

Chapter 8

The Importance of Fors Clavigera (1871 - 1884): The Convergence of Ruskin's Social and Educational Thought

Within a year of his appointment to Oxford as Professor of Fine Art, Ruskin began writing Fors Clavigera, a series of letters to the working men of England. The letters span the same period as the years of the professorship at Oxford and the letters were written as Ruskin explained "as a byework to quiet my conscience, that I might be happy in ... my own proper life of Art - teaching at Oxford and elsewhere, and through my own happiness rightly help others".¹ The "byework" lasted for fourteen years, ending when Ruskin was sixty-five years old. Ruskin published the first eighty-seven letters at monthly intervals commencing in January, 1871 and terminating in March, 1878 with his breakdown in health. Nine more letters appeared at irregular intervals between 1880 and 1884. The last letter was written on the eve of Ruskin's final resignation from the Slade Professorship. The letters were subsequently published in volume form and an abridged version also was issued.

Fors Clavigera is the most extraordinary work in English literature. This is a bold claim, particularly so when Tristram Shandy or Ulysses are remembered. Yet there is no other work quite like Ruskin's strange, often demented letters addressed to the working men of England. There is a temptation, which some critics seem unable to resist,² to see the 650,000 word deluge of Fors Clavigera as Ruskin's masterpiece in the same way that the tables have been turned to claim that Wordsworth's late poetry is greater than Lyrical Ballads or that Shakespeare's "romances" of his final period eclipse his tragedies. In Ruskin's case, however, this will not do because much of Fors Clavigera, even on the most charitable view, is sheer chaos and does not reveal

the cunning hidden pattern of some Dedalus-like artificer.

Ruskin did claim on one occasion that his letters, although mosaic work into which he put pieces of coloured glass here and there to be set in patches, were nevertheless "not without design."³ Yet even he despaired of giving his work unity despite his providing "check-points",⁴ summaries and lists of aphorisms to his readers as the letters progressed. He was plagued by "the thousand things flitting in my mind, like sea-birds for which there are no sands to settle on"⁵ and in a less despairing mood cheerfully admitted his own discursiveness claiming that "I can well conceive how irritating it must be to anyone chancing to take special interest in any one aspect of my subject - the life of Scott for instance - to find me or lose me wandering away from it for a year or two and sending new roots into new ground in every direction ..."⁶ All these new roots became a dense undergrowth and a clearing needs to be made to see the essential purposes of Ruskin's efforts, otherwise the threads that do give Fors Clavigera any claim to continuity - his continual self-analysis, his plans for his utopian society and the reflections on education together with his plans for proposed schools in his agrarian community - are simply lost in Ruskin's extremely long out-pourings.

Ruskin initially confuses the reader by his arcane title, Fors Clavigera. He makes a number of efforts to explain it, but the explanations are in no way consistently followed through the book. The very title, Fors Clavigera, let alone the contents, annoyed some readers as a kind of hoax. The source for the title was from Horace (Odes 1:35). Fors has three meanings: fortune or trick of fate, force and fortitude. Similarly, Clavigera has a threefold meaning of club or key or nail-bearing. Not being able to stop his

own embroidering Ruskin added that Fors meaning Fate was also associated with "the Three Fates of the Greeks which control the thread of our destiny".⁷ All the meanings merge together and the reader is tempted to read the letters according to whim, following the waywardness of Fors itself.

It is the combination of playfulness, ferocious invective and compassion that make Fors Clavigera such an oddly endearing book. Constant changes of tone and emphasis as well as subject matter draw the reader into Ruskin's web. In the present age which has seen the rise and retreat of a counter culture it is still a moving experience to read Fors Clavigera, aptly described as "a one man underground organ of Ruskin's alternative society."⁸

The playful element is shown when Ruskin commenting on the message of his own work spoke of "knowing no more as I unfolded the scroll of it, what next would be written there, than a blade of grass knows what the form of its fruit shall be."⁹ Ruskin opened his pages to replies from his readers which were printed occasionally in the body of the letters but usually as appendices together with cuttings from newspapers, anecdotes and "the gossip of aesthetic old ladies."¹⁰ Sometimes the discursiveness knew no bounds. For example, the twenty-fifth letter begins with a recipe for a Yorkshire Goosepie, "a Brobdingnagian pie, which engulfs also a turkey, ducks, woodcocks, a hare and any quantity of spices and butter."¹¹ When correspondents wanted to know what he meant by randomly introducing this rather preposterous recipe, Ruskin replied by introducing an assault on Darwinism into the subject which hardly cleared the point.¹² Yet included in the whimsy of this letter - which also dealt with a description of the British penny, discussions of heraldy and an account of the army of Edward III fighting at Calais - is a most ferocious attack questioning "whether England is

a Nation, mother of nations; or a slimy polype, multiplying by involuntary vivisection, and dropping half-putrid pieces of itself wherever it crawls or contracts?"¹³

Even when the rhetoric is at its most violent and the irony at its most scathing - usually in passages describing the plight of the wretched poor at the hands of their "betters" - the reader is always aware of a real human being¹⁴ imploring his readers to listen and act. Fors Clavigera is possibly the most intensely personal work in English literature, a prolonged act of catharsis, with few parallels, "a private pulpit"¹⁵ from which Ruskin made "almost a religion of his own idiosyncrasy".¹⁶ As John Rosenberg has pointed out, what saves Fors Clavigera from being unbearably oppressive is the constant change of tone. For example, Ruskin describes himself cast amidst a carnivorous crowd and this is immediately followed by a description of a contented pig "feeding on a mess of ambrosial rottenness with whom Ruskin would fain change places."¹⁷

