VIII

On Possessing Beauty

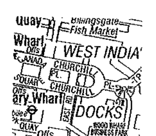
The Lake District

Places

Madrid

Amsterdam

Barbados



London Docklands

Guide

John Ruskin

The Art of Travel

ALAIN DE BOTTON

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1.

Among all the places that we go to but don't look at properly or that leave us indifferent, a few occasionally stand out with an impact that overwhelms us and forces us to take heed. They possess a quality that might clumsily be called beauty. This may not involve prettiness nor any of the obvious features that guidebooks associate with beauty spots; having recourse to the word might be just another way of saying that we like a place.

There was much beauty on my travels. In Madrid, a few blocks from my hotel, there lay a patch of waste ground bordered by apartment buildings and a large, orange-coloured petrol station with a carwash. One evening, in the darkness, a long, sleek, almost empty train passed several metres above the roof of the station and wended its way amongst the apartment buildings, on a level with their middle floors. With its viaduct lost in the night, the train appeared to float above the earth, a technological feat that looked more plausible given the train's futuristic shape and the pale ghostly-green light emanating from its windows. Inside the apartments, people were watching television or moving around their kitchens; meanwhile, dispersed through the carriages, the few passengers stared out at the city or read newspapers: the start of a journey to Seville or Córdoba that would end long after the dishwashers had reached the end of their cycles and the televisions fallen silent. The passengers and apartment dwellers paid little attention to one another; their lives ran along lines that would never meet, except for a brief moment in the retina of an observer who had taken a walk to escape a sad hotel room.

In Amsterdam, in a courtyard behind a wooden door, there was an old brick wall that despite a tear-inducing wind blowing along the

canals had slowly heated itself up in a fragile early-spring sun. I took my hands from my pockets and ran them along the bricks' gnarled and pitted surface. They seemed light and ready to crumble. I felt the impulse to kiss them, so as to experience more closely a texture that reminded me of blocks of pumice or halva from a Lebanese delicatessen.

In Barbados, on the eastern shore, I looked out across a dark-violet sea that stretched unhindered to the coasts of Africa. The island suddenly seemed small and vulnerable, its theatrical vegetation of wild pink flowers and shaggy trees a touching protest against the sober monotony of the sea. In the Lake District, I took in the view at dawn from our window in the Mortal Man: hills of soft Silurian rock covered in fine green grass above which a layer of mist was hovering. The hills undulated as though they formed part of the backbone of a giant beast that had lain down to sleep and might at any point awake and stand up several miles high, shaking off oak trees and hedgerows like pieces of fluff caught on its green felt jacket.

2.

A dominant impulse on encountering beauty is to wish to hold on to it, to possess it and give it weight in one's life. There is an urge to say, 'I was here, I saw this and it mattered to me.'

But beauty is fugitive, being frequently found in places to which we may never return or else resulting from rare conjunctions of season, light and weather. How then to possess it, how to hold on to the floating train, the halvalike bricks or the English valley?

The camera provides one option. Taking photographs can assuage the itch for possession sparked by the beauty of a place; our anxiety over losing a precious scene can decline with every click of

the shutter. Or else we can try to imprint ourselves physically on a place of beauty, perhaps hoping to render it more present in us by making *ourselves* more present in *it*. In Alexandria, standing before Pompey's Pillar, we could try to carve our name in the granite, to follow the example of Flaubert's friend Thompson from Sunderland. ('You can't see the pillar without seeing Thompson's name, and consequently thinking of Thompson. This cretin has thus become part of the monument and has perpetuated himself along with it.... All imbeciles are more or less Thompsons from Sunderland.') A more modest step might be to buy something—a bowl, a lacquered box or a pair of sandals (Flaubert acquired three carpets in Cairo)—as a reminder of what we have lost, like a lock of hair cut from a departing lover's mane.

3.

John Ruskin was born in London in February 1819. A central part of his work was to pivot around the question of how we can possess the beauty of places.

