

# VICTORIAN MODERNISM

*Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience*

JESSICA R. FELDMAN



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*To the memory of  
Milly Feldman, Jonathan Feldman, Joseph Simko*

*"And shall my sense pierce love, – the last relay  
And ultimate outpost of eternity?"*

Dante Gabriel Rossetti

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\* \* \*

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## Abbreviations

### Dante Gabriel Rossetti

- Contents* 16, Cheyne Walk, Chelsea. *The Valuable Contents of the Residence of Dante G. Rossetti*
- CW* *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*
- LDGR* *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*
- Surtees* *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1828–1882: a Catalogue Raisonné*

### Augusta Evans

- Hoole* *Letters to Rachel Heustis*, Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama
- Curry* *Letters to the Honorable J. L. M. Curry*, Curry Collection, Library of Congress

### William James

- CWJ* *The Correspondence of William James, vols. 1–4*
- ECR* *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*
- ERE* *Essays in Radical Empiricism and A Pluralistic Universe*
- ERM* *Essays in Religion and Morality*
- Houghton* *Correspondence*. James Family Collection. Houghton Library
- MEN* *Manuscript Essays and Notes*
- P* *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*
- PP* *The Principles of Psychology*
- TT* *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*

## List of abbreviations

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- VRE* *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*
- WB* *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*

### Wallace Stevens

- CP* *Collected Poems*

## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence.

William James, *Pragmatism*<sup>1</sup>

The more that is gathered together in a confused representation, the more extensive clarity the representation has.

Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*<sup>2</sup>

Marcel Proust, exemplary high Modernist, saw himself as more than an admirer of the Victorian sage John Ruskin, explaining in the "Preface" to his translation and creative annotation of Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens* that he mingled his being with that of Ruskin in an actual, if aesthetic, lovemaking. Proust teaches, in a tangle of pronouns and antecedents, that Ruskin's thought has "[M]ade the universe more beautiful for us, or at least certain individual parts of the universe, because it touched upon them, and because it introduce[d] us to them by obliging us, if we want to understand it, to love them."<sup>3</sup> Love, understanding, beauty; a universe in parts; touching and obligation: Proust speaks of a world of intense and complicated interrelations.

Proust never met Ruskin face to face, but his "Preface" describes an intimate relationship. To know Ruskin, Proust tells us, we must love what he has loved. Ruskin, by visiting places and works of art and by sketching them and writing about them, inhabits them: "It was the soul of Ruskin I went to seek there, which he imparted to the stones of Amiens as deeply as their sculptors had imparted theirs, for the words of genius can give, as well as does the chisel, an immortal form to things."<sup>4</sup> For Proust, the experience of art is a pilgrimage in which we touch the holy relics – stones and words.

When we feel beauty as Ruskin discovered and made it, when we touch him as we visit and touch objects he loved, Proust continues, we share in Ruskin's aesthetic sensibility which is his very being. He becomes part of



us as we weave ourselves into a chain bound, embarrassingly enough to our professional sensibilities, by love. Reading Proust reading Ruskin as Ruskin himself reads statues and buildings, we enter a chain of embodied beauty that invites our creations, including our works of literary commentary, as the next link. Intimacy, reverence, and creativity, Proust tells us, will forge the links. Proust's "Preface," in its open references to love as the engine and reward of art, might easily have become cloying. What mitigates the sweetness is his fascination with the substance of the chain itself, with the works of art created when artists and aesthetes know one another – even mystically inhabit one another – across continents, centuries, and artistic media.

Art which is complex, always under construction yet providing dwelling places, satisfying in its very lack of simplicity and closure: Proust and Ruskin found these ideas *useful*. Together they have suggested to me the hypotheses I have set out to explore, these acts of exploration themselves grouping, for the moment, under the term "Victorian Modernism." It is meant to signal an exploration of mid-nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century literature, with an emphasis on the earlier century, in which both the artists studied and the critics doing the studying are pragmatists. The upper-case Pragmatism of such classic American philosophers as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey is a category that may itself expand, as I shall explain, to include lower-case pragmatists writing in other times and places.<sup>5</sup> It is easier to say what pragmatist truth-seeking is not, than to say what it is. Pragmatism tends to be anti-dogmatic, anti-metaphysical, anti-foundational, anti-positivist, anti-systematic. Suspicious of traditional dualisms (subject-object, mind-world, theory-practice), it eschews monisms; tends toward meliorism (the idea that human effort may improve the world) rather than optimism or pessimism; and involves an evolutionary view of truth that examines how truth is made and remade over time – and always in the "light of human needs and interests."<sup>6</sup>

Rather than assuming the successful work of art to be the product of a unifying imagination, a seminal and quasi-mystical power superior to mere emotion and mere fancy, Victorian Modernists fuel their pragmatist search for linked and contingent truths with the energies of fancy and tender feeling: superfluous, sentimental, over- or under-wrought as that feeling might appear when held to the standard of modernist purification. The pragmatist hypotheses of Victorian Modernism, the network of paths down which I have chosen to set foot, are as follows. Whether they are true in a pragmatist sense – that is, whether they add to existing bodies

of critical truth in ways that speak effectively to our "human needs and interests" – it will be the work of this study to discover, and for readers themselves to judge.

