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EDITURA UNIVERSITARIA
Craiova, 2013

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Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naţionale a României

FIRICĂ, CAMELIA
John Ruskin : interrelation between the theory of political economy and the theory of art / Camelia Firică. – Craiova : Universitaria, 2013
Bibliogr.
ISBN 978-606-14-0582-4

75 (420) Ruskin,J.
929 Ruskin,J.

Apărut: 2013
TIPOGRAFIA UNIVERSITĂŢII DIN CRAIOVA
Str. Brestei, nr. 156A, Craiova, Dolj, România
Tel.: +40 251 598054
Tipărit în România

CHAPTER ONE

OF THE WRITER'S LIFE AND OEUVRE

Ruskin's life and literary activity

"If origin, if early training and habits of life, if tastes, and character, and associations, fix a man's nationality, then John Ruskin must be reckoned a Scotsman. He was born in London, but his family was from Scotland. He was brought up in England, but the friends and teachers, the standards and influences of his early life, were chiefly Scottish. The writers who directed him into the main lines of his thought and work were Scotsmen — from Sir Walter and Lord Lindsay and Principal Forbes to the master of his later studies of men and the means of life, Thomas Carlyle. The religious instinct so conspicuous in him was a heritage from Scotland; thence the combination of shrewd common-sense and romantic sentiment; the oscillation between levity and dignity, from caustic jest to tender earnest; the restlessness, the fervour, the impetuosity - all these are the tokens of a Scotsman of parts, and were highly developed in John Ruskin."[4]

Ruskin's life, as he himself described it in *Fors Clavigera*[5], was persistently literary, being instructed, from an early age, by masters such as Walter Scott and Homer whose novels were, during his childhood, the constant readings, as his own choice, on week-days alongside with the religious texts imposed by his mother, a

[4] W. G., Collingwood. 1905. *The Life of John Ruskin*, London, p. 3. (http://archive.org/stream).

[5] John, Ruskin. *Fors Clavigera.* (http://www.archive.org/stream).

consummate housewife[6] who had solemnly devoted the child to God before he was born meaning to make a clergyman of him, who could hardly allow any plaything around her son who, until the age of five had only a bunch of keys, a cart and a ball as toys. Ruskin's daily consensual or imposed contact with written words, upon the meaning of which he had to ponder so as to grasp their most concealed significance, taught him to be mindful when handled the pen. This made of Ruskin one of the greatest master of the English language. And as if he longed for becoming the personality he was, Ruskin began to learn by himself to read, not by adopting the *popular system of syllabic study*,[7] but buy learning by heart entire sentences. And again, as if spurred by the disquietude of growing into the great writer and art critic meant to be, the child learned to write by simply copying - fascinated by the aspect of their printed form - letters. An early art study, the first of the many Ruskin will take most of them by himself in direct contact with art and art masterpieces.

Critic, historian, essayist, nonfiction writer, poet, autobiographer, and diarist, equally considered one of the greatest prose stylists in the English language, driven by the passion for reforming, Ruskin left as heritage over forty books and several hundred essays and lectures where he expounded his theories on economics, social reform, aesthetics, morality and history, but also on art, mythology, education, war, law, geology, botany, and ornithology becoming one of the most prominent and influential critics of art and society during the Victorian era. Admired by personalities such as Lev Tolstoy Ruskin's influence, upon prominent figures like Mohandas K. Gandhi, was evident, centuries later.

In all his writings, Ruskin stressed upon the relationship existing between nature, art and society, he believed that art, morality and politics were all inter-connected. Ruskin tackled these subjects all his life, from the late 1850s his writings taking on a more political tone, as he attempted to combat the influence of conventional economics and

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[6] John, Ruskin. 1907. *Praeterita.* London: George Allen, p. 10. (http://books.google.ro).

[7] idem, p. 13.

industrial capitalism, enjoying great popularity and exercising huge influence particularly during the latter half of the nineteenth century up to the First World War. The sixth decade of the twentieth century brought about an increase of his reputation after having known a period of relative decline. His sundry academic studies were published so that, nowadays, after hundreds of years, Ruskin's ideas and theories enjoy wide recognition as they not only influenced great minds[8] all over the world but they also anticipated the interest in environmentalism, sustainability and craft.

