THE «FAINT IMAGE OF A LOST CITY»: JOHN RUSKIN AND THE MEANING OF VENICE

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When late in life Ruskin wrote in *Praeterita* of the cities which had been «centres of my life's thought», Venice was not among them [1]. His autobiography was intended to recall «frankly» what gave him joy, but to pass over in silence those things he had «no pleasure in reviewing», and by 1889 his memories of Venice were a source of pain rather than happiness. Yet on his first visit in 1835, aged sixteen and travelling with his parents, he had surrendered utterly to the romantic vision of the city, and at once felt compelled to write about it: first in poetry, in conscious emulation of Byron, and then in prose, in a letter to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* to defend J.M.W. Turner's painting of *Juliet and Her Nurse*, which had been ridiculed by the critics, partly for placing Juliet in Venice rather than Verona, partly for its supposed incoherence as a composition. Ruskin's letter dazzlingly evokes city and picture alike as «embodied enchantment, delineated magic» (III, 639); it is less a description of Turner's canvas than an attempt to recreate its effects in a different medium. But in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853), written after two extended stays in the city, he sought to go beyond both Byron and Turner, to rediscover a city which could rightly be the centre of a man's life and thought: an unfallen Venice, whose image could still be discerned through the patient study of its fragments – literally, its stones – which he examined, measured, deciphered, as if, he wrote to his father, he could «eat it all up in to my mind – touch by touch» [2].

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[1] Ruskin 1903-12, XXXV, 156. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text; *The Stones of Venice* appeared as volumes IX, X and XI.

[2] Ruskin 1955, 293. Ruskin was in Venice with his wife Effie from November 1849 to March 1850, and September 1851 to the end of June 1852.

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By the 1870s, however, he had come to associate Venice with the sense of his failure to avert the moral and social collapse of England in the nineteenth century. It seemed to him a city doubly ruined: first by the processes of decay – partly natural, partly the result of neglect, but a cause for sadness rather than anger; second, and more deeply, by the twin follies of modernization and restoration. In 1872 modern Venice, in the form of the steamers whistling in the Lido outside his hotel, forced him not into speech but into an angry silence: «Sixth whistle – [...] Seventh, – from I don't know which of the boats outside – and I count no more» (XXVII, 324). Yet the city never let go its hold on him. In all he was to make eleven visits, the last in 1888, when after a few days he was overcome by the need to flee from «the elements of imagination which haunt me here» (XXXVII, 608). He never left England again.

His fullest account of the city came in the three volumes of *The Stones of Venice*. This ought to be a more orderly book than *Modern Painters* (1843-1860), which he set aside in 1846 for the best part of ten years while he turned his attention to architecture. It is shorter, it was written in a more concentrated period, and its focus is apparently narrower: the rise and fall of a single city, as revealed by the development of its architecture, from Byzantine into Gothic – in Ruskin's view, the great central period in Venetian history – and then from Gothic into the Renaissance and the fall from greatness, or rather the first of a series of falls, since Ruskin interprets almost every event in Venice after the fifteenth century as further evidence of decline.

Ruskin liked to think in threes, and the tripartite pattern of slow struggle, magnificent achievement, and final utter defeat, is clearly given, but the book as a whole is typically contradictory, allusive and digressive. Like *Modern Painters*, it is at once illuminating about its subject – even at his most erratic, Ruskin is the most attentive and impassioned of observers – and a crucial chapter in the spiritual biography of one of the great writers of Victorian England.

The opening paragraph of the first volume signals both the scale of Ruskin's ambition and the urgency with which he approaches his task:

> Since first the dominion of men was asserted over the ocean, three thrones, of mark beyond all others, have been set upon its sands: the thrones of Tyre, Venice, and England. Of the First of these great powers only the memory remains; of the Second, the ruin; the Third, which inherits their greatness, if it forget their example, may be led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction. (IX, 17)

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But for all his rhetorical energy Ruskin could not resolve whether to denounce an England which had already fallen, or to urge onward a nation which might yet come to Europe's rescue, and unite its Protestant nations against the Roman church [3]. In the end, he does both. Similar uncertainties mark his account of Venetian history. Perhaps because he was unsure what to expect from the English aristocracy of the 1850s, Ruskin hesitates over how far to blame the Venetian nobles for reducing the power of the Doge to «a spectral and incapable magnificence», and how far to applaud the «unity and heroism» by which they formed themselves into an aristocracy around him (IX, 19-20). He divides the history of Venice into two periods, separated by the *Serrata del Maggior Consiglio* in 1297, only to argue that the city's true history could be written «almost» without reference to its political institutions (IX, 22). He promises «irrefragable» evidence that the decline of «political prosperity» in Venice exactly coincided with the decay of «domestic and individual religion» – one of the lessons England was to take to heart – but then puzzles over the fact that it was precisely because it put the claims of commercial advantage above those of religion that Venice was able to maintain and increase her power (IX, 23-24).

