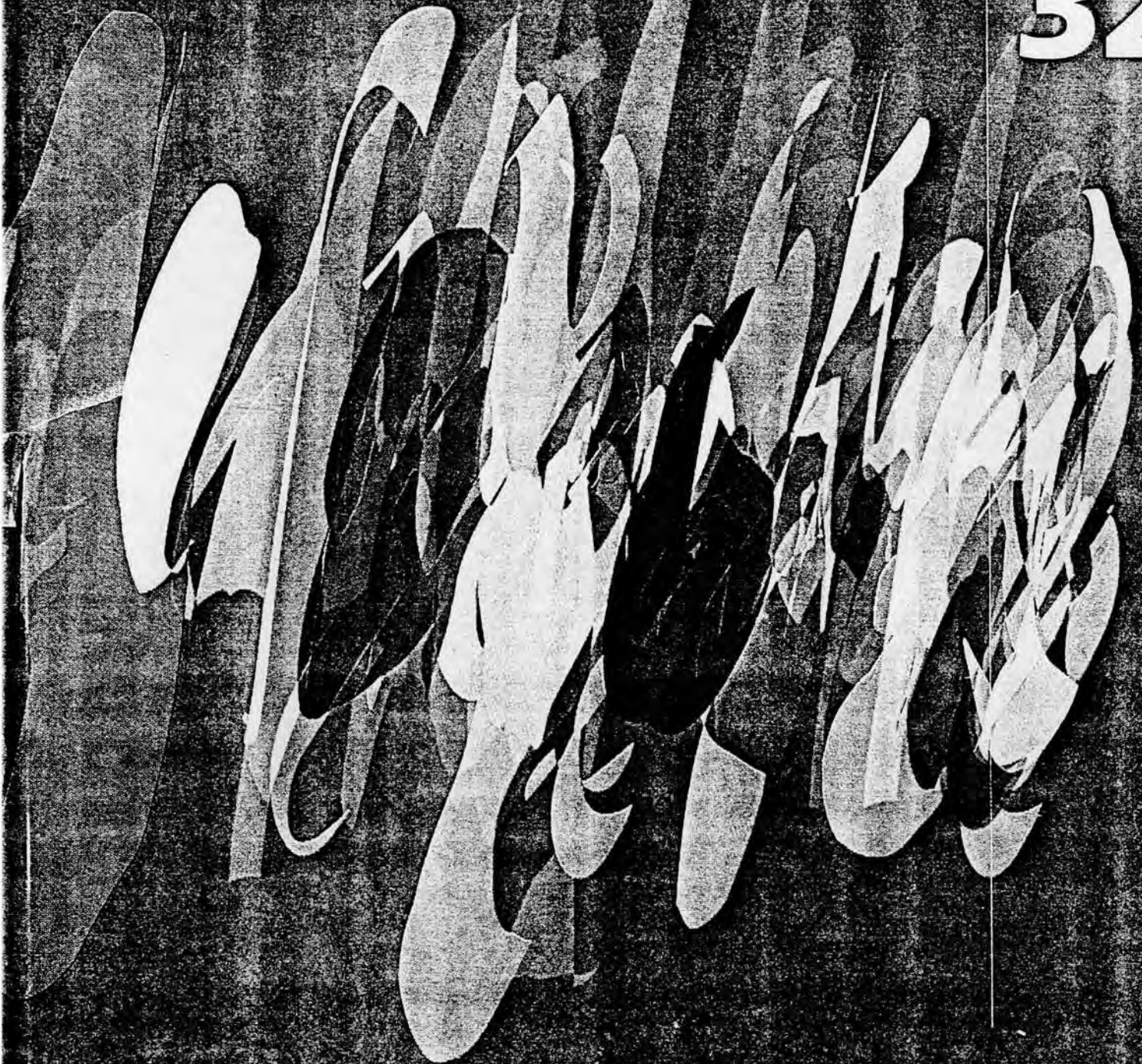
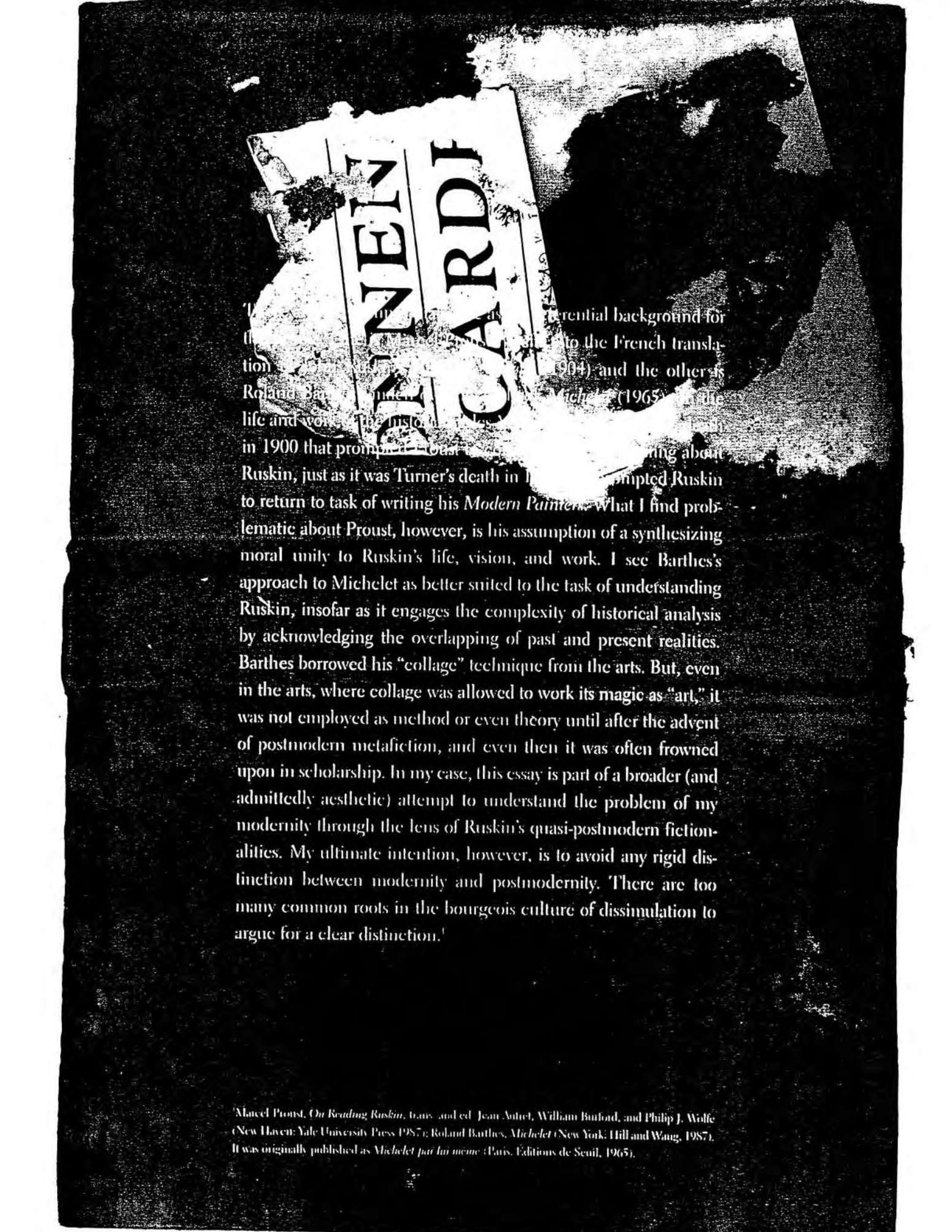


