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The Lay Figure. Is Criticis useless?

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The Lay Figure

THE LAY FIGURE. IS CRITICISM USELESS?

"It's like my luck," grumbled the Journalist. "Whenever I find time for a debauch of serious reading, I come upon something which unfits me for the daily work I have to do. On this paper, for instance, there's a quotation from one of Goethe's letters to Schiller, and I'm a 'peppercorn and a brewer's horse' if it does not unsettle all my old views as to the value of criticism."

"I know the passage," said the Lay Figure. "It begins with the remarks that no sympathy, however valuable, can teach us anything, and that neither is any species of censure of any use."

"And it runs on thus," said the Journalist: "As long as a work does not exist no one can form any idea of the possibility of its existence, and, as soon as it does exist, praise and blame are in all cases subjective, and many, who cannot be denied to possess taste, will wish something added to or taken from it, whereby, possibly, the whole work would be destroyed; so that not even the actual negative value of the critic, which is perhaps always the most important, can be of any benefit to us."

"That seems reasonable," said the Man with a Clay Pipe. "Artists would certainly go mad if they tried to profit by the thousands of various expert criticisms passed upon their finished work."

The Philosopher laughed. "You all know, of course," said he, "that Turner and Ruskin soon arrived at Goethe's conclusion."

"Ruskin?" cried the Art Critic. "Nonsense!"

"It's true," replied the Philosopher. "Ruskin's comments on this point were written in 1862, and you will find them quoted in *Francis Turner Palgrave: His Journals and Memories of his Life*, a book published last year. You will do well to consider them side by side with the familiar dictum as to criticism being the vanity of the personal equation."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the Journalist.

"Simply this: that criticism is an infinitely varied result of man's inborn egotism and self-satisfaction. Throughout life we are moved by an irresistible wish to draw attention to ourselves by speaking of what we like and dislike; and the expression we give to this vanity is affected by our temperaments, characters, prejudices, and many other things. You will notice, for instance, that those who know much about the history of art are

very apt to believe that their knowledge has endowed them with a faultless good taste."

"To believe that," said the Lay Figure, "is to imply that such knowledge not only kills all prejudices, but frees its possessors from a very potent influence in all criticisms—namely, the spirit of the age. Was it not inevitable that Shakespeare's greatness should seem barbarous during the artificial times which followed the death of Ben Jonson?"

"And we may be sure," exclaimed the Journalist, "that the present revival of militancy in our national life will not be friendly to any artist of a piece with our Pre-Raphaelites, whose epicene and luxurious greatness marks a coddled epoch in our history. But this is not the main point. Is criticism really useful?"

"I think it should be," the Lay Figure answered.

"Good!" cried the Art Critic. "You believe, I suppose, that the province of the critic is to lay down rules for the guidance of the artist as well as for the instruction of the public?"

"Not so fast," said the Lay Figure. "Have you ever visited a painting class? If so, you must have noticed that no two students either express the same feeling or see precisely the same forms or precisely the same colours. How, then, are you to lay down rules for the æsthetic guidance of those who neither feel as you do nor see what you see? The notion that critics should be dictatorial pedagogues in all matters of æstheticism is sheer nonsense. They may be dogmatic when they ridicule eccentricities of taste, or when they correct bad drawing, wrong perspective, or any other fault in the grammar of Art; and, when speaking of our nation's art as a whole, they should fight for those qualities which time has proved to be the best in our national character."

"That's important," said the Man with a Clay Pipe; "but how should we deal with Art in its separate manifestations?"

"Surely," replied the Lay Figure, "we should remember that each true artist has his own æstheticism, and that we cannot understand it unless we identify ourselves with the artist's character and temperament, and put ourselves in visual possession of the conditions among which he lived or lives. This is what Mr. Ruskin did in his admirable defence of Rubens, teaching us to understand that in Rubens was quintessentialized the masterful virility for which his countrymen had long been especially famous. This form of criticism is impersonal, historical, and dramatic; and I find it useful."

THE LAY FIGURE.





1850



"MONTE ROSA: SUNSET" FROM "MODERN PAINTERS" (George Allen)

BY JOHN WARDEN

RUSKIN AS ARTIST AND ART CRITIC. BY E. T. COOK

"WHAT greater sarcasm can Mr. Ruskin pass upon himself?" asked Mr. Whistler in "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies," "than that he preaches to young men what he cannot perform? Why, unsatisfied with his own notorious power, should he choose to become the type of incompetence by talking for forty years of what he has never done?" And to like purpose we read in the same author's "Ten o' Clock" that Ruskin was "learned in many matters, and of much experience in all, save his subject." Sir Edward Poynter in his "Lectures on Art," "burns with indignation" at Ruskin's heresies about Michelangelo, and ascribes them to "his ignorance of the practical side of art." Sir Edward Poynter and Mr. Whistler, while belittling or denying the claims of Ruskin as an artist, proceed to praise very highly his genius as a writer. It is curious that a yet more violent critic of Ruskin than either of those just mentioned takes a precisely contrary view of the subject. In a slashing article, of the good old Keats-killing kind, which appeared in the "Edinburgh" a few years ago, the reviewer derides Ruskin's literary works, but extols his pictures. "In one respect only," he says, "we are prepared to give Mr. Ruskin nearly unqualified admiration, namely, in regard to his own artistic work as far as it has gone; with the exception of those unhappy illustrations to the "Seven Lamps," his own drawing of architecture especially, is admirable. When two or three of his own landscapes were exhibited

some years ago in Bond Street along with his Turners, our impression at the time was that they were equal to most of the Turner drawings in that collection; at all events his drawings, as some of St. Mark's, exhibited more recently at the Society of Water Colours, were of the highest class, and such as indeed, of their kind, would be impossible to surpass." One is reminded also of a review of a certain illustrated book from which it appeared, according to one critic, that it could have been tolerable without the illustrations, and according to another, tolerable without the letterpress. The real truth with regard to Ruskin, I submit, that he was a writer of consummate power, and also an artist of real, though restricted, talent.

My proposition with regard to Ruskin as an artist is not easy to prove, for Ruskin's original drawings are somewhat inaccessible. From his work, however, done for the engravers, and shown in "Modern Painters" and "Stones of Venice," and in occasional reproductions in colour included in some of Mr. George Allen's recent republications, a good idea may be formed of Ruskin's gifts as an artist. Ruskin, it should always be remembered, illustrated his own books, and the combination of literary genius and artistic skill which they display is probably unique. The examples from Turner given in "Modern Painters" were either etched by Ruskin himself from the originals or engraved from copies in which he had translated Turner's work out of colour into black and white. The plates "after" Raphael and other masters were similarly made from Ruskin's drawings of the original pictures. The other illustrations in his

FONDACO DE' TURCHI, VENICE,

FROM "STUDIES IN BOTH ARTS," BY

JOHN RUSKIN.

(By permission of George Allen, Esq.)

