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Robert Hewison, *Ruskin and Venice: The Paradise of Cities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 500 pp. \$85.

**A**LTHOUGH JOHN RUSKIN WAS VEXING ABOUT VENICE IN his autobiography, there are a few passages of affectionate remembrance in *Praeterita* (1885–89) in which Ruskin's novelistic imagination summons the romance of the city. "The beginning of everything," he says, with his characteristic habit of finding starting points, "was in seeing the gondola-beak come actually inside the door at Danieli's, when the tide was up, and the water two feet deep at the foot of the stairs; and then, all along the canal sides, actual marble walls rising out of the salt sea, with hosts of little brown crabs on them, and Titians inside" (*Works* 35: 295). The wonder survives, for a fleeting moment, in such a memory. The brown crabs are still there—some of them, at any rate—and the Titians. The water entrance to the Danieli, though, can no longer accommodate a gondola entering beak first (has the water entrance moved? Did Ruskin misremember?). Ruskin's Venice has not wholly been lost, even if an obvious Ruskin site (Al Calcina on the Zattere, where he worked on the revisions to *The Stones of Venice* [1851–53]) has gone, in spite of what the present hotel and the plaque outside declare. Elsewhere, it is not time and its depredations that distance us from Ruskin's Venice. It is Ruskin.

For the author of *Praeterita* was, despite the allure of that early memory, bracingly different and difficult on the topic of the Sea City. He refused to allow the reader of *Praeterita* the pleasure of reading much about Venice at all, just as he cut short his narration of Oxford without regard to protests. Rouen, Pisa, and Geneva were his life's centers, he said. And what that

seems half to mean is this: "You may care about Venice, dear reader, but I am not merely indifferent or disappointed, I am hostile, dismissive, embarrassed: this is a city I wish to give up and to cut from my story, as I cut Effie, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the details of my broken friendship with Turner." Venice is a side issue, a distraction: it was "bye work" (*Works* 35: 156), Ruskin says, shrivelling up the reader's last hope for a return to memories of the city. The discovery of the fragile Tintoretto paintings in the Scuola di San Rocco, Ruskin said, swept him away into an episode of art history, and social analysis, which was valuable but not central. Tintoretto urged him into the great sea of the schools of art that "crowned the power and perished in the fall of Venice; so forcing me into the study of the history of Venice herself; and through that into what else I have traced or told of the laws of national strength and virtue." That is all right. But Ruskin saves the disappointing dismissal to his last sentence: "I am happy in having done this so that the truth of it must stand; but it was not my proper work" (*Works* 35: 372). The author of *Modern Painters* (1843–60) did not have more serious criticism of a man's life than saying he had spent time on what was *not* his proper work.

And so Ruskin's testimony in *Praeterita* is not easy to read. The uncertainties about Venice are not simply a matter of Ruskin omitting the story of his marriage and, therefore, omitting much detail from the work that led to *The Stones of Venice* when Effie was with him, cheerfully dancing through the ballrooms of the *piazza*, and making friends. Ruskin thought Venice an "enchanted world" (*Works* 35: 293), and once it had been "the Paradise of cities" (*Works* 35: 296). But in *Praeterita* Ruskin offers no adequate or ample sense of the role of the city in his life. Wordsworth teaches, "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her." But Ruskin seemed, somehow, to think Venice had betrayed him. And readers of Ruskin in turn may feel, with some fairness, that he betrayed Venice in his survey of his life's work, influences, and currents. Better explanations, bigger books, and greater care are needed. Ruskin, on Venice, needs to be saved from himself. Robert Hewison—internationally acclaimed cultural critic, leading Ruskin scholar, fluent Italian speaker, and curator in 1978 of *Ruskin and Venice* for the J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky—is certainly a writer

to whom all serious Ruskin readers need to pay attention. He is, says the biography at the back modestly, "the author of many books." And some of those, in particular *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye* (1976), as well as his previous work on Ruskin and Venice, reach their summation in this long chronological survey and profound analysis of what Ruskin made of Venice, and what Venice made of Ruskin. *Ruskin and Venice: The Paradise of Cities* is an astonishing achievement.

