

On Art and Life

J.Ruskin

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Ruskin was a fluent writer who never could resist a temptation to digress. The result is a profusion of words welling forth as a tsunami drowning the unwary reader who does not know how to swim. As a result his works are usually presented to the modern reader in abridged form¹ or even worse as mere excerpts, as in the present book under review. Ruskin never wrote a book called 'On Art and Life' hence it is illegal to give his name as an author. When ordering the book I had no idea of the fact, and the slim volume is part of a series published by Penguin named 'Great Ideas'. The book itself contains no editorial explanation in the form of a preface, let alone an introduction, not even a remark to the effect that it consists of two short extracts from his voluminous writing. This is criminal.

The general theme is the exploitation of man by man, not only economical but moral, not just an oppression of the flesh but of the very soul. The first longer extract is taken out of the 'Stones of Venice'² where in the midst of an explanation of the style of Gothic, Ruskin lashes out in a diatribe against the exploitation of simple craftsman in the construction of large edifices. As stated on the title page (an extract of an extract) *You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him, you cannot make both.* In order to make a perfect building all its parts need to be perfect. As a building cannot be made by a single individual alone, in particular not by its architect, it needs to be leased out. To realize the vision of the designer each craftsman is reduced to a mere tool, trained to do to perfection certain simple things. Such work is deadening, Ruskin admonishes, and it is much better that each craftsman may exercise his own creativity, however feeble and however crude the results, because it would be more satisfying to his soul. And this is what Gothic art is all about, a so called 'democratization' of art, at least according to Ruskin, who contrasts the northern Christian spirit of barbarism, thus the name Gothic he explains, with the southern more despotic one. Christianity, if taken literally, as earnest fellows such as Ruskin are liable to do, is opposed to slavery, as all men are created equally in the eyes of God and each man posses an immortal soul not to be thwarted. From this follows that art can never be perfect, in fact that perfection is anathema to the very idea of art. Art is a process, which may aim towards perfection, but if reached comes to an end and dies. Ultimately it is the effort that is laudable and inspiring not the result.

Now as to making men mere tools, this was, what in a more general setting, industrialization turned out to be all about. A process of which Ruskin must have been well aware, although he did not live to see the conveyor belt. The second extract develops the same theme, as a digression inside a public lecture on which he expounds on the virtues of and blessings bestowed by iron, especially in its oxidized form as rust. The upper and middle classes live on the material fruits produced by the toil of the lower classes who are not paid

¹ Such as the X-edition of 'The Stones of Venice' reviewed in those volumes

² See previous footnote!

enough for their labor. This is called theft, or to use the more Anglo-Saxon word - stealing. To suffer neglect, is bad enough, but to suffer downright oppression and exploitation is far worse, and not mitigated by the fact that those who commit it, supposedly the audience he is addressing, are not aware of it. This is very much a topical concern today. Rightly aghast at the enjoyment of child pornography, the production of which involves a humiliation of innocence, we ought to be even more upset about our enjoyment of cheap consumer goods produced by child labor stunting their growth and happiness even more than the abuse of their innocence. Yet without this exploitation those children may starve and die. This is an illustration of economical laws or at least the inescapable fact that economics has to do with material constraints indifferent to the fate and happiness of man. Man does not consume in order to support anonymous producers but to satisfy their own selfish needs (which according to Adam Smith make the wheels turn, if any an acknowledgement of the material basis for economic activity by a moralist). Ruskin, as a moralist, cries out against this injustice, and cannot think of anything else than we should pay more for our needs, adhering to the notion of intrinsic worth of commodities consisting in the effort that went into its production. This lies at the heart of Marxism as an economic theory but goes against the grain of a capitalistic commitment to efficiency and growth, rationalized as to benefit us all. Ruskin is very much a moralist, which permeates his whole philosophy of life and supplies the energy for his writing. Art cannot be separated from morality. Nor heart from the mind.

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