Ruskin saw Fors Clavigera as a prophetic work. In the same vein as his three letters to The Times on social and educational matters in which he claimed that rather than solving immediate problems he was writing for posterity which would vindicate his position,¹⁸ similarly he claimed he was writing his letter series for the labourers of England - but not for the working classes of the eighteen seventies, rather for future generations.¹⁹

The letters were cast out into the world (or more precisely, only inconveniently available for seven pence each, or "the price of two pints of beer"²⁰ from George Allen, Heathfield Cottage, Keston, Kent) with the hope that whether Fors Clavigera "passed from friend to friend, or from foe to foe, it must make its own way, or standing

still biding its time."²¹

Twenty years hard thought and reading, Ruskin tells us,²² went into the production of Fors Clavigera. The letter series were at the same time the culmination of his political economy and served a distinctly educational purpose:

I begin to give these letters the completed character I intend for them; first, as it may seem to me needful, commenting on what is passing at the time, with reference always to the principles and plans of economy I have to set before you; and then collecting out of past literature, and in occasional front pieces or woodcuts out of past art, what they confirm or illustrate of things that are forever true: choosing the pieces of the series so that, both in art and literature, they may become to you, in the strictest sense educational, and familiarize you with the look and manner of finework.²³

Ruskin was often exasperated by his readers for not understanding much of the content of Fors Clavigera and he had to warn his readers not to take with literal seriousness what was often meant as irony.²⁴ He also repeatedly apologized to his readers for his lack of system but inserted that "if any patient and candid person cares to understand the book and master its contents, he may do so with less pains than would be required for the reading of any ordinary philosophical treatise on equally important subjects."²⁵

Readers were warned that Fors Clavigera served several purposes; this explains the different tones and voices that are heard throughout the letters "written, frankly, and as the mood or topic changes",²⁶ but behind the vagaries of the letter form there was nevertheless "a bitter play, as stern a final purpose as Morgiana's dance"²⁷ even if "the gesture of the moment must be as the humour takes me".²⁸

Readers wrote to Ruskin about his own politics and his replies showed him at his most ironical claiming to be both a Tory and a Communist, claims that sorely puzzled his audience who demanded an explanation. Ruskin never voted in elections,²⁹ considering the whole political party process a sham, calling the Houses of Parliament "a mouldering toy".³⁰ Nevertheless he always took a keen interest in contemporary affairs and political events and was an inveterate reader of newspapers and correspondent to editors of the national press.³¹

Ruskin calling himself a Communist is a reverberation of his reaction to the uprising of the Paris Commune. There are many allusions in the early letters of Fors Clavigera to the Franco-Prussia war, the siege of Paris and its aftermath as well as the revolt of the Commune. His attitude to the Commune was ambivalent, as he seemed most distressed by the destructiveness of the event and the possible damage to art treasures.

Contrasting himself to the "Communists" of Paris, Ruskin claimed he was a "Communist of the old school - reddest also of the red"³² and fervently believed that "our property belongs to everybody and everybody's property to us"³³ whereas the "Communists" of the new school only wanted to destroy other peoples' property.

In a passage full of wit and irony, Ruskin further divides "the old Reds" into two classes. Although trying to keep a spare style in his letters to working-men, the old intoxication with language reminiscent of The Stones of Venice breaks through:

...we old Reds fall into two classes, differing, not indeed in colour of redness, but in the depth of tint of it - one class being, as it were, only of a delicately pink, peach-blossom, or dog-rose redness, but the other, to which I myself do partly, and desire wholly, to belong, as I told

you, reddest of the red - that is to say,
full crimson or even dark crimson ...

And between these two sects or shades of us,
there is this difference in our way of holding
our common faith (that our neighbour's
property is ours and ours his) namely that
the rose-red division of us are content in
their diligence of care to preserve or guard
from injury or loss their neighbour's
property as their own...

The vermilion or Tyrian-red sect of us, however,
are not content merely with this carefulness
and watchfulness over our neighbours' goods,
but we cannot rest unless we are giving what
we can spare of our own; and the more
precious it is the more we want to divide it
with somebody.³⁴

The "communism" that Ruskin wanted was that of Sir Thomas More's Utopia with all its concomitant austerity of living. When he came to found his Guild of St. George the precepts of More were very much in his mind. (The parallels between More's and Ruskin's communities are discussed in Chapter 9.) At this stage it is suffice to note the intensely conservative nature of Ruskin's "communism". What he shared with modern communists was a violent distrust of liberalism,³⁵ claiming emphatically that "I am not a Liberal - quite the polar contrary of that".³⁶

Fors Clavigera continues Ruskin's attack on the prevailing laissez-faire school of political economy and Ruskin's invective reached new heights when he claimed that the "modern Liberal politico-economist of the Stuart Mill school is essentially of the type of flatfish - one eyeless side of him always in the mud, and one eye, on the side that has eyes, down in the corner of his mouth - not a desirable guide for man or beast."³⁷ Apart from invective - Ruskin freely admitted that "he was always making myself a nuisance to people with my political economy"³⁸ - there is little detailed analysis of the doctrines of the dominant political economy of the time in Fors Clavigera. Unlike the polemical

writings of the sixties such as Munera Pulveris statements of principles and doctrines are replaced by numerous concrete specific illustrations of the life of the poor in England.

