

The Stones of Venice

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John Ruskin is the great doyen of art criticism in England, and whose influence has pervaded generations of British art connoisseurs. Elitist in his conception, yet egalitarian in his reach, he had a major impact on the Arts and Craft movement with the ambition of bringing good taste and manner to the multitudes. He wrote a purple prose, ostensibly directed to the reader, whom he repeatedly addresses, yet making no concessions to his taste nor patience. The work of which this is a mere abridgment filled three volumes and took years of research on location to prepare and conclude. In its unedited form it is a huge compilation of all that he saw and tried to systemize in a coherent way, accompanied by accomplished drawings by his own hand, unobtrusively exploiting a skill, which it was considered useful for a well-rounded gentleman to acquire at the time. His extended word paintings may wear the reader, but also intrigue him, in its manifestation of what could be done and with what relentless energy and attention to detail can be brought to the business of observing, enjoying but also criticizing art. In the full version, the tediousness may be prolonged, but so would the instruction. Basically the book is a documentation of degeneration.

Ruskin, with his young fun-loving wife arrived on the scene in the fall of 1849, the year that followed that year of revolutions all around Europe, which by its end had spent themselves mostly to no real avail. Venice whose declined had been extended lost its independence during the Napoleonic wars, and at the conclusion of those found itself under the Austrian empire. In that fateful year 1848, it had rebelled and established the independent Republic of St Marco, only to find itself besieged by the Austrian army, that eventually prevailed, as cholera brought the besieged to their knees, and was able to re-occupy the city¹. Ruskin hence would meet an occupied city and he had worries that much of the architecture may have been demolished by war, worries which basically turned out to be unfounded. He set to work immediately, staying with his wife in the city for years, travel in those times, being no quick and impatient affairs, as in the modern age, but typically sustained expeditions that allowed the traveller an in-depth experience. This was not Ruskin's first trip to Venice, as a young teenager and only child of wealthy parents, he had already visited the city, along with other worthwhile destinations in Western Europe. He set to work with single-minded intensity. Walking around observing, sketching, taking notes, as well as immersing himself in archives to get proper documentation whenever possible, thereby neglecting his young wife, whose love of social life, he had no inclination nor patience to share. Famously he neglected to consummate the marriage, blaming that although his wife had a pleasant and pretty face, the rest of her, as it was revealed on the wedding night, inspired nothing but horror and disgust. Eventually she would seek

¹ The occupation would last until 1854, and its eventual liberation from Austrian rule would follow from the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 paving the way for its unification with Italy.

and obtain annulment and find carnal satisfaction in a new union, the scandal of which may have hurt her, but above all branded Ruskin in the eyes of posterity as a spoiled and effeminate character, something which appear contradicted by the likenesses of him at the time, showing a tall energetic individual, not without manly charm. In fact his suppressed urges would continue to glow, but the object of those tended to be pubescent girls, a taste that at first grows ridiculous with age, only to turn gross. But at the time Ruskin was thirty, and that was still far into the future.

What interests Ruskin is the decline of Venice, not its political per se, but its artistic and hence spiritual decline, which of course is seen as intimately connected to the first, without it being explicitly spelled out. The history of Venice penetrates deeply into the past, connecting it to the split of the ancient Roman empire, and with a strong Byzantine streak. In fact the origin of Venice is Byzantine, and its first architectural style is of the Byzantine variety, traces of which can only be sensed by the scrutinizing eye, with which Ruskin is endowed. The Byzantine era was replaced by the Gothic, a Northern invention of sorts, which took a slightly different form in the South. The bulk of the book consists of a discussion of what the Gothic really meant, both philosophically and in artistic manifestation, providing the main interest of the work. But the Gothic style degenerated, meaning that the skill may to some extent survive, but the spirit that imbued it dry up. Ruskin sets the start of the decline already in the early 15th century, followed by a period of the Renaissance, which would initially make up for the short-comings of late Gothic, but then inevitably succumb due to its inherent weaknesses. The spiritual decline of Venice is envisioned in moral terms. From being a responsible and Christian state it became a degenerate and fun-loving one, which among other manifestations is documented through its vulgarization of its sarcophagus.

What is Gothic architecture? Its hallmarks are generally known, the pointed arched window and gable, by which it can be readily identified. But this is superficial and does not allow you to discriminate between good and bad Gothic. To understand Gothic architecture, especially as it is exercised in the erection of cathedrals, the most momentous structures effected by Medieval Europe, we need to understand what is at stake and what are the methods for achieving it. A cathedral is conceived and directed by a master builder. As the building of a cathedral may take a century or more, there cannot be just one master builder, but several. And as there cannot be an effective transference of intentions from one to another, the success of the whole enterprise depends on their being a tradition, external to everybody involved, which can be served as a general blueprint allowing each individual to express his own personal variation on the theme. This is of course true of art in general, with the difference that here tradition builds a single coherent object. Furthermore a single individual cannot build a cathedral it is a true collective enterprise involving a lot of individual craftsmen, whose skill may vary a lot, yet needed to achieve a consistent whole.