Modern Painters - 5 volumes (1843-1860)

It was with the first volume of *Modern Painters (by a Graduate of Oxford to the Landscape Artists of England)* (1843), published anonymously, a work that would eventually consist of five volumes that would take the author 17 years to complete, an extended essay in defence of the work of J.M.W. Turner,[9] that Ruskin draw general

[8] *Unto This Last* had a very important impact on Gandhi's philosophy and brought an instantaneous change in his life. He discovered the book in March 1904 through Henry Polak, whom he had met in South Africa. Polak was chief editor of the Johannesburg paper *The Critic*. Gandhi decided immediately not only to change his own life according to Ruskin's teaching, but also to publish his own newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, in a farm where everybody would get the same salary, without distinction of function, race or nationality, which for that time, was quite revolutionary. „*Unto This Last*, I translated it later into Gujarati entitling it *Sarvodaya* (the welfare of all). I believe that I discovered some of my deepest convictions reflected in this great book of Ruskin and that is why it so captured me and made me transform my life." Mahatma, Gandhi, *Autobiography*, Part IV, Chapter XVIII, "The Magic Spell of a Book". (http://gandhifoundation.org).

[9] „Neoclassical critics had attacked the later work of Turner, with its proto-Impressionist concern for effects of light and atmosphere, for mimetic inaccuracy, and for a failure to represent the "general truth" that had been an essential criterion of painting in the age of Sir Joshua Reynolds. Drawing on his serious amateur interests in geology, botany, and meteorology, Ruskin made it his business to demonstrate in detail that Turner's work was everywhere based on a profound knowledge of the local and particular truths of natural form. One after another, Turner's "truth of tone," "truth of colour," "truth of space," "truth of skies," "truth of earth," "truth of water," and "truth of vegetation" were minutely considered, in a laborious project that would not be completed until

attention by stating that an artist's primary purpose and service is to be *true to art*, and ever since the 1850s he supported the followers of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who were influenced by his ideas and acceded to them. "Modem Painters attracted great attention at once, because of its brilliant style and its original theories of art, which disregarded the conventional rules followed by the old masters and accepted by all critics until that time. The book established Buskin's reputation as an art critic, and revolutionized public opinion in England upon questions of art."[10]

John Ruskin's work increasingly focused on social and political issues pursuit to which his growing friendship with the historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle contributed. Beginning with 1871 the philosopher published, until 1884, his monthly letters to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain under the title *Fors Clavigera* developing the principles underlying his ideal society.

The first and only child of a well-to-do wine-merchant - John James Ruskin, a prosperous, self-made[11], honest[12] businessman and art collector[13] and of Margaret Cox - daughter of old Mr. Ruskin's sister,

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the appearance of the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters* in 1860." Encyclopedia Britannica. (http://www.britannica.com).

[10] Agnes Spofford Cook. *John Ruskin 's Sesame and Lilies*. Edited with introduction and notes by Agnes Spofford Cook, A.B., Silver, Burdett And Company New York, Boston, Chicago, p. 9. (http://www.readbookonline.net).

[11] "It took nine years of assiduous labour and economy. He worked the business entirely by himself. The various departments that most men entrust to others he filled in person. He managed the correspondence, he travelled for orders, he arranged the importation, he directed the growers out in Spain, and gradually built up a great business, paid off his father's creditors, and secured his own competence. This was not done without sacrifice of health, which he never recovered, nor without forming habits of over-anxiety and toilsome minuteness which lasted his lifelong." W. G., Collingwood. 1905. *The Life of John Ruskin*, London, p.11. (http://archive.org/stream).

[12] "He was an entirely honest merchant, and his memory is to all who keep it dear and helpful. His son, whom he loved to the uttermost, and taught to speak truth, says this of him." idem, p. 211.

