



Ruskin: The Design of Nature and the Transcription of Its Manuscript

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Source: *Assemblage*, No. 32 (Apr., 1997), pp. 12-21

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171404>

Accessed: 18/11/2013 16:18

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John Dixon Hunt Ruskin: The Design of Nature and the Transcription of Its Manuscript

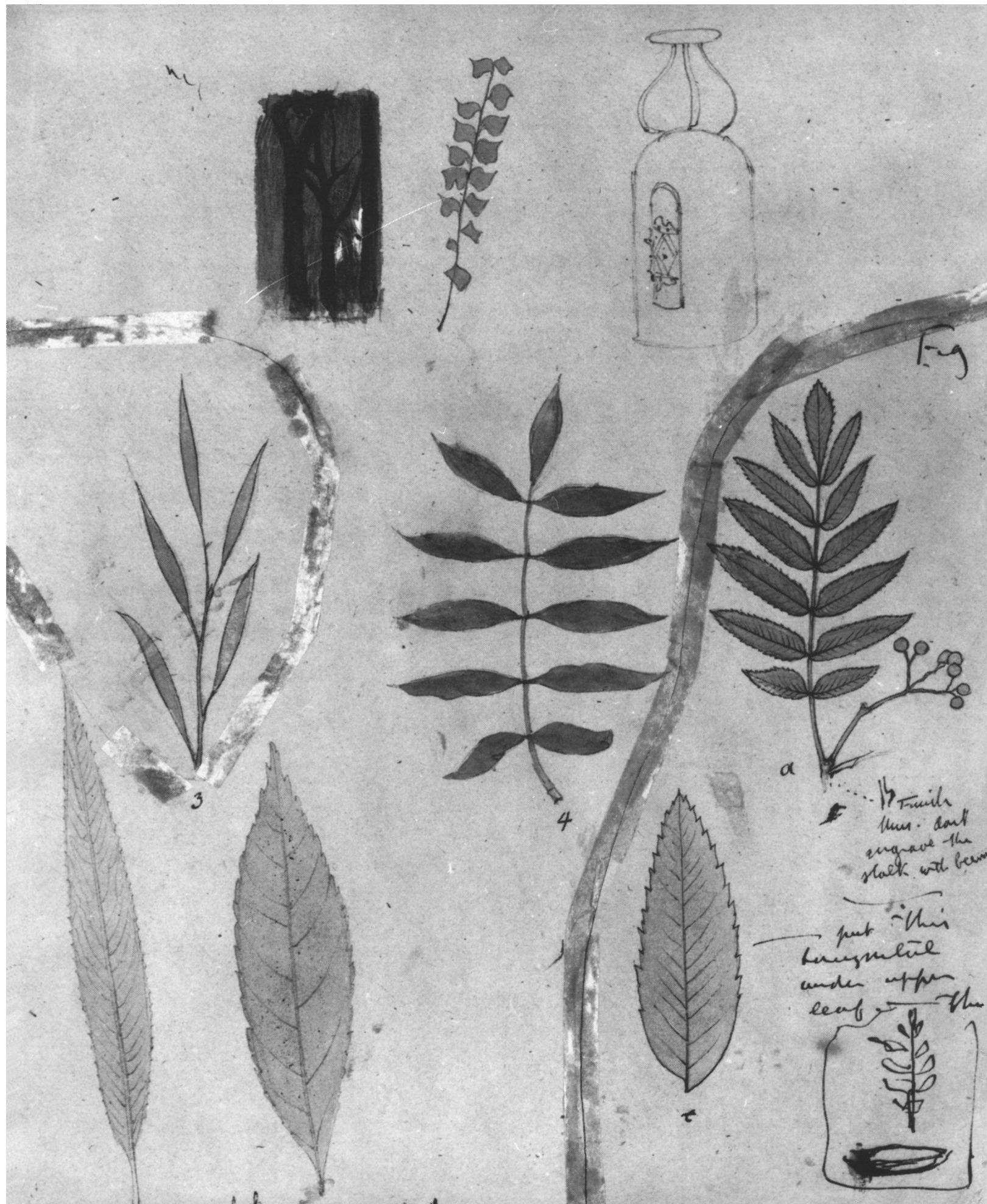
John Dixon Hunt is a professor and the chairman of the Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Pennsylvania. Author of a biography of Ruskin, *The Wider Sea*, he is currently finishing a theoretical book on landscape architecture and resuming work on a diachronic study of gardens in the city of Venice.

