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Ut pictura poesis, the picturesque, and John Ruskin

John Dixon Hunt

> As I am always blamed if I approach my subject on any but its picturesque side. . .
>
> (Ruskin, writing to *The Daily Telegraph,* 8th October 1870)

It was John Ruskin's lifelong conviction that "the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way." And what he goes on to say is crucial to any understanding of the priorities of his spiritual and intellectual world: "Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion,—all in one" (V 333).[1] An examination of that triad is the underlying purpose of this essay.

But it is important, by way of preamble, to insist that Ruskin was not a philosopher nor, though he pretended on occasions to be more systematic and logical than his opponents, did he depend much upon the rigours and consistencies of formal thinking.[2] He told a Cambridge audience in 1858:

> Perhaps some of my hearers this evening may occasionally have heard it stated of me that I am rather apt to contradict myself. I hope I am exceedingly apt to do so. I never met with a question yet, of any importance, which did not need, for the right solution of it, at least one positive and one negative answer, like an equation of the second degree. Mostly, matters of any consequence are three-sided, or four-sided, or polygonal; and the trotting round a polygon is severe work for people any way stiff in their opinions.
>
> (XVI 187)

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He may well be engaged there in rationalizing his own career as a critic of art and architecture; for in 1858 he was still two years away from completing the already fifteen-year-old project of *Modern Painters*, about which the best of his modern commentators has written that it "would be less perplexing if Ruskin had known more about art when he began it, or learned less in the course of its composition."[3] Such a conviction, which Ruskin may—at least unconsciously—have shared, obviously contributed some personal urgency to his version of the general Romantic faith in organic structure: "All true opinions are living," he wrote in *Modern Painters* (VII 9), "and show their life by being capable of nourishment; therefore of change."[4]

But this generally accepted idea that Ruskin knew too little at the start of his career and learned too much during it conceals another equally fundamental truth about him. This is his early established debt to eighteenth-century picturesque aesthetics and his long-held obligation to its ideas about experiencing landscape and reading landscape paintings, all of which can be recognized in *The Poetry of Architecture*, his first formal publication of any consequence, and continued to inform all his work at least until 1860, despite his public renunciations of picturesque taste.

When in *The Poetry of Architecture* he talks of our education by landscape—the "nobler scenery of that earth. . . has been appointed to be the school of. . . minds" (I 132), he is rehearsing his own youth, which his poetry and sketches reveal as being a frequent exposure to the picturesque. Yet that claim for the intellectual and moral benefits of travel is (maybe deliberately) opposed to an assertion by the leading eighteenth-century popularizer, William Gilpin, that "picturesque travel" should not be brought "into competition with any of the more useful ends of travelling."[5] It is typical of Ruskin's mixture of debt and independence, which informs his later treaty with the picturesque, that he adjusts Gilpin's emphasis to suit his own convictions even while writing a series of essays that draw upon much experience of viewing scenery in Gilpin's manner.

It is a commonplace that Ruskin's youth was a substantial education in the picturesque. In 1880 he recalled that one of Samuel Prout's drawings, bought by his grandfather, and which

> hung in the corner of our little dining parlour at Herne Hill as early as I can remember. . . had a most fateful and continual power over my childish mind. In the first place, it taught me generally to like rugged-

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> ness. . . the conditions of joints in moulding, and fitting of stones in walls which were most weather-worn. . . .
>
> (XIV 385)

His father's own modest artistic talents were distinctly picturesque,[6] and on his travels as a sherry merchant securing orders from customers all over Britain his letters home reported frequent picturesque encounters: "old oak trees. . . twisted and knotted in the most fantastic manner. . . the Ruins of Kennilworth a very interesting scene."[7] And the family's annual excursions, ostensibly in search of further orders, were a progress from one picturesque site to another, with the young John watching landscape framed "through the panoramic opening of the four windows of a postchaise" (XXXV 16). And in adult life these experiences continued, as he toured Europe to view its scenery as Prout and Turner had painted it. And I think that painting—Turner's certainly, but Carpaccio's and the Bellinis' also—largely determined his approach to Venetian art; while his study of illuminated MSS, as much as his researches among the churches of Venice, determined his ideas on the gothic craftsman.[8]

The three crucial ingredients of picturesque aesthetic and practice that Ruskin seems most to have adopted—though much also of a more peripheral nature was borrowed—were its fascination with ruins, its organization of some fresh alliance of word and image in the wake of the eighteenth-century rejection of the traditions of *ut pictura poesis*, and its use of mirrors.[9] It cannot be denied that these adopted picturesque ideas, modes of experience, and methods of analysis were, inevitably, adapted by Ruskin during his career. The famous re-formulation of Turnerian or noble picturesque by the fourth volume of *Modern Painters* would be the most obvious example. Yet the three picturesque ideas or strategies remained, even while undergoing revision, basic to his whole work. They are even, I'd want to suggest, the signature of Ruskin's imaginative world.

I

Ruins were an essential ingredient of any picturesque view; a love for their broken and rough surfaces also determined the central element of the picturesque aesthetic:

> in ruins, even of the most regular edifices, the lines are so softened by decay or interruped by demolition; the stiffness of design is so relieved by the accidental intrusion of springing shrubs and pendant weeds. . .

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But equally essential was that a ruin should have been "of some grandeur and elegance" and "should refer to somewhat really interesting"[10] so that the associative faculty could be brought into play. For what attracts one to ruins is their incompleteness, their instant declaration of loss. From Thomas Burnet, enquiring into the causes of the "broken world" of mountains in *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, to Turner or Byron, meditating upon the vacancies of Roman remains, ruins have invited the mind to complete their fragments. Whereas the sublime invocation of ruins stressed their inexplicitness, their relieving the spectator of his habitual recourse to precise explanations, the picturesque, the aesthetics of which developed out of a need to label experiences which eluded Burke's definitions for the sublime and the beautiful, chose rather to colonize that emptiness.

