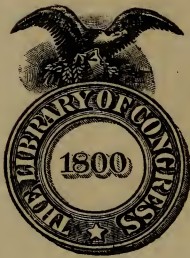


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RUSKIN AS MASTER OF PROSE

BY

FREDERIC HARRISON



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RUSKIN AS MASTER OF PROSE



RUSKIN AS MASTER OF PROSE.¹

Is it indeed beyond hope that our generation should at last do entire justice to our brightest living genius, the most inspiring soul still extant amongst us, whilst he may yet be seen and heard in the flesh?

The world has long been of one mind as to the great charm in the writings of John Ruskin; it feels his subtle insight into all forms of beauty; and it has made familiar truisms of his central lessons in Art. But it has hardly yet understood that he stands forth now, alone and inimitable, as a supreme master of our English tongue; that as preacher, prophet, (nay some amongst us do not hesitate to say as saint,) he has done more than as master of Art; that his moral and social influence on our time, more than his æsthetic impulse, will be the chief memory for which our descendants will hold him in honour.

Such genius, such zeal, such self-devotion should have imposed itself upon the age without a dissentient voice; but the reputation of John Ruskin has been exposed to some singular difficulties. Above all, he is what the Italians call *uomo antico*: a survival of a past age: he is a man of the Thirteenth Century pouring out sermons, denunciations, rhapsodies to the Nineteenth Century; and if Saint Bernard himself in his garb of frieze and girdle of hemp were to preach amongst us in Hyde Park to-day, too many of us would listen awhile, and then straightway go about our business with a smile. But John Ruskin is

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not simply a man of the Thirteenth Century: he is a poet, a mystic, a missionary of the Thirteenth Century — such a poet as he was the young Dante in the days of his love and his chivalrous youth, and his Florentine rapture of all beautiful things, or as was the young Petrarch in the lifetime of his Laura, or the young Francis beginning to dream of a regeneration of Christendom through the teaching of his barefoot Friars.

Now John Ruskin not only is in his soul a Thirteenth-century poet and mystic: but, being this, he would literally have the Nineteenth Century go back to the Thirteenth: he means what he says: he acts on what he means. And he defies fact, the set of many ages, the actual generation around him, and still calls on them, alone and in spite of neglect and rebuffs, to go back to the Golden Ages of the Past. He would not reject this description of himself: he would proudly accept it. But this being so, it is inevitable that much of his teaching — all the teaching for which he cares most in his heart — must be in our day the voice of one preaching in the wilderness.

He claims to be not merely poet of the beautiful, but missionary of the truth; not so much judge in Art as master in Philosophy. And as such he repudiates modern science, modern machinery, modern politics — in a sense modern civilisation as we know it and make it. Not merely is it his ideal to get rid of these; but in his own way he sets himself manfully to extirpate these things in practice from the visible life of himself and of those who surround him. Such heroic impossibilities recoil on his own head. The Nineteenth Century has been too strong for him. Iron, steam, science, democracy — have thrust him aside, and have left him in his old age little but a solitary and most pathetic Prophet, such as a John the Baptist by Mantegna, unbending, undismayed, still crying out to a

scanty band around him — ‘Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand’!

I am one who believes most devoutly in the need of repentance, and in the ultimate, if not early, advent of a kingdom of the Beautiful and the Good. But like the world around me, I hold by the Nineteenth Century and not by the Thirteenth:—or rather I trust that the Twentieth Century may have found some means of reconciling the ages of Steam and the ages of Faith, of combining the best of all ages in one. Unluckily, as do other prophets, as do most mystics, John Ruskin will have undivided allegiance. With him, it is ever—all or none. Accept him and his lesson—wholly, absolutely, without murmur or doubt—or he will have none of your homage. And the consequence is that his devotees have been neither many, nor impressive. His genius, as most men admit, will carry him at times into fabulous extravagances, and his exquisite tenderness of soul will oftentimes seem to be but a second childhood in the eyes of the world. Thus it has come to pass that the grotesque side of this noble Evangel of his has been perpetually thrust into the forefront of the fight; and those who have professed or expounded the Gospel of Ruskin have been for the most part such lads and lasses as the world in its grossness regards with impatience, and turns from with a smile.

As one of the oldest and most fervent believers in his genius and the noble uses to which he has devoted it, I long to say a word or two in support of my belief: not that I have the shadow of a claim to speak as his disciple, to defend his utterances, or to represent his thoughts. In one sense, no doubt, I stand at an opposite pole of ideas, and in literal and direct words, I could hardly adopt any one of the leading doctrines of his creed. As to mine, he probably rejects everything I hold sacred and true with

violent indignation and scorn. Morally, spiritually, as seen through a glass darkly, I believe that his teachers and my teachers are essentially one, and may yet be combined in the greater harmony that is to be. But to all this I should despair of inducing him to agree, or even to listen with patience. He regards me, I fear, as an utterly lost soul, destined to nothing but evil in this world and the next. And has he not, in private communication and in public excommunication, consigned me to outer darkness, and covered with indignant scorn every man and everything in which I have put my trust?

The world has long been of one mind, I have said, as to the beauty of Ruskin's writing; but I venture to think that even yet full justice has not been rendered to his consummate mastery over our English tongue: that it has not been put high enough, and some of its unique qualities have not been perceived. Now I hold that (in certain qualities, in given ways, and in some rarer passages of his, Ruskin not only surpasses every contemporary writer of prose (which indeed is obvious enough), but he calls out of our glorious English tongue notes more strangely beautiful and inspiring than any ever yet issued from that instrument. No writer of prose before or since has ever rolled forth such mighty fantasias, or reached such pathetic melodies in words, or composed long books in one sustained strain of limpid grace.)

It is indeed very far from a perfect style: much less is it in any sense a model style, or one to be cultivated, studied, or followed. If any young aspirant were to think it could be imitated, better were a millstone round his neck and he were cast into the sea. No man can bend the bow of Ulysses: and if he dared to take down from its long rest the terrible weapon, such an one might give himself an ugly wound. Ulysses himself has shot with it wildly,

madly, with preposterous overflying of the mark, and blind aiming at the wrong target. Ruskin, be it said in sorrow, has too often played unseemly pranks on his great instrument: is too often 'in excess,' as the Ethics put it, indeed he is usually 'in excess;' he has used his mastery in mere exultation in his own mastery; and as he now knows himself (no man so well) out of wantonness — rarely, but very rarely, as in *The Seven Lamps*, in a spirit of display, or with reckless defiance of sense, good taste, reserve of strength — yet never with affectation, never as a tradesman, as a hack.


