to any sympathy with the temper into which I had brought myself by years of thinking over subjects full of pain ... I can well imagine a reader laying down the book without being at all moved by it, still less guided to any definite course of action.

And, from the sixth letter of *Fors Clavigera*:

> I neither wish to please, nor displease you; but to provoke you to think; to lead you to think accurately ... You fancy, doubtless, that I write—as most other political writers do—my 'opinions'; and that one man's opinion is as good as another's. You are much mistaken. When I only opine things, I hold my tongue; and work till I more than opine—until I know them. If the things prove unknowable, I, with final perseverance, hold my tongue about them ...

It is interesting to note in passing the differences of style and general tone between the two passages—between the sensitive and controlled prose that is characteristic of the *Preface*, and the aggressively short

sentences and unfortunate colloquialisms that one finds so frequently in *Fors Clavigera*: but both passages are indicative of an attitude to his own work that is typical of Ruskin. Writing is seen as valuable only inasmuch as it represents a clearly communicable truth, a certain knowledge expressed in such a way as to directly influence the thinking and behaviour of the reader. Even though he had admitted that 'the thoughts even of the wisest are very little more than pertinent questions',[11] those thoughts should be stated as a teaching or as a guide to 'a definite course of action'. This generally didactic purpose is presumably what T. E. Welby has in mind when he comments that Ruskin's writing is 'too propagandist, and too much to some special occasion' to allow of a clear statement of his logical position.[12]

The present problem, then, is one of examining the work of an educationalist who wrote no single work on education,[13] a thinker who chose to express his arguments in a deliberately emotive terminology and to employ digression and anecdote as the instruments of persuasion, a man whose authoritarian cast of mind tends to alienate the modern reader. The most practical of these difficulties is the diffuse and digressive nature of so much of the work to be considered: in order to do full justice, each separate lecture, letter or essay should arguably be examined as a whole and separately from the rest. Since, however, this is clearly not practicable in an article of this length, I propose to look at Ruskin's educational theories from two angles: as part of the general attack on Victorian social institutions, in the first place; and, secondly, as a collection of ideas about the nature of the school and of the curriculum.

Society, the State and Education

The educational writer who seeks to criticize contemporary practices may, in essence, adopt one of two positions: he may attack the current educational system on the ground that it fails to provide a training or a cultural background appropriate to the needs of the community, without necessarily questioning the fundamental structure of that community—a procedure often followed by educational theorists. Alternatively, he may attack the fundamentals of the society itself, including its educational institutions; but in this case it is clear that any meaningful proposals that are made for educational reform will of necessity rest upon a clearly formulated set of social aims, since any concept of 'education' is determined by social priorities and cultural values. It is to the second category that Ruskin's approach belongs: he is a writer whose attack on social institutions is wide-ranging, and whose basic premisses consequently have to be taken into account before his educational theories make sense. Education may itself be the instrument of social or moral reform, and Ruskin takes his readers to task for failing to think in these terms: '. . . you

never educate any of your children with the earnest object of enabling them to see their way out of this, not by rising above their father's business, but by setting in order what was amiss in it'.[14] For these reasons I outline below the general nature of Ruskin's criticism of the standards and assumptions of Victorian society, and then proceed to consider the ways in which educational ideas and institutions are involved in the basic arguments.

One of Ruskin's foremost concerns was with the workings of nineteenth-century capitalism in general, and with the economic writings of John Stuart Mill and other economists in particular:

> Of course, as in the instances of alchemy, astrology, witchcraft, and other such popular creeds, political economy has a plausible idea at the root of it. The social affections, says the economist, are accidental and disturbing elements in human nature; but avarice and the desire of progress are constant elements. Let us eliminate the inconstants, and consider the human being merely as a covetous machine . . .[15]

One constantly finds Ruskin's arguments to be concerned, as here, with values which are essentially personal and moral: money, he holds, is of value only inasmuch as it gives power over the labour of men (a simplification of the view that Marx had propounded), and any such power which is not justly earned by a corresponding giving of labour is to be deplored. The 'unjust' exploitation of labour leads society to the point where it becomes a 'money-making mob' playing a 'game of counters' without purpose and without mercy:[16] such a society is capable of offending against every principle of its professed religion, so that the 'Lazarus of Christianity' no longer expects crumbs from the rich man's table, but is reduced to 'gnawing the scraps of putrid flesh, and sucking the marrow from the bones of the horses he is employed to crush'. Much of the bitterness of this rejection of the *laissez-faire* principle in political economy is balanced by sections of lucid and clear argument, illustrated characteristically by the 'simple' relationship which exist between father and son, master and servant, or between craftsman and village community.

