
Review: [untitled]

Author(s): H. M. McLuhan

Reviewed work(s):

Ruskin and the Landscape Feeling: A Critical Analysis of his Thought During the Crucial Years of his Life, 1843-56. by Francis G. Townsend

Source: *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Apr., 1952), pp. 280-281

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2909363>

Accessed: 08/04/2009 00:11

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=jhup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Modern Language Notes*.

Ruskin and the Landscape Feeling: A Critical Analysis of His Thought During the Crucial Years of His Life, 1843- '56.

FRANCIS G. TOWNSEND. Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, vol. xxxv, No. 3. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1951. \$2.00 paper, \$3.00 cloth.

This is a useful and well-written book which will greatly ease the tasks of subsequent Ruskin students. Professor Townsend does not present a mere view of Ruskin so much as install himself within Ruskin's mind in order to note the logic of his inconsistencies and conflicts. The result of this excellent procedure is a kind of reconstruction of the processes of Ruskin's mind leading to multiple, simultaneous views of the same subject. It could properly be called "cubist perspective."

On p. 57 it suggests the reflection: "It is odd that for over a century a man whose fundamental consistency is his most grievous fault should have been criticized for self-contradiction." Keeping his eye on the same mind in action, Professor Townsend is obliged to say on p. 65: "Ruskin's mind was a catch-all, absorbing new ideas from new sources and adding them to his old store, but seldom making room for them by casting out the old. The recurrence of an old idea is not, therefore, as significant as the occurrence of a new one." On p. 77 there is a resolution of this contradiction in the light of the intervening vivisection of evidence: "Almost any reader will observe the exasperating alacrity with which Ruskin could concoct a theory to fit any situation. . . . But to balance this defect . . . he had an eye, and it could not choose but see. When he saw something which did not fit one of his quack theories, he had to change the theory. . . ."

Professor Townsend was right to organize his study around Ruskin's changing attitude to landscape. Had he considered the eighteenth-century attitude to landscape as well as the twentieth-century attitude he would have been able to carry his vivisection of Ruskin's mind to an even fuller display of its working. For the landscape school in paint and poetry originates and develops within the changing conceptions of communication theory. The conceptions of the relation of reader to artist and of artist to society change with the conception of the poetic process. Searching for a key to this process, Ruskin was led, as Professor Townsend clearly shows, to espouse landscape successively as social panacea, as psychotherapy, and as channel of supernatural grace. For the same reason he turned from landscape to architecture and from architecture to sociology and economics, seeking always the collective center of the poetic process but finding only the peripheral effects in the individual or the society.

Just how radically significant communication theory was for

Ruskin and his age appears in his final rejection of the Bible for the same reason that he came to reject landscape art: "For I believe the Bible to have been written for simple people, and that simple people can only look at isolated texts." Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Valéry started from the Ruskin position and came up with the answer he never reached. Their answers have never found a rhetorician such as Ruskin was to promote them. Perhaps this is unavoidable, since their view that the art process is the analogue of cognition itself, is metaphysical. But it provides all those insights into the poetic process and into the social role of the poet which Ruskin never stopped seeking.

The merely automatic conclusion to Ruskin's typical dilemma was provided on the one hand by Marxist esthetics and on the other by Tolstoy's *What Is Art?*, one merging the artist with society and the other with God.

Professor Townsend notes in passing several specific jobs to be done in connection with Ruskin, and in particular he mentions the need for a study of Carlyle's influence on him. He might have added that apropos of the metamorphosis of the landscape feeling itself a study is needed of the supplanting of Newton by Malthus and Darwin. This dark view of nature had been well prepared by the eighteenth century exponents of the sublime.

Professor Townsend's study, then, presents an inside view of the operations of Ruskin's mind, showing the dramatic intervention of his studies in the processes of his thought; and at the same time he maintains a sharp external focus by noting the respects in which Ruskin was a mirror of his age.

H. M. McLUHAN

University of Toronto

Thackeray: The Sentimental Cynic. By LAMBERT ENNIS. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1950. Pp. vii + 233. \$5.00.

Determining what was wrong with Thackeray's personality is a fascinating project to the biographer with an interest in psychology, particularly since the publication of the *Letters and Private Papers*. Mr. J. Y. T. Greig's *Thackeray, a Reconsideration* is devoted largely to this question, and so is Mr. Ennis's monograph, which is labeled, rather unfortunately, "a chronicle of Thackeray's attitudes." Actually it is a demonstration, by detailed reference to Thackeray's life and writings, of the novelist's personal defects and limitations as Mr. Ennis sees them.

The book leaves in the reader's mind the impression of an