But no reader will look in *The Stones of Venice* for conventional history. Ruskin was interested in political ideas and values, but bored by political events and movements; he simply ignores the Repubblica di San Marco under Daniele Manin in 1848-1849, and the Austrian occupation of the city which followed, as indeed he ignores most of the history of Venice from the end of the sixteenth century. He was to write later that the chief subject of the book was «the relation of the art of Venice to her moral temper» (IX, 14); and elsewhere, that «a nation's art is its only reliable biography» (XXIV, 203). The aim, then, is to read back from the art into the moral life of the society of whose values the art – this capital or architrave, that moulding or frieze – is necessarily the expression. Every Venetian building is a repository of cultural meaning, a sign of the changing moral and spiritual life of the city. Ruskin's aim is to recover these meanings. The aim of this essay is to follow his attempts to do so.

The opening chapter of the first volume, «The Quarry», suggests the kind of cultural history Ruskin has in mind. One of the most admired

[3] In *Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds*, issued three days after first volume of *Stones*, Ruskin urged the Protestant churches in England and Scotland to set the pace in a new crusade against European Romanism.

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Renaissance tombs in Venice was that of Doge Andrea Vendramin (1393-1478), in the basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo. Ruskin borrowed a ladder, climbed the tomb and brushed away the dust – his wife remarked that on such occasions bystanders were usually unsure whether he was very wise, or very mad – to discover first that the effigy had only one hand, that on the far side of the spectator having been left an uncarved block, and then that the face too was a piece of «semi-sculpture», a «monstrous mask» instead of the «true portraiture of the dead» (IX, 51-52). Where others had admired the elaborate cutting and the painstaking handling of detail, Ruskin finds evidence of the loss of faith, an increased fear of death, and a new emphasis on the display of technical skill at the expense of human feeling[4]. Similarly, he describes a fourteenth century capital on the Ducal Palace in which the figure of Hope is seen praying, with the hand of God emerging towards her from the sunbeams; in the fifteenth century imitation of the same capital, Hope is left praying to the sun only, and «the hand of God is gone»[5]. Ruskin's conclusion is that the pride of the Renaissance had made it unable «to see God's hand in the light He gave» (IX, 55).

It is difficult to resist such readings, and impossible not to be excited by them. To argue that changes in tomb sculpture reveal nothing about the changing beliefs and values of a society seems absurd, and no-one was better able than Ruskin to find the telling detail, or having found it to make it tell. Yet to make such details the basis for the history of a society, or even a history of its moral life, is clearly tendentious. A student of Renaissance music might write a very different account of Venetian life in the sixteenth century, celebrating the work of Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli or Monteverdi, and be no less plausible. Ruskin himself found it difficult to account for the greatness of Titian and Tintoretto, whose work was contemporary with the architecture he despised. But such problems are not allowed to impede his narrative of the rise, maturity and fall of Venice. From the outset, the city draws him to absolutes. The Renaissance began with the destruction of the old Ducal Palace of Doge Sebastiano Ziani (1172-1178), and from that moment – Ruskin dates it precisely, to 27 March 1424 – there was «a loss of truth and vitality in existing architecture all over the world» (IX, 44). As Venice at her height was the most religious of cities, so in her fall she is the most corrupt (IX,

[4] Ruskin claims with satisfaction, but without citing an authority, that the sculptor (Tullio Lombardo) was later banished for forgery.

[5] Ruskin puts the sentence in italics.

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46-47). Ruskin is writing not a history but a myth of Venice. But like so many of Ruskin's myths it was, even at its most sweeping, based on intense and detailed *looking*.

