# Building Texts + Reading Fabrics: Metaphor, Memory, and Material in John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*

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## Abstract

We cannot remember without [architecture], declares John Ruskin (1819–1900) in "The Lamp of Memory" of his *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) (Cook and Wedderburn, 1904, vol. 8, p. 224).[1] For Ruskin, the city is a place of collective memory, a space where buildings are analogized as texts—"the criticism of the building is to be conducted precisely on the same principles as that of a book," he contends (*Works*, 10: 269). In the evangelical tradition of Ruskin's upbringing, this interpretation of architecture is a kind of *lectio divina*; a great building is a sacred palimpsest for those who read the fabric with patience and insight. Equally, a text such as the three volumes of his *Stones of Venice* is endowed with a tectonic in counterform to the city it depicts. Thus, the first volume is constructed from quarry to cornice; Ruskin demands his readers to roll up their sleeves, gives them "stones, and bricks, and straw, chisels and trowels, and the ground, and then asks [them] to build" (*Works*, 9: 73). In exploring these analogous spaces of text and architecture, this research operates within the empirical and documentary arena of Ruskinian interpretation, working with the primary notebooks, worksheets, and diaries from which the *Stones of Venice* was constructed. It examines the reciprocity between Ruskin's multiple readings of the urban fabric, the erection of the manuscript of *Stones*, and the playing out of his intimate physical knowledge of the city in themes of metaphor, memory and material.

## Introduction

As buildings are to be *read*, texts are *built*: John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853) (considered one of the greatest works of social and cultural criticism) develops rich analogies and metaphors between *reading* and *building*—between the text as an architectonic work and architecture

as language—for it possesses a tectonic and spatial character in counter-form to the city of Venice it, itself, deeply *reads.* Thus, volume 1 of *Stones* is "constructed" from quarry to cornice, and Ruskin expects his surprised readers to roll up their sleeves as he gives them "stones, and bricks, and straw, chisels and trowels, and the ground, and then asks [them] to build." (*Works*, 9: 73).

This essay begins by outlining the various languages with which Ruskin metaphorizes architecture: the expected iconography of sculpture and fresco; the languages of the picturesque; and that omnipresent language of nature inscribed in the mountain and the forest—analogized most vividly in the stones and naturalism of Gothic architecture—which, for Ruskin, proclaims the theological message of the divine. As for Ruskin's own texts, we examine how they imbricate both exacting technical description and moving evocation in their reading of building; and also how they use a synecdochic method whereby the whole is interpreted through the part—macrocosm is therefore understood through microcosm. In the overwhelming landscape of the Alps, for example, Ruskin senses that if he can interpret a single stone, or blade of grass, he might have mind enough for the whole; as he can read the greatness or decline of an entire city like Venice in the molding of an arch, or a solitary keystone.

Ruskin's language of the picturesque was much influenced by the English topographical artist Samuel Prout, whose drawing manuals, as interpreted here, teach the student to build a picturesque composition in a manner analogous to how children learn their letters—word building becomes picturesque image building. But we discover how the contented framework of the Proutian "surface" picturesque was shattered for Ruskin by the visionary power of the artist J. M. W. Turner; through him Ruskin recognized a deeper world of feeling—that of the "noble" picturesque, and the sublime.

Finally, obeying Ruskin's injunction to *Read* architecture—often, as noted, through the fragment—we interpret a pair of windows from an alley near the Arsenal in Venice to understand in a specific case the operation of these languages, analogies, and metaphors in synthesis. The *modus operandi* of Ruskin's near-Biblical exegesis of architecture is thereby understood; a method that makes an arch a lesson in human capacity, and a warning as to the moral health of nations. At the same time we learn—through reading these technical and rhetorical texts interleaved with innumerable drawings—how a work like *The Stones of Venice* was built.

## Analogizing Architecture

Elizabeth Helsinger has examined how Ruskin's penetrating studies of architecture in the 1840s and 1850s intensified his sense of architecture as language: "He formulates for himself a critical identity to which reading is central" (Helsinger, 1982, p. 212); concerns that crystallize in the

following summons in the closing words of the pivotal "Nature of Gothic" chapter of *The Stones of Venice*: "Lastly, *Read* the sculpture." "Thenceforward," Ruskin concludes, "the criticism of the building is to be conducted precisely on the same principles as that of a book; and it must depend on the knowledge, feeling, and not a little on the industry and perseverance of the reader, whether, even in the case of the best works, he either perceive them to be great, or feel them to be entertaining" (*Works,* 10: 269).