First path: the Victorian period and the Modern period, each so complex as to resist intellectual containment almost successfully; may be studied fruitfully as one continuous period, Victorian Modernism. Such a study will lean more heavily on intricate, intermingling patterns – on nuance, detail, and plenitude – than it will on sturdier critical constructions such as "The Victorian Novel" or "The Crisis of Modernity." Nor are the boundaries of this "period" themselves firm; the method of finding relations between Victorian and Modern will naturally lead outside the artificial limits I have set (and exceeded): 1837 to 1945. Implicit in this study is a questioning of the periodization of literary study – a questioning, not a conclusion.

Second, Victorian Modernist criticism will find multiple links and overlappings of hitherto separate critical discourses such as those of sentiment, sublimity, domesticity, and aestheticism. When we are able to see that a sublime sentimentality intermingles with a domestic aestheticism in a given work, we will find ourselves experiencing multiple centers, at home in the pragmatist realm of Victorian Modernism where sharp breaks between categories and concepts are usually softened. Similarly, chronologically separate categories such as aestheticism and decadence or Pre-Raphaelitism and Abstractionism will lose their hard edges. National divisions will not disappear, but will be less useful sorting devices, as Victorian Modernism not only links the art of England, America, and France, but also follows each country's linkages with multiple and always contingent centers in many countries. Phrases such as "Victorian America" will feel more comfortable to our ears. Victorian Modernism will also turn some disciplinary tables. To the list of philosophers who made the aestheticist turn,<sup>7</sup> we will add such artists as John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde, who made the philosophical turn. "Theory" will be as much an exercise of artists and artistic creations as it is an exercise of critical schools of thought.

Third, in Victorian Modernist works, frames of art and frames of reality overlap. Artists' everyday lives at home are not lived in contradistinction to their works; the artistic and the ordinary mingle. To the extent that the quotidian (often seen as trivial) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been traditionally gendered feminine and imagined in domestic terms, its importance in the patterns of Victorian Modernism returns a measure of female experience to our critical narratives. Because

public (masculine) and private (feminine) spheres have never actually been separate in "Victorian" or "Modern" culture, critics of Victorian Modernism simply remember to look harder for the aspects of everyday life within works of art, and of art within everyday life, aspects that have been occulted by many critical narratives. Furthermore, Victorian Modernist critics will work to bring their daily lives and their professional worlds into convergence by writing what helps them (and if they are talented and lucky, may help others) to discover, in Wallace Stevens's words, "how to live" and "what to do."<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, neither simply mimetic of everyday life nor sleekly autonomous and therefore apart from everyday life, literary works of Victorian Modernism seek what will work by exploring and expressing a filigree of four major, and many minor, strands: the artist herself, the "actual" worlds in which that artist participates (including but not limited to the most mundane), the work of art, and the audience.<sup>9</sup> By examining any one of these strands in isolation, we as critics fail to address the plenitude of relations of Victorian Modernism. Victorian Modernism will reveal artists' ability to dwell in complexity and even seeming paradox: incoherent coherence, controlled disorganization, concatenated union, patchworks, and filigrees. It will involve literary scholars in a related making of patterns-in-progress that are playful but also serious, sentimental but also restrained.

But, it will be asked, is there not already a rich critical literature reading Modernism across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? The answer, of course, is yes. I use the term "Victorian Modernism," however, to signal my intention of *adding to* the body of dominant beliefs, methods, and conclusions of those who have already made such connections, by whatever tag we may choose to know them: Critical, Queer, and Post-Colonial Theorists; New Historicists and Literary Historians; Feminist, Psychoanalytic, and Cultural Studies critics, and so on. I began to write this book because some words seemed to me to be missing from the contemporary critical scene, at least in their positive connotations. Dare I say them? Tenderness, pleasure, beauty; playfulness, fascination.<sup>10</sup>

In bringing the Victorian period into relation with twentieth-century modernity and post-modernity, we have created critical narratives that have for the most part featured strife, loss, rupture, and a perpetual disorientation caused by often over-powering forces. Furthermore, a preeminent critical stance of the past thirty years – whatever one's methodology and subject matter – has been adversarial. Modernism has often been about resistances, and who would deny the significance

of such work? Even when resistance is joined by submission or active acceptance, critical narratives have tended to the strenuous. What has not clashed in the night? I do not wish to eliminate the energy that comes from living and writing *à rebours*; as a feminist I continue to try to think against the grain of accepted truths and customs. In fact, I too, have written a work of resistance: to argue is to resist. Yet I have felt another need – the desire not just to react *against*, but also to react *with*, that is, to appreciate. Pragmatist receptivity requires geniality and inclusiveness. Personifying Pragmatism as a woman, William James assures us that "she will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence." Aestheticist impulses, for all we have been taught of their ideological work and their market value (and I will be discussing both) need not always be dramatized as economic, social, and psychological agon and alienation. We also need to explore in a variety of ways the pleasurable swoons and feelings of reverence that sometimes occur as we experience art.