If Ruskin tends to see England as 'a mere heap of agonising human maggots scrambling and sprawling over each other for any manner of rotten eatable thing they can get a bite of',[17] then these tendencies are to be seen in the educational system too. The main preoccupation of the parent, in his view, is to gain 'advancement in life' for his child, and education is to provide the means for this advancement—what Arnold had described as 'the ladder', the instrument of social betterment: but, since 'advancement' is necessarily at the expense of others, such attitudes represent a denial of all the moral values that form the basis of a true culture:

> . . . it never seems to occur to the parents that there may be an education which, in itself, *is* advancement in life.[18]

The whole competitive motive in education is systematically attacked at many points in Ruskin's writing, since—like commercial competition—it stems from and encourages further 'the vice of jealousy'.[19] The time and energy which Ruskin himself expanded in competing for the Newdigate Poetry Prize at Oxford is bitterly regretted, since he later came to feel that such competition is motivated by a desire for the wrong kind of praise, and that it causes a 'strain and anxiety' which is not conducive to learning. The examination system in its 'miserable confusion and absurdity' seeks to channel these competitive desires, to formalize the essential injustice which will reward not the fittest man, but he who 'on a given day, chances to have bodily strength enough to stand the cruellest strain'.[20] The 'Goddess of Getting-on' is a force quite as destructive in education as in other spheres of life.

It is important to stress that Ruskin's criticisms of the workings of *laissez-faire* capitalism are primarily based not so much upon an intellectual conviction, or a simple sense of justice, as upon a profound and humane indignation at the conditions under which those men and women commonly referred to as the 'lower orders' were forced to live. In his account of the death of a boot-repairer, reprinted in red in *Sesame and Lilies* from a newspaper report; or in the account in *The Crown of Wild Olive* of a bone-picker dying on a dung-heap, 'in the lowest stage of poverty, poorly clad, and half-starved', there is an attempt to arouse the conscience of the Victorian public, a conscience so dulled in sensibility by the daily experience of death and degradation in the larger cities that shock or mawkish sentimentality were needed to produce a popular response. Ruskin's indignation is the greater because he regards the poverty of the cities as being the result of economic policy, and therefore avoidable—a view by no means common at the time: *The Times*, for example, had reported upon the appalling misery of conditions in London's East End during a depression in the 1850s, and had commented that 'there is no one to blame for this: it is the result of nature's simplest laws'.[21] Ruskin argues that the roots of such misery lie in the parasitic nature of the idle rich and the idle poor, and bitterly satirizes the unfortunate comment made by a contemporary that the country's wealth 'is now filtering downwards to the actual workers'—whence, he asks, did it filter to the actual idlers?

The wastefulness of industrial society, with its tendency to despoil all that is of true value is a further cause of poverty, a poverty of environment: the stream at Carshalton, for example, is described thus:

> . . . just in the very rush and murmer of the first spreading currents, the

> human wretches of the place cast their street and house foulness; heaps of dust and slime, and broken shreds of old metal and rags of putrid clothes; which, having neither energy to cart away, nor decency enough to dig into the ground, they thus shed into the stream, to diffuse what venom of it will float and melt far away.[22]

The values of middle-class capitalism are seen as resulting in waste —of human life, abilities and dignity, and of the resources of the physical environment.

Whatever the remedy for these evils, Ruskin does not suggest as did many of his contemporaries that poverty is to be overcome by education in any direct sense, and it is clear that he regarded the teaching of people who were dirty, hungry or homeless as an absurdity. Writing of the education of working-class men, he complains that

> it has become a popular idea that you may in great part remedy deficiencies by teaching to these starving and shivering persons, Science and Art . . . but I should strongly object myself to being lectured on either, whilst I was hungry and cold.[23]

It is worth noting that Ruskin does not merely attack the view that men can 'paint or star-gaze themselves into victuals', but that he appears aware of a divergence of interests between the teachers and the taught that was to bedevil the Adult Education movement until the late 1930s, a divergence between the desire of the teachers to 'bring culture to the people' and the desire of the taught to turn their acquired knowledge to practical account.[24]

Two further aspects of Ruskin's attack on Victorian social and political institutions remain to be discussed, both of which have a significant bearing upon his educational theories, and both of which have been much misunderstood: the antipathy towards the machine; and the political rejection of 'atheistic liberalism'. It would be easy to dismiss his views on the use of machines as those of a belated Luddite or of a mere obstructionist, were they not so consistently and rationally argued. Machinery formed the basis of the industries which Ruskin saw as laying waste the countryside, vitiating cities and blighting the lives of the labourers who were so helplessly involved: in a well-known passage, he describes the destruction of a valley as the railway was constructed—in order merely that 'every fool in Buxton can be at Bakewell in half an hour, and every fool in Bakewell at Buxton'; factories were making the towns places unfit to live in—'the horrible nests, which you call towns, are little more than laboratories for the distillation into heaven of venomous smokes and smells, mixed with effluvia from decaying animal matter, and infectious miasmata from purulent disease . . .'.[26] The industrial blight was not accompanied by any improvement in the living conditions

of the poorer classes, but rather appeared to be contributing to their misery; whilst the machines worked, men were allowed to remain unemployed.[27] It appears to be Ruskin's view that the 'machine age' was responsible for more than the spoilation of land and lives, however, and that the very cultural roots of society—vested in the traditional crafts, festivals and modes of life of the countryside—were being weakened. Art can only be created by men who are 'living contented lives, in pure air, out of the way of unsightly objects, and emancipated from unnecessary mechanical occupation'.[28] His horror is boundless when he describes a traditional festival in Cumberland where the dancing was omitted and the piping performed by a 'steam plough'.[29] Lowered standards of design and quality in clothing, domestic utensils, furniture—changes which affect the nature of ordinary life—are also seen as the direct result of machine manufacture; characteristically, the remedy proposed is not an improvement in the quality of industrial design, but the reinstatement of the craft apprenticeship, so that 'every male child born in England must learn some manner of skilled work by which he may earn his bread'.[30]