There can be no question of the outlay of energy involved in Ruskin's own readings of the city that produced the interrelated system of diary-notebooks, large worksheet studies, and pocketbooks crammed with notes and sketches that are the foundations of *The Stones of Venice.* Helsingor claims this work as "Ruskin's first and his most sustained effort to combine religious and artistic reading in a single critical activity" (1982, p. 212). In Ruskin's injunction to "*Read,*" she therefore distinguishes at least four kinds of symbolic language. There is the evident language of sculpture and pictorial iconography (*Works*, 11: 182–183). Then there is the language of the picturesque, that "golden stain of time"; for Ruskin the "glory of a building . . . is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy . . . which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity" (*Works*, 8: 234). Finally, there are two symbolic languages employed by architecture that derive from nature: the inherent geological record of the stones themselves, and their theological message (*Works*, 11: 38, 41). Thus—opening the last and third volume of *The Stones of Venice*—Ruskin affirms that the preceding two books have "dwelt . . . on the historical language of stones; let us not forget this, which is their theological language." Explicitly, as the same passage explains, such stones set "forth [the] eternity and . . . TRUTH' of the Deity, just as the 'elements of the universe—its air, its water, and its flame. . . .'" (*Works*, 11: 41; Landow, 1971, chaps. 4,5).[2]

In conceptualizing Venice's urban and literary spaces through these various languages of "religious evocation and exhortation," we need to also recognize that there is the drier "language of technical description" (Hewison, 2000, p. 57), that demanding practical language from which the first volume of *Stones* is largely constructed. A language from which puzzled readers—expecting the luminous phrases of *The Seven Lamps*—were challenged to build the city as if from a handbook of building construction. For Ruskin "the history of Venice . . . was written in her ruins," and, in ways which seem presciently modern, those ruins are commonly decoded through the fragment (*Works*, 11: 231). J. B. Bullen identifies this as Ruskin's synecdochic method whereby the contending forces of history "are focused, as in a burning glass, within a single art—architecture. The flux of human events is arrested in art; the chronicle is memorialized in stone" (Bullen, 1992, p. 56), and the smallest details can metaphorize the ethics and destiny of a nation. Here we inspect these relations between

text and architecture, between languages technical and rhetorical, and *Stones* measured, evoked, and verified.

Always first for Ruskin is the language of Nature; he responded intensely to the microcosmic aspects of landscape in summer walks in the Rhone valley and the Alps in 1849, studying the architecture of these "great cathedrals of the earth" as intently as, in the winter of that year, he would begin his detailed architectural research in Venice. Having completed *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* Ruskin was exhausted, and felt the calling of these beloved mountains as centers of imaginative renewal; he was also working on the material that would compose the third and fourth volumes of *Modern Painters.* The appearance of the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843—begun as a defense of the painter J. M. W. Turner—had established Ruskin as a forceful, if immature critic of art, distinguished by his stress on truth to the observed facts of nature. *Modern Painters* evolved slowly into a huge five volume project that was only completed seventeen years later in 1860. In the context of this vast literary edifice, the major architectural studies seem almost an interlude; *The Seven Lamps,* as noted, and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853). Equally *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*—Sacrifice, Truth, Power, Beauty, Life, Memory, Obedience—insists on truths rooted in nature; a building should have an organic life, and the pages of its walls will ineluctably reveal the qualities of the society that raised it. Ruskin's yoking of ethics and architecture—truth to nature, material, maker, purpose, society—was a trial to the Victorians, it became the manifesto of the Arts and Crafts in England and its European manifestations, and subsequently proved enduring in the conscience of modernism.

There is a confessional quality to these 1849 Alpine diaries as Ruskin makes the sometimes painful transition from that youthful absorption in nature he had known on earlier visits to these mountains, to the adult capacity to stand outside himself as a critical and aesthetic being. The prospects that impressed him most were those of Vevay (on the north-east shore of Lake Geneva), Chamonix, the Rhone Valley, and Zermatt: if overwhelmed by the majesty of the "Dorons and its range behind me, . . . Mont Blanc and all its aiguilles . . . in front of me," "I discovered that when I confined myself to one thing, as to the grass or stones . . . I began to enjoy directly, because then I had mind enough to put into the thing" (Evans & Whitehouse, 1956, p. 384). Thus his experience of the fields below the village of Blonay (near Vevay) would inspire the famous set-piece passages on grass in *Modern Painters,* vol. 3 where he suggests we "gather a single blade of grass, and examine for a minute, quietly, its narrow sword-shaped strip of fluted green" (*Works,* 5: 287). Earlier, also near Blonay, he discovers a picturesque "group of old cottage and tower" related to a "bit of fence and field underneath" and—as with the blades of grass— "by throwing my mind full into the fence and field, as if I had nothing else but them to deal with, I found light and power and loveliness, a