[13] "He loved art, painted in water-colours in the old style, and knew a good picture when he saw it. He loved literature, and read aloud finely all the old standard authors, though he was not too old-fashioned to admire ' Pickwick ' and the ' Noctes Ambrosianæ' when they appeared. He loved the scenery and

who had married a Captain Cox, sailing from Yarmouth for the herring fishery[14] - whose religiosity left a profound imprint upon the child - was born in 1819, February 8 in London and spent his childhood under the influence of his parents who were his private tutors, too, and who nourished great ambitions for their child educated by them at home[15] until 1834 when he began to attend the school in Peckham run by the progressive Evangelical, Thomas Dale[16]. Brought up in a strict, religious environment[17] where playfellows, toys and dainties lacked or were scare not because of destitution but as a precept of his mother's monastic discipline, in an orderly routine, gentle affection and quite home, the child, who never wronged or knew the meaning of doing wrong, directed his attention towards the surrounding world and towards study. And he observed the world - whence his love for geology and mineralogy - and pictured it - his drawings were shown in different exhibitions - taught himself to read[18] and began to write[19] his first *works* in prose and verse at the age of seven.

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architecture among which he had travelled in Scotland and Spain; but he could find interest in almost any place and any subject; an alert man, in whom practical judgment was joined to a romantic temperament, strong feelings and opinions to extended sympathies." idem, p.12.

[14] idem, p. 7.

[15] „…they did not send him to school for fear of the excitement of competitive study. His mother put him through the Latin grammar herself, using the old Adam's manual which his father had used at Edinburgh High School… They could keep him from school, but they did not keep him from study." idem, p.24.

[16] „…they sent him to Mr. Dale for some private lessons, and for the lectures on logic, English literature, and translation, which were given on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays at King's College, London. John enjoyed his new circumstances heartily. From voluminous letters, it is evident that he was in high spirits and in pleasant company. He was a thorough boy among boys — Matson, Willoughby, Tom Dale, and the rest. He joined in their pranks, and contributed to their amusement with his ready good-humour and unflagging drollery." idem, p. 44.

[17] „When once he could read, thenceforward his mother gave him regular morning lessons, in Bible-reading and in reciting the Scotch paraphrases of the Psalms and other verse, which for his good memory was an easy task." idem, p. 19.

[18] "At the age of four he had begun to read and write, refusing to be taught in the orthodox way — this is so accurately characteristic - by syllabic spelling

A more rebellious character, as compared to his mother of course, Ruskin's father - whose family name[20] was traced back to an old English word denoting, among others, the winter-fur of a squirrel - was a man of rare character who loved literature and art and to go to church as less as the child did, a prosperous sherry trader to whom the boy owed the cultivation of his artistic gifts and his readings of Shakespeare, Scott, Byron.

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and copy-book pothooks. He preferred to find a method out for himself, and he found out how to read whole words at a time by the look of them, and to write in vertical characters like book-print, just as the latest improved theories of education suggest." idem, p.18,

"… At five he was a bookworm, and the books he read fixed him in certain grooves of thought, or, rather, say they were chosen as favourites from an especial interest in their subjects - an interest which arose from his character of mind, and displayed it." idem, p. 19.

[19] "At seven he began to imitate the books he was reading, to write books himself." ibidem.

"...The first dated ' poem ' was written a month before little John Ruskin reached the age of seven. It is a tale of a mouse, in seven octosyllabic couplets, ' The Needless Alarm,' remarkable only for an unexpected correctness in rhyme, rhythm, and reason." idem, p. 22.

[20] "The origin of the name of Ruskin is obscure. It has been taken for Lowland Scottish, a variant of Erskine; for a Highland place-name, Roskeen; for a corruption of Roger-kin; or even for a vulgar nickname, Roughskin. These are mere guesses, but Ruskington, in Lincolnshire, points, by a well-known rule of place-names, to a tribe of Anglian settlers called Rusking, of whom this village was originally the "tún", or homestead, as Pennington was the ' town ' of the Pennings, and so forth. Soon after the dissolution of Furness Abbey, Richerde Ruskyn and his family were land-owners at Dalton- in-Furness. Other Ruskins and Ruskens are known in the North of England, and naturally also in London, whither all our tribes go up. One branch, however, and that with which we are especially concerned, settled in Edinburgh." idem, p. 6.

The period Ruskin spent as a child in his parents' house[21], the

[21] "When I was about four years old my father found himself able to buy the lease of a house on Herne Hill, a rustic eminence four miles south of the 'Standard in Cornhill'; of which the leafy seclusion remains, in all essential points of character, unchanged to this day: certain Gothic splendours, lately indulged in by our wealthier neighbours, being the only serious innovations; and these are so graciously concealed by the fine trees of their grounds, that the passing viator remains unappalled by them; and I can still walk up and down the piece of road between the Fox tavern and the Herne Hill station, imagining myself four years old.