We need not enter here on the interminable debate about what is called 'poetic prose,' whether poetic prose be a legitimate form of expressing ideas. A good deal of nonsense has been talked about it; and the whole matter seems too much a dispute about terms. If prose be ornate with flowers of speech inappropriate to the idea expressed, or studiously affected, or obtrusively luscious — it is bad prose. If the language be proper to verse but improper to prose — it is bad prose. If the cadences begin to be obvious, if they tend to be actually scanned as verses, if the images are remote, lyrical, piled over one another, needlessly complicated, if the passage has to be read twice before we grasp its meanings — then it is bad prose. On the other hand, all ideas are capable of being expressed in prose, as well as in verse. They may be clothed with as much grace as is consistent with precision. If the sense be absolutely clear, the flow of words perfectly easy, the language in complete harmony with the thought, then no beauty in the phraseology can be misplaced — provided that this beauty is held in reserve, is to be unconsciously felt, not obviously thrust forward, and is always the beauty of prose, and not the beauty of verse.

It cannot be denied that Ruskin, especially in his earlier works, is too often obtrusively luscious, that his images

are often lyrical, set in too profuse and gorgeous a mosaic. Be it so. But he is always perfectly, transparently clear, absolutely free from affected euphuism, never laboriously 'precious,' never grotesque, never eccentric. His besetting sins as a master of speech may be summed up in his passion for profuse imagery, and delight in an almost audible melody of words. But how different is this from the laborious affectation of what is justly condemned as the 'poetic prose' of a writer who tries to be fine, seeking to perform feats of composition, who flogs himself into a bastard sort of poetry, not because he enjoys it, but to impose upon an ignorant reader! This Ruskin never does. When he bursts the bounds of fine taste, and pelts us with perfumed flowers till we almost faint under their odour and their blaze of colour, it is because he is himself intoxicated with the joy of his blossoming thoughts, and would force some of his divine afflatus into our souls. The priestess of the Delphic god never spoke without inspiration, and then did not use the flat speech of daily life. Would that none ever spoke in books, until they felt the god working in their heart.

To be just, we should remember that a very large part of all that Ruskin treats concerns some scene of beauty, some work of fine art, some earnest moral exhortation, some indignant rebuke to meanness, — wherein passionate delight and passionate appeal are not merely lawful, but are of the essence of the lesson. (Ruskin is almost always in an ecstasy of admiration, or in a fervour of sympathy, or in a grand burst of prophetic warning.) It is his mission, his nature, his happiness so to be. And it is inevitable that such passion and eagerness should be clothed in language more remote from the language of conversation than is that of Swift or Hume.) The language of the preacher is not, nor ought it to be, the language of the critic, the

philosopher, the historian. Ruskin is a preacher: right or wrong he has to deliver his message, whether men will stay to hear it or not; and we can no more require him to limit his pace to the plain foot-plodding of unimpassioned prose than we can ask this of Saint Bernard, or of Bossuet, of Jeremy Taylor or Thomas Carlyle.

Besides all this,  Ruskin has shown that, where the business in hand is simple instruction, philosophical argument, or mechanical exposition, he is master of an English style of faultless ease, simplicity, and point. When he wants to describe a plain thing, a particular instrument for drawing, a habit of Turner's work, the exact form of a boat, or a tower, or a shell, no one can surpass him, or equal him, in the clearness and precision of his words. His little book on the *Elements of Drawing* is a masterpiece in lucid explanation of simple mechanical rules and practices. *Præterita*, *Fors Clavigera*, and the recent notes to reprinted works, contain easy bits of narration, of banter, of personal humour, that Swift, Defoe, Goldsmith, and Lamb might envy. Turn to that much-abused book, *Unto this Last* — the central book of his life, as it is the turning-point of his career — it is almost wholly free from every fault of excess with which he has been charged. Men may differ as to the argument. But no capable critic will doubt that as a type of philosophical discussion, its form is as fine and as pure as the form of Berkeley or of Hume.

But when, his whole soul aglow with some scene of beauty, transfigured by a profound moral emotion, he breaks forth into one of those typical descants of his, our judgment may still doubt if the colouring be not overcharged and the composition too crowded for perfect art, but we are carried away by its beauty, its rhythm, its pathos. We know that the sentence is too long, preposterously, impossibly sustained — 200 words and more — 250,

may 280 words without a single pause — each sentence with 40, 50, 60 commas, colons, and semicolons — and yet the whole symphony flows on with such just modulation, the images melt so naturally into each other, the harmony of tone and the ease of words is so complete, that we hasten through the passage in a rapture of admiration. Milton began, and once or twice completed, such a resounding voluntary on his glorious organ. But neither Milton, nor Browne, nor Jeremy Taylor, was yet quite master of the mighty instrument. Ruskin, who comes after two centuries of further and continuous progress in this art, is master of the subtle instrument of prose. And though it be true that too often, in wanton defiance of calm judgment, he will fling to the winds his self-control, he has achieved in this rare and perilous art, some amazing triumphs of mastery over language, such as the whole history of our literature cannot match.

Lovers of Ruskin (that is all who read good English books) can recall, and many of them can repeat, hundreds of such passages, and they will grumble at an attempt to select any passage at all. But to make my meaning clear, I will turn to one or two very famous bits, not at all asserting that they are the most truly noble passages that Ruskin ever wrote, but as specimens of his more lyrical mood. He has himself spoken with slight of much of his earlier writing — often perhaps with undeserved humility. He especially regrets the *purpurei panni*, as he calls them, of *The Seven Lamps* and cognate pieces. I will not quote any of these *purpurei panni*, though I think that as *rhetorical prose*, as apodeictic perorations, English literature has nothing to compare with them. But they *are* rhetorical, somewhat artificial, manifest displays of eloquence — and we shall all agree that eloquent displays of rhetoric are not the best specimens of prose composition.