One of Ruskin's earliest surviving drawings is of the ruins of Dover Castle,[11] while his juvenile and generally tedious verses establish ruin as a central motif: at the age of eleven he apostrophized the "old walls" of Haddon Hall in a cheerful song, the refrain of which was "Hey, ruination and hey, desolation,—/But created to spoil the creation!" (II 284). Three years later, travelling down the Rhine, this youthful connoisseur of delapidation encountered only a "tiresome repetition of ruins, and ruins too which do not altogether agree with my idea of what ruins ought to be" (II 349). The remark is loftily *un*explained; but from other remarks and reactions on this 1833 journey it is possible to deduce that Ruskin required ruins which he was able to complete with some specificity—thus at Andernacht they were "mighty. . . and majestic in their decay, *but* their Lords are departed and *forgotten*" (II 355, my italics). But it was actually his geological interests that extended his early picturesque preoccupations: in the "ruined universe" (II 373) of the alps his highest standard of ruin was satisfied:

> before me soared the needles of Mont Blanc, splintered and crashed and shivered, the marks of the tempest for three score centuries, yet they are here, shooting up red, bare, scarcely even lichened, entirely inaccessible, snowless. . .
>
> (II 382)

His poem on "The Chrystal-Hunter" provided a fresh identity for the picturesque tourist. In the next family tour of 1835 there is an eloquent record of some hours spent beside the Glacier du Trient: a conventional picturesque experience ("a most beautiful ruin, a superb desolation, a most admired disorder") also involves his

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completion of the ruins of the "veteran crags" ("telling to every traveller a wonderful tale of ancient convulsions").[12]

In his only attempt to write a novel, which survives as the fragment "Velasquez, the Novice," one of the characters is given a speech that was later revised for inclusion in *The Poetry of Architecture*: "the cypress befits the landscape of Italy, because she is a land of tombs, the air is full of death—it is the past in which she lives, the past in which she is glorious—she is beautiful in death, and her people, her nation, are the dead; and the throne of her pride is the *hic jacet*" (I 542). In *The Poetry of Architecture* this emphasis on ruin is intensified with more picturesque details like a "fallen column" (I 19). Since *The Poetry of Architecture* is largely dedicated to exploring how the mind as well as the eye must be satisfied in both architecture and landscape, a mental and hence verbal response to images of ruin or delapidation is established as ruin's proper complement. When he talked in *Modern Painters* of his early years, which informed the essays contributed to Loudon's *Architectural Magazine*, he spoke of being "never independent of associated thought. Almost as soon as I could see or hear, I had got reading enough to give me associations with all kinds of scenery. . . and thus my pleasure in mountains or ruins was never, even in earliest childhood, free from a certain awe and melancholy, and general sense of the meaning of death" (V 365-6).

By this third volume of *Modern Painters*, however, Ruskin had decided that the modern taste for ruin was excessive (V 319); yet on the other hand ruin was by then established as the theme of all his writings. *Modern Painters* discovers its essential subjects equally in what is elsewhere called "the ruined mountain world" (IX 294) of alpine geology and in the Hesperid dragon—"the worm of eternal decay" (VII 420)—of Turner's *Garden of the Hesperides*. Inasmuch as his work does focus upon Turner, Ruskin's peroration singles out one all-important fact about his subject—that "through all the remainder of his life, wherever he looked, he saw ruin. Ruin, and twilight. . . And fading of sunset, note also, on ruin. . ." (VII 432). And in the midst of his long composition of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin did the research and wrote *The Stones of Venice*,[13] which is constructed, as its first page declares, out of ruin. His Venetian letters, notes and sketches are constantly lamenting and annotating ruin, just as the text of his book is slowly reconstituting it. Even when he collects materials that are not obviously ruined, Ruskin's

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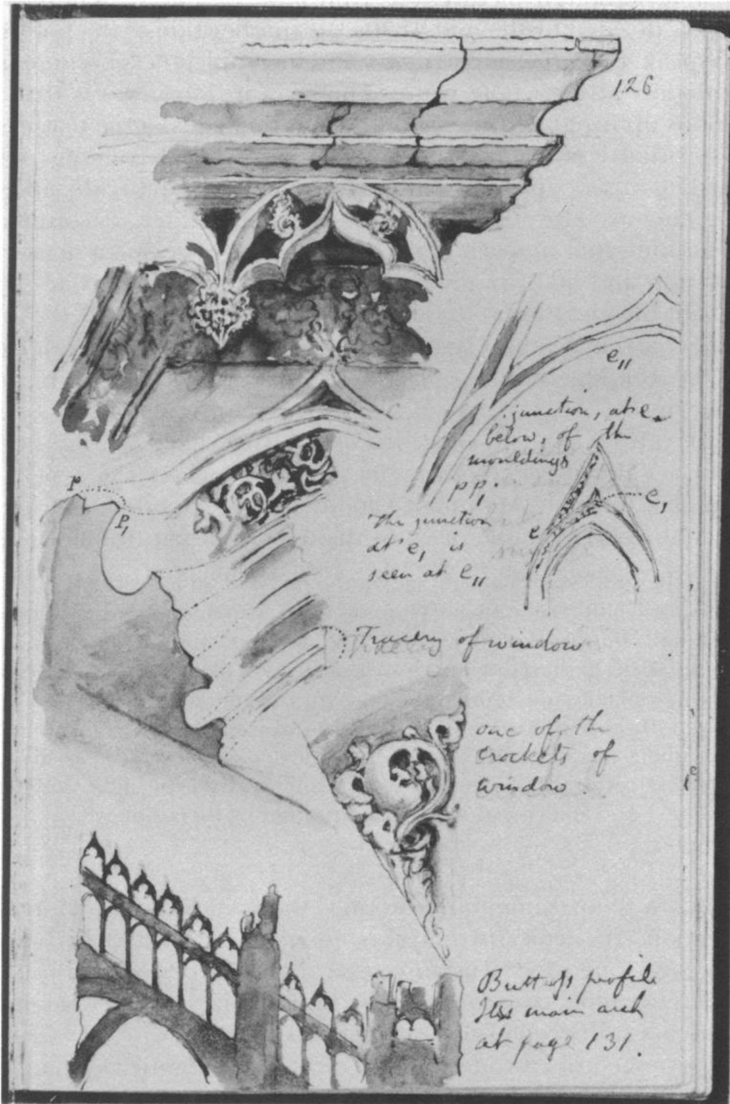

Page from Ruskin's Architectural Sketchbook
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memoranda [see figure 1] themselves choose to fragment gothic buildings.

