

# RUSKIN JOHN

FRONDES AGRESTES:  
READINGS IN 'MODERN  
PAINTERS'

John Ruskin

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in 'Modern Painters'**

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# John Ruskin

## Fronde Agrestes: Readings in 'Modern Painters'

### PREFACE

I have been often asked to republish the first book of mine which the public noticed, and which, hitherto, remains their favourite, in a more easily attainable form than that of its existing editions. I am, however, resolved never to republish the book as a whole; some parts of it being, by the established fame of Turner, rendered unnecessary; and others having been always useless, in their praise of excellence which the public will never give the labour necessary to discern. But, finding lately that one of my dearest friends, who, in advanced age, retains the cheerfulness and easily delighted temper of bright youth, had written out, for her own pleasure, a large number of passages from 'Modern Painters,' it seemed to me certain that what such a person felt to be useful to herself, could not but be useful also to a class of readers whom I much desired to please, and who would sometimes enjoy, in my early writings, what I never should myself have offered them. I asked my friend, therefore, to add to her own already chosen series, any other passages she thought likely to be of permanent interest to general readers; and I have printed her selections in absolute submission to her judgment, merely arranging the pieces she sent me in the order which seemed most convenient for the reciprocal bearing of their fragmentary meanings, and adding here and there an explanatory note; or, it may be, a deprecatory one, in cases where my mind had changed. That she did me the grace to write every word with her own hands, adds, in my eyes, and will, I trust, in the readers' also, to the possible claims of the little book on their sympathy; and although I hope to publish some of the scientific and technical portions of the original volumes in my own large editions, the selections here made by my friend under her quiet woods at Coniston—the Unter-Walden of England—will, I doubt not, bring within better reach of many readers, for whom I am not now able myself to judge or choose, such service as the book was ever capable of rendering, in the illustration of the powers of nature, and intercession for her now too often despised and broken peace.

*Herne Hill,  
5th December, 1874.*

## SECTION I. PRINCIPLES OF ART

1. Perfect taste is the faculty of receiving the greatest possible pleasure from those material sources which are attractive to our moral nature in its purity and perfection; but why we receive pleasure from some forms and colours, and not from others, is no more to be asked or answered than why we like sugar and dislike wormwood.

2. The temper by which right taste is formed is characteristically patient. It dwells upon what is submitted to it. It does not trample upon it,—lest it should be pearls, even though it look like husks. It is good ground, penetrable, retentive; it does not send up thorns of unkind thoughts, to choke the weak seed; it is hungry and thirsty too, and drinks all the dew that falls on it. It is an honest and good heart, that shows no too ready springing before the sun be up, but fails not afterwards; it is distrustful of itself, so as to be ready to believe and to try all things; and yet so trustful of itself, that it will neither quit what it has tried, nor take anything without trying. And the pleasure which it has in things that it finds true and good, is so great, that it cannot possibly be led aside by any tricks of fashion, or diseases of vanity; it cannot be cramped in its conclusions by partialities and hypocrisies; its visions and its delights are too penetrating,—too living,—for any whitewashed object or shallow fountain long to endure or supply. It clasps all that it loves so hard that it crushes it if it be hollow.

3. It is the common consent of men that whatever branch of any pursuit ministers to the bodily comforts, and regards material uses, is ignoble, and whatever part is addressed to the mind only, is noble; and that geology does better in reclothing dry bones and revealing lost creations, than in tracing veins of lead and beds of iron; astronomy better in opening to us the houses of heaven, than in teaching navigation; botany better in displaying structure than in expressing juices; surgery better in investigating organization than in setting limbs.—Only it is ordained that, for our encouragement, every step we make in the more exalted range of science adds something also to its practical applicabilities; that all the great phenomena of nature, the knowledge of which is desired by the angels only, by us partly, as it reveals to farther vision the being and the glory of Him in whom they rejoice and we live, dispense yet such kind influences and so much of material blessing as to be joyfully felt by all inferior creatures, and to be desired by them with such single desire as the imperfection of their nature may admit; that the strong torrents, which, in their own gladness, fill the hills with hollow thunder, and the vales with winding light, have yet their bounden charge of field to feed, and barge to bear; that the fierce flames to which the Alp owes its upheaval and the volcano its terror, temper for us the metal vein, and warm the quickening spring; and that for our incitement, I say, not our reward,—for knowledge is its own reward,—herbs have their healing, stones their preciousness, and stars their times.

4. Had it been ordained by the Almighty<sup>1</sup> that the highest pleasures of sight should be those of most difficult attainment, and that to arrive at them it should be necessary to accumulate gilded palaces, tower over tower, and pile artificial mountains around insinuated lakes, there would never have been a direct contradiction between the unselfish duties and the inherent desires of every individual. But no such contradiction exists in the system of Divine Providence; which, leaving it open to us, if we will, as creatures in probation, to abuse this sense like every other, and pamper it with selfish and thoughtless vanities, as we pamper the palate with deadly meats, until the appetite of tasteful cruelty is lost in its sickened satiety, incapable of pleasure unless, Caligula like, it concentrates the labour of a million of lives into the sensation of an hour,—leaves it also open to us, by humble

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<sup>1</sup> The reader must observe, that having been thoroughly disciplined in the Evangelical schools, I supposed myself, at four-and-twenty, to know all about the ordinances of the Almighty. Nevertheless, the practical contents of the sentence are good; if only they are intelligible, which I doubt.

and loving ways, to make ourselves susceptible of deep delight, which shall not separate us from our fellows, nor require the sacrifice of any duty or occupation, but which shall bind us closer to men and to God, and be with us always, harmonized with every action, consistent with every claim, unchanging and eternal.