Our house was the northernmost of a group which stand accurately on the top or dome of the hill, where the ground is for a small space level, as the snows are, (I understand,) on the dome of Mont Blanc; presently falling, however, in what may be, in the London clay formation, considered a precipitous slope, to our valley of Chamouni (or of Dulwich) on the east; and with a softer descent into Cold Harbour-lane on the west: on the south, no less beautifully declining to the dale of the Effra, (doubtless shortened from Effrena, signifying the 'Unbridled' river; recently, I regret to say, bricked over for the convenience of Mr Biffin, chemist, and others); while on the north, prolonged indeed with slight depression some half mile or so, and receiving, in the parish of Lambeth, the chivalric title of 'Champion Hill,' it plunges down at last to efface itself in the plains of Peckham, and the rural barbarism of Goose Green.

The group, of which our house was the quarter, consisted of two precisely similar partner-couples of houses, gardens and all to match; still the two highest blocks of buildings seen from Norwood on the crest of the ridge; so that the house itself, three-storied, with garrets above, commanded, in those comparatively smokeless days, a very notable view from its garret windows, of the Norwood hills on one side, and the winter sunrise over them; and of the valley of the Thames on the other, with Windsor telescopically clear in the distance, and Harrow, conspicuous always in fine weather to open vision against the summer sunset. It had front and back garden in sufficient proportion to its size; the front, richly set with old evergreens, and well-grown lilac and laburnum; the back, seventy yards long by twenty wide, renowned over all the hill for its pears and apples, which had been chosen with extreme care by our predecessor, (shame on me to forget the name of a man to whom I owe so much!) - and possessing also a strong old mulberry tree, a tall white heart cherry tree, a black Kentish one, and an almost unbroken hedge, all round, of alternate gooseberry and currant bush; decked, in due season, (for the ground was wholly beneficent,) with magical splendour of abundant fruit: fresh green, soft amber, and rough-bristled crimson bending the spinous branches; clustered pearl and pendant ruby joyfully discoverable under the large leaves that looked like vine.

The differences of primal importance which I observed between the nature of this garden, and that of Eden, as I had imagined it, were, that, in this one, all the

journeys he used to make, first with his father to the latter's business clients and with the whole family, later, to Lake District, France, Belgium or Italy, became the cornerstone for his education, taste and inclination for beautiful landscapes, architecture and paintings that inspired him in his first writings. He was only ten when, in a letter to his father, John declared the year to be the happiest of his life because he was so busy reading and writing that he wished the days were longer and the paper broader, because he had understood that happiness or unhappiness had everything in common with being an active person. Encouraged by his father, the child began to write and publish at the early age of eleven, glorifying in lyrics his love and admiration for nature and its unspeakable beauties.

The young man's strong love for nature was blossoming with every tour he used to make in the company of his parents. Ruskin fell in eternal love with the beauty of Venice and the Alps so magnificently depicted in the third volume of his *Modern Painters*: "Not long ago, as I was leaving one of the towns of Switzerland early in the morning, I saw in the clouds behind the houses an Alp which I did not know, a grander

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fruit was forbidden; and there were no companionable beasts: in other respects the little domain answered every purpose of Paradise to me; and the climate, in that cycle of our years, allowed me to pass most of my life in it. My mother never gave me more to learn than she knew I could easily get learnt, if I set myself honestly to work, by twelve o'clock. She never allowed anything to disturb me when my task was set; if it was not said rightly by twelve o'clock, I was kept in till I knew it, and in general, even when Latin Grammar came to supplement the Psalms, I was my own master for at least an hour before half-past one dinner, and for the rest of the afternoon.

My mother, herself finding her chief personal pleasure in her flowers, was often planting or pruning beside me, at least if I chose to stay beside her. I never thought of doing anything behind her back which I would not have done before her face; and her presence was therefore no restraint to me; but, also, no particular pleasure, for, from having always been left so much alone, I had generally my own little affairs to see after; and, on the whole, by the time I was seven years old, was already getting too independent, mentally, even of my father and mother; and, having nobody else to be dependent upon, began to lead a very small, perky, contented, conceited, Cock-Robinson-Crusoe sort of life, in the central point which it appeared to me, (as it must naturally appear to geometrical animals,) that I occupied in the universe." John, Ruskin. 1907. *Praeterita.* London, George Allen, pp. 35-39. (http://books.google.ro).