I take first a well-known piece of an early book (*Modern Painters*, vol. iv. c. i., 1856), the old Tower of Calais Church, a piece which has haunted my memory for nearly forty years:—

The large neglect, the noble unsightliness of it; the record of its years written so visibly, yet without sign of weakness or decay; its stern wasteness and gloom, eaten away by the Channel winds, and overgrown with the bitter sea grasses; its slates and tiles all shaken and rent, and yet not falling; its desert of brickwork, full of bolts, and holes, and ugly fissures, and yet strong, like a bare brown rock; its carelessness of what anyone thinks or feels about it; putting forth no claim, having no beauty, nor desirableness, pride, nor grace; yet neither asking for pity; not, as ruins are, useless and piteous, feebly or fondly garrulous of better days; but useful still, going through its own daily work,—as some old fisherman, beaten grey by storm, yet drawing his daily nets: so it stands, with no complaint about its past youth, in blanched and meagre massiveness and serviceableness, gathering human souls together underneath it; the sound of its bells for prayer still rolling through its rents; and the grey peak of it seen far across the sea, principal of the three that rise above the waste of surfy sand and hillocked shore,—the lighthouse for life, and the belfry for labour and this—for patience and praise.

This passage I take to be one of the most magnificent examples of the 'pathetic fallacy' in our language. Perhaps the 'pathetic fallacy' is second-rate art; the passage is too long—211 words alas! without one fullstop, and more than forty commas and other marks of punctuation—it has *trop de choses*—it has redundancies, tautologies, and artifices, if we are strictly severe—but what a picture, what pathos, what subtlety of observation, what nobility of association—and withal how complete is the unity of impression! How mournful, how stately is the cadence, how harmonious and yet peaceful is the phraseology, and how wonderfully do thought, the antique history, the picture, the musical bars of the whole piece combine

in beauty! What fine and just images — ‘the large neglect,’ the ‘noble unsightliness.’ The tower is ‘eaten away by the Channel winds,’ ‘overgrown with bitter sea grasses.’ It is ‘careless,’ ‘puts forth no claim,’ has ‘no pride,’ does not ‘ask for pity,’ is not ‘fondly garrulous,’ as other ruins are, but still goes through its work, ‘like some old fisherman.’ It stands blanched, meagre, massive, but still serviceable, making no complaint about its past youth. A wonderful bit of word-painting — (and, perhaps, word-painting, at least on a big canvas, is not strictly lawful) — but such a picture as few poets and no prose-writer has surpassed! Byron would have painted it in deeper, fiercer strokes. Shelley and Wordsworth would have been less definite. Coleridge would not have driven home the moral so earnestly; though Tennyson might have embodied it in the stanzas of *In Memoriam*.

I should like to take this passage as a text to point to a quality of Ruskin’s prose in which, I believe, he has surpassed all other writers. It is the quality of musical *assonance*. There is plenty of *alliteration* in Ruskin, as there is in all fine writers: but the musical harmony of sound in Ruskin’s happiest efforts is something very different from *alliteration*, and much more subtle. Coarse, obtrusive, artificial *alliteration*, *i.e.* the recurrence of words with the same initial letter, becomes when crudely treated or overdone, a gross and irritating form of affectation. But the prejudice against alliteration may be carried too far. Alliteration is the natural expression of earnest feeling in every form — it is a physiological result of passion and impetuosity: — it becomes a defect when it is repeated too often, or in an obtrusive way, or when it becomes artificial, and studied. Whilst alliteration is spontaneous, implicit not explicit, felt not seen, the natural working of a fine ear, it is not only a legitimate expedient both of prose and of

verse, but is an indispensable accessory of the higher harmonies in either.

Ruskin uses alliteration much, (it must be admitted, in profusion,) but he relies on a far subtler resource of harmony — that is *assonance*, or as I should prefer to name it, *consonance*. I have never seen this quality treated at all systematically, but I am convinced that it is at the basis of all fine cadences both in verse and in prose. By *consonance* I mean *the recurrence of the same, or of cognate, sounds*, not merely in the first letter of words, but where the stress comes, in any part of a word, and that in sounds whether vowel or consonant. Grimm's law of interchangeable consonants applies; and all the well-known groupings of consonants may be noted. The liquids connote the sweeter, the gutturals the sterner ideas; the sibilants connect and organise the words. Of poets perhaps Milton, Shelley, and Tennyson make the fullest use of this resource. We need not suppose that it is consciously sought, or in any sense studied, or even observed by the poet. But *consonance*, *i.e.* recurrence of the same or kindred sounds, is very visible when we look for it in a beautiful cadence. Take Tennyson's —

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
 That name the under-lying dead,
 Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
 Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.

How much does the music, nay the impressiveness, of this stanza depend on *consonance*! The great booming *o* with which it opens, is repeated in the last word of the first, and also of the last line. The cruel word 'graspest' is repeated in part in the harsh word 'stones.' Three lines, and five words in all, begin with the soft 'th': 'Name' is echoed by 'net,' 'under-lying' by 'dreamless'; the 'r' of 'roots' is heard again in 'wrapt,' the 'b' in

'fibres,' in 'about,' and 'bones.' These are not at all accidental cases of *consonance*.

This musical *consonance* is quite present in fine prose, although many powerful writers seem to have had but little ear for its effects. Such men as Swift, Defoe, Gibbon, Macaulay, seldom advance beyond alliteration in the ordinary sense. But true *consonance*, or musical correspondence of note, is very perceptible in the prose of Milton, of Sir Thomas Browne, of Burke, of Coleridge, of de Quincey. Above all, it is especially marked in our English Bible, and in the Collects and grander canticles of the Prayer-book; and is the source of much of their power over us. Of all the masters of prose literature, John Ruskin has made the finest use of this resource, and with the most delicate and mysterious power. And this is no doubt due to his mind being saturated from childhood with the harmonies of our English Bible, and to his speaking to us with religious solemnity and in Biblical tones.