In the early letters of Fors Clavigera in particular, Ruskin keenly felt the tension of his cushioned life as Slade Professor and the fate of the masses. He was very aware that there was "an agonizing distress even in this highly favoured England, in some classes, for want of food, clothes, lodging and fuel. And it has become a popular idea among the benevolent and ingenious, that you may in great part remedy these deficiencies by teaching, to these starving and shivering persons, Science and Art".³⁹

What helps give Fors Clavigera its continuing force as a social commentary on Victorian England are the many appalling stories from national newspapers which are given in full as appendices to the letters and short accounts also occur in the letters themselves. Ruskin often used stories of lavish expenditure and conspicuous waste and culled stories of utter misery, even horror, from the pages of the same newspaper and juxtaposed the stories to gain maximum effect. For one accused of having an "effeminate sensibility"⁴⁰ by one critic there is certainly a lack of squeamishness in the stories that Ruskin collected for his readers.

We are told the story of Mary Wilson, who after three weeks working in a white-lead factory, died in convulsions with congestion of the brain and chest-organs. The coroner reported that persons following this occupation should drink diluted sulphuric acid to counteract the poison.⁴¹ Ruskin plies his readers with story after story of helpless elderly or young people dying of hunger in rat-infested cellars. As well as detailed discussions of dreadful conditions in factories and accounts

of extreme poverty amid affluence, Ruskin stresses the brutality of the lives of many of the workers. In a passage of scathing irony Ruskin gives "a specimen of the conduct of the Saints to whom our English clergymen have delivered the Faith".⁴² The "Saints" in question were a group of young coal-miners who raped a drunken rain-soaked woman, and left her to die in an open field. In court the colliers claimed because the woman said nothing they could not see their actions were wrong, "only a bit of fun".⁴³

There is no denying Robert Hewison's claim that the social criticism in Fors Clavigera is more violent and multi-faceted than in Ruskin's earlier polemical works "but it never loses touch with the theme of exploitation and destruction of which the modern city becomes the most powerful symbol".⁴⁴ Indeed Ruskin, in deliberate counterpoint to his descriptions of life in industrial cities and accounts of desecration of the English countryside around large towns, gives several accounts of rustic simplicity, particularly translations made for his readers from the writings of Marmontel⁴⁵ and Gotthelf.⁴⁶ These writers were a strong influence on the plans for his proposed recaptured paradise, the agrarian communities of the Guild of St. George.

Considerable space in Fors Clavigera is devoted to studies of peasant life and Ruskin found in Marmontel and Gotthelf writers whose purity and simplicity of style admirably matched the arcadian subject matter they described.⁴⁷ He had previously told his readers that Marmontel was "one of the persons in past history with whom he had most sympathy."⁴⁸ This is shown by Ruskin translating several long passages from Marmontel for the subscribers to the letters. Similarly, in various letters of Fors Clavigera he gives a complete translation of The Broom Merchant of Gotthelf.

Ruskin claimed there was a close link between "Marmontel's rusticity and

mine"⁴⁹ and also an affinity with that "romantic clergyman, an Evangelical divine of the purest type",⁵⁰ Gotthelf. After evoking Marmontel reading his Virgil in the shade with the murmur of bees around him in the sunshine in a lovely valley with vines on the steep-river shore, Ruskin describes for his readers a view from a train window of children playing at Christmas time in England, 1872:

These children rolling on the heaps of black and slimy ground, mixed with brickbats and broken plates and bottles, in the midst of Preston or Wigan, as edified travellers behold them when the station is blocked and the train stops anywhere outside - the children themselves, black, and in rags evermore, and the only water near them either boiling, or gathered in unctuous pools, covered with rancid clots of scum, in the lowest holes of the earthheaps - why do you not paint these for past-time?⁵¹

For a man who hated railways, the steam-engine energy of Ruskin's prose pulsates throughout the eight volumes of Fors Clavigera, flashing sparks of lightening wit and coruscating irony, yet paradoxically also producing passages of great tenderness, beauty and calm particularly when describing his idealized kingdom, the Guild of St. George, where no one dies of hunger or cold, where no one suffers the weals of poverty, where young men are not sacrificed fruitlessly in war or where young women do not lead barren lives, only, like the beloved Rose, to sicken and die before their time.

To grasp Ruskin's vision of a new society his very distraught state of mind at the time of his drawing up his plans must be stressed. Fors Clavigera is a most elaborate example of writing as therapy, which has parallels with the stance of D. H. Lawrence who wrote to Edward Garnett "I give myself away so much, and write what is my most palpitant, sensitive self that I loathe (The Trespasser) because it will betray me to a parcel of fools. Which is what any deeply personal or lyrical writer feels, I

guess. I often think Stendahl must have writhed in torture every time he remembered Le Rouge et Le Noir was public property: and Jefferies at The Story of My Heart."⁵² More applicable than Stendahl or Richard Jefferies to Lawrence's claim is the Ruskin of Fors Clavigera.

