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Ruskin as a Political Preacher.

II

In the columns which from time to time may appear under the above heading, I propose to give, with the smallest possible of connecting thread, such passages as shall, to use one of his book-titles, be veritable "arrows of the chase." I do not propose much in the way of criticism; if I were doing this I should take exception to much of Ruskin's writing. The authority of a great name is potent with so many of the bourgeois, that we must use great names if we would help to attack great abuses. While I adopt Ruskin's political economic views as the total of his superstitions, I disown his supernaturalism. His great regard for lawyers and soldiers seems to me utterly evil.

I shall give exact references, but shall abbreviate titles after the first citation.

That Ruskin has been regarded as dangerous enough in his teachings to make him an important "name" is not known to every reader. "Unto This Last," a pamphlet of which Ruskin was commenced in Cornhill in 1860, the storm raised was so fierce that the editor had to shut down the articles. After a little space of time the editor of Fraser's Magazine invited some contributors on similar lines, and Ruskin during 1862-3 wrote in that journal, somewhat tamer, by the way, but now the publisher put on the veto, and again Ruskin's political economy was out in the cold. Munera Pulveris is the third of a series of three pamphlets and the second series. The ideas of those two pamphlets have been touched upon and filled out in almost every book of his since. What could have raised such a storm? Much explanation cannot be asked for in the following:

"Primarily, which is very notable and curious, I observe that men of busi- ness rarely know the meaning of the word 'rich.' At least, if they know, they do not in their resolutions allow for the fact that it is a relative word, implying, not so much a wealth of gold and silver as the power and the liberty to use it south. Men negligently speak and write as if riches were absolute, and it is no wonder that they are forming certain scientific theories, for everybody to be as rich; whereas riches are a power like that of electricity in putting only through inequalities or negations of itself. The force of the guinea you have in your pocket is the same as the force of a guinea in your neighbour's pocket. If he did not want it, it would be of no use to you; the degree of power it possesses depends accurately upon the need or desire he has for it; and the art of making yourself rich, in the ordinary mercantile economist's sense, is therefore equally and necessarily the art of keeping your neighbour poor.

(Unto This Last, 2nd ed., 1867, p. 60.)

There seems to be nothing which the worshippers of the god "thrift" would, if cornered, have some difficulty in getting over. He next suggests that a distinction should be made between the two economies, "political" and "mercantile."

"The commercial economy (or Capitalist or State of Profits, Claims), consists simply in the production, preservation, and distribution, at fittest time and place, of useful or pleasurable things."

"At fittest time and place" cuts at our present production-wholly-for-profit system.

"But mercantile economy . . . signifies the accumulation, in the hands of individuals, of legal or moral claims upon, or power over, the labour of others, the claim being of paying precisely so much money or debt or value on one side as it implies riches or right on the other." (P. 42.)

E. B. Bax seems to think that Ruskin in the region of economics fails to see things as they are (see Commonweal, 15th May, p. 50). In this I do not altogether agree (see my essay in the Commonweal). He is a great deal more to us all than that any one, so far as I can see, ever gave him credit for on the subject of "who has the right to be on a property on privilege. Its formation was the last sign of the approaching end of the absolutist bureaucracy which was, so to say, propped up by the body or state, which had a triumphant few of the rights of the older nobility. That great French centralised monarchy had been a long time ripening, but once ripe it decayed very speedily, and no wonder since it was the corruption of a corruption.

I propose to turn to the State of things in England. No constitutionalism here; an absolutism despised even by the privileged classes; unable to move in the direction of progress, even when the absolute was merely being metaphorically transferred to the intelligent conservative above mentioned; bankrupt also amidst a people broken down, and a commerce hampered by the exactions of the hereditary privilege which is its sole support, discriminated by unsuccessful wars, so that the door is shut to its ambition in that road; at home it has to face unending the abstract new ideas of liberty and the rights of men. These ideas are professed, indeed, by those who have an interest in preserving the present state of things, but are listened to and per- dered by those who find that state of things unbearable. In short, while England, at peace at home and prosperous under reasonable con- servatism, is forced to be seeking colonies and markets abroad, while with her own soil she is already over-developed, the whole of this great change, France, driven back on herself, is forced to face to face with the elements of violent change at home; on the one hand the ruin, rapacious passion for the social and intellectual activity directed solely towards theories of material well-being, a view of the social class, and the back of all a commercial bourgeoise oppressed by privilege, and a miserable proletariat of mere starvings. From such elements political revolution must be born. (Pp. 39, 40.)