So that although picturesque ruin and its sentimental associations are derided by the mid-1850s, on another side of the polygon, so to speak, the attraction to decay and incompleteness becomes the foundation of his whole work. The reason, I believe, is that his religious upbringing contrived to make ruin an essential feature of his spiritual landscape. His mother's evangelical training never ceased to insist upon the imperfections of human life and its achievements. The ruination of the Garden of Eden, encountered and adumbrated on each daily Bible reading, became a matter of conviction and accordingly a characteristic image of his adult vision. On the early tours to Switzerland of 1833 and 1835 the Alps from Schaffhausen and the Valley of Chamounix were both close to a "heaven-like dwelling place" (II 392); but the former are described in *Praeterita* as having been "the seen walls of lost Eden" (XXXV 115).[14] And in *Modern Painters* the valley of the Trient between Valorsine and Martigny, which provides the type and specific location of "Mountain Gloom," is an extended, but by no means isolated, example of ruins discovered in pastoral enclaves:

> The other [i.e. Savoyard] cottage, in the midst of an inconceivable, inexpressible beauty, set on some sloping bank of golden sward, with clear fountains flowing beside it, and wild flowers, and noble trees, and goodly rocks gathered round into a perfection as of Paradise, is itself a dark and plague-like stain in the midst of the gentle landscape. Within a certain distance of its threshold the ground is foul and cattle-trampled; its timbers are black with smoke, its garden choken with weeds and nameless refuse, its chambers empty and joyless, the light and wind gleaming and filtering through the crannies of their stones.
>
> (VI 389)

For such a temperament as Ruskin's, the idea of ruin had a vital fascination. It seems furthermore to have permeated his whole psychology long after Ruskin ceased to subscribe to his mother's religious teaching; consequently, we find that he is ready to identify and discuss ruin even in contexts that do not otherwise declare any strong evangelical attitudes. His account of "romantic association," for instance, is based upon its response to ruin:

> It rises eminently out of the contrast of the beautiful past with the frightful and monotonous present; and it depends for its force on the existence of ruins and traditions, on the remains of architecture, the

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> traces of battle-fields, and the precursorship of eventful history. The instinct to which it appeals can hardly be felt in America. . . .
> (V 369)[15]

Long before he manoeuvred towards redefining the noble or Turnerian picturesque in *Modern Painters* IV, he defended Samuel Prout's picturesque sketches of buildings by insisting on Prout's

> feeling which results from the influence, among the noble lines of architecture, of the rent and the rust, the fissure, the lichen, and the weed, and from the writing upon the pages of ancient walls of the confused hieroglyphics of human history.
> (III 217)

The idea there is characteristically picturesque, and Ruskin goes on rather nervously to defend it from any superficiality by arguing for the "deeper moral" of Prout's "ideal appreciation of the present active and vital being of the cities" which he depicts; that is to say, Prout successfully images what he sees in delapidated cityscapes and what he can thence deduce of their past. Ruskin's own fascination with ruin, itself partly learnt from Prout, as we saw, has to be defended in similar ways. He is tempted into a brief, but eloquent description of the facade of San Michele at Lucca—

> the mosaics have fallen out of half the columns, and lie in weedy ruin beneath; in many, the frost has torn large masses of the entire coating away, leaving a scarred unsightly surface. Two of the shafts of the upper star window are eaten entirely away by the sea-wind, the rest have lost their proportions; the edges of the arches are hacked into deep hollows, and cast indented shadows on the weed-grown wall. The process has gone too far, and yet I doubt not but that this building is seen to greater advantage now than when first built. . . .
> (III 206)

—yet he goes on immediately and severely, as if suddenly aware of his own indulgence, that this "is no pursuit of mere picturesqueness; it is true following out of the ideal character of the building."

II

The ideal building would exist, then, simply in the imagination.

> Let the reader, with such scraps of evidence as may still be gleaned from under the stucco and paint of the Italian committees of taste, and from

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> under the drawing-room innovations of English and German residents, restore Venice in his imagination to some resemblance of what she must have been before her fall.
>
> (III 213)

His obsessional need to "preserve" ruin was probably at the root of his lifelong hostility to the restoration of ancient buildings: "I have never yet seen any restoration or cleaned portion of a building whose effect was not inferior to the weathered parts, even to those of which the design had in some parts almost disappeared" (III 205). So that if architectural restoration was anathema and the fall of Venice could never be redeemed by recovering its buildings (nor, with stucco, re-covering them), their vacancies must be completed while still leaving them ineluctably fragmentary—completed, therefore, in the imagination. This version of the picturesque required verbal elaboration of the visual image.

For these reasons Ruskin insisted upon the necessity of an alliance between image and word. His belief that a human soul does best by telling what it saw has already been quoted and undoubtedly lies behind his use of "the words painter and poet quite indifferently" (V 221).[16] The example of Turner's own use of elaborate titles and catalogue entries for his pictures was one that Ruskin inevitably took seriously; Constable's recourse to letterpress in the 1830's for *The English Landscape* he chose to ignore, for reasons that presumably have to do with his preferential defence of Turner. But he was convinced that modern artists should attach written statements to their work to complete their meanings and in the Pre-Raphaelites he saw a new union of the sister arts (VI 32 and V 127 respectively).

Yet Ruskin was also often at pains to remind his readers that "Words are not accurate enough, not delicate enough, to express or trace the constant, all pervading influence of the finer and vaguer shadows throughout" Turner's works (III 308). Such admissions, however, are almost inevitably the prelude to one of Ruskin's more strenuous and rhetorical analyses, as he rises to the challenge of translating visual into verbal discourse. But he was not tutored in the picturesque for nothing, and one of its legacies to him was an addiction to formal effects in nature or paint, before which words seem especially inefficacious. Thus he is unusually mute—merely listing the relevant subjects—before Turner's late Swiss watercolours (III 551). He certainly never faces the problem of paint-

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ing's formal language very steadily in *Modern Painters*, yet there is much scattered attention of a high order dedicated to it. Specifically, the discussion of colour, growing in confidence and scope throughout *Modern Painters*—and fueled by its central role in his appreciation of Venetian architecture—is never brought together into a coherent section, except for the panic admission in a note to volume five that he hasn't got around to doing so (VII 414). Yet his random discussions of colour reveal some real feeling for formal elements in visual art, which language may point towards but cannot translate into its own terms. The analysis of scarlet in volume four (VI 69ff.) is especially good.

These hesitations about the primacy of the visual over either the joint endeavours of visual and verbal or the verbal *tout simple* obviously derive in part from his own competence with both. Though his parents only encouraged his drawing and painting to the level of gentlemanly accomplishment, he expressed himself fluently with both image and word. As a child he devised his own books where both forms collaborated [figure 2], a dual enterprise that was given added stimulus after the discovery in 1832 of Roger's *Italy* with its vignettes after Turner. His adult letters will often switch from sentence to sketch and back again to complete his meaning [figure 3]. But God, as we are reminded in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (III 345), was in the still small voice rather than the forms of earthquake, wind and fire. Elsewhere we are told that God is served better with few words than many pictures (V 86), though that is a by-product of Ruskin's endless doubts as to the moral efficacy of landscape painting.

