

RUSKIN, THE P.R.B. AND THE DAISY'S SHADOW

Rossetti is said not to have cared whether the earth revolved around the sun or not, and Millais to have ventured to say: "It's all nonsense; of course nature's nature, and art's art, isn't it?"¹

If they were indifferent or uncertain, the young critic Ruskin was quite sure that he knew what nature is and what art is. "My first business," he declared in Modern Painters I, "...must be to combat the early universal error of belief among the thoughtless and unreflecting, that they know either what nature is, or what is like her..."²

But Ruskin's concept of nature was complex, more complex than many of his readers realised, and was darkening steadily during the period in which he was writing the five volumes of Modern Painters, 1843-60. For all their zeal, the P.R.B., apparently unaware of the deeper meanings of Ruskin's "nature," adopted the most obvious one, thereby sacrificing what Ruskin praised as "the nobler scenery" to what he damned as "duck-pond delineation."³ The great critic himself soon realised that the Pre-Raphaelites were working within too narrow a definition of "nature"; but he admired their work and, through his praise of it, ensured their financial success.

There are passages in Modern Painters I in which Ruskin used the word "nature" as Wordsworth had: to signify physical manifestation of God or, in the poet's own phrase, "the breath of God." Both he and Wordsworth were, of course, attempting to lead a return to nature -- away from sterile, elitist conventions of art. As Wordsworth had tried to emancipate the ear, Ruskin tried to emancipate the eye. A society so accustomed to the artificialities of Augustan poetry as to prefer them to "the real language of men" was "depraved," Wordsworth declared in his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads; similarly, Ruskin felt that the appetite for Late Renaissance conventions of painting was "morbid." To uproot these conventions and recultivate an honest observation of nature, would seem, then, in the thinking of both the poet and the critic, to lead not only to better art but to a better society. The merest attempt to depict naturalistically is acknowledgment of God's existence in the world, and "All great art," said Ruskin, "is praise." The artist, approaching nature as a scientist might, can perceive the inexplicable in the objective fact, the "thoughts that...lie too deep for tears" in the "meanest flower."