From an early age, he was unusually alive to the smallest features of the visual world. He recalled that at three or four, 'I could pass my days contentedly in tracing the squares and comparing the colours of my carpet—examining the knots in the wood of the floor, or counting the bricks in the opposite houses with rapturous intervals of excitement.' Ruskin's parents encouraged his sensitivity. His mother introduced him to nature, while his father, a prosperous sherry importer, read the classics to him after tea and took him to a museum every Saturday. Over the summer holidays, the family travelled around the British Isles and mainland Europe, not for entertainment or diversion but for beauty, by which they meant chiefly the beauty of the Alps and of the medieval cities of northern France

and Italy, in particular Amiens and Venice. They journeyed slowly, in a carriage, never covering more than twenty-five miles a day, and stopping every few miles to admire the scenery—a way of travelling that Ruskin was to practise throughout his life.

Ruskin's interest in beauty and in its possession led him to five central conclusions. First, beauty was the result of a number of complex factors that affected the mind both psychologically and visually. Second, humans had an innate tendency to respond to beauty and to desire to possess it. Third, there were many lower expressions of this desire for possession (including, as we have seen, buying souvenirs and carpets, carving one's name on a pillar and taking photographs). Fourth, there was only one way to possess beauty properly, and that was by *understanding* it, by making oneself conscious of the factors (psychological and visual) responsible for it. And last, the most effective means of pursuing this conscious understanding was by attempting to describe beautiful places through art, by writing about or drawing them, irrespective of whether one happened to have any talent for doing so.

4.

Between 1856 and 1860, Ruskin's primary intellectual concern consisted in teaching people how to draw. 'The art of drawing,' he maintained, 'which is of more real importance to the human race than that of writing and should be taught to every child just as writing is, has been so neglected and abused, that there is not one man in a thousand, even of its professed teachers, who knows its first principles.'

To begin rectifying the situation, Ruskin published two books, *The Elements of Drawing* (1857) and *The Elements of Perspective* (1859), and gave a series of lectures at the Working Men's College in Lon-

don, where he instructed students—mostly Cockney craftsmen—in techniques of shading, colour, dimension, perspective and framing. The lectures were heavily subscribed, and the books were critical and commercial successes, confirming Ruskin in his view that drawing should not be for the few: 'There is a satisfactory and available power in every one to learn drawing if he wishes, just as nearly all persons have the power of learning French, Latin or arithmetic, in a decent and useful degree.'

What was the point of drawing? Ruskin saw no paradox in stressing that it had nothing to do with drawing *well* or with becoming an artist: 'A man is born an artist as a hippopotamus is born a hippopotamus; and you can no more *make* yourself one than you can make yourself a giraffe.' He did not mind if his East End students left his classes unable to draw anything that would ever be hung in a gallery. 'My efforts are directed not to making a carpenter an artist, but to making him happier as a carpenter,' he told a royal commission on drawing in 1857. He explained that he himself was far from being a talented artist. Of his own childhood drawings, he said mockingly, 'I never saw any boy's work in my life showing so little original faculty, or grasp by memory. I could literally draw nothing, not a cat, not a mouse, not a boat, not a brush.'

If drawing had value even when practised by those with no talent, it was, Ruskin believed, because it could teach us to see—that is, to notice rather than merely look. In the process of re-creating with our own hands what lies before our eyes, we seem naturally to evolve from observing beauty in a loose way to possessing a deep understanding of its constituent parts and hence more secure memories of it. A tradesman who had studied at the Working Men's College reported what Ruskin told him and his fellow students at the end of their course: ' "Now, remember, gentlemen, that I have not

been trying to teach you to draw, only to *see*. Two men are walking through Clare Market. One of them comes out at the other end not a bit wiser than when he went in; the other notices a bit of parsley hanging over the edge of a butter-woman's basket, and carries away with him images of beauty which in the course of his daily work he incorporates with it for many a day. I want you to see things like these." '

Ruskin was distressed by how seldom people noticed details. He deplored the blindness and haste of modern tourists, especially those who prided themselves on covering Europe in a week by train (a service first offered by Thomas Cook in 1862): 'No changing of place at a hundred miles an hour will make us one whit stronger, happier, or wiser. There was always more in the world than men could see, walked they ever so slowly; they will see it no better for going fast. The really precious things are thought and sight, not pace. It does a bullet no good to go fast; and a man, if he be truly a man, no harm to go slow; for his glory is not at all in going, but in being.'