Ruskin at times despaired himself of the outcome of the series of letters, disarmingly saying that "there was much trivial and desultory talk by the way. Scattered up and down it - perhaps by the Devil's sowing tares among the wheat - there is much casual expression of my own personal feelings and faith, together with bits of autobiography."⁵³ There were times when the outpouring of those letters to workmen were broken off because of his mental collapses, in 1878, 1881 and 1882, and after the letters stopped, there were four more long attacks of profound mental disturbance culminating in the silence which began in 1889 and ended with Ruskin's death in 1900. There are many passages in the letters where Ruskin is close to derangement, startling his readers, for example, by his obsession with St. Ursula from whom he claimed he had received a flower from her bedroom window box. The close study and reproduction of Carpaccio's painting of St. Ursula had led him to identify the saint with his beloved Rose La Touche who had recently died.

Of course Rose was not the only woman to figure in the pages of Fors Clavigera and one of the themes that saves the letters from complete chaos is the amount of attention Ruskin gives to the subject of education, including the education of women, a subject he takes up again from his polemical writings of the eighteen sixties. But just as important as the discussion of the education of women in Fors Clavigera are the many provocative comments about education in general and its relationship to society. It is argued ⁵⁴ that Ruskin's work as a social reformer is inseparable from his ideas on education and furthermore to understand Fors Clavigera as an essay in social reconstruction ⁵⁵

it is necessary to take Ruskin's views on educational thought and practice in these volumes into account.

Running parallel with his injunctions to Oxford undergraduates to combine education with manual labour Ruskin writes in a similar vein to his different constituency in the second letter of Fors Clavigera, Ruskin claimed that for the last eight hundred years "the upper classes of Europe have been on one large Picnic Party."⁵⁶ The party was now over: although the upper classes may have considered themselves "commanded into that position by Divine authority and fed with bread from Heaven: of which they duly considered it proper to bestow the fragments in support, and the tithes in tuition, of the poor."⁵⁷ Nevertheless such a divinely ordained scheme was no longer tenable if social disaster was to be avoided:

The labour producing useful result was educational in its influence on the temper. All such labour is.

And the first condition of education, the thing you are all crying out for, is being put to wholesome and useful work. And it is nearly the last conditions of it, too; you need very little more ...⁵⁸

He castigates his audience, including himself, "that you do not know how, you answer, how to make a brick, a tile or a pot; or how to build a dyke, or drive a stake that will stand. No more do I. Our education has to begin; - mine as much as yours."⁵⁹

This theme is returned to several times and in letter 64 (April, 1876) Ruskin's invective surpasses itself. After the usual ridicule of gentlemen again for not being able to make bricks and tiles,⁶⁰ he gives a mocking dialogue:

You rather think not? Well, if you are healthy and fit for work, and can do nothing better - go and learn.

You would rather not? Very possibly: but you can't have your dinner unless you do. And why would you so much rather not?

"So ungentlemanly."

No; to beg your dinner, or steal it, it is ungentlemanly. But there is nothing ungentlemanly that I know of, in beating clay, and putting it in a mould.

"But my wife wouldn't like it!"⁶¹

Wives of gentlemen are just as useless themselves. In a ferocious passage (not raised in feminist critiques of Ruskin) women are derided for not doing useful work. Quoting from Keble's The Christian Year the phrase "the trivial round, the common task," Ruskin claims that women interpreted their duties in this phrase as nothing more than women dressing themselves and their children becomingly and engaging in an incessant round of social activities but nevertheless believing that these efforts would be rewarded by God "by immediate dinner and everlasting glory"⁶²:

That was your wife's real notion of the matter, and modern Christian women's generally, so far as they have got any notions at all under their bonnets and the skins of the dead robins they have stuck in them - the disgusting little savages. But that is by no means the way in which either your hands are to be delivered from making the pots, or her head from carrying them.⁶³

There is no denying that Ruskin's first educational principle is the importance of work in education, that all education must be directed to practical work. In William Jolly's Ruskin on Education (1894) he is rightly placed with educators of the past who shared this emphasis. Yet with the exception of Xenophon and his account of the education of Cyrus, Ruskin makes no mention of any such educators, not Fellenberg⁶⁴, not Pestalozzi nor the efforts of the Kindergarten movement to combine head work and hand work. Ruskin came to his views on education independently

except for an indebtedness to Plato and Xenophon (and slightly to Aristotle) and never draws on the educational thought of his contemporaries - and yet his views on the centrality of work in education clearly parallel the thought of many other nineteenth century educational theorists.

Froebel, for example, claimed in The Education of Man that "at present people have an entirely false and degrading idea of work which is done for material results. God himself works to continuously create and produce. We only have to look at the life and work of Jesus, or, if we live true to ourselves, at our own lives and work ... It becomes clear that, from earliest childhood, man should be trained in productive activity, since the development of both mind and body demand it."⁶⁵