Such inconsistencies, more trotting round the polygon, largely stem from Ruskin's ambivalent feelings towards the picturesque, a movement which contrived as well as inherited certain difficulties which have to do with the relations of word to image. Ruskin points indirectly to some of them when he notes how Turner broke away from the iconographical traditions of pictorial allegory and mythological subjects and learnt to use instead the landscape of natural forms:

> it is one of the most interesting things connected with the study of his art, to watch the way in which his own strength of English instinct breaks gradually through fetter and formalism; how from Egerian wells he steals away to Yorkshire streamlets; how from Homeric rocks, with laurels at the top and caves in the bottom, he climbs, at last, to Alpine precipices fringed with pine, and fortified with the slopes of their own

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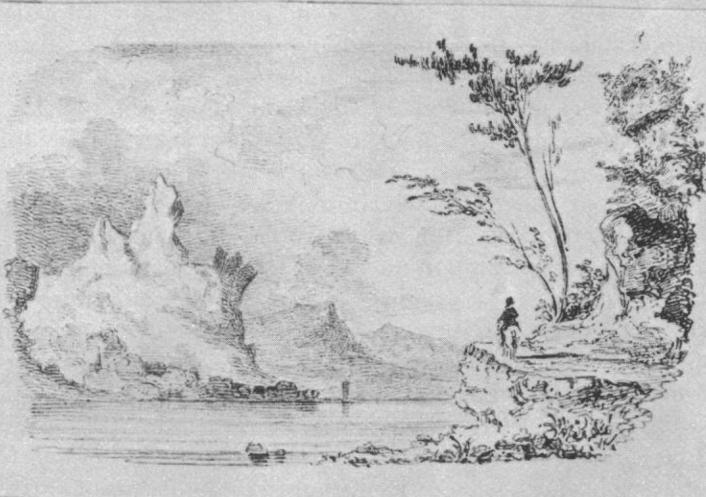
And vineyards clothe the bending brow
'Stead of the clinging copsewood now



How lightly the waves of the broad Meuse
crisped with the first breath of the mor
ning as we swept over the long bridge
that crosses the river from Namur, and
looked back on the rich dome of its small
but beautiful cathedral, as it began to
smile to the first glance of the joyous
sun that was drinking up the delicate

Page from one of Ruskin's early poetry notebooks (no. IX)
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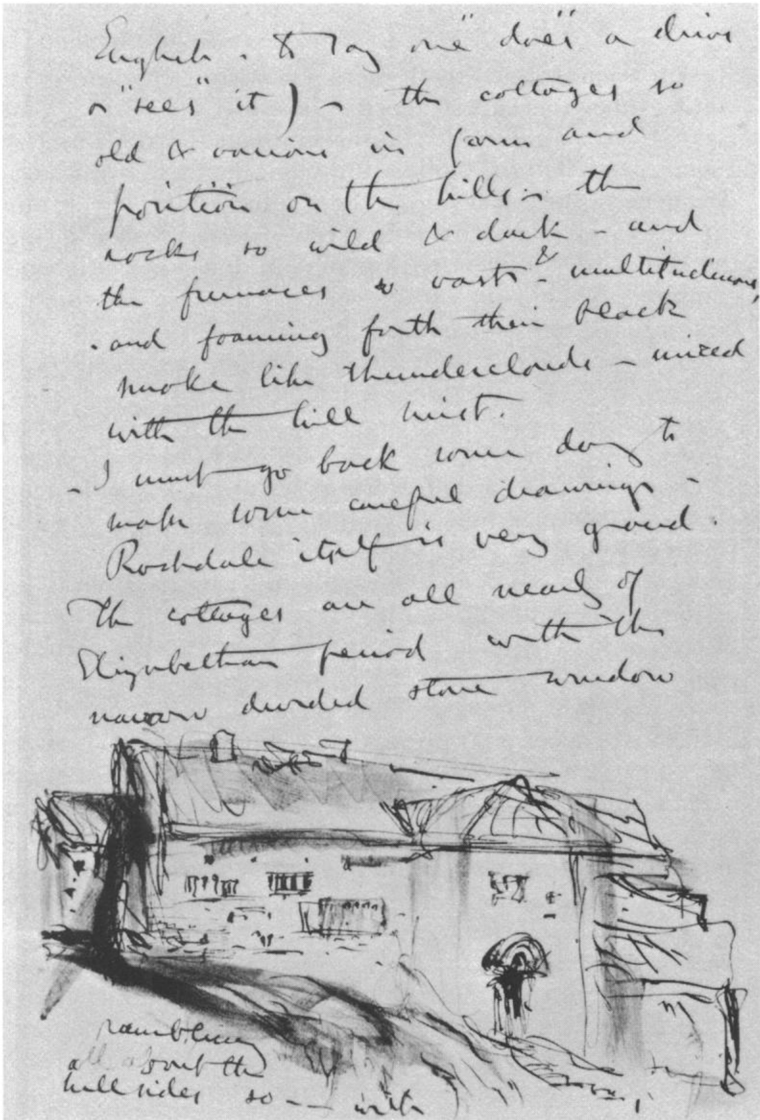
English. & today one "does" a drive
or "sees" it) — the cottages so
old & curious in form and
position on the hills — the
rocks so wild & dark — and
the furnaces so vast & multitudinous,
and foaming forth their black
smoke like thunderclouds — mixed
with the hill mist.
— I must go back some day to
make some careful drawings —
Rochdale itself is very good.
The cottages are all nearly of
the Elizabethan period with the
narrow divided stone window

rambling
all about the
hill sides so — with

Page of Ruskin letter (25 February 1859)
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> ruins; and how from Temples of Jupiter and Gardens of the Hesperides, a spirit in his feet guides him, at last, to the lonely arches of Whitby, and the bleak sands of Holy Isle.
>
> (V 329)

Ruskin isolates a vital truth there, even while characteristically ignoring other relevant evidence (it is one of the startling omissions from *Modern Painters* that he never treats Turner's early picturesque years). Turner's gradual (though not at all consistent) abandonment of mythical and iconographical imagery through his career—Constable, of course, rarely if ever invoked it—declares the late eighteenth-century loss of confidence in one of the main components of *ut pictura poesis*—namely, imagery that could readily be translated into verbal discourse.