*Ruskin and Venice* is, for a start, a volume of exceptional empirical detail. There is a big picture, and a set of major contentions, of course. But also there are details in great and celebratory abundance. Hewison solves, or at least records the solution to, some persistent Ruskin puzzles. Ruskin's celebrated watercolor of the Ca' d'Oro (1845) has a large portion of the *palazzo* left blank. It has always been assumed that this beautiful drawing was simply unfinished because Ruskin was either dissatisfied with it or because he moved onto something else and never returned. But a recently discovered daguerreotype (reproduced on 102) shows the Ca' d'Oro *in restauro* in 1845. The portion Ruskin left blank proves to be the area where work was being undertaken. Ruskin hated this renovation. The mutilation of the Ca' d'Oro was emblematic of the ignorance and folly of modern Venice, dismantling the delicate, expensive ship of a Gothic palace (now most easily recalled as a Vaporetto stop) for its own ill-conceived convenience and whims. That blank in the painting is not dissatisfaction with his drawing but shock at what modern Venice is doing. It is a speaking silence. Incidentally, the ballerina Marie Taglioni would commission further work on this *palazzo* when it became her home: Hewison notes this connection later on, but does not link it with Ruskin's enthusiasm for Taglioni as a dancer: did Ruskin ever know that one of his favorite ballerinas helped to destroy one of his favorite Gothic *palazzi*?

Hewison also tracks down the sculptured head at the Ponte delle Guglie, and (a copy of) the bas relief at the Ponte dei Baretteri. These feature as important images in *St. Mark's Rest* (1877–84), around which Ruskin plots the history of Venice, the story of *The Stones*, but retold in a few hundred words. But why is the bas relief—an image of St. George—so hard to find? It is hard to find, Hewison reveals, because it was removed in

1877 as if in some minute but ironic fulfilment of Ruskin's conviction that the meaning of Venice was being continually eroded. Ruskin's account of the Waldensian Chapel in Turin, which plays a suggestive role in his "unconversion" is tested against actual substance, too. Ruskin claims it was a "little chapel" with an "unobserved door" (*Works* 35: 495). Nothing, counters Hewison, "could be further from the case" (267). The real barn-like neo-Gothic temple seats 600 people. Even the smallest details sustain the reader's conviction in the depth and the extent of Hewison's research and prompts thought about what constituted evidence for Ruskin and how important memory was in the recovery of fact. Hewison does not merely discuss *Fors Claveriga* (1871–84) carefully: he reads Rawdon Brown's copy and finds a nice example in the marginalia of the political difference between Ruskin and this exiled Englishman who turned himself into one of the most important of nineteenth-century Venetian historians. Ruskin's criticism in *Fors Claveriga* for April 1874 of the Austrians in the Franco-Prussian war who "bombard Venice, steal her pictures[,] . . . and entirely ruin the country" prompted Brown to write in his copy, now preserved in the Marciana Library, "TRASH." On Austria, Ruskin and Brown were sharply divided. Hewison's indefatigable appetite for the facts, for the evidence, pulls one deeply into the currents of history, into the very strands and contests of the past.

Ruskin in *The Stones* was proud of his empirical accuracy. Getting Venice right mattered. The difficulties in reading the first volume, with its many diagrams and figures, arises in part from Ruskin's certainty that Venice deserved better than the swirling mists of romance, the Byronic accounts of treacherous doges, or the distorted inaccuracies of the picturesque. Measuring and annotating, documenting and studying, provided a solid foundation for a great narrative that seemed mythic in its structure of rise and fall, but which Ruskin saw as historical veracity. Hewison's empiricism is the product of a life's work. But he never doubts that Ruskin was, essentially, dealing with a myth—a myth shaped by the Judaeo-Christian conception of the Fall, of Paradise lost. Yet, to the end, Ruskin thought he was not; or at most, he thought that the language of myth enabled in him a better understanding of the moral meaning in historical truth. When readers find it hard to take

the dryness of the first volume of *The Stones* (and John James Ruskin, his father, did not tire of criticizing that dryness), it is worth remembering that hard, and hard-earned, historical veracity seemed to Ruskin to lie at the heart of what he had to say about Venice's greatness and her degradation.