It is a commonplace that a number of prominent nineteenth-century writers attempted to come to terms with the problems presented by industrialization by an attempted return to the supposed values of the 'ordered' or feudal society—to the period that Ruskin describes as 'Christian Feudal', and which, he says, lasted roughly from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries in England. Such a 'return' is proposed by the writers of the Young England movement in their efforts to unite aristocratic and labouring classes against the ethos of the middle-class entrepreneur; feudal values are romanticized in Scott's novels, and justified in the writings of Carlyle. Ruskin, too, in his rejection of the 'atheistic liberalism' of his time—a liberalism which was, he says, initiated by the discovery of gunpowder and the development of printing[31]—proposes an ideal society, discussed at length in *Fors Clavigera*, in which authority shall be absolute. Of the proposed Guild of St. George, he says:

> We will try to take some small piece of English ground, beautiful, peaceful and fruitful . . . We will have no liberty upon it; but recognition of every betterness that we can find, and reprobation of every worseness . . .[32]

The rejection of the notion of 'liberty' in Ruskin's work is unfortunately not systematically discussed at any point, and doubtless some of the allegations of inconsistency that have been made against him have arisen from Ruskin's vociferous complaints when he feels that any of his personal freedoms are threatened: when, for example, it was pointed out to him that Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools would not allow him to run a school in which the Three R's were not taught, he retorted that 'ten

millions of inspectors of schools collected on Cader Idris should not make me teach in my schools, come to them who liked, a single thing I did not choose to!'[33]

The rejection of 'freedom' is closely linked with Ruskin's view of leadership: he argues, for example, in Letter XXII of *Time and Tide* that human abilities are best utilized when directed by the kind of leader who excites love and reverence in his followers, a king whose duty is to work harder and for less reward than his subjects, guided by 'the law of justice and love'[34] rather than by his own will, in order that his people may be protected, provided for and spiritually guided. In the letter on 'Dictatorship' (also in *Time and Tide*), Ruskin examines a social microcosm in the shape of a number of people escaping from shipwreck in an open boat: just as, in this case, 'laws are constantly established and enforced which no one thinks of disobeying . . . an entire equality of claim to the provisions is acknowledged without dispute; and an equal liability to necessary labour . . . the right man is put at the helm: every available hand is set to the oars; the sick are tended, and the vicious restrained, at once, and decisively . . .'—so it should be in the modern state, in which the basic needs of self-preservation as a community are, Ruskin argues, essentially the same even if infinitely more complex; and such self-preservation is to be achieved only by the willing subservance of the individual to the interests of society as a whole.

If the community which Ruskin proposes is to be one in which each person works according to the best of his or her ability, and in which all accept the laws and guidance of those wise and capable men who are the natural leaders of the community, then in what ways can and should education contribute towards the accomplishment of these ends? Since work is the important contribution which any man makes to society, then it is of prime importance that everyone should be trained to perform some useful task; and, let it be noted, Ruskin regarded physical labour as the only true form of work, admitting that he himself 'never did a stroke of work in my life worth my salt, not to mention my dinner'.[35] Education, then has the primary function of preparing the child for its life's work is concerned, in fact, with what Arnold had rejected as the Hebraist virtues of 'doing' as opposed to the Hellenic virtues of 'knowing'; Ruskin is entirely in earnest when he suggests that the cricket fields of the public schools would provide a suitable area for the practice of ploughing. Children must learn to work, then; but—of equal importance in an ordered and orderly society—they must learn to become citizens of the most desirable kind:

> All education must be moral first; intellectual secondarily . . . moral education begins in making the creature to be educated clean and

> obedient. This must be done thoroughly, and at any cost, and with any kind of compulsion rendered necessary by the nature of the animal, be it dog, child, or man.[36]