During the nineteenth century there was a very close affinity between educational and communitarian ideals ⁶⁶ and indeed Ruskin is a very good example of this tradition, his educational ideals becoming inseparable from his communitarian commitment to the Guild of St. George. Some of the nineteenth century communitarian societies built on the emphasis placed by Pestalozzi, Froebel and De Fellenberg on the centrality of work, the New Harmony community of Robert Owen and William Maclure being a good example of this response. Other communities such as the Shakers and the Oneida community brought their own religious doctrines to bear on the subject of the importance of work in education and come to similar conclusions with the result that communitarian groups with widely different emphases and backgrounds, nevertheless all had children engaging from an early age in a wide variety of practical pursuits which occupied a considerable part of the child's day. The educative value of work in the utopian communities may be summarized as follows: it developed a sense of community pride, obedience and devotion to duty; promoted social justice; served as a means of orientation in the choice

of a vocation and developed the body and mind of the young.⁶⁷ A follower of Froebel, Baroness Berthe Von Marenholtz-Bülöw further developed the relationship between education and work. After paying her respects to the educational theories and practices of Fourier, Owen, Fellenberg, Pestalozzi and other educators in the romantic/utopian tradition, the Baroness pointed out in her Hand Work and Head Work that "in all the institutions founded by the abovementioned educationists or on their model, physical and industrial exercises alternated with mental instruction, but they were not the medium of this instruction ... all such work shall be organized to constitute intellectual and mechanical exercise at the same time."⁶⁸

Hand Work and Head Work (1886) was an astonishingly prescient work; it anticipates the combination of work, "abstract" subjects and social purpose, that elusive amalgam that came to be known as "polytechnicalization".⁶⁹ It is claiming too much for Ruskin's view on education and work to see him as a kind of precursor to the educational reforms propounded by Krupskaya but Ruskin's views are not far removed from Marenholtz-Bülöw; certainly from Ruskin's position work is not simply an added subject to the curriculum or as in so many of the utopian colonies it simply replaced much of the usual classical humanistic content of the curriculum because, in William Maclure's phrase, all subjects had to be judged by utility "which shall be the scale on which we shall endeavour to measure the value of everything."⁷⁰

Closely related to his views on combining educational and manual labour are his attitudes to the teaching of natural science, nature study and the child's sense of wonder in "which we live by Admiration, Hope, and Love."⁷¹

Every school, he claimed, should have garden and cultivable land. spacious enough to employ the scholars in fine weather mostly out of doors.⁷²

Although Ruskin's ideas were not taken up in all English schools, as his editors pointed out,⁷³ the "Memorandum on Courses of Work in Rural Evening Schools" (July, 1906) echo much of the pronouncements of Ruskin on education in his letters some twenty-five years previously.

Writing in a very confident way, Ruskin believed that "admiration, hope and love" could be taught directly, particularly by the study of Nature. He sought to rectify what he considered to be the abysmal teaching of nature study in schools by writing three books on the subject himself, Love's Meinie, Proserpina and Deucalion, which he referred to as "school grammars".⁷⁴ Indeed he spent much of his later life, even after the fury of Fors Clavigera had abated, continuing work on his "grammars" (discussed in Chapter 9) which were an integral part of his educational project.

An aspect of education that is raised again in Fors Clavigera is the education of women, a subject never far from Ruskin's mind. The opportunity presented itself when some of his young female readers wrote asking the Master's advice. He replied at some length on three occasions to his various female seekers after truth in the notes and correspondence sections of Fors Clavigera. Obviously his message had its effect, serving the purposes of its times, because these admonitions when reprinted separately as Letters to Young Girls reached an edition of seventy-five thousand copies by 1902.⁷⁵ Furthermore, a pirated version⁷⁶ with added comments of Ruskin on the nature of women sold very well in the United States.

The Letters to Young Girls must be seen in the context of the wider comments about women scattered throughout other parts of Fors Clavigera. The polemic against John Stuart Mill in these letters often refers to Mill's views on women. Ruskin inferred from Mill's pronouncements that Mill considered "the career of the Madonna was too limited."⁷⁷ His wrath

was particularly evolved by a passage from the Principles of Political Economy wherein Mill claimed that "there was scarcely any means open to (a woman) of gaining a livelihood, except as a wife and mother", and that "women who prefer that occupation might justifiably adopt it - but that there should be no option, no other carrière possible, for the great majority of women, except in the humbler departments of life, is one of those social injustices which call loudest for remedy".⁷⁸

Ruskin followed up his disapproval of Mill's sentiments by commenting on a crowd of two thousand young women who "in an effort to fulfil Mr. John Stuart Mill's wishes and procure some more lucrative occupation than that of nursing the baby"⁷⁹ besieged the Civil Service Commissioners for eleven vacancies in the metropolitan post-offices. The Telegraph (18th March, 1873) reported the commotion:

The crowd, the agitation, the anxiety, the fatigue proved too much for many of those who attended; several fainted away; others went into violent hysterics; others despairing of success, remained just long enough to be utterly worn out, and then crept off, showing such traces of mental anguish as we are accustomed to associate with the most painful bereavements.⁸⁰

When Ruskin spoke so often of women not earning a living (for a bachelor he was reticent about the plight of single women without financial means) he was often misinterpreted as meaning that women should never work outside the home on a voluntary basis. Indeed he encouraged his female followers to engage in practical activities of social reform, even before his injunctions to female members of the Guild of St. George to engage in "good works". In particular, he drew attention to the example of Miss Octavia Hill who had been the mainstay of Ruskin's efforts in having restored and managed tenements at cheap rental in the centre of Marylebone, then one of the worst districts of London.⁸¹ Ruskin conceded that "it is difficult enough, I admit to find a woman of average sense

and tenderness to be able for such work, but there are indeed, other such in the world, only three-fourths of them now get lost in pious lecturing, or altar-cloth sewing; and the wisest remaining fourth stay at home as quiet house-wives, not seeing their way to wider action."⁸²

The emphasis has been too readily placed on Ruskin endorsing "the wisest staying at home" rather than his encouraging social action at the expense of "pious lecturing or altercloth sewing."