Roger's vignette character put into them directly" (Evans & Whitehouse, 1956, p. 381). Here, he refers to the *Poems* and *Italy* of the then celebrated English poet Samuel Rogers (1763–1855), which were vignetted by the artist J. M. W. Turner; in boyhood Ruskin had been given a copy of Samuel Roger's poems *Italy* (Rogers, 1852) with its Turner's vignettes on 8 February 1832, this was his first encounter with Turner, and he was dazzled. Such microcosmic visions are central to the interplay of metaphor and material in Ruskin's interpretations of architecture. For Ruskin, the "instructive lesson" of these experiences is that "each spirit can only embrace at a time so much of what has been appointed for its food, and may therefore rest contented with little" (Evans & Whitehouse, 1956, p. 385). Contemplate a few stones therefore, and you may learn the structure of the Alps or the complexity of a city.

## MICROCOSM TO MACROCOSM

These observations establish the centrality of the notion of reading to Ruskin's critical identity; they indicate the variety of languages that criticism would encompass and the synecdochic method of understanding the whole through the fragment. We now turn to examine one of Ruskin's first adopted and most pervasive symbolic languages—the picturesque—to see how his representation of architecture evolved under the influence of that master in British line-and-watercolor architectural topography, the artist Samuel Prout (1783–1852). In the year following the gift of Rogers's *Italy,* Ruskin's father had introduced him to this master of the language of the picturesque through a gift of Prout's *Sketches made in Flanders and Germany* (1833) (Cook, 1911, pp. 33–34). Ruskin set himself to emulate Prout's style, copying his drawings and using his teaching manuals. One such manual is *A Series of Easy Lessons in Landscape Drawing* (1820), reflecting—as Ruskin describes—Prout's "strong love of truth" (*Works*, 12: 307). Prout's discovery of a wider Europe in 1819—when cross-Channel travel from England again became possible at the end of the Napoleonic wars— had transformed his work. Of his Continental topography one reviewer commented: "Such original examples of the picturesque give a new impulse to art," praising his "pictorial character, originality of effect, depth of tone, and general energy of style" (quoted in Lockett, 1985, p. 66). The drawing manuals were works to which, according to Ruskin, many artists have "frankly confessed their early obligations" (*Works*, 12: 308). *Easy Lessons* is "arranged progressively from the first principles" (Prout, 1820). Prout's guides are fine examples of the "progressive method," which was the foundation of teaching in many of the manuals of this period; the student built up a picture of the world from microcosm to macrocosm (e.g., Prout's *Microcosm* of "Figures, Shipping and other Picturesque Objects" was published in 1841) by making vignette drawings of picturesque objects, contextualizing them, and working gradually wider to a full com-

position (Bicknell & Munro, 1988, pp. 48ff.). Prout's "love of truth" is a sign of how the picturesque had gained a more scientific perspicacity by artists working in the medium of drawing and watercolor in the nineteenth century.

In the context of this exploration of building texts and reading fabrics, it is significant that Prout describes his "progressive lessons" as analogous to "an alphabet followed by words, and from words to sentences, it being precisely the same in its elements with language" (Prout, 1820). As in the vignette "group of old cottage and tower," Ruskin discovered near Blonay, the apprentice artist learns synecdochically to comprehend the whole through the part. To my knowledge this vignette is unidentified, but a page of studies drawn by Ruskin in 1842 of fabrics, parts of a tower, and a rustic shaded porch shows the method well (fig. 1). In the early pages of *Modern Painters,* Ruskin declares: "Art . . . with all its technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends, is nothing but a noble and expressive language, invaluable as the vehicle of thought, but by itself nothing" (*Works*, 3: 87). As architecture moves to the focus of Ruskin's concerns in the writing of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853), the already firm link between art, words, and intellect—foreshadowed at the beginning of *Modern Painters*—will translate into that unequivocal stress on art and language and that notion of *reading* a work of architecture and art described earlier here.

Accordingly, let us see how Prout constructs his picturesque language in the progressive method from some plates of his *Easy Lessons* (figs. 2, 3). At the beginning, he advises the student to confine looking to one thing: a single gatepost stone or a few blocks upright or inclined. All are delineated in Prout's characteristic alphabet of distinctive glyphs: worm-like wiggles, broken lines, and isolated dots and bow-curves. Read together these idiosyncratic marks well describe the poetry of the "golden stain of time" and weathered walls "washed by the passing waves of humanity." The younger Ruskin carefully imitated this alphabet of marks. Then come plates of recognizable architectural fragments—Gothic and Romanesque arches and so forth. On further plates, these fragments coalesce into vignette compositions—two broken arches and a belfry, for example—which take their place in a landscape setting.