Thus there are two Books from which I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of his servant Nature, that universal and publick Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the Eyes of all, those that never saw him in the one, have discovered him in the other.

Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*

Ruskin may seem an implausible authority to invoke in the interests of contemporary landscape architecture; he may also prove to be a double-edged weapon, since he can be so readily quoted against himself and therefore against the causes he is summoned to support.¹ Nonetheless, in an enterprise no more perverse than many that he himself undertook, I propose to explore the ways in which his attention to the natural world may be a model for our current thinking, not least as the profession of landscape architecture struggles with two central issues: the relations of design to ecology and of the past (precedence or authority) to the present (creative freedom).

Neither *nature* nor Ruskin are anything but slippery entities. The first is a category whose instability modern critics like Raymond Williams, John Barrell, and David Solkin have demonstrated with much energy,² yet one that others still happily and lazily invoke as if unproblematic.



The convenience of the term in gesturing toward the organic and inorganic materials of the world — “rocks and stones and trees,” to quote Wordsworth — challenges our postmodernist sense of its constant manipulation by special interest groups at every place and time, a manipulation that its commentators contend deprives it of any usefulness as sound conceptual coinage.

It is, of course, true that “nature” is culturally constructed. When a French seventeenth-century theorist like Jacques Boyceau claims that garden symmetry is predicated on nature’s own efforts at abstraction, he appeals to a nature differently conceived — not least as a result of post-Renaissance scientificism — either from those on which Denis Diderot, a century later, could base his claim that spatial principles of symmetry or proportion were simply not to be found in nature or from a world that modern photography celebrates in *its* ecological concern to give amazing proofs of nature’s abstractions.³ Thus it follows that we must carefully scrutinize every context of the term’s use to adjudicate its local and/or historical meaning. Especially in casual or colloquial usage, such phrases as “it’s natural” or “naturally” inevitably camouflage ideological assumptions by pretending that some expressed opinion, far from special pleading, is grounded in a way of things beyond dispute.⁴

“Nature” is a term, however, that won’t go away; above all, for our purposes, it is endlessly, and inevitably, invoked by landscape architects. The term has performed various duties, some less strenuous than others: it can refer to a few bushes around a building (a lazy architectural assumption met with too frequently in professional circles); less residually, it can mean an invented countryside (Fairmount Park along the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia, however devised and remodeled from the late eighteenth century onward, provides a “natural” site especially when contrasted with the adjacent inner city); or at its most strenuous (for instance, in Ian McHarg’s *Design with*

Nature), it can signal an intricate congeries of causes and effects, to which the precisions of physical science seem to give us the best access, but even here cannot at times escape being colored by a visionary rhetoric that endows it with a value beyond the normative and objective.⁵

Like “nature,” Ruskin himself is slippery by virtue of our ability to find what appear to be contradictory opinions at almost every turn within his oeuvre, a characteristic of which he came to make a virtue: “matters of any consequence are three-sided, or four-sided, or polygonal” (16: 186). But his writings and drawings — the totality of his creative and conceptual work — present other problems. One is their enormous range: the posthumous edition of his collected works amounts to thirty-nine massive volumes (and who has not found many of their pages still uncut in his/her local research library?); there are as many more volumes published since this edition, as well as hundreds of manuscripts and drawings still unedited and perhaps unscrutinized. Furthermore, the monumental Library Edition is itself a careful editorial construction, not without precedents in Ruskin’s own editorial representations of himself.