5. A great Idealist never can be egotistic. The whole of his power depends upon his losing sight and feeling of his own existence, and becoming a mere witness and mirror of truth, and a scribe of visions,—always passive in sight, passive in utterance, lamenting continually that he cannot completely reflect nor clearly utter all he has seen,—not by any means a proud state for a man to be in. But the man who has no invention is always setting things in order,<sup>2</sup> and putting the world to rights, and mending, and beautifying, and pluming himself on his doings, as supreme in all ways.

6. *So far as education does indeed tend to make the senses delicate, and the perceptions accurate, and thus enables people to be pleased with quiet instead of gaudy colour, and with graceful instead of coarse form; and by long acquaintance with the best things, to discern quickly what is fine from what is common—so far acquired taste is an honourable faculty, and it is true praise of anything to say it is "in good taste." But,<sup>3</sup> so far as this higher education has a tendency to narrow the sympathies and harden the heart, diminishing the interest of all beautiful things by familiarity, until even what is best can hardly please, and what is brightest hardly entertain,—so far as it fosters pride, and leads men to find the pleasure they take in anything, not on the worthiness of the thing, but on the degree in which it indicates some greatness of their own, (as people build marble porticoes, and inlay marble floors, not so much because they like the colours of marble, or find it pleasant to the foot, as because such porches and floors are costly, and separated in all human eyes from plain entrances of stone and timber);—so far as it leads people to prefer gracefulness of dress, manner, and aspect, to value of substance and heart, liking a well-said thing better than a true thing, and a well-trained manner better than a sincere one, and a delicately-formed face better than a good-natured one,—and in all other ways and things setting custom and semblance above everlasting truth;—so far, finally, as it induces a sense of inherent distinction between class and class, and causes everything to be more or less despised which has no social rank, so that the affection, pleasure, and grief of a clown are looked upon as of no interest compared with the affection and grief of a well-bred man;—just so far, in all these several ways, the feeling induced by what is called "a liberal education" is utterly adverse to the understanding of noble art.*

7. He who habituates himself in his daily life to seek for the stern facts in whatever he hears or sees, will have these facts again brought before him by the involuntary imaginative power, in their noblest associations; and he who seeks for frivolities and fallacies, will have frivolities and fallacies again presented to him in his dreams.<sup>4</sup>

8. *All the histories of the Bible are yet waiting to be painted. Moses has never been painted; Elijah never; David never (except as a mere ruddy stripling); Deborah never; Gideon never; Isaiah never.<sup>5</sup> What single example does the reader remember of painting which suggested so much as the faintest shadow of their deeds? Strong men in armour, or aged men with flowing beards, he may remember, who, when he looked at his Louvre or Uffizi catalogue, he found were intended to stand for David, or Moses. But does he suppose that, if these pictures had suggested to him the feeblest image of the presence of such men, he would have passed on, as he assuredly did, to the next picture, representing,*

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<sup>2</sup> I am now a comic illustration of this sentence, myself. I have not a ray of invention in all my brains; but am intensely rational and orderly, and have resolutely begun to set the world to rights.

<sup>3</sup> Nobody need begin this second volume sentence unless they are breathed like the Græme:—"Right up Ben Ledi could he press, And not a sob his toil confess."

<sup>4</sup> Very good. Few people have any idea how much more important the government of the mind is, than the force of its exertion. Nearly all the world flog their horses, without ever looking where they are going.

<sup>5</sup> I knew nothing, when I wrote this passage, of Luini, Filippo Lippi, or Sandro Botticelli; and had not capacity to enter into the deeper feelings, even of the men whom I was chiefly studying,—Tintoret and Fra Angelico. But the British public is at present as little acquainted with the greater Florentines as I was then, and the passage, for *them*, remains true.

doubtless, Diana and Actæon, or Cupid and the Graces, or a gambling quarrel in a pothouse—with no sense of pain or surprise? Let him meditate over the matter, and he will find ultimately that what I say is true, and that religious art at once complete and sincere never yet has existed.

## SECTION II.

### POWER AND OFFICE OF IMAGINATION

9. What are the legitimate uses of the imagination,—that is to say, of the power of perceiving, or conceiving with the mind, things which cannot be perceived by the senses? Its first and noblest use is,<sup>6</sup> to enable us to bring sensibly to our sight the things which are recorded as belonging to our future state, or invisibly surrounding us in this. It is given us, that we may imagine the cloud of witnesses, in heaven, and earth, and sea, as if they were now present,—the souls of the righteous waiting for us; that we may conceive the great army of the inhabitants of heaven, and discover among them those whom we most desire to be with for ever; that we may be able to vision forth the ministry of angels beside us, and see the chariots of fire on the mountains that gird us round; but, above all, to call up the scenes and facts in which we are commanded to believe, and be present, as if in the body, at every recorded event of the history of the Redeemer. Its second and ordinary use is, to empower us to traverse the scenes of all other history, and to force the facts to become again visible, so as to make upon us the same impression which they would have made if we had witnessed them; and, in the minor necessities of life, to enable us, out of any present good, to gather the utmost measure of enjoyment, by investing it with happy associations, and, in any present evil, to lighten it, by summoning back the images of other hours; and also to give to all mental truths some visible type, in allegory, simile, or personification, which shall most deeply enforce them; and finally, when the mind is utterly outwearied, to refresh it with such innocent play as shall be most in harmony with the suggestive voices of natural things, permitting it to possess living companionship, instead of silent beauty, and create for itself fairies in the grass, and naiads in the wave.

