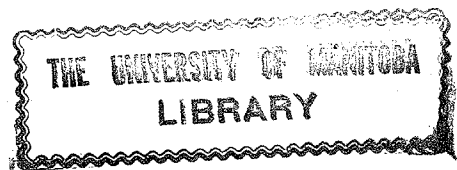


The Aestheticism of John Ruskin.

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## INTRODUCTION.

In the world of art John Ruskin has occupied for many years an authoritative position as critic and teacher. For a full half century he was "the apostle of beauty" in England, pleading for the beauty that was always spiritual, that appealed to the soul of man rather than to his eyes, and led to better work and better living.

The object of the present writing is to trace the aestheticism of Ruskin throughout his life's work. Before attempting to do so, however, and even before taking into account the many influences that tended to develop in his character a rare sensitiveness to beauty in every form, it will not be amiss to present a brief summary of the history of Aesthetics from the time of the ancient Greeks, who have left us a record of the first speculations on the culture of the beautiful and the aim of the arts.

Aesthetics, a Greek derivative from *aisthetikos*, perceivable by the senses, is defined as the theory or philosophy of taste, the science of the beautiful in nature and art, and especially that which treats of the expression and embodiment of beauty by art. But, what is beauty?

Bosanquet remarks that there is no definition of beauty that can be said to have met with universal acceptance. G. Vapereau declares that beauty is itself the object of a primary idea and as such is indefinable. "Le beau est lui-même objet d'une notion première, et comme tel indéfinissable."

The most usual definition is that "beauty is an assemblage of graces, or properties pleasing to the eye, the ear, the intellect, the aesthetic faculty, or the moral sense."

Among the ancients the fundamental theory of the beautiful was connected with the notions of rhythm, symmetry, harmony of parts; briefly, with the general formula of unity in variety. In the great art of the ancient Hellenes are seen chiefly the qualities of harmony, regularity, and repose.

The first Greek scholar whose views on this subject are definitely known was Socrates, who lived in the 5th century before Christ. According to Xenophon, Socrates regarded the beautiful as coincident with the good, and both as resolvable into the useful.

In one of the "Dialogues" of Plato, entitled Phaedo, or the Immortality of the Soul, ~~is~~ Phaedo, the "beloved disciple" of Socrates, is represented as narrating the circumstances of his Master's last hours during which he discoursed with his faithful disciples on various philosophical subjects. In the course of the conversation, Socrates leads them to the conclusion that from the senses is derived the knowledge that all sensible things aim at an idea of equality, beauty, good, justice, and holiness, of which they fall short, and that consequently we must have had a previous knowledge of absolute equality, beauty, and so on, else we could not have referred to them the knowledge derived from the senses.

"Then will not that which we call learning be a process of recovering our knowledge, and may not this be rightly termed recollection by us?" he asks.

Plato, as well as Socrates, taught that the human soul is of the same spirit as the Supreme Being; it neither begins nor ends; the soul knew itself, and still remembers some of its knowledge.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that Wordsworth voiced the same theory of the eternity of ideas or the pre-existence

of the soul in his Ode on Immortality, in the lines:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar;  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home."

Referring once more to his idea of absolute beauty, Socrates continues:-"I cannot help thinking that if there be anything beautiful other than absolute beauty, that can only be beautiful in as far as it partakes of absolute beauty--and this I should say of everything. I know nothing and can understand nothing of any other of those wise causes which are alleged; and if a person say to me that the bloom of color, or form, or anything else of that sort is a source of beauty, I leave all that, which is only confusing to me, and simply and singly, and perhaps foolishly, hold and am assured, in my own mind that nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence and participation of beauty in whatever way or manner obtained; for as to the manner I am uncertain, but I stoutly contend that by beauty all beautiful things become beautiful." (1)

From the "Dialogues" it may therefore be concluded that, in accordance with his idealistic theory, Plato held the existence of an absolute beauty, which, to his mind, is the only beauty worth the name, which is beautiful in every respect, and is the ground of beauty in all things. He also asserted the intimate union of the good, the beautiful, and the true.