Ruskin's views on the nature of the compulsion to be clean and obedient are, in fact, by Victorian standards moderate;[37] but it is clear that what is meant by a 'moral' education here subserves a *social* requirement, the requirement of a benevolent authority that its subjects be law-abiding and healthy. 'Intellectual education' is to serve the same basic ends: this consists of 'giving the creature the faculties of admiration, hope and love', which are to be taught by 'the study of beautiful Nature; the sight and history of noble persons; and the setting forth of noble objects of action'[38] —for Ruskin had written earlier in *Sesame and Lilies*, 'We are only human in so far as we are sensitive . . .': sensitive, that is, to the needs of the poor, the sick and the weak, and to the qualities of spirit and intellect of those who are our true superiors. These statements are, it is true, presented in terms which are moral rather than political, but it is characteristic of Ruskin that his political views are deeply rooted in a revulsion against his own society that is essentially moral—a revulsion, as we have seen, against poverty, against injustice and against the manifestations of industrialism in society. It is only a man who is 'uneducated' in this sensitive awareness who could base his life upon the money-making motive that Ruskin sees as the principle force in Victorian Society.[39]

Education, then, is to fit the child for a life of dignified labour and to develop the moral qualities suitable for a happy and useful membership of the community, by 'recognition of every betterness' and training of every ability in the child. Ruskin is no egalitarian: if society is to be ruled by the wisest and best of men, then the distinction between man and man in the community are those distinctions alone which emerge in the course of the educational process; 'social' class as such is an irrelevance. Writing of the differences between such a man as the fictional Justice Shallow and the real Sir Isaac Newton, he comments: 'Leave . . . both on the village green and you will hardly know one from the other. Educate both as well and as far as you can and see what a gulf you set between them'.[40] In Appendix 7 of *The Stones of Venice* it is argued that this inequality of intellectual and moral understanding is a positive good, enabling every man to fill his 'appointed place in society, however humble': education is the means by which each man learns how he can serve best rather than the 'ladder' of advancement.

So far this account of the relationship between social and educational aims in Ruskin's work has been little concerned with the mainstream of nineteenth-century educational argument. The principal concern of Victorian educational legislators, committee members and report-writers was,

I think it would be agreed, with the creation of an administrative framework for the educational system, and in particular with the financial relationships between government, the school boards, and the religious bodies and societies which dominated many of these boards. Such a general area of interest can be traced from the Brougham reports of 1816 and 1818, through the 1870 Forester Act, until by 1902 the basis of the modern financial and administrative structure had emerged. By this time, two years after Ruskin's death, some of the duties of central and local authorities to satisfy the educational needs of the community had achieved a tentative definition:

> the Local Education Authority shall consider the educational needs of their area and take such steps as seem to them desirable, to supply or aid the supply of education other than elementary, and to promote the general co-ordination of all forms of education.[41]

It is notable that, despite his prominence in university and public life, and despite his close involvement in the running of a number of schools, Ruskin rarely concerns himself with financial or organizational detail; his rather naïve radicalism was such as to make matters of this kind appear quite irrelevant or insignificant to him. He held, simply, that education is a *part* of government, a part which '. . . does not mean teaching men to know what they do not know. It means teaching them to behave as they do not behave'; and that, since the act of educating is also an act of governing, and since the ends of education by definition benefit the whole community, then it must be made compulsory and free.[42] Clearly the 'returns' are not likely to be financial, for 'education is not a profitable business, but a costly one; nay, even the best attainments of it are always unprofitable, in any terms of coin: no nation ever made its bread either by its great arts or its great wisdoms'. The 'family' image of social structure is used to support the belief in free and compulsory education: a father educates his children expecting no reward other than that of a good child, and in just such a way should the state educate the peasant, expecting only that he should become a good man. Since, in Ruskin's view, this is a self-evident duty, the financial means must be found—if not by reducing some existing form of public expenditure, then by redirecting private expenditure from such 'unnecessary' activities as breeding race-horses or drinking port.

In a number of respects, then, Ruskin's educational theories correspond with his rejection of many of the social values of his period; but they also correspond with a positive set of ideas—the vision of a rural society in which each man is educated according to his abilities, given work for a fair reward, and cared for in sickness and old age by a benevolent authority. In the ensuing section I attempt to set out briefly some of the

more practical and particular suggestions which were the by-products of the positive and the 'visionary' elements in Ruskin's thinking.

The Curriculum and the School Environment

In a period when increasing sums of public money were being used to subsidize the education of children from a social class that had been little educated in the past, it was natural that men should ask, as did Spencer, 'what knowledge is of most worth?'[43] since, as a modern report has pointed out, 'the question of a curriculum does not arise until the prior questions of why society exists at all, and what functions its schools are to fulfil, have been settled first . . .'[44] we find many Victorian writers attempting to a greater or lesser degree to define the purposes of education, as did Ruskin. The fundamental disagreement about the proper nature of the curriculum can be seen in the division between those who advocated the retention of the traditional grammar-based study of the classical languages as the basis of education, and those dissidents who either advocated the classical humanist approach of Arnold and Newman, or on the other hand believed with John Stuart Mill and T. H. Huxley that scientific study should become an integral part of a liberal education. There is some danger when discussing these arguments of losing sight of the educational context with which most of the writers were concerned: it would clearly be foolish to compare Newman's view of the curriculum of the University with Ruskin's discussion of class-room teaching in Coniston Village School: Newman, it will be remembered, claimed that he thought of the poor only as 'objects of charity and compassion'. Arnold was clearly aware himself of the necessary distinctions between the teaching of a public school and that appropriate to an elementary school; despite his belief in the value of the study of classical literature, philosophy and history, he gently ridicules the suggestion that Greek or Sanskrit might form a valuable part of the elementary school curriculum,[45] and points out that many children have considerable difficulty in mastering English—such suggestions are, he says, 'dangerous trifling, because they tend to make us forget the pressing reality'.