10. Yet, because we thus reverence the power and art of imagination, let none of us despise the power and art of memory.

Let the reader consider seriously what he would give at any moment to have the power of arresting the fairest scenes, those which so often rise before him only to vanish; to stay the cloud in its fading, the leaf in its trembling, and the shadows in their changing; to bid the fitful foam be fixed upon the river, and the ripples be everlasting upon the lake; and then to bear away with him no darkness or feeble sun-stain, (though even that is beautiful,) but a counterfeit which should seem no counterfeit—the true and perfect image of life indeed. Or rather, (for the full majesty of such a power is not thus sufficiently expressed,) let him consider that it would be in effect nothing less than a capacity of transporting himself at any moment into any scene—a gift as great as can be possessed by a disembodied spirit; and suppose, also, this necromancy embracing not only the present but the past, and enabling us seemingly to enter into the very bodily presence of men long since gathered to the dust; to behold them in act as they lived; but, with greater privilege than ever was granted to the companions of those transient acts of life, to see them fastened at our will in the gesture and expression of an instant, and stayed on the eve of some great deed, in immortality of burning purpose.—Conceive, so far as is possible, such power as this, and then say whether the art which conferred it is to be spoken lightly of, or whether we should not rather reverence, as half-divine, a gift which would go so far as to raise us into the rank, and invest us with the felicities, of angels.<sup>7</sup>

11. *I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power, or hesitation of speaking his opinions; but a right understanding of the relation between what he can do and say, and the rest of the world's sayings and doings. All great men not*

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<sup>6</sup> I should be glad if the reader who is interested in the question here raised, would read, as illustrative of the subsequent statement, the account of Tintoret's 'Paradise,' in the close of my Oxford lecture on Michael Angelo and Tintoret, which I have printed separately to make it generally accessible.

<sup>7</sup> Passage written in opposition to the vulgar notion that the 'mere imitation' of Nature is easy, and useless.

only know their business, but usually know that they know it; and are not only right in their main opinions, but they usually know that they are right in them; only they do not think much of themselves on that account. Arnolfo knows he can build a good dome at Florence; Albert Durer writes calmly to one who has found fault with his work,—“It cannot be better done;” Sir Isaac Newton knows that he has worked out a problem or two that would have puzzled anybody else; only they do not expect their fellow-men, therefore, to fall down and worship them. They have a curious under-sense of powerlessness, feeling that the greatness is not *in* them, but *through* them—that they could not do or be anything else than God made them; and they see something divine and God-made in every other man they meet, and are endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful.

12. As far as I can observe, it is a constant law, that the greatest men, whether poets or historians, live entirely in their own age, and the greatest fruits of their work are gathered out of their own age. Dante paints Italy in the thirteenth century; Chaucer, England in the fourteenth; Masaccio, Florence in the fifteenth; Tintoret, Venice in the sixteenth; all of them utterly regardless of anachronism and minor error of every kind, but getting always vital truth out of the vital present. If it be said that Shakespeare wrote perfect historical plays on subjects belonging to the preceding centuries, I answer that they *are* perfect plays, just because there is no care about centuries in them, but a life which all men recognise for the human life of all time—and this it is, not because Shakespeare sought to give universal truth, but because painting, honestly and completely, from the men about him, he painted that human nature which is indeed constant enough,—a rogue in the fifteenth century being *at heart* what a rogue is in the nineteenth, and was in the twelfth; and an honest or knightly man being in like manner very similar to other such at any other time. And the work of these great idealists is, therefore, always universal; not because it is not *portrait*, but because it is *complete* portrait, down to the heart, which is the same in all ages; and the work of the mean idealists is *not* universal, not because it is portrait, but because it is *half* portrait—of the outside, the manners and the dress, not of the heart. Thus Tintoret and Shakespeare paint, both of them, simply Venetian and English nature, as they saw it in their time, down to the root; and it does for *all* time; but as for any care to cast themselves into the particular ways and tones of thought, or custom, of past time in their historical work, you will find it in neither of them,<sup>8</sup> nor in any other perfectly great man that I know of.

13. I think it probable that many readers may be surprised at my calling Scott the great representative of the mind of the age of literature. Those who can perceive the intense penetrative depth of Wordsworth, and the exquisite finish and melodious power of Tennyson, may be offended at my placing in higher rank that poetry of careless glance and reckless rhyme in which Scott poured out the fancies of his youth; and those who are familiar with the subtle analysis of the French novelists, or who have in any wise submitted themselves to the influence of German philosophy, may be equally indignant at my ascribing a principality to Scott among the literary men of Europe, in an age which has produced De Balzac, and Goethe<sup>9</sup>.