Writing primarily about Venice, Hewison tells a rich and detailed story about the development of Ruskin as a critic from his earliest investigations of architecture, through the changefulness of *Modern Painters* (1843–60). Venice is part of a larger whole in Ruskin's development. This study is particularly good on the evolution of Ruskin's understanding of history as a mode of commentary on the present, and his engagement with writing, immediately prior to *The Stones*, on early Italian art. Hewison also provides a glimpse of one of the most remarkable and still unpublished studies of Ruskin: Nicholas Shrimpton's 1976 Oxford DPhil thesis, "Economic, Social, and Literary Influences upon the Development of Ruskin's Ideas to *Unto this Last* (1860)." Hewison treats Ruskin's relationship with Sismondi and Rio, as well as with Lord Lindsay, with the kind of authoritative clarity that only a writer immersed in this literature can obtain. Here is the simplicity of real learning. Hewison is mysteriously impatient with Ruskin's denial of influence by Pugin, though I am not certain it is possible to be quite so sure that Pugin played a large a role in Ruskin's conception of the Gothic as the form of Christian architecture that most vigorously admonished the godlessness of the present. It looks as if Ruskin knew his Pugin well and chose not to acknowledge him. But that does not mean that he actually did. The authority of simplicity, though, produces some of the crispest readings in Hewison's study, where the reader almost draws breath as he transforms scholarship into penetrating analysis of what, exactly, Ruskin was doing. Ruskin's realization of the political and moral meaning of Italy (in 1845) through Sismondi is clenched with Hewison's line: "The past is no longer a Byronic romantic dream, but a book—a history book—where the past is not an escape, but a warning that is eternally present" (85). It would be difficult to be more acute about Ruskin's recognition of the uses of the past, and of his own role as a historian.

Hewison's analysis of the riskiness of the Gothic as Catholic architecture is expert, and there is no better account of Ruskin's

“Protestantisation” of Venetian Gothic as a Bible that needs to be read. For Ruskin, reading the meaning of the Basilica di San Marco, “The Catholic space of the image becomes the Protestant space of the word” (220). And so the architecture of a Catholic church, in such terms, can be read with integrity and faith by a Protestant critic. It is another of those incisive lines that distil labour into wisdom. And yet, elsewhere, Hewison is less patient with what mattered to the Ruskins in their relationship with God. His parents’ objection to the fact that his first serious love, Adèle Domecq, was a Catholic, and therefore no suitable lover for their son, may well have been nothing more than a “prejudice” (46). But what seems to one person in the twenty-first century a prejudice might well have seemed to another in the 1830s but the sincere reaction of parents who fear their son is emotionally involved with someone who is wrong for him from tip to toe, whose understanding of the world is confused and indulgent, whose very conception of what human life means is in tension with everything for which they have stood. It is a legitimate function of parents to worry about whom their son might marry, and religion is as good a reason as politics, or personality, or criminal records are now. There are some more bothering statements. “As with women priests and gay bishops today,” Hewison contends, “on the narrow point of baptismal regeneration hung the question of whether Evangelicals could remain members of the Church of England’ (187). The matter of baptismal regeneration was not a narrow point in the nineteenth century (it is not today, actually), however much it might seem so to the secular viewpoint. The question of eternal life depended on it, and if that seems only a trivial matter, then the spiritual dynamics of the nineteenth century have been misunderstood. It is hard to comprehend how the matter of women priests and gay bishops could be conceived as a minor issue either, within or outside the Christian church.

Hewison sets Ruskin’s early work on Venice in the context of Venetian historians and artists. There is a strong and purposeful sense of what Ruskin meant as a reader of Venice in the broadest sweep of Italian political and cultural history. Hewison’s placing of Ruskin’s response to Venice’s future in relation to the Austrians (with whom Hewison has sympathy) provides, moreover, amplitude to *The Stones* as a study with,

and speaking to, a risky and controversial European context. Ruskin's meditations on what might survive of Venice; on her future in the modern world and her lesson to England (the feminine pronouns are Ruskin's); and on the role and identity of Italy itself in the modern world are sharpened, and sometimes ironized, by the Austrian occupiers around whom Ruskin literally negotiated—and with whom Effie danced. Ruskin in the first half of this book matters on a new scale: as a Venetian historian, as a political commentator, as a public figure, as a writer about the city's past in a turbulent but defining moment of her present. Yet Hewison, allowing Ruskin to set the terms of his reading in the second half of the book, offers a different focus after *The Stones* and the “unconversion” in Turin. A strange, parochial, sorrowful, and sick Ruskin takes over the book. The troubled author of *The Stones* becomes, in the second half of his life, a peculiarly eloquent but also anguished commentator on himself. In turn, Hewison perceives Ruskin's Venice primarily as a quirky mirror of Ruskin's quirky self in the 1870s and 1880s. The potential amplitude of his later ideas—particularly theological and political—must wait for Hewison's next study.