Victorian Modernist appreciation does not mean turning away from or correcting the critical explorations conducted since the New Criticism began to feel inadequate to our needs. Rather, I take my cues from William James's Pragmatist philosophy which, read across his writings, advocates not so much a method of finding the truth as an openness to various methods, a reactive tendency, a pluralist and changing set of positions. Appreciation as criticism takes place in the time signatures of finding, making, testing, and dwelling; in textures of finely grained and evolving relations interrupted by both dwellings in plenitude and sharp breaks; in colors both shimmering and opaque. It is escapist and utopian when it needs to be; it is angry, socially aware, rebellious, and recuperative when it needs to be, and sometimes it is playful, hedonistic, irresponsible, or passive.

Victorian Modernism is, then, a provisional set of leadings that may prove useful to scholars and critics. It signals, as well, a set of intermingling pathways and resting places explored by the artists I have chosen to study. So I emphasize for the moment, and at length in my chapters about authors, not what the critic does, but what the artists studied have done, although the two are never fully separable. Works of modern art have been richly interpreted as phenomena that express strife, rupture, loss, and gap – but they have been insufficiently appreciated as figurings forth of peaceful dwelling, plenitude, and continuities that reach across gaps.<sup>11</sup> The very Victorian qualities that Modernists purportedly had to overcome – conventionality of form, sentimentality and coyness, discursiveness, didacticism – have, like Poe's purloined letter, been hidden for

all to see on the very surfaces of Modernist works.<sup>12</sup> Faulkner abstractly spreads the conventional nineteenth-century melodrama of beset womanhood across *Light in August* as he teaches us about the poisonous notion of the color line. Willa Cather's sentimental and domestic fiction so deliberately wrings the heart that it took critics a long while to recognize its Modernist sophistications.

But of which Modernism do I speak? The answer, of course, depends on one's own Modernism, since there is so little agreement about modern literature's formal qualities, its years of origin (1490s? 1880s?), its longevity (has it ended?), and its groupings of artists and texts, whether generic, national, philosophical, or historical.<sup>13</sup> Every argument about modernism can thus be seen as a straw-man argument since its assumptions are eminently open to challenge. I have had to choose. The understanding of modernism to which I wish to add often goes by the name "high Modernism," and its dates are roughly 1880–1945. It features a literary work that, having been conceived in a time of spiritual crisis, communicates an exile from the homeland of certainty as it sits high on the shelf of autonomous art. An object to be admired (or in some cases excoriated) for its self-sufficiency and self-involvement, the Modern work has often been imagined, by artists and critics alike, as purely sculpted, paradoxically spiritual or cerebral for all its hardness, and preferably not for sale. Its internal incoherencies are bounded by its autonomy, made whole by its separation, at times its rupture, from the familiar. It takes the long and impersonal view, turning away from the ordinary and the fleshly, the vulgarly emotional and the preachy. This autonomy may also be viewed as false in the sense that the work expresses important, if often denied or unconscious, relations to capitalist society or the dehumanizing aspects of technological or profane culture. One must work hard to understand and appreciate such a Modernist work of art, and most people will fail to do so.

This portrait is as false as any other composite, but as a way to begin examining Victorian Modernism it is one that I choose to take down and handle – not because I wish to reject it but because I wish to work with it, to place it in relation to some other ideas. I shall wish to explore what John Ruskin described as an "art of the wayside," a space and an energy within Modernism that differs from both the maelstrom and the serene island of the autonomous.

In addition to hypothesizing the importance of tender relation to nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, I have also attempted to add to the body of understandings of "the aesthetic" by asking whether

it would be useful to regard it as something in addition to a (philosophical, political, historical, or social) problem to be solved. Problem became a verb, problematize, through the needs of a varied and instructive theoretical literature that does just that – "takes" things as problems, and often as evidence of social injustice. Some of this professional literature embodies what George Levine has called the "appropriation of the aesthetic by politics," a practice which he sees as ignoring questions of literary value and of literature's distinctiveness.<sup>14</sup> His goal in collecting the essays of *Aesthetics & Ideology*, he tells us, has been to reconsider the "category of the aesthetic" (p. 13) and to urge us to ask a set of questions that moves beyond noting the "politico-historical purposes" of literature (p. 13) in favor of questions about how we place value on what we read.

Instead of reconsidering, as Levine urges, what the "category of the aesthetic" refers to, I have begun by hypothesizing that I could do without the category, without "the aesthetic" itself. I have tried to understand what happens when we replace aesthetics as an object of study with aestheticism: the beliefs, customs, experiments, and actual creations in words and paint of nineteenth-century artists such as Ruskin and Rossetti. For attempts to understand an abstract aesthetic, I have substituted a pragmatist approach, asking how particular artists made their art in relation to their own specific human needs and interests – and their own notions, always embodied in works of art, of what art is and does, what artists do and are. The question, "What is the aesthetic?" metamorphoses to "How have artists lived, what have they made?"<sup>15</sup>

This pragmatist receptivity to the complex ways in which aestheticism answers in imagery or tone or rhythm our questions about the artistic enterprise also rescues us from a dualism that haunts talk about art. "The aesthetic" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought has been understood in two opposing ways: as a self-contained realm entirely apart from everyday concerns or reality, and as the whole of reality, the "tendency to see 'art' or 'language' or 'discourse' or 'text' as constituting the primary realm of human experience."<sup>16</sup> Thus on the one hand, the relation of "reality" to "the aesthetic" has been seen as absent, attenuated or threatening, e.g., "Rossetti knows the nearness of human life in the concrete world only as that which besieges the house of aesthetic life and threatens it with death and disruption."<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the relation of reality to the aesthetic is one of identity: reality just *is* the aesthetic. In this view, we live, inescapably, inside and through texts and performances. To regard the figures of my study as four artists whose delights and terrors, intellectual explorations and physical habits at home bring into complex

relation the lives they led and the works of art they made is to study aestheticism rather than aesthetics, to engage in tentative and varied strolls, flights, and dwellings in the neighborhood of art. It is to avoid the all-or-nothing views of aesthetics.