"The economic idea is not, therefore, necessarily involved in an addi- tion to the actual property or well-being of the State in which it exists. But since this commercial wealth or power over labour—[Here is the difference in the kitchen as nearly always converted at half-dead property, while real property, while not always convertible at once into power over labour, the idea of riches among active men in civilised nations generally refers to commercial wealth; and in estimating their possession rather calculate the value of their horses and their fields by the number of guineas they could get for them, than the value of their guineas by the number of horses and fields they could buy with them.] (P. 42.)

To most of us, I take it, it seems clear that so-called riches of so-called rich people do not add to the well-being of the State. The last part goes: "If there is no "unanimous and common desire,"" that is to say, the values of one side of the balance are not the equivalent of the other."

There is, however, another reason for this habit of mind; namely, that an accumulation of real property is of little use to its owner unless, together with its personal power, it be put in possession of a large estate of fruitful land, with rich beds of gold in its gravel, countless herds of cattle in its pastures, houses and gardens and stonework of the richest kind; in short, all the things that a landlord can offer to his tenants. That in order that he may be able to have servants, some one in his neighbourhood must be poor and in want of his gold, or his corn. Assume that no one is in want of either, and no servants are to be hired. But, if we must, therefore, bake his own bread, make his own clothes, plough his own ground, and shall we not, in his own words, be as useful to him as any other yellow pebbles on his estate. His stores must rot, for he cannot consume them. He can eat no more than another man could eat, and wear no more than another man could wear. He can no longer make common labour to procure even ordinary comforts; he will be ultimately unable to keep either houses in repair or fields in cultivation, and forced to content himself with the poor nastiness of a ruinous garden, in the midst of a desert of waste land trampled by wild cattle and encumbered by rings which will hardly produce a single potato. The most covetous of mankind would, with small exultation, I presume, accept riches of this kind on these terms. What is really desired, under the name of riches, is essentially power over men; in its simplest sense, the power of obtaining for our own advantage the labour of the servants, tradesmen, and artist."

"So that, as above stated, the art of becoming 'rich,' in the common sense, is not absolutely nor finally the art of accumulating much money for oneself; but the art of being a master, and including many shall have less. In accurate terms, it is the art of establishing the maximum individuality on own favour." (Pp. 43, 44.)

"This accumulation of wealth in a nation resembles that of the blood in the natural body . . . There is a flow of the blood which is really of warmth and life, and another which will pass into inaction. The analogy is extremely good. If you put to the heart a small portion of strong poison, the circulation of the blood involves depression of the general health of the system, the bad location of riches will be found ultimately to involve a weaken- ing of the resources of the body politic."

Will any cure to contest this? What is our "Trade Depression" but in reality a determination of blood—capital to the (punningly) capitalists, the hand of death, the want of blood at the other part of the body. A death, however, not so much from want of the capital itself as by the power which the capitalist has over labour by prohibiting production."

"Any given accumulation of commercial wealth may be indicative of, on the one hand, of faithful industries, progressive energies, and productive in- nate; or, on the other, it may be indicative of a certain moral luxury, merciless and ruinous, such as the Greek merchants in the days of the Golden Age, ane of action which has created another, of action which has annihilated—too much the issue of the greed of gathering hands which have been barrelled, as if they had been hobbled by nightshade; so many strong men's courage broken, so many productive operations hindered . . . That is to say, they may be said to be wealthy in name only, not in the least in the rock of riches."

(P. 59.)

Even the bourgeois political economists are beginning to see that the "rich" and "wealth" do not have the exact relations they should have.

"Since the essence of wealth consists in its authority over men, if the apparent or nominal wealth fail in this power, it fails in essence; in fact, it is not wealth which does not yield to the power of authority over men is absolute. The servitors show a disposition to rush riotously up- stairs, under an impression that their wages are not regularly paid."

We may judge the character of gentlemen of this or any other day in his drawing-room. So also the power of our wealth seems less, regards the comfort of the servants and not their quietude. That the kitchen County, to be ill-dressed, served his men, or that he can- not help imagining that the riches of the establishment must be of a very theoretical and documentary character." (P. 63, 64.)