

MODERN PAINTERS.



RUSKIN? Oh, yes, he is a writer of art literature. I've often heard of him, but I've never read any of his works. They're too dry and too deep to suit my taste." Such is the expression to which nine out of every ten students of English letters will give vent when asked their opinion of the author of the work which forms the subject of this essay. And as a matter of fact, except for a person of uncommonly serious disposition, the above mentioned work is far from being so interesting as the productions of Scott and Dickens; still for the student whose object in reading is to beautify his style rather than to gratify his longing for pleasure, the works of no author possess more attractions than those of John Ruskin.

This great master of English composition, was born in 1814 and is still living. His early education, imparted to him by a stern-minded father and a solicitous mother, formed so solid a foundation that he afterwards distinguished himself at Oxford, where, at an early age, he won the Newgate prize for English poetry. After studying for a time the rudiments of painting he directed his efforts towards the writing of art literature; and has since given to the world many valuable works, among which "Fors Clavigera" and "Modern Painters" are the most important.

"Modern Painters" is not written in the form of a novel, nor is it simply a collection of precepts. It is rather a criticism of the art of painting from its earliest evidences to its present high development, and is artistically interwoven with important principles which should

underlie all true works of art. It was written, as the author tells us, "not for fame or for money, or for conscience' sake, but of necessity, to bring about, in favor of nature, a reaction against the last four hundred years." The work is remarkable no less for its beauty of style and richness of language than for the depth of thought and soundness of reasoning which are its most prominent characteristics; and everywhere it bears indications of the author's penetrative judgement and wonderful command of language.

"Modern Painters," though designed to be, as its name suggests, a treatise on painting in particular, may in many of its principles be most appropriately applied to works of literature. A few examples to bear out this statement may not be out of place here. In one part of the volume treating of the "Grand Style," "True and False Ideal," etc., we are told that the "great end of art is to produce a deceptive resemblance of reality." This might well have been written concerning novels, to the exclusion of everything else; for it is a well-known fact that the value of a novel is in most cases proportional to the naturalness of the characters and events therein described.

In another place the author tells us that the difference between great and mean art lies in the nobleness of the end to which the effort of the painter is addressed. It is certainly true that the artist who successfully paints such an imposing scene as the "General Judgement" bids higher for immortality than the person who gracefully sketches and faithfully colors some occurrence of ordinary society life; but it is equally certain that a poet who writes some well-finished stanzas on so familiar a subject as "Parliament Hill at Ottawa," is not thereby rendered worthy of such lasting renown as