He appeared wherever there was an artist soul to be comforted, or a flame of enthusiasm to be kept alive.
JOHN RUSKIN

To attempt to cast new light upon “the sage of Coniston” would be an effort from the very first doomed to failure, in view of the many and distinguished writers who have considered him from the artistic, the literary, the economic, or yet the purely human point of view. But to assemble and concentrate the judgments brought to bear upon this “old man eloquent” by late and authoritative critics, such as M. de la Sizeranne, Mr. Frederic Harrison and Professor Geddes of Edinburgh,—this would appear to be a task promising somewhat useful results. For it is they who have classified and codified the utterances and the decisions of Ruskin, which represent a production of fifty years, and which touch upon subjects and interests almost as varied as human thought itself.

The readers of Ruskin may be divided into those who admire him to the point of unreasonable adoration; those whose attitude toward him is one of perplexity and doubt; and those whom he at once fascinates and exasperates. The first class, largely composed of women, is best epitomized by the group whom M. de la Sizeranne saw one morning in the luminous shadow of the great Dominican church of Florence: “girlish forms, with grotesque profiles, wearing sailor hats and little white veils, and all carrying bunches of mimosa in their hands.” One of the young girls was reading from a small red and gold book, while the others, according to her direction, and with the precision of a Prussian platoon, formed face to this or that figure of the old mural paintings. These were of that division of spiritually cultured souls whom the profound morality, the fervor of sympathy, the harmonious, peaceful phraseology of Ruskin overpower to the degree of silencing in them all critical faculty. The second class of the readers of Ruskin comprises those whom the writer,
orator and patron of village industries has, at some point, touched and quickened in his threefold teaching of aesthetics, morals and social reform. These are, almost without exception, men, who in the art-lover and critic, irritated, nay even frenzied by hyperaesthesia, recognize a prophet foretelling better social and economic conditions for the English-speaking race. The third class is composed of materialists who, returning again and again to the charge, seek in Ruskin vulnerable points for their blunt and unskilful attacks. For such as these he is the man of genius who spoke contemptuously of all the highest practical achievements of the nineteenth century; who regarded modern commerce as a complex system of thieving, and who saw in great industrial cities naught save the working-models of hell.

Upon examination, it is seen that the devout students of the "Mornings in Florence" and the critics of "Fors Clavigera" and "Unto this Last" are equally distant from the truth; that the right point of view, as is usual, lies midway between the extremists. The all too emotional youth who mistake religious rhapsody for art-criticism, fail as utterly to recognize the value of the life and influence of Ruskin as do those of grosser type who stamp him as a madman seeking to turn Time back upon itself. It is true that he was, to an extent, ill-fitted to his age and position. As to time, he presents a singular paradox; since he was at once a survival of a past age, a man of the thirteenth century, and again one whose piercing gaze into the future was rewarded with glimpses of fact which were denied to all but the chosen few of his contemporaries. It would seem indeed that many of his most characteristic utterances prove that the fables of yesterday are the truths of to-day. What were regarded as absurdities by the public of his middle life have recently become intelligible; assuming in spite of a note of over-statement, much of scientific value. Ruskin, the dreamer and
rhapsodist, has gained the new and irrevocable titles of economist and sociologist. And in reviewing his life and work, we find his evolution to be parallel with that of the great scientists, his contemporaries. In common with the biologists and geologists whose names are become household words in the two hemispheres, he passed, with his mind opened and disciplined by contact with nature, beyond to the supreme study of his fellow beings. He lacked the training of the men with whom he may be compared, nor did he create for himself opportunities equal to those which led to the successes of the others. Early environment gave direction and prescribed limits to his development. The quiet home, with his imaginative father and deeply religious mother, the ancient university at which he passed his most formative years, kept him apart from those freer and less exalted minds who advanced more rationally and patiently to their conclusions. But yet, the spirit of his time awakened within him, as a seed germinates in the warmth of spring. He apprehended facts which, equally from vehemence of spirit and from lack of specific training, he was unable to state with precision. For him, intuition often supplied the place of genuine knowledge, as we may learn by even casual reference to his writings. As an example of his intuitional power in economics, may be cited a passage of the "Munera Pulveris," in which he assigns "values" with apparent waywardness. It reads: "Intrinsic value is the absolute power of anything to support life. A sheaf of wheat of given quality and weight has in it a measurable power of sustaining the substance of the body; a cubic foot of pure air, a fixed power of sustaining its warmth; and a cluster of flowers of given beauty, a fixed power of enlivening or animating the senses and heart."