It is a measure of how accustomed we are to inattention that we would be thought unusual and perhaps dangerous if we stopped and stared at a place for as long as a sketcher would require to draw it. Ten minutes of acute concentration at least are needed to draw a tree, but even the prettiest tree rarely detains passersby for longer than a minute.

Ruskin connected the wish to travel fast and far with the inability to derive appropriate pleasure from any one place or, by extension, from details such as single sprigs of parsley hanging over the edges of baskets. In a moment of particular frustration with the tourist industry, he harangued an audience of wealthy industrialists in Manchester in 1864, charging, 'Your one conception of pleasure is to drive in railroad carriages. You have put a railroad bridge over the

fall of Schaffenhausen. You have tunnelled the cliffs of Lucerne by Tell's chapel; you have destroyed the Clarens shore of the Lake of Geneva; there is not a quiet valley in England that you have not filled with bellowing fire nor any foreign city in which the spread of your presence is not marked by a consuming white leprosy of new hotels. The Alps themselves you look upon as soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb, and slide down again, with "shrieks of delight".'

The tone was hysterical, but the dilemma was genuine. Technology may make it easier to reach beauty, but it does not simplify the process of possessing or appreciating it.

What, then, was wrong with photography? Nothing, thought Ruskin initially. 'Among all the mechanical poison that this terrible nineteenth century has poured upon men, it has given us at any rate *one* antidote,' he wrote of Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's invention of 1839. In Venice in 1845, he made numerous daguerreotypes and delighted in the results. To his father he wrote, 'Daguerreotypes taken by this vivid sunlight are glorious things. It is very nearly the same thing as carrying off a palace itself—every chip of stone and stain is there—and of course, there can be no mistakes about proportion.'

Yet Ruskin's enthusiasm diminished as he began to note the devilish problem that photography created for the majority of its practitioners. Rather than employing it as a supplement to active, conscious seeing, they used the medium as a substitute, paying *less* attention to the world than they had done previously, taking it on faith that photography automatically assured them possession of it.

In explaining his love of drawing (it was rare for him to travel anywhere without sketching something), Ruskin once remarked that it had arisen not from a desire 'for reputation, [or] for the good of

others, [or] for my own advantage, but from a sort of instinct *like that of eating or drinking*'. What unites the three activities is that they all involve assimilations by the self of desirable elements from the world, a transfer of goodness from without to within. As a child, Ruskin said, he had so loved the look of grass that he had frequently wanted to eat it, but gradually he had discovered that it would be better to try to draw it: 'I used to lie down on it and draw the blades as they grew—until every square foot of meadow, or mossy bank, became a *possession* to me' (emphasis added).

Photography alone could not, and cannot, ensure such eating. True possession of a scene is a matter of making a conscious effort to notice elements and understand their construction. We can see beauty well enough just by opening our eyes, but how long this beauty will survive in memory depends on how intentionally we have apprehended it. The camera blurs the distinction between looking and noticing, between seeing and possessing; it may give us the option of true knowledge, but it may also unwittingly make the effort of acquiring that knowledge seem superfluous. It suggests that we have done all the work simply by taking a photograph, whereas proper eating of a place—a woodland, for example—requires that we pose ourselves a series of questions such as 'How do the stems connect to the roots?' 'Where is the mist coming from?' 'Why does one tree seem darker than another?' These questions are implicitly asked and answered in the process of sketching.

5.