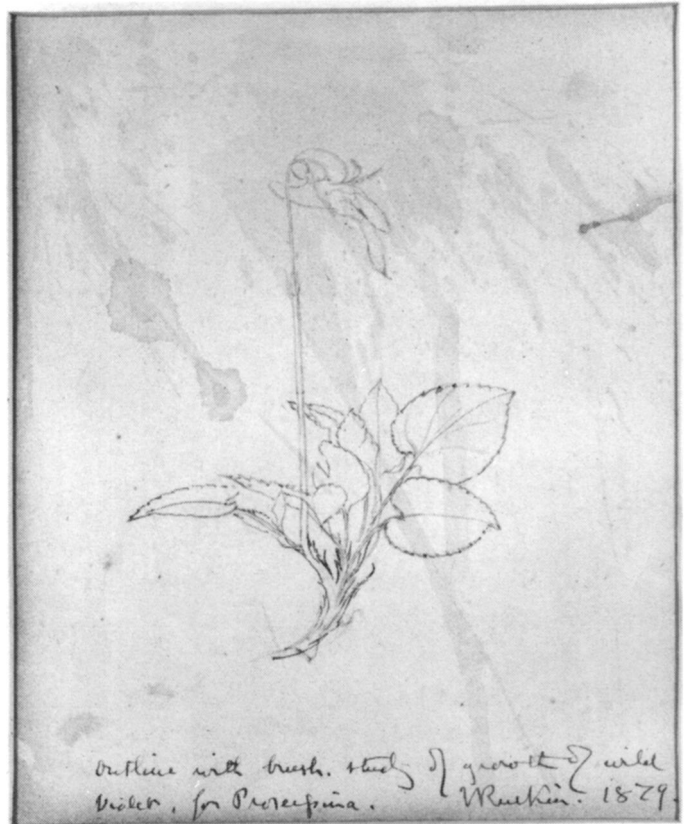
Beyond the sheer bulk of his publications, though not particularly excessive by nineteenth-century standards, and the speed with which he sometimes produced them, his own sense of where he stood on certain issues and therefore his consistency are often in doubt; hence his reediting of his past selves, most notably, in the autobiography, *Praeterita*. But over and above the inevitable (and welcome) fact that writers, and Ruskin was no exception, change their opinions over time, we also have to reckon with Ruskin’s keen rhetorical strategizing. In his earliest drawing and writing, like all children, he was supremely imitative; but as his career started and evolved, he grew adept at manipulating what today we would label speech acts; he could, chameleonlike, shape his discourse to its local or intended

audience. He used this to particular effect once he began to give public lectures, but even as a nineteen-year-old undergraduate at Oxford he aped the urbane and studied manner of the amateur, the arbiter of taste and culture, for the articles that became his *Poetry of Architecture*. These strategies mean that we need often to take into account their occasional nature when citing even the most *ex cathedra* sounding of Ruskin's remarks.⁶

Under these circumstances, Ruskin's idea of nature was manifold and changeable; yet we can clarify three of its basic forms during his career, through which their rather different strands are woven.

1. Nature as a rich and intricate corpus of organic and inorganic material, the study of which glorifies and illuminates both God, whose work it is, and, by reflection, those who study it. This nature exists independently of its proper study, which was, according to Ruskin, vouchsafed to few but which it was, throughout his career, one of his consistent aims to teach.

2. Nature represented or rehearsed by a gifted artist, whether verbal or visual. We may understand this in Coleridge's terms as the secondary imagination, whereby that first process of intense nature study, or the primary imagination, is recreated in art. Some societies — notably, medieval society — have collectively evinced this imagination; others have lost it, though it occurs in rare spirits like Turner. It was, however, a creative facility that Ruskin himself constantly sought to achieve and to encourage others to emulate; that not everybody could rise to Turner's heights implied that, for most people, landscape drawing was inevitably as much a record of natural configurations as an artistic representation of them. But in such transcriptions the natural world could become an expression of personal or social feelings — though the abuse of this was stigmatized by Ruskin at one point of his career as “the pathetic fallacy.”