In the old school of economists, such statements could not do otherwise than to excite mirth and contempt; for air and beauty were barred out
from the things representing wealth. They were removed from the arena of Supply and Demand. Therefore, they were forces unrecognized in that unsentimental community formed and held together by "enlightened self-interest," which was Adam Smith's conception of society. But now the scientists have revolutionized economic studies; bringing to bear upon the subject their knowledge of physical laws and of living beings. A half-century ago, Auguste Comte constituted sociology upon the basis of the natural sciences; later, Herbert Spencer corroborated the work of the great Frenchman; so that now physics and chemistry, biology and medicine, psychology and education have ranged themselves on the side of Ruskin, and must be taken into account by one who would accurately define "wealth" and "values." Ants and bees, beavers and men, living alike in communities, are recognized as subject to similar physical laws. Pure air, beauty and other intangibles are known to have definite and intrinsic "values," which can be reduced to exact mathematical statement. Life and energy are proclaimed as the great capital of the universe, and the things which maintain and protect them are regarded as of the greatest moment. The block of coal and the loaf of bread are so much fuel and food, with their heat-giving and life-sustaining power measurable in actual units of work. So too, the cluster of flowers and the sun-beam act as sensory stimuli, the force of which can be determined by instruments.

Ruskin is thus justified; for purblind as he was, when gazing upon the every-day scenes about him, he was clear and true of vision, when his eye was fixed upon a distant and pure ideal. The economists, now become sociologists and philanthropists, recognize the importance of food and light. The zoologist arrests the development of the tadpole by subjecting it to darkness; the physiologist with his sphygmograph, shows how the pulse bounds at every
beam of sunshine, while the medical profession is hastening to apply these results to the development of human life in towns. Thus Science and Sentiment, which have been so long regarded as antagonists, are found to be friends and lovers, and Ruskin is the high-priest before whom the union has been acknowledged. They who now regard him solely as the man of art and letters, as one of the greatest masters of English prose, have yet to learn that he was among the first to seize the vital principles of the science upon which depends the happiness, comfort, nay even the future existence of the human race. His advocacy of the principle that intrinsic value lies in the power of anything to support life is his great claim to consideration and remembrance. His greatest thoughts are epitomized in sayings like these:

"Production does not consist in things laboriously made, but in things serviceably consumable; and the question for the nation is not how much labor it employs, but how much life it produces."

And again:

"There is no Wealth but Life, Life including all its powers of love and joy and admiration."

Nor is it an Utopian dream to await a day when the theory of intrinsic values shall be generally understood, as Ruskin himself apprehended it; when the coal wealth of the world shall be no longer the object of subjective desire, and therefore of exchange value, but rather the fixture and embodiment of a definite quantity of stored energy; when the wealth of nations shall be recognized as dependent not upon the massing of great individual fortunes, nor yet in the increase of miners' wages, but rather in the relations of actual supply to existing and future demands. To-day the economic writings of those who by training and temperament are fitted to plan and prepare the future development of the race, teem with the thought of Ruskin expressed in
calmer mood and more intelligible and accurate form, as when a Scotch professor writes:

“Man if he is to remain healthy and become civilized, must not only aim at the highest standard of cerebral, as well as non-cerebral excellence, but must take especial heed of his environment; not only at his peril keeping the natural factors of air, water and light at their purest, but caring only for the production of wealth, in so far as it shapes the artificial factors, the material appliances and surroundings of domestic and civil life into forms more completely serviceable for the ascent of man.”

Thus the social and moral ideas of Ruskin, shooting like stars across the chaos of his voluminous writings, are proven to be of the eternal stuff of truth. His passion for beauty betrayed him often into extravagance of speech; his adoration for divine nature induced him to intemperate and insensate ideas, as when he cried out in his wrath:

“I should like to destroy most of the railways in England and all the railways in Wales. I should like to destroy and rebuild the Houses of Parliament, the National Gallery and the East End of London, and to destroy, without rebuilding, the new town of Edinburgh and the city of New York.”

