

A SPECTRAL TURN AROUND VENICE

By Luke Jones

I spent several days, during a recent trip to Venice, in conversation with a ghost. The writer and critic John Ruskin became my spectral guide, and his commentary on the buildings that we visited transformed my experience of those spaces. What follows is an account of my time with him.

This ‘conversation’, if it were a conceit on my part, had the aim of finding a productive way of addressing his difficult, extraordinary, vast *Stones of Venice* in light of the deeply, but incompletely, felt affection which many have for it. The book is a history of Venice as a sort of epic tragedy narrated by its buildings, and it is simultaneously a polemic against the previous three hundred years of European architecture, directed particularly against London, and proposing a revolution in architectural style. It is commonly viewed as a heroic, rousing failure. Kenneth Clark said of it that ‘even now [...], when the cause it advocates is dead, we cannot read it without a thrill, without a sudden resolution to reform the world’ (Clark 1964, 181), and Colin Amery reveals a typical ambivalence when he writes that ‘the trouble is that Ruskin was wrong [...] [yet] we need a voice like his again’ (Amery 2001, viii-ix).

The effect of invoking Ruskin in the manner of a haunting is not simply to convey a measure of sympathy for him, as a figure, or his work. Rather, I am trying to approach, however obliquely, the subtle and intriguing way in which Ruskin’s rhetoric, which is concerned with portraying contemporary Venice as a ruin, also starts to reveal within itself the ruin of Ruskin’s ideals.

The idea of ‘ruin’, or ‘the ruinous’, is a construct which is historically specific, and capable of being superseded. Andreas Huyssen has revealingly described the way in which the ‘imaginary of ruins’ in Piranesi’s etchings is itself a kind of ruin because the notion of authenticity which it implies is discredited (Huyssen 2006, 9). I do not just want to contend that a similar circularity affects Ruskin, but to retrieve from *Stones of Venice* a critical understanding of ‘ruin’. This is accomplished in three ways: first, in illuminating the means by which he narrates architectural spaces as ruins, to vindicate his belief in the potential of narrative as a means of transforming the experience of space; second, in documenting the ruinous quality of his project itself, to outline a sense in which even a text whose religiosity, tendentiousness and anachronism make it impossible for the reader to endorse can still be appreciated as a failure, like a ruin in that its decay only heightens its beauty; and third, though the essay may in essence do little more than trace the partiality of Ruskin’s success, it attempts, in doing so, to locate its own form of critically productive observation.

Venice from the sea

In the event, I arrived on the first budget flight of the day from London, and consequently reached the city around midday in a state of exhaustion, curled up in the back of one of the highly polished water taxis which spend their time idling by the airport jetty; thus I remained for most of the day, shunting myself bad-temperedly between small coffee shops to stay out of the wind. Early the next day, at Ruskin’s insistence, I retraced my route from terra firma and back again, this time on the municipal vaporetto, or ferry-bus. The drama of arriving in Venice is undiminished either by repetition, or by the depredations which have fallen on the lagoon and the city in recent times. The ferry swept away from the airport and out along a wide channel, the stone-retaining walls of which fall gradually away beneath the surface of the milky lagoon. I stood on the deck as the ferry scudded along between the monumental wooden piles which direct the boats. We passed a series of tiny islands, each big enough only for a single building; an abandoned fort, greenish and dank; a single-storey palazzo whose small rose garden subsides without warning into the water; a tumbledown warehouse.

Venice was ahead, a tawny cloud on a horizon dotted with spires, when Ruskin began to speak: 'It would be difficult to overrate the value of the lessons which might be derived from a faithful study of this strange and mighty city: a history which, in spite of the labour of countless chroniclers, remains in vague and disputable outline, barred with brightness and shade, like the far away edge of her own ocean' (Ruskin 1873 I, 2).

