

'And now, come with me': a closer look at Ruskin's writing

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With 39 volumes of collected works and several million words to choose from, tackling Ruskin's prolific writing can be intimidating. Faced with so much reading, it's often tempting to focus on the nature of his argument and the passion of his polemic, rather than examining the detail of *how* his language conveys meaning, both intentional and instinctive. Exploring Ruskin's work from the viewpoint of a practising novelist, this paper takes a personal look at elements of his writing style – and suggests why it might be important to pay attention to the way he expresses his ideas. Close reading of a passage from *Stones of Venice* considers how Ruskin constructs his prose, why his language is so powerful, and what can be revealed in a handful of words.¹

'And now, come with me', Ruskin suggests, urges even, at the end of book one of the *Stones of Venice*. And off he goes, expecting the reader to go with him, off on a short road trip from Padua along la Riviera del Brenta to Mestre, where it's only then a brief gondola ride to Venice. Such an excursion promises a pleasant day out, surely; a rewarding trip with an informed and trusted guide. But I want to look more closely at what's happening in this passage. In particular, I want to examine Ruskin's language, how it works and to what effect. Unlike most of the rest of the first volume – and indeed those that were to follow – there is virtually nothing in these few paragraphs about architectural achievement, about the act, principles or models of building. So what is the purpose of this passage? Is this a description of an autumn landscape in Northern Italy, as it seems to be at first glance, or is it something more interesting and complex?

Even a brief examination of Ruskin's prose in this extract reveals a sustained vocabulary of barrenness and disintegration, pile upon pile of adjectives evoking decay and destruction. In the opening lines, the laden vines, which could be fruitful and full of autumnal colour, are instead presented with the magnificently disturbing image of leaves 'veined in scarlet hectic', all those hard cs evoking the tangle of painfully varicose legs; the autumn grapes around Padua are a 'gloomy blue', the river 'twisted' and 'vanishing', the road 'dusty and shadeless'. As the passage progresses, buildings and landscape are 'trembling' and 'twisted', 'struggling'. A view of the celebrated villas along the river Brenta does nothing to change the mood. 'Glaring' and 'spectral', they present only 'dead' walls and 'grotesque'

¹ Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), *The works of John Ruskin*, London: George Allen / New York: Longman, Green, and Co, 1903-12, 39 vols, IX, 412-415. The passage under consideration is available [here](#).

decoration. The canals are 'half-stagnant'; Ruskin draws our attention to their 'utter ruin, black, and rent, and lonely', the 'dull water', gardens 'kneaded into mud', 'blighted fragments' of hedges and steps. On it goes, this bleak worldview. Mestre is 'not cheerful', 'barren' and smelly; when Ruskin leaves the road for what might have been the pleasure of a gondola ride, he is preoccupied instead with 'rank grass' and 'stunted' trees, walls 'torn to pieces' and 'staggering in ugly rent towards the water'. Meanwhile the mountains glower in the distance, 'the colour of dead rose-leaves'. This is a marked, apocalyptic change of tone from earlier writing in the volume: book one has been about proposing the building of good honest constructions that will stand the test of time and moral decrepitude. Now, in the very last pages, the reader is instead asked to confront and examine a physical world fragmenting, declining, disappearing. The imagery is visceral, the language physical, conjuring an environment that's actively tormented, intent it seems on devouring itself.

The mood here is intense and dark. Which begs the question, surely: why on earth invite us to share such a miserable journey? Why bother to haul us all the way from Padua on dusty roads, through dingy towns and onto sluggish canals if there's nothing special for us to see? Perhaps more strangely still, we were invited on this journey with such positive excitement: 'And now, come with me', Ruskin urged, as though he had something remarkable to show us, releasing us from our grave study of columns and doorframes and bridges bringing us to this.

This passage should be the culmination, the high-point of the entire volume. It is not until the very last page – in fact the very last line – of a book entitled *Stones of Venice* that we arrive in Venice, and it's this arrival, this much-anticipated first glimpse, that we're sharing here. This journey should surely be one that brings together, and celebrates, the progress of the book to this point. What we get instead is strange and anticlimactic and personal, with hardly mention of architecture or indeed Venice itself.

So what is it all about?

In early works, such as *Modern Painters*, this might have been the moment when Ruskin offered a lesson, teaching ways of looking at art and by extension the world that inspired it. And indeed, there is an element of such an approach here. There are several painting references: the villas on the Brenta are offered as a series of vignettes; Ruskin emphasises points of architecture which draw attention to their painterly effects – the architraves, he suggests, are 'like picture-frames', for example. The procession along the road from one villa to the next, viewing each in turn and picking out their features, is not unlike strolling through a gallery viewing painting after painting. The painterly sentences of intense observation and a truthful rendition of environment could be read in this light, as expressing the precision of thought and vision which Ruskin brought to bear on art and its history in *Modern Painters* and for which he is rightly admired.