Nabokov's butterflies famously display the finely patterned wing of art-and-science, beauty-and-morality, arabesque-and-grid; indeed, they bring into intricate proximities, not synthesis, any of a number of erstwhile dichotomies. Such a butterfly has, in my fond imaginings, occasionally fluttered through the work that follows. Mine is a work of pattern, and it does not shy away from complication or even entanglement. In the spirit of Alexander Baumgarten ("The more that is gathered together in a confused representation, the more extensive clarity the representation has.") it looks for and embraces clarity which is not necessarily simplicity. This study itself has been conceived as a large pattern. Meditations on four artistic phenomena – sentimentality, domesticity, sublimity, aestheticism – appear between chapters addressing the study's principal writers: Ruskin, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Augusta Evans, and William James. Because this is a work of *arrangement* rather than an organic or fused whole, it is open to rearrangement and repetition with a difference. Any of its elements may, for a time, figure as center. *Beyond this introduction, meditations and chapters may be read in any order.* This is a work that tends to begin again and again, although it provides opportunities for dwelling. It is meant not to define Victorian Modernism, but to suggest its own revision.

But why primarily nineteenth-century writers in a study that also addresses the issues of twentieth-century modernisms? I have in passing sketched relations to twentieth-century writers such as Proust, James Joyce, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and Elizabeth Bishop. A fuller treatment of that century would have required a second volume. But more important than the issue of length is the issue of critical mode. Much of what I have seen in nineteenth-century texts I have seen because I looked at them through a twentieth-century lens. The latter century is in this way everywhere implied, but not always stated. Further, each of the chapters and each of the meditations may be treated as, to borrow a phrase from William James, "little hangings-together" within the larger hanging-together of the book. The partial stories of the world "mutually interlace and interfere at points" (*P*, p. 71) – and if others find it useful to link their stories of twentieth-century literature to this study, it will have fulfilled a pragmatist goal by at least presenting Victorian Modernism as what William James would call a "live option."

There is another reason, though, why I have chosen these four writers in particular. They present a pleasing historical pattern as they group about one American publication of their day, *The Crayon*, forming less than a cohesive coterie, more than a random set. Art critic William Michael Rossetti (Dante Gabriel Rossetti's brother, an original member of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, and its self-appointed publicist) appeared in its pages, as did Henry James, Sr., whose religious philosophy and personality influenced his son William. *The Crayon* also presented to the American public much of Ruskin's work, sometimes before it appeared in book form in the United States.<sup>18</sup> And Evans clearly chose him as a teacher; he provides the epigraph to *St. Elmo*.

Ruskin we might liken to a moving spider in the web of arguments that stretches across this study, perhaps because as both a critic and an artist he so frequently presents and explores hypotheses about what art and artists are and do. Of the four writers I discuss, he is the only one read by all the others. His relationship with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal has been well documented, and he also provides a strong link between the two principal literatures of this work, English and American.<sup>19</sup> He was exceedingly well known throughout America during the Victorian period – we know that not only Evans and James, but also most educated readers of the day, would have read at least some of his work.<sup>20</sup>

Augusta Evans took Ruskin's words to heart before Proust did. Characters in one of her novels model a "school of design" where people may see "specimens of the best decorative art of the world" on the school which Rossetti, William Morris, and Ruskin created in Red Lion Square.<sup>21</sup> The heroine of Evans's *St. Elmo* borrows Ruskin's passion for world mythology, specifically imitating his fascination with the mythologies of William Tell and the Egyptian goddess Neith.<sup>22</sup> In such admiration for Ruskin, Evans, as a domestic novelist, was not alone. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, was proud to announce that she had visited Ruskin in England. While the Bible was the most important book to nineteenth-century American women who wrote domestic and sentimental novels, they schooled themselves fervently in the works of John Bunyan, Charlotte Brontë, Lord Byron, and John Ruskin. Why Ruskin? They saw in him a good Christian man who loved the Bible and preached the virtues. Further, he taught Americans, and American women in particular, that a man could discuss the affections of the human heart, and, what is more, could mention such affections in the varied contexts of judging high art, explaining the natural world, and writing history. What he did it was safe for them to do.

Whatever his subject, and however pious he may have been, Ruskin preached an experiential approach to the world, not a dogmatic one, counseling his readers, as Dante Rossetti had earlier, to look accurately, but to think of accuracy as a matter of actual, tender experience. Ruskin reassured women when he made such pronouncements as "It is not feeling, nor fancy, nor imagination . . . that I have put before science, but watchfulness, experience, affection, and trust in nature".<sup>23</sup> In these terms, women writers who lacked systematic education or doubted their right or ability to engage in describing the world could find confidence in their own human goodness. Taking a degree mattered less than taking care, sincerity mattered more than science. Furthermore, Ruskin demonstrated that a good Christian could take a fervent interest in art, that beauty and morality were entwined. To women writers who feared novel reading and writing, Ruskin's message came as good news.