It is an awareness of this 'pressing reality' that seems to underly Ruskin's attack on the classical basis of English education: the concern for dead languages and cultures, the mistaking of erudition for education, serves in his view to direct attention away from the important ends of human existence. Ruskin rejects the claim that it is 'the general discipline which a course of classical reading gives to the intellectual powers' which is the essential justification of the study of the classics, since he believes that such an intellectual discipline may be derived equally from the study of more 'useful' bodies of knowledge; i.e., those skills which have a direct application either to the work by which the individual is to serve

the community, or to the development of that sensitivity to the needs of others which is the basis of what Ruskin calls 'the science of the relations and duties of men to each other':[46]

> It might be a matter of dispute what processes have the greatest effect in developing the intellect; but it can hardly be disputed what facts it is most advisable that a man entering into life should accurately know.

Thus, until the means by which children's abilities develop is more fully understood, the content of education should relate directly to that which is clearly useful: the 'useful' subjects should be concerned with the natural environment, with the religious or moral ends of existence, and with work. Except in one important respect, classical studies do not fulfil any of these functions, and may actually stand in the way of a true education (the unconvincing attack upon Aristotle in *Modern Painters* suggests that Ruskin regards the ancient philosophies as potentially corrupting). In the first part of *Sesame and Lilies*, however, one finds Ruskin advocating the study of Latin and Greek on the grounds that both languages are necessary for the full understanding of the English language and of English literature. In a language 'so mongrel in breed as the English' a failure in complete grasp of meaning is 'a fatal power of equivocation put into men's hands', and any teaching which seeks to clarify the means of communication is a weapon against the 'marked words droning and skulking about us', and against the 'catechisms and phrases' taught instead of 'human meanings'.[47] It is true that *Sesame and Lilies*, in its original lecture form, was intended for a very middle-class audience, but —despite his dictum that most men are fitted for the study of things rather than words—a careful reading of *Fors Clavigera* reveals an extraordinary expenditure of energy in the explanation of classical phrases and the discussion of word derivations to the 'working men of England'. One letter even puts the view that a knowledge of Latin may be useful to any 'European workman'; for

> the Romans did more and said less, than any other nation that ever lived; and their language is the most heroic ever spoken by men'[48]

One's conclusion, inevitably, is that Ruskin's view on this matter is equivocal at least, and often appears inconsistent: however desirable a knowledge of Latin may be for the working man, he is clear that it should form no part of the elementary school curriculum.

Ruskin has very much more to say about the place of science in the curriculum, and it is interesting to see how his justification of the study of science differs fundamentally from that of his contemporaries. John Stuart Mill, whilst acknowledging that a part of the value of scientific

instruction lies in 'the mere information that it gives', justifies it on much wider grounds:

> It is more important to understand the value of scientific instruction as a training and disciplining process, to fit the intellect for the proper work of human being. Facts are the materials of our knowledge, but the mind itself is the instrument: and it is easier to acquire facts, than to judge that they prove, and how, through the facts which we know, to get to those which we want to know.[49]

Science is thus to take over some of the functions of the traditional grammar-based study of the classics in that it is to be regarded as an academic discipline in its own right, a training of the mind in the empirical method rather than by the transmission of an accepted body of knowledge, and therefore an essential part of a 'liberal' education. Ruskin differs fundamentally from Mill, as he does from Huxley and Spencer too, in that the whole tendency of his thought is to reject both the ends and the methods of contemporary science, on grounds which are both emotional and moral:

> All true science is *savoir vivre:* but all your modern science is the contrary of that. It is *savoir mourir* . . .[50]

This 'modern science' is the technology which mechanizes and degrades labour, the botany that seems to prove that there is no such thing as a flower,[51] the physiology that is exemplified by 'Professor Huxley asking ironically "Has a frog a soul?" and scientifically directing young ladies to cut frogs' stomachs to see if they can find it'.[52] The man who had, with Acland, been instrumental in the foundation of the Natural History School at Oxford University, was the same man who, at the end of his career, resigned a chair as a protest against the opening of a laboratory of physiology at the same university. It is paradoxical that he should have been so much responsible for the eventual introduction of a scientific study that went far beyond Matthew Arnold's idea of *Natur-Kunde* into the elementary schools.

In view of his opposition to the current tendencies in scientific thinking and practice, then what are the proper aims of science as Ruskin defined them? In the first place, education should help a man to know:

> where he is—that is to say, what sort of a world he has got into; how large it is; what kind of creatures live in it and how; what it is made of and what may be made of it.