Ruskin elaborated on the duties of middle class women in response to a letter he received from "a young lady who asked what I really wanted girls to do."⁸³ His reply was given in the correspondence section of Letter 34 of Fors Clavigera. Women's work was five-fold: to please people, to feed them in "dainty" ways, to clothe them, to keep them orderly, to teach them.⁸⁴

A very demanding list but Ruskin made it seem very simple. By pleasing people he claimed that for a woman it merely meant that people liked "the room better with you in it than out of it."⁸⁵ His other injunctions to young women as part of their informal education at first seem strange bearing in mind that Ruskin was addressing his remarks to women of the middle-classes where servants and housemaids would do the duties that he recommends. For Ruskin, however, the young ladies were to set a good example by being always able to perform any of the duties that they required of their servants. This attitude reflects his admonitions at Oxford that his privileged undergraduates should be able to do any of the work on the family estates, if the occasion demanded it, that was usually done by labourers.

Simplicity and economy in cookery were required of young ladies.

This advice again recalls Oxford days when Ruskin enjoined his undergraduate friends not to give extravagant dinner parties but simple symposia with, if not the Biblical dinner of herbs, at least the plainest of "honest"

food. Although a number of his young friends tried the experiment, the novelty did not last long: "champagne and truffles were always lurking behind the door ready to rush in on a hint."⁸⁶

Perhaps young ladies would prove more faithful in their task which also included a mission to the poor "not as their patroness, but their friend: if then you can modestly recommend a little more water in the pot, or half-an-hour's more boiling, or a dainty bone they did not know of, you will have been useful indeed."⁸⁷

Making clothes of first rate material and simple form were also to occupy a considerable amount of the young ladies time, but this was not simply for one's personal enjoyment or to while away lazy summers' afternoons. Much of this clothing, made of the prettiest and best materials was to be given to poor working girls who did not have the time for these female accomplishments or the money for the best materials. Ruskin encouraged his middle class audience not to mind the criticism from misguided advisers that such gifts to the poor were extravagant and foolish; afterall, the epitome (in the Victorian mind) of good works, Dorcas, "wasn't raised from the dead that modern clergymen might call her a fool."⁸⁸

These philanthropic endeavours were to be matched by rising early, being at work by the latest at six in summer and seven in winter.⁸⁹ The young ladies were to do "a little bit of housemaid's work in your own house, thoroughly, so as to be a pattern of perfection in that kind."⁹⁰ As much time as possible was to be spent outdoors in gardening, if not in one's own place, then in the gardens of the poor, if no gardens or flowers to be tended, there was always dead leaves to be gathered, snow to be swept or "matting to be nailed and the like."⁹¹

Furthermore, when not engaged in these various activities, a great deal of time was to be given to self improvement by reading edifying literature. Ruskin told his young friends ⁹² that in effect he had given them Sesame and Lilies (short course) and wished them well.

He was indeed to find his female followers more faithful than the males - even the first trustees of St. George's Guild, Ruskin's close male friends at the time, were driven to resign as Ruskin became more importunate in his schemes. But letters, encouragement and gifts from women continued to come to Ruskin who made acknowledgement and gave replies in Fors Clavigera. Some female followers may have wanted to marry Ruskin ⁹³ (despite his deplored reputation as a husband) or at least take him in hand, look after him and curb his more quixotic extravagances. He was touched by these expressions of concern and quite early in the series of letters (Letter 29), finding that the workers preferred their two pots of beer to sending their money to him for a Fors letter, declared "Yes, my pets, I am tired of talking to these workmen who never answer a word; I will try you now - for a letter or two - but I beg your pardon for calling you pets, my "qualified aspirants I mean (Alas! time was when the qualified aspiration was on the bachelor's side.)"⁹⁴

Some young ladies wrote asking for a copy of the rules of the Guild of St. George because even if they could not join the Guild they would at least try to follow the rules and precepts.⁹⁵ Ruskin, pleased by the enquiry, replied at some length in the correspondence sections of Letters 65 and 66.

These letters express Christian beliefs strongly and at the same time attack equally sharply much of conventional Christian belief and practice. In June 1874, Ruskin rediscovered the importance of Giotto while visiting the church of St. Francis at Assisi,⁹⁶ which in turn led to a process of

reconverting to a highly personalized form of Christianity. He tells the readers of Fors Clavigera that they could not have failed to notice that the letters had become "much more distinctly Christian in tone"⁹⁷ particularly when compared with the secular stance of The Crown of Wild Olive (especially its preface).⁹⁸

The later correspondence to young ladies begins by a call to Christian discipleship wherein "you must be doubly submissive; first in your own will and purpose to the law of Christ; then in the carrying out of your purpose, to the pleasure and orders of the persons whom He has given you for superiors."⁹⁹ The young ladies are to make their own beds, clean their own furniture, wash their plates and be generally useful around the house and not leave the work all to servants.