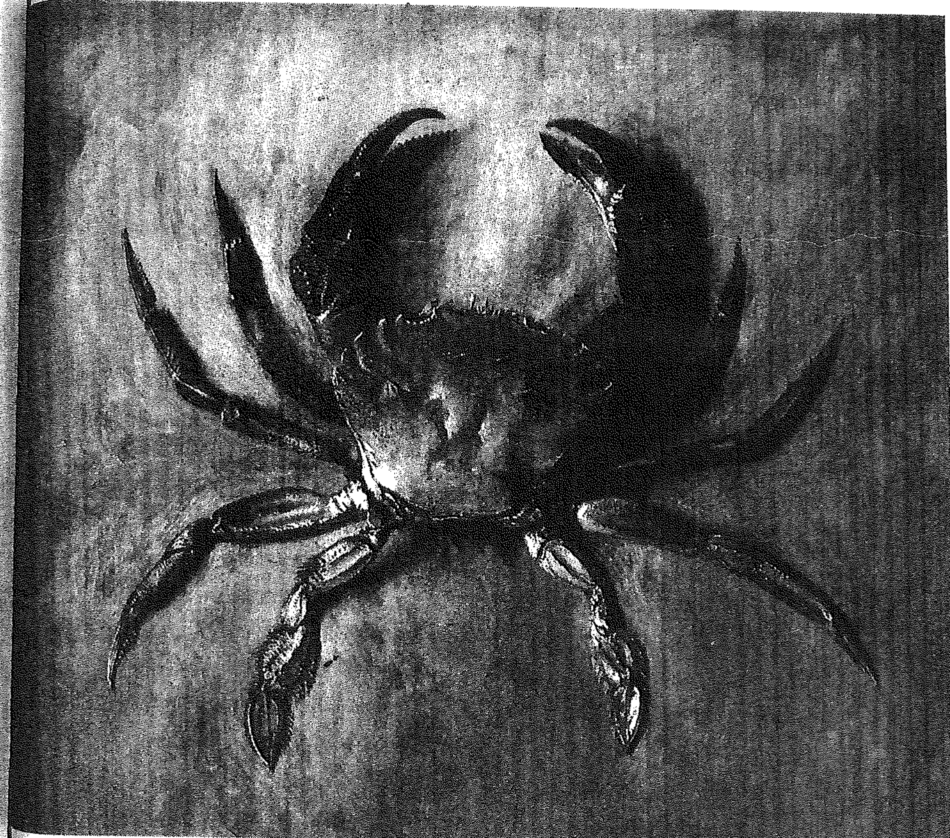
Encouraged by Ruskin's democratic vision of drawing, I tried my hand at it during my travels. As to what I should draw, it seemed sensible to be guided by the same desire to possess beauty that had previously led me to take up my camera. In Ruskin's words, 'Your art is

John Ruskin, *Study of a Peacock's Breast Feather*, 1873

to be the praise of something that you love. It may only be the praise of a shell or a stone.'

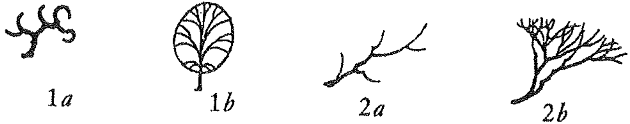
I decided to draw the bedroom window at the Mortal Man because it was to hand and seemed attractive on a bright autumn morning. The result was a predictable yet instructive disaster. The very act of drawing an object, however badly, swiftly takes the drawer from a woolly sense of what the object looks like to a precise awareness of its component parts and particularities. 'A window' thus reveals itself to be made up of a succession of ledges holding the glass in place, a system of ridges and indentations (the hotel was in the Georgian style), twelve panes that at a glance seem square but are in fact mildly though importantly rectangular, and white paint that is not really white but rather ash-grey, brown-grey, yellow, pinky-mauve or mild green depending on the light and on the relationship between the light and the condition of the underlying wood (in the northwestern edge of the window, for example, a trace of damp gave the paint a pinky tint). Nor, as it turns out, is glass wholly clear, having within it minute imperfections, tiny bubbles of air like those in a frozen fizzy drink; on its surface, moreover, mine was marked with the traces of dried raindrops and the impatient swipes of a window cleaner's cloth.