William James, too, read and admired Ruskin. Even without claiming Ruskin as a source, we may see ample similarities between their ideas. Both wondered about the nature of faith and looked for answers not in Church doctrine but in the actual experiences of people, in what, for example, James called the "buildings out" of faith and Ruskin called the Gothic impulse in architecture. James's essay "The Will to Believe" describes the way in which a decision to believe can bring the repose of faith; Ruskin describes a similar insight in an 1852 letter to his father. "I resolved," Ruskin writes, "that at any rate I would act as if the Bible *were* true; that if it were not, at all events I should be no worse off than I was before; that I would believe in Christ, and take Him for my Master in whatever I did . . . When I rose in the morning the cold and cough were gone; and – I felt a peace and spirit in me I had never known before" (10.xxxix). James explained "The Sentiment of Rationality"; Ruskin spent a lifetime telling his audience that their sentiments mattered, that they must express their feelings through their thought and work.

Ruskin, however, provides only one of several centers for my investigations. Studying Victorian Modernism, I believe, we will learn to ponder works of art as webs of relations and ideas with multiple centers and gaps, a filigree-in-progress. Or, in weightier terms, we will learn to pay attention to collections of things, arranged but subject to rearrangement. In parallel, our critical goal will be to chart coherences that begin and end with critical scintillations, not solid blocks. Like the structural designs of buildings that Ruskin often found less interesting than their surface ornamentations, the solidities of this study exist for the patterns they make possible, not the patterns for the solid blocks.

One important pragmatist pattern has been provided by James when he asks us to consider

the world . . . as a collection, some parts of which are conjunctively and others disjunctively related. Two parts, themselves disjoined, may nevertheless hang together by intermediaries with which they are severally connected, and the whole world eventually may hang together similarly, inasmuch as *some* path of conjunctive transition by which to pass from one of its parts to another may always be discernible. Such determinately various hanging-together may be called *concatenated* union, to distinguish it from the 'through-and-through' type of union, 'each in all and all in each' . . . which monistic systems hold to obtain when things are taken in their absolute reality.<sup>24</sup>

Such a union, James's notion of Pragmatist and Radical Empiricist unity, describes both a central practice of Victorian Modernist writers and a central practice of this study as well. It is a process of recentralization, rearrangement, and tactile meaning, and one might imagine it as lace-making or interior decoration.<sup>25</sup>

Concatenated union is more closely related to Romantic notions of Fancy than to Imagination. The Victorian Modernists' Romantic forebear, Coleridge, describes the supreme, God-the-Father-like powers of the Secondary Imagination. He even coins a term, "esemplastic" – "to shape into one," – both to describe such imagination and to enact it as he collapses two Greek words into one Angloid word. The Secondary Imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create . . . struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially dead and fixed." In contrast to Imagination, Fancy is of the kingdom of death, for it "has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites . . . [like ordinary memory] the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association."<sup>26</sup> Fancy is, as it were, the interior decorator of the art world – it never creates from unformed matter paintings or poems of the first order, but merely rearranges existing artistic furniture. Surely moving received, dead objects about is, in comparison to the vast seminal power of the unifying and idealizing Imagination, woman's work.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, the very notion of decorative art, ornamentation and detail work – as opposed to one central infusion of breath that, like God creating the world, makes a work whole – has a gendered history.<sup>28</sup> To the extent that detailed ornamentation can obscure the central subject, or even take on an important life of its own, to decorate or ornament is intrinsically to challenge the notion of unified, mastering form.

"Hanging together" implies less than total union. James uses it to describe the very process of consciousness, suggesting that we are all

artists in our sensory lives: "Out of what is in itself an undistinguishable, swarming *continuum* devoid of distinction or emphasis, our senses make for us by attending to this motion, and ignoring that, a world full of contrasts, of sharp accents, of abrupt changes, of picturesque light and shade (*PP*, I:284). For James, philosophy is what we all do in making sense of the world, and it is a process linked to the making of art: we explore and test possibilities, we try to maintain the "richest intimacy" with the world, we trace the practical consequences of a notion and judge it by our impressions and feelings as we dwell in them. We taste experience, judge the flavor, and move according to another part of our experience, "linking things satisfactorily" (*P*, p. 34) into the creation of our world. In this way we all compose patterns; and these patterns we relate to the (already mentioned) "innumerable little hangings-together of the world's parts within the larger hangings-together, little worlds, not only of discourse but of operation, within the wider universe." (*P*, p. 67).

These hangings-together James takes aesthetically, as well: "Things tell a story. Their parts hang together so as to work out a climax. They play into each other's hands expressively. . . . The world is full of partial stories that run parallel to one another, beginning and ending at odd times. . . . we cannot unify them completely in our minds" (*P*, p. 71).