1. Volume I: «The Foundations»

The first volume of *The Stones of Venice* sets out to provide a basic education in architecture: what a wall, a roof, or a cornice is, and how these may be described; what capitals are, how many kinds there may be, where and when these different kinds originate, and so on [6]. Ruskin insists that good architecture both can and must be «indisputably» divided from the bad by reference to «universal» laws (IX, 56); Ruskin's preferences and distinctions have a habit of becoming laws. So there are three and only three forms of arch, identified as the lintel, the gable and the arch proper; there are only two orders of architecture, Doric and Corinthian, «and there can never be any more until doomsday» (IX, 34); in the five forms of capitals illustrated in an accompanying figure are to be found «the roots of all good capitals existing or capable of existence» (IX, 141). Where Ruskin cannot discover foundations for his argument, he asserts them. In one paragraph he says the Greeks invented the shaft, in the next that it may have derived from Egypt. No matter: the Greeks perfected it, and their work provides «a fixed point of origin» for all subsequent European architecture (IX, 34). Ruskin's scheme could hardly be more comprehensive: an originating point in Greece, and a culminating point in Venice – the Ducal Palace, «the central building of the world» (IX, 38): thereafter, immediate and universal decline.

But as each aspect of architectural form is docketed and pinned down, Ruskin finds means to challenge his own lists and taxonomies. He is too excited by what he sees to deny himself the pursuit of a detail for its own sake. In chapter 23, on «The Edge and the Fillet», he painstakingly identifies what «I shall always call 'the plain dogtooth'», but he never uses the term again, either in *Stones* or in the rest of his work; what follows instead is an illustration of the niche of a single tomb in Verona together with a commentary showing how the sharp shadow cast by one form of dogtooth sets off the delicacy of floral ornament (IX, 319). But – if you are Ruskin –

[6] Broadly, chapters 3 to 19 cover the rules of good construction, chapters 20 to 29 the rules of good ornament.

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there are always more details to see. In the first volume of *Modern Painters*, he had noted how the uniformity of nature's laws is endlessly modified by the «grace and accidentalism» with which the law is carried out (III, 452). So it is with architecture. There are four laws governing the true proportion of capitals, but this proportion is «utterly endless in its infinities of change» (IX, 147); the variety of pointed arches is «infinite» (IX, 160); the difference of plan in window tracery is «perfectly endless» (IX, 225) [7]. Much as Ruskin loved systems, he loved infinity more.

2. Volume II: «The Sea-Stories»

In the final chapter of the first volume Ruskin takes his by now well-instructed reader on a journey eastwards from Padua towards a first sight of the city. This is designedly not romantic Venice, but Venice found past the monotonous wall of the newly-completed railway bridge, beneath a «sullen cloud of black smoke» issuing from the belfry of a church. The opening of the second volume continues to assert Ruskin's Venice in opposition to other views. In Samuel Rogers's poem *Italy*, or in Byron's *Childe Harold*, Venice «rises» as if at an enchanter's hand [8]; in Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy* (1842), it is laid out as if on a counter, for the visitor to select what he wishes. Ruskin's Venice is not to be had on such terms. Instead, the reader is told to set aside the Venice conjured up by «the impotent feelings of romance», and to seek out «some faint image of a lost city»: faint, and an image merely, but based on what Ruskin likes to call stern facts (X, 7-9). This lost city provides the standard by which modern Venice, and modern England, will be judged, and found wanting.

One stern fact on which Ruskin insists is that if the tidal system had been different by just a few inches Venice could never have been built at all. The city exists because the laws which by God's wisdom govern the movement of water and the massing of sediment were «a preparation, and

[7] What the co-presence of law and infinite variety might mean in practice is shown by the illustrations. Ruskin's drawings, especially those of capitals from San Marco for the second volume, beautifully engraved by J.H. Le Keux, embody the delight that comes only through patient and loving observation.

[8] Rogers's *Italy* was published in two parts, in 1822 and 1828, but its success came with the 1830 edition, with illustrations by Turner, Stothard and Prout. It was in this latter edition that Ruskin first encountered Turner's work. Byron's *Childe Harold*, in four parts, was published between 1812 and 1818.

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the only preparation possible» for it to do so (X, 15; Ruskin's emphases). But it is not only the favourable geology which persuades Ruskin to see the early Venetians as a chosen people. As he tells the story, their first act as refugees from the Huns in the fifth century was to build the great cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta at Torcello [9]. The task Ruskin sets himself, and the reader, is to recognise how the form and mosaics of the building embody the otherwise «mute language of early Christianity» (X, 25). The severity of its organization, the refusal of worldly imagery, the absence of any signs of pride or self-indulgence, all speak of «the deep sorrow and sacred courage» with which these first Venetians held their faith. Faced with the destruction of their home on earth, they re-affirmed their trust in the life to come, and in doing so provided future generations with a «type» or illustration of the spiritual condition every Christian believer has to acknowledge as his or her own (X, 21-22). Here, Ruskin argues, is the authentic spirit of Venice, and the reason for its future success, and not, as conventional historians would have it, in the power of its navy, or the size of its arsenals.