2. Ruskin, drawing of wild violets, dated 1879, a study for *Proserpina*

3. Nature as a zone for that specific act of intervention that today we term landscape architecture. Ruskin did not express it this way, of course; but from his earliest essays in *The Poetry of Architecture* — a misleading title that disguises a central interest in the contribution of built works to the larger cultural landscape — through his sustained interest in landscapes visited on his many travels, to his concern with educational horticulture or garden making by the end of his career, there is a focus on varieties of designed landscapes as sites of habitation.

Nature was a largely unproblematical term for Ruskin. The vast ensemble of organic and inorganic materials that had evolved over millenia were deemed to exist antecedent to human interventions or reformulations of them. Human or cultural reworkings of the physical world could be good — namely, those conducted in the light of what Ruskin considered a just comprehension of it — or bad — those that wickedly or ignorantly disregarded its essential forms. The problems, in other words, were not with nature itself but with human treatment of it. Ruskin wrote and published *The Poetry of Architecture* under the Greek pseudonym of “Kata Phusin” (“according to nature”), and it implies an uncomplicated sense of fitness and purpose in the physical world.

Access to these natural phenomena was empirical, was deemed to be uncomplicated and transparent (or unmediated), and was, above all, communicable (Ruskin was nothing if not an autodidact who loved teaching others what he had learned for himself). He was a proficient geologist, a competent botanist, and — despite a famously wild excursus in 1884 on *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* — a lifelong meteorologist whose accounts of sky and cloud are among the best I know. If these avocations have been eclipsed by his art and architecture criticism, it is perhaps because they were so exactly as he wished them to be: careful, sometimes astonishingly sensitive renderings in

sketch or sentence of those parts of the natural world that he chose to bring into sharp focus; they were not other than in themselves freighted with significance. Some of his later flower and bird studies, massively overdetermined by mythical glosses, have enjoyed little attention.

Yet two formative influences marked all Ruskin’s work with the natural world, even sometimes when it professed to be contemplation pure and simple: a Calvinist upbringing, for which his mother was essentially responsible, and a studied devotion to picturesque practice and theory, which it was his father’s particular enthusiasm to encourage. Both, but especially the first, underwent profound changes during his eighty-one years; but neither, I believe, was ever eclipsed by other beliefs, ideas, or practices.

The intense religious upbringing taught him early on to see the organic and inorganic world as evidence of divine wisdom and artistry. Even when he had turned his back on religion — after his famous “unconversion” of 1859 at Turin before a painting of Veronese — he would nonetheless examine the natural world as a manifestation of design that celebrated either an unidentified *maker*, whom by not naming he might try to ignore, or its own ontology and integrity. His rooted belief in typology had one particular resonance, not usually remarked on: that to identify something as a typological figure in no way impugnes its own distinct characteristics.⁷ In this concern with inherent qualities, he anticipates other modernists such as G. M. Hopkins, glorifying the this-ness, thing-ness, or *haecceitas* of things, or the artist hero of James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, championing their *quidditas* (neither concept, from Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas, respectively, is modern).

Ruskin’s dedication to the very structure of distinct things — plant, tree, bird, stone, shell, clouds, mountains — may be tracked throughout his drawings and his writings. It is not appropriate here to do more than remind ourselves of this

fundamental dedication by recalling two famous passages in the late autobiographical *Praeterita*, useful because the narration of these two early epiphanies is imbued with a retrospection that has edited out any explicit religious meaning. One concerns his drawing of an aspen tree in the forest of Fontainebleau: “the beautiful lines insisted on being traced . . . they ‘composed’ themselves” (35: 315). The other is the passage on the River Rhône as it compresses itself from the lake to flow through Geneva, “never in any taken shape to be seen for a second” (35: 326–27). The verbal skills here should not prevent us from invoking also his drawings and his, albeit infrequent, admissions that “the difference between rock curvature and other curvature I cannot explain verbally” (3: 475 n.).