His introduction had something irresistible about it, out on the lagoon. Surrounded by that expanse of flat water, I felt equipped for the epic sweep of the history of an entire nation. That broad horizon, for Ruskin, seemed to encompass not only space, but history. It was an insight with which I would become familiar. As we drew closer, he continued:

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, may be led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction. (Ruskin 1873 I, 1)

Ruin and poetry

The initial attractiveness of the idea of Venice as a ruin is due to Ruskin's gift for poetic language, which he uses to gild his assertions in a way that makes them fascinating. Stating his aims, he says: 'If I should succeed, as I hope, in making the Stones of Venice touchstones, and detecting, by the mouldering of her marble, poison more subtle than ever was betrayed by the rending of her crystal; [...] I believe the result of the enquiry may be serviceable for proof of a more vital truth than any at which I have hitherto hinted' (Ruskin 1873 I, 33).

His 'mouldering marble' is engaging because of the beauty of the phrase itself. His writing has a kind of rhythm, created by long, elliptical chains of clauses broken by commas, which is allied to the aesthetic effect of phrases like 'mouldering marble [...] rending crystal'. Ruins are known to provoke a particular sort of reflective mood: 'immersion in ruins instills [...] a lofty, even ecstatic, drowsiness' (Woodward 2001, 4). Ruskin's rich, unmeasured language and the rhythm of his meandering Miltonian sentences produce a similarly drowsy, beatific mood in the reader. There is a sense in which these poetic effects are analogous to some of the techniques by which he narrates spaces, such as the combination of winding narrative progressions, and framed, static moments of rapturous contemplation.

His poetic imagination is at work in the text which ended the previous section above, which is also the first part of the book itself. In it, the two exemplary ruins of Tyre and Venice are described. Ruskin tells of Tyre's 'exaltation [...], sin and [...] punishment', leaving a skeletal impression of 'bleaching [...] rocks, between the sunshine and the sea', and then never refers to it again. Venice, by contrast, as we have heard, is 'so bereft of all but her loveliness, that we might well doubt [...] which was the City and which the Shadow' (Ruskin 1873 I, 1).

Between his descriptions of Venice and Tyre, there is a significant change in tone. The hectoring religiosity of 'warning' becomes complicated by 'doubt', and the discriminating mind becomes clouded by a sort of aesthetic rapture. There is a quietude about his use of the word 'loveliness' which is difficult to reconcile with the oratorical posture immediately preceding it. The first description conjures the spectre of Tyre with the glibness of a figure of speech, using it to signify 'destruction'. It is a neat summation. By contrast, the latter description has Ruskin casting his gaze over the water: entranced, trapped, lost in the image.

Broadly, these two descriptions reflect, on the one hand, the rhetorical and critical abilities which allow Ruskin to marshal his arguments, and, on the other, the highly-developed aesthetic sensibility that produces the insights with which these arguments are populated. A

tension exists between the two, between a ‘conception of beauty, so complicated, so subtle, so clouded with association and overtone’ (Clark 1964, 184), and his desire and need to systematize – ‘he loved [...] disentangling [...] [to] find the order buried underneath’ (Harbison 1977, 56). Kenneth Clark argued that Ruskin ‘never quite reconciled his principles and his sensibility’, and that he ‘first felt an object to be beautiful, and then tried to fit [it] into some theory’ (Clark 1964, 181-2).

Later, this creates some very awkward and reductive arguments. So, whereas his narration of the Basilica of St Mark as ‘a multitude of pillars and white domes, clustered into a long low pyramid of coloured light’ (Ruskin 1873 II, 66) seems as vivid as the original, his attempt to extrapolate general rules from it is ingenious but futile. The following are only four of at least ten rules based on St Mark’s: ‘All shafts are to be solid [...] the shafts may sometimes be independent of construction [...]. Shafts may be of variable size [...]. All decoration must be shallow in cutting’ (Ruskin 1873 II, 80-6). Such rules might be produced indefinitely, without ever defining what it is about the building that fascinates and attracts the viewer. Ruskin himself admitted that his famous *Seven Lamps of Architecture* might have been eight, nine, or any number at all (Clark 1964, 182). The attempt to present exact rules in this case is obviously pointless: even as the rules unfold, it is obvious that Ruskin will fail. The poignancy of this situation, of failure foretold, gives his commentary on Venice an unintentionally tragic, ruinous air.