Hewison is irritated by sexual interpretations of Ruskin's work: any critic who “reads into” Ruskin's writing sexual undertones “has to be challenged” (411), he asserts bracingly. But this book seeks out sexual meanings itself and is unexpectedly loyal to the interpretative mode it seeks, apparently, to reject. Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* “may . . . have carried an erotic charge” for Ruskin (81), Hewison argues, and the “voyeurism in Hugo's erotic encounter may have provoked disgust not so much at Victor Hugo as at himself” (81). The chapter on St. Mark's in *The Stones of Venice* ends “in an almost orgasmic ecstasy” (217), while the 1850s are best interpreted as a period in which Ruskin “began to acknowledge the sexual in himself” (241). The serpent of Turner's *Apollo and Python* is “phallic” (259), while the “unconversion” after looking at (what Ruskin thought was) Veronese's *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* may have been erotic too: “It is quite possible that the swooning Queen of Sheba . . . contributed to his sexual awakening” (266). It is odd to claim that such ruminating on what *may* have been happening is wrong. The dominating “subtext” of sex is Rose La Touche. With the “story of Rose La Touche the biographical

threatens to overwhelm any other reading of his work” (306), Hewison insists. And, despite the warning, this dominance is what more or less happens. Because Ruskin interprets his life, particularly the strange experience of “Christmas Story” in the winter of 1876–77 in Venice, around the presence of Rose, and the memory of her love, Hewison emphasizes her as *the* interpretive principle of his later work on Venice. Ruskin the public thinker, the man of consequence, shrinks away into the private figure. Perhaps it is true, as Tim Hilton points out, that Ruskin “lost control of his rational mind” (341). Perhaps it is true that Ruskin, in important ways, *did* cease to matter. But this is a proposition that needs fuller testing. The study that endeavours to read what broader, intellectual significance there *may* be in those sad struggles of a troubled mind, in the most exquisite city in the world, is still to come. One area worth thinking about would be the theological. Ruskin’s concern with resurrection and the survival of the dead is not only a private problem centered on Rose, whose loss forced Ruskin into a major nineteenth-century debate about the nature of a miraculous Christianity and, in turn, about the promise of the dead’s survival. The “unconversion” from Evangelicalism in 1858 did not, for sure, settle matters with Christianity. And Venice offered a distinctive location to think long and hard about the presence of the dead and about the ability of the past to live on as the Gothic city lived on into the precarious present. Ruskin’s struggle to understand the emotional meaning of bereavement and of survival both within and outside a Christian vocabulary, belongs amid a turbulent argument in the nineteenth century. Venice was a city that seemed variously to Ruskin to be the body of the dead, a corpse, a ghost, a still-living spirit, a Sybil. And so, naturally, it was available as a text over which Ruskin could write his theological meditation on the nineteenth-century understanding of the grave.

Where Hewison expresses a heightened interest in the broader implication of Ruskin’s later interventions in Venice is in the matter of conservation. He narrates the compelling story of the “restorations” of San Marco in the chapter “Saving St. Mark’s,” one of the most stimulating of the whole captivating study. The relationship with Count Zorzi is narrated in new detail. The plan to protect the mosaics of the Basilica as well as