In Plato's "Republic", Socrates discusses the place of the arts in education, and insists on music as of prime importance. He propounds the question, "What should be the end of music if not the

(1) Dialogues of Plato, translated by Jowett, page 124.

love of beauty?"

Regarding the poets and creative artists, Socrates says:

"Let our artists rather be those who are gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful; then will our youth dwell in a land of health, amid fair sights and sounds, and receive the good in everything; and beauty, the effluence of fair works, shall flow into the eye and ear, like a health-giving breeze from a purer region, and insensibly draw the soul from earliest years into likeness and sympathy with the beauty of reason." (1)

With respect to the youth of Greece, he continues: "Therefore, musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony, find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful; and also because he who has received this true education, of the inner being will most shrewdly perceive omissions or faults in art and nature, and with a true taste, while he praises and rejoices over and receives into his soul the good, and becomes noble and good, he will justly blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth; and when reason comes he will recognize and salute the friend with whom his education has made him long familiar." (2)

From Bosanquet's "History of Aesthetic" we learn that Aristotle treated of aesthetics in much more detail than Plato, but chiefly from a scientific or critical point of view. In his treatises on "Poetry" and "Rhetoric" he lays down a theory of art and establishes principles of beauty. His philosophical views were in many respects opposed to those of Plato. He does not admit an absolute conception of the beautiful; but he distinguishes

(1) "The Republic of Plato" translated by Jowett, p.85

(2) Ibid, p. 86.

beauty from the good, the useful, the fit, and the necessary. He resolves beauty into certain elements, as order, symmetry, definiteness, and a certain magnitude, which appears to be relative to the perceptive capacity.

Plotinus, who lived in the 3rd century after Christ, agrees with Plato and disagrees with Aristotle in holding that beauty may subsist in single and simple objects, and consequently in restoring the absolute conception of beauty. He differs from both in raising art above nature, contending that art is not imitative but symbolic. The realization, he explains, is indeed always less than the idea, and the created less than the creator, "but still," he continues, "if any one condemns the arts, because they create by way of imitation of nature, first we must observe that natural things themselves are an imitation of underlying reasons or ideas, and next we must bear in mind that the arts do not simply imitate the visible, but go back to the ideas from which nature comes; and further, that they create much out of themselves, and add to that which is defective, as being themselves in possession of beauty." (1)

In opposition to Plotinus in his estimation of art we may quote passages from two Christian writers of the 4th century, which show a sympathy with nature and a certain hostility to artificial beauty.

St. Gregory of Nyssa writes: "When I see every hilltop, every valley, every plain covered with fresh sprung grass, and then the various array of the trees, and at my feet the lilies, doubly furnished by nature, both with pleasant scent and with beauty of colour; when in the distance I behold the sea, to which the wandering cloud leads the way, my mind is seized by a melancholy which is not without

(1) Bosanquet's History of Aesthetic. page 113.



happiness; and when in autumn the fruits disappear, the leaves fall and the boughs are left bare, we are absorbed in the thought of the eternal and continuously recurring change in the accord of the marvellous forces of nature. Whoever apprehends this with the intelligent eye of the soul, feels the littleness of man compared with the greatness of the universe." And St. Chrysostom: "When you look at gleaming buildings, and the aspect of colonnades allures your eye, then turn at once to the vault of heaven and to the free plains in which herds graze at the water's brink. Who does not despise all the creations of art when at dawn in the stillness of his heart he admires the rising sun, as it sheds its golden light over the earth; or, when resting by a spring in the deep grass or under the dark shade of thick-leaved trees, he feasts his eye on the far distance vanishing in the haze?" (1)

In the early part of the 5th century St. Augustine wrote on "Beauty of the Universe," in which he presented his formal doctrine of beauty. He emphasizes the idea of symmetrical relations between parts as belonging to a whole. The variety correlative to unity in ancient formal aesthetic is deepened by him into the opposition of contraries. This he considers to be essentially included within the symmetry of the universe, as in the antitheses of rhetoric, or in the shadows of a picture, which do not make it ugly if rightly placed. Poisons, dangerous animals, and the like, all have their due place in the world, and so far are elements in its beauty.