The Doge’s Palace

Prompted by Ruskin, as we reached the vaporetto stop at San Zaccaria, I rose and, stumbling off amid the throng of passengers, disentangled myself slowly from the crowd disembarking. Moving a little way up the quayside, I found myself all at once, and almost inadvertently, in the imperial heart of Venice, on the Piazzetta San Marco, a long, wide strip paved with large flagstones stretching down to the water’s edge. A number of columns, some bearing statues, stood arrayed on it, but were overshadowed by a vast, solitary building faced in white and pink stone, which, Ruskin informed me, was the Ducal (or Doge’s) Palace.

The building roused him to the highest degree of excitement, and he explained hurriedly about ‘the three preeminent architectures of the world’, eventually concluding that

[t]he Lombard [...] and the Arab [...] Opposite in their character and mission, alike in their magnificence of energy [...] met and contended over the wreck of the Roman empire; and [...] the point of pause of both [...] is VENICE. The Ducal palace of Venice contains the three elements in exactly equal proportions – the Roman, Lombard and Arab. It is the central building of the world. (Ruskin 1873 I, 17)

There is a peculiar sadness implicit in this last sentence, as we witness the slow transformation of the central building of the world into an empty vessel, a vestige of empire now reduced to a tourist attraction, for Venice is now a wholly peripheral sort of place. I could not help noticing that Ruskin appeared to feel something more profound, and I noted again his apparent hyper-awareness of history, his ability to project onto the extant all of its vanished predecessors, the buildings which previously occupied the site, the different stages of their construction. He recited these ghostly monuments as we moved around the long facades where the Palace faces onto the causeway and the Piazzetta, and the vanished Byzantine palace built by Sebastian Ziani in the late twelfth century, the Great Saloon built by Doge Gradenigo in 1309, and the Paradise of Guariento, burnt in the fire of 1574 (Ruskin 1873 II, 289-303). They seemed for him somehow just as present, perhaps flickering in the gaps between the stones.

Ruin and the presence of history

History is present in Ruskin's narration of the Ducal Palace as nostalgia. When he talks about the Palace, it is emblematic of a sort of vanished Gothic splendour; it 'at once consummates and embodies the entire system of the Gothic Architecture of Venice [...] the principal effort of [Venice's] imagination in this period', and lingers on as 'the last representation of her power' (Ruskin 1873 II, 280-7). It is a reminder of Venice's decline, and this metaphor of embodiment is nostalgic in the sense that it makes visible a disappearance – a reminder of the irreversibility of time (Huysen 2006, 7). Although the building is intact, it functions as a ruin like a very large architectural fragment, a remaining trace of a mostly vanished Venice, which conveys a sense of ruination towards the scale of the city.

At the same time, the Palace is conceived of as a ruin in and of itself. Ruskin narrates the series of demolitions, rebuildings and accretions which pattern the history of the site, and undermines the visible wholeness and fixity which he had earlier stressed (Ruskin 1873 II, 287). The ghosts which he projects on to the now uncertain hulk of the Palace feel present, because their former positions are determined and explained with great care, and have a sort of symbolic, even occult, significance; the destruction of the Ziani Palace, for example, is taken to prefigure Venice's slide into decadence (Ruskin 1873 II, 301). The existing and vanished parts of the Palace are considered together, in the way in which Ruskin presents it, as a narration of Venice's glorious history. This understanding permits a final transformation, in which 'the new [post-Byzantine] buildings consume the palace [...] destroying or hiding their own commencement, as the serpent, which is the type of eternity, conceals its tail in its jaws' (Ruskin 1873 II 291-2). This metaphor reveals the building, for an instant, fully temporalised, mutable, seemingly in motion.