But it is to his lasting honor that works of art did not make him forget the workers. He was, in his love and sympathy for humanity, a man of the highest type of his time; penetrated with the social significance of art and conscious of its vital relations to the life of the masses. His French critic, M. de la Sizeranne, so often before quoted, has perhaps best of all his appreciators understood him in writing:

“Each day which passes now, like a leaf which falls from a tree, reveals a little more of the heaven that he conceived. As our life becomes more analytic, more wandering and more restless, as we gain
greater knowledge and more store of imagination and of human pity, so we feel more sympathy for Ruskin's science, his cosmopolitanism and his social theory."

To this fine appreciation may be added the regret which must be felt at times by all Ruskin's admirers as they enter into his moods of depression, despair and violent anger; as they are made to feel how sorrowfully and savagely he desired to aid the world, which he believed to have scorned and rejected him; as they sometimes find him mistaking the great plantation of society for a field of thistles in which the uprooting must be ruthless. But against this impression may again be set an uplifting tribute to his spirit—this time offered on the occasion of his eightieth birthday in the "London Daily Chronicle," and written by Mr. Frederic Harrison, who says:

"In this most voluminous and most versatile of modern writers (may we not say of all English writers?), there is not one line that is base, or coarse, or frivolous, not a sentence that was formed in envy, malice, wantonness, or cruelty; not one piece that was written to win money, or popularity, or promotion; not a line composed for any selfish end, or in any trivial mood. Much of the seed he scattered with such fervid hopes has fallen on stony ground. But his spirit has passed far wider than he ever knew or conceived."

Corroborating the final thought of this tribute, there is a phase of Ruskin's public work which will receive far greater recognition and honor in the future than was possible for it to attain in the past: that is, his influence as a teacher. His Oxford lectures, at the time of delivery, were described as disjointed, erratic, lacking in point, abounding in fanciful ethics, still more fanciful theology, and violent criticisms upon art, letters and life; while their power of attracting and holding great audiences was ascribed solely to an unrivaled beauty of diction and the constant tide of emotion which surged throughout
their course. But to-day they are known to contain ideas upon popular education which are sound, practical, and certain to be utilized in the time to come. He stood for a radical reform: holding that technical and industrial training should, to a great degree, supersede literary studies; that observation of facts and reasoning therefrom should count for more than verbal memory, and that practical tests in life should outweigh competitive examinations. And these ideas, reduced to their lowest terms, are those which are now forcing themselves alike upon pedagogues and people. The school of Cram is giving place to the school of Culture; the world is coming to realize that the student, in order to become the citizen, must investigate nature, or wrestle with the facts of history and society; that the people, in order to become happy, must be made to feel pleasure in their work by means of the wide diffusion of artistic taste and knowledge; such diffusion being always productive alike of masters to create and of amateurs to admire, encourage and support.

Another measure, more purely economic, which was strongly advocated by Ruskin, is advancing rapidly in favor, as its great usefulness and necessity becomes more and more apparent. It relates to that much-agitated question: the division of labor. Following his instincts, Ruskin insisted that every artist should be a workman; and this in order that there should be no loss or lapse of power between the conception and the execution. Such, also, we may say in passing, was one of the strongest convictions of William Morris, who refused to allow his own designs to be worked out by another, and who himself supplied the practical details for the drawings of his artistic-double, Burne-Jones, to the end that their beauty should not perish in the hands of machine-like artisans. To apply the converse of Ruskin’s maxim is to follow his meaning faithfully. He taught that every workman should be an artist capable of conceiving the object at whose making he labors, capable also
of fashioning its every part. Under such conditions, the workman would take pleasure in his work, since it would so become the product of his brain and skill, his very own, born of his enthusiasm and of his struggles, and for that reason dear and sacred to his heart. In the England of Ruskin's middle life, these doctrines were received with indifference, ridicule or opposition, as they were strongly at variance with the prejudices and interests of the ruling classes. For Birmingham, Manchester, and the other great industrial towns, stood as representatives of the subdivision of labor, which ensures great and rapid financial returns, while it just as certainly and as quickly causes the degeneration of the workman, by robbing him of his ambition, his hope and his critical faculties, and thus lowering him to the level of an automaton. With the passage of time and the greater enlightenment of the people, Ruskin's belief in this matter has gained adherents from the ranks of those who are most capable of forming intelligent opinion. And here again is science called to witness and corroborate facts occurring in the social and economic world. It is recognized in biology that "function makes the organ;" furthermore, that a highly specialized function dwarfs and lames the remaining powers of the organism. What then is to be expected from a man, the play of whose intelligence is confined to the endless repetition of a single mental process, and whose physical exercise is restricted to the working of certain unvarying sets of muscles?