John Shade, poet laureate of the country of lost souls and partial stories in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, chooses pattern upon pattern:

My picture book was at an early age  
The painted parchment papering our cage:  
Mauve rings around the moon; blood-orange sun;  
Twinned Iris; and that rare phenomenon  
The iridule—when, beautiful and strange,  
In a bright sky above a mountain range  
One opal cloudlet in an oval form  
Reflects the rainbow of a thunderstorm  
Which in a distant valley has been staged—  
For we are most artistically caged.<sup>29</sup>

John Shade is at this moment both poet and art critic. His "iridule," made of water, light, printed word and imagination, is also a version of the rainbow, nature's own work of art, translated by a young aesthete's yearning to oval, opal form. His cage is also his space of freedom and his home; and he imagines it as abundantly filled, like a Victorian parlour, with as many shapes and patterns as he needs.

Dante Rossetti similarly writes and paints the story of "[t]enderness, the constant unison of wonder and familiarity so mysteriously allied in

nature, the sense of fullness and abundance such as we feel in a field, not because we pry into it at all, but because it is all there. . . ." Tenderness is "the inestimable prize to be secured".<sup>30</sup> Ruskin, too, describes his experience of tender pattern in the landscape of northern climes when he sees: "Not the diffused perpetual presence of the burden of mist, but the going and returning of intermittent cloud. All turns upon that intermittence. Soft moss on stone and rock;—cave fern of tangled glen;—wayside well—perennial, patient, silent, clear;" (7.178).

Proust not only touches Ruskin when he reads his work with love and visits the places Ruskin has touched, but he also creates, with Ruskin's intermittent help, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. The paralyzed narcissist and aesthete Charles Swann is, like Ruskin himself, a wealthy man, an art critic, and an unlucky lover. Swann has realized that (though not why) his love affair with Odette has failed. Fitfully asleep in his own life, he is about to be awakened by Beauty incarnate in the musical art of the composer Vinteuil, himself victimized by love. Tenderness between suffering men through the medium of art is about to replace in Swann's imagination and heart—at this moment indistinguishable from each other—regret for his lost love. Alone at a party, Swann hears once again "the little phrase," anthem of his and Odette's *amour*. The poignant sound awakens him:

And Swann's thoughts were borne for the first time on a wave of pity and tenderness towards Vinteuil, towards that unknown, exalted brother who must also have suffered so greatly. What could his life have been? From the depths of what well of sorrow could he have drawn that god-like strength, that unlimited power of creation?<sup>31</sup>

Proust rewrites in high-Modernist fashion a literary form from the past: the sentimental tableau. Its elements include a suffering victim and a sensitive spectator who can read the victim's body in order to know, even empathically inhabit, that person's mind, spirit, and heart. Action halts for a time, and the author, narrator, and reader (if all goes well) are overcome, almost beyond the ability of language to communicate. In this expanding moment only feelings matter.<sup>32</sup>

For eighteenth-century readers, a sentimental scene such as Proust's would have required the actual presence of the suffering Vinteuil, with the pitying, empathizing gaze of Swann focused directly upon him. By the mid-nineteenth century, writers create more abstract sentimental tableaux. Here, for example, Vinteuil's work of art stands in for him, expressing, even embodying, his innermost self. A little thing that is a

great thing happens: in hearing these notes, the souls of Swann and Vinteuil meet in an expanding moment created by Swann's sympathetic curiosity, a pooling of time in which music and sympathy together free him from the prison of his own dormant imagination.

Implicit in Proust's tableau, and finally inseparable from one another, are four complex notions which we may, for a moment, artificially separate: sentiment, as we have already seen, along with aestheticism, domesticity, and sublimity. Together they comprise much of the wisdom Proust culled from his Victorian teacher, and they will help to structure my study as well. *Sentiment*: Swann feels acutely the sorrows of Vinteuil, the local Combray music master whose lesbian daughter makes him the subject of malicious gossip. *Aestheticism*: Swann is potentially capable of deep and generous feeling because he is a sensitive gentleman of consummate good taste and artistic judgment who can fully savor a phrase of beautiful music. His love of art, hallowed by Vinteuil's musical presence, allows him to grow morally, to pose at this moment a question about the humanity of another, and by so asking, to begin to save himself. *Sublimity*: "that god-like strength, that unlimited power of expression" that Swann believes Vinteuil to possess removes him from the company of mere mortals and places him in an elevated realm apart – but not completely. Vinteuil's sublimity is extensive. It reaches through space and time, not above or beyond them, as Swann feels a deep and specifically human tie to him: "that unknown, that exalted brother who must have suffered so greatly." *Domesticity*: Vinteuil's art issues from the richness of daily life in Combray. The home truths of Vinteuil's musical existence – his careful cottage existence with Mlle. Vinteuil, his direct connection to "Swann's Way," (the landscape of an almost lost Eden of familial tenderness that presents a well-prepared lunch as a work of art), the hiddenness of his public success – have infused Vinteuil's ethereal art as Proust imagines it. Vinteuil makes his art at the wayside in Combray and not in the nineteenth-century capital of culture, Paris.

Proust links notions of sentiment, aestheticism, sublimity, and domesticity not just in this tableau, but throughout the diffuse and interlocking tableaux of his complex, multi-centered novel. By early in the twentieth century, these elements may mingle as equals: the weave is so tight and the pattern so fine that the reader barely stops to examine its parti-colored texture. A major inspiration for such an undertaking has been another vast, nearly static set of tableaux mingling the same elements: the *oeuvre* of John Ruskin.