The past, then, however irrevocably behind us, is still, in a sense, present. Mindfulness of time's irreversibility, or nostalgia, is produced, paradoxically, by the fact that the past lingers. In tandem with this consideration of the building entire, Ruskin presents a bewilderingly detailed account of the forty-seven principal capitals of the Palace:

Eighth capital [...] [f]ourth side: A monstrous figure terminating below in a tortoise [...] Ninth capital [...] second side: Fortitude. A long bearded man. Tenth capital [...] third side: Pride. A knight with a heavy and stupid face, holding a sword with three edges [...]. (Ruskin 1873 II, 336-343)

This string of fragments has a poignancy which comes from their weirdness and the way that they seem like ill-fitting parts of a story whose full import cannot be explained. This sequential view of fragments can be described as the allegorical mode (Rendell 2006, 85-7). Here, our melancholic drift through, and focus on, these pieces of the building allow us to imagine it as a ruin before our eyes; all we see are the marks of its creators and the indissoluble gulf between now and then.

Both melancholy and nostalgia have the potential to be quite reactionary. Andreas Huyssen has said of nostalgia that 'it is difficult to walk the line between sentimental lament over a loss and the critical reclaiming of a past for the purposes of constructing alternative futures' (Huysen 2006, 9). Jane Rendell has elsewhere added, about melancholy, that, while 'the melancholic view [...] towards the past has often been criticised for being nostalgic or turning away from a social critique of current conditions, it is possible for such a position to be critically productive and provide the potential for new and different futures' (Rendell 2006, 85).

Ruskin's melancholy and nostalgia are neither entirely convincing as critique, nor wholly damnable as sentimental time-wasting. Despite his undoubted desire to imagine an alternative future and his polemical critique of everyday art and society, Ruskin's sentimentalism, and the way that he gazes so resolutely into a distant and idealised past, marks his words as coming from a different era entirely. His general approbation of the 'Christian imagination' of builders and sculptors expresses an entirely discredited sort of moralism (Ruskin 1873 II, 312). To follow such

a commentary around the building is to feel very powerfully the distance between then and now, and the 'ruined' state of that Victorian mindset.

More ruined still is Ruskin's notion of the authentic, which is central to his preference for the city's Byzantine and Gothic periods (Ruskin 1873 I, 4-34). 'Ruin' thus comes to refer both to the eloquent traces of this first, noble age and simultaneously to the evidence of collapse during the second Renaissance period (Ruskin 1873 III, 2). His view of authenticity is discernible in the way that he views these fragments as truthful, potentially eloquent, traces of the past. The reason for his preference for the Gothic over the Renaissance has to do with the 'freedom' of the workman to express himself in the former case, and his inability to do so in the latter instance: 'You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both' (Ruskin 1873 II, 161).

The artifacts of this idealised time represent the authentic, un-alienated product of the labour of its creators. To journey around Venice in Ruskin's company, and to follow his commentary on its spaces and places, is necessarily to be made aware of this naive notion of the authentic. It would be difficult indeed to sustain seriously such a view nowadays. Within the space of his argument, we can glimpse a world in which the notion of 'authenticity' is not yet implicated (as now, post-Adorno) in the construction of fascism, against which it also stands fast, rather than being rendered meaningless by 'alienation, inauthenticity and reproducibility', and the 'shadow of mass-media representation and distortion' which characterises the modern day (Huyssen 2006, 12). Huyssen has attempted to rehabilitate another notion of authenticity – that of Piranesi. But where Piranesi's 'refusal of wholeness and classical closure' (Huyssen 2006, 15) can quite easily be redecorated as a palatably edgy and disruptive contemporary manner of critique, Ruskin's highly emotive, religious-minded sentimentalism is beyond such a rehabilitation.

Yet, in an age in which the worth of utopian thinking itself is disputed, and in which the possible use of such 'open, dynamic and provocative' utopianism 'to challenge the conditions of the present' (Pinder 2005, 265) has to be vigorously argued for, the ingenuous way in which Ruskin presumes to challenge and overturn the visual and social norms of his age is something about which one can easily feel nostalgic. Moreover, the awareness of the irreversible gap between his utopian imaginary and my own is itself a narrative which transforms the experience of architectural space.