The rise of the picturesque school and the decline of confidence in *ut pictura poesis* during the eighteenth century seem to me closely related. Their respective fortunes can be traced in and I suspect were, if not caused, at least hastened, by the new art form of the English landscape garden. Here, to start with, readable items such as statues, temples, and inscriptions were situated among natural forms of wood, lawn, and water. Gradually, as the taste for allegory and allusion waned, these natural forms by themselves came to assume the central role—either as the constituents of formal visual effects, as in "Capability" Brown's gardens, or, if that abstract appeal to the eye did not suffice, as the new visual language for "meaning" in a landscape. The picturesque movement annexed both those concerns. It promoted the appreciation of aesthetic effects, divorced from moral or religious values. And it sanctioned personal and sentimental discoveries of meaning in landscape. Both were consequences of the disrepute which had overtaken the old iconographical or emblematical syntax, which connected aesthetic to moral and communicated public meaning in a scene. Joseph Spence, whose *Polymetis* of 1747 has been offered by D. J. Gordon as a major text in the history of the English rejection of *ut pictura poesis*, not only declared that he could not understand paintings which relied on emblematic imagery, but would not bother to invoke Ripa's *Iconologia* or Alciati's *Emblemata* and preferred to rely solely upon what he saw—"the figures of things themselves speak . . . the clearest language."[17]

Ruskin's scepticisms with the extreme manifestations of the picturesque appear early, in *The Poetry of Architecture*, and they centre precisely around this largely eighteenth-century emphasis upon

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the clear language of things. He shared, as we've seen, the picturesque propensity to treat simply of forms and shapes, as in the variety and roughness of ruins or in geological samples. There things speak for themselves to our eye. But he also shared the rather old-fashioned idea that landscape and architecture should address themselves to our minds as well as to our sight, though what had now been lost from that tradition was any language in which it could be done.

Both in his conservatism and his loss of conventional language Ruskin seems close to the later ideas of Humphry Repton on landscape design. Repton's writings were collected for publication in 1840 by J. C. Loudon, Ruskin's mentor in the late 1830's and the man who accepted the essays on *The Poetry of Architecture* for his *Architectural Magazine* during 1837 and 1838; Loudon even included a piece of Ruskin's ("On the Proper Shapes of Pictures and Engravings" I 235-45) in the volume of Repton's works. It seems likely, then, that Ruskin would have heard much of Repton's ideas; certain parts of *The Poetry of Architecture* declare this influence quite strongly—notably Ruskin's praise of the formality of terracing introduced around Italian villas as a necessary "link between nature and art" (I 86). But in their general emphasis upon a landscape's appeal to the intellect, especially to the mind's adjudication of proper connections between buildings and surrounding scenery and between that location and the building's ornamentation, Ruskin and Repton have much in common.[18] Thus Ruskin makes fun of what he calls "edificatorial fancies" of contemporary picturesque architects, which he parodies in the style of *Pickwick Papers* that he was just then reading:

> the humour prevailing at the present day among many of our peacable old gentlemen, who never smelt powder in their lives, to eat their morning muffins in a savage-looking tower, and admit quiet old ladies to a tea-party under the range of twenty-six cannon, which, it is lucky for the china, are all wooden ones, as they are, in all probability, accurately and awfully pointed into the drawing-room windows.
>
> (I 153)

This is comparable to Repton's query whether the picturesque vocabulary of "Salvator Rosa, and our English Mortimer" is fitly copied "for the residence of man in a polished and civilized state."[19] The appeal to the mind, which is neglected in both examples, involves a lack of consideration for the propriety and reasonableness of association: "the spirit of the English landscape is simple, pas-

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toral and mild, devoid, also, of high associations," which the Scottish Highlands by contrast would possess (I 169).

The problem for both Ruskin and Repton was that 'meaning' in a building or landscape could no longer depend upon a clear iconographical language, in which objects were readily 'translated' according to established allegorical syntax, which Ruskin had already seen Turner abandon. Yet in order to avoid the mindless absorption in either merely formal effects or random fancifulness, Ruskin thought that landscape needed to be seen as having meanings—he uses variously the terms, "character," "soul," "animation"—which the spectator could understand. His essays are at times rather confused as to whether these meanings come 'ready-made' in the different landscapes he treats of or whether a properly educated sensibility registers as elements of a scene what are in fact constituents of that person's consciousness.[20] But in either case the visual experience has mental repercussions, which it is the business of verbal discourse to identify and explain. (In this Ruskin shows, what is never mentioned by his critics, an obvious debt not just to picturesque paintings but to contemporary landscape gardens, many examples of which he saw during the family's annual excursions around Britain.)[21]

Ruskin would continue to use the term 'picturesque' in a perjorative fashion, to indicate his disapproval of a "narrow enjoyment of outward forms" (VI 23) and the mere display of the "skill of the artist, and his powers of composition" (VII 255), even while he was relying upon other aspects of the picturesque aesthetic. He adopted one of the most blatent of picturesque visual enthusiasms, for example, upon which to base his lifelong attention to architectural ornament, yet at the same time made it the premise for his own re-shaping of the picturesque alliance between words and visual images.

William Gilpin had described how, to "satisfy the eye" before picturesque objects, there must be a textured surface:

> various surfaces of objects, sometimes turning to the light one way, and sometimes in another, . . . give the painter his choice of opportunities in massing, and graduating both his lights, and shades.—The *richness* also of the light depends on the breaks, and little recesses, which it finds on the surfaces of bodies.

As an example, Gilpin adduced the architect who "break[s] the front of his pile with ornaments."[22] Now it is these decorations by an architect of his basic structure that Ruskin, in *The Poetry of Ar-*

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chitecture, argues will obtain "character" for a building (I 136). And 'character,' in the terminology of picturesque aesthetics, means what initiates and guides our associations, which language in its turn articulates. Ruskin engages, I think, in some circular (rather than polygonal) thinking at this point: decorations promote 'character' which, in its turn, promotes associations; associations involve the mind not just the eye; decoration is what distinguishes human architecture from animal building.

> The mere preparation of convenience, therefore, is not architecture in which man can take pride, or ought to take delight; but the high and ennobling art of architecture is, that of giving to buildings, whose parts are determined by necessity, such forms and colours as shall delight the mind, by preparing it for the operations to which it is to be subjected in the building.
>
> (I 105)

Hence the insistence, appearing early in *The Poetry of Architecture*, that "the proper designing of ornament" (I 135) must be an architect's prime concern.

