

of *literature* that Martin seems to favor. Sometimes an allusion is to a phrase used earlier in a conversation between two people, so unless we were to extend *literature* to such instances, even the revised definition would come up short.

Still, Martin is right to pinpoint *literature* as the term whose meaning I had to leave unquestioned so that I could explore the meanings of *allusion*. However insufficiently defined in the essay, *literature* was far from *impensé* as I wrote. If my attempt to define *allusion* in a thirty-thousand-word essay did not prove entirely satisfactory, I might well tremble to define *literature* within the thousand-word limit of this response. But I do not hesitate to covenant with any knowing reader that for some years yet I may go on trust toward the payment of a work addressing this issue. Cultures generally hold some set of texts worthy of preservation and dissemination (a collection that in Western culture went until recently by the term *literature*, though we may not quite have a word for it now), and allusions are to this body of texts, whatever we might wish to call it.

While it was indeed my premise that if I got the words right we might have a more dependable way to discuss one literary reality, I confess that I honestly cannot understand why Martin defines *context* as intrinsically antithetical to lexicographical initiative. Are there no historical circumstances in which any people are ever motivated to adopt a particular terminology for a particular kind of intellectual work?

But if, after all of Martin's reservations, a blindness early in my article is regarded as having produced insight later on, I shall steer right onward, content though blind. So much the rather thou, celestial light, shine inward.

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Ruskin, Turner, and Modernism

TO THE EDITOR:

While Rachel Teukolsky's "Modernist Ruskin, Victorian Baudelaire: Revisioning

Nineteenth-Century Aesthetics" (122 [2007]: 711–27) may reflect an understanding of Fredric Jameson's "brief" essay and Charles Baudelaire's "anglophilia" or his "love of the elitist dandy," it is uncertain what the article is saying about John Ruskin or about modernism (720). Throughout the essay, there seems to be an insufficient distinction among terms like *modernism*, *modernity*, and the relative *modern*. There is passing recognition, early in the essay, of some of the things that modernism implies ("avant-garde experiments in high-art formalism and abstraction, leading to cubism, abstract expressionism, and more radical adventures in literary form" [712]). But the title "Modernist Ruskin, Victorian Baudelaire," though smart, is not justified by much of what Teukolsky discusses, limited as her article is to volume 5 of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* and an essay by Baudelaire. In fact, she concludes that both of these two texts might be called "eminently" and "very" Victorian (713, 724). It ends up that Jameson is wrong about Baudelaire's anticipation of the postmodernist sensibility (e.g., 717) and that Baudelaire's and Ruskin's judgments suffer from unwitting "confusions" (e.g., 723). Putting such points aside, there are two crucial omissions in the essay.

The most serious gap is its failure to show the relevance of J. M. W. Turner's later style to a major shift in modes of aesthetic representation during the Victorian period. In this context (unless one looks only at Turner's early, "picturesque," style), it is at best inaccurate to describe Turner's paintings as merely "vivid" and his kind of art as something that "faithfully reproduced a divinely ordered natural world . . . [his] painting and landscape [providing] mirrorlike proofs . . ." (712, 718). It is more seriously dismissive of Turner to conclude that "while Ruskin wants to ameliorate conditions for the modern worker, his social vision is fundamentally conservative and upholds social hierarchies and class divisions, *especially* in the elevation of Turner above other spectators" (720; my emphasis). A non sequitur like the following further indicates deprecation or disregard of Turner: "Yet Ruskin

cannot escape the modernity he critiques. Even while he assails mechanical reproduction, he . . . reproduces images of Turner's paintings in all the volumes of *Modern Painters*" (723).

Rather, it is an opposite quality that is Turner's innovative legacy, what Ruskin admired and defended, what makes Turner a precursor of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernist trends in art and literature. Turner's career, like the period over which Ruskin's *Modern Painters* was written, is long. Turner drastically changed his rendering of landscape toward the end of his career, something that displeased most contemporaneous commentators, who wanted to remain faithful to the traditional notion that painting should reproduce what one sees exactly, that it be "mirrorlike." Nathaniel Hawthorne, typifying this puzzlement, described Turner's later paintings as "blotches of color, and dabs of the brush, meaning nothing." He could not comprehend them as "pictures" nor guess if they "purported to represent earth, sea, or sky": "I mean to buy Ruskin's pamphlet at my next visit, and look at them through his eyes. But I do not think I can be driven out of the idea that a picture ought to have something in common with what the spectator sees in Nature" (*English Notebooks*, ed. Randall Stewart [New York: MLA, 1941] 614). Others, however, like Herman Melville, an admirer of Hawthorne and himself a protomodernist, found the same Turner paintings suggestive and inspiring.