The narrative critiques, and lends a further degree of pathos to, the walk along the Riva de' Schiavoni, where amorphous, globalised forces of production have, since Ruskin, contrived to deck the old jetty with stalls selling imported plastic parasols and the same range of postcards to crowds of tourists, to the exclusion of all other activity. One is made aware of what Gianfranco Pertot has called 'the slow but continuous construction of a one-dimensional image of Venice' and 'the development of the stereotype of the "museum city"' (Pertot 2004, 9-18). Against this inexorable force of dissimulation, Ruskin's argument seems quaint and rather lost; but, despite its state of ruin, it can still critically illuminate the condition of the present.

St Mark's

I went back to my apartment, and it was not until a day or so later that Ruskin led me back towards the centre of Venice again via the street known to him as Calle Lunga San Moise, which is now the Calle Lunga XXII Marzo, his description of which was so at odds with what I myself saw as to be quite disorientating:

We find ourselves in a paved alley, some seven feet wide where it is widest, full of people, and resonant with cries of itinerant salesmen [...]. Overhead an inexplicable confusion of rugged shutters, and iron balconies and chimney flues pushed out on brackets to save room, and arched windows with

projecting sills of Istrian stone, and gleams of green leaves here and there where a fig-tree branch escapes over a lower wall. (Ruskin 1873 II, 64)

The street is now a parade of empty souvenir sellers, behind whose plate-glass windows are piled thousands of startlingly ugly Murano glass ornaments. As I walked past these, he described with a strange, Anglican horror the clusters of dark shops which had stood there, each with its own shrine to the Virgin:

The less pious shopkeeper sometimes leaves his lamp unlighted, and is contented with a penny print [...] but at the regular wine-shop of the calle the Madonna is in great glory [...] flanked by goodly ranks of bottles of Maraschino. (Ruskin 1873 II, 64-5)

I noted, at each shop, its fluorescent interior, identical with the one before it.

But then, as we emerged onto the Piazza San Marco, his narration mirrored the unfolding scene so truly that I now find that my memory of the scene and his description of it are inseparable, and that I cannot recall one without the other:

Between those pillars there opens a great light, and, in the midst of it, as we advance slowly, the vast tower of St Mark's seems to lift itself visibly forth [...] on each side, the countless arches prolong themselves onto ranged symmetry, as if the rugged and irregular houses that pressed together above us in the dark alley had been struck back into sudden obedience and lovely order [...] beyond those troops of ordered arches there rises a vision out of the earth [...] a multitude of pillars and white domes, clustered in a long low pyramid of coloured light; a treasure-beap, it seems. (Ruskin 1873 II, 65-6)

Remembering St Mark's, I am somehow constantly in this moment of arrival.

Ruin and narrative

In general, if Ruskin's narration of the Ducal Palace as a ruin was mostly 'disruptive' – penetrating the existing fabric with ghostly forms and viewing it in fragments – then his mode here, at the Basilica, is different. Often, Ruskin's words create a ruinous impression by inscribing the Basilica on to a sort of picturesque sequence. It is not an image as such: the Basilica is situated in a very deliberate and significant context, as with a picturesque image, but this context occurs before or after, rather than beside it, so that the memory of the Calle Lunga San Moise is still very much present as the Basilica appears. The elements are significantly juxtaposed within a narrative rather than, as one might normally do, in a picturesque image, within a landscape in which the objects are simultaneously visible.

The intention of this approach is to reveal the Basilica as a fantastic image at the end of a rather dismal promenade: 'we forget them all, for between those pillars there opens a great light' (Ruskin 1873 II, 65). The cathedral is therefore foregrounded against the gloomy landscape through which the narrative has just passed. The narrative device of surprise is a means by which the splendour of the building, and the contrast that it makes with its drab surroundings, is emphasised. The description of the vicious and indolent masses who surround and ignore it – 'knots of men of the lowest classes, unemployed and listless[...] basking in the sun like lizards' – combines with the squalor that is described on the approach; there is a pervasive atmosphere of decay, in which the Basilica is marooned (Ruskin 1873 II, 67).