The question is not difficult to answer. The individual will develop morbidly, and his mind will offer a resting-place for destructive and chaotic ideas, which, like the temptresses in Macbeth, ever float over the wastes of blighted human ambitions. And, like Macbeth, being not without personal claims to dignity and power, he becomes an insurrectionist, perhaps even a pervert and criminal. He is, indeed, alone responsible for his crimes once they are committed; but it is right and just
that society should protect him from a mental disease more awful than any scourge, or plague, or Black Death that has ever decimated the world’s population. And once again, as science with its anti-toxins and systems of sanitation annihilates the enemies of physical life, so Sociology, understood in its highest sense—that is, the study of our companions and brothers—can finally render our strongholds of civilization immune against the evil germs which pollute, vitiate and destroy the vitality of the human mind, and which bear names awful to the ear by their suggestion of negation and chaos.

To-day, indeed, Science is proffering her aid to all students of economics: offering her eloquent parallels and correspondences, devising and putting into effect measures which demonstrate the agreement and unity of physical and metaphysical laws. But it is to the glory of art and of our English tongue that two men devoted to the religion of beauty, long ago espoused the cause of the artisan, and wrought patiently and grandly for his happiness and elevation. If William Morris, through his fiery spirit, was betrayed, at times, into violence of speech against existing authority, he was far too sane and sound of mind long to linger among active malcontents. All his efforts and work tended toward the reconstruction of society upon the basis of intelligent labor and the co-operation of the different classes. In Ruskin reverence and hero-worship were developed to the same high degree as in “his master,” Carlyle. He writes, in the spirit of the thirteenth century, and approaching closely the quaint expression of Dante:

“I desire that kings should keep their crowns on their heads, and bishops their croziers in their hands, and should duly recognize the meaning of the crown and the use of the crozier.”

He was submissive to the right, but everywhere and always, he lifted up his voice
in condemnation of abuses. Outrages and insults against beauty angered him to the point of frenzy, but even these he forgot in the presence of human grief. He sincerely loved his kind, caring for the health and the culture of the worker; for the ennoblement of his function in the body social; for the purification of his environment. It was Ruskin’s misfortune to labor alone and somewhat desultorily, but his ideas, co-ordinated and subjected to method, have borne fruit in college settlement and model tenement. To extend his propaganda of art, he spared himself nothing in mind, body or estate, as his laborious writings, his protracted journeys and the spending of his large fortune bear witness. His art-ideals lay in the Middle Ages, when the great monuments rose, not, as now, largely from personal luxury, but rather from the encouragement and enthusiasm of combined aesthetic effort, when, as in all truly organic periods, the artistic support came not from the treasure of a Maecenas, but from the small purses of the common people. He laid bare the function and spirit of art when he wrote:

“Great nations write their autobiography in three manuscripts: the book of their words; the book of their deeds; the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the other two, but of the three the only one quite trustworthy is the last. The acts of a nation may be triumphant by its good fortune, and its words mighty by the genius of a few of its children, but its art can be supreme only by the general gifts and common sympathies of the race.”

As an art critic, the services of Ruskin to England were great, since he turned the most matter-of-fact nation of the world toward aesthetic thought, multiplied amateurs, taught his countrymen to appreciate landscape, and, by his treatises: “The Seven Lamps of Architecture” and “The Stones of Venice,” reformed the building art of the kingdom. As he advanced in life,
his heart grew softer, his blood warmer and his brain quicker. And as long as England shall exist, he will not wholly die.