An interest and pleasure in observation of the physical environment, a 'perpetual, simple and religious delight'[53] is clearly the 'natural food which God intended for the intellect': the proper function of natural

science, then, is to satisfy a healthy curiosity in the surrounding world, a curiosity that is exemplified by the questioning nature of the child who is 'not frightened from asking what he means to know by teachers who have been afraid that they wouldn't be able to answer'.[54] Ruskin's view as to what is a 'healthy' interest remains unclear, and as far as I am aware he at no point attempts to define the proper limits of curiosity with any precision. However irritating the appeal to God's intentions may now appear, Ruskin's comments and ideas on the teaching of science to children of elementary school age are nevertheless characterized by a fresh common sense and a still-infectious enthusiasm which contrasts strikingly with Matthew Arnold's endorsement of Lubbock's view that science is best taught 'orally and with the aid of the blackboard'.[55] One example of this approach is to be found in the section of *Fors Clavigera* where the nature of a suitable reference book on bees for a country child is considered. Such a book would not include, as was the current practice, a list of all the species of bee,

> . . . nor what grounds there may be for suspecting that one species is another species . . . neither do I want a book to tell her what a bee's inside is like . . . nor whether the morphological nature of the sternal portion of the thorax should induce us, strictly, to call it the prosternum . . .

It should, however, tell the child how the bee buzzes, and 'how and by what instrumental touch, its angry buzz differs from its pleased or simply busy buzz', how the bee feeds and builds, and how the community of bees is organized. The careful observation of characteristics and behaviour are here to form the basis of the child's learning.

A second function of the study of science is to assist man in the pursuit of his work: the sailor needs to learn about the creatures of the sea, the farmer needs to understand the composition of the soil, and so on—in fact, the basis of education in science as in other subjects is to be 'doing' rather than 'knowing'. As Spencer had argued earlier (in reviewing a biography of Pestalozzi) 'start from the concrete and end in the abstract . . . proceed from the empirical to the rational'.[56] The child is thus to be encouraged from the first to contribute to his own upkeep and to do what work he can 'as soon as he can hold a hoe', and the most important part of the school is to be the gardens and farmlands attached to it. In talking of 'Agnes' (the country child for whom the bee book was to be written), Ruskin writes that 'she should assuredly learn the elements of Geometry, but she should at first call it "Earth-measuring" and have her early lessons in it in laying out her own garden'.[57] A more advanced lesson in science and geometry would be an examination of the tubular nest of the leaf-cutting bee, a task which would be useless to the child unless she were

shown 'how to be a leaf-cutting bee herself, and invited to construct, or endeavour to construct, the likeness of a bee's nest with paper and scissors'. Ruskin himself, as Collingwood said of him, 'a great teacher, because he took you by the hand as he went on his voyage of discovery through the world; he made you see what he saw, and taught you to look for yourself':[58] reading the account of the lesson on diamonds that he gave to the girls of Whitelands College, of his suggestions about teaching botany, or of the orrery that he helped the children of Coniston to build in their school playground, one gains some insight into the nature of the fascination that his teaching held. The efficiency of a school, he believed, increases 'exactly in the ratio of its direct adaptation to the circumstances of the children it receives',[59] and the study of the environment has therefore to bear a direct and immediate relationship to the particular nature of that environment, in a way which would not be possible working 'orally and with the help of the blackboard'.

Throughout the Victorian period, the chief function of the elementary school curriculum—a function which was enforced by Lowe's 'payment by results' system—was to ensure that children should learn to read and write, and to handle simple computation of number. It is not therefore surprising that Ruskin's view that the Three R's should not be taught in school was regarded at the time with incredulity, and has indeed been the cause of much subsequent misunderstanding. The principal argument in support of this contention—and, paradoxically, it is one of his most convincingly stated—is that the school-teacher's proper preoccupation is with the giving of a sound moral education together with a grounding in such subjects as music, astronomy and geometry; and that a person fit to teach these subjects should not waste time in teaching the elementary skills. The Three R's should be taught by the children's parents, or brother and sisters, or, if this is impossible, by the mistress of a dame school. A similar view is, incidentally, pressed frequently by Arnold in his Elementary School Reports when he pleads for the establishment of more Infants' Schools. Other aspects of Ruskin's argument may not prove so acceptable to the modern reader: literacy is not, he claims essential to the type of education which he has in mind any more than it is essential in adult life, and it may even obscure the processes of thought when forced upon a dull child; thus only those children who show an inclination to read should be so taught. Arithmetic is merely the skill of the bank-clerk or small tradesman, and is therefore to be despised: a child will learn by experience how to handle its own money, and needs no more. Such a view does not imply that mathematics, or literacy for that matter, are in any sense despised on the one hand, or considered to be the preserve of an elite on the other. Ruskin in fact shows a good deal of informed interest in how ordinary children learn to read and write, arguing heatedly in

favour of a 'whole word' approach to the initial teaching of reading. An engraving in *Fors Clavigera* illustrates how a child teaches himself to write by 'labelling' pictures: and for older children, Ruskin suggests that each school should have attached to the main school building 'a children's library, in which the scholars who *care* to read may learn that art as deftly as they like by themselves, helping each other without troubling the teacher'.