There are, according to Ruskin, six characteristic or moral elements of Gothic, listed in order of diminishing importance as 1. Savageness, 2. Changefulness (or love of change of the builders), 3. Naturalism (or love of nature), 4. Grottesqueness (or a disturbed imagination), 5. Rigidity (or obstinacy) and finally 6. Redundance (or generosity in the builders). Not all characteristics need to be present, but the more importance need to be. Then he

proceeds to explain and comment at some length on each of the characteristics.

1.Savageness. The provenance of Gothic is from the North, but of course it does not necessarily mean it was named after the Germanic tribes of the Goths. By the term no disrespect is meant. It stands for rudeness in the sense of power and sturdy spirit, which Ruskin sees as coming from the North and thus in contrast to the enfeebled South. With savagery is connected nobility and we may here, as late readers, think of the influence of the notion of the 'Noble Savage' of Rousseau. Ruskin makes a digression on ornament and divides it into three types i) servile ii) constitutional and iii) revolutionary. By the first the workman is entirely subjected to the will of the superior and seen as inferior. By the second the workman still acknowledges his inferiority, yet is allowed some independence. Finally as to the last, no inferiority is admitted. Servile ornaments are seen among the Greeks, the Egyptians and the Assyrians. Imperfection was not tolerated so the tasks of the workmen were very simple. The Greek possessing superior knowledge were able to raise the minimal standard somewhat by giving precise instructions, yet limiting themselves to give tasks that could be performed by applying strict rules. But with the relaxation of standards and the concomitant liberation from slavery, associated to the advent of Christianity, the admonishment to the workers was simply to do your best, acknowledge your shortcomings, and be not afraid of imperfection, because as Ruskin points out no architecture can be noble unless it is not perfect. Because from practical considerations, as explained above, if perfection is the goal, the standards have to be low. Besides perfection admits no development, while imperfection inspires improvement. As Ruskin puts it (emphasizing it as well). *the demand for perfection is always a sign of misunderstanding of the ends of art.* This incidentally holds for science as well, where perfection would mean absolute, undeniable truth, impeccable and immune to falsification². Perfection in art would mean that the powers of execution would always be up to the ambition of the mind, which hence cannot be very high. Secondly imperfection is inherent in life, providing both growth and decay at the same time, the very prerequisites for change, thus to ban imperfections, in the words of Ruskin, is to destroy expression and paralyze vitality. He concludes by writing that: 'Of human work none but what is bad can be perfect, in its own bad way.' It is in this sense Savagery and Rudeness should be understood, namely in abandoning perfection and cherishing imperfection.

2.Changefulness. When the workmen are enslaved to be able to do just one thing, in order to do it well, there will be no variety. The columns, capitals and mouldings are the same, as are the ornaments, so you are able to tell by a glance whether the workmen have been degraded. Gothic architecture delights in variety and the individual workmen are entrusted with license. The pointed arch, unlike the rigid semi-circularity of the Roman vault, allows an unlimited number of variations as to proportions. Yet of course variation cannot be unchecked, there is in the words of Ruskin a distinction between a healthy and a diseased love of change. Any quality needs the presence and hence the contrast of the opposite to come to its fore. A drawing needs both black and white to show anything at all. The satiation of hunger becomes more lustful the stronger the hunger is. Thus to highlight change and its delight there has to be monotony against which to measure it. Not that monotony has a value in itself, it may disturb and pain the noble man more

² Only achievable if the ambitions are severely restricted, say to the level of tautologies

than the coarse, but the former is prepared to put with it more, in order to enhance the change he cherishes. The Gothic elements, as noted, can be varied, that makes it flexible, and flexibility is not an end to itself, but a means for necessary accommodation. Thus if a window was needed, the Gothic tradition does not interfere by real needs, due to some rules of symmetry or other consistencies.