The essence of this theory is to recognize the ugly as a subordinate element in the beautiful, to which it serves as a foil, contributing, however, on the whole to an effect which is harmonious or symmetrical.

(1) Bosanquet's "History of Aesthetic." page 128.

This idea of the beautiful being enhanced by contrast is well illustrated by Browning in his "Abt Vogler."

"And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence  
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered  
or agonized?  
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing  
might issue thence?  
Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should  
be prized?"

This principle is also exemplified by the use of the gargoyle in Gothic cathedrals.

St. Thomas Aquinas, who lived in the early thirteenth century, more than once referred to the nature of beauty in his great work the "Summa Theologica".

St. Thomas teaches that there are no innate ideas: that the mind is at first a "tabula rasa," pure potency in the intellectual order, just as "materia prima" is pure potency in the physical order. Having no innate ideas, the intellect must obtain the matter of thought from the world outside; the senses are, therefore, the channels of communication between the soul and the objects of knowledge. All knowledge begins with sense-knowledge: "Nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu." Thus, for example, he says: "Deficiente aliquo sensu, deficit scientia eorum quae apprehenduntur secundum illum sensum; sicut caecus natus nullam potest habere notitiam de coloribus." (1)

The intellect, it is true, knows itself by its own act, but the act of the intellect presupposes the previous exercise of the senses.

In the "Summa", St. Thomas mentions brightness of color, symmetry, and perfection among the elements of beauty. The ultimate ground of attraction in beauty is the affinity, revealed in symmetry, between

(1) Turner's "History of Philosophy" page 363.

the percipient and the perceived. But, although he makes the senses the direct bearers of this affinity, yet he clearly adopts the derivation of all beauty from God and gives the first rank to the sense of sight because of its affinity to the intellect.

"The middle age," says Bosanquet, "throughout its long development, was unquestionably inspired by the conviction that beauty is the revelation of reason in sensuous shape, that its fascination consists in its affinity with mind, and that consequently the entire sensible universe, as a symbol of the Divine reason, must be beautiful to the eye that can see it in relation to its Creator."

The systematic treatment of Aesthetics begins with Alexander G. Baumgarten's "Aesthetica", which was so far characteristically concerned about the theory of beauty as to hand down the term Aesthetic as the accepted title for the philosophy of the beautiful.

Baumgarten (1714-1762) made the division of philosophy into logic, ethics, and aesthetics; the first dealing with knowledge, the second with action (will and desire), the third with aesthetics. He held that as truth is the end and perfection of knowledge, and good that of the will, so beauty should be the end of all knowledge derived through the senses. He makes nature, the world accessible to sense-perception, the standard and pattern of art, imitation of nature being the law of art.

Kant defines beauty in reference to his four categories, quantity, quality, relation, and modality. "The aesthetical sense," he says, "differs both from the understanding and the will. It is neither theoretical nor practical in character; it is a phenomenon 'sui generis'. But it has this in common with reason and will, that it rests on an essentially subjective basis. Just as reason constitutes

the true, and will the good, so the aesthetical sense makes the beautiful. Beauty does not inhere in objects; it does not exist apart from the aesthetical sense; it is the product of this sense, as time and space are the products of the theoretical sense. That is beautiful which pleases (quality), which pleases all (quantity), which pleases without interest and without a concept (relation), and pleases necessarily (modality).