# assemblage

A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture

32





terential background for  
to the French transla-  
(1904) and the others as  
Roland Barthes' *Michelet* (1965) of the  
life and work of Michelet.  
in 1900 that prompted Proust's writing about  
Ruskin, just as it was Turner's death in 1846 that prompted Ruskin  
to return to task of writing his *Modern Painters*. What I find prob-  
lematic about Proust, however, is his assumption of a synthesizing  
moral unity to Ruskin's life, vision, and work. I see Barthes's  
approach to Michelet as better suited to the task of understanding  
Ruskin, insofar as it engages the complexity of historical analysis  
by acknowledging the overlapping of past and present realities.  
Barthes borrowed his "collage" technique from the arts. But, even  
in the arts, where collage was allowed to work its magic as "art," it  
was not employed as method or even theory until after the advent  
of postmodern metafiction, and even then it was often frowned  
upon in scholarship. In my case, this essay is part of a broader (and  
admittedly aesthetic) attempt to understand the problem of my  
modernity through the lens of Ruskin's quasi-postmodern fiction-  
alities. My ultimate intention, however, is to avoid any rigid dis-  
tinction between modernity and postmodernity. There are too  
many common roots in the bourgeois culture of dissimulation to  
argue for a clear distinction.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin*, trans. and ed. Jean Autret, William Butler, and Philip J. Wolfe (New Haven: Yale University Press 1987); Roland Barthes, *Michelet* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987). It was originally published as *Michelet par lui-même* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1965).



# Mark Jarzombek

## Recognizing Ruskin: *Modern Painters* and the Refractions of Self

Mark Jarzombek, associate professor in the History of Architecture, is the director of the History Theory Criticism Section at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

### Impressions of Time

I will even go so far as to say that we ought not to get books too cheaply. No book, I believe, is ever worth half so much to its reader as one that has been coveted for a year at a bookstall, and bought out of saved halfpence; and perhaps a day or two's fasting. That's the way to get at the cream of a book. (16: 59)

Ruskin, *A Joy For Ever*

But this is not how I acquired my Ruskin. It fell into my hands on a hot summer's day practically for free. Driving through upstate New York, I came upon a rambling shack, a precarious assemblage of aluminum siding and plywood roofs, situated in a flat landscape of scraggly fields, rusting farm equipment, and dilapidated barns. In front of it there was a small sign that read "Books." I pulled up, stopped the car, and listened for a moment to the chirping of the crickets, sweat pouring down my neck and back. I opened the wobbly screen door only to discover that inside it was even hotter. A yellowish light filtered through a sheet of corrugated plastic roofing, the smell of hot plywood reminding me of summer camp. In a corner, behind a massive desk blanketed with crusty layers of paper, I spotted the owner, dozing in front of a gently buzzing fan. I moved into a labyrinth of book-lined alleyways and was soon lost among rows and rows of sagging pine shelves. Some had long since snapped in half, and piles of books and magazines lay in heaps just

where they had fallen, perhaps years ago. As I stepped over one pile with a finger braced gingerly against a shelf for balance, my eye fell onto a reddish book speckled with green and white mold. The title had long since faded away and so, too, had the handwritten call number on the spine.

Stuck to the cover was part of a page from another book that happened to have fallen against it. The letters *GARDE* were still legible. Was it part of the word *GARDEN* or *AVANT-GARDE*? I picked the book up and inspected a faded pink sticker pasted to the inside flap, on which was printed "Dansville Public Library Rules." The overdue fine was two cents a day. The book had been checked out once in its entire life on 7 April 1947. I cracked open some of its stuck pages and read aloud: "the columnar peaks of solitary snow, kindling, downwards, chasm by chasm, each in itself a new morning . . . interwoven with a roof of waving flame, and tossing, vault beyond vault, as with the drifted wings of many companies of angels." What a perfect setting for this wonderful sentence.

And so it was that, after paying five quarters, one for each volume, I came to own the cabinet edition of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1888), written, as stated on the title page of the first volume, "By a Graduate of Oxford."<sup>1</sup> I thought back to the last time I had read Ruskin as a graduate student at MIT. Having been schooled in German philosophy and French existentialism, I had nothing but disdain for Ruskin's literariness and didn't take well to his advise to his readers to refrain from studying Kant and "from meddling with German books" (5: 426). Now that I am older and have reread Ruskin with new eyes, I have patience for the rambling Victorian prose; I understand his gutsy defense of Turner as well as his impatient critique of incompetence. And now that I have had the opportunity to recall my own youthful wanderings through the Swiss Alps, I am more sympathetic to his love of the grandiosity of nature. I ad-

mire his impassioned protest against conventionalism and his disdain for the emergent forces of capitalism. I have taken note of his troubled relationship with his father, his "unnatural" affection for young girls, and his fond infatuation with his own correctness. I am fascinated by the madness of his later life and the concatenating prose that blends fantasy, guilt, and vitality. But only now have I been able to tackle his discovery, if it can be put that way, of "paganism." It is this, and less his critique of idealist abstractions, that makes his work so un-Kantian. In Kant's civilized world order — built around the premise that we should live in such a way that our actions may be made into universal laws — art played an essential role as it seemed to offer a resolution for the divergent interests of the individual and society. As good as this sounded, Ruskin was skeptical. Yes, he admired the Good and the Beautiful with probably as much enthusiasm as any German idealist, but he also recognized the inevitability of cynicism, skepticism, and even downright nastiness in aesthetic discourses.

Ruskin's book thus has concurrent parallels to Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (The individual and his own) of 1844, a book that also critiqued a world in which abstract philosophical notions were to find their happy fulfillment. Both works called for a healthy dose of nonconformism and skepticism, and each in its different way set the stage for the coming age of avant-gardist confrontation. For Ruskin, the gist of the matter was a desire to replace rote standards of criticism with personal conviction, the ultimately unprovable abstractions of philosophy with the manifest truth of aesthetic realism, and the drudgery of the professional artist with a seer type of genius. To establish these transferences, the artist and the critic would have to find a common base in the principle of verifiability, the end condition in which artist, critic, and society could merge in a synthesis of overlapping affirmations. But if this was to be achieved it could only be in the form of a para-

dox, for Ruskin knew that his own ego was too contaminated by unruly desires ever to achieve the clarity and transparency that his own theory demanded. And so, if Kant saw art as the ground of society's conscience, hoping for an eventual harmony of Self and Society, Ruskin inadvertently pointed to the terrifying impossibility of closure. He could never satisfy his own ideal; it is what eventually kept him out of the promised land of sanity. Ruskin was, of course, able to distill advantage out this, for in his crisis-of-the-Self he projected, reflected, and magnified the crisis inherent in all of modern society. It is along the seams of this crisis that this essay will move, for the problem of Self as we encounter it in Ruskin differentiates his work from the less self-inflicted theorizations of his contemporaries. It is also what links Ruskin with such later figures as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Aby Warburg, and Michel Foucault.