Alp than any I knew, nobler than the Schreckhorn or the Mönch; terminated, as it seemed, on one side by a precipice of almost unimaginable height; on the other, sloping away for leagues in one field of lustrous ice, clear and fair and blue, flashing here and there into silver under the morning sun. For a moment I received a sensation of as much sublimity as any natural object could possibly excite; the next moment, I saw that my unknown Alp was the glass roof of one of the workshops of the town, rising above its nearer houses, and rendered aerial and indistinct by some pure blue wood smoke which rose from intervening chimneys. It is evident, that so far as the mere delight of the eye was concerned, the glass roof was here equal, or at least equal for a moment, to the Alp. Whether the power of the object over the heart was to be small or great, depended altogether upon what it was understood for, upon its being taken possession of and apprehended in its full nature, either as a granite mountain or a group of panes of glass; and thus, always, the real majesty of the appearance of the thing to us, depends upon the degree in which we ourselves possess the power of understanding it, - that penetrating, possession taking power of the imagination, which has been long ago defined as the very life of the man, considered as a seeing creature. For though the casement had indeed been an Alp, there are many persons on whose minds it would have produced no more effect than the glass roof. It would have been to them a glittering object of a certain apparent length and breadth, and whether of glass or ice, whether twenty feet in length, or twenty leagues, would have made no difference to them; or, rather, would not have been in any wise conceived or considered by them. Examine the nature of your own emotion (if you feel it) at the sight of the Alp, and you find all the brightness of that emotion hanging, like dew on gossamer, on a curious web of subtle fancy and imperfect knowledge. First, you have a vague idea of its size, coupled with wonder at the work of the great Builder of its walls and foundations, then an apprehension of its eternity, a pathetic sense of its perpetualness, and your own transientness, as of the grass upon its sides; then, and in this very sadness, a sense of strange companionship with past generations in seeing what they saw. They did not see the clouds that are floating over

your head; nor the cottage wall on the other side of the field; nor the road by which you are travelling. But they saw that. The wall of granite in the heavens was the same to them as to you. They have ceased to look upon it; you will soon cease to look also, and the granite wall will be for others. Then, mingled with these more solemn imaginations, come the understandings of the gifts and glories of the Alps, the fancying forth of all the fountains that well from its rocky walls, and strong rivers that are born out of its ice, and of all the pleasant valleys that wind between its cliffs, and all the châlets that gleam among its clouds, and happy farmsteads couched upon its pastures; while together with the thoughts of these, rise strange sympathies with all the unknown of human life, and happiness, and death, signified by that narrow white flame of the everlasting snow, seen so far in the morning sky.

These images, and far more than these, lie at the root of the emotion which you feel at the sight of the Alp. You may not trace them in your heart, for there is a great deal more in your heart, of evil and good, than you ever can trace; but they stir you and quicken you for all that."[22] At the age of thirteen Ruskin gets acquainted with Turner's paintings and three years later he writes his first essay in defence[23] of the artist.

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[22] John, Ruskin. *Modern Painters,* p. 131. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files).

[23] At the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1836 Turner showed the first striking examples of his later style in "Juliet and her Nurse," "Mercury and Argus," and "Rome from Mount Aventine." The strange idealism, the unusualness, the mystery, of these pictures, united with evidence of intense significance and subtle observation, appealed to young Ruskin as it appealed to few other spectators. Public opinion regretted this change in its old favourite, the draughtsman of Oxford colleges, the painter of shipwrecks and castles. And *Blackwood's Magazine*, which the Ruskins, as Edinburgh people and admirers of Christopher North, read with respect, spoke about Turner, in a review of the picture-season, with that freedom of speech which Scotch reviewers claim as a heritage from the days of Jeffrey. Young Ruskin at once dashed off an answer.

The critic had found that Turner was "out of nature"; Ruskin tried to show that the pictures were full of facts, but treated with poetical license. The critic pronounced Turner's colour bad, his execution neglected, and his chiaroscuro childish; in answer to which Ruskin explained that Turner's reasoned system was to represent light and shade by the contrast of warm and cold colour,