In modernism, all this sense of architecture as a *lectio divina* interpreted through the part is summed up in Mies van der Rohe's famous dictum "God is in the details." Presaging Mies, Ruskin argues that the rank of an artist is determined "with what respect he views the minutiae of nature." "He who can take no interest in what is small, will take false interest in what is great" (*Works*, 3: 491). Accordingly Ruskin points up social realities and evidences truths through the fragment, in counter to those commentators who suspect in the fragmenting picturesque a mask of truth. For Robin Evans, the picturesque breaks down and disguises the presence of

Figure 1. Architectural and domestic details. John Ruskin, 1842. (RF 1996 P 1139, Ruskin Foundation, Ruskin Library, Lancaster University.)
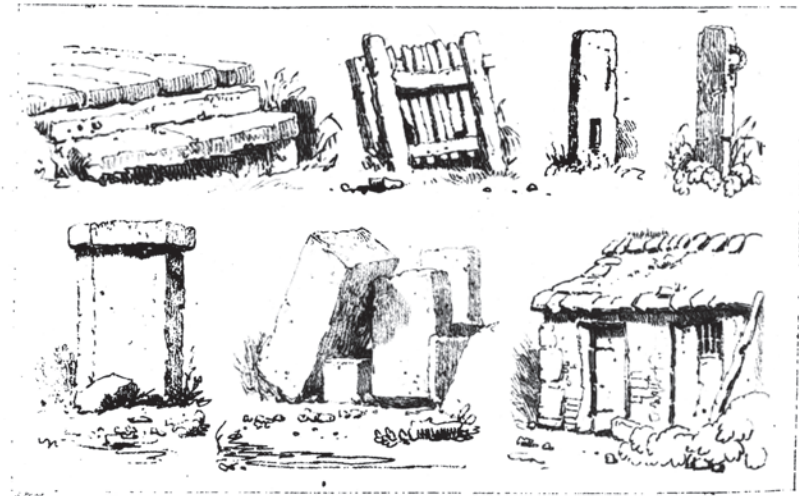
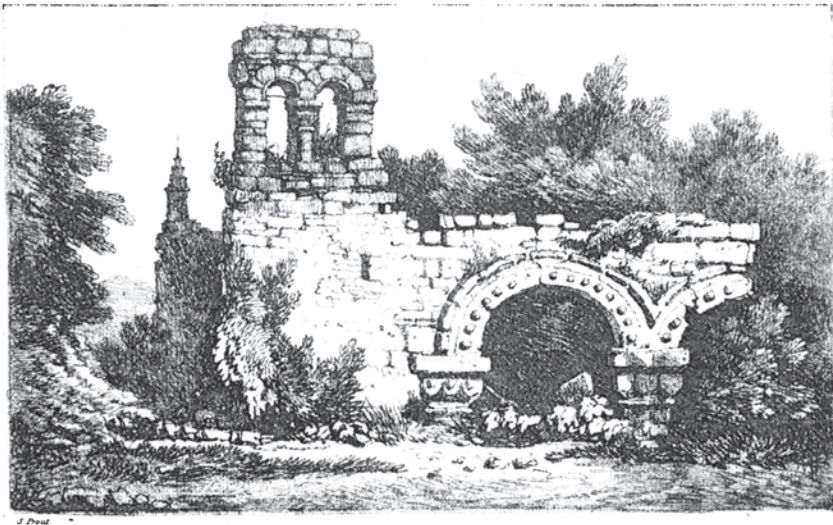Figure 2. Samuel Prout. (Plate from *Easy Lessons*.)



Figure 3. Samuel Prout. (Plate from *Easy Lessons*.)

power structures, whether in vast contemporary shopping centers or in Humphrey Repton's emollient landscapes that sweeten the presence of the country house and cloak the suppression evidenced by the enclosed field and ill-housed peasant (Evans, 1995, pp. 80–83). Ruskin, however, increasingly condemned that heartless aspect of the picturesque that employs the ill-housed peasant to complete a composition.

