

The Art of Absence in *The Stones of Venice*

The Stones of Venice, a historical portrait of a "dying city, magnificent in her dissipation,"¹ is Ruskin's elegy for a lost landscape and ideal. As a slightly parodic travel guide, it reminds us of all that is gone or defiled through restoration. The first chapter of the actual tour, "The Vestibule," takes us past tritely picturesque spots toward a vision of black smoke and straggling buildings. This anticlimactic approach to Venice at the end of Volume I fixes the mournful tone of the succeeding chapters and confirms the dire prophecies of the earlier ones; evocations of a glorious past only intensify the images of corruption and death that Venice first shows us. The text's Victorian clutter of details makes the city almost a palpable object, but an incomplete or broken one. Ruskin describes ornaments and churches from the painstaking eyes of an actual observer whose movement around Venice gives *Stones* the shifting but detailed point of view associated with nineteenth-century realism. Yet Ruskin compares what he sees with what is missing and uses vestiges or substituted objects to evoke the past and lament its passing. Absence motivates the narrative and underlies its theme: the Renaissance spirit lacks sincerity and vision; its art is definable by *vanished* elements. And the loss he imputes to Venice was draining his own life; faith in God and simple faith in fixity—of the landscape and of values—was dissolving for many Victorians. Left only with remains, Ruskin tried in *Stones* to base his artistic power and moral sense on the dissolution itself.

Throughout many of his trips abroad, he carried a copy of Roger's *Italy* and fashioned his history in the vein of this much beloved travel narrative.² In the often quoted entrance to Venice from *Stones*, the views of a restaurant and of a street from a balcony, along with the attention to the reader's Britishness (buildings remind him of those at Kew or on Euston Road (9.413)), characterize the guide's care to entertain and inform a specific audience with as many sights and

facts as possible. However, as the first glimpse of Venice shows, Ruskin slanted the tour with a polemical tension that channeled his vision. As tourists and sometime historians, narrator and audience have come specifically to witness decay and corruption, and the narrative thus enfolds itself around these themes.

Elizabeth Helsinger remarks on the "increasingly self-conscious confrontation of present with past which an experience of history through tourism implied,"³ a juxtaposition that, she says, dominates almost all of the chapters of *Stones*. However, Ruskin yokes past and present not simply through ordered sightseeing and historical commentary but through the dramatic presentation of fragments, a method he surely knew Gibbon used in the last chapter of his history. In his final sentence, the eighteenth-century historian says wistfully, "It was among the ruins of the Capitol that I first conceived the idea of a work which has amused and exercised near twenty years of my life." Noting this, Patricia Craddock comments that "'ruins' are an emblem of Gibbon's view of Rome, an emblem that enables his reader to reconcile Gibbon's cautiously progressive philosophy of historical change with his elegiac and even tragic tone."⁴ In a letter to his father in 1852 about his chapter on the Ducal Palace, Ruskin calls his entire book "a kind of great moral" of that building and compares its centrality in *Stones* with that of the Battle of Salamis in Herodotus' history (qtd. in 10.327n). His models for the narrative thus included histories like Gibbon's, and he investigates and recaptures the past as it bears on the present through the historical, inspirational and prophetic associations of ruins.

Stones and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* begin from the same nostalgic impulse, as well as from similar physical positions. Craddock repeats the anecdote (which may or may not be true) that the idea of composing a history came to Gib-