Patricia Ball in *The Science of Aspects* (1971), Jay Fellows in *Ruskin's Maze: Mastery and Madness in His Art* (1981), and Raymond E. Fitch in *The Poison Sky: Myth and Apocalypse in Ruskin* (1982) have begun to study the question of self and identity in Ruskin's work. This essay, drawing only on *Modern Painters*, is more limited in scope. Its primary intention is to interlink the question of modernity and color with Ruskin's creative ambivalence toward death, father, and Turner.

## The Scientist-Child

Observe, my pleasure was chiefly when I first got into beautiful scenery, out of London. The enormous influence of novelty — the way in which it quickens observation, sharpens sensation, and exalts sentiment — is not half enough taken note of by us, and is to me a very sorrowful matter. I think that what Wordsworth speaks of as a glory in the child, because it has come fresh from God's hands, is in reality nothing more than the freshness of all things to its newly opened sight. (5: 369)

"We must know more to *see* more" (5: 157). The italics are Ruskin's and they are indeed telling. They set up a paradox

within the domain of knowing by suggesting a form of ontological intellectualism impatient with the very process of cognition. To "know" more does not mean we have to read more, debate more, or acquire more academic degrees. The sentence has to be read in reverse: we must see more to know more. "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something" (5: 333).

Ruskin's circular reasoning uses an unexpected agency of transformation: the paintings of Turner. They need to be discussed not because of some narrow event in art production or art criticism, but because they open up a utopian world in which knowing and seeing become essentially coterminous. The distanced scholar is replaced by the seer-artist; the quick fix of mimesis by the insightful observation of nature; and the arrogance of bad critics by the humility of faith. In sidestepping the traditional warning about the falsity inherent in all that is aesthetic, Ruskin hoped to salvage art from its own forces, and *seeing* was the avenue back up the steep slope of negativities. Not in vain was Ruskin often referred to as the Luther of the arts.

It boils down to a "truth" inherent in precisely that which is most subjective, the application of paint to a canvas. But to disguise this subjectivity, (the disguise of subjectivity being essential to *our* modernity just as much as to Ruskin's), readers are told that a painter is great not because of skill alone, but because of his capacity to link the secular with the divine. "Knowing" is not some overly reasoned abstract cognition, it is rooted in a cultural dynamic that recognizes its timely importance. The argument is complete when Ruskin extends this as commensurate with historical greatness. Turner, Ruskin states, should be placed on the same level of significance as Francis Bacon (5: 353), especially since he "fills every corner and space with new evidence of knowledge and fresh manifestation of thought" (3: 489). In Turner's hands, something as insignificant as "a little crum-

bling white, or a lightly rubbed paper” can, in the arts, become the mark of “a great man” (2: 52).

But it would be wrong to conclude that painting, for Ruskin, has its epistemological analogy in science, for whereas science is anything but innocent, the painter has the advantage of achieving “science” without the guilt implied in its acquisition. He can acquire knowledge and yet remain “immaculate.” “Childhood often holds a truth with its feeble fingers which the grasp of manhood cannot retain, which it is the pride of utmost age to recover” (3: 31).

Though this fascination with innocence is wrapped up in the tortures of Ruskin’s own personality, it was a proposition that, once theorized, was to have enormous appeal, for it spoke to the emergent modernist desire to create a way of making art outside of the possibility of deception. Armed with the self-aggrandizing ethos of innocence (carrying with it its own supposedly “historical” dimension), artists throughout the twentieth century saw themselves as sites of incorruptibility.

And Ruskin is no exception. His discomfort with modern life is well known and expresses itself in many places in *Modern Painters*. We live, he states, in an “age of Charlatanry,” giving ourselves over to “the rage of fashion” and to “the glare of novelty” (3: 16–17). As a result, humanity suffers from a “generally diseased state of mind,” with “the great mechanical impulses of the age, of which most of us are so proud,” he adds, nothing more than “a mere passing fever” (5: 356, 380). Ruskin does not limit his “critique” of modernity merely to its chaos, but works backward through art history to attack, among others, Lee, whose paintings are “small, confused, and unselected” (3: 18), Teniers, whose are “a mere sweeping of the brush over the surface” (3: 483), and Canaletto, that “inferior workman,” whose paintings are an “inexcusable violation of truth” (3: 514). It is all part of a “history” of the insidious conspiracy of

civilization, manifesting itself in art criticism when writers fail to understand the depth of knowledge that is required of painters. If they use generalization to describe a landscape, it is “the generalization of a defeated army into indistinguishable impotence, — the generalization of the elements of a dead carcass into dust” (3: 38).

And it is here, in the vortex of this terrifying world of “confusion and chaos,” that Ruskin, stepping into his own gloomy picture, proffers himself as the ideal artist, risking body and soul for its salvation. He makes sure his readers learn how *terribly* the train whistles interfere with his thinking processes, and — while on a train in Italy, for he did love its sense of speed and movement! — how totally insipid he found the American girls who traveled with him in the coupé. Ruskin’s “delicacy” suffers St. Sebastian–like in an insensate world. *Seeing* comes at the price of *suffering*. But this suffering, in restoring art to its rightful place, forces Ruskin to find in it a kernel of impossibility that will haunt him to the very end. For like his critic colleagues, who can generalize “a carcass into dust,” Ruskin, too, faces death; but, as he recognizes in *Modern Painters*, it will have to be of a different kind and for a different end.

No doubt, Ruskin is a hypocritical, conservative, stuffy, highbrow Englishman who has simply no intention of fathoming the extent and nature of his own complicity in what he called “the present crisis of civilization” (5: 371). But to criticize Ruskin at this point would be difficult, for he articulated an issue already practically a cliché; namely, the bourgeois desire to express its self-victimization while aiming to make art true to the cause of its secular salvation. As late as 1950, a philosopher wrote that the artist gives us “the structure of reality as it reveals itself to him through his eyes. . . . What he gives us is knowledge of the primary data of experience, [which enables us to] snatch at the spirituality that would otherwise escape [us in a world] drunken with tech-



nological power and misguided by bad philosophy. We must use our eyes not for banal practical responses but to penetrate into the metaphysical nature of man.” This comes from a book by Elísio Vivas, but a similar quotation could be drawn from any number of places, with artists easily lured down the path of false promises, as the history of the modernist avant-garde has borne out. Simply stated, modern art theory, from Ruskin on, promised too much to too many (a history better than that of historians, a science better than that of scientists, and, above all, an innocence purer than that of children), while never having to own up to its own inadequately cleansed rhetoric. The truth it heralded to have discovered could only stand in for its tortured impossibility. That which came to be *seen* represented what the subject wanted to see more than anything else.