In *Modern Painters* in the 1840s, Ruskin praises Prout's feeling for "locality and life" in his depictions of Venice, in contrast to the generalized images of Canaletto. In Prout's work, "we feel there is something in the subject worth drawing, and different from other subjects and architecture. That house is rich and strange, and full of grotesque carving and character—that one next to it is shattered and infirm, and varied with picturesque rents and hues of decay—that farther off is beautiful in proportion, and strong in its purity of marble" (*Works*, 3: 256). The drawing of the Casa Contarini Fasan that Ruskin made in Venice in May 6–16, 1841, represented both the zenith and conclusion of his imitation of Prout's language of picturesque particularity. Indeed, the master admired the study and borrowed it for himself. "Though full of weaknesses and vulgarities," Ruskin thought his own drawings of this period had "also much good in them" (*Works*, 4: 342). The boat at the bottom left of the image is a Proutesque microcosm where Ruskin delights in the "interchange" of light and dark and the interlocking patterns made by spar, sailcloth, and rigging. In his *The Elements of Drawing*, Ruskin notes that this "law of interchange [is] insisted upon at length by Prout in his Lessons on Light and Shade" (*Works*, 15: 197). Equally, on the palace itself Ruskin renders the ephemeral patterns of fabric and shade as tenderly as the forms of column and capital. Certainly there is close observation here, but little sense of the architecture possessing weight or bone structure. Writing forty years later, Ruskin claimed, with some truth, that he "knew absolutely nothing of architecture proper" at this point, he "had never drawn a section nor a leaf moulding," but nonetheless he "drew with an acuteness of delight in the thing as it actually stood." The following year, he continues, he "began trying to do what I could not, and have gone on ever since, spending half of my days in that manner" (*Works*, 35: 296).

## THE "DEPTH OF TURNER'S SENTIMENT"
By "trying to do what [he] could not," and striving to emulate the architect's methods and language of technical description, Ruskin realized he had reached the limits of his picturesque delight in building. Alone, this could have meant dry analysis, and indeed there are long musings on material and moldings in *Seven Lamps* and *Stones* that tested the expectations of his literary audience. But powerful readings of architecture result as this rigor is allied, both to the earlier picturesque language and the empathetic languages he learned from Turner, as we now examine.

So, in the pages of Ruskin's pocket notebook "House Book 1," which he began some eight years after the Contarini Fasan drawing in late October or early November 1849, we now find scores of sections and leaf moldings. He records the wheel motif of the uppermost balconies of the same Casa in detail: the section of the cornice, the foliation of the arch, and the profile of the lower arch and its cusps (fig. 4). Much of this vast technical research that underpins *Stones* was never published, and only the elevation of this balcony is published in the "Gothic Palaces" section of Volume 2 of *The Stones of Venice* (fig. 5). If the etching of the upper balcony elevation still has some Prout-esque line, we can now be sure of the technical, yet impassioned, investigation underlying the image, and Ruskin's statement in the text that the "traceried parapet . . . is, when well designed, the richest and most beautiful of all forms" (*Works*, 10: 286) (fig. 6).

What had happened? To recapitulate a process of almost two decades, the vortex of Turner's imagination had shattered the picturesque frame, drawing Ruskin centripetally into an emotionally fired engagement with the physical world. In his psychoanalytical interpretation of Turner, Adrian Stokes writes of "a whirlpool envelopment into which we are drawn," of how "in the act of painting, even his vast distances were pressed up against his visionary eye like the breast upon the mouth"(Gowing, 1978, pp. 245, 252). Ruskin confesses his equally oral engagement with the stones of Venice in the letter to his father from Verona of 2 June 1852 in describing his instinct "to draw and describe the things I love . . . like that for eating and drinking. I should like to draw all St Mark's, and all this Verona stone by stone, to eat it all up into my mind, touch by touch" (*Works*, 10: xxvi). As has been pointed out, Ruskin's "references to reading almost always suggest a real love, often felt with the force of a hunger, for multiple meaning in the visual aspects of things" (Helsinger, 1982, p. 209). Compared to Turner's richly symbolic language, Prout's art is a one-liner. Instinctively, Ruskin sensed Turner's power early on—from first seeing the vignettes to Rogers's poems in fact. But he only gradually deepened his aesthetic perception interpretatively, integrating into his criticism of art and architecture that intensity of evangelical exegesis of allegory and typology, inculcated in Bible readings at his mother's knee.

Look at the way Ruskin's whirling drawings of 1845, such as *Trees on a Mountainside* (1845), rhyme the rhythms of Turner's *Slave Ship* of 1840 (Walton, 1972, p. 61). In Ruskin's diary of November 8, 1840, Lucca had been "an ugly little [Italian] town" whose streets were "narrow and uninteresting"; that is, lacking in picturesque motifs (Evans & Whitehouse, 1956, p. 107). Then, he was still the gentleman-amateur, and the language of the diaries is of one seeking out pleasing "subjects" related to textual associations such as the romantic poetry of Robert Byron. The feeling for architecture *as* architecture is undeveloped; buildings help out a composition whose landscape context is felt more intensely.