It is, of course, the premise of much of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, where gothic ornament becomes the whole object of his discourse—"fair fronts of variegated mosaic, charged with wild fancies and dark hosts of imagery" (VIII 53)—*and* at the same time provides the language for Ruskin's text—"not a leaflet [in northern Gothic ornament] but speaks, and speaks far off too" (VIII 28). In *The Poetry of Architecture* is first heard the characteristic Ruskinian formulation of a landscape or a building *speaking* to us through its details: a cottage is "a quiet life-giving voice" (I 12) or a very old forest tree has its age "written on every spray" and is "always telling us about the past" (I 68). In later works this emphasis on the mute language of visible things coordinates three picturesque strategies—the search for textured roughness, for ornament in Venice or a geological formation in the Alps is generally ruined, or seen fragmentarily by Ruskin; the picturesque alliance of word with image; and the address via that fresh language to the mind.

The rich ornamentations of Venetian building, like the "sculptured and coloured surfaces" of Nature's crags and crystals (VIII 145), are formal delights beyond the imagination of any picturesque traveller. They are also "hieroglyphs," and the stones of Venice, as of Chamounix, require translation. The gothic building, Ruskin argues in "The Lamp of Memory,"

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admits of a richness of record altogether unlimited. Its minute and multitudinous sculptural decorations afford means of expressing either symbolically or literally, all that need be known of national feeling or achievement. More decoration will, indeed, be usually required than can take so elevated a character; and much, even in the most thoughtful periods, has been left to the freedom of fancy, or suffered to consist of mere repetitions of some national bearing or symbol. It is, however, generally unwise, even in mere surface ornament, to surrender the power and privilege of variety which the spirit of Gothic architecture admits; much more in important features—capitals of columns or bosses, and string-courses, as of course in all confessed bas-reliefs. Better the rudest work that tells a story or records a fact than the richest without meaning.

(VIII 229-30)

And in discussions of mountain scenery, which he connected to his architectural studies by emphasising the community of cathedral and Alp, he was equally alert to visible fact and translatable meaning:

For a stone, when it is examined, will be found a mountain in miniature. The fineness of Nature's work is so great, that into a single block, a foot or two in diameter, she can compress as many changes of form and structure, on a small scale, as she needs for her mountains on a large one; and, taking moss for forests, and grains of crystal for crags, the surface of a stone, in by far the plurality of instances, is more interesting than the surface of an ordinary hill; more fantastic in form, and incomparably richer in colour,—the last quality being, in fact, so noble in most stones of good birth (that is to say, fallen from the crystalline mountain-ranges), that I shall be less able to illustrate this part of my subject satisfactorily by means of engraving than perhaps any other, except the colour of skies.

And in that significant admission of the uselessness of visual illustration, Ruskin prepares for his necessary act of literary translation of those facts and meanings. Such interpretation provides the occasion for most of Ruskin's famous set pieces, the purple passages so dear to those who select gobbets from his works for us to peruse. Yet without their context of a criticism which constantly stresses our obligation to interpret the mute poesy of ornament or mountain structure, those fine periods are themselves merely picturesque, evidence of *our* "narrow enjoyment" of Ruskin's "merely outward delightfulness" (VI 15).

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III

The last of the three picturesque procedures which seem central to the functioning of Ruskin's imagination concerns the use of the mirror or Claude glass. These tinted convex mirrors were carried by most picturesque tourists—thus Thomas Gray, visiting the ruins of Kirkstall Abbey, tells how

> the gloom of these ancient cells, the shade & verdure of the landscape, the glittering & murmur of the stream, the lofty towers & long perspective of the church. . . detain'd me for many hours, & were the truest subjects for my glass I have yet met with.[23]

The 'glass' had many traditional sanctions for the artist; it acquired fresh ones for the picturesque traveller, who would often, as amateur artist, transpose its reflections into sketch and water-colour.

The mirror was the privileged metaphor of artistic representation, authorizing, according to one's emphasis, either accuracy of vision or the capture of *la belle nature*. To the picturesque artist it reflected the real world, yet also collected carefully chosen images within the oval (or sometimes square) frame and coloured them with its one coordinating tint. It was both an objective, cognitive activity and also a private, creative one, as the user of the mirror turned his back upon the scene to be studied and withdrew into his own reflections. The reversed images in the glass, paralleling of course the upside-down images we receive upon our retinas, were a visible token of that joint world of optical and mental reflections—otherwise announced in *speculum* and speculation—which is dramatised in the myth of Narcissus, an extremely popular motif in eighteenth-century descriptive poetry. Narcissus' confrontation with his watery mirror had also been, for Alberti in the second book of his *Treatise on Painting*, the origin and superiority of painting, as a three-dimensional world is transposed into a two-dimensional image.[24]

Ruskin did not, as far as I know, ever use a Claude glass, though some of his juvenile verse is composed as if he did.[25] But he nonetheless found that the picturesque obsession with mirrors and reflections answered many of his own beliefs and even coincided with imagery derived at an early age from his study of the Bible. Ruskin frequently invokes the traditional artistic metaphor of art

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holding a mirror up to nature—not of course a specifically picturesque idea—and, as we might expect, places contradictory constructions upon it. Sometimes it is simply the image for unsatisfactory and incomplete imagination:

> And then, lastly, it is another infinite advantage possessed by the picture, that in these various differences from reality it becomes the expression of the power and intelligence of a companionable human soul. In all this choice, arrangement, penetrative sight, and kindly guidance, we recognize a supernatural operation, and perceive, not merely the landscape or incident as in a mirror. . . .
>
> (V 186-87)

On other occasions the mirror represents the narcissistic arrogance which is disclaimed on the title pages of *Modern Painters* via some lines of Wordsworth's who does not want to be counted among those who only prize

> This soul, and the transcendent universe,
> No more than as a mirror that reflects
> To proud Self-love her own intelligence.