The development of this spirit, and its manifestation in material form as architecture, is the central subject of the second volume. Overlooked by the modern traveller, hidden behind or lost among the restorations and additions of a later time, are the stones which record the «real» Venice, and continue to assert its meaning, or what Ruskin calls its «Will» (IX, 5). In the two central chapters on «St Mark's» and «The Nature of Gothic», Ruskin seeks to trace and make legible the true Will of Venice. For the rest of the century, this was the Venice that British visitors came to see [10].

3. «St Mark's»

The account of San Marco begins obliquely, by asking the reader to call to mind an English cathedral – Salisbury, perhaps, or Hereford – worn by the rain, coloured by lichen, its towers a «drift of eddying black points» in a sky filled with «restless birds», and its peaceful sublimity complemented by the «small formalisms» and «drowsy felicities» of the life which goes

[9] It was reputedly founded by the exarch Isaac of Ravenna in 639; the mosaics date from the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

[10] These chapters also had an important effect on Victorian architects, who increasingly introduced Venetian colour and forms into their designs.

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on around it (X, 79-80). Naturalized by time and weather, absorbed into the landscape and into the daily life of the community, it speaks of the continuity of thought and feeling, of values and understanding passed down from one generation to the next (like many other Victorian writers on architecture, Ruskin elides the huge disjunction of the Reformation).

By contrast with this image of unity, San Marco seems noisily out of place, and out of its time. The streets which surround it are full of «inextricable confusion»: rows of shops packed into narrow alleys, with dark-green water-melons heaped up like cannon-balls, copper pans hanging from the roofs, bottles and casks of wine illuminated by crimson lamps lit in honour of the Madonna. Set amidst this din and bustle, San Marco rises like «a vision out of the earth», in silent rebuke to the surrounding chaos. Ruskin draws the reader's eye upwards over a facade rich with tracery and the sculptured forms of plants, birds, men and angels, «a continuous chain of language and of life», and dazzling with colour – gold, mother-of-pearl, alabaster, jasper, porphyry – and still further up, beyond another range of «glittering pinnacles», towards the crests of the arches, which appear like «marble foam» tossed against the blue of the sky [11]. And what effect, he then asks, abruptly, «has this splendour on those who pass beneath it?» (X, 84).

It is an uneasy question. The immediate answer is that the Venetians who inhabit the city in the middle of the nineteenth century are indifferent: «You may walk from sunrise to sunset, to and fro, before the gateway of San Marco, and you will not see an eye lifted to it, nor a countenance brightened by it. Priest and layman, soldier and civilian, rich and poor, pass by it alike regardlessly» (X, 84). Even those who enter to pray are responding only to «the stage properties of superstition» (X, 90). Such comments may have helped to allay the fears of those who feared that Ruskin was too sympathetic to Romanism. But what effect does the splendour of San Marco have on Ruskin himself? «Never», he writes in the last paragraph of the chapter, «had city a more glorious Bible»; that the Venetians carried out their sins «in the face of the House of God» makes their guilt all the greater (X, 141). Yet to argue in this way is to make no distinction between sin against God's Law and the desecration of a city made holy – or perhaps it is merely made beautiful – by the presence of His cathedral. Is it the glory of San Marco itself, or the glory of God to which it bears witness, that Ruskin wishes to praise? In preparing to read the «Book-Temple», he comes close to fetishising it.

[11] John Unrau notes the «cinematic effect» of the writing: see Unrau 1984, 10.

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Ruskin's difficulty in setting a limit to his admiration of St Mark's raises the question of what it means to speak of religious art: more broadly, of how to give to each, art and religion, what is their due. He addresses the question directly, and as so often proposes a three-part scheme. At one extreme, the «wooden and waxen images of Romanism» are misleading because they substitute for the true object of worship; at the other, the work of the most accomplished artists «instantly» diverts the mind from the subject to the art itself, so that «admiration takes the place of devotion» (X, 131). The simple-minded are seduced into idolatry, the educated respond as connoisseurs, but despite the differences between them, both remain trapped at the level of the image, rather than looking to the reality which lies beyond it. The right kind of religious art, then – Ruskin takes as his example the mosaics in San Marco – must be that which leads away from itself, towards the truths which it represents. That such an art may appear simple, even rude, to modern minds is only another instance of the pernicious effect of the Renaissance and its pride in human skill.