But the mass of sentimental literature concerned with the analysis and description of emotion, headed by the poetry of Byron, is altogether of lower rank than the literature which merely describes what it saw. The true seer feels as intensely as any one else; but he does not much describe his feelings. He tells you whom he met, and what they said; leaves you to make out, from that, what they feel, and what he feels, but goes into little detail. And, generally speaking, pathetic writing and careful explanation of passion are quite easy, compared with this plain recording of what people said, and

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<sup>8</sup> What vestige of Egyptian character is there, for instance, in Cleopatra?—of Athenian in Theseus or Timon?—of old English in Imogen or Cordelia?—of old Scottish in Macbeth?—or even of mediæval Italian in Petruccio, the Merchant of Venice, or Desdemona? And the Roman plays appear definitely Roman only because the strength of Rome was the eternal strength of the world,—pure family life, sustained by agriculture, and defended by simple and fearless manhood.

<sup>9</sup> I knew nothing of Goethe when I put him with Balzac; but the intolerable dullness which encumbers the depth of Wilhelm Meister, and the cruel reserve which conceals from all but the intensest readers the meaning of Faust, have made him, in a great degree, an evil influence in European literature; and Evil is always second-rate.

did; or with the right invention of what they are likely to say and do; for this reason, that to invent a story, or admirably and thoroughly tell any part of a story, it is necessary to grasp the entire mind of every personage concerned in it, and know precisely how they would be affected by what happens; which to do, requires a colossal intellect; but to describe a separate emotion delicately, it is only needed that one should feel it oneself; and thousands of people are capable of feeling this or that noble emotion, for one who is able to enter into all the feelings of somebody sitting on the other side of the table. Even, therefore, where this sentimental literature is first rate, as in passages of Byron, Tennyson, and Keats, it ought not to be ranked so high as the creative; and though perfection even in narrow fields is perhaps as rare as in the wider, and it may be as long before we have another "In Memoriam" as another "Guy Mannering," I unhesitatingly receive as a greater manifestation of power, the right invention of a few sentences spoken by Pleydell and Mannering across their supper-table, than the most tender and passionate melodies of the self-examining verse.

14. Fancy plays like a squirrel in its circular prison, and is happy; but Imagination is a pilgrim on the earth—and her home is in heaven. Shut her from the fields of the celestial mountains, bear her from breathing their lofty, sun-warmed air; and we may as well turn upon her the last bolt of the Tower of Famine, and give the keys to the keeping of the wildest surge that washes Capraja and Gorgona<sup>10</sup>.

15. In the highest poetry, there is no word so familiar, but a great man will "bring good out of it, or rather, it will bring good to him, and answer some end for which no other word would have done equally well. A common person, for instance, would be mightily puzzled to apply the word 'whelp' to anyone, with a view of flattering him. There is a certain freshness and energy in the term, which gives it agreeableness, but it seems difficult, at first hearing it, to use it complimentarily. If the person spoken of be a prince, the difficulty seems increased; and when farther he is at one and the same moment to be called a 'whelp' and contemplated as a hero, it seems that a common idealist might well be brought to a pause! But hear Shakespeare do it:—

"Awake his warlike spirit,  
And your great uncle's, Edward the Black Prince,  
Who on the French ground played a tragedy,  
Making defeat on the full power of France,  
While his most mighty father on a hill  
Stood smiling, to behold his lion's whelp  
Forage in blood of French nobility."

16. Although in all lovely nature there is, first, an excellent degree of simple beauty, addressed to the eye alone, yet often what impresses us most will form but a very small portion of that visible beauty. That beauty may, for instance, be composed of lovely flowers, and glittering streams, and blue sky and white clouds; and yet the thing that impresses us most, and which we should be sorriest to lose, may be a thin grey film on the extreme horizon, not so large, in the space of the scene it occupies, as a piece of gossamer on a near-at-hand bush, nor in any wise prettier to the eye than the gossamer; but because the gossamer is known by us for a little bit of spider's work, and the other grey film is known to mean a mountain ten thousand feet high, inhabited by a race of noble mountaineers, we are solemnly impressed by the aspect of it, and yet all the while the thoughts and knowledge which cause us to receive this impression are so obscure that we are not conscious of them.

17. Examine the nature of your own emotion, (if you feel it,) at the sight of the Alps; and you find all the brightness of that emotion hanging, like dew on a gossamer, on a curious web of subtle fancy and imperfect knowledge. First you have a vague idea of its size, coupled with wonder at the

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<sup>10</sup> I leave this passage, as my friend has chosen it; but it is unintelligible without the contexts, which show how all the emotions described in the preceding passages of this section, are founded on trust in the beneficence and rule of an Omnipotent Spirit.