3.Naturalism. If the workman is given a license to create, he needs some external standards to lean against, and the most natural and available are those of nature itself. But there is a marked difference in the imaginations enjoyed by the Western (Gothic) races and those of the East, Ruskin points out. The Western delight in the representation of facts, as the author puts it (thus in natural imitation, often referred to as mimesis), while the Eastern races excel in colors and forms. Each of those imaginations are prone to their own specific errors and abuses. Ruskin points out, what is now commonplace, that the arrangement of colors and lines are independent of facts and that the ensuing harmony is akin to that of music. Now Ruskin claims that man cannot be perfect in both, either they tend to facts or they tend to harmony and design, making up the classes of right and left. To that there is also a centre, the men that can passably command both. Any distinct demarcations are of course not to be had, the classes fuse imperceptibly into each other. However there will be four cases which may lead to degeneration and fatal errors. Those correspond to either class despising or envying the other. Ruskin, true to form goes through all four cases systematically. If the man of fact despises design we have the usual Dutch error of mindless imitation of nature, as if its perfection would suffice. Conversely if the man of design despises facts there is trouble, as some facts must always be taken into account. One cannot neglect the truths of nature, as the Chinese tended to do. The Greek designers delighted in the human form but not in the lower forms of nature, and thus their inferior ornament became dead and devoid of value, according to Ruskin. But if men of facts envy design, they ignore their own inherent talents and in a futile quest of appropriating the inventive powers nature has denied them perish in a fungous growth of plagiarism. Similarly if men of design envy facts, they ignore their own talent of composition aiming only for graphic truth. However, Ruskin claims, men of the central class will be immune to either error, as there is no need to despise nor to envy yourself. After this lengthy digression, which the author fears may worry his readers, he is ready to claim that the a very important quality of Gothic was its fusing of the fact with the design and that its workmen were predominantly of the central class. One example of this was how the Gothic artists were able to artfully develop foliage into pleasing design, which the Greeks and the Romans failed to do. True, the Gothic were liable to err on the side of fact, but not because of any lack of love of truth, only due to a lack of thought. As an example he points out that the fires of hell should not be depicted as usual fires, that misses the point, but to go beyond the fact of mundane nature.

4.Grotesque. On this subject Ruskin is brief, briefer than I will be in my rewording, assuming that anyone familiar with Gothic architecture will understand immediately at the meaning. I assume that he refers to gargoyles and similar digressions on cathedral walls.

5.Rigidity. This is a concept that Ruskin takes some care to delineate. He contrasts the passive incumbent of one stone on another in Egyptian and Greek buildings, while in

Gothic architecture there is dynamic tension, as in the bones of a limb or in the fibers of a tree. Similarly while Greek ornament is more or less superficial, however luxuriant, the Gothic takes on a life of its own, standing out as well as invading. In the exact words of Ruskin 'But the Gothic ornament stands out in prickly independence, and frosty fortitude, jutting into crockets, and freezing into pinnacles; here starting up into a monster, there germinating into a blossom, anon knitting itself into a branch, alternatively thorny, bossy, and bristle, or writhed into every form of nervous entanglement;..' and on and on. While many of the remarks of Ruskin may be brilliant, there is also a lot of silliness when he seduces himself into luxuriant speculations going out on limbs, not unlike the Gothic extravaganzas he so excitedly describes. Examples of such is the importance and effects he assigns to the role of the cold in the races of the North who gave birth to the movement. He speaks about the strength of will and resoluteness of purpose which set the individual reason against authority and the individual deed against destiny, which has characterized the Gothic North in contrast to the languid submission to tradition of the South. And his prose bleeds purple and it becomes hard to make head or tail of it.

6.Redundance. This is the least important aspect, and Ruskin admits that it can very well be absent in Gothic expression. He links it to humility. A humility which excels not only in imperfection, but in the accumulation of ornament. He goes on to speak about the unselfishness of the sacrifice born out of unbridled and hence magnificent enthusiasm for the fertility and wealth of Nature.

Clearly to Ruskin the high Gothic represent the pinnacle, making him resent and decry the degenerate and imitative Gothic that has become so prevalent in the architecture of his time. The Gothic decline in Venice was replaced by the revival brought about by the Renaissance, but he cautions against its inherent dangers residing in its various prides, of which he singles out the pride of knowledge, meaning the overdue intrusion of science into art. He points out that there is no set of laws that can be formulated, whose adherence to would by itself produce masterpieces. He dismisses the grammarians comment on great poetry, and points out that logic is unnecessary for those who know how to reason. The study of such sciences makes men shallow and dishonest.

As noted in the discussion of fact and design, Ruskin has a strong preference for the influence of nature. He writes in a commentary on Byzantine art '..but all beautiful works of art must either intentionally imitate or accidentally resemble natural forms'. He waxes about color, writing: 'The fact is, that, of all God's gifts to the sight of man, color is the holiest, the most divine, the most solemn'. In his concluding chapter he states that art has value only as far as it expresses a personality, activity and loving perception of a good and great human soul. He points out that wanting this its worthlessness may only be as art, but can have other uses. Photography is not art, he claims, although it requires a lot of skill, likewise not an exact likeness even if drawn by human hand. Let us not be proud of our knowledge, he cautions, intellectual powers per se possess no nobility unless applied to a worthy cause. Great art is the work of the whole creature, not just reason alone, and it also addresses itself to the whole creature. To what the perfect being speaks must have in itself perfection to receive.