Ruskin's scheme is tidy, and consistent with the emphasis in all his work on the power of art to refer to something beyond itself. This has not prevented some of his closest readers, notably Marcel Proust, from questioning how far in writing about San Marco, say, or Turner, Ruskin was able to prevent his passionate admiration for the art becoming a form of devotion – indeed, it is hard to know how else to describe his feeling for Turner, or for Tintoretto. Throughout the chapter, Ruskin insists that San Marco is to be read like «a vast illuminated missal»; but his eye, and thus the reader's, is constantly drawn to the fact that it is an exquisite volume, «bound with alabaster», «studded with porphyry pillars», written «in letters of enamel and gold» (X, 112). In asking about the meaning and value of religious art, Ruskin inevitably opens up questions about the basis of his own pleasure in form and colour.

4. «The Nature of Gothic»

In 1854 Ruskin's chapter on «The Nature of Gothic» was issued by the Working Men's College as a pamphlet, with the subtitle «and Herein of the True Function of the Workman in Art». It remains the most compelling of the many theories of work offered in the nineteenth century. At the heart of the chapter is Ruskin's attempt to identify what he describes as the «moral elements» of Gothic architecture, that is, those of its qualities

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which express the moral character of the original builders, and in particular its «Savageness» or «Rudeness» – that aspect which earned it the title of Gothic [12]. He begins by taking the reader on an imaginary flight above Europe, from the «great peacefulness of light» of the Mediterranean to the ice and storms of the far north, where the Gothic workman learned to smite «an uncouth animation out of the rocks», heaving up into the air an architecture instinct with an imagination «wild and wayward as the northern sea» (X, 186-187). This descriptive tour de force then leads into an apparent digression, as he returns to a distinction made in the first volume between Greek and Egyptian architecture, both characterized by their unrelenting insistence on an accuracy of form which could allow the workman no freedom of expression, and Gothic, which in a spirit of Christian humility accepted the value of every workman's contribution, just as Christianity itself acknowledged «the individual value of every soul» (IX, 291). Gothic architects, Ruskin argues, were content to let each workman work to his utmost capacity, even to the point of exceeding his capacity, rather than demand the limited perfection of repeated geometrical forms or severely stylized figures. The Gothic architecture of the middle ages, unlike that of the pre-Christian past, was willing to «receive the results of the labour of inferior minds; and out of fragments full of imperfection, and betraying that imperfection in every touch, indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole» (X, 190).

What had appeared to be a digression (and in so far as the Gothic Ruskin has in mind at this point is Northern rather than Venetian, it *is* a digression) is now revealed as the starting-point for a critique of nineteenth-century society. Ruskin challenges his readers to look around their well-appointed houses and admit that they too are drawn to perfect accuracy, preferring «mean victory» in the lesser, mechanical task to «honourable defeat» in the greater, creative one. But the demand for commodities is also a demand for the labour which produces them. The consumer – Ruskin's audience – must choose whether to demand goods which can be produced so as to draw out in the worker «some tardy imagination, torpid capacity of emotion, tottering steps of thought», or those which can be manufactured only by reducing him to a machine (X, 191): «You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him» (X, 192). Men can endure hardship or poverty, but not the denial of their

[12] Sections 6-78 deal with the «moral elements» of Gothic, and sections 80-105 with its defining formal features – essentially, in Ruskin's account, the pointed arch, steeply pitched gable, and the extensive use of foliation.

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humanity; to be «counted off into a heap of mechanism, numbered with its wheels, and weighed with its hammer strokes» is beyond enduring. The reality behind what was described as the division of labour is in fact the division of men, «broken into small crumbs and fragments of life»: degraded, and aware of their degradation (X, 195). The modes of contemporary industrial production were not simply non-Gothic; they were also un-Christian.

There is much in this chapter which is humanly attractive and eloquently argued: the concern for the wholeness of being of the working man; the sense of society as drawing on the different qualities of each of its members; above all, perhaps, its emphasis on a non-ascetic view of work as a means of self-realization. Here Ruskin's position is significantly different from that of Thomas Carlyle, whose work, in particular *Past and Present* (1843), he was beginning to read more attentively. He accepts Carlyle's distinction between the merely nominal physical slavery of the middle ages and the real moral and spiritual slavery of modern industrial labour, but cannot follow him in holding that all work is inherently noble [13]. Ruskin was as concerned as Carlyle with the moral imperative of work – the biblical injunction to work «while it is day [for] the night cometh, when no man can work» (John 9,4) was never far from his mind – but he was also preoccupied with the quality of the life out of which the work came, and to which it testified; he wanted to discover «what kinds of labour are good for men, raising them, and making them happy» (X, 196). Ruskin, unlike Carlyle, was not disturbed by the word «happy» [14].