This piece about the tower of Calais Church is full of this beautiful and subtle form of alliteration or colliteration — 'the large neglect, the noble unsightliness of it' — 'the record of its years written so visibly, yet without sign of weakness or decay' — 'the sound of its bells for prayer still rolling through its rents.' Here in a single line are three liquid double 'll'; there are six 's.'; there are five 'r' in seven words — 'sound rölling throügh rents' is finely expressive of a peal of bells. And the passage ends with a triple alliteration — the second of the three being inverted: 'bel' echoing to 'lab.' — 'the lighthouse for life, and the belfry for labour, and this — for patience and praise.'

Turn to another famous passage (*Modern Painters*, vol. iv. cap. 19), a somewhat over-wrought, possibly unjust picture, stained as usual with the original sin of Calvinism,

but a wonderful piece of imaginative description. It is the account of the peasant of the Valais, in the grand chapter on 'Mountain Gloom'

They do not understand so much as the name of beauty, or of knowledge. They understand dimly that of virtue. Love, patience, hospitality, faith,—these things they know. To glean their meadows side by side, so happier; to bear the burden up the breathless mountain flank un murmuringly; to bid the stranger drink from their vessel of milk; to see at the foot of their low death-beds a pale figure upon a cross, dying, also patiently;—in this they are different from the cattle and from the stones; but, in all this, unrewarded, so far as concerns the present life. For them, there is neither advance nor exultation. Black bread, rude roof, dark night, laborious day, weary arm at sunset; and life ebbs away. No books, no thoughts, no attainments, no rest,—except only sometimes a little sitting in the sun under the church wall, as the bell tolls thin and far in the mountain air; a pattering of a few prayers, not understood, by the altar-rails of the dimly gilded chapel,—and so, back to the sombre home, with the cloud upon them still unbroken—that cloud of rocky gloom, born out of the wild torrents and ruinous stones, and unlightened even in their religion, except by the vague promise of some better things unknown, mingled with threatening, and obscured by an unspeakable horror—a smoke, as it were, of martyrdom, coiling up with the incense; and amidst the images of tortured bodies and lamenting spirits in hurtling flames, the very cross, for them, dashed more deeply than for others with gouts of blood.

The piece is over-wrought as well as unjust, with somewhat false emphasis, but how splendid in colour and majestic in language! 'To bear the burden up the breathless mountain flank un murmuringly'—is fine in spite of its obvious scansion and its profuse alliteration. 'At their low death-beds a pale figure upon a cross, dying, also patiently'—will not scan, but it is charged with solemnity by soft 'l,' 'd,' and 'p,' repeated. How beautifully imitative is the line, '*as the bell tolls thin and far in the mountain air*'—a, e, i, o, u, —u, o, i, e, a—with ten

monosyllables and one dissyllable! 'The crōss dashed more deeply with gōūts of blōōd.' No one who has ever read that passage can pass along the Catholic valleys of the Swiss Alps without having it in his mind. Overcharged, and somewhat consciously and designedly *pictorial* as it is, it is a truly wonderful example of mastery over language and sympathetic insight.

We may turn now to a passage or two, in which perhaps Ruskin is quite at his best. He has written few things finer, and indeed more exactly truthful, than his picture of the Campagna of Rome. This is in the Preface to the second edition of *Modern Painters*, 1843.

Perhaps there is no more impressive scene on earth than the solitary extent of the Campagna of Rome under evening light. Let the reader imagine himself for the moment withdrawn from the sounds and motion of the living world, and sent forth alone into this wild and wasted plain. The earth yields and crumbles beneath his foot, tread he never so lightly, for its substance is white, hollow, and carious, like the dusty wreck of the bones of men. The long knotted grass waves and tosses feebly in the evening wind, and the shadows of its motion shake feverishly along the banks of ruin that lift themselves to the sunlight. Hillocks of mouldering earth heave around him, as if the dead beneath were struggling in their sleep. Scattered blocks of black stone, four-square remnants of mighty edifices, not one left upon another, lie upon them to keep them down. A dull purple poisonous haze stretches level along the desert, veiling its spectral wrecks of massy ruins, on whose rents the red light rests, like dying fire on defiled altars; the blue ridge of the Alban Mount lifts itself against a solemn space of green, clear, quiet sky. Watch-towers of dark clouds stand steadfastly along the promontories of the Apennines. From the plain to the mountains, the shattered aqueducts, pier beyond pier, melt into the darkness, like shadowy and countless troops of funeral mourners, passing from a nation's grave.

Here is a piece of pure description without passion or moralising; the passage is broken, as we find in all good modern prose, into sentences of forty or fifty words. It is

absolutely clear, literally true, an imaginative picture of one of the most impressive scenes in the world. All who know it, remember 'the white, hollow, carious earth,' like bone dust, 'the long knotted grass,' the 'banks of ruin' and 'hillocks of mouldering earth,' the 'dull purple poisonous haze,' 'the shattered aqueducts,' like shadowy mourners at a nation's grave. The whole piece may be set beside Shelley's poem from the '*Euganean Hills*,' and it produces a kindred impression. In Ruskin's prose, perhaps for the first time in literature, there are met the eye of the landscape painter and the voice of the lyric poet — and both are blended in perfection. It seems to me idle to debate, whether or not it is legitimate to describe in prose a magnificent scene, whether it be lawful to set down in prose the ideas which this scene kindles in an imaginative soul, whether it be permitted to such an artist to resort to any resource of grace or power which the English language can present.

This magnificent piece of word-painting is hardly surpassed by anything in our literature. It cannot be said to carry alliteration to the point of affectation. But the reader may easily perceive by analysis how greatly its musical effect depends on profusion of subtle *consonance*. The 'liquids' give grace: the broad *ō* and *ā*, and their diphthong sounds, give solemnity: the gutturals and double consonants give strength. 'A dull purple poisonous haze stretches level along the desert' — 'on whose rents the red light rests like dying fire on defiled altars.' Here in 13 words are — 5 'r.,' 4 t., 4 d., 3 l., — 'Dark clouds stand steadfastly' — 'the promontories of the Apennines.' The last clause is a favourite cadence of Ruskin's: its beautiful melody depends on a very subtle and complex scheme of *consonance*. 'From the plain to the mountains, the shattered aqueducts, pier beyond pier, melt into the

darkness, like shadowy and countless troops of funeral mourners, pāssing from a nātion's grāve.' It is impossible to suppose that the harmonies of this 'coda' are wholly accidental. They are the effect of a wonderful ear for tonality in speech, certainly unconscious, arising from passionate feeling more than from reflection. And Mr. Ruskin himself would no doubt be the first to deny that such a thought had ever crossed his mind; — perhaps he would himself denounce with characteristic vehemence any such vivisection applied to his living and palpitating words.