To us, Ruskin’s insistence throughout his work that natural forms speak of themselves and their ecology is more interesting than his sense that they spoke of God; reading, say, even in the first volume of *Modern Painters* the sections on the truths (that is, the quiddities) of sky, of cloud, of earth, and of water, we might be forgiven for thinking that Ruskin, too, entertained this preference — at least, he seems constantly to have to recover himself from the detailed analysis of their structures and processes to remind himself that they all bear “witness to the unwearied, exhaustless operation of the Infinite Mind” (3: 381).

Irrespective of his current and local emphasis, he treated this interest in the deep forms of things in many ways. Sometimes he would focus on the skills by which forms were represented, and Turner, of course, was his prize exemplum of the gifted perceiver and translator; thus the whole enterprise of *Modern Painters* was conceived of to explain how Turner’s genius rested on his faithful representation of natural appearances. A characteristically perverse as well as modern enterprise, which, in the famous redefinition of Turnerian topography, would acknowledge that

translating the actual world into imagery necessitated modification of the visible world so that its essence, its character, and the process of its reception would be captured and communicated.

At other times, he would be more interested in the qualities necessary to perceive the exterior world, either in its “natural state” or when represented in word and image. Here his early Calvinist confidence in the visitation of grace to those who were “elect” continued to color his view that few were truly gifted enough to see and then to pass on their insights to others. Yet, with characteristic paradoxicality, Ruskin urged himself into greater and greater efforts of pedagogy, on behalf of artists like Turner or on behalf of pupils to whom he took a particular shine.

Or, finally, he would seek to bypass mediation and reception altogether to privilege the objects themselves as best he could, paradoxically here ignoring the very means, graphic or literary, by which — before his happy discovery of photography — objects were being represented to his readers or listeners. His lifelong interest in museums was, in part, a dedication to the presentation of things for themselves;⁸ what in 1880, writing about museums, he termed “the right manner of manifestation of all divine things to those who desire to see them” (34: 251).

Given the glory and precision of the natural world, as he was taught from his earliest years to see and understand it, he was quickly appalled by any threat to it. This came from bad artists, who saw and represented it through clichés, and those who were influenced by their enthusiasm for bad art (hence his encouragement of others’ graphic skills by which a fresh and personal vision could be developed). But increasingly he came to see only threats from society’s perverse neglect of both good art and good understanding of natural things. Too many people were totally inadequate stewards of the earth, simply because they did not attend to

how it worked and thus could blithely pollute it with claptrap, technology, industry, urban sprawl, tourist hotels, and railways (the list of Ruskin's anathemata is long).⁹

It seems almost an accident that Ruskin had his attention diverted by Turner, a landscape painter. He might well have focused on what we now call landscape architecture. His earliest publication, *The Poetry of Architecture* — commissioned as a series of fourteen essays by the landscape theorist and practitioner John Claudius Loudon, for a journal he edited, *Architectural Magazine*, and published between November 1837 and December 1838 — is largely about the characteristics of different landscapes and their embellishment with buildings.¹⁰ *The Poetry of Architecture* is, without question, heir to the late-eighteenth-century focus on landscape gardening, perhaps best represented by Thomas Whately's *Observations on Modern Gardening* of 1770; Ruskin's very concerns — with the "character" of scenery, for example — as well as his technical vocabulary are derived from landscaping treatises. And when he comes in the first volume of *Modern Painters* to isolate the different constituents of landscape (sky and clouds, water, earth, and different kinds of topography), he structures his inquiry into landscape painting along the same lines as did the landscape gardening treatises of the previous century.¹¹ We may go further and see his early education in scenery as being crafted by his exposure to the landscaped grounds of many country estates visited by the Ruskin family on their annual coach tours of the British countryside. In this regard, Turner, who painted often and strikingly on country estates, was not even a distraction from this early enthusiasm and education in designed landscapes.

