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Abse, John Ruskin: The Passionate Moralist

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JOAN ABSE. *JOHN RUSKIN: THE PASSIONATE MORALIST*. NEW YORK: ALFRED A. KNOPF, 1981. 363 pp. \$18.50.

A biographer of Ruskin has in this era a peculiarly difficult task. So many incidents in Ruskin's personal life—his submission to his parents well into his middle age, his famous divorce, the notorious squabble with Whistler—appear ludicrous to an age specializing in individual emotional and sexual fulfillment. The easiest way to defend Ruskin (and incidentally to write a book of limited usefulness) would be to deny the validity of modern values, making the twentieth-century's preoccupations a measure of its triviality and Ruskin an Old Testament prophet above such ordinary concerns. Partially by skillful use of his diaries and letters, Joan Abse instead depicts an immensely talented yet rigidly circumscribed man who elicits sympathy, pity, and frequently exasperation. Abse excels in common sense without ever sacrificing a certain delicacy of perception and precision. She constructs the patterns of Ruskin's life with a steady accretion of detail unaccompanied by the dully portentous biographical standby, "This was the first appearance of." For example, Ruskin's surprisingly limited and rather repetitive travels abroad become, in Abse's presentation, an emblem of his inability to transcend parental constraints sufficiently to imagine and accomplish a trip essentially different from those of his childhood.

Abse notes many paradoxes in Ruskin's character. His parents' crushing expectations of his intellect and their devastating lack of emotional demands, his drive toward sensual enjoyment and fear of self-indulgence, his powerful literary self-assertion and private reliance on baby talk: all figured prominently in his personality. Abse nonetheless manages to make Ruskin's life coherent. The man capable of describing the breakup of his marriage in these terms—"Perhaps the principal cause of it—next to her resolute effort to detach me from my parents, was her always thinking that I ought to attend *her*, instead of *herself* attending to me. When I had drawing or writing to do—instead of sitting with me as I drew or wrote, she went about her own quests: and then complained that 'I left her alone'"—could also write tellingly of the need to re-sensitize oneself to the natural world: "We go through such processes of experiment unconsciously in childhood; and having once come to conclusions touching the signification of certain colours, we always suppose that we *see* what we only know, and have hardly any consciousness of the real aspect of the signs we have learned to interpret. Very few people have any idea that sun

lighted grass is yellow." Ruskin chafed at being expected to confine his lectures at Oxford to the history of art. This man whose emotional development had been early arrested, who recognized but could not resist the forces of arrest, desired above all else to contribute to and guide his country's development into a more humanely fulfilling culture.

The first two-thirds of this biography offer substantially more excitement and insight than the last third. In part, this settling effect follows from the choice which makes the first sections so attractive. The last twenty-five years of Ruskin's life consisted mostly of the predictable operation of biological and psychological factors which had become evident much earlier. Abse's decision not to apotheosize Ruskin then makes his final madness a kind of Greek tragedy lacking the intensifying quality of heroic grandeur. To some extent, the biography reflects the included photographs of Ruskin; except that he is clean-shaven, the photograph of Ruskin at thirty-six shows almost exactly the same facial lineaments and expression as that taken at seventy-five.

Biographies seem to come in five varieties—the literal transcription of minutely detailed notecards (Blotner's book on Faulkner), the inaccurately imaginative (Gaskell's vision of Charlotte Brontë), the thesis-monger (Strachey's attack on Queen Victoria), the finely touched portrait (Gittings's *Young Thomas Hardy*), and the inspirational re-creation (Bate's *Samuel Johnson*). One of the fourth rank, Joan Abse's *John Ruskin: The Passionate Moralists* earns the right to its dustjacket's portrait of Ruskin.

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