"What characterizes the beautiful and distinguishes it from the sublime, is the feeling of peace, tranquility, or harmony which it arouses in us, in consequence of the perfect agreement between the understanding and the imagination. The sublime, on the other hand, disturbs us, agitates us, transports us. Beauty dwells in the form; the sublime, in the disproportion between the form and the content. The beautiful calms and pacifies us; the sublime brings disorder into our faculties; it produces discord between the reason, which conceives the infinite, and the imagination, which has its fixed limits. The emotion caused in us by the starry heavens, the storm, and the raging sea springs from the conflict aroused by these different phenomena between our reason, which can measure the forces of nature and the heavenly distances without being overwhelmed by the enormous figures, and our imagination, which cannot follow reason into the depths of infinity. Man has a feeling of grandeur, because he himself is grand through reason. The animal remains passive in the presence of the grand spectacles of nature, because its intelligence does not rise beyond the level of its imagination. Hence we aptly say, the sublime elevates the soul. In the feeling of the sublime, man reveals himself as a being infinite in reason, finite in imagination." (1)

(1) Weber's "History of Philosophy." page 469-70

Turner adds: "The sublime is that which is great beyond all comparison; it gives satisfaction by its boundless and formless greatness, as the beautiful does by its definiteness of form. The great produces, it is true, a 'humiliating' impression; but it is the sensitive nature that is humiliated, while at the same time the spiritual nature is exalted and carried out towards the idea of the Infinite, which the sublime always suggests."

In Hegel's aesthetic system, beauty is the Idea as it shows itself to sense. Therefore, the beautiful is the shining of the idea through a sensuous medium. Its essence, according, is in appearance and in this it differs from the true. In art the absolute is immediately present to sensuous perception. With him, as with Schlegel, it is the highest revelation of beauty and superior to nature. (1)

Art, according to Hegel, is the anticipated triumph of mind over matter; it is the idea penetrating matter and transforming it after its image. He divides the arts into three classes: architecture, sculpture, and painting together forming material, or objective art; music being immaterial, invisible, subjective art; while the harmonious union of the world of music and the world of objective art produces poetry, the perfect art, the art of arts. (2)

Shaftesbury, an English writer on beauty, adopted the notion that beauty is perceived by a special internal sense; in which he was followed by Hutcheson, who held that beauty existed only in the perceiving mind, and not in the object.

Burke, in his Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful, defines beauty as that quality or those qualities in bodies, by which a certain satisfaction arises to the mind upon contemplating anything beautiful of

(1) Encyclopedia "Americana," article "Aesthetics."

(2) Weber's "History of Philosophy." page 525.

whatsoever nature it may be. He does not agree with those writers who maintain that the idea of beauty is concerned with proportion, fitness, utility, or perfection. Beauty is for the greater part some quality in bodies acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses, and since the qualities of beauty are merely sensible qualities, they are, according to Burke:- small size; smoothness; gradual variation; delicacy; clear and bright color, not strong and glaring, or if glaring, diversified by others.

These are the properties on which beauty depends; properties that operate by nature, and are less liable to be altered by caprice, or confounded by a diversity of taste than any other.

Burke speaks of his work as an inquiry, not into the ultimate cause of Sublimity and Beauty, but into the efficient cause, by which he means certain powers and properties in bodies that work a change in the mind. As if, says he, he were to explain the motion of a body falling to the ground, he would say it was caused by gravity; and he would endeavor to show after what manner this power operated, without attempting to show why it operated in this manner.

"The great chain of causes," says Burke, "which links one to another, even to the throne of God himself, can never be unravelled by any industry of ours. When we go but one step beyond the immediate sensible qualities of things, we go out of our depth. All we do after is but a faint struggle, that shows we are in an element which does not belong to us."

Alison and Jeffrey have supported the theory that the source of beauty is to be found in association. Dugald Stewart attempted to show that there is no common quality in the beautiful beyond that of producing a certain refined pleasure.

