

The Genius of Norman Nicholson & John Ruskin Christopher Donaldson

From Aristotle we have inherited the idea that genius consists in the capacity to perceive the universal in the particular. One finds this proposition repeated throughout the history of philosophy.

My interest here, however, is less with philosophy than with poetry: specifically, the poetry of Norman Nicholson.

Nicholson was a poet, of course, and he should primarily be appreciated as a poet. But he was also – and this is the point I want to make in this short article – a genius according to the Aristotelian rule. Few writers have shown such a talent for tracing the pattern of universal truths in the particularity of everyday life.

Consider, for example, the closing lines of ‘The Pot Geranium’, which I am certain many of you have off by heart:

My ways are circumscribed, confined as a limpet
To one small radius of rock; yet
I eat the equator, breathe the sky, and carry
The great white sun in the dirt of my finger nails. (ll. 45–8)¹

These lines have often been read as an artistic self-affirmation on Nicholson’s part, and rightly so. They undoubtedly are. As David Cooper, who has written well on this point, notes: ‘they represent the poet’s attempt’ to establish his ‘locatedness’ as a ‘foundation’ for his verse.²

This is quite true, and, extending David’s point, I would add that when read in the context of ‘The Pot Geranium’, these lines also affirm that even a ‘small radius of rock’ contains within it the forces that shape the physical universe.

Holborn Hill and the Himalayas, seen from this perspective, are of equal importance.

This is, of course, the thrust of the meditation on the pot plant from which the poem takes its title:

this crock of soil,
Six inch deep by four across,
Contains the pattern, the prod and pulse of life,
Complete as the Nile or the Niger. (ll. 34–7)

Here alliteration – ‘Contain’ and ‘Complete’, ‘Nile’ and ‘Niger’, ‘pattern’ and ‘prod and pulse’ – conspires with a series of end-stopped clauses to create a sense of containment: a containment that corresponds analogically to the confined environment of the living plant being described.

¹ Norman Nicholson, ‘The Pot Geranium’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by N. Curry (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), pp. 179-80 (p. 180). All further quotations from Nicholson’s poem are taken from this edition.

² David Cooper, ‘Envisioning “the cubist falls”’: Ways of Seeing in the Poetry of Norman Nicholson’, in *Poetry & Geography: Space & Place in Post-War Poetry*, ed. by N. Alexander and D. Cooper (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 148-60 (p. 156).

Even in this small plot – ‘this crock’ – the poem argues, the physical forces that shape all the universe are present.

Nicholson was not the first poet to put this idea in verse. The Romantics, and William Wordsworth especially, did so long before him. (Indeed, I have often wondered if there is not something of Wordsworth’s ‘meanest flower that blows’ in Nicholson’s humble geranium.)

But it is not only to the Romantics that we should look in seeking out the source of this strain in Nicholson’s thinking. Certainly, we should also turn our attention to the writings of that other bewhiskered lover of Cumberland, John Ruskin.

The notion of the particular as an embodiment of the universal is, of course, foundational to Ruskin’s own theory of genius.

One need look no further for proof of this than to a declaration made in his *Journal of a Tour through France and Chamouni*: the verse-diary Ruskin composed in imitation of Byron whilst touring the Continent at the age of sixteen. I quote the relevant stanza in full:

Give me a broken rock, a little moss,
A barberry-tree with fixed branches clinging,
A stream that clearly at its bottom shows
The polished pebbles with its ripples ringing;
These to be placed at Nature’s sweet dispose,
And decked with grass and flowers of her bringing;—
And I would ask no more; for I would dream
Of greater things associated with these,
Would see a mighty river in my stream,
And, in my rock, a mountain clothed with trees.
For Nature’s work is lovely to be seen;
Her finished part as finished whole will please;
And this should be a mountain-scene to me
My broken rock, my stream, and barberry-tree. (Canto II, 35)³

That these are the words of a young man attempting to put his thoughts into verse is clear. Though the imagery is apt, the rhythm is uneven and the rhyme strained.

The meaning of the whole stanza, however, is sincerely expressed, and it recommends a way of looking at the world that Ruskin would advocate for the rest of his life.

There is more that one might write about this than I have room to include here. But it seems significant to me that, despite some of the critical things Nicholson has to say about Ruskin in *The Lakers*, he and his Victorian forebear held a fair bit in common.

Both, notably, had a passion for geology and botany, and for natural history; and for both this passion was a wellspring of literary inspiration.

³ John Ruskin, *Journal of a Tour through France and Chamouni, 1835*, in *The Poems of John Ruskin*, ed. by W. G. Collingwood, 2 Vols. (Orpington & London: G. Allen, 1891), I, 181-223 (p. 201).

Their genius was, therefore, both poetic and scientific. Like Ruskin, Nicholson was a writer who could capture the workings of the natural world in language, and who could ‘see a mighty river in [a] stream’ – or even, as the lines quoted above attest, in a pot plant.

Even more so than Ruskin, though, Nicholson was a poet who made this way of seeing the world integral to the identity he created for himself in his verse.