

## BERNARD SHAW ON RUSKIN

IT was a stock taunt at Ruskin twenty years ago, when he began to become unfashionable, that he was 'a schoolmaster.' In the sense that he was mainly concerned with the imposition of a divinely-inspired discipline on a perverse and unruly generation, this is undoubtedly true. The same may be said—at least in his later manifestations—of Mr. Shaw; with the devastating difference that *his* curriculum is avowedly of his own devising, and does not lay claim to any sanction whatever outside the author's invariably upright but occasionally insensitive conscience. Bearing in mind these points of contact and cleavage, it is extraordinarily interesting to read in the speech delivered by Mr. Shaw at the Ruskin Centenary Exhibition, and now re-published as *Ruskin's Politics*, the younger teacher's opinion of the older.

Mr. Shaw starts, as all good pedagogues do, by arguing from the seen to the unseen. He points out the portraits of Ruskin on the walls of the exhibition—the early Mozart-like medallion; the Herkomer, strongly resembling John Stuart Mill; the photographs taken at Coniston, where the head is a naturalist's (Grant Allen's, to be precise); and finally, Severn's studies of the wonderful old man like 'God as depicted in Blake's *Book of Job*.' Through these he traces the painter, music-lover, poet, rhetorician, economist and sociologist who ended (he says) by 'developing sociology and economics into a religion, as all economics and sociology that are worth anything do finally develop.'

Now this is very much the same thing as saying that a sufficiently devoted mill-wheel finally develops into the mountain torrent that turns it. Religion—the

\* *Ruskin's Politics*. By Bernard Shaw. (London: Christophers).

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power generated by the right recognition of God—is obviously bound to take precedence of all other powers. And it is just because Ruskin—as far as one can gather, with the best intentions in the world—so often tried to exploit religion to ‘bind the sweet influences of Pleiades,’ instead of letting religion exploit him, that he broke down into the magnificent Victorian ruin he was.

The inter-reaction of religion and politics is one of the most fruitful and fascinating subjects known. ‘There’s a couple of topics for you (said the irreverent Congreve), no more alike one another than oil and vinegar; and yet those two, beaten together by a state-cook, make sauce for the whole nation.’ Luckily Mr. Shaw’s concern is mainly with the vinegar. Ruskin’s disciples (he says very aptly) were ‘the few who were at war with commercial civilization.’ In this warfare, though Mr. Shaw stresses Ruskin’s scorn for ‘the cultured society of his day,’ I cannot myself see that he showed (true prophet that he was) any class bias whatsoever. Greed and indolence, he found, were common to rich and poor; and he inveighed against the workmen in *Time and Tide* just as fiercely as against the employers in *The Political Economy of Art*; and anathematized both, quite impartially, in *Fors Clavigera*. His invective, as Mr. Shaw legitimately claims, beats the philippics of Marx and Cobbett hollow. ‘Perhaps the reason was that they hated their enemy so thoroughly. Ruskin does it without hatred, and therefore he does it with a magnificent thoroughness. You may say that his strength in invective is as the strength of ten, because his heart is pure.’

Ruskin’s specific contribution to economics was to knock the spurious law of value—the Adam Smith ‘value in exchange’—‘into a cocked hat. But (continues Mr. Shaw) he did not go on to discover a scientific law of value.’ Perhaps (as Dean Inge pointed

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out in *his* centenary lecture) it was because the philosophy of absolute values, the Platonist doctrine of Ideas, had been revealed to him already. For these are 'not only ideals, but operative laws, creative powers: and the objects or actions which are formed or done "according to the pattern showed us in the mount" are the most real and the most significant things in the world of experience.'

It is an apparent lack of experience of these 'real and significant things' which sends Mr. Shaw occasionally off the rails in his enthusiastic and extraordinarily interesting effort to keep pace with the political velocity of Ruskin. He rightly insists that Ruskin set no more store by 'democracy in a vulgar sense' than did Dickens. For the one, reform was to come through 'a band of delivering knights—not of churls needing deliverance';<sup>1</sup> for the other, through 'Your Majesty, my lords and gentlemen . . .' 'Dickens always appeals to the aristocracy,' says Mr. Shaw, 'and that is really my attitude as well.' But though he allows that Ruskin, too, appealed to the aristocracy, that Ruskin was in fact a Tory, he so defines both Toryism and aristocracy that they are capable of covering Bolshevism and the myrmidons of Lenin. 'The Tory (he says) is a man who believes that those who are qualified by nature and training for public work, and who are naturally a minority, have to govern the mass of the people. That is Toryism.' And the lecture closes with an apology for Lenin as a man (by implication) after Ruskin's own heart.

But Ruskin has defined his Toryism for himself. 'I am, and my father was before me, a violent Tory of the old school—Walter Scott's school, that is to say, and Homer's.'<sup>2</sup> 'I love Lords and Ladies . . . and Earls and Countesses, and Marquises and Marchionesses, and Honourables and Sirs; and I bow

<sup>2</sup> *Praeterita*, I.

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down before them and worship them, in a way that Mr. Thackeray thought "snobs" did . . . But my way of worship was Walter Scott's, which my father taught me."<sup>3</sup>

The final qualification of Ruskin's governing aristocracy was 'the faith of saints and prophets.' "I know that my Redeemer liveth" is a state of mind of which ordinary men cannot reason,' he writes, 'but which in the practical power of it has always governed the world, and must for ever. No dynamite will ever be invented that can rule—it can but dissolve and destroy. Only the Word of God and the heart of man can govern.'<sup>4</sup>

No one interested in Ruskin or Mr. Shaw, or interested (like the present writer) in both, should fail to buy this small book. Its large involuntary perversities are no less interesting than its small, deliberate felicities. Especially happy is the recognition afforded to Mr. Charles Rowley's Ancoats Brotherhood—a society of Manchester working-men, deeply influenced by Ruskin, who were *inter alia* the first to reproduce, for their own edification and with cordial acknowledgments of his sanctity, the Windsor Castle Holbein of Blessed Thomas More.

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<sup>3</sup> *Fors Clavigera*, LXIII.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, XCII.