Drawing brutally shows up our previous blindness to the true appearance of things. Consider the case of trees. In a passage in *The Elements of Drawing*, Ruskin discussed, with reference to his own illustrations, the difference between the way we usually imagine the branches of trees before we draw them and the way they reveal themselves once we have looked more closely with the help of a pad and pencil: 'The stem does not merely send off a wild branch here and there to take its own way, but all the branches share in one great fountain-like impulse. That is to say, the general type of a tree is not



John Ruskin, *Velvet Crab*, c. 1870–71

as 1a but as 1b, in which the boughs all carry their minor divisions right out to the bounding curve. And the type of each separate bough is not 2a but 2b; approximating, that is to say, to the structure of a plant of broccoli.'



John Ruskin, *Branches*, from his *Elements of Drawing*, 1857

I had seen many oak trees in my life, but only after an hour spent drawing one in the Langdale Valley (the result would have shamed an infant) did I begin to appreciate, and remember, their identity.

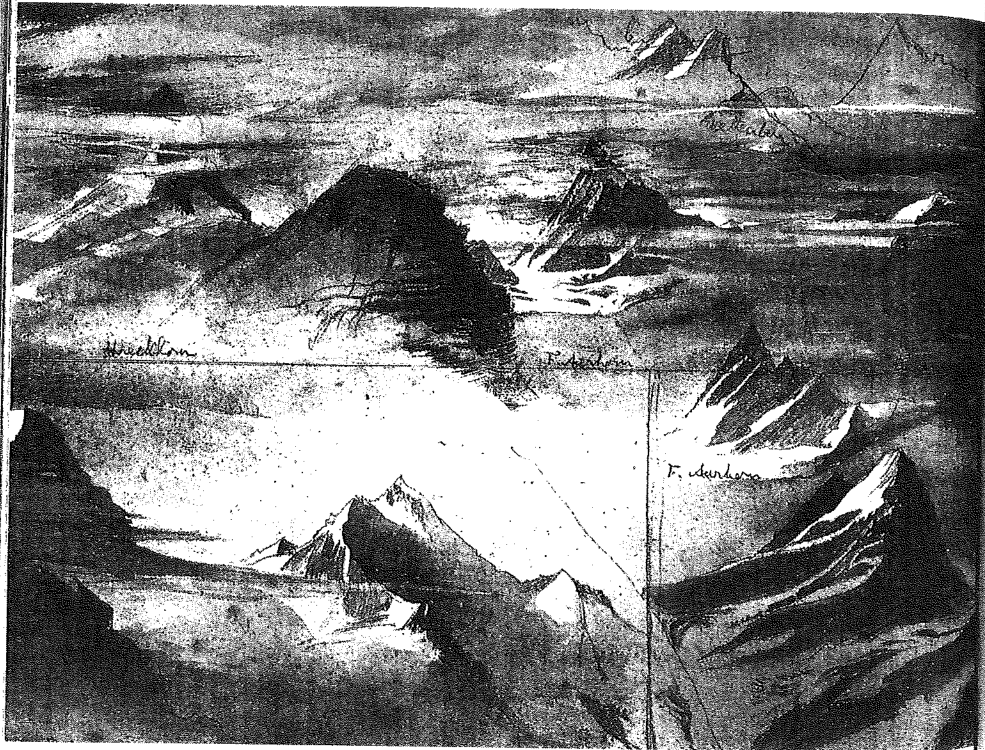
6.

Another benefit we may derive from drawing is a conscious understanding of the reasons behind our attraction to certain landscapes and buildings. Through drawing, we may find explanations for our tastes and begin to develop an 'aesthetic', or a capacity to assert judgements about beauty and ugliness. We may determine with greater precision what is missing from a building we don't like and what contributes to the beauty of one we do. We may be able more quickly to analyse a scene that impresses us and to pin down whence its power arises ('the combination of limestone and evening sun', 'the way the trees taper down to the river'). We may move from a numb 'I like this' to a more exacting 'I like this because . . .', and then in turn towards a generalisation about the likeable. Even if they are held only in exploratory, tentative ways, laws of beauty come to

mind: it is better for light to strike objects from the side than from overhead; grey goes well with green; in order for a street to convey a sense of space, the buildings must be no taller than the street is wide.