I turn now to a little book of his written in the middle of his life, at the height of his power, just before he entered on his second career of social philosopher and new evangelist. *The Harbours of England* was published nearly forty years ago in 1856 (ætat : 37), and it has now been happily reprinted in a cheap and smaller form, 1895. It is, I believe, as an education in art, as true, and as masterly as anything Ruskin ever wrote. But I wish now to treat it only from the point of view of English literature. And I make bold to say that no book in our language shows more varied resources over prose-writing, or an English more pure, more vigorous, more enchanting. It contains hardly any of those tirades with which the preacher loves to drench his hearers — torrents from the fountains of his ecstasy, or his indignation. The book is full of enthusiasm and of poetry: but it also contains a body of critical and expository matter simple, lucid, graceful, incisive as anything ever set down by the hand of John Ruskin — or indeed of any other master of our English prose.

Everyone remembers the striking sentence with which it opens — a sentence, it may be, exaggerated in meaning, but how melodious, how impressive — 'Of all things, liv-

ing or lifeless, [note the 5 l., the 4 i. in the first six words] upon this strange earth, there is but one which, having reached the mid-term of appointed human endurance on it, I still regard with unmitigated amazement.' This object is the bow of a Boat, — 'the blunt head of a common, bluff, undecked sea-boat lying aside in its furrow of beach sand. . . .'

The sum of Navigation is in that. You may magnify it or decorate it as you will: you will not add to the wonder of it. Lengthen it into hatchet-like edge of iron, — strengthen it with complex tracery of ribs of oak, — carve it and gild it till a column of light moves beneath it on the sea, — you have made no more of it than it was at first. That rude simplicity of bent plank, that [? *should be 'which'*] can breast its way through the death that is in the deep sea, has in it the soul of shipping. Beyond this, we may have more work, more men, more money; we cannot have more miracle.

The whole passage is loaded with imagery, with fancy, but hardly with conceits; it is wonderfully ingenious, impressive, suggestive, so that a boat is never quite the same thing to anyone who has read this passage in early life. The ever-changing curves of the boat recall 'the image of a sea-shell.' 'Every plank is a Fate, and has men's lives wreathed in the knots of it.' This bow of the boat is 'the gift of another world.' Without it, we should be 'chained to our rocks.' The very nails that fasten the planks are 'the rivets of the fellowship of the world.' 'Their iron does more than draw lightning out of heaven, it leads love round the earth.' It is possible to call this fantastic, over-wrought, lyrical: it is not possible to dispute its beauty, charm, and enthusiasm. It seems to me to carry imaginative prose exactly to that limit which to pass would cease to be fitting in prose; to carry fancy to the very verge of that which, if less sincere, less true, less pathetic — would justly be regarded as Euphuistic conceit.

And so this splendid hymn to the sea-boat rolls on to that piece which I take to be as fine and as true as anything ever said about the sea, even by our sea poets, Byron or Shelley :—

Then also, it is wonderful on account of the greatness of the enemy that it does battle with. To lift dead weight; to overcome length of languid space; to multiply or systematise a given force; this we may see done by the bar, or beam, or wheel, without wonder. But to war with that living fury of waters, to bare its breast, moment after moment, against the unwearied enmity of ocean,— the subtle, fitful, implacable smiting of the black waves, provoking each other on, endlessly, all the infinite march of the Atlantic rolling on behind them to their help, and still to strike them back into a wreath of smoke and futile foam, and win its way against them, and keep its charge of life from them;— does any other soulless thing do as much as this?

This noble paragraph has truth, originality, music, majesty, with that imitative power of sound which is usually thought to be possible only in poetry, and is very rarely successful even in poetry. Homer has often caught echoes of the sea in his majestic hexameters; Byron and Shelley occasionally recall it; as does Tennyson in its milder moods and calm rest. But I know no other English prose but this which, literally and nobly describing the look of a wild sea, suggests in the very rhythm of its cadence, and in the music of its roar, the tumultuous surging of the surf— ‘To war with that living fury of waters’— ‘the subtle, fitful, implacable smiting of the black waves,’— ‘still to strike them back into a wreath of smoke and futile foam, and win its way against them’— Here we seem not only to see before our eyes, but to hear with our ears, the crash of a stout boat plunging through a choppy sea off our southern coasts.

I would take this paragraph as the high-water mark of Ruskin’s prose method. But there are scores and hundreds

of passages in his books of equal power and perfection. This book on *The Harbours of England* is full of them. *O si sic omnia!* Alas! a few pages further on, even in of this admirable book which is so free from them, comes one those ungovernable, over-laden, hypertrophied outbursts of his, which so much deform his earlier books. It is a splendid piece of conception; each phrase, each sentence is beautiful; the images are appropriate and cognate; they flow naturally out of each other; and the whole has a most harmonious glow. But alas! as English prose, it is *impossible*. It has 255 words without a pause, and 26 intermediate signs of punctuation. No human breath could utter such a sentence: even the eye is bewildered; and, at last, the most docile and attentive reader sinks back, stunned and puzzled by such torrent of phrases and such a wilderness of thoughts.¹

He is speaking of the fisher-boat as the most venerable kind of ship. He stands musing on the shingle between the black sides of two stranded fishing-boats. He watches 'the clear heavy water-edge of ocean rising and failing close to their bows.' And then he turns to the boats.