This view of work has been taken up by other writers, usually from the political left, most notably William Morris, but Ruskin's own construction of the idea was quasi-feudal, deriving from his admiration for the hierarchical, orderly and creative Venice of the early fifteenth century. His discussion of «The Treatment of Ornament» in the first volume of *Stones* distinguishes between three kinds: Servile (Egyptian, Greek), Constitutional (Gothic), and Revolutionary (Renaissance). His immediate quarrel in the chapter on «The Nature of Gothic» is with Servile ornament, in which the capacity of the workman is denied, and the design

[13] The claim that men «may be beaten chained, tormented, yoked like cattle [...] and yet remain in one sense, and the best sense, free» seems to owe something to Carlyle (X, 193).

[14] As Raymond Williams has pointed out, in making happiness the criterion for deciding which are the right kinds of labour, Ruskin is deliberately rejecting the notions of «labour for profit, or for production, or for the smooth functioning of the existing order»: see Williams 1985, 147.

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accordingly lowered to the level at which it can be carried out without error by even the least skilled, and this is the basis of his challenge to Victorian modes of production and consumption. But his deeper quarrel, here as elsewhere, is with the art of the Renaissance. The characteristic of Revolutionary ornament, as Ruskin defines it, is the refusal to admit the incapacity of the workman relative to the architect, and this denial is «destructive of all noble architecture»: precisely as, in Ruskin's later writings on politics, liberal ideology and the refusal of hierarchy are presented as destructive of all noble society. Gothic or Constitutional ornament is not primarily valuable because it allows for the self-expression of the workman, and invites the tolerant acceptance of his inevitable occasional error by architect and beholder alike, though both these are of value: its true value consists rather in that here incapacity is guided, and willingly submits to be guided. The purest forms of Gothic architecture «are expressions of the mind of manhood by the hands of childhood» [15]; the «conceptive» mind of the master is always present to direct the «executive» hand of the worker (IX, 290-291).

The «constitution» implicit in Gothic ornament is as hierarchic and illiberal as the one on which Ruskin was to insist in his work on politics and economics from the 1860s onwards: for all his admiration of Venice, Ruskin was the least republican of writers. To insist on the illiberalism of «The Nature of Gothic» is not to detract from its importance both in itself and as an inspiration to later thinkers – the passion and generosity of the argument are in any case unmistakable – but it is to acknowledge the deep if at times wayward coherence of Ruskin's writing.

5. Volume III: «The Fall»

The final volume of *The Stones of Venice* is given over to a fierce and sustained assault on the Renaissance. The term itself was relatively new, even in the context of art history, and initially little more than another name for the art and architecture of the *Cinquecento*, but Ruskin's insistence that the art of any society is an index to its moral nature inevitably led him to give it a wider significance, as the inauguration of a «vast [...] change in the European mind» (XI, 4). *The Stones of Venice* develops an «aesthetic

[15] Ruskin puts the sentence in italics.

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historiography» which reveals the Renaissance both as an event in history, evident in the emergence of new structures of thought and feeling in the fifteenth century, and as part of the present, an aspect of the unending struggle between the good and the bad, still making its influence felt in all that Ruskin found most hateful in the cultural forms of his own age [16]. In this third volume, his concern with Venice itself is bound up with his analysis of the spiritual condition of Europe, and of England in particular.

The charges Ruskin brings in his chapter on the «Early Renaissance» have become familiar: over-luxuriance, over-refinement, jaded imagination, and an ever more morbid search for pleasure and excitement. The echoes here of the Romantic critique of Augustan art may suggest that Ruskin has lost the historical plot, but as ever he seeks to link the general indictment to the intensely apprehended detail. A piece of ornamentation from a thirteenth-century *Book of Hours* exhibits moderation in curvature, and the power of energy held in reserve; an Italian example from the fifteenth century is «wholly unrestrained [...] rolling hither and thither in confused wantonness». The Gothic artist stays his hand; the artist of the *Cinquecento* allows himself «one wave of motion more», and the result is debauchery (XI, 9) [17]. Not for the first time, nor the last, the Renaissance marks for Ruskin the moment when Venice fell from purity and temperance into sexual excess.