And on the basis of this conscious awareness, more solid memories can be founded. Carving our name on Pompey's Pillar begins to seem unnecessary. Drawing allows us, in Ruskin's account, 'to stay the cloud in its fading, the leaf in its trembling, and the shadows in their changing'.

Summing up what he had attempted to do in four years of teaching and writing manuals on drawing, Ruskin explained that he had been motivated by a desire to 'direct people's attention accurately to the beauty of God's work in the material universe'. It may be worth quoting here in full a passage in which Ruskin demonstrated exactly what, at a concrete level, this strange-sounding ambition might involve: 'Let two persons go out for a walk; the one a good sketcher, the other having no taste of the kind. Let them go down a green lane. There will be a great difference in the scene as perceived by the two individuals. The one will see a lane and trees; he will perceive the trees to be green, though he will think nothing about it; he will see that the sun shines, and that it has a cheerful effect; and that's all! But what will the sketcher see? His eye is accustomed to search into the cause of beauty, and penetrate the minutest parts of loveliness. He looks up, and observes how the showery and subdivided sunshine comes sprinkled down among the gleaming leaves overhead, till the air is filled with the emerald light. He will see here and there a bough emerging from the veil of leaves, he will see the jewel brightness of the emerald moss and the variegated and fantastic lichens, white and blue, purple and red, all mellowed and mingled into a single garment of beauty. Then come the cavernous trunks and the twisted roots that grasp with their snake-like coils at the steep bank,



John Ruskin, *Alpine Peaks*, 1846

whose turfy slope is inlaid with flowers of a thousand dyes. Is not this worth seeing? Yet if you are not a sketcher you will pass along the green lane, and when you come home again, have nothing to say or to think about it, but that you went down such and such a lane.'

7.

Not only did Ruskin encourage us to draw during our travels; he also felt we should write, or 'word-paint', as he called it, so as to cement our impressions of beauty. However respected he was in his lifetime for his drawings, it was his word-paintings that captured the public's imagination and were responsible for his fame in the late Victorian period.

Attractive places typically render us aware of our inadequacies in the area of language. In the Lake District, for example, writing a postcard to a friend, I explained—in some despair and haste—that the scenery was pretty and the weather wet and windy. Ruskin would have ascribed such prose more to laziness than to incapacity. We are all, he argued, able to turn out adequate word paintings; our failure to do so is the result merely of our not asking ourselves enough questions and not being precise enough in analysing what we have seen and felt. Rather than rest with the idea that a lake is pretty, we must ask ourselves more vigorously, 'What in particular is attractive about this stretch of water? What are its associations? What might be a better word for it than *big*?' The finished product may not be marked by genius, but at least it will have been motivated by a search for an authentic representation of an experience.

Ruskin was throughout his adult life frustrated by the refusal of polite, educated English people to talk in sufficient depth about the weather—and in particular by their tendency to refer to it as wet and windy: 'It is a strange thing how little people know about the

sky. We never attend to it, we never make it a subject of thought, we look upon it only as a succession of meaningless and monotonous accidents, too common and too vain to be worthy of a moment of watchfulness or a glance of admiration. If in our moments of utter idleness and insipidity, we turn to the sky as a last resource, which of its phenomena do we speak of? One says it has been wet, and another, it has been windy, and another, it has been warm. Who, among the whole chattering crowd, can tell me of the forms and the precipices of the chain of tall white mountains that girded the horizon at noon today? Who saw the narrow sunbeam that came out of the south, and smote upon their summits until they melted and mouldered away in a dust of blue rain? Who saw the dance of the dead clouds when the sunlight left them last night, and the west wind blew them before it like withered leaves?'