Several pious resolutions follow with the underlying assumption that the young ladies should be thankful for the position in life Providence has placed them. Ruskin stresses once more that this should not lead to complacency because there is plenty of work to be done by fortunate young women in making dresses for the poor and in being helpful companions to them. As in so many previous writings he stresses the inherent decency of the poor:

...Serve the poor, but, for your lives, you little monkeys, don't preach to them. They are probably, without in the least knowing it, fifty times better Christians than you; and if anybody is to preach, let them.¹⁰⁰

Although his insistence on young ladies doing some of the servants' work may have given some offence, the aspect of Ruskin's thoughts on education that drew most fire from correspondents was his playing down the importance of the three R's." When a school teacher Companion of the Guild of St. George, remonstrated with him claiming that inspectors required great emphasis on these basic subjects in accordance with the Education

Codes, Ruskin told his readers "I again answered with indignation at high pressure, that ten million inspectors of schools collected on Cader Idris should not make me teach in my schools, come to them who liked, a single thing I did not choose to."¹⁰¹

Another controversial stance in which Ruskin was equally adamant was his rejection of competition in education:

Farther, of schools in all places, and for all ages, the healthy working will depend on the total exclusion of the stimulus of competition in any form or disguise. Every child should be measured by its own standard, trained to its own duty, and rewarded by its just praise. It is the effort that deserves praise, not the success; nor is it a question for any student whether he is clever than others or duller, - but whether he has done the best he could with the gifts he has. The madness of the modern cram and examination system arises principally out of the struggle to get lucrative places...¹⁰²

It was this effort to get "lucrative places", the ruination of education through the competitive rather than the co-operative spirit, that Ruskin saw as an inevitable part of the tragedy of capitalism which was literally destroying the England he loved so much before his very eyes. Passages of political economy (he now told his readers that 'my forte is not really description but political economy'¹⁰³) educational reform and eloquent pleas for the conservation of the countryside are all indissolubly linked in Fors Clavigera.

Ruskin observed that fish could no longer live in English rivers, particularly the muddy waters around Manchester and Rochdale where he had actually observed the surface of streams smoking.¹⁰⁴ Other rivers in England on occasion had caught fire because of the amount of oil floating on the waters.¹⁰⁵ But all was not lost: these rivers were now suitable for crocodiles, he ironically remarked, and soon Englishmen could have streaky crocodile for breakfast instead of streaky bacon.¹⁰⁶

The rivers were certainly not suitable for baptising children, as they were now no better than "common sewers".¹⁰⁷ Well, you could hold the baby's face out in the rain, but alas claims Ruskin "even that falls dirty."¹⁰⁸

Ruskin confided to his readers that his struggles to create a better England often was too much for him; the siren call was always beckoning him to retire to his delightful world of Turners, coin-collecting, classification of crystals and a life of seclusion and quiet pleasures:

I would give anything to be quit of the whole business, and therefore that I am certain it is not ambition, not love of power, not anything but absolute and mere compassion, that drags me on. That shoemaker, whom his son left lying dead with his head in the fire place the other day - I wish he and his son had never been born; but as the like of them will be born, and must so die, so long as things remain as they are, there's no choice for me but to do all that I can to change them since others won't.¹⁰⁹

Keenly feeling his isolation, personal, spiritual and political, Ruskin turned to a dream of human fellowship, wherein he would have plenty of companions to share his ideals and compassion: together he and his followers would begin to reverse the inhuman spread of Victorian capitalism, by a process of buying back land, beginning again in rural communities, educating the new generation of children differently. Gradually, Ruskin hoped, the movement known as the Guild of St. George would spread and it would still be possible "to keep the fields of England green, and her cheeks red."¹¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 Works, Volume XXVIII, p. 485
- 2 For example, Tim Hilton, "Under Rose's Rule", The London Review of Books, 3 April, 1980 p. 15 speaks of "the masterpiece of Fors Clavigera".
- 3 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 669
- 4 John Bradley, An Introduction to Ruskin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 93.
- 5 Works, Volume XXVIII, p. 460.
- 6 Ibid., p. 254.
- 7 Works, Volume XXVII, p. xxi.
- 8 Francis Watson, "The Devil and Mr. Ruskin", Encounter, January, 1972, Vol. XXXVIII, no. 1, p. 64.
- 9 Works, Volume XXIX, p. 138.
- 10 Frederick Harrison, Realities and Ideals (London: Macmillan, 1908), p. 365.
- 11 Leslie Stephen, Studies of a Biographer, Second Series, Volume III (London: Duckworth & Co., 1902), p. 104.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 451.
- 14 Leslie Stephen, Studies of a Biographer, Second Series, Volume III, p. 104.
- 15 George Saintsbury, The Collected Essays and Papers 1875 - 1920, Vol. II (London: J. M. Dent, 1923), p. 303.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 John Rosenberg, The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 193.
- 18 Works, Volume XII, p. LXXXI.
- 19 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 669.
- 20 Ibid., p. 100.
- 21 Works, Volume XXVIII, p. 42.
- 22 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 99.
- 23 Ibid., p. 250.
- 24 Works, Volume XXVIII, p. 650.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Works, Volume XXIX, p. 197.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 544.
- 30 Works, Volume VII, p. 451.
- 31 Ruskin's letters to the press were printed in a selection form, The Arrows of the Chace, Works, Volume XXXIV.
- 32 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 116.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., pp. 122 - 123.
- 35 Maurice Cranston, "Ruskin's Letters to English Working Men", The Listener, 57 (Jan. 31, 1957), p. 192.
- 36 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 166.
- 37 Ibid., p. 180.
- 38 Ibid., p. 183.
- 39 Ibid., p. 19.
- 40 Works, Volume XXVIII, p. 81.
- 41 Ibid., p. 438.
- 42 Ibid., p. 251.
- 43 Ibid., p. 252.
- 44 Robert Hewison, The Argument of the Eye (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), p. 180.