The traditional concept of the school and of the school curriculum is thus almost totally rejected: apart from the library mentioned above, every parish school should have 'garden, playground and cultivable land round it . . . spacious enough to employ the scholars in fine weather mostly out of doors'.[61] The buildings should include laboratories and workshops—a carpenter's and a potter's shop being the most important—as well as room for traditional teaching. Apart from the 'music, astronomy and geometry' mentioned previously, botany and zoology should be taught to all, together with art and history 'to children who have gift for either'.[62] The extent to which the traditional disciplines overlap and complement one another is clearly realized; it is argued, for example, that drawing can be taught as an incidental part of other subjects:

> I think it would be much more sensible to consider drawing as in some degree teachable in concurrence with other branches of education. Geography, for instance, ought to introduce drawing maps and shapes of mountains. Botany, shapes of leaves. History, shapes of domestic utensils, etc. I think I could teach a boy to draw without setting any time apart for drawing, and I would at the same time make him learn everything else quicker by putting the graphic element into other studies.[63]

It is this kind of awareness of the nature of the educational process, and the argument for a fresh approach to teaching, an approach which is to make the maximum use of physical activity, the study of 'things' rather than of words, and the working from the visual and concrete rather than from the abstract, that gives interest to many of Ruskin's ideas.

As we have seen, one of the principal aims of Ruskin's educational method was to fit the child for life in which the moral qualities of 'obedience, admiration and hope', combined with a capacity for hard physical work, would enable him to live productively and purposefully, an aim which it seems to me is worked out with force and coherence in general terms, even when Ruskin is apparently inconsistent in detail. Inevitably some important aspects of Ruskin's thinking on educational matters have been neglected in the present discussion, most notably his views on the education of women and girls and his proposals for the

setting up of 'Trial Schools' for vocational testing and guidance; nevertheless I hope that the scope and tendencies of Ruskin's thinking have been indicated in sufficient detail for a tentative assessment to be made.

It is, perhaps, natural to judge any writer by the originality of his views and the extent of his influence on subsequent writers who concern themselves with the same or with related issues, and in both these respects, Ruskin has little claim to serious attention as an educationalist. He was, it is true, an influential writer in his own day, and much read well into the twentieth century—and, as it would appear, much studied in modern Japan; but this is not to claim that his educational theories have been influential in the sense that teachers or legislators have obviously acted upon his suggestions or writers have taken serious account of his views. If Ruskin has any claim to originality, it is not a claim that he made for himself; speaking of the St. George's Company, he specifically denies this with a characteristic combination of humility and arrogance:

> ... the very gist and essence of everything St. George orders is that it shall *not* be new, and not an "experiment"; but the re-declaration and re-doing of things known and practised successfully since Adam's time.[64]

Indeed, I have been unable to isolate any particular aspect of his educational theory, as opposed to his actual suggestions for lessons, that had not been propounded before in one form or another: even the attack on the competitive principle in education and upon the examination system had, it would appear, a forerunner in the work of the American Horace Mann.[65] Much of what Ruskin says in general of teaching methods, and his whole approach to the class-room, is fairly clearly derivative from the work of Froebel and Pestalozzi.[66]

It would do Ruskin an injustice, however, to dismiss his work on education thus, for it does have other claims to serious attention some of which were discussed in the introductory section of this article. A writer's 'influence' is so much dependant upon subsequent trends in taste and ideas —and, as we have seen, Ruskin's thinking is not of a kind that has accorded on the whole with twentieth-century sympathies—that it would be foolish to underestimate him on such grounds. 'Originality' derives as often from an ability to relate, a welding together of disparate ideas into a coherent and forceful statement, as it derives from the ability to think of ideas which are 'new' in themselves: the gentlemen who suggested Sanskrit in the Elementary School (see note 49) certainly displayed originality, but we do not highly regard the quality in this case! It does seem to me that Ruskin had an extraordinary ability to weld ideas into a concept of society of an education which functions as a whole with the originality of a personal utopia: it is curious that Ruskin has so often been

considered incapable of 'constructive thinking', for it is just those parts of his work where he is most explicit, and avoids making sweeping moral statements, that appear to be of the most permanent interest and value. One is never quite clear when he talks about teaching 'admiration' or 'humility' precisely what is meant; but when, on the other hand, he formulates a specific attack on contemporary practice, or when he makes suggestions about school buildings or teaching methods, Ruskin's work is compelling in its vigour and common sense.

Where Ruskin's arguments lack clarity, this is compensated for by the wealth of ideas that he flings at the reader; and even where we are left uncertain as to his precise view, we are compelled by the overall coherence of his view of the corruption of the society in which he found himself, by his very human involvement in the struggles taking place within that society, and by his vision of the community that could be. Although his hypothesis may no longer appear relevant, it does not appear to me to be one which should be totally disregarded.