Turner's great appeal to Ruskin, beyond his perceived concern for "vital fact" (2: 382), was his linking of scenic forms with meaning, of place with history, of scene with narrative. This was exactly analogous to the school of English land-

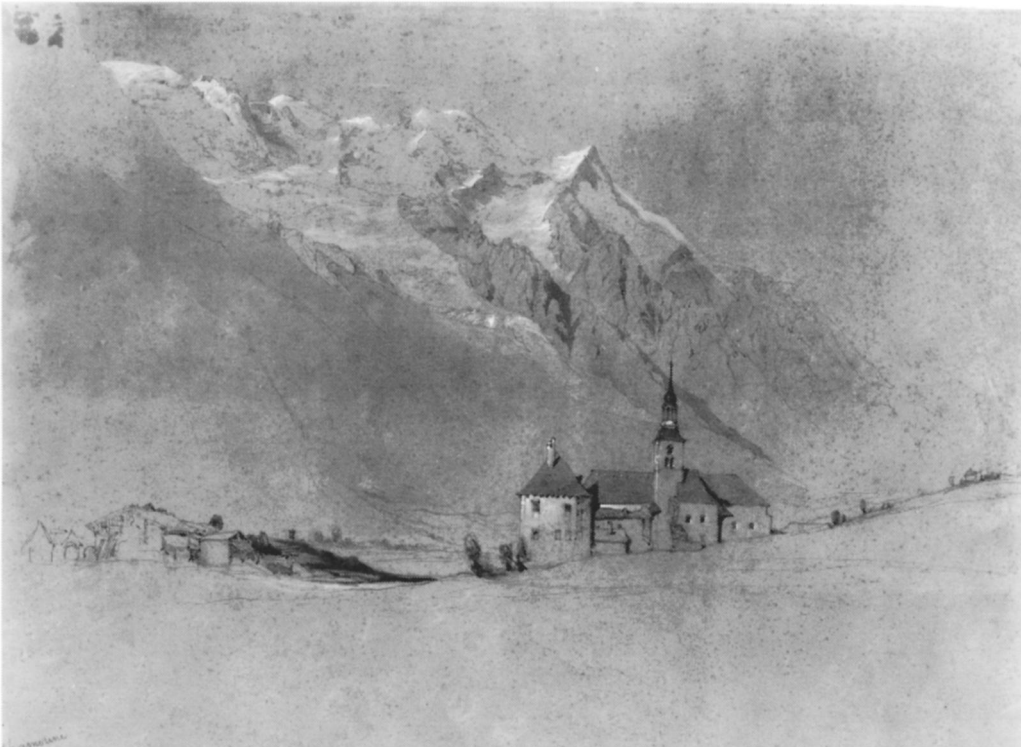
scape gardening's concern for "genius loci" or to Humphry Repton's concern for association, a theme that lies at the center of *The Poetry of Architecture*.¹² So when Ruskin came in *Modern Painters* to study the natural world as a preliminary to defending Turner's translation of it into paint, there is much that reads (with sometimes only a modest change of terms) as if he were discussing the transformation of organic and inorganic materials into designed landscapes rather than a painter's representation of them in two-dimensional imagery.

Though Ruskin never addressed himself to matters of reshaping grounds, as landscape architects did then and can now, his focus was on the meaning of ground, of territory, of terrain, its geological history, its botanical and arboreal inhabitants, its character that — independent of all influence except its own formation — guides our "reading" of it. His task in *Modern Painters*, he wrote, was to assess artists as "historians of nature" (3: 130), a role that any modern designer could or should accept easily as urging a design that stays faithful to the ecological demands of the site. Ruskin's critique of artistic representations of the natural world parallels our own landscape architectural concerns for proper stewardship of the earth, which involves, in its turn, a deep understanding of its ecology. Equally, his very absorption in natural studies that distracts him from examining their reappropriation by Turner and his frequent lack of concern with how organic and inorganic materials are used — they are often simply to be studied, to be allowed their own space and existence — answer to our own deep distrust of design intervention in the land.