## Turner Enclosed

To watch the corn grow, and the blossoms set, to draw hard breath over ploughshare or spade; to read, to think, to love, to hope, to pray, — these are the things that make men happy. . . . The world’s prosperity or adversity depends upon our knowing and teaching these few things: but iron, or glass, or electricity, or steam, in no wise. . . . [Scientists] are always adverse to it, having a tendency to chill and subdue the feelings, and to resolve all things into atoms and numbers. (5: 380f)

*Modern Painters* should go down in the history of theory as an early form of pop psychology. It is diagnosis, theory, and therapy all rolled into one. Ruskin lets us know, for example, that his readers are “simple and busy men” who would like to get on with life, but are unfortunately “beset by fatigue of the eyes” (5: 426). But the book works only if these simple and busy men are not so busy that they put the book down after reading a few pages. “Stay a moment,” Ruskin pleads at a particularly knotty spot in his argument (5: 362). It is, he adds, not easy to “reanimate” the forces of “space and time” (5: 380f).

*Seeing* is thus not an abstract admonition; it is embodied in the act of *reading*. The ambiguity between seeing and reading finds its expression in the painfully slow movement of Ruskin’s eye across the painter’s “canvas” — in a few inches we can go from “leaden purple,” “aquamarine green,” “transparent pea-green,” “plate aquamarine,” to “bright green,” marking out inch by inch even “the seemingly vacant or incomprehensible portions of Turner’s canvases” in a way that is both accurate and obtuse, visual and consciously myopic (3: 23). The slowing down of the eye is supposed to help readers coordinate their perceptions with Turner’s life, which was, for Ruskin, the embodiment of all that was *not* modern. As an immobile recluse shunning the public sphere, Turner had a career that was “uneventful and secluded” (7: 442f). But in emphasizing this fact, Ruskin forces Turner, his paintings, and his colors back into the center of a bourgeois struggle for survival.

Ultimately, Ruskin’s purpose is two-fold: to bring the reader into the claustal walls of Turner’s domain (with the text becoming the very architecture against which Turner’s paintings are framed), and, at the same time, to bring Turner’s paintings into the open as a type of devotional object that can provide stability and control in the tormented secular world.

Before continuing, I would like once again to note Ruskin’s participation in the formation of modernist theory. I think in particular — and in the context of the German infatuation with Ruskin’s antitechnological moralism — of Martin Heidegger and his Black Forest farmer-philosopher. This deep and pensive “farmer,” like Ruskin’s “Turner,” is meant to point out the inadequacies of a hectic and driven life. But the problem with Ruskin — and this is probably why his “Turner” is better than Heidegger’s “farmer” — is that he cannot give himself up to the forces of stasis. He is mobile, all too mobile. “Let us beware,” so he states, “that our rest becomes not the rest of stones, which so long as they

are torrent-tossed, and thunder-stricken, maintaining their majesty, but when the stream is silent, and the storm passed, suffer the grass to cover them and the lichen to feed on them, and are ploughed down into dust" (4: 31).

Turner is, therefore, not a passive ideal. He cannot be allowed to remain just Turner. And so his "monasticism" (like the slowness of his reading) becomes a foil against which Ruskin projects his own yearning for stability while simultaneously lamenting its impossibility in the mirror of his own fictionalized spirit. This brings us to the problem of death. In the first part of *Modern Painters* death belongs only to the overcivilized. It is foreign, removed, and distant. But by the end of the book it has become a lens through which the works of even Dürer would be viewed. He, too, "had to work out his question concerning the grave" (7: 306). The slow reading, whether it be of Turner or of any landscape, is a type of textual premonition of death. It is a middle ground, the ennobling of the human spirit in its desire for monumentality (bringing us to the point of its grand passivity), while carrying readers forward into a knowledge of the scientifically intimate realities of the divine. The result is death snatched away from its civilizational curse. *Seeing* is a liberation by death under its own terms, death being thus "the last enemy that shall be destroyed" (7: 460).

## The Desires of Death

In seven tin boxes in the lower room of the National Gallery I found upward of nineteen thousand pieces of paper, drawn upon by Turner, in one way or another. Many on both sides; some with four, five or six subjects on each side (the pencil point digging spiritedly through from the foregrounds of the front into the tender pieces of sky on the back). (7: 4)

Ruskin finished part two of *Modern Painters* in 1846; he began work on part three in May of 1854. These years spanned the period of his falling in love with Effie Gray (1847), their

marriage (1848), two trips to Venice (the winter of 1849–50 and the winter of 1850–51), the writing of *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53), a trip to Scotland to help in the remodeling of Camden Chapel (1853), and finally, the annulment of the marriage (April of 1854). With the ink on the annulment paper barely dry, Ruskin took up the task of writing part three.

Ruskin refused to make love to Effie, or, as she claimed, was incapable of it. He described her as a "man trap," "a Medusa," "a beautiful destruction." Maybe his resistance to her was a point of theory and not of physicality, with the "strength" of the former covering the inadequacies of the latter. "Observe," so he states in his famous critique of the "pathetic fallacy" formulated in part three, "there is not a single false, or even overcharged expression" (5: 211). The ultimate love was the most unconsummated one. Effie was in no position to understand. She was the equivalent of the vulgar Philip Wouwerman, the seventeenth-century Dutch painter, whom Ruskin describes in part nine as having "thoughts [that] are wholly of this world." Ruskin, on the other hand, saw himself as possessing the soul of "Angelico," whom he contrasts with Wouwerman: "Angelico was habitually as incognizant of an earthly pleasure as Wouwerman of any heavenly one" (7: 370). From Angelico it was a small step across the disappointments of marriage to the beloved "Turner."

Turner's death in 1851 was the event that helped Ruskin gather faith in his conflicted desire for love. His first thought was that there remained nothing to write "but his epitaph" (5: 4). He soon changed his mind, and in this "sadder age" — as he described the post-Turner era — he recognized an opportunity to portray the Self as liberated from all that is false. Ruskin took up his reinvestigation into Turner, not with death per se, but with its cultural equivalent. In 1851 he added a short postscript to part two, lamenting that the



paintings of the artist were not to be seen on the walls of the Academy. Turner's oeuvre was cut down less by the forces of nature than by a host of "vicious critics" (3: 631). This observation, which probably reflects some of Ruskin's own fears, sets the stage for one of the tenderest passages in all of Ruskin's writings. It deals with the exhumation of Turner's work. Between 1857 and 1858 Ruskin spent several months in the basement of the National Gallery in London pouring over Turner's drawings. The physical body of Turner, rotting in a tomb in St. Paul's, becomes a body of "worm-eaten" and "mouse-eaten" drawings, some of which were "in chalk, which the touch of the finger would sweep away," others "in ink rotted into holes," and yet others "long eaten away by damp and mildew, and falling into dust at the edges, in capes and bays of fragile decay." With two assistants, Ruskin points out, "I worked all day long and far into the night," unfolding, sorting, and arranging "the flattened bundles" of drawings. "I have never in my life felt so much exhausted as when I locked the last box and gave the keys to Mr. Wornum in May 1858" (7: 5).

The job of sorting all these drawings is, of course, well done. But, as everything with Ruskin, it is written against the grain of its own theory. The artist, Ruskin writes, "has done nothing till he has concealed himself" (3: 22), and Turner has concealed himself many times over: in his studio, in his tomb, and in his desk drawers, all of which now have to be violated for the sake of truth.