His fullest critique comes in the chapter on «Roman Renaissance», or what is now more usually known as the High Renaissance, which stands condemned for Pride and Infidelity. The former is manifested in three areas. The Pride of Science fostered an interest in things in themselves, or in terms of their relation to each other, to the neglect of art's proper concern with things «as they affect the human sense and human soul» (XI, 48). In looking to knowledge as the only good, Renaissance artists impoverished the imagination; the pursuit of accuracy in the handling of perspective or anatomy became more important than the delineation of feeling and emotion. The Vasarian, and Victorian, view of the development of Renaissance art was simply wrong; Raphael «painted best when he knew least» (XI, 70) [18].

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[16] The phrase «aesthetic historiography» is borrowed from Bullen 1994, 128.

[17] Or it is for Ruskin: the reader who knows the story of his unconsummated marriage, and of his guilt about his masturbatory practices, can hardly avoid reading such passages as projections of his fears and anxieties.

[18] On the Victorian view of Raphael, see Fraser 1992, esp. 44-46.

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The Pride of State is reflected in an art addressed exclusively to an educated taste, and consequently cold, haughty, and lacking in sympathy (XI, 74). Appropriately, since he regards the Renaissance as spiritually dead, Ruskin concentrates on the changing style of funerary monuments, in one of his most brilliant pieces of visual analysis. In the Gothic period, a sarcophagus with a recumbent figure and a simple canopy marked the calm acceptance of the fact of death; in the Renaissance, the tomb was gradually transformed into a pedestal or stage for the portrait statue, now standing erect, and surrounded by allegorical images of Fame and Victory. Behind the pomp and the love of luxury lies the fear of extinction: «The soul of the sixteenth century dared not contemplate its body in death» (XI, 110).

Finally, the Pride of System rejected inspiration, or the instinctive submission of the artist to universal law, and sought instead to formalize the rules of art – the five orders of Vitruvius, the unities of neo-classical drama – until poetry, painting and architecture were «reduced [...] to so many different forms of fetter-dance» (XI, 115). Later writers – Jules Michelet in France, Walter Pater in England – would take precisely the opposite view, and see in the Renaissance the development of an intellectual freedom and independence denied in the Middle Ages. Such freedom, in Ruskin's work, is the substitution of human pride for obedience to divinely-given law.

These forms of Pride were made more dangerous by what Ruskin sees as the infidelity of the age. In a time of religious dispute, even the best of men lost their way, and bestowed on pagan poetry and myth the reverence they could no longer give to Christian texts and traditions. The faculties which had formerly been dedicated to the service of Faith «were now transferred to the service of Fiction» (XI, 130). As the artist felt free to draw his material equally from mythology or the scriptures, neither fully believing nor fully disbelieving in the one or the other, so the subject was used as a means to display his skill, and not the skill as a means to reveal the truth of the subject. Inevitably, there came a time when the images summoned by the artist «began to assume one average value in the spectator's mind» (XI, 130): the sacred and the profane, a Bacchanal and the Nativity, a Madonna and an Aphrodite, all alike were reduced to questions of handling and technique [19]. No writer was ever more anx-

[19] When he later came across Robert Browning's poem from 1845, «The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church», in which the dying Bishop plans a memorial to himself which mingles religious and classical motifs – Moses the Lawgiver alongside

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ious than Ruskin to establish hierarchies of value, and the absoluteness of distinctions; nowhere more than in Renaissance Venice did he feel the danger that these certainties might be eroded, and the slide begun into moral and aesthetic anarchy. What Ruskin regards as the apathy of modern Europe – its lip-service Christianity, its indifference to art, its deadened cities, and its diminished men and women – is essentially the final and «congealed» form of the general collapse of value initiated by the Renaissance (XI, 131).

6. «Grotesque Renaissance»

The chapter on «Grotesque Renaissance» opens where that on «Roman Renaissance» leaves off, with the irremediable degradation of Venice. Ruskin begins by focusing on a single spot, the site of the church of Santa Maria Formosa. Until the end of the fourteenth century, this had been the scene of a festival in honour of the ideal of marriage, held each year on 2 February, the feast of the Purification of the Virgin. Nothing remains of the original church, but Ruskin asks the reader to consider the head carved on the bell-tower of its seventeenth-century replacement: «[...] huge, inhuman, and monstrous – leering in bestial degradation, too foul to be either pictured or described»[20]. And this is only one of many hundreds of such heads around the city. It is as if the central city in the world is also the place of nightmare: one moment the letters in an illuminated manuscript writhing in sexual excess, a moment later statues «sneering» from every bridge, their tongues thrust out in «idiotic mockery» (XI, 144-145). Wherever he looks, Ruskin sees purity about to give way to pollution. Predictably, he responds by defining, or asserting, new distinctions. The leering head is an example of the base grotesque; there must then be another kind, the true or noble grotesque, and the separation between the two kinds must be absolute. In the event, the monstrous proves even more difficult to classify than the beautiful; but Ruskin is often at his most brilliant when tracing what he fears, or abhors.