work of the great Builder of its walls and foundations; then an apprehension of its eternity, a pathetic sense of its perpetualness, and your own transientness, as of the grass upon its side;—then, and in very sadness, a sense of strange companionship with past generations, in seeing what they saw. They did not see the clouds that are floating over your head, nor the cottage wall on the other side of the field, nor the road by which you are travelling. But they saw *that*. The wall of granite in the heavens was the same to them as to you. They have ceased to look upon it; you will soon cease to look also, and the granite wall will be for others. Then, mingled with these more solemn imaginations, come the understandings of the gifts and glories of the Alp;—the fancying forth of all the fountains that well from its rocky walls, and strong rivers that are born out of its ice, and of all the pleasant valleys that wind between its cliffs, and all the *châlets* that gleam among its clouds, and happy farmsteads couched upon its pastures; while, together with the thoughts of these, rise strange sympathies with all the unknown of human life, and happiness, and death, signified by that narrow white flame of the everlasting snow, seen so far in the morning sky. These images, and far more than these, lie at the root of the emotion which you feel at the sight of the Alps. You may not trace them in your heart, for there is a great deal more in your heart, both of evil and good, than you can ever trace; but they stir you and quicken you for all that. Assuredly, so far as you feel more at beholding the snowy mountain than any other object of the same sweet silvery grey, these are the kind of images which cause you to do so; and observe, these are nothing more than a greater apprehension of the *facts* of the thing. We call the power 'Imagination,' because it imagines or conceives; but it is only noble imagination, if it imagines or conceives the *truth*. And according to the degree of knowledge possessed, and of sensibility to the pathetic or impressive character of the things known, will be the degree of this imaginative delight.

18. So natural is it to the human heart to fix itself in hope rather than in present possession, and so subtle is the charm which the imagination casts over what is distant or denied, that there is often a more touching power in the scenes which contain far-away promises of something greater than themselves, than in those which exhaust the treasures and powers of nature in an unconquerable and excellent glory, leaving nothing more to be by fancy pictured or pursued. I do not know that there is a district in the world more calculated to illustrate this power of the expectant imagination than that which surrounds the city of Fribourg in Switzerland, extending from it towards Berne. It is of grey sandstone, considerably elevated, but presenting no object of striking interest to the passing traveller; so that as it is generally seen in the course of a hasty journey from the Bernese Alps to those of Savoy, it is rarely regarded with any other sensation than that of weariness, all the more painful because accompanied with reaction from the high excitement caused by the splendour of the Bernese Oberland. The traveller—foot-sore, feverish, and satiated with glacier and precipice,—lies back in the corner of the diligence, perceiving little more than that the road is winding and hilly, and the country through which it passes, cultivated and tame. Let him, however, only do this tame country the justice of staying in it a few days, until his mind has recovered its tone, and take one or two long walks through its fields, and he will have other thoughts of it. It is, as I said, an undulating district of grey sandstone, never attaining any considerable height, but having enough of the mountain spirit to throw itself into continual succession of bold slope and dale; elevated, also, just far enough above the sea to render the pine a frequent forest tree along its irregular ridges. Through this elevated tract the river cuts its way in a ravine some five or six hundred feet in depth, which winds for leagues between the gentle hills, unthought of until its edge is approached; and then, suddenly, through the boughs of the firs, the eye perceives, beneath, the green and gliding stream, and the broad walls of sandstone cliff that form its banks; hollowed out where the river leans against them, at its turns, into perilous over-hanging; and, on the other shore, at the same spots, leaving little breadths of meadow between them and the water, half overgrown with thicket, deserted in their sweetness, inaccessible from above, and rarely visited by any curious wanderers along the hardly traceable footpath which struggles for existence beneath the rocks. And there the river ripples and eddies and murmurs in an outer solitude. It is passing through a thickly peopled country; but never was a stream so lonely. The feeblest and

most far-away torrent among the high hills has its companions; the goats browse beside it; and the traveller drinks from it, and passes over it with his staff; and the peasant traces a new channel for it down to his mill-wheel. But this stream has no companions; it flows on in an infinite seclusion, not secret, nor threatening, but a quietness of sweet daylight and open air—a broad space of tender and deep desolateness, drooped into repose out of the midst of human labour and life; the waves plashing lowly, with none to hear them; and the wild birds building in the boughs, with none to fray them away; and the soft, fragrant herbs rising and breathing and fading, with no hand to gather them;—and yet all bright and bare to the clouds above, and to the fresh fall of the passing sunshine and pure rain. But above the brows of these scarpèd cliffs, all is in an instant changed. A few steps only beyond the firs that stretch their branches, angular, and wild, and white, like forks of lightning, into the air of the ravine,—and we are in an arable country of the most perfect richness; the swathes of its corn glowing and burning from field to field: its pretty hamlets all vivid with fruitful orchards, and flowery garden, and goodly with steep-roofed storehouse and barn; its well-kept, hard, park-like roads rising and falling from hillside to hillside, or disappearing among brown banks of moss, and thickets of the wild raspberry and rose, or gleaming through lines of tall trees, half glade, half avenue, where the gate opens, or the gateless path turns trustedly aside, unhindered, into the garden of some stately house, surrounded in rural pride with its golden hives, and carved granaries, and irregular domain of latticed and espaliered cottages, gladdening to look upon in their delicate homeliness—delicate, yet in some sort, rude; not like our English homes—trim, laborious, formal, irreproachable in comfort—but with a peculiar carelessness and largeness in all their detail, harmonizing with the outlawed loveliness of their country. For there is an untamed strength even in all that soft and habitable land. It is indeed gilded with corn, and fragrant with deep grass, but it is not subdued to the plough or to the scythe. It gives at its own free will; it seems to have nothing wrested from it, nor conquered in it. It is not redeemed from desertness, but unrestrained in fruitfulness,—a generous land, bright with capricious plenty, and laughing from vale to vale in fitful fulness, kind and wild. Nor this without some sterner element mingled in the heart of it. For, along all its ridges stand the dark masses of innumerable pines,<sup>11</sup> taking no part in its gladness; asserting themselves for ever as fixed shadows, not to be pierced or banished even in the intensest sunlight; fallen flakes and fragments of the night, stayed in their solemn squares in the midst of all the rosy bendings of the orchard boughs and yellow effulgence of the harvest, and tracing themselves in black network and motionless fringes against the blanched blue of the horizon in its saintly clearness. And yet they do not sadden the landscape, but seem to have been set there chiefly to show how bright everything else is round them; and all the clouds look of pure silver, and all the air seems filled with a whiter and more living sunshine, where they are pierced by the sable points of the pines; and all the pastures look of more glowing green where they run up between the purple trunks; and the sweet field footpaths skirt the edges of the forest for the sake of its shade, sloping up and down about the slippery roots, and losing themselves every now and then hopelessly among the violets and ground-ivy and brown sheddings of the fibrous leaves, and at last plunging into some open aisle, where the light through the distant stems shows that there is a chance of coming out again on the other side; and coming out indeed in a little while from the scented darkness into the dazzling air and marvellous landscape, which stretches still farther and farther in new wilfulness of grove and garden, until at last the craggy mountains of the Simmenthal rise out of it, sharp into the rolling of the southern clouds.