Yet the mirror equally sanctioned Ruskin's requirement of an artist that he carefully delineate the natural world, that he look—at any rate as a preliminary stage of his education—not at what his predecessors have done but at the details of the natural world caught in the glass of his careful private scrutiny. If Alberti saw the Narcissus myth as a translation of three into two dimensions, Ruskin invoked the mirror as the artist's guide back into a proper apprehension and renewed contact with three dimensions:

> Every object, however near the eye, has something about it which you cannot see, and which brings the mystery of distance even into every part and portion of what we suppose ourselves to see most distinctly. . . .
>
> (III 337)

This paradoxical reversal of the mirror's loss of depth is first explored in his—this time specifically picturesque—astonishingly perceptive discussion of the lake as mirror in *The Poetry of Architecture*:[26]

> When a small piece of quiet water reposes in a valley, or lies embosomed among crags, its chief beauty is derived from our perception of crystalline depth, united with excessive slumber. In its limited surface we cannot get the sublimity of extent, but we may have the beauty of peace, and

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> the majesty of depth. The object must therefore be, to get the eye off its surface, and to draw it down, to beguile it into that fairy land underneath, which is more beautiful than what it repeats, because it is all full of dreams unattainable and illimitable. This can only be done by keeping its edge out of sight, and guiding the eye off the land into the reflection, as if it were passing into a mist, until it finds itself swimming into the blue sky, with a thrill of unfathomable falling.
>
> (I 90)

The lake's mirror, better far than any picturesque equipment, because God-given, invites and accommodates the imagination's inward reflections. And because the "surface of water is not a mockery, but a new view of what is above it," as he says in *Modern Painters* (III 542), reflections can be used as the emblem of the highest imagination. For Ruskin this is Turner's, which mirrors the natural world accurately as well as provides a "new view of what is above it." Ruskin defends Turner from hostile contemporary criticism by applying to his work the basic truth of what watery reflections teach. The whole of *Modern Painters* is an effort to answer the question that is posed by our fascination and puzzlement with mirrors, expressed by another visitor to Italy in 1821:

> Why is the reflection in that canal far more beautiful than the objects it reflects? The colours more vivid yet blended with more harmony; the openings from within into the soft and tender colours of the distant wood and the intersection of the mountain lines surpass and misrepresent truth.[27]

In 'misrepresenting' and surpassing truth, Ruskin shows that Turner, who was himself obsessed with reflections in water, especially in his Swiss and Venetian subjects, not only combines all traditional sanctions of the mirror, but becomes in his turn "a mere instrument or mirror, used by a higher power for a reflection to others of a truth which no effort of his could ever have ascertained" (VI 44).

The picturesque mirror and the Biblical mirror eventually coincide in the chapter called "The Dark Mirror" in the final volume of *Modern Painters*. In this he is most exercised about whether "it might seem a waste of time to draw landscape at all." He pulls together by way of response many threads from the previous nine interconnected volumes of his work—*The Poetry of Architecture, The Seven Lamps*, three volumes of *The Stones of Venice* and the first four of *Modern Painters* itself—and he passes in review most of the concerns that I have tried to elucidate in this paper.

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He notes that the picturesque at its lowest is a degradation of the contemplative or reflective faculty. He reaffirms, however, the great artist's attention to the "historical association connected with landscape" and with cities like Venice. He reminds his readers that "in these books of mine, their distinctive character, as essays on art, is their bringing everything to a root in human passion or human hope." He traces "every principle of painting" to "some vital or spiritual fact," which he has used his own verbal skills to translate even when "connections between art and human emotion" were sometimes "slight or local." He then justifies that emphasis upon man's inward rather than outward concerns, even in visual art, by saying that it is in his soul that man resembles the Deity: "the soul of man is still a mirror, wherein may be seen, darkly, the image of the mind of God."

He apologizes at once for these "daring words." Part of the boldness at this point in Ruskin's long endeavour to bring *Modern Painters* and its satellites to completion is perhaps that he finds he still must use an imagery which he encountered first in the picturesque movement, aspects of which he now rejects, and a picturesque imagery that forged strong bonds with religious ideas that he has also found insufficient (he is writing at most twelve months after his famous "unconversion" in 1858 before Veronese's *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* in Turin). Continuity and contradiction are the twin hallmarks of Ruskin's mind. So the reliance upon ideas still drawn from modes of thought now rejected must be no surprise, except to those who need to make Ruskin into a systematic thinker. The "soul of man is a mirror of the mind of God" is quickly restated, after a brief defence of the original bold words, and in ways that are even more revealing of Ruskin's debts:

> A mirror, dark, distorted, broken, use what blameful words you please of its state; yet in the main, a true mirror, out of which alone, and by which alone, we can know anything of God at all.
>
> (VII 260)

The human ruin, blemished and rough like any picturesque object—has in its turn to be interpreted and articulated as the hieroglyph of spiritual and divine history.

IV

Ruskin's early schooling in the picturesque joined his mother's constant instruction of him in the Bible to shape his most characteristic

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ideas. At times he needed to insist that he had grown out of both disciplines; while it is certainly true that he re-modelled them, I do not think they ever ceased to determine the ways of his imagination and even the odd fashion in which his *oeuvre* (at least until 1860) was built up.

The love of ruin, of fragments, gave Ruskin, as it had given Thomas Gray, the "truest subjects for his glass." They offered him opportunities for exact delineation, a loving response to shape, form, colour and light. But they also provided occasions for interpretation. For even in what Ruskin calls "lovely nature," though there is "an excellent degree of simple beauty, addressed to the eye alone, yet often what impresses us most will form but a very small portion of that visible beauty" (V 355-6). The key word there is *impress*; elsewhere in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (p. 201) the picturesque is specifically contrasted with the "impressive." I suspect what we have here is some fossilized jargon from the Lockean and associational traditions; it serves, however, to distinguish the merely visual from the visible's address to the mind. The impression upon that mind of beauty or truth in visual objects, however, needed fresh languages for its interpretation. Picturesque skill at recording formal delights was not a sufficient syntax; old allegorical and emblematic languages were in disrepute as being both too arcane and too public and general, not tailored for the individual sensibility. Fresh alliances of word and image must be forged to treat of truths which

> may be stated by any signs or symbols which have a definite signification in the minds of those to whom they are addressed, although such signs be themselves no image nor likeness of anything.
>
> (III 104)

What he strove, therefore, to do was to honour in the same object both truths that he saw and truths that he deduced, for which a language traditionally existed in his own evangelical background: that of typology.[28] "I have throughout the examination of Typical beauty, asserted our instinctive sense of it; the moral meaning of it being only discoverable by reflection" (IV 211). Reflection is thought *and*, as he claimed for Turner, our readiness to act as God's mirror.