Ruskin himself admits that while there is an «infinite distance» between the true and the base forms of grotesque, this distance is filled

«Pan / Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off» – he wrote that it perfectly encapsulated his own views of the Renaissance.

[20] As Jeanne Clegg points out, this was also the wedding day of Ruskin's parents, and the date on which in 1866 he was to propose to Rose La Touche: see Clegg 1981, 126.

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by «endless conditions more or less inclining to the evil or the good» (XI, 177). In sum, however, the true grotesque is «the expression of the *repose* or play of a *serious* mind», in the necessary intervals between periods of intense labour; the false grotesque is «the result of the *full exertion* of a *frivolous* one», lingering over the obscene, or expending its best skill on trifles (XI, 170; Ruskin's emphases). This at least has the look of a firm distinction, though it is not easy to re-cast it in strictly formal or visual terms. But it does not quite satisfy Ruskin. In the chapter on «Roman Renaissance» he had insisted that the task of the artist is to be «a seeing and feeling creature», receiving all things «on the broad, white, lucid field of his soul», not grasping at one (XI, 49, 52). By maintaining himself in this state of wise passiveness he will be able to «stay what is fleeting», and to «immortalize [...] the flitting shadow of faint emotion, the imperfect lines of fading thought» (XI, 62). As Tony Tanner points out, there is something like a modernist aesthetic here: a painting, like a poem, can be «a momentary stay against confusion», «a last act of defence against the chaos of the world»[21]. But in defining the noble grotesque Ruskin sees the artist's passivity in a darker light. Even in his playful moods he will feel the presence of sin and death around him; the inescapable «harm and horror of life», its «misery and wrath, and discordance, and danger, and all the work of the dragon and his angels», will speak through his work, whether he will or no (XI, 168). This kind of grotesque – Ruskin calls it the symbolic grotesque – reflects the mystery of the human condition. Where it appears, it testifies to the nobility of the artist, but it is not the product of artistic discipline and control.

What Ruskin is moving towards in this chapter is a discussion of what he calls «the ungovernableness of the imagination». This is most evident in dreams, but even the noblest forms of imaginative power are, Ruskin concludes, «in some sort ungovernable [...] so that the vision, of whatever kind, comes uncalled, and will not submit itself to the seer, but conquers him» (XI, 178). Except in those rare cases when the mind of the artist is entirely «calm, consistent, and powerful», the vision will be seen «as in a broken mirror, with strange distortions and discrepancies» (XI, 179). The fallen human soul at its best resembles a broken diminishing glass, so that «the wider the scope of its glance, and the vaster the truths into which it obtains an insight, the more fantastic their distortion is likely to be» (XI, 181). Like the spirit of Gothic itself, the grotesque in art is the necessary consequence of our «imperfect, childish, and fatigable nature» (XI, 152).

[21] Tanner 1992, 113. The familiar quotations are from Robert Frost and W.B. Yeats.

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It signals both the aspiration of our fallen human natures to achieve an understanding of the divine, and the extent of our failure to do so.

This is the beginning of a new account of the nature of the artist, and of the natural world. In the first volume of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin had written of Turner standing «like the great angel of the Apocalypse [...] with the sun and stars given into his hand», a prophet and visionary appointed to reveal the mysteries of God's universe (III, 254). In the third and subsequent volumes, resumed after the completion of *The Stones of Venice*, it is the tragic humanism of Turner's work which concerns Ruskin. What he now finds in Turner are those qualities which defined the noble grotesque: the fear of sin, the certainty that there is no good or lovely thing in nature without its correspondent darkness, the awareness of human labour, sorrow and death – these are the subjects Ruskin now sees at the centre of Turner's work, as they were increasingly to be at the centre of his own. When he next wrote of Venice, in the fifth and last volume of *Modern Painters* (1860), it was to investigate how Venetian painters, like the Greeks, like Turner, confronted the pain and evil of human life.

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