The answer was, of course, Ruskin himself, who liked to boast, in another analogy between the function of art and that of eating and drinking, that he bottled skies as carefully as his sherry-importing father did sherries. Here are two diary entries for sky-bottling days in London in the autumn of 1857:

> *1 November:* A vermilion morning, all waves of soft scarlet, sharp at the edge, and gradated to purple. Grey scud moving slowly beneath it from the south-west, heaps of grey cumuli—between the scud and cirrus—at horizon. It issued in an exquisite day.... All purple and blue in distance, and misty sunshine near on the trees, and green fields.... Note the exquisite effect of the golden leaves scattered on the blue sky, and the horse-chestnut, thin and small, dark against them in stars.

> *3 November:* Dawn purple, flushed, delicate. Bank of grey cloud, heavy at six. Then the lighted purple cloud showing through it, open sky of

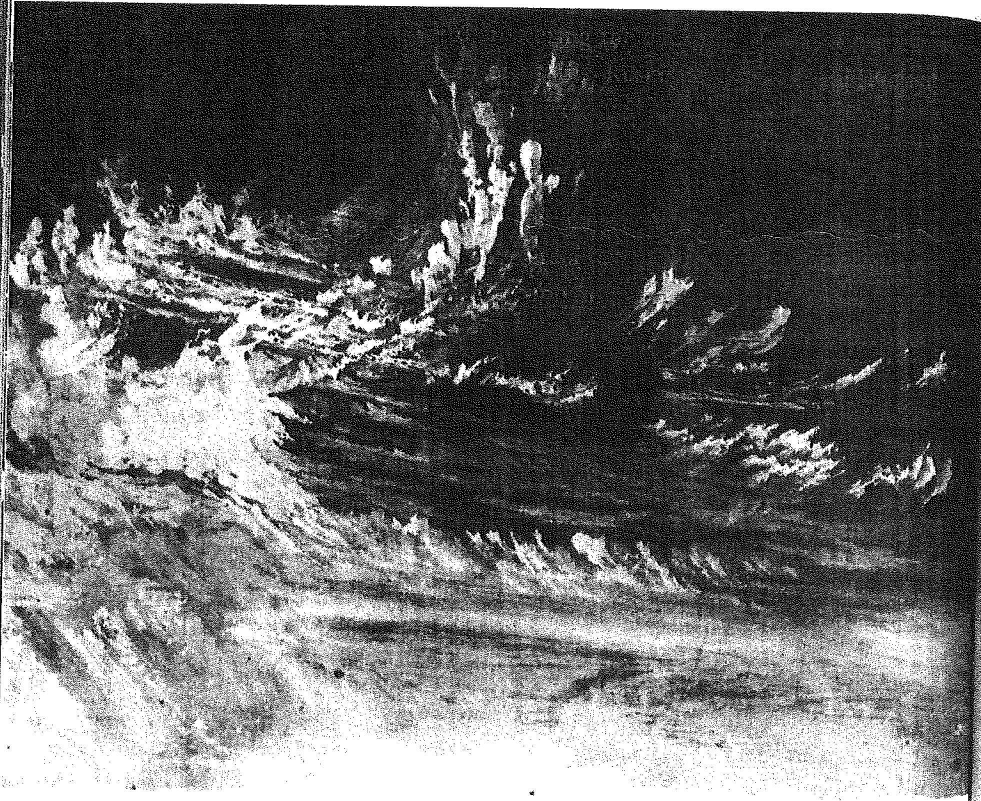
> dull yellow above—all grey, and darker scud going across it obliquely, from the south-west—moving fast, yet never stirring from its place, at last melting away. It expands into a sky of brassy flaked light on grey—passes away into grey morning.

8.

The effectiveness of Ruskin's word-painting derived from his method of not only describing what places looked like ('the grass was green, the earth was grey-brown') but also analysing their effect on us in psychological language ('the grass seemed *expansive,* the earth *timid*'). He recognised that many places strike us as beautiful not on the basis of aesthetic criteria—because the colours match or symmetry and proportion are present—but on the basis of psychological criteria, inasmuch as they embody a value or mood of importance to us.

One morning in London, he watched some cumulus clouds from his window. A factual description might have noted that they formed a wall, almost completely white, with a few indentations that allowed some sun through. But Ruskin approached his subject more psychologically: 'The true cumulus, the most majestic of clouds... is for the most part windless; the movements of its masses being *solemn,* continuous, *inexplicable,* a steady advance or retiring, as if they were *animated* by an *inner will,* or compelled by an unseen power' (emphasis added).