Ruskin can "discover" Turner's art only as something rescued from the grips of the eternal. The process seems to have been conducted with the cool dispassion of an autopsy, but it was not lacking in feeling. On the contrary, it was dispassion in the name of the most exalted of sentiments. Ruskin is alone with the beloved and he does not need to worry about a potentially troublesome reciprocity of feelings. He is finally in a realm that is outside the cruel se-

ductions of modernity; but it is not a peaceful existence. Again and again, in ever-escalating terms, he points to the intensity of the struggle. On the last pages of his book, while describing Turner's *Apollo and the Python* of 1811, he enters into the figure of Apollo in order to fight the cruel Python himself, that "worm of eternal decay." It is "a strife of purity with pollution; of life, with forgetfulness; of love, with the grave" (7: 420). The struggle with the Python was not always antagonistic. In her youth, Ruskin points out, she was beloved by Apollo, "who promised to grant her whatever she would ask," but once she had been given eternal youth, "she denied him, and wasted into the long ages." Now she was "to him Calypso, the Concealer, Circe, the Sorceress" (7: 422).

"Turner" thus undergoes a second death, for he can be put back to rest only when he has helped Ruskin overcome his ambivalence toward woman and modernity. "It is not the mere bodily death that [Turner] conquered — that death had no sting. It was this spiritual death which He conquered, so that at last it should not be swallowed up — mark the word — not in life; but in victory" (7: 456). "Turner" thus makes the impossible possible. His death denies Ruskin speech, just as his "speech" denies its artistry. Ruskin, through the artifice of the maneuvering-of-Self, recovers "Turner's" language, and through language, the possibility of love, and through love, the possibilities inherent in the original state of artlessness.

The stresses on Ruskin are profound. Against the church dogmatist he had to become the cold scientist (if not the mad doctor); against the scientist he had to become the impassioned admirer (if not the necrophilic lover); against the critic he had to become the wise philosopher (if not a soothsayer of modernity); against the philosopher he had to become the "humble amateur" (if not the architect of cultural salvation). On the front line of the battle, Ruskin has

to renegotiate his identity at every turn of the page, finally stepping into the canvas of the beloved “other” to explain away his tragic and ineffectual relationship with Effie, uniting classical myth, Turner’s painting, and his own life into a seamless whole. Ruskin has brought “Turner” to the brink of extinction by making him completely his.

### (Re)Fracted Landscapes

The sunlight falls from the cypresses of Rousseau’s island and straight towards the bridge. The shadows of the bridge and of the trees fall on the water in leaden purple, opposed to its general hue of aquamarine green. This green color is caused by the light being reflected from the bottom, though the bottom is not seen. (3: 504f)

Ruskin quoting from his own diary

Free from the curse of excessive human emotion as well as from the mandates of church and state, landscape evokes the purest of passions. It is the site where artists can make a subject out of an apparent subjectlessness. “The ground,” Ruskin writes, “is to the landscape painter what the naked human body is to the historical” (3: 425). In the landscape, the subject enacts its desire for the objective. It is, therefore, not the real landscape that Ruskin wants us to see, just as it is not the real Ruskin that he portrays for his readers. The two are the poles of an axial relationship that fall away once Turner’s “landscape” and Ruskin’s “writings” consummate their cold love on center stage. For Ruskin, the moment of union, though confirmed in the death of “Turner,” begins when “Turner” first discovered “loveliness at last,” not among people — “those pale, poverty-struck” examples of “marred humanity” — but in the place “that God has made,” there among “the purple rocks, and river pools of blue, and tender wilderness of glittering trees, and misty lights of evening on immeasurable hills” (7: 384).

“Landscape” is thus a domain not only of vision but also of color-speech. The true site where landscape shakes off its sta-

tus as representation, color-speech is where knowing, seeing, and art defy illusion. And it is precisely in this conflation of “Turner’s” eye and Ruskin’s voice (Ruskin’s autobiography having entered that of Turner’s, canvas has become synonymous with text) that Ruskin charts the presence of an aesthetic that picks its way through reality like a cat on cautious feet. We are to release ourselves into its fiction in the same way we are to release ourselves into its truth. It is an aesthetic that aspires to render objects visible at the moment of their greatest remoteness.

Ruskin’s “landscapes” are, however, a prefiguration of the same violence that they condemn, for the text that brings us into a landscape inadequately renders itself invisible in the immanence of its practice. It links the quietude of the emptied space of the landscape with the silence of the archival lab in the National Gallery. The resultant paradox of *seeing* what is so obvious and yet so (in)visible forces Ruskin, naturally, to the limits of expression. “I cannot in the least describe the feeling,” he claims, even though we know that he will (5: 368). He must, even if it means that Ruskin has to describe nature as if it were a painting, and a painting as if it were nature, to link them to the same level of science. In a parenthetical clause, he states that “I am now describing nature’s work and Turner’s with the same words” (3: 485). This is hardly just another case of *ut pictor poesis*, because Ruskin in actuality puts himself *between* “nature” and “Turner,” and nowhere more poignantly than in those instances where, as part of his evidence of “nature,” he uses pieces of his own “textual” (textual-pictorial/pictorial-discursive) presence. When he quotes from his diaries, as he does in the passage above, it is under the pretext of calling upon his own observations as authentic evidence. But, in actuality, Ruskin, realizing the inadequacies of description — if not the inadequacies of “Turner”! — discovers himself in his own science, in this sense, putting himself into his own textual

landscape. It is a convenient yet impossible conflation of means and ends. The ineradicable desire for objectivity when confronted by the equally precise realities of dissimulation guarantees that thought will never become totally coincident with the terms of its discourse. The modernity of Ruskin's science is cut through by the postmodernity of his being.

## The Writer's Eye

Philosophers, who, though the human soul  
Be of a thousand faculties composed,  
And twice ten thousand interests, do yet prize  
This soul, and the transcendent universe  
No more than as a mirror that reflects  
To proud Self-love her own intelligence

Wordsworth, quoted on the title page of *Modern Painters*

Ruskin's "Turner" is inscribed in at least three different categories of intention: strategy (the critique of modern culture through a combination of tropes of innocence and social decline), admiration (the creation of a mutually affirmative unity of morality, science, and philosophy struggling against the cruel temporalities of God, life, and society), and finally, superiority (the death of Turner's limited univalence and the rise of Ruskin's self-reflective complexity). Ruskin outdoes his beloved by projecting "Turner" into the folds of his own quest for historical legitimacy. "Turner," who has from Ruskin's perspective so triumphantly concealed himself from the world, is thus portrayed as something less than Ruskin himself, for if "Turner" is limited by the canvases that separate art from nature, Ruskin enters nature through the greater force of language and cunning to uncover the power of the pictorial exchange between the dynamic and the static.

is a quest that rests on a problem having to do with Ruskin's unusual bifurcated talents as writer and as artist. It leads Ruskin into a psychological bind. He must avoid narcissism, yet is drawn to himself again and again. He quotes from his

diaries in one moment, as if to emphasize, if not overemphasize, his literary skills; he also quotes from his own drawings to demonstrate his considerable design talents. He lets it be known that "I have sketched by chance one evening the lines of the Apennines from the ramparts of Parma, and I have put the rough note of it, and the sky that was over it, in Plate 14" (5: 397). The drawings evoke the desire for transparency, for an art without artifice, and thus keep the Self from recognizing its participation in the aesthetic quality of life.