And the dark flanks of the fishing-boats all aslope above, in their shining quietness, hot in the morning sun, rusty and seamed, with square patches of plank nailed over their rents; just rough enough to let the little flat-footed fisher-children haul or twist themselves up to the gunwales, and drop back again along some stray rope; just round enough to remind us, in their broad and gradual curves, of the sweep of the green surges they know so well, and of the hours when those old sides of seared timber, all ashine with the sea, plunge and dip into the deep green purity of the mounded waves more joyfully than a deer lies

In the second volume of *Modern Painters*, p. 132, may be found a mammoth sentence, I suppose the most gigantic sentence in English prose. It has 619 words without a full stop, and 80 intermediate signs of punctuation, together with four clauses in brackets. It has been reprinted in the revised two volumes, edition of 1883, where it fills four whole pages, i. 347-351.

down among the grass of Spring, the soft white cloud of foam opening momentarily at the bows, and fading or flying high into the breeze where the sea-gulls toss and shriek, — the joy and beauty of it, all the while, so mingled with the sense of unfathomable danger, and the human effort and sorrow going on perpetually from age to age, waves rolling for ever, and winds moaning for ever, and faithful hearts trusting and sickening for ever, and brave lives dashed away about the rattling beach like weeds for ever ; and still at the helm of every lonely boat, through starless night and hopeless dawn, His hand, who spread the fisher's net over the dust of the Sidonian palaces, and gave into the fisher's hand the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

It is a grand passage, ruined, I think, by excess of eagerness, and sympathetic passion. Neither Shelley nor Keats ever flung his soul more keenly into an inert object and made it live to us, or rather, lived in it, felt its heart beat in his and made his own its sorrows, its battles, its pride. So Tennyson gazing on the Yew which covers the loved grave cries out —

I seem to fail from out my blood
And grow incorporate into thee.

So the poet sees the ship that brings his lost Arthur home, hears the noise about the keel, and the bell struck in the night. Thus Ruskin, watching the fisherman's boat upon the beach, sees in his mind's eye, the past and the future of the boat, the swell of the green billows, and the roar of the ocean, and still at the helm, unseen but of him, an Almighty Hand guiding it in life and in death.

Had this noble vision been rehearsed with less passion, and in sober intervals of breathing, we could have borne it. The first twelve or fourteen lines, ending with 'the deep green purity of the mounded waves,' form a full picture. But, like a runaway horse, our poet plunges on where no human lungs and no ordinary brain can keep up the giddy pace ; and for seven or eight lines more we are pelted

with new images till we feel like landsmen caught in a sudden squall. And then how grand are the last ten lines — ‘the human effort and sorrow going on perpetually from age to age’ —! down to that daring antithesis of the fishermen of Tyre and the fisherman of St. Peter’s! I cannot call it a conceit: but it would have been a conceit in the hands of anyone less sincere, less passionate, not so perfectly saturated with Biblical imagery and language.

I have dwelt upon this passage as a typical example of Ruskin’s magnificent power over the literary instrument, of his intense sympathy, of his vivid imagination, and alas! also of his ungovernable flux of ideas and of words. It is by reason of this wilful megalomania and plethoric habit, that we must hesitate to pronounce him the greatest master of English prose in our whole literature: but it is such mastery over language, such power to triumph over almost impossible conditions and difficulties, that compel us to regard him as one who could have become the noblest master of prose ever recorded, if he would only have set himself to curb his Pegasus from the first, and systematically to think of his reader’s capacity for taking in, as well as of his own capacity for pouring forth, a torrent of glowing thoughts.

As a matter of fact, John Ruskin himself undertook to curb his Pegasus, and, like Turner or Beethoven, distinctly formed and practised ‘a second manner.’ That second manner coincides with the great change in his career, when he passed from critic of art to be social reformer and moral philosopher. The change was of course not absolute; but whereas, in the earlier half of his life he had been a writer about Beauty and Art, who wove into his teaching lessons on social, moral, and religious problems, so he became, in the later part of his life a worker about Society and Ethics, who filled his practical teaching with judg-

ments about the beautiful in Nature and in Art. That second career dates from about the year 1860, when he began to write *Unto this Last*, which was finally published in 1862.

I myself judge that book to be not only the most original and creative work of John Ruskin, but the most original and creative work in pure literature since *Sartor Resartus*. But I am now concerning myself with form: and, as a matter of form, I would point to it as a work containing almost all that is noble in Ruskin's written prose, with hardly any, or very few, of his excesses and mannerisms. It is true, that, p. 147-8, we have a single sentence of 242 words and 52 intermediate stops before we come to the pause. But this is occasional; and the book as a whole is a masterpiece of pure, incisive, imaginative, lucid English. If one had to plead the cause of Ruskin before the Supreme Court in the Republic of Letters, one would rely on that book as a type of clearness, wit, eloquence, versatility, passion.

From the publication of *Unto this Last*, in 1862, John Ruskin distinctly adopted his later manner. Two volumes of selections from Ruskin's works were published in 1893 by George Allen, the compilation of some anonymous editor. They are of nearly equal size and of periods of equal length. The first series consists of extracts between 1843 and 1860 from *Modern Painters*, *Seven Lamps*, *Stones of Venice*, and minor lectures, articles, and letters anterior to 1860. The second series, 1860-1888, contains selections from *Unto this Last*, *Fors*, *Præterita*, and the lectures and treatises subsequent to 1860. Now, it will be seen that in the second series the style is more measured, more mature, more practical, more simple. It is rare to find the *purpurei panni* which abound in the first series, or the sentences of 200 words, or the ostentatious piling up

of luscious imagery, and tumultuous fugues in oral symphony. The 'first state' of a plate by Ruskin has far richer effects and more vivid light and shade than any example of his 'second state.'

Alas! the change came too late—too late in his life, too late in his career. When *Unto this Last* was finally published, John Ruskin was forty-three: he had already written the most elaborate and systematic of all his books—those on which his world-wide fame still rests. He had long past *il mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*—and even the middle of his own long life: his energy, his health, his hopes were not what they had been in his glorious youth and early manhood: his mission became consciously to raise men's moral standard in life, not to raise their sense of the beautiful in Art. The old mariner still held us with his glistening eye, and forced us to listen to his wondrous tale, but he spoke like a man whose voice shook with the memory of all that he had seen and known, over whom the deep waters had passed. I am one of those who know that John Ruskin has told us in his second life things more true and more important even than he told us in his first life. But yet I cannot bring myself to hold that, as magician of words, his later teaching has the mystery and the glory which hung round the honeyed lips of the 'Oxford Graduate.'

If then, John Ruskin be not in actual achievement the greatest master who ever wrote in English prose, it is only because he refused to chasten his passion and his imagination until the prime of life was past. A graceful poet and a great moralist said:—

Prune thou thy words; the thoughts control
That o'er thee swell and throng:—
They will condense within thy soul,
And change to purpose strong.