It's what is expected of Ruskin, isn't it, such persuasive, such honest vision?

But come with me: let's look again. There are some questions to pose here and they're buried deep in Ruskin's language.

Firstly then – is this a real journey or a remembered one? Is it a remembered one or an imagined one? The apparent accuracy and detail of Ruskin's descriptions draw the reader so fully into the written experience in this passage, that's it's easy to believe we're on an actual day out with Ruskin. He even offers directions to allow for an exact appraisal of the landscape: leaving Padua by the road to the East, turning sharply North after the stop at Dolo, 'five minutes more' to Mestre, a walk of 'some two hundred yards' to the wharf, travelling the canal with Mestre and the mountains to the West. This appears to be a specific route Ruskin knows well. But for all the filmic qualities of this passage, this is not Ruskin on his travels here, of course, nor are we actually accompanying him. Such impressions are an illusion, a writerly sleight of hand. Ruskin spent the winters of 1849-50 and 1851-52 in Venice researching *Stones of Venice*. The first volume, this one, was published before his second research visit, so it is likely that he's describing the trip from Padua in the Autumn of 1849, a journey made with Effie some eighteen months after their marriage. The Ruskins had already been on a long tour, beginning in France and journeying through Switzerland on the way to Northern Italy. It was a journey that followed close on the heels of the successful publication of *Seven Lamps of Architecture* in early 1849 and Ruskin clearly intended it as a study trip. He worked hard: his notes and sketchbooks are full of examples of drawings executed on the spot. But his focus in these notes and sketches is on Venice. There are no sketches or notes about this particular journey, nothing from Mestre or Dolo; nothing from Padua on this occasion.² It is probable that Ruskin was sitting at his desk some time after making this journey from Padua to Venice, some time during the cold Winter of 1850 in Venice, looking back on the autumn journey, remembering. Indeed, he may not have been remembering only this journey: in 1846 he had made the trip along the Brenta in the opposite direction, from Venice to Padua, for example, so he may have been remembering several journeys, conflating these several memories, selecting from them, filtering them.

Considering the passage as memory goes some way towards explaining the intensity of the writing here, the brilliance of light and shadow, for example, and the strong evocation of mood. Fiction writers, of course, draw on memory all the time; fragments of memory that they revisit and transform into psychological 'truth'. Those writing autobiography or memoir – into which category this passage seems to fall – may take a step further and present memory as 'fact', eliding the boundaries between truth and fiction in the equivocal act of recounting remembered experience. Perhaps that's what is being presented in this passage: a half-recalled, half-fictionalised account. Such an explanation still does not fully explain, however, why Ruskin would pay so much attention to – would bother to remember – such a troubling, unappealing journey. So, is this memory that is being recalled here, or does the language suggest an experience even more slippery and unpredictable than memory, even more personal and intense, even more revealing? Ruskin himself uses the word 'feverish' to describe the light – the 'thick glow of feverish sunshine'; he suggests the unstable consciousness of a fever. He offers a way of interpreting this passage so that reality and memory and imagination collide, so that the pictorial

² Ruskin visited Padua six times in all, and there is an earlier sketch of the Piazza del Erbe in Padua which he drew much earlier, in 1841.

and the linguistic work together, hallucinatory, shifting one to the other. This is not a journey remembered, I would argue, so much as a journey dreamt.

Commentators have noticed that the mannerism of Ruskin's early prose in works such as *Modern Painters* gives way to a more naturalistic style as he matures and grows in confidence.³ Reading the first volume of *Stones of Venice*, this naturalism – the easy fluency and conversational tone – becomes increasingly evident. Here, however, at the end of the book, Ruskin's writing slips beyond naturalism into a heightened reality, a style more akin to stream-of-consciousness, more fantastical, like dream – or even nightmare. He steps through a portal, through the 'dark gates of Padua', into a world of 'scarlet hectic' and 'gloomy blue'. The view of the river begins plainly enough: 'The Brenta flows slowly, but strongly', Ruskin writes. That's matter-of-fact observation. But rivers have a way of becoming dark and strange and dreamlike, of reflecting the subconscious, carrying us to the underworld, as the Styx might, or into the unknown, real and metaphorical, as the Floss does in George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, for example (published in 1860, not long after *Stones of Venice*) or, later, the Congo in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Similarly, Ruskin's Brenta quickly becomes menacing and enigmatic. The eddy on the water's surface babbles and twists, 'vanishing,' he says, 'as if something had been dragged into it and gone down.' The water is threatening now, and mysterious, unreadable. What is it that's been dragged under, just out of vision, that has 'gone down'? Suddenly the stability and solidity of reality is shifting: not only has the river become a source of danger but the tower at Dolo is 'trembling' and in that particular dream-like manipulation of time and space, 'never seems nearer than it did at first' despite the journey towards it.