These drawings scattered throughout *Modern Painters* thus beg comparison with "Turner" and at the same moment create a disciplinary disjuncture between painting and writing as they evoke not painting but poetry, particularly that of Keats, Tennyson, and Wordsworth, Ruskin's childhood hero. Their work serves as a stabilizing literary referent for the open-ended pictorial subjectlessness of Turner's work. At several points in the text it is not Ruskin, but actually Wordsworth, "the keenest-eyed of all modern poets" who "illustrates Turner" (3: 307). Why? Because these poets deal with reality just like Ruskin. "Highly creative poets" are "to a great extent impassive, . . . watching the feeling as if it were from far off" (5: 210). Wordsworth is another "Ruskin," and "Turner" is rendered oddly transparent by the force of poetry.

There is a brilliant (in)congruity in this triangulated relationship, for the vast knowledge that Ruskin demands of himself — and of his readers — does not necessarily seem appropriate to the "Turner" that Ruskin portrays. "Turner" is a good painter, but he is not literary. He is at best a type of idiot savant who, in looking "stoutly into the world," resolves everything into a few "great brush strokes." The process by which this enscripting of "Turner" becomes an exaltation of life beyond Turner conjures up the possibility of a speechlessness that Turner could never express.



## The Subject Within

It is a little valley of soft turf, enclosed in its narrow oval by jutting rocks and broad flakes of nodding fern. From one side of it to the other winds serpentine, a clear brown stream, drooping into quicker ripple as it reaches the end of the oval field, and then, first islanding a purple and white rock with an amber pool, it dashes away into a narrow fall of foam under a thicket of mountain ash and alder. (7: 268)

When Ruskin took up the task of finishing *Modern Painters* after Turner's death, he had planned to give the book to his father as a Christmas present. The elder Ruskin supported John financially and was eager for him to succeed. He also placed enormous psychological demands on him by outlining the structure of his success. Their conflict was deep and painful. They disagreed "about all the universe." The struggle prompted Ruskin to continually look for an existence unencumbered by "paternal interference." And once Ruskin transformed his father into a convenient symbol of modernity, capitalism, and cruelty, he could see his hatred for his father as part of his noble resistance to all that was corrupt. He would meet with his father and then claim, "for the rest of the day one is apt to think of dying." *Modern Painters* thus represents the lingering hope Ruskin had for reconciliation, but it was written without hope of success.

In this context, it is understandable that "Turner" should become a type of ersatz father. He demands nothing from Ruskin, for he is the ultimate nonwriter, and as such he elicits nothing but love. Ruskin is, therefore, drawn to his father and to Turner from opposite poles. "Turner" is the representative of everything that has found its way back to the Self, back into the "landscape," and back — with Ruskin's help — to the "islanding" of color and the alternate paternalism of Wordsworth.

The problem is that this forces Ruskin to confront his father within the very body of his theory, for as bad as Ruskin's re-

lationship with his father was, it did not keep him from writing to him almost daily when he was traveling. Ruskin's father, as Ruskin well knew, understood the essential problem of his son's literariness. Ruskin's tug-of-war with his father is thus not only a tug-of-war with the abstractions of modernity but with his own literariness. He has internalized the demon and yet seeks to throw it off. We read, for example, that he wants to throw his "geological outlines aside, and take up Turner's vignette of the Alps at Daybreak" — some of these outlines (Saussure's *Voyage dans les Alpes* of 1779–96, for instance) having been given to him by his father (3: 433).

Turner's death in 1851 made the relationship one-sided. "I must find a home" — a *new* home — Ruskin would write from abroad in 1862. But the truth is that he never found another "Turner." None of the artists that he supported from the 1850s onward would carry the same weight. All that was left was a desire for the death of the true parent, which took place in 1864. By then, the first death had exhausted the second.

*Modern Painters*, lodged between the terrifying forces of self-love and self-hate, moves from a text-under-autobiographical-stress to the paradox of writing in modern times. It is either biblical in its hope to reorient the lives of others or patently superficial in its powerlessness to overcome its own literariness. Though Ruskin would accuse himself of writing a book that represented the latter (it being "too floral"), he clearly aims for the former. He wants it to be a structure that "stands in blanched and meager massiveness and serviceableness, gathering human souls together underneath it" (6: 11). After all, the book, Ruskin admits, was written not "for fame, or for money, or for conscience-sake, . . . but of necessity." But this necessity defeats the purpose, for it forces Ruskin to confront the guilt of his literariness (and wanderlust).

Ruskin confronts this guilt with a simple self-effacing move. *Modern Painters*, he claims in the introduction, is “rooted like a tree” (7: 10). It is an important metaphor as it once again links Ruskin with his text. I think, in particular, of part six, which has as its subject the observation of trees. “The other great class of plants,” Ruskin writes, “we may perhaps best call BUILDING PLANTS. These will not live on the ground but eagerly raise edifices above it. Each works hard with solemn forethought all its life. Perishing it leaves its work in the form which will be most useful to its successors — its own monument, and their inheritance. These architectural edifices we call “Trees” (7: 21–22). What follows is a bizarre self-portrait of man-as-plant, reminiscent of Daphne escaping the touch of Apollo. Ruskin escapes the contaminating touch of human emotion by dissecting himself in an extended trope of denial. The “tree” rises above the ground, but is still tied to it and thus to the compulsions of science. It is also tied to the desire of death. “Kindred of the earth shall you yourself become,” Ruskin says in the last lines of the book, “saying to the grave, ‘Thou art my father’” (7: 466).

The tree, in its conflicted attitude toward the very ground that gives it sustenance, helps link Ruskin’s literary *opus* with Turner’s artistic *corpus*. For it reflects off from Turner’s noble death to become its self-victimizing opposite, the book “being done for nothing,” he would say, “or rather less than nothing, in the expectation of no pay but death” (7: 449). The fruit of the tree, Ruskin adds, can be taken by anyone who might pass along. “You are welcome to gather it without thanks” (7: 10). Such a gesture defies nature, for, as he writes at the end of the chapter on trees, “fruit should not be trampled on, and had better perhaps be put a little out of reach than too near at hand, so that it may not be gathered wantonly or without some little trouble, and may be waited for until it is properly ripe” (7: 125). Clearly in *this* world, in *this modern* world, that will not happen.

Once again, subject and object continually replace each other in a complex system of tropes that struggle to undermine the inevitable force of modernity by positing it against the equally inevitable force of self-denial. It requires only one last fillip. Though a device that renders the Self invisible, the “tree” is, after all, in a landscape and thus asks to be *seen* (italics are appropriate here I believe), which means that in the very moment it is brought into life as a metaphor for the anguished Self it is further reduced to a few flecks of paint. “The moment the artist . . . can make us think that *he* has done nothing, that nature has done all — that moment he becomes ennobled, he proves himself great. He becomes great when he becomes invisible” (7: 60). When he first wrote *Modern Painters*, Ruskin tried to master the art of invisibility by presenting it anonymously. Though he would later own up to his text, he would do so in such a way that ultimately it is unclear whether Ruskin or Turner is the most invisible. Ruskin, as the true “subject” of his discourse, masks its lack of fulfillment through the “otherness” of representation. It begs for a “science” adequate to its cunning. It begs for a “Turner” adequate to Ruskin.