To recognise a building as a ruin is to imagine a past, a departed state of 'wholeness'. Ruskin uses picturesque devices, such as the promenade and the surrounding narrative landscape, to 'ruin' St Mark's by severing it from the ignorance and baseness of its neighbours and

inhabitants. Its built fabric has not fallen to pieces, but it suffers injury, and is no longer whole, by being ignored and unloved. The most strikingly ruinous transformation which occurs is entirely unintentional, produced by the anachronistic quality of his descriptions of Venice today, which poignantly document the atmosphere of the city when it was still mostly inhabited by Venetians whose lives were not yet entirely occluded by the growth of tourism. The scene which he describes with such horror now incites nostalgia: the vivid squalor of Ruskin's description has a promise of authenticity which is unavailable in the meretricious and sterile environment that exists in its place. The cathedral is, arguably, no less 'ruined' in the depopulated Venice of today; and if it is now highly regarded, and gazed at incessantly, it is also alien to the crowds who pay to photograph and objectify it. The irony is that, for all its anachronism, Ruskin's description of the crowds outside St Mark's gives a model of 'ruination' in which the new crowd can effectively be substituted for the old.

The loneliness of Ruskin's position is also potentially 'ruinous' in character. Robert Harbison has argued that, in Ruskin's narrative, 'it is the speaker who stands desolate, who feels cut off from the happy crowds, but worse still, from the building, bereft and alien in front of its dumbness [...]. He and St Mark's are lost together, neither understood, neither loved, every communication a failure' (Harbison 1977, 56). Ruskin's estrangement is analogous to that of St Mark's itself; there is a poignancy to the fact that the profound, deeply-felt emotions which he expresses seem incomprehensible, by his account, to the other people around him.

It is a poignancy which is only enhanced by the time which has passed since he first wrote those words. His inability to communicate, there in St Mark's square, seems almost to prefigure his inability to convey properly to the public back in Britain the ideas that he had developed. His own view in 1871, twenty or so years after the first publication of the book, was that

No work of mine has had so much influence on contemporary art as *The Stones of Venice*; but this influence has been possessed only by the third part of it, the remaining two-thirds having been resolutely ignored [...]. The relation of the art of Venice to her moral temper [...] and that of the life of the man to his work [...] have both been ignored. (Ruskin 1873 I, v-viii)

Ruskin's intention was to use the ruin of Venice within the rhetorical space of a polemic about architecture, and to provoke a revolution of sorts. But his legacy was entirely distasteful to him; in his view, architects had imitated the styles he described without making any attempt to understand the spirit which animated them. As one historian put it: 'the nineteenth century devoured his purple and glowing prose, and then – in his name – committed every sort of architectural vandalism' (Furieux-Jordan 1966, 170). Ruskin's self-designated role in this scene, as a man apart from the crowd, was in life to be his sad fate, his ruin.

Torcello

On the last day, Ruskin and I took the little-used boat which runs from Burano to Torcello, the abandoned medieval city on the northern fringe of the lagoon. From the top of its solitary campanile, Ruskin promised, 'we may command [...] one of the most notable scenes in this wide world of ours'. He described the building merging with its landscape; a landscape totally saturated in a kind of all-encompassing melancholy, 'a waste of wild sea moor, of a lurid ashen grey [...] lifeless, the colour of sackcloth [...] the corrupted sea water soaking through the roots of its acrid weeds' (Ruskin 1873 II, 11).

Its condition had become somewhat altered. The journey which Ruskin describes, up a 'narrow creek of sea [...] winding for some time among buried fragments of masonry' now takes place on foot, on a smart brick road, next to a fat, soapy channel of green water. From somewhere in the middle distance, the whine of a petrol

generator can be heard. There are several recently-built houses, whose gardens are marked with a succession of chain-link fences.