Contemplate, for example, Ruskin's memory of the Col de la Faucille, which rises like a sublime peak among the many reminiscences of *Praeterita*:

the Col de la Faucille, on that day of 1835, opened to me in distinct vision the Holy Land of my future work and true home in this world. My eyes had been opened, and my heart with them, to see and to possess royally such a kingdom! Far as the eye could reach – that land and its moving or pausing waters; Arve, and his gates of Cluse, and his glacier fountains; Rhone, and the infinitude of his sapphire lake, – his peace beneath the narcissus meads of Vevay – his cruelty beneath the promontories of Sierre. And all that rose against and melted into the sky, of mountain and mountain snow; and all that living plain, burning with human gladness – studded with white homes, – a milky way of star-dwellings cast across its sunlit blue. (35.167–168)

Ruskin recounts an experience of montane sublimity whose conventions he would expect his audience to recognize and share. From this pass in the Jura mountains, he can see "the chain of the Alps along a hundred miles of horizon" (35.167). The passage delivers the diction and imagery of sublimity: nobility, cruelty, vastness, extremes of temperature. Not limited to verticality (what Longinus called *hyposos*, the elevated), this sublime also leads the eye outward to a vast plain (what I shall call *platos*, the extended).

Ruskin, however, intertwines with these conventions another set: those of sentimentality. His heart has been opened, it beats with the shapes of what he sees, and what he sees is infused with "human gladness" as well as a more sublime awe. Hearts burn, personified rivers take their rest, and the viewer has lovingly connected with joy, rather than fainted from grandeur. Given the insistently domestic focus of all of *Praeterita*, and especially of the passages immediately preceding this moment of vision, it comes as no surprise that we are asked to understand such sublimity and sentimentality within the context of domesticity. The passage begins with "my true home in the world," gestures toward the shared home of the "Holy Land," and extends to an image of homes as stars. These three intertwinings of immanence (the familiarity of home) and transcendence (the visionary quality of home) echo the larger pattern of intertwining sentiment and sublimity. Finally aestheticism infuses the whole without effacing its separate, but linked, discourses. The boy's work, his home, is to be the home of art, the cultivation of good taste, pleasure, and morality in his own life and in that of his readers. What matters is the making and loving of art, and Ruskin sees nature twice, once as wild, and again



as artificial: rivers are gems and mythical beings, glaciers are fountains, mountains are a kingdom.

The Victorian Modern finds a voice. Both Proust and Ruskin create what George Eliot independently described in 1868 as a particular kind of unity:

And as knowledge continues to grow by its alternating processes of distinction and combination, seeing smaller and smaller likenesses and grouping or associating these under a common likeness, it arrives at the conception of wholes composed of parts more and more multiplied and highly differenced, yet more and more absolutely bound together by various conditions of common likeness or mutual dependence. *And the fullest example of such a whole is the highest example of Form: in other words, the relation of multiplex interdependent parts to a whole which is itself in the most varied and therefore the fullest relation to other wholes. . . .* The highest Form, then, is the highest organism, that is to say, the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena.<sup>33</sup>

When Eliot describes complex wholes that are themselves formed in relation to other complex wholes, she offers us a useful way in which to think about the relation of Proust's and Ruskin's already internally complex works to each other.

Eliot's description offers us as well a way of thinking about the four authors who provide interlinking centers for my own study of "multiplex interdependent parts": Ruskin, Rossetti, Evans, and James. I have chosen these figures for their differences as well as their similarities. Two are American, two are British. Evans is a popular, domestic novelist, Ruskin an art critic, Rossetti a poet and painter, James a scientist and philosopher. Three carry out their work within the confines of the nineteenth century; James publishes through 1910 and has been much more closely associated with Modernism than the others. Of their similarities and historical connections, more later.

For Victorian Modernists, the process of art is something like the process of life. Yeats's old man does say, "Consume my heart away," but the artist who forges the aesthetic object, the wonderful bric-à-brac of the Byzantine bird, continues to burn the hotter for that wish. Let us turn to sharp accents and clouds, intermittences, entanglements, and partial stories – the wayside worlds of Victorian Modernism.

## CHAPTER 2

### *A sweet continuance: John Ruskin's Victorian Modernism*

In order to teach men how to be satisfied, it is necessary fully to understand the art and joy of humble life, – this, at present, of all arts or sciences being the one most needing study. Humble life, – that is to say, proposing to itself no future exaltation, but only a sweet continuance . . . the life of domestic affection and domestic peace, full of sensitiveness to all elements of costless and kind pleasure.