Architectural judgement aside, the villas, too, are the stuff of nightmares: 'glaring, spectral'. I've claimed that our passing of them could be read as the contemplation of works on display in a gallery but read again: the pace here is strange. The examination of the first villa, its windows and its courtyard, is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of another, without the viewer apparently moving, then all at once a third. Ruskin counts them, as though they're ambushing him unexpectedly out of the feverish sunshine – 'then another... a third... and a fourth' – until finally he describes the distorted nightmarish vision of 'clumsy grotesque dwarfs with fat bodies and large boots.' This is not an orderly viewing like the progression through an art collection, surely. Indeed, the impression is not of the traveller moving at all but rather being stationary, the dreamer transfixed on the river bank and accosted by a series of increasingly disturbing spectral presences which come out of the heat mist. And the sense of menace and uncertainty continues, grows. Dolo, as we've seen, is a place of fragments and half-glimpses, black and lonely, nothing quite grasped, unstable again, shifting, sinking in mud. And when the road turns to the north: what happens here? Ruskin points out 'an open space, covered with bent grass, on the right' – ordinary enough, surely – but then he says: 'but do not look that way.' 'But do not look that way'. What on earth is

³ See, for example, John Rosenberg's excellent and detailed analysis, 'Style and Sensibility in Ruskin's Prose' in George Levine and William Madden, eds, *The Art of Victorian Prose*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968, 177-200.

going on? What is it that threatens, again? What is it that cannot be looked at? Again, there's a dreamlike sense of distortion, something lurking just out of vision but simultaneously known and recognised.

Next, in a hop and a bound, the traveller is transported, as in a dream state, from one place to another, from outside to inside, from that alarming patch of grassy ground to 'the upper room' at Mestre and a warped reincarnation of the Last Supper: the table, the bread, the oil. The view from the balcony is of both a convent and a church, religion closing in all around but in a sudden shift of place and perspective we're no longer on the balcony but instead, through an intrusion of memory, of longing, we're deep in an English tea-garden with its roses before being hurled back into the alleys of Northern Italy, hot and close, smelling of the foreign – 'garlic and crabs'. Then, suddenly, Ruskin is appealing the barrow boys and setting off 'with our best patience'. How have we got here, from the upper room, from the balcony, down into the street? The conventions of realist writing are stretched and distorted, and are challenged again, as almost immediately, we're struck by the river, black this time and congealed. As shapes form more clearly, it becomes clear that in fact this is not the river but another dark vision emerging, the 'black boats of Venice', the funeral gondolas.

Finally, then, Ruskin is on the water, quiet, gliding, not yet sure, as he says, whether these 'be real boats or not'. This uncertain reality is highlighted by the sensory confusion of the experience, not so much like being in a gondola, notes the guide, as flying. Finally, in an effort to counter the dreamlike lethargy, Ruskin and his companion – Ruskin and you, Ruskin and me – haul themselves outside and the pace suddenly changes: as we approach Venice, the language becomes charged with a vocabulary of speed – 'swiftly', 'keenly', 'forward' – and the silver beak of the gondola, like a hawk with carrion, slices through the cloying darkness and stagnant decay amongst which we've been travelling. It 'cleaves' through the detritus, the 'rank grass' falling away, and in a strange act of levitation – flying again – Ruskin shows the gondola physically rising above the banks, the view opening up and as it does so, the claustrophobia of much of the earlier writing dissipating. There remains, however, a final bending of time and place, a final dreamlike warping of reality. In perhaps the most telling sentence of the entire passage, Ruskin urges his reader to look across to the shore, 'on the right, but a few years back.' He asks us to look through time: he guides us towards something we cannot see, a view that is no longer there, no longer possible, the past overwhelming the present, the dream now merging with memory and shifting to what is lost, enjoying for a second the impossibility of a 'warm southern sky bending over Malamocco to the sea' before confronting the dull reality of the railway bridge. As Ruskin nears Venice, despite the anticipation, the intensity evident in the rest of the passage seems to wane, perhaps because of the disillusion of being faced with a 'struggling line of low and confused brick buildings' rather than a magnificent city; perhaps because the traveller is emerging from his dream. Much as the gondola has risen above the banks, so Venice rises from the lagoon, the line of buildings 'rises' from the water, 'four or five domes... rise' – with similarly religious language later in *Stones of Venice*, Ruskin will confront us with the frontage of St Marks' cathedral: 'there rises a vision out of the earth' – but despite this, the final impression is as brooding and sullen as the cloud of black smoke pumping from the belfry. We are awake now and