Lamennais, in his work "De l'Art et du Beau," writing of harmony in the universe, says: "Il existe une musique non moins vaste que la création, une musique qui embrasse tous les sons, tous les bruits, et leurs combinaisons innombrables, et leurs lois de tous ordres: depuis la goutte d'eau qui gémit en se brisant sur un brin d'herbe, jusqu'à l'océan qui ébranle avec des mugissements formidables les bases souterraines de la terre; depuis le jonc des bords du fleuve, jusqu'à l'oiseau qui soupire la nuit au fond des forêts; depuis l'insecte imperceptible qui murmure des tristesses ou des joies inconnues dans le calice d'une fleur, jusqu'à l'homme dont les chants s'élèvent de monde en monde vers leur éternel architecte. Oui, tout est harmonie ici-bas et dans les cieux; tout chante la gloire et la bonté du Très-Haut."

"There is in man," says Chateaubriand, "an instinctive melancholy, which makes him harmonize with the scenery of Nature. Who has not spent whole hours seated on the bank of a river contemplating its passing waves? Who has not found pleasure on the sea-shore in viewing the distant rock whitened by the billows?" He also speaks of "the immensity of the seas, which seems to give an indistinct measure of the greatness of our souls, and which excites a vague desire to quit this life, that we may embrace all nature and taste the fulness of joy in the presence of its Author." (1)

Fr. Martinus, explaining the effects of beauty, says: "Le beau ne produit sur l'âme droite que des effets bienfaisants. D'abord, il agit sur l'intelligence pour l'éclairer.--Le beau, en éveillant notre sentiment esthétique, nous fait sentir notre âme. Il nous fait prendre connaissance de nous-mêmes et de l'émotion que nous éprouvons. Puis, des choses créées qui nous procurent cette émotion,

(1) "Le Genie du Christianisme," translated by White.  
"The Genius of Christianity," page 302.

nous remontons à la cause première, à Dieu, dont la présence comme créateur et conservateur nous est ainsi révélée. Oui, l'univers est bien le livre du Très-Haut! Pour celui qui sait regarder et comprendre, la connaissance des choses sensibles conduit vite à celle de la cause invisible! Aussi, de tout temps, le beau manifesté dans les êtres de la création fut, pour les âmes saintes, l'occasion d'aimer, d'adorer et de glorifier l'auteur de toute beauté, le beau absolu." (1)

Fr. Martinus concludes his excellent treatise on beauty with these words:- "Ainsi, le beau regardé à la clarté des rayons qui émanent de son principe éternel, brille d'un éclat qui réchauffe et reconforte notre âme. Il lui ouvre pour ainsi dire un coin du ciel qui illumine son exil terrestre. C'est l'aurore de l'extase éternelle, où nous posséderons pour toujours la Source et l'Archétype de toute beauté." (2)

Emerson, in his essay on Art, remarks: "The reference of all production at last to an Aboriginal Power, explains the traits common to all works of the highest art, that they are universally intelligible; that they restore to us the simplest states of mind; and are religious. Since what skill is therein shown is the reappearance of the original soul, a jet of pure light; it should produce a similar impression to that made by natural objects. In happy hours, nature appears to us one with art; art perfected,--the work of genius. And the individual in whom simple tastes and susceptibility to all the great human influences, overpowers the accidents of a local and special culture, is the best critic of art. Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us, or we

(1) "La Connaissance Pratique du Beau," page 17.

(2) Ibid. page 323. Montreal: 1924.



find it not. The best of beauty is a finer charm than skill in surfaces, in outlines, or rules of art can ever teach, namely, a radiation from the work of art, of human character,--a wonderful expression through stone or canvas or musical sound of the deepest and simplest attributes of our nature, and therefore most intelligible at last to those souls which have these attributes."

With these words in mind, one now realizes more than ever, that the study of the sense of beauty in Ruskin is the study of a soul gifted with pre-eminent sensibility to nature's beauty, and endowed with an extraordinary ability to perceive nature's truth, who "lends a voice to the hills and adds a music to the streams," who has sent a "wave of enthusiasm" for nature into ten thousand young hearts, and at whose bidding we awaken to a new consciousness of the beauty and grandeur of the world.