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1. J. C. Garrett, *Utopias in Literature since the Romantic Period* (Christchurch, University of Canterbury; 1968): Chapter II.
2. These include, for example, *Ethics of the Dust: ten lectures to little housewives on the elements of crystallisation* (1866); *Love's Meinie: lectures on Greek and English birds* (1873/1881); *The Elements of English Prosody* (for use in St. George's Schools, explanatory of the various terms used in Rock honeycomb); 1880.
3. Gotthelf's *Ulric the Farm Servant*, felt by Ruskin to be particularly suitable for the moral education of the young, was one such.
4. He was particularly concerned in the building of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and in the Meersbrook Park Museum project in Sheffield.
5. i.e. Coniston Village School; Winnington School; Whitelands College; Christ's Hospital.
6. R. H. Wilenski: *John Ruskin* (London, Faber 1933); this view refers particularly to *Unto this Last* and *Munera Pulveris.*
7. P. Quennell in *John Ruskin: The Portrait of a Prophet* (London, Collins, 1949).
8. G. M. Young in *Victorian England—Portraits of an Age* (London, O.U.P., 2nd ed. 1960).
9. P. Quennell: *John Ruskin*, Writers and their Work No. 76 (London, for the British Council and National Book League, Longmans 1956).
10. G. C. Leroy in 'John Ruskin' in *Victorian Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Austin Wright (New York, O.U.P. 1961).
11. *Sesame and Lilies*, I, 'Of King's Treasures' (1864).
12. T. E. Welby: *The Victorian Romantics 1850–1870*, XX.
13. It is arguable that *Sesame and Lilies* is chiefly concerned with education.
14. *Fors Clavigera* (1871–1884). Letter LXXXIX.
15. *Unto this Last* (1862), I—'The Roots of Honour'.

16. *Sesame and Lilies* I—'Of King's Treasures'.
17. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter XXXVI; quoted by Leroy, *op. cit.*
18. *Sesame and Lilies*, Preface to the 1865 edition.
19. *Crown of Wild Olive* (1866)—II, 'Traffic'.
20. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter IX.
21. Quoted by Peter Quennell, *op. cit.*
22. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter IV.
23. *Crown of Wild Olive*—I, 'Work'.
24. An example of such a divergence of interests can be found in the early years of the twentieth century when the 'working men' of Ruskin College, Oxford, initiated a strike because they were not taught as much about Marxism as they wished. In the 1920s and 30s the W.E.A.'s and University Extra-Mural Boards attracted criticism in some quarters for failing to provide courses which would have been of practical use and assistance to the unemployed.
25. *Praeterita* (1886–9) III—'Joanna's Cave'.
26. *Fors Clavigera* Letter V.
27. *Ibid.*, Letter LXXXI.
28. *Ibid.*, Letter IX.
29. *Ibid.*, Letter V.
30. *Ibid.*, Letter LXXXVI.
31. *Ibid.*, Letter XXV.
32. *Ibid.*, Letter XXII.
33. *Sesame and Lilies I*—'Of King's Treasures'.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Arrows of the Chace* (A collection of letters written 1840/80, ed. Wedderburn in 1880).
36. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter LXVII.
37. See *F.C.* Letter XCV, where Ruskin discusses the question of obedience in children.
38. *Ibid.* Letter LXVII.
39. *The Crown of Wild Olive*—I 'Work'.
40. From a letter to Jean Ingelow in *Arrows of the Chace.*
41. The Education Act of 1902.
42. See, for example, *The Crown of Wild Olive* IV—'The Future of England'.
43. From a review by Herbert Spencer of a biography of Pestalozzi: cited by J. A. Lauwerys in his chapter on 'Herbert Spencer and the Scientific Movement' in *Pioneers of English Education*, ed. A. V. Judges (1952).
44. *Report on Curriculum Reform* (HMSO 1945).
45. Matthew Arnold in the *General Report* for 1880.
46. *Stones of Venice* (1853)—Appendix 7 'Modern Education'.
47. *Sesame and Lilies*, I—'Of King's Treasures'.
48. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter II.
49. From J. S. Mill's Inaugural Address as Rector of St. Andrews University, 1867.
50. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter V.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter LXIV.
53. *Stones of Venice*, Appendix 7—'Modern Education'.
54. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter LI.
55. Matthew Arnold: *Report on the Elementary Schools*, 1880.
56. Herbert Spencer, *op. cit.*
57. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter LI.

58. Collingwood, as quoted by H. B. Hugstotz in *The Education Theories of John Ruskin*, Chapter II (1942).
59. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter XCV.
60. *Ibid.* Letter XCIV.
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Ibid.*
63. Letter to Henry Cole, 1853.
64. *Fors Clavigera*, Letter LXXVIII.
65. This point is made by Hugstotz, *op. cit.*, in my view it is unlikely that Ruskin was aware of this work.
66. Neither man is mentioned, as far as I am aware in Ruskin's writings: nevertheless, he could hardly fail to be aware of their work, which was often discussed and reviewed in the London magazines.