More importantly, Teukolsky's essay does not mention one key concept in Ruskin's works—namely, his definition of the grotesque. Ruskin designates this concept as the last of the three true or "noble" ideals in art and defends it against earlier assumptions, such as Burke's that the grotesque consists merely of "fanciful and terrible ideas" incapable of producing a serious effect. The true or noble grotesque, as opposed to the "ignoble" grotesque, is an appropriately "imperfect" mode. It gains significance crucial to the essence of modernism from a positive kind of imaginative "confusion" in the presence of truths difficult to grasp or represent, resulting in the juxtaposition of symbols and of

"gaps" in "bold and fearless connection . . . left for the beholder to work out." Ruskin is describing an "abstract" quality—*abstract* being a less accessible term then, though Ruskin uses it incidentally in this context (*Works* 5: 138, 130, 132 [my emphasis], 137). (On the grotesque, see the whole of ch. 8, "Of the True Ideal: Grotesque," in vol. 5 [130–48] and ch. 3 in vol. 11 [166–95]. *Modern Painters* runs from vol. 3 to 7 in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. [London: Allen, 1903–12].) Some of Ruskin's examples (Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein, David Teniers) suggest that this grotesque also deforms humanity in order to portray its reality. Similarly, in landscape observation, scenes that have the quality of "unsightliness" could produce a strange kind of pleasure, thus modifying the classical principles of "beauty" (e.g., *Works* 5: 131; 6: 11–12). Also, Turner himself was largely responsible for resurrecting British interest in Giambattista Piranesi, whose obsessive maze-like scenes indicate a representational mode that achieves its effect not by exact imitation but through haziness and obscurity into which are built hints and suggestions. (For an important study of this concept, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham's *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982].)

Certainly Ruskin can be contradictory. In particular, what would contradict his "modernism" and his admiration of the later Turner is his insistence on the need for historical "association," tradition and ruins, in the landscape—a kind of leftover "picturesque" requirement that made him dismiss the "new" American landscape as inferior to Europe's. At the same time, we should read what he says that is relevant to what is being discussed, as well as give sufficient consideration to other works by the same writers and by other writers and artists, which, whether written before or after the two texts considered, whether classified as Romantic or Victorian or Gothic or art-for-art's-sake or whatever, somehow paved the way for the dissatisfaction with traditional aesthetics and the development of new modes of representation, as

in Turner's late paintings, that become characteristic of modernism.

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Reply:

Basem L. Ra'ad is right to suggest that my essay is less interested in reading John Ruskin into the explicit styles of twentieth-century modernism than in recuperating a more capacious vision of Victorianism, one that locates more relativistic and destabilized modes of thinking than the stereotype of the period would allow. The overarching goal, which I articulated in the essay's subtitle, was to "revision . . . nineteenth-century aesthetics."

Yet since Ra'ad raises the question of Ruskin's ties to twentieth-century aesthetics, I will take the opportunity to pursue his theme. Ra'ad argues that Ruskin is modernist because Turner is: in defending Turner, Ruskin embraces the "abstract" style that was characteristic of Turner's late-career paintings, thus eschewing any "mirrorlike" visual investments. This claim, unfortunately, is simply untrue. Ruskin was a staunch supporter not only of Turner but also of the Pre-Raphaelites, whose style in the 1850s entailed a supersharp, almost photographic representation of visual detail. And in the 1870s, Ruskin accused Whistler of "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" with his proto-modernist nocturnes (*Works* 29: 160). So it was not Turner's abstract brushwork that Ruskin was espousing. In fact, the modernism of Turner's painting is a different issue than the modernism of Ruskin's writing; it is fuzzy thinking to conflate the two. A careful reader of Ruskin will observe that his claims are often at variance with the images he ostensibly describes. This was the case with many Victorian art writers, who appropriated controversial artworks to debate cultural questions beyond the strict bounds of art history or criticism.

In my recently completed book manuscript on Victorian aesthetics, I analyze the question

of Ruskin's modernism using the lens of the first volume of *Modern Painters*. Published in 1843, this text responds most directly to the firestorm in the British press that was being generated by Turner's provocative late style. Far from promoting abstraction, however, *Modern Painters I* aspires to be a natural-history treatise of landscape painting: the book contains chapters on the "Truths" of natural features such as mountains, trees, and clouds. Combining Lockean empiricism with a stern evangelical vision of nature, Ruskin analyzes landscape paintings as an encyclopedia of natural forms, a catalog of the immutable object world of God's creation. In *Art and Illusion*, E. H. Gombrich pinpoints the "vast treatise" of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* as "perhaps the last and most persuasive book in the tradition that starts with Pliny and Vasari in which the history of art is interpreted as progress toward visual truth" (2nd ed. [New York: Pantheon, 1961] 14). Ruskin writes, "And let not arguments respecting the sublimity or fidelity of *impression* be brought forward here. . . . I am not talking about what is sublime, but about what is true" (*Works* 3: 283). Ruskin's fierce dedication to a singular truth in the object world, which he pursued in studies of natural history and earth science throughout his life, contrasts sharply with the visual impressionism that French painters were later to find so compelling in Turner's works.

Rather than dismiss Ruskin's mimetic ideal as outmoded, however, I would suggest that it can also be found in modernism, in the poetic desire to escape from the suffocating enclosure of personality. Appearing under the rubric of *classicism* or *impersonality*, this modernist strain of utopian poetics aimed to escape the human, subjective qualities of language, often invoking a "picture" or "image" to figure its cold, impersonal qualities. Ezra Pound sounds like Ruskin when he theorizes imagism in 1912 as a new poetry that "will be as much like granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth, in its interpretive powers" ("Prologomena" [sic], *Poetry Review* 1.2 [1912]: 76). In "Romanticism and Classicism," T. E. Hulme desires a language that