

ROBERT CASILLO

## Ruskin, Pound, and the Fate of Venetian Art

Although Ezra Pound figures within the aesthetic and economic tradition inaugurated by Ruskin, the resemblance between these writers lies not so much in textual affiliations or borrowings as in what Guy Davenport terms the "contemporaneity" of two discontinuous minds. Whether their concern is Nature or Culture, art or literature, history or society, politics or economics, Ruskin and Pound frequently held the same values, examined the same artifacts, and reached the same conclusions.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is this congruity more striking than in their interpretation of Venetian history.

Like *The Stones of Venice* and Ruskin's other Venetian studies, Pound's *The Cantos* chart the slow collapse of Venice from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Medieval Venice figures in both works as a republican city, with political power divided among the Doges, the merchant aristocracy, and the common people. Meanwhile Venetian society of the Middle Ages fulfills Ruskin's and Pound's ideal of corporate and organic hierarchy: Doge, aristocrat, clergyman, merchant, craftsman, each finds his appointed place and function within the social hierarchy and works happily for the good of the whole. In economic life, the guild system provides job security and social representation for the artisan while assuring the highest standards of invention and craftsmanship. As for religion, Ruskin and Pound emphasize the simple piety of Venetian life. Yet all this changes in the transition to the Renaissance. Once the aristocracy usurps the government in 1297, the city becomes an oligarchy, and the political and social solidarity of Venice is slowly destroyed. Gradually a new spirit of

economic individualism and capitalist acquisition undermines the city's religious traditions and social customs. For Pound, as for the later Ruskin, this development results from usury. Now vast differences in wealth separate the upper and lower orders, while the craftsman's skill is corrupted by the aristocracy's increasingly luxurious taste. Finally, Venice's imperialistic greed leads to its defeat and transformation into a second-rate power in 1508 at the hands of the League of Cambrai.

Despite their prejudices and moralizing, Ruskin and Pound often reveal a good grasp not only of facts but of broad historical currents.<sup>2</sup> However, the focus of this paper is Venetian art, especially as a symptom of the historical process outlined above. In Venice Ruskin comes to realize what Pound too discovers, namely the inextricable relation of art to society, politics, and economics. For both writers the great achievements of Venetian art largely parallel the Middle Ages and the quasi-Gothic early Renaissance, and reflect in their form and content the spiritual and intellectual virtues of this period of supposed social, political, and economic well-being. But with the triumph of the Renaissance, with its egotistical impiety and usurious greed, its aristocratic luxury and brutal militarism, Venetian arts sinks into irredeemable decadence as the visible manifestation of the evils of its age. In sculpture the restrained and orderly Gothic style yields to the Renaissance taste for voluptuous and chaotic opulence. Having once expressed himself freely through the careful imitation of natural forms, the Venetian craftsman learns to parrot the lifeless academic models dictated by