

1999

Saggio su John Ruskin: Il Messaggio nello Stile. by Claudia Ruggiero Corradini

Robert Casillo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

Recommended Citation

Casillo, Robert (1999) "Saggio su John Ruskin: Il Messaggio nello Stile. by Claudia Ruggiero Corradini," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*. Vol. 8 , Article 41.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol8/iss1/41>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu, hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu.

where is it to be found? In Plato's *Sophist* or in Hegel's *Phenomenology*? Bruno may be an art icon (he has always been an icon for someone) but he is primarily a philosopher, and he needs to be addressed with philosophical awareness. These flaws do not diminish the importance of Doria's and Higgins's translation. Scholars cannot blame them for having attempted, with passion and dedication, a difficult enterprise that no one had undertaken before. Now that *De imaginum . . .* is available even to non-specialists, thanks to Doria and Higgins, one has only to hope that it will find its place in Bruno's canon.

ALESSANDRO CARRERA
New York University

**Saggio su John Ruskin:
Il Messaggio nello Stile.**

By Claudia Ruggiero Corradini.
Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1989.

This book is a welcome contribution to the long-overdue Ruskin revival of the past two decades. It admirably supplies what Ruskin criticism has needed, namely a study of his literary theory and literary style. Since Ruskin left no systematic stylistic treatise, the first chapter pieces together his stylistic theory from scattered statements; yet Corradini rightly rejects Croce's claim that Ruskin's stylistic concepts form no system. Valuing verbal precision, clarity, concision, and directness, Ruskin would reconcile metaphorical richness and simplicity, imagination and literal truth. Far from valuing style by itself

or as a superaddition to content, he believes that it should express its content while conveying empirical and moral truth (*ethos*). Ruskin realized that his early works tended toward floridity, and were being valued mainly for verbal beauty. His later writings stress truth's "bitter almond" over beauty of style—without, however, ceasing to be beautiful.

Central to Ruskin's stylistic theory is a concept of the sister arts uniting literature, painting, and drawing: each demands fidelity to nature and the imaginative capacity to penetrate essential form. Hence Ruskin encourages accurate seeing as essential to literary and visual art. He considers drawing as important as reading and writing, and recommends mandatory art education in British schools. Yet as Ruskin turns to socio-economic issues in the later 1850s, he increasingly emphasizes learning how to read. "Of King's Treasuries", the first part of *Sesame and Lilies*, showcases Ruskin's innovative method of close reading of classic texts while stressing etymology and verbal accuracy as the basis for good writing.

The second chapter relates Ruskin's stylistic values to his literary criticism. Besides noting his admiration for the Bible, Corradini demonstrates Ruskin's esteem for Turner, Byron, and Scott as exemplars of imaginative truth in the sister arts. Ruskin prefers Scott's historical romances over Dickens's urban novels, a new genre Ruskin was perhaps the first to define. However, the chapter focuses upon his reading of Dante in *Modern Painters*. Regarding Dante as a paragon of humanity, Ruskin admires his verbal accuracy, combin-

ing geographical and semantic precision; his pictorial values, such as the use of color adjectives for realistic and emotional effects; and his visual accuracy and imaginative truth. Just as Dante embodies Ruskin's ideal of *sapere vedere*, so the complexity and precision of his allegory influenced Ruskin's.

The third chapter accepts the view that Ruskin has three basic literary styles: 1) the flamboyantly metaphorical, 2) the terse, analytical, and argumentative, and 3) the heterogenous, as in the allusive, abrupt, and simultaneously private and public style of *Fors Clavigera*. Noting the coexistence of these styles in much of Ruskin's writing, Corradini denies that they correspond successively to the phases of his career, yet she finds in them common features: metaphorical richness (the chief feature of Ruskin's style), rhythmic amplitude and variety, and syntactical complexity. In her view, the key to Ruskin's style is neither rhythm, as some claim, nor some unanalyzable quality, but the interplay between sight and imaginative insight, between Ruskin's literary work and his drawings, watercolors, sketches, and diary entries. Verbally and visually, he attempts to unite sublime and humble forms, factual accuracy and imaginative penetration, stasis and dynamism.