19<sup>12</sup>. Although there are few districts of Northern Europe, however apparently dull or tame, in which I cannot find pleasure; though the whole of Northern France (except Champagne), dull as it

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<sup>11</sup> Almost the only pleasure I have, myself, in rereading my old books, is my sense of having at least done justice to the pine. Compare the passage in this book, No. 47.

<sup>12</sup> This, and the following passage, have nothing to do with the general statements in the book. They occur with reference only to my own idiosyncrasy. I was much surprised when I found first how individual it was, by a Pre-Raphaelite painter's declaring a piece of unwholesome reedy fen to be more beautiful than Benvenue.

seems to most travellers, is to me a perpetual paradise; and, putting Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, and one or two such other perfectly flat districts aside, there is not an English county which I should not find entertainment in exploring the cross-roads of, foot by foot,—yet all my best enjoyment would be owing to the imagination of the hills, colouring with their far-away memories every lowland stone and herb. The pleasant French coteau, green in the sunshine, delights me either by what real mountain character it has in itself, (for in extent and succession of promontory, the flanks of the French valleys have quite the sublimity of true mountain distances,) or by its broken ground and rugged steps among the vines, and rise of the leafage above against the blue sky, as it might rise at Vevay or Como. There is not a wave of the Seine, but is associated in my mind with the first rise of the sandstones and forest pines of Fontainebleau; and with the hope of the Alps, as one leaves Paris, with the horses' heads to the southwest, the morning sun flashing on the bright waves at Charenton. If there be no hope or association of this kind, and if I cannot deceive myself into fancying that perhaps at the next rise of the road there may be the film of a blue hill in the gleam of sky at the horizon, the landscape, however beautiful, produces in me even a kind of sickness and pain; and the whole view from Richmond Hill or Windsor Terrace,—nay, the gardens of Alcinous, with their perpetual summer—or of the Hesperides, (if they were flat, and not close to Atlas,) golden apples and all, I would give away in an instant, for one mossy granite stone a foot broad, and two leaves of lady fern.

20. I cannot find words to express the intense pleasure I have always in first finding myself, after some prolonged stay in England, at the foot of the old tower of Calais Church. The large neglect, the noble unsightliness of it; the record of its years written so visibly, yet without sign of weakness or decay; its stern wasteness and gloom, eaten away by the Channel winds, and overgrown with the bitter sea grasses; its slates and tiles all shaken and rent, and yet not falling; its desert of brickwork, full of bolts, and holes, and ugly fissures, and yet strong, like a bare brown rock; its carelessness of what any one thinks or feels about it, putting forth no claim, having no beauty, nor desirableness, pride, nor grace; yet neither asking for pity; not, as ruins are, useless and piteous, feebly or fondly garrulous of better days; but, useful still, going through its own daily work,—as some old fisherman, beaten grey by storm, yet drawing his daily nets: so it stands, with no complaint about its past youth, in blanched and meagre massiveness and serviceableness, gathering human souls together underneath it; the sound of its bells for prayer still rolling through its rents; and the grey peak of it seen far across the sea, principal of the three that rise above the waste of surfy sand and hillocked shore,—the lighthouse for life, and the belfry for labour, and this—for patience and praise.

I cannot tell the half of the strange pleasures and thoughts that come about me at the sight of that old tower; for, in some sort, it is the epitome of all that makes the continent of Europe interesting, as opposed to new countries; and, above all, it completely expresses that agedness in the midst of active life which binds the old and the new into harmony. We in England have our new streets, our new inn, our green shaven lawn, and our piece of ruin emergent from it—a mere *specimen* of the Middle Ages put on a bit of velvet carpet, to be shown; and which, but for its size, might as well be on a museum shelf at once, under cover;—but, on the Continent, the links are unbroken between the past and present; and, in such use as they can serve for, the grey-headed wrecks are suffered to stay with men; while, in unbroken line, the generations of spared buildings are seen succeeding, each in its place. And thus, in its largeness, in its permitted evidence of slow decline, in its poverty, in its absence of all pretence, of all show and care for outside aspect, that Calais tower has an infinite of symbolism in it, all the more striking because usually seen in contrast with English scenes expressive of feelings the exact reverse of these<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> My friend won't write out the reverse! Our book is to be all jelly, and no powder, it seems. Well, I'm very thankful she likes the jelly,—at any rate, it makes me sure that *it* is well made.