The attention to fragments, which could be found to speak volumes, may also, we would be not uncharitable in thinking, serve as an analogy for Ruskin's own work. He talks frequently of its "warped and broken" text (VII 257). But in it he could reveal by

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many images and even more words how ruin was of the essence of God's universe as we find in the Alps and of man's world as we find it in Venetian ornament. He could catalogue and itemise their phenomenal as well as their noumenal significance. In his mirror he could keep, perhaps, the whole image steady for himself; it is not always so coherent when we try to peer over his shoulder. We can from time to time feel confident that we see him steadily and see him whole; but it would be just as fair to those other moments of our bewilderment, trotting round his polygon, to end by quoting his father's panic in face of the son's frenetic quest among the ruins of Venice on 25 May 1846, an activity that the old man seems to intuit, for he was no fool, as a strange revision of the picturesque:

> He is cultivating art at present, searching for real knowledge, but to you [W. H. Harrison, an old friend] and me this is at present a sealed book. It will neither take the shape of picture nor poetry. It is gathered in scraps hardly wrought, for he is drawing perpetually, but no drawing such as in former days you or I might compliment in the usual way by saying it deserved a frame; but fragments of everything from a Cupola to a Cart-wheel, but in such bits that it is to the common eye a mass of Hieroglyphics—all true—truth itself, but Truth in mosaic.
>
> (VIII xxiii)

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NOTES

1 All quotations are taken, unless otherwise stated, from *The Works of John Ruskin* (Library Edition), ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London, 1903-1912), with references, as here, to volume and page numbers.

2 "I do not intend, however, now to pursue the inquiry in a method so laboriously systematic. . ." (V 18) seems to me a remark more representative of Ruskin's actual practice than the attempt to shape him into a systematic thinker made by G. P. Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton, N.J., 1971). However, Landow's book and Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin, The Argument of the Eye* (London, 1977), are the two most recent works to address themselves to the subject of Ruskin and the picturesque.

3 John D. Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass. A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius* (New York, 1961), p. 2.

4 I have examined the development and accretions of Ruskin's writing in a paper, "John Ruskin: *oeuvre* and footnote," read to the Ruskin Symposium at the Humanities Center of The Johns Hopkins University in April 1978. The papers read on that occasion are to be published.

5 *Three Essays* (1792), p. 41. On Gilpin generally, see Carl Paul Barbier, *William Gilpin, His Drawings, Teaching and Theory of the Picturesque* (Oxford, 1963).

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6 On this topic see Helen Gill Viljoen, *Ruskin's Scottish Heritage* (Urbana, Illinois, 1956), pp. 107 and 227 note 23.

7 *The Ruskin Family Letters*, ed. Van Akin Burd, 2 vols. (Ithaca, NY., 1973), pp. 117-18. The father's letters are full of his picturesque discoveries—"You must see Bury St Edmond fine picturesque Bridge & Churches. . ." (p. 557).

8 On this last topic see the paper by Alice Hauck, "Ruskin's use of Illuminated Manuscripts: the case of the Beaupré Antiphony at the Walters Art Gallery," also in the collection mentioned in note 4.

9 I have explored all three aspects of the eighteenth-century picturesque cult in my essay, "Picturesque Mirrors and the Ruins of the Past," forthcoming in *Dispositio*, to which the reader is referred for elaboration of some of the background to Ruskin's work examined here.

10 J. Aikin, *Letters from a Father to a Son* (2nd ed., London, 1794), pp. 266 and 269.

11 This was one of the subjects in his "first sketchbook," according to *Praeterita* (XXXV 77); the drawing, at Vassar College Art Gallery, dates from 1835, his sixteenth year. Another early drawing of what his editors at least call a "ruin" near Ambleside is reproduced by them in II facing p. 201.

12 *The Diaries*, ed. Joan Evans and J. H. Whitehouse (Oxford, 1956), I 32. And for a similar section on the valley of Chamounix, see *Diaries* I 14-16.

13 For an account of how these two major works relate to each other see my essay mentioned in note 4.

14 See also, on Chamounix, II 425 and note.

15 The American insight is echoed by Cadwallader D. Colden, a New York canal builder: "Did we live amidst ruins and. . . scenes indicating present decay. . . we might be as little inclined as others, to look forward"; quoted by David Lowenthal, "The Place of the Past in the American Landscape," *Geographies of the Mind*, ed. David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden (Oxford, 1975), p. 93.

16 See also the "inventions of such incidents and thoughts as can be expressed in words as well as on canvas" (III 112).

17 Quoted in D. J. Gordon's essential essay, "Ripa's Fate," *The Renaissance Imagination*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Berkeley, 1975), p. 60.

18 I have argued for a conservative and revisionist Repton, especially for his being rather distinct from the picturesque practioners with whom he is usually associated, in my "Sense and Sensibility in the Landscape Designs of Humphry Repton," *Studies in Burke and his Times*, XIX (1978), 3-28.

19 J. C. Loudon, *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the late Humphry Repton, Esq.* (1840), p. 592.

20 An interesting discussion of the languages of scenery—whether endemic or derived from some exercise of what Ruskin would come to distrust as the "pathetic fallacy"—and an enquiry into the significance of *The Poetry of Architecture* in Ruskin's career which complements my considerations here is Harold L. Shapiro, "*The Poetry of Architecture*: Ruskin's Preparation for *Modern Painters*," *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, XV (1971), 70-84.

21 And see "Nature. . . is a good landscape gardener" in *Diaries* I 63.

22 *Three Essays*, p. 20.

23 *Works*, ed. Edmund Gosse (London, 1884), I 281.

24 *On Painting and On Sculpture*, ed. with translations, introductions and notes by Cecil Grayson (London 1972), pp. 60-63.

25 See his early verses on Derwent Water (II 265-66), jointly written with those on Skiddaw, where the ruins of the mountain are also celebrated. For other uses of the picturesque cliché of the mirror of lake waters see *Iteriad*, ed. J. S. Dearden (Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1969), pp. 33-34.

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26 See also John James Ruskin in February, 1840, perhaps taught to look at reflections carefully by his son's essays on *The Poetry of Architecture*, "In winter if quite still the absence of strong light gives such a complete mirror like steel with every object so clearly reflected that it is a wonder altogether," *Ruskin Family Letters*, p. 647. E. T. Cook's *Life of Ruskin* (London, 1911), I 143, notes that Ruskin's various accounts of reflection were invoked approvingly in Sir Montagu Pollock's *Light and Water* (1903).

27 *Collected Poems of Shelley*, ed. Neville Rogers (Boston, 1968), p. 485.

28 On Ruskin's use of typological strategies see the discussion by G. P. Landow in the volume cited in note 2 and his most recent account of the same topic in the very useful volume, *Literary Uses of Typology*, ed. Earl Miner (Princeton, 1977).

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