

**A DISCIPLE OF PLATO,
A CRITICAL STUDY OF
JOHN RUSKIN**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649321148

A disciple of Plato, a critical study of John Ruskin by William Smart

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

WILLIAM SMART

**A DISCIPLE OF PLATO,
A CRITICAL STUDY OF
JOHN RUSKIN**

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each
moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in
the glass,
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is signed
by God's name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go,
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.

WALT WHITMAN.

A DISCIPLE OF PLATO

A CRITICAL STUDY

OF

JOHN RUSKIN

BY

WILLIAM SMART, M.A.

With a Note by Mr. Ruskin.



GLASGOW

WILSON & McCORMICK, SAINT VINCENT STREET

1883

17006 . d . 81.

A DISCIPLE OF PLATO.

"Be sure, if the author is worth anything, that you will not get at his meaning all at once;—nay, that at his whole meaning you will not for a long time arrive in any wise. Not that he does not say what he means, and in strong words too; but he cannot say it all; and what is more strange, *will* not, but in a hidden way and in parables, in order that he may be sure you want it." *

With these words of his own before me it may seem misdirected energy to attempt, as I have done in the following paper, to find out the central and essential teaching of John Ruskin. My excuse is that such an attempt seemed necessary in view of the great ignorance and misunderstanding that prevails as to what Ruskin really has taught.

"Read his 'Munera Pulveris,' 'Oxford Lectures on Art,' and whatever else he is now writing if you can manage to get them—which is difficult here owing to the ways he has towards the bibliopolic world," wrote Carlyle to Emerson: and although Ruskin is the most candid of writers, these "ways" explain much

* *Sesame and Lilies*, i., 13.

of the general ignorance regarding his writings. "He is the founder of some sort of Socialistic scheme," says a common report, and the mere mention of Socialism explains much of the misunderstanding.

Hence one who knows his writings, and knows also how much nonsense is talked about them by critics who have not troubled themselves to ascertain his *standpoint*, is constantly reminded of a very old text, "The Letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life." It happens continually that those who respect him as an art critic have no interest in his social teachings, while those who agree with him in his social views have no interest in his art work. Yet his teachings in both departments have been entirely homogeneous. If he says that there is no "wealth" but Life, he also says that greatness in Art is measured by the moral life of the workman. Let it be remembered that Ruskin's work in life has been Art Criticism; that he is now for the second time Slade Professor in Oxford; and yet that those who know him best consider him above all great as a preacher of life and conduct: and one may see that it is not unreasonable to ask, in the case of his writings, where the Letter reveals the Spirit, and where it hinders it?

That the spirit of a great man's teaching is not on the surface, is in fact generally mistaken by his own generation, is evident from this, that almost all great thinkers have had schools of disciples, who became in great measure rivals, even enemies of each other. We all know how variously the words of Christ himself have been interpreted, from the schisms that split the Church

into east and west, down to the latest divide of sectarianism. In philosophy the last great name, Hegel, is acknowledged as master by the rising school of Christian philosophy in this country, and by the extreme left of Nihilism in Germany. While for Ruskin at the present day all faiths are claimed, from the reddest Communism to the rankest Toryism.

And necessarily so. It is not so much that one school follows the Letter, and another the Spirit—the two are not always so distinct as make that possible; but that all great men are many-sided; are, in fact, at once broad and narrow. It is the penalty of greatness that disciples are sure to carry out one of the sides to the neglect of the others. And yet the search for truth is not to be thought a game of compromises. When one side of a thought or theory has been stated by one man, and the other side by another, you cannot always find the truth by splitting the difference. Truth lies not in any division, nor between the two, but is always the living union of sides which, in isolation, are contradictory. It is a well defined law of thought and progress, that when one aspect of truth is pushed too far, it shows its unreality by swinging round into its opposite. And the perpetual tendency of all great thinking, especially such thinking as makes for practical reform, is to accentuate unduly some one side, and push it to extremes. The very violence of such extreme draws attention to its falsity in that form, and brings out the championship of the other side; indeed, in a very great man, leads to reaction and self-contradiction. Hence the assumption that self-contradiction is the mark

of weakness or falsity is not always well-grounded. The consistent man is the narrow man, for he has to limit his sphere of vision to one side of every question. It is true that the great deeds of history have been done by men who fixed their eyes steadily on one thing, and refused to look beside or beyond it; but they did so at the cost of having their work revised in another generation. The difference between a great thinker and a great reformer generally is, that the work of the former lies in finding out the contradictions and trying to reconcile them, while the latter passes by the unsolved contradiction, and unhesitatingly takes one side.

This law is seen both in individual systems and in historical evolutions. It explains how we find such a transcendent genius as Plato contradicting himself at various stages of his advance, and, as a whole, calling up the counterpart in Aristotle. In the same way Mill's *Economy* brings out what we might call the *Polity of Ruskin*. And it is worth noting that we find the profoundest example of this law in such a thorough-going contradiction as the two statements:—"He that is not for me is against me," and "He that is not against us is on our side."

On this account it seems to me that all great teachers, as certainly all great philosophers, must be studied historically. In themselves they are always either the counterpart or the summing up of thinkers that have preceded them, and in the course of their own writings they generally exhibit the opposition of thought I have mentioned.

Or, putting the matter in another aspect, might one not say

that the Genius and the Reformer come into collision in a great man. As a genius, he touches the world on many sides, all finding voice in him : like a finely strung instrument he vibrates to every impulse that comes from the heart of nature and of man. But by reason of this very sympathy the overwhelming sadness of human life touches him as it does not touch others. His nearness to God makes him more tenderly human, and in the end the intellect is overborne by the heart : he is forced to desert his own quiet work and rush into the arena of reform, and too often he blunts his weapons and saddens his life, in not recognizing that human misery is as old as the world, and is a problem for the gods to solve.

Indeed it is not given to any man to be alike great in all departments. Greatness comes very much of knowing what one is best fitted for, and recognizing the necessary limitations of life and strength. But few have the patience and the courage to pursue one work steadily, and let the innumerable cries of help from other fields fall upon deaf ears. The great man must, because he is human, essay upon fields which ordinary men know better, and his failures in this so-called practical sphere form favourite texts for the great army of small men to declaim—"See what a miserably ordinary mortal your hero is!" Equality has always been a favourite doctrine of those who would attain it by levelling down, not by levelling up—of which there is no better proof than the satisfaction with which the public have settled down to the opinion, that the key to Carlyle's philosophy was his Dyspepsia. The world takes very long to learn the double mean-