## SECTION III. ILLUSTRATIVE: THE SKY

21. It is a strange thing how little in general people know about the sky. It is the part of creation in which Nature has done more for the sake of pleasing man—more for the sole and evident purpose of talking to him, and teaching him—than in any other of her works; and it is just the part in which we least attend to her. There are not many of her other works in which some more material or essential purpose than the mere pleasing of man is not answered by every part of their organization; but every essential purpose of the sky might, so far as we know, be answered if once in three days, or thereabouts, a great, ugly, black rain-cloud were brought up over the blue, and everything well watered, and so all left blue again till next time, with perhaps a film of morning and evening mist for dew;—and instead of this, there is not a moment of any day of our lives, when Nature is not producing scene after scene, picture after picture, glory after glory, and working still upon such exquisite and constant principles of the most perfect beauty, that it is quite certain<sup>14</sup> it is all done for us, and intended for our perpetual pleasure. And every man, wherever placed, however far from other sources of interest or of beauty, has this doing for him constantly. The noblest scenes of the earth can be seen and known but by few; it is not intended that man should live always in the midst of them; he injures them by his presence, he ceases to feel them if he is always with them; but the sky is for all: bright as it is, it is not

"too bright nor good For human nature's daily food;"

it is fitted in all its functions for the perpetual comfort and exalting of the heart,—for soothing it, and purifying it from its dross and dust. Sometimes gentle, sometimes capricious, sometimes awful—never the same for two moments together; almost human in its passions, almost spiritual in its tenderness, almost divine in its infinity, its appeal to what is immortal in us is as distinct as its ministry of chastisement or of blessing to what is mortal is essential. And yet we never attend to it, we never make it a subject of thought, but as it has to do with our animal sensations; we look upon all by which it speaks to us more clearly than to brutes, upon all which bears witness to the intentions of the Supreme that we are to receive more from the covering vault than the light and the dew which we share with the weed and the worm, as only a succession of meaningless and monotonous accident, too common and too vain to be worthy of a moment of watchfulness, or a glance of admiration. If in our moments of utter idleness and insipidity, we turn to the sky as a last resource, which of its phenomena do we speak of? One says, it has been wet; and another, it has been windy; and another, it has been warm. Who among the whole chattering crowd can tell one of the forms and the precipices of the chain of tall white mountains that girded the horizon at noon yesterday? Who saw the narrow sunbeam that came out of the south, and smote upon their summits until they melted and mouldered away in a dust of blue rain? Who saw the dance of the dead clouds when the sunlight left them last night, and the west wind blew them before it like withered leaves? All has passed unregretted as unseen; or, if the apathy be ever shaken off even for an instant, it is only by what is gross, or what is extraordinary. And yet it is not in the broad and fierce manifestations of the elemental energies, not in the clash of the hail, nor the drift of the whirlwind, that the highest characters of the sublime are developed. God is not in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the still, small voice. They are but the blunt and the low faculties of our nature, which can only be addressed through lamp-black and lightning. It is in quiet and subdued passages of unobtrusive majesty, the deep and the calm, and the perpetual; that which must be sought ere it is seen, and loved ere it is understood; things which

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<sup>14</sup> At least, I thought so, when I was four-and-twenty. At five-and-fifty, I fancy that it is just possible there may be other creatures in the universe to be pleased, or,—it may be,—displeased, by the weather.

the angels work out for us daily, and yet vary eternally; which are never wanting, and never repeated; which are to be found always, yet each found but once;—it is through these that the lesson of devotion is chiefly taught, and the blessing of beauty given.

22. We habitually think of the rain-cloud only as dark and grey; not knowing that we owe to it perhaps the fairest, though not the most dazzling, of the hues of heaven. Often in our English mornings, the rain-clouds in the dawn form soft, level fields, which melt imperceptibly into the blue; or, when of less extent, gather into apparent bars, crossing the sheets of broader cloud above; and all these bathed throughout in an unspeakable light of pure rose-colour, and purple, and amber, and blue; not shining, but misty-soft; the barred masses, when seen nearer, composed of clusters or tresses of cloud, like floss silk; looking as if each knot were a little swathe or sheaf of lighted rain.

23. Aqueous vapour or mist, suspended in the atmosphere, becomes visible exactly as dust does in the air of a room. In the shadows, you not only cannot see the dust itself, because unilluminated, but you can see other objects through the dust, without obscurity; the air being thus actually rendered more transparent by a deprivation of light. Where a sunbeam enters, every particle of dust becomes visible, and a palpable interruption to the sight; so that a transverse sunbeam is a real obstacle to the vision—you cannot see things clearly through it. In the same way, wherever vapour is illuminated by transverse rays, there it becomes visible as a whiteness more or less affecting the purity of the blue, and destroying it exactly in proportion to the degree of illumination. But where vapour is in shade, it has very little effect on the sky, perhaps making it a little deeper and greyer than it otherwise would be, but not, itself, unless very dense, distinguishable or felt as mist.

