

JOHN RUSKIN AND THE SUMMER OF 1873:

ARE CHILDREN LIKE THAT?

(Part II)

Hunt responded by an immediate visit to Brantwood, where he spent a rainy Sunday afternoon discussing Venice over lunch and tea.⁵⁰ This then would be Venice's last week, and it must have passed slowly with both Ruskin and the child irritable and impatient in the summer heat. "Y[esterday] desperately hot," Ruskin wrote in his diary the following Tuesday (July 23). "Across lake, where man was blasting. Venice beaten by it." Sometime during that week, Margaret arrived at Coniston, and the Hunts paid a visit to Brantwood. It was a painful and frustrating evening for Margaret, who came on Ruskin's invitation to discuss Venice, and found both the subject and herself ignored as Ruskin gave his whole attention to an unexpected guest. Ruskin sought more to explain than to apologize in a letter that Friday. Unpleasant matters are after all more easily dealt with by letter, and so he tells Margaret to review what he has already said about Venice in writing. He accepts blame for his own limitations in dealing with her, but spares neither child nor parents, whom he implicitly accuses of having left their daughter too much alone:

Brantwood
Coniston, Lancashire.
Friday 25th July '73

My dear Margaret

I was very sorry as you must have been -- that the Thomas's chanced to come just when they did -- but she is an old friend whom I had not seen for 15 or 16 years -- and had a right to me altogether for the time.

That I let you go without saying a word about Venice must not too seriously grieve, or alarm you -- I simply would wish you to use your own sense and observation in determining how to treat her, and to be unbiased by any other expression of my estimate of her than that which I have already given in writing -- namely that she is not a child who can be safely left to herself, or who will grow up into the best she is capable of, as the larks and linnets do. And most assuredly, I am the last person who should attempt to form or teach children -- being naturally careless of play, and slow, now, to love. My patience makes no amends for want of affection -- I feel sure that a child is happier with