John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, v<sup>1</sup>

To read Ruskin is to enter a world of fluid commixtures in which we can observe Victorian Modernism in the making. As he considers the arrangements of nature, art, and society, Ruskin links them to the making of delicate, labyrinthine, sometimes even entangled patterns. Whether Ruskin looks at a Gothic workman's sculpture or the book of nature, he feels

love of all sorts of filigree and embroidery, from hoarfrost to the high clouds. The intricacies of virgin silver, of arborescent gold, the weaving of birds'-nests, the netting of lace, the basket capitals of Byzantium, and most of all the tabernacle work of the French flamboyant school, possessed from the first, and possess still, a charm for me. (35.157n3)

One might add to his list of filigreed work his own prose. He describes himself as a girl working a sampler, "quietly and methodically as a piece of tapestry," placing the words "firmly in their places like so many stitches, hemm[ing] the edges of chapter round" (35.367–368).<sup>2</sup>

For all Ruskin's lists, numbered categories, definitions, and anatomies, he is not a systematic writer. It has been a tradition among Ruskin scholars to attempt to pin down the excesses and digressions of his expository prose long enough to extract his ideas on given subjects.<sup>3</sup> This study does not jettison that effort, but adds to it by attempting to study the fluid connections among Ruskin's discrete ideas as seriously as those ideas themselves. Differentiating and rationalizing will give way to a host of less



tidy activities: mixing, analogizing, linking, wandering, and pausing at the waysides. Ruskin as an artist and critic can teach us his own method, that of exploration rather than system, of intricate and spreading mazes rather than hierarchical orderings, of continual burgeoning into states of repose rather than achieved organic unity. Once we look seriously at relations, at Ruskin's prepositional rather than propositional life, once we acknowledge Ruskin's confusions as his insights, we will recognize him for the aesthetic pragmatist and Victorian Modernist that he was.

To establish Ruskin as a pragmatist, we will follow the multiple and intersecting paths he explored as he sought always contingent truths about beauty, right action, and human identity. He shows his pragmatist credentials when he writes, "an affected Thinker, who supposes his thinking of any other importance than as it tends to work, is about the vainest kind of person that can be found in the occupied classes. Nay, I believe that metaphysicians and philosophers are, on the whole, the greatest troubles the world has got to deal with" (5.333).

The pattern of this chapter presents three interconnected centers. First, Ruskin's interweaving of the conventional rhetorics of domesticity and sentiment. Then, beginning again with a biographical perusal of Ruskin's poignant difficulties in human relations (his needs for personal solitude and a stony integrity conflicting with his needs for community and tender relations), we shall proceed to ask why and how he developed a Victorian Modernist notion of artistic impersonality that was, through Pater, the French Symbolists, and the Parnassians, to mingle in the imaginations of William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, and others. The lapis Chinamen's stony gaiety, the gray isolation in which each Dubliner fantasizes – these are patterned in relation to Ruskin's experiments in feeling. We shall come to understand impersonality as sublime sentimentality, Ruskin's feelings for people extended to vast and important webs of relation spun across his lifetime's work as an aesthetic thinker at and about home. To close, we shall dwell in one of Ruskin's late texts. *Roadside Songs of Tuscany* (1884–1885), in which he exemplifies the making of intimate, pragmatic truth over his lifetime. Viewing Ruskin as a pragmatist will lead us to see that, rather than slipping into ineffectual raving as the lights of sanity dimmed, he explored until he could write no more.

For all his fascination with architectural structure, Ruskin loves watery mixtures of things more than solid constructions. He prefers the fluid flutings of capitals to the right angles formed by sturdy walls. Considering San Marco in Venice as perhaps the greatest example of the domestic

transformed into "lovely order." he imagines its stone as water: "the crests of the arches break into a marble foam, and toss themselves far into the blue sky in flashes and wreaths of sculptured spray" (10.83). San Marco is, he tells us, "a confusion of delight" (10.83).

Ruskin creates minglings whose separate elements are neither wholly distinct nor wholly merged: water and stone. He prefers unstable mixtures to stable solutions. In this way Ruskin the writer follows his own advice to painters, that those who would capture the truth must understand that nature "is never distinct and never vacant, she is always mysterious, but always abundant: you always see something, but you never see all" (3.329). By analogy, artists and critics – Ruskin was both – must find a way that, whatever the polarities involved, leads them toward neither an ordered and complete synthesis nor an unchecked chaos.

As a pragmatist, Ruskin questions monistic unities and master plans, even though he believes in God.<sup>4</sup> From early on, he praises God as the author and sustainer of all creation yet continuously (and even contradictorily) works his way toward an understanding of creation as a set of fascinating contingencies. Ruskin's monist or essentialist thinking is tempered by pluralist and empiricist leanings; in James's terms, Ruskin is both "tender minded" (going by principles, religious) and "tough-minded" (going by facts, materialist) (P. p. 13). He imagines artistic creation itself as a matter of contingent arrangements: "A poet, or creator, is . . . a person who puts things together" (7.215). The artist is one who collects in the storehouse of his memory all the images he has ever seen, and then relaxes into reverie as "over all this unindexed and immeasurable mass of treasure, the imagination [moves.] brooding and wandering, but dream-gifted, so as to summon at any moment exactly such groups of ideas as shall justly fit each other" (6.42). Dreamily, fancifully, precisely and carefully – so the artist places and replaces found images and idea. If those adverbs seem inconsistent, Ruskin minds less than we do. Echoing the Coleridgean notion of Fancy as subordinate to Imagination, he nevertheless presents a notion of creativity as arrangement, not god-like creation *ex nihilo*. This notion is a feminizing one, and we may think of it as interior decoration rather than seminal construction, as house-keeping rather than house-building and as inextricable from his understanding of domesticity's nurturing and sentimental powers.

Arrangement for Ruskin often has a specifically moral quality: "The Law of Help" decrees that "composition may be best defined as the help of everything in the picture by everything else" (7.205).<sup>5</sup> To paint well is to bring into nurturing relation. He frequently views the external walls