We reached the cathedral and climbed the tower. From the top, a loud roaring sound could be heard. Towards the horizon, the salt marshes merged, in a grey haze, with the airport. The channels in the grey lagoon through which our ferry had travelled were marked with piles and buoys, which from the tower appeared to extend, without interruption, the geometry of the runways and taxiways out into the lagoon, almost to the shore of Torcello itself. I descended, filled with unease.

The 'Ruin' of Ruin

The landscape which holds these ruins, the abandoned churches and grassed-over palazzo, now finds itself circumscribed by human intervention. Antoine Picon has likened this removal of a 'natural vista', in which urbanity can be framed, to a sort of imprisonment in which 'it is impossible for us to detach ourselves from the thousand and one gestures that connect us to the urban landscape in front of our eyes' (Picon 2000, 72-6). In such a landscape, visibly and invisibly contained by human action, where every vista contains some present human intervention, the idea of a ruin in the sense that Ruskin imagines it is endangered. His description of the prospect, as a 'melancholy clearness of space' (Ruskin 1873 II, 11), is in a sense still apposite, but the authentic, bleak emptiness of nature has been effaced by the twenty-first century's expansive urban periphery, in which it is hard to know if there is any nature to which the ruin may return, or any way of knowing whether an apparent ruin is real or purely *spectacular*.

Torcello has been transformed since Ruskin described it. But there is something potentially critically productive in the way that his visual account of the area's bleakness still, perversely, seems appropriate. In the cathedral, he examines the marks of its builders – 'the two solemn mosaics [...] expressive at once of the deep sorrow and the sacred courage of men who had no home left them upon earth' (Ruskin 1873 II, 14). Through this concern with the authentic, he illuminates the difference between the bleak landscape he described and the similarly stark and grey one which exists now; it is impossible to speak of authenticity in a landscape in which all the proper borders between things have been occluded by the invisible networks which permeate it. In this way, the demonstrable ruin of Ruskin's concept of ruin is nonetheless a critique of the present.

Conclusion

John Ruskin's ghost is inextricably bound to Venice. Even before I arrived, my guidebook had intimated as much, directing visitors to 'the Piazzetta, [...to] find Ruskin busy with his watercolours, sketching the capitals of the façade' (Honour 1977, 18). He is in a sense Venice's pre-eminent ghost, and ghostliness and ruin are his fate in an era which is unable to take him seriously. Yet it is precisely this ghostly quality which creates a model for a sort of rehabilitation.

As spectral narrator, the way in which he alters the experience of space, both intentionally and unwittingly, destabilises the idea of fixed meanings within spaces. His tendentiousness, religiosity and anachronism not only constitute a fascinating, ruined ideology but also, when considered critically in the way in which they have been undone by history, garner a different capability for opposing norms of linear progress. This simultaneous drift through a ruined city and a ruined ideology contrives to excavate from within Venice a set of tools with which to critique the modern world. The lesson, above all others, which I derive from my time with Ruskin is that it is possible for a critique like his to be rescued by its very abjection. Venice's abjection produces his argument, and, in the same way, his project can be productive in its

decrepitude: 'an efflorescence of decay' (Ruskin 1873, 4). *The Stones of Venice* is, in the first instance, a narrative on the ruin of Venice, but what is really *written* is the ruin of the text itself.

A particular critical understanding of ruin can be elucidated by examining the succession of different, but related, ways in which it appears in the work of John Ruskin. 'Ruin' is created as a deliberate function of the argument in three ways: first, as a poetic *impression*, and then made apparent as a corollary of the cognizance of history, which is freighted with the inevitability of time's passing. Last, 'ruin' is produced by the narration of spaces, by fragmentation, by repetition, and by a kind of picturesque theatricality. The recursive fact that this book on ruin should be a ruin itself is a reminder that a ruin always lingers, and is apparent in the intellectual monuments of past ages just as in the decrepitude of their built works.

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