Here is where his picturesque education, though a huge topic in itself, is relevant. Ruskin himself was always quick to stigmatize the inert maneuvers of picturesque taste, but he characteristically seized on some of its strategic advantages. Picturesque theory and practice enjoined a fascination with



3. Ruskin, study of mountains, dated "Friday, Sept. 27," probably 1861



4. Ruskin, drawing of mountains and church at Chamonix, undated

fragments, with the details of natural and architectural worlds, and this, as we have seen, Ruskin clearly embraced; his own scrutiny of landscape, at least as his drawings record it, cherishes the details not the *ensemble*.

The picturesque tradition also authorized a double approach to the world, at once verbal and visual; for the sight, as Ruskin was fond of reminding us, was but a prelude to insight, and a place or site called forth the energies of both. The glossing of wordless but richly varied phenomena — and etymologically, to “gloss” means to give a tongue to — was therefore a picturesque reflex that also called into play the Christian duty of praising the Lord; both were handles on the conspectus of organic and inorganic things.

The picturesque was also, as this glossing suggests, about the conjunction of subject and object, perceiver and perceived, about connecting process and product. It is this melding that sustains the famous formulation of Turnerian topography in volume four of *Modern Painters*.¹³ Basically, Ruskin was placed in the predicament of recognizing that the best of Turner’s work did not reproduce, as a photograph might, a given landscape, that his beloved master was not always or at his best a straightforward transcriber of nature. The artist’s representation selected from, even rearranged, the natural scene in the interests of a “history” more inclusive than a topographical survey or naturalistic record. Ruskin here treats of exactly the dilemma faced by any landscape architect, who, wishing to honor natural process — the ecology and topography of a site — yet needs to shape it into something more significant, more visibly a human construct.

There are, finally, Ruskin’s gardens. Like today’s landscape architects, he gives the impression that he preferred large-scale, regional views: the Vale of Chamonix or the Vosges Mountains, and for these he is certainly best remembered. But he nevertheless appreciated gardens as miniature mod-

els of the large world, small-scale laboratories where the observers of the natural world could practice, especially when they were small, infirm, female, or otherwise disadvantaged. The work he put into his St. George’s Guild — an enterprise that provokes much mirth in some of his twentieth-century commentators — involved what we would call community gardening (see his delighted surprise when he found the same instincts at work on a private estate, 28: 705ff.).

His religious training made him wary of edenic enclosures, for, after all, the world he inhabited was postlapsarian and flawed, and an angel with a fiery sword prevented any return to the only true Paradise. Yet it also encouraged him to search endlessly for alternative paradises — in Venice, the Alps, Gothic Amiens, within Turnerian landscapes, and within gardens. And the latter half of his career saw him encouraging in both girls’ schools and industrial urban settings the pursuit of gardening and the making of gardens, an enthusiasm he passed on to such disciples as Octavia Hill.

From his childhood in Herne Hill, south of London, to his last home in the English Lake District, he acknowledged gardens as miniature versions of the larger natural world that was always visible from within them; if not literally, then surely in the mind’s eye. Work in gardens — weeding and sweeping leaves (28: 181) — was an apprenticeship in understanding seasonal change (he was firmly against greenhouses and hot-houses and horticultural shows that forced the seasonal processes, which explains his abhorrence of the Crystal Palace); what grew in gardens proved every bit worthy of close scrutiny as the aspens and wild flowers that solicited his attention on Swiss mountainsides or in Italian valleys.

The last, silent years of his life were spent in a garden overlooking Lake Coniston at Brantwood, which he landscaped and where he built a throne from which to observe the larger world of mountains across the lake. This site offers itself as a final Ruskinian paradox: of human design, but with its ingredi-

ents testifying to a larger creative energy than his own; a laboratory for detailed study, yet the platform from which to contemplate a vast panorama; a place of sight without vital speech; a typically Ruskinian place, yet in the final resort insufficiently expressive of his life's visions. As landscape architecture, it achieved, and still retains, a powerful sense of place, attentive to both associations (or "the history of nature") and the replication of organic and inorganic facts; it also makes room for that element without which no landscape design can thrive, yet which no landscape designer can create or manipulate: the sky. "It is a strange thing how little in general people know about the sky. It is the part of creation in which nature has done more for the sake of pleasing man, more for the sole and evident purpose of talking to him and teaching him, than any other of her works, and it is just the part in which we least attend to her" (3: 342).