Corradini's rhetorical and structural analyses show the frequent parallels (and differences) between Ruskin's pictorial and verbal representations. The rhetorical, syntactical, and metaphorical structure of the passage on the *Falls of Schaffhausen* in *Modern Painters* is a verbal analogue to his watercolor of the same

scene. Just as Corradini reveals the stylistic congruity between Ruskin's 1861 self-portrait and the confrontational, resolute public rhetoric of that phase of his career, so she demonstrates that his self-portraits of the 1870s, with their strong contrasts of light and shade, and their public yet reserved poses, correspond to the public-private, tormented rhetoric of *Fors Clavigera*. However, Ruskin's 1844 watercolor of Amalfi has artistic value independent of any text. Reexamining "Of King's Treasuries", Corradini underscores Ruskin's concern for literature's moral significance; his belief, shared by many modern educators, in the reciprocal influence of reading and writing; and his appeal to international literary standards.

This study has its shortcomings. Although Corradini implies that Ruskin believes in and achieves verbal transparency, and although she stresses his belief in the intrinsic value of literary classics, Ruskin actually accuses the greatest poets of coining delusory metaphors, images, and symbols. Corradini never mentions that Ruskin views literature as a *pharmakon*, an ambiguous drug capable of nourishing but also poisoning. (Giuseppe Sertoli's brilliant article on Ruskin's attitude toward the text appeared in the first issue of *Differentia*.) She also suggests that Ruskin's writings usually balance external fact and the projective imagination, rejecting any excess of the latter as the "pathetic fallacy". However, Corradini says little about the pathetic fallacy and fails to discuss, as Harold Bloom does, Ruskin's dissociation of its positive and nega-

tive forms. She also ignores the fact that his later works abound in the pathetic fallacy, engulfing and obscuring external reality in personal emotion. This imbalance is evident in some of Ruskin's sketches of the 1870s, which Corradini mentions in passing. She explains Ruskin's etymologizing and its contemporary analogues, but apparently accepts his assumption that words have natural origins and that a word's "original" meaning is the true one. Her analysis might have benefited from Derrida's "White Mythology", among other works. While Corradini notes that Ruskin's ideal of adjectival accuracy influenced the Decadents, who abandoned his moralism, she might have mentioned that his aesthetic, combining dynamism and stasis, anticipates Vorticism. Ezra Pound shares Ruskin's desire to harmonize fact and insight and to promote international literary standards through close reading.

ROBERT CASILLO
University of Miami

Liberalism and Democracy

By Norberto Bobbio.

Translated by Martin Ryle and Kate Soper. New York: Verso, 1990.

Though Bobbio says that "liberalism and democracy have never been radically antithetical" (73), the bulk of this text, rightly concerns the border warfare that has raged and ever will rage between the partisans of the

individual (liberals) and those of society (democrats). Beginning in the ancient world where individual rights were essentially unknown, Bobbio traces, in a bare ninety pages and seventeen chapters, the encounters of society with those who defend the right of the individual against the weight of society. His text covers, among other things, Hobbes, Locke, and natural rights theory, Kant's hostility to state paternalism, the uneasiness of Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill about the tyranny of the majority, the complications arising out of the encounter of socialism and democracy, as well as the problems raised by the appearance of the popular and democratic authoritarian state.

The modern version of the conflict between the individual (liberalism) and society (democracy) may be seen in the impossibility of reconciling the contradictory ideals displayed in the 1789 political slogan: *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. The problem of reconciling liberty—with its inherent recognition of the right of each person to rise to his/her own chosen level (and equality) with its demand that before the race begins, everyone must be brought to the same level—is the prime meridian across which stare Rousseau, Mazzini, socialism and other leveling forces on the one side, and Montesquieu, Cavour, de Tocqueville, and defenders of the individual on the other. How could one ever come to an agreement that everything practical had been done for equality and that the starting pistol could then be fired? Worse, how could one ever come to an agreement that everything had been done to