This lesson Ruskin never learned until he was growing grey, and even now he only observes it so long as the spirit moves him, or rather does not move him too keenly. He has rarely suffered his thoughts to condense within his soul. Far from controlling them, he has spurred and lashed them into fury, so that they swell and throng over him and his readers, too often changing into satiety and impotence. Every other faculty of a great master of speech, except reserve, husbanding of resources, and patience, he possesses in measure most abundant—lucidity, purity, brilliance, elasticity, wit, fire, passion, imagination, majesty, with a mastery over all the melody of cadence that has no rival in the whole range of English literature.

RUSKIN AS MASTER
OF PROSE

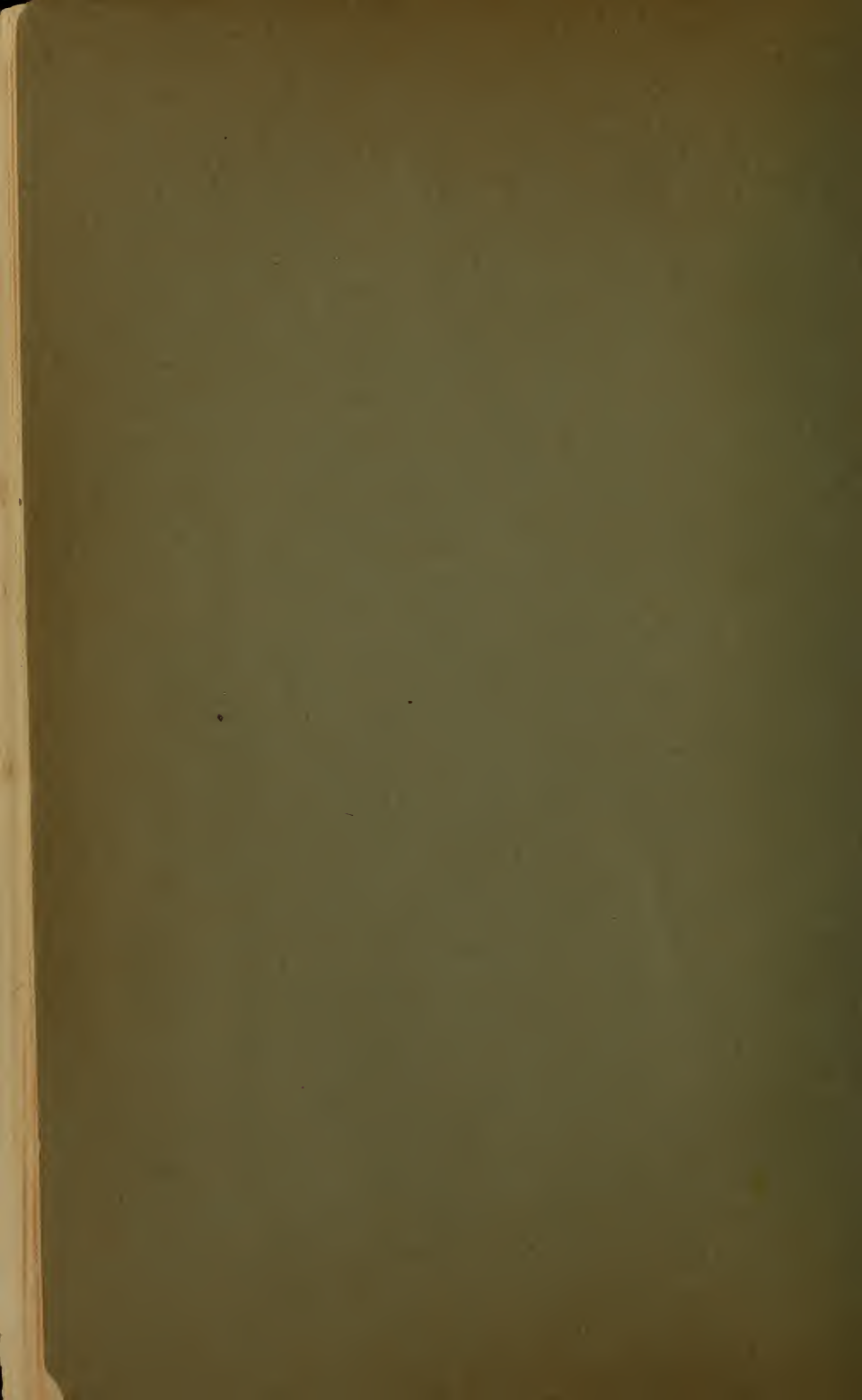
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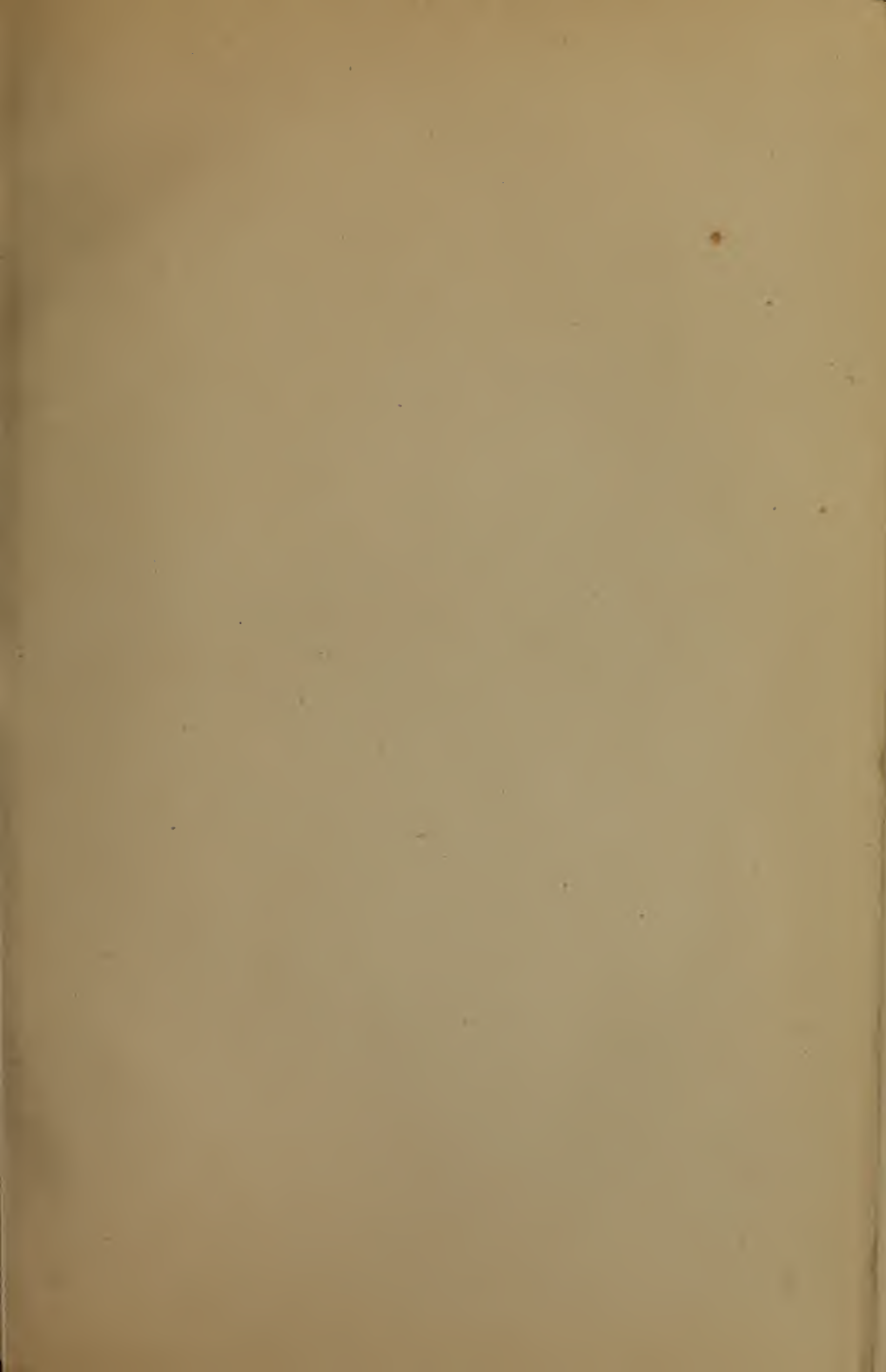
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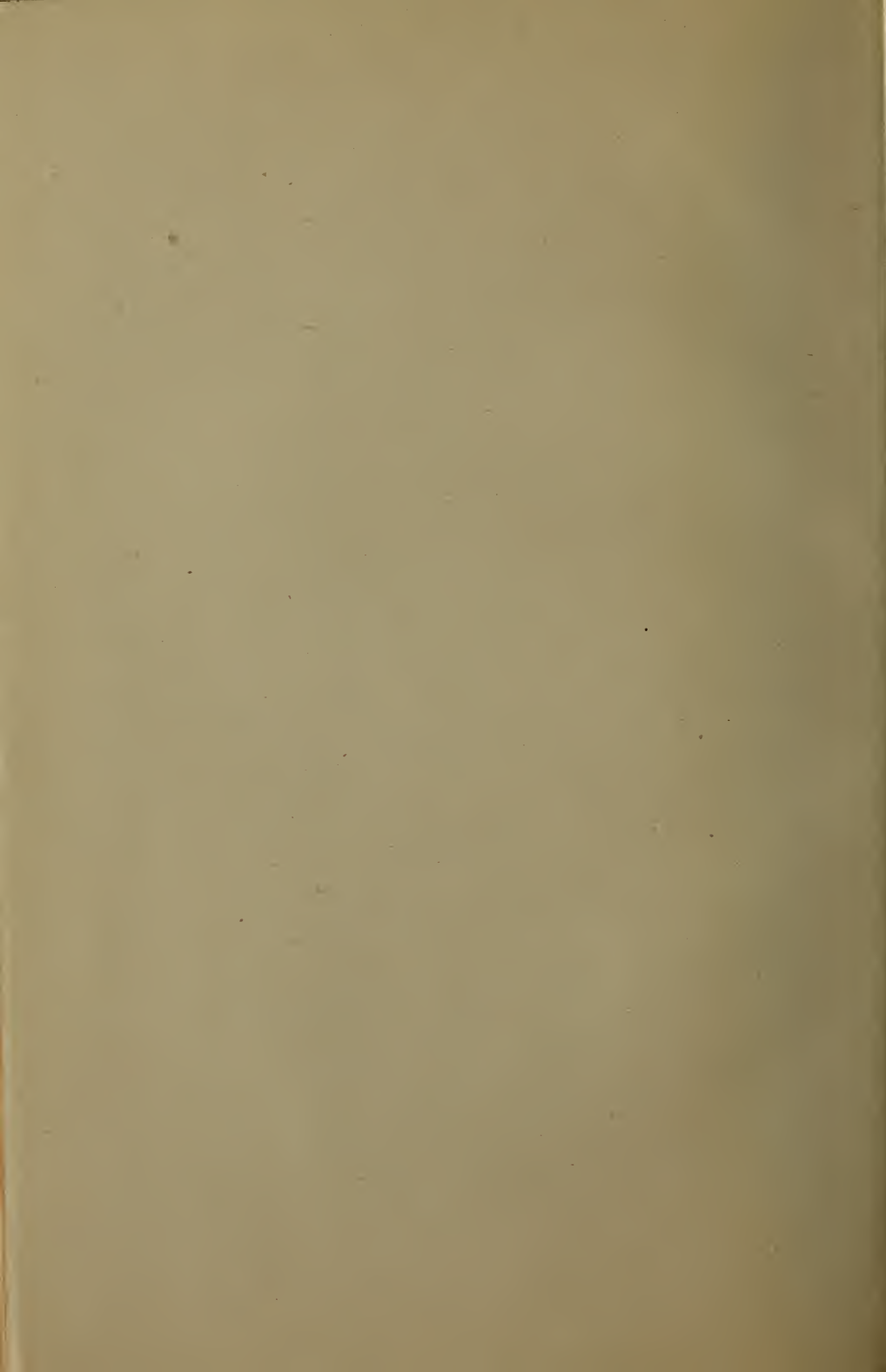
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