In the Alps, he described pine trees and rocks in similarly psychological terms: 'I can never stay long without awe under an Alpine cliff, looking up to its pines, as they stand on the inaccessible juts and perilous ledges of an enormous wall, in quiet multitudes, each like the shadow of the one beside it—upright, fixed, *not knowing each other.* You cannot reach them, cannot cry to them;—those trees never



Clouds, engraving by J. C. Armytage after a drawing by J. M. W. Turner, from John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, Vol. 5, 1860

heard human voice; they are far above all sound but of the winds. No foot ever stirred fallen leaf of theirs. All *comfortless* they stand, yet with such *iron will* that the rock itself looks bent and shattered beside them—*fragile, weak, inconsistent*, compared to their dark energy of *delicate life* and *monotony of enchanted pride*.' [*Emphasis added*]

Through such psychological descriptions, we seem to come closer to answering the question of why a place has stirred us. We come closer to the Ruskinian goal of consciously understanding what we have loved.

9.

It would scarcely have been possible to guess that the man parked at the kerb opposite a row of large office blocks was doing some word-painting. The only hint was a notepad pressed against the wheel, on which he occasionally scribbled something between long periods of staring.

It was eleven-thirty at night, and I had been driving around the docks for several hours, stopping for coffee at London City Airport (where I had longingly watched the last flight, a Crossair Avro RJ85, take to the skies, bound for Zurich—or for Baudelaire's 'anywhere! anywhere!'). On my way home, I came upon the giant illuminated towers of the West India Dock. The offices seemed to have no connection with the surrounding landscape of modest and weakly lit houses; they would have been more at home, I thought, on the banks of the Hudson or to one side of the space shuttle at Cape Canaveral. Steam was rising from the top of two adjacent towers, and the whole area had been painted with an even, sparse coating of fog. The lights were still on in most floors, and even from a distance, one could see computer terminals, meeting rooms, potted plants and flipcharts inside.

It was a beautiful scene, and along with the impression of beauty came the desire to possess its source—a desire that, to follow Ruskin, only art could properly satisfy.

I began word-painting. Descriptive passages came most readily: the offices were tall; the top of one tower was like a pyramid; it had ruby-red lights on its side; the sky was not black but an orangey-yellow. But because such a factual description seemed of little help to me in pinning down why I found the scene so impressive, I attempted to analyse its beauty in more psychological terms. The power of the scene appeared to be located in the effect of the night and of the fog on the towers. Night drew attention to facets of the offices that were submerged in the day. Lit by the sun, the offices could seem normal, repelling questions as effectively as their windows repelled glances. But night upset this claim to normality, it allowed one to see inside and wonder at how strange, frightening and admirable they were. The offices embodied order and cooperation among thousands, and at the same time regimentation and tedium. A bureaucratic vision of seriousness was undermined, or at least questioned, by the night. One wondered in the darkness what the flipcharts and office terminals were for: not that they were redundant, just that they might be stranger and more dubitable than daylight had allowed us to think.

At the same time, fog ushered in nostalgia. Foggy nights may, like certain smells, carry us back to other times we experienced them. I thought of nights at university, walking home along illuminated playing fields, and of the differences between my life then and my life now, which led to a bittersweet sadness about the difficulties that had beset me then and the precious things that had since been lost to me.

There were bits of paper all over the car now. The standard of the word-painting was not far above that of my childlike drawing of an oak tree in the Langdale Valley. But quality was not the point. I had at least attempted to follow one strand of what Ruskin judged to be the twin purposes of art: to make sense of pain and to fathom the sources of beauty.

And, as he had pointed out when presented with a series of misshapen drawings that a group of his pupils had produced on their travels through the English countryside: 'I believe that the sight is a more important thing than the drawing; and I would rather teach drawing that my pupils may learn to love nature, than teach the looking at nature that they may learn to draw.'