- 4 5 Jean-Francois Marmontel (1723 - 1799) was the author of Contes
moraux, collected in 1761 and 1789 - 1792 after appearing
serially in the Mercure. Marmontel contributed the literary
articles to the Encyclopedie.
- 4 6 Jeremias Gotthelf was the pseudonym of Albert Bitzius (1797 - 1854)
a Swiss pastor who turned to authorship late in life and
wrote a long series of novels of peasant life.
- 4 7 Works, Volume XXVII, p. XII.
- 4 8 Works, Volume XVIII, p. 48.
- 4 9 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 303.
- 5 0 Ibid., p. 546.
- 5 1 Ibid., p. 256.
- 5 2 Anthony Beal (Ed.), D. H. Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism
(London: Mercury Books, 1961), p. 12.
- 5 3 Works, Volume XXIX, p. 384.
- 5 4 Works, Volume XXVII, p. LX.
- 5 5 Ibid.
- 5 6 Ibid., p. 39.
- 5 7 Ibid., p. 40.
- 5 8 Ibid., p. 39.
- 5 9 Works, Volume XXVIII, p. 199.
- 6 0 Ibid., p. 565.
- 6 1 Ibid., p. 566.
- 6 2 Ibid., p. 567.
- 6 3 Ibid.
- 6 4 On Ruskin's first European tour with his parents when he was
fourteen years old he visited Fellenberg's school at
Hofwyl, but Ruskin makes no reference to Fellenberg's
writings. Works, Volume XXXV, p. 592.
- 6 5 Friedrich Froebel, The Education of Man, in Irene M. Lilley (Ed.),
Friedrich Froebel: A Selection From His Writings
(Cambridge: University Press, 1967), pp. 64 - 66.
- 6 6 A. E. Bestor, Backwoods Utopias (Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press, 1950), p. 134.
- 6 7 Adapted from G. Masso, Education in Utopias (New York: Teachers
College Press Columbia University, Contributions to Education
No. 257, 1927), p. 96.
- 6 8 Berthe Marenholtz-Bulow, Hand Work and Head Work (London: Swann
Sonnenschein nd but 1886), p. VII.
- 6 9 Krupskaya had read Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Tolstoy on education.
See Robert H. McNeal, Bride of the Revolution:
Krupskaya and Lenin (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1973),
pp. 161 - 163 for influences on Krupskaya's educational
thought.
- 7 0 Quoted in George B. Lockwood, The New Harmony Movement (New York:
Dover Publications, 1971 (1905), p. 254.
- 7 1 The phrase is Wordsworth's. Works, Volume XXVII, p. LXVI.
- 7 2 Ibid.
- 7 3 Ibid., p. LXV.
- 7 4 Ibid., p. LXVI.
- 7 5 Ibid., p. LXVIII.
- 7 6 Works, Volume XXVIII, p. XXVI.
John Ruskin, Letters and Advice to Young Girls and Young Ladies
on Dress, Education, Marriage, Their Sphere, Influence,
Women's Work, Women's Rights Etc. (New York: John Wiley
& Sons, 1879).

- 77 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 431.
 78 Ibid., pp. 208 - 209.
 79 Ibid., p. 536.
 80 Ibid.
 81 For Octavia Hill work in reclaiming slum areas see Works,
 Volume XIX, pp. XXIV - XXV. Also Derrick Leon,
Ruskin The Great Victorian, pp. 340 - 341.
- "By 1890 people looked upon Octavia Hill as the
 expert on working class housing. Crucial to the
 "Hill system" was her corps of rent collectors.
 This group of young ladies visited the tenants
 weekly, developing relationships with them in
 order to find out how best to help them attain
 independence and self-respect... they were
 virtually social case workers." Barbara Corrado
 Pope, "Leisured Women in the Nineteenth Century"
 in Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Eds.)
Becoming Visible: Women in European History
 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 317.
- 82 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 175.
 83 Ibid., p. 645.
 84 Ibid.
 85 Ibid.
 86 G. W. Kitchin, Ruskin in Oxford and Other Studies, p. 43.
 87 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 645.
 88 Ibid., p. 646.
 89 Ibid.
 90 Ibid.
 91 Ibid.
 92 Ibid., p. 645.
 93 Ruskin's female audience and Fors Clavigera is discussed by
 Margaret Spence in "Ruskin's Correspondence with Miss
 Blanche Atkinson" Bulletin of the John Rylands Library
 Vol. 42, No. 1 September, 1959, p. 194.
- 94 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 537.
 95 Works, Volume XXVIII, p. 608.
 96 Ruskin's rediscovery of Giotto and the importance of his stay
 at Assisi are discussed in Works, Volume XXIII, pp. XLIII -
 XLVI
- 97 Works, Volume XXIX, p. 86.
 98 Ibid.
 99 Ibid., p. 609.
 100 Ibid., p. 637.
 101 Ibid., p. 479.
 102 Ibid., p. 496.
 103 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 325.
 104 Ibid., p. 504.
 105 Ibid., p. 607.
 106 Ibid., p. 504.
 107 Ibid., p. 92.
 108 Ibid.
 109 Works, Volume XXVIII, p. 486.
 110 Works, Volume XXVII, p. 15.