Notes

1. A point that, as many others have done, Ruskin himself made about the Bible, "with respect to which any conclusion can be gathered from its pages" (*The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. [London: George Allen, 1903–12], 12: 51). All references in the text are to the volume and page number of this, the Library Edition.
2. See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), and David Solkin, *Richard Wilson: The Landscape of Reaction* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1982). There is, of course, a much more extensive literature on the theme of culturalized natures.
3. On Jacques Boyceau and Diderot, see Michel Baridon, "Les Mots, les

- images et la memoire des jardins," in *Le Jardin, art et lieu de mémoire*, ed. Monique Mosser and Philippe Nys (Besancon: Éditions de l'Imprimeur, 1995), 183–203; on modern photography, see Pat Murphy and William Neill, *By Nature's Design* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993).
4. On a recent visit to the U.K., where the wish of a woman, who had been on fertility drugs, to abort some of the resulting octuplets was a big news item, I saw the following letter in *The Times* (14 August 1996), which nicely drew attention to the opportunism with which "nature" could be invoked: "You quote Miss M... A... as saying of her eight-baby pregnancy; 'I want nature to take its course.' What a pity that she did not do so before accepting infertility treatment."
5. In this, McHarg seems close to Ruskin. See Ian L. McHarg, *Design*

with Nature (Garden City, N.J.: Natural History Press, 1969).

6. In typically Ruskinian fashion, having sounded this warning, I shall largely ignore it; it is, however, important lest we are tempted to ascribe to any one of his pronouncements a larger and more general authority than the occasion of its utterance warrants.
7. A useful discussion of this aspect of Ruskin's thinking is given along with extensive reading lists, in C. Stephen Finley, *Nature's Covenant: Figures of Landscape in Ruskin* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), esp. 17–18 n.
8. I have made this a leitmotif of my biography, *The Wider Sea: A Life of John Ruskin* (London: J. M. Dent, 1982); see index under "Ruskin: museum, idea of."
9. It is also easy to mock his distaste for, say, railways, when he always had his own coach for private travel; but his passionate defence of the Lake District, for instance, from its invasion by the railways was as visionary as it was premature: the automobile and the motorways have since succeeded in destroying what the railroads never quite managed to do. By contrast, his beloved Switzerland exercised more vision and care with its mountain spaces as well as having a topography that frustrated much exploitation — but that is another story.
10. A curiosity should be noted here: Loudon was also the editor of Humphry Repton's collected writings on landscape gardening, into which he actually inserted one of Ruskin's essays as a footnote; see *The Landscape Gardening of the Late Humphry Repton Esq.* (London, 1840), 32–38.

11. Not that Ruskin makes anything of it, but the invocation of painting as a model for landscape gardening — from Addison's and Pope's hints to Walpole's categorical claims — sustained a deep if unexplored connection between landscape painting during the Romantic period and the layout of "picturesque" grounds. See here my "Ut pictura poesis, ut pictura hortus, and the Picturesque," in *Gardens and the Picturesque* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), 105–36.
12. On Repton's continuing concerns with associative patterns in landscaping, see Edward Harwood's essay in *Journal of Garden History* 16 (1996).
13. See my "Ruskin, 'Turnerian Topography' and *Genius Loci*," in *Gardens and the Picturesque*, esp. 219–221.

Figure Credits

1. Beinecke Library, Yale University.
- 2, 4. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University (1926.33.165 and 1901.23).
3. Yale Center for British Art, Yale University (B 1977.14.5343).