24. Has the reader any distinct idea of what clouds are?<sup>15</sup>

That mist which lies in the morning so softly in the valley, level and white, through which the tops of the trees rise as if through an inundation—why is *it* so heavy, and why does it lie so low, being yet so thin and frail that it will melt away utterly into splendour of morning when the sun has shone on it but a few moments more? Those colossal pyramids, huge and firm, with outlines as of rocks, and strength to bear the beating of the high sun full on their fiery flanks,—why are *they* so light, their bases high over our heads, high over the heads of Alps? Why will these melt away, not as the sun *rises*, but as he *descends*, and leave the stars of twilight clear; while the valley vapour gains again upon the earth, like a shroud? Or that ghost of a cloud, which steals by yonder clump of pines; nay, which does *not* steal by them, but haunts them, wreathing yet round them, and yet,—and yet,—slowly; now falling in a fair waved line like a woman's veil; now fading, now gone; we look away for an instant, and look back, and it is again there. What has it to do with that clump of pines, that it broods by them, and weaves itself among their branches, to and fro? Has it hidden a cloudy treasure among the moss at their roots, which it watches thus? Or has some strong enchanter charmed it into fond returning, or bound it fast within those bars of bough? And yonder filmy crescent, bent like an archer's bow above the snowy summit, the highest of all the hills—that white arch which never forms but over the supreme crest,—how is it stayed there, repelled apparently from the snow,—nowhere touching it, the clear sky seen between it and the mountain edge, yet never leaving it—poised as a white bird hovers over its nest? Or those war clouds that gather on the horizon, dragon-crested, tongued with fire,—how is their barbed strength bridled? What bits are those they are champing with their vaporous lips, flinging off flakes of black foam? Leagued leviathans of the Sea of Heaven,—out of their nostrils goeth smoke, and their eyes are like the eyelids of the morning; the sword of him that layeth at them cannot hold the spear, the dart, nor the habergeon. Where ride the captains of their armies? Where are set the measures of their march? Fierce murmurers, answering each other from morning until evening—what rebuke is this which has awed them into peace;—what hand has reined them back by the way in which they came?

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<sup>15</sup> This is a fifth volume bit, and worth more attention.

I know not if the reader will think at first that questions like these are easily answered. So far from it, I rather believe that some of the mysteries of the clouds never will be understood by us at all. "Knowest thou the balancings of the clouds?" Is the answer ever to be one of pride? The wondrous works of Him, who is perfect in knowledge? Is *our* knowledge ever to be so?...

For my own part, I enjoy the mystery, and perhaps the reader may. I think he ought. He should not be less grateful for summer rain, or see less beauty in the clouds of morning, because they come to prove him with hard questions; to which perhaps, if we look close at the heavenly scroll, we may find also a syllable or two of answer, illuminated here and there<sup>16</sup>.

And though the climates of the south and east may be *comparatively* clear, they are no more absolutely clear than our own northern air. Intense clearness, whether, in the north, after or before rain, or in some moments of twilight in the south, is always, as far as I am acquainted with natural phenomena, a *notable* thing. Mist of some sort, or mirage, or confusion of light or of cloud, are the general facts; the distance may vary in different climates at which the effects of mist begin, but they are always present; and therefore, in all probability, it is meant that we should enjoy them.... We surely need not wonder that mist and all its phenomena have been made delightful to us, since our happiness as thinking beings must depend on our being content to accept only partial knowledge even in those matters which chiefly concern us. If we insist upon perfect intelligibility and complete declaration in every moral subject, we shall instantly fall into misery of unbelief. Our whole happiness and power of energetic action depend upon our being able to breathe and live in the cloud; content to see it opening here, and closing there; rejoicing to catch through the thinnest films of it, glimpses of stable and substantial things; but yet perceiving a nobleness even in the concealment, and rejoicing that the kindly veil is spread where the untempered light might have scorched us, or the infinite clearness wearied. And I believe that the resentment of this interference of the mist is one of the forms of proud error which are too easily mistaken for virtues. To be content in utter darkness and ignorance is indeed unmanly, and therefore we think that to love light and find knowledge must always be right. Yet (as in all matters before observed,) wherever *pride* has any share in the work, even knowledge and light may be ill pursued. Knowledge is good, and light is good: yet man perished in seeking knowledge, and moths perish in seeking light; and if we, who are crushed before the moth, will not accept such mystery as is needful to us, we shall perish in like manner. But, accepted in humbleness, it instantly becomes an element of pleasure; and I think that every rightly constituted mind ought to rejoice, not so much in knowing anything clearly, as in feeling that there is infinitely more which it cannot know. None but proud or weak men would mourn over this, for we may always know more, if we choose, by working on; but the pleasure is, I think, to humble people, in knowing that the journey is endless, the treasure inexhaustible,—watching the cloud still march before them with its summitless pillar, and being sure that, to the end of time, and to the length of eternity, the mysteries of its infinity will still open farther and farther, their dimness being the sign and necessary adjunct of their inexhaustibleness. I know there are an evil mystery, and a deathful dimness,—the mystery of the great Babylon—the dimness of the sealed eye and soul; but do not let us confuse these with the glorious mystery of the things which the "angels desire to look into," or with the dimness which, even before the clear eye and open soul, still rests on sealed pages of the eternal volume.

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<sup>16</sup> Compare, in 'Sartor Resartus,' the boy's watching from the garden wall.

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