CHAPTER I

Introduction

> She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence.
>
> William James, *Pragmatism*[1]

> The more that is gathered together in a confused representation, the more extensive clarity the representation has.
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> Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*[2]

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."[3] 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."[4] 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.[5] 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."[6]

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,[7] 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."[8]

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.[9] 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.[10]

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.[11] The very Victorian qualities that Modernists purportedly had to overcome – conventionality of form, sentimentality and coziness, discursiveness, didacticism – have, like Poe's purloined letter, been hidden for

all to see on the very surfaces of Modernist works.[12] 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.[13] 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.[14] 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?".[15]

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."[16] 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."[17] 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.[18] 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.[19] 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.[20]

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.[21] 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.[22] 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".[23] 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.