find ourselves returned to the suburbs of an English manufacturing town; the energy and ambiguity of the dream landscape has given way finally to a pragmatic reality: a disappointing conclusion, then, to a disappointing journey. The promised land is a let down.⁴ 'It is Venice', says Ruskin flatly, of the dull brick walls and black smoke and dismal arches.

And so what can be made of this anticlimactic arrival, and more broadly, of this strange and evocative passage? Does a closer look at this short extract of text change in any way how we might read the rest of the book, or indeed the rest of Ruskin's writing?

The troubled language and underlying menace of this passage can be read in many ways, of course. Certainly, it foreshadows Ruskin's later work, such as *The Stormcloud of the Nineteenth-Century*, published some thirty years after *Stones of Venice* (1884) and in which he rails against a darkening world. I would suggest, in fact, that in this short account of the journey along the Riviera del Brenta lies the germ of Ruskin's dark and enigmatic later writing. There are also clear and fascinating connections to the Gothic tradition – not the architectural Gothic which Ruskin admired, but the literary one: Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, hugely popular and highly influential during the first half of the Nineteenth Century, the writing of which, Walpole suggested, came to him in a dream; to Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Raven', in which the narrator, 'nearly napping' is lured into dark dreams, and which was published in 1845 just a few years before this passage; such intense, dreamlike states perhaps culminating in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* which was not to appear until the end of the century (1897).⁵

It is also interesting to consider this passage entirely on its own terms, however. Not as a part of the larger and influential *Stones of Venice*, nor as a reflection of Ruskin as sage or critic, but as a story, a piece of flash fiction. The structure stands up to it – there is, after all, a beginning ('Come with me') and a middle in Mestre and an end: 'It is Venice'. There is the gathering of pace and expectation, the classic journey motif, the dreamlike feverish strangeness and the remarkably evocative language. With 39 volumes of complete works, it's all too easy to view Ruskin's writing as monolithic, each essay or lecture accruing meaning as much in relation to those before and after as having an identity in its own right; it's easy to consider the effect as cumulative. But what if this passage is cut away from the rest of Ruskin's work. What do we get?

It's not a story about Venice; that much is surely clear. Nor is it a piece about architecture or art, or even Northern Italy. It's not the description of a journey, as might have been expected. Instead, Ruskin offers a voyage into an internal landscape, a story that releases the inexplicable terrors of the bad dream, menacing presences just out of sight, physical reality giving way under the feet, a twisted river

⁴ Robert Hewison helpfully identifies two discourses in Ruskin's works: the language of technical description and the richer rhetoric of religious evocation. See 'Ruskin and the Gothic Revival: his research on Venetian architecture', in *Ruskin's Artists: Studies in the Victorian Visual Economy*, London, Ashgate, 2000, 53-69.

⁵ Letter of Horace Walpole to the Reverend William Cole, 9 March 1765, quoted in the introduction to *Three Gothic Novels*, ed. Mario Praz, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, 17.

sinking. He offers a story about trying to find your way in the dark distorted reaches of a crumbling life, a disturbing – frankly terrifying – story about being alone and vulnerable in a dangerous world. He writes a gothic story about fear.

Viewed in this light, the passage can be seen to work perfectly well in its own right. It is striking in its modern style and tone, its contemporary concerns with anxiety, with selfhood, with the complex interplay between inner and outer. The reader invests in the character of the narrator who shares so much, and is hooked in the plot, such as it is, wanting to know how this journey turns out. The story causes us to reflect and it prompts us to question. Moreover, this short passage – this short story – offers a significant and intimate insight into the writer, a way of understanding Ruskin, the internal landscape of this man who wrote and achieved so much, who had such influence.

So to return to the earlier question: why does Ruskin invite us to share this journey? Why does he begin this passage with such an eager invitation: 'And now, come with me'? The answer lies, I would suggest, in the powerful intimacy and dark imagination of the writing. Perhaps after all, the invitation is not in order to explore the Brenta or to teach about architecture or to conduct a companion to Venice. Perhaps Ruskin wants the reader along for his own sake: if we accompany him, if we go with him, then he is no longer travelling alone with his fearful dreams.

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