the dispute about the Zen Chapel; the argument that the facade of San Marco needed to be “straightened,” and the matter of the new grey marble cladding of the Basilica all drew Ruskin into the material history of one of Europe’s greatest buildings. Hewison remarks that the campaign to protect the west facade of San Marco “was the beginning of the debate that led to the establishment of modern ideas of conservation,” particularly the principle “of minimum intervention for purposes of stabilisation only, with the old stones put back wherever possible and new ones dated” (394). This is a bold statement. But what is the relationship between Ruskin’s ideals for this new conservation and the endangered, economically vulnerable city of Venice today? Hewison seems to imply that this question should serve as a guide for the present (although he also thinks that Austrian modernization of the city was “necessary”—a comment he does not explain). Yet the protection of the twenty-first century city is a complicated matter: the city’s economic sustainability is a daunting challenge, and its architectural inheritance complex and diverse and—messy. An apparently Ruskinian faith in one model of the future of Venice’s historical buildings looks doubtful to me. That model of conservation can bear, surely, only limited relevance to the tough economic decisions that lie before the city now in relation to its future.

Ruskin’s role as a critic of Venice remains significant, and not only in terms of his comparison of Venice, as he interpreted her meaning in *The Stones*, to an England that might take the same un-pitied route to destruction. But Venice was also Ruskin’s hope for himself, and beyond that, as the place of wisdom and of education, for the modern world. Ruskin and Venice, despite the words of *Praeterita*, share a deeper bond than he does with any other city. In Venice’s ability to continue in spite of ruin the later Ruskin in a way found hope for himself as a victim of dismay and of deterioration. In the survival of something like a meaningful supernatural religion in Venice was a half-reassurance that there was more in the world than the merely material. And in the survival of Venice’s beauty was a half-promise that transcended Ruskin’s gloom about the modern world, that human artistic creations could endure. In 1860, he recalled the fragments of Giorgione’s frescoes on the Fondaco dei Tedeschi. These fragments, he suggested, may,

indeed, “melt away into paleness of night, and Venice herself waste from her islands as a wreath of wind-driven foam fades from their weedy beach.” But, he went on:

[T]hat which she won of faithful light and truth shall never pass away. Deiphobe of the sea—the Sun God measures her immortality to her by its sand. Flushed, above the Avernus of the Adrian lake, her spirit is still seen holding the golden bough; from the lips of the Sea Sibyl men shall learn for ages yet to come what is most noble and most fair; and, far away, as the whisper in the coils of the shell, withdrawn through the deep hearts of nations, shall sound for ever the enchanted voice of Venice. (*Works* 7: 438–40).

Virgil’s *Aeneid* reverberates here, and not merely in the thoughts of Avernus and the Sibyl. As Aeneas in Book II is given the memory of Troy to keep still in “heavenly keeping,” so Ruskin describes himself implicitly as a second Aeneas, with a new city to preserve for future generations, just as Virgil’s hero carries in Book III the memory of the “blazing heart of Troy” after Troy’s destruction (as Cecil Day-Lewis has it in his luminous translation). Yet Ruskin’s prose is not heroic self-assertion only. Beneath his regret for the loss of Giorgione’s fresco, made here emblematic of the fall of Venice, Ruskin is thinking, in a cross-gendered way, about the durability of his own words as a Sybil of Venice’s meaning, which is to say the place of wisdom in the modern world. If the Cumæan Sybil had spoken Apollo’s words, Ruskin was the oracle who spoke of the Sea City, and he would never forget that. He had completed his major work on painting with this final volume of *Modern Painters*, a project that had occupied more than seventeen years of his life. Legacies, consequences, were on his mind—and not only his own legacies and consequences. In the glowing concern for the preservation of what was once fair, Ruskin’s meditation at the end of *Modern Painters* on the durability of wisdom was about Venice and about himself. And it was also, beyond these, about the prospects of what we would call the public intellectual in a culture doubtful of the witness of art and uncertain what could be done with the human experience of the exquisite.

The matter of intellectual authority; the place of the public intellectual; the role of writing and education in a democratic

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society; the place, value, and purposes of what we would now call the arts and humanities; of criticism itself: all were topics of importance for Ruskin in the second half of his career. And the survival of Venice stood, fragilely, as an emblem of the place of hope, teaching, and art in the modern world, and the troubles with which they must compete. Robert Hewison's volume, and the life's work it so richly documents, speaks of the ongoing desire to make Ruskin's words on and images of Venice, count. No one who cares about Ruskin or about Venice should miss this remarkable achievement. It is one of the best critical books on Ruskin to have been published.

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