*Modern Painters* thus attempts through the enactment of paternal loss (the loss of Self into both the textualness-of-the-Self and the canvasness-of-the-other) to break out of the ego and enter into the quietude of an alternate paternity. But because Turner’s death is precisely not paternal, it uproots the very fabric of destiny and destroys the peace of death even as it claims to find, in the closing chapters, a new sense of earthly peace.

### The Magnifying Gaze

If one of those little flakes of Mica-sand, hurried in tremulous spangling along the bottom of the ancient river, too light to sink, too faint to float, almost too small for sight, could have a mind given to it as it was at last borne down with its kindred dust into the abysses of the stream . . . what would it have thought, had it

been told that one day, knitted into a strength as of imperishable iron, restless by the air, infusible by the flame, out of the substance of it, with its fellows, the axe of God should hew that Alpine tower; that against it — poor, helpless mica flake! — the wild north winds should rage in vain. (6: 292)

Ruskin looks up from the tin boxes containing Turner's drawings, straightens his collar, and states: "It is as ridiculous for any one to speak positively about painting who has not given a great part of his life to its study, as it would be for a person who had never studied chemistry to give a lecture on affinities of elements" (5: 5). This follows his own admission that "I have given up so much of life to this object; earnestly desiring to ascertain, and be able to teach the truth respecting art; and also knowing that this truth was, by time and labor, definitely ascertainable" (5: 4). Ruskin punishes the body of the beloved by forcing it into complicity with his insistently dispassionate gaze. Turner's is pursued as if by a stalker, one who hunts him down, leaving no drawing and no stone unturned. At one point in *Modern Painters* Ruskin notes that "I went there [Rheinfels] the moment I had got Turner's sketches arranged in 1858, and drew it with pen . . . on every side on which Turner had drawn it" (7: 436).

The protocol of self-control restores faith, at least for the moment, in the unified masculine (dis)passion of life. It helps Ruskin to see beyond the eroticism implied in his work. But in loosing himself in the other, he can only pretend to be following in the footsteps of science. As a result, the book creates an indecision about the nature of art and passion that makes it look as if it were written by a stranger eager to hide all traces of psychological affliction lest they destroy the image of perfect synthesis between subject and object. It is a synthesis that we are allowed to suspect for being a mixture of psychological necessity and literary craft. The demise of romanticism is thus inevitable. The free-ranging figure of the imagination encounters the steely eyes of a poker player

who has much to lose if his gambles do not pay off. And everyone knows the game: to be a hero, you have to play the part of the victim without ever being literally the victim. The unattainable horizon of certainty is never meant to completely obscure the underlying sense of tragedy.

But, we might ask, what good are these theatrics if the evocations of Self cannot fit back into its projected image, if it postulates a capacity to experience the object within a safe haven of productive knowledge and guarantees an affinity between knower and known, but crumbles apart when knowledge locates too many discrete pieces of Self infiltrating its reality? Instead of grounding the discourse in what is presumably obvious, it incapacitates the critical element in its own medium. As a result, underneath Ruskin's enunciative modalities lurks the anxiety that not enough has been said. Nothing is left empty in the canvas and yet the moment the canvas is filled by "Ruskin," the essence always seems to remain that which is left blank.

"Only another Turner could apprehend Turner," Ruskin states (7: 453). That "other Turner" is, of course, Ruskin. But where is he once he has been folded out of view behind the veils of Turner's canvases and reembodyed as text? This ambiguity of location constituted the masterstroke of Ruskin's success, even though it would also be the undoing of his position in the twentieth century, which in its high modernist phase at least preferred simpler — and more overt — manifestations of "affliction."

### Seeing Color

I take about an inch and a half of Turner's ash trunks and this I cannot better; this is perfectly finished; it is not possible to add more truth to it on that scale. . . . Every quarter of an inch in Turner's drawings will bear magnifying in the same way; much of the finer work in them can hardly be traced, except by the keenest sight, until it is magnified. (4: 140, 142)



In Ruskin's "Turner," the inch of canvas brings us close to the power of painting to transcend its own medium. But at the precise moment that it solves the Platonic distrust of representation, the very segmentation and measurement of art denatures the object; an inch of art, especially when magnified, is, after all, unnatural and returns us to the problematic scientism of the archival lab. And yet it is at this moment, when the scale of observation has been radically challenged, that color becomes a prescription for transcendent objectivity. Color-text is the stitches that tie Ruskin with "Turner." "It begins with purple and blue; then passes to gold, or cairngorm color (topaz color); then to pale gray, through which the yellow passes into black; and the black through broken dyes of lichen, into green" (5: 349). "Color is, therefore, in brief terms, the type of love" (7: 419). And so it is color, Turner's use of color in particular, that in the end of *Modern Painters* conquers the "dark enemy" Python, which turns out to be not only Effie and father combined, but all of modernity. Ruskin gives as an example the railroad bridge over the Fall of Schaffhausen, adding that every perfect and lovely spot which they can touch, they defile" (7: 423). Color becomes the site of the ultimate escape but it is also the site of the ultimate self-victimization and a longing for its own form of exalted death. The great beauty of color, Ruskin told an audience at a lecture, is that it is a type of "dying away; no color was in fact of use till it appeared to be dying" (12: 503).

These patches of color return Ruskin to his childhood experiences, and in this sense we can say that he saturates his admiration of Turner's color with the inescapable realities of autobiographical stress. Having been raised in a strict puritanical environment in which his mother forbade him the right to play with dolls, he comments in his self-portrait *raeterita*, written in the years 1885–89 in between bouts of madness, that "I was always summarily whipped if I cried, and not do as I was bid, or tumbled on the stairs. I soon at-

tained serene and secure methods of life and motion; and could pass my days contentedly in tracing squares and comparing the colors of my carpet. . . . The carpet, and what patterns I could find in bed-covers, dresses, or wall-papers to be examined, were my chief resources" (35: 21).

Color-text purifies Ruskin of the anxieties of his madness, while simultaneously reminding him of their source. Discovered under the sensory stresses of his upbringing, they represent a longing for companionship. In their more philosophical rearticulations in *Modern Painters* — "every square inch of canvas is a perfect composition" (3: 572) — color-text not only preserves (and conceals) the discourse of the sensual within the search for the modernist disciplinary *ratio*, but articulates a line of thought that, had it been maintained, would have brought "art" to its own form of punishing end. Ruskin's color-language ultimately attempts to obliterate art in the immanence of its own practice. It represents the longing for the quietude of a nonaesthetic Self, drawing the unsuspecting reader into the depths of his compulsions. These pieces of pigmented, paranoid loneliness, reducing the optic to something no bigger than "a little crumbling white," claim to resolve the crisis by bringing the flux of life to a grinding myopic halt. They are meditative fix points, yet, because of their scale, indeterminate, unsatisfiable, and melancholic; as entry into the possibility of the other they are subjected to the will of the same uneasy modernist aesthetic that allowed them to come into being in the first place.

## Recognizing Ruskin

Robert Slutzky, five other students, and I were walking through the streets of Lucca, Italy. It was late and we were a bit drunk and unsure of the route back to the hotel. We wound up on a long straight street at the perimeter of town. The line of sky above us was a dark marine blue turning to purplish black at the horizon. Ahead of us there was a small intersection with a single street



Mark Jarzombek, 3.92.series 10

lamp dangling unsteadily from a pole. Suddenly we heard the noise of a car, then its red shape streaked through the crossing and was gone in an instant. Its afterimage lingered as an orangish reflection on the shiny pavement for a few moments, then slowly began to fade away. Slutzky stopped abruptly, and we crowded around behind him. There was silence as the shadow of the street lamp tossed back and forth across our faces; he whispered loudly, 'Did you *see* that?' I presume italics are appropriate here.

Jarzombek, diary entry, 1977

To also partially (un)conceal myself, I must admit that I, too, am not writing at a remove. In my own collage work, which dates back to the mid-1970s, I create, among larger pieces, dozens of small ones. It was this work, tied into Ruskin only through the realities of disseminational practices (about which at the time I knew very little), that prepared me, ironically, to recognize Ruskin among the piles of fallen books. But unlike Ruskin's interest in color, my pieces do not go from the represented to the nonrepresentable. Rather, they are produced through a system that, in the mechanical actions of sanding, rubbing, pounding, and cutting, propounds the very techniques of modernity that Ruskin so abhorred. The final pieces, many of which are thrown away, cannot compete with the avant-gardist requirement of dense intentionality. In other words, Ruskin's stress on *knowing* is a contributor to the theorization of art that is now so essential to our discourse. But these theorizations hide that which is untheorized and untheorizable. My art tries to work in this dialectic by admitting that I am not in control of all the theoretical issues that go into the making of my "art." These little pieces are discovered to be art only when the process of their making is challenged by an inner subjectivity that admits the silent teleological direction of aesthetics in our consciousness.

Making these "squares" thus starts from the opposite direction of "Turner"; namely, from a discourse not of landscape but of modernity. This means that instead of art emerging

out of the context of an intention "to make art" (with the ego claiming to objectify and affirm its own will), this is an "art" that is identified as such only in the last flash point by an underlying aesthetic will that imposes itself on the distant objective other and draws it close. These pieces represent the localized collapse of Self into pure subjectivity. In this sense, even though they do the opposite of Ruskin's "Turner," they are attracted to the same reality of brinkmanship that evokes the repressed in the disguise of the other. In this sense, these pieces, like Ruskin's color-text, are the site where the modernist Self attempts to overcome and yet represent its own illegibility. If I am implicated in this rhetoric (and perhaps beyond that in issues of psychological stress), it may be because this rhetoric is already implicated in the general desperations of modernity.

### Postscript

The sign is that which is *surpassed toward meaning*, that which is neglected for the sake of meaning, that which is never apprehended for itself, that beyond which the look is perpetually directed.

Jean-Paul Sartre

What are the experiences that he will always vouch for, never to betray or divulge their secrets?

Walter Benjamin

With these notes, I have tried to move from Ruskin's construction of the other to his construction of Self, from his banal fixation on the terrors of modern life to his complicity in its crisis of dislocation. He extracts out of a childhood trauma a symbolic reality that intellectualizes itself as a critique. The centerline in my discussion is the death of Turner, for it brings us to the site in Ruskin's writings where veil and skin, page and canvas, Self and landscape all blend into a system of reinforcing metaphors. It is a site where



Ruskin tries to project himself into the certainty of science only to be thrown back into the problematic of his own inadequate reflection. Insofar as all this opens up the possibility of a meditation on the tortured relationship between theory and practice, *Modern Painters* is probably more interesting to us today than it was to earlier generations. For only today are we emerging, agonizingly, from the spell of essentialism that has so dominated twentieth-century aesthetic philosophy. At any rate, it is safe to argue that, unlike his critique of technology and his search for innocence — which were all too easily consumed in the twentieth century by the philosophical avant-garde — Ruskin's fusion of, and purposeful confusion between, painting and prose, Turner and Self, was not a problem that interested earlier readers. It went against the grain of the demand for the professionalization of "authenticity." As artists tried to be more like "Turner" (the idiot savant discovered by the critic) than like Ruskin, the anxiety about the aesthetic dimension of the Self (and the death of the aesthetic Self) found no discipline that could adequately explain it until, possibly, the advent in the 1950s of metafictional literature, in which the game could be played out with less embarrassment. It would be hasty to say that Ruskin prefigures postmodern fiction, but there are similarities, if only because *Modern Painters* is a work that tries desperately to escape from the shadow of its aesthetic textuality and yet is entangled in the veils of its own design. As a result, the book establishes a domain of ontological slippages that Ruskin is forced to acknowledge; at the same time, he wants readers to respond to his writings with an intensity comparable to, but dialectically different from, those of his own life experiences. Though easy on the surface, *Modern Painters* is tortured by the self-conscious displacement of its author from the landscape of its own desire.

My intention in all this, however, has been to study the intersection of two dynamics, one played out in Ruskin's life

and one played out in mine, which is why I have constructed the investigation with self-referential brackets that both mimic and reflect the fundamental problem of "reading" Ruskin. The study of Ruskin allows me to reflect on the impact of modernism on my own education (and by modernism I mean the theoretical sanctioning of the attempt to externalize the Self as a form of aesthetic/nonaesthetic "resistance" to the chaos of modernity). Since such a part of my early philosophical and architectural training carried with it these subtexts, it is difficult for me to read Ruskin without calling to mind the cultural practices that worked on me to salvage modernism from its own modernity. My art idiom, collage, constitutes a limited attempt to exorcise the demon of my fraudulently liberated ego.

The ambiguity of the process — *and* the consciousness of its impossibility — allow me to see another point of contact with Ruskin's work; namely, with his self-referential entrapments. It was, therefore, not narcissism that drove me to include something about myself. Nor was it simply a desire for "contextualism." Rather, it was to underscore my interest in the impossibility of locating the Self, the scholarly Self in particular, in its maneuvering with its own historical complexity. If Ruskin's idea of landscape still represents the possible locus for a dialectical cleansing of the density of human history and psychological anxiety, his text, when we include in its constructions "Ruskin" himself, represents reality overburdened by the weight of multiple self-encounters.

#### Note

1. All of the quotations that follow are taken from *Modern Painters*, vols. 3–7 of the Library Edition of *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903–12). References to the *Works* will be given in the text by volume and

page number. Ruskin's volume one becomes, in the Library Edition, volume three, Ruskin's volume two becomes volume four, and so forth. Though I use Cook and Wedderburn because it is the scholarly norm, the numbering difference is a bit distracting.

Dansville Public Library  
Dansville, N. Y.

RULES

Books must be kept two weeks before being returned to the library. No book shall be taken away from the library until it has been paid for.

All injuries to books, beyond reasonable wear, and all losses shall be made good to the satisfaction of the Librarian.

The borrower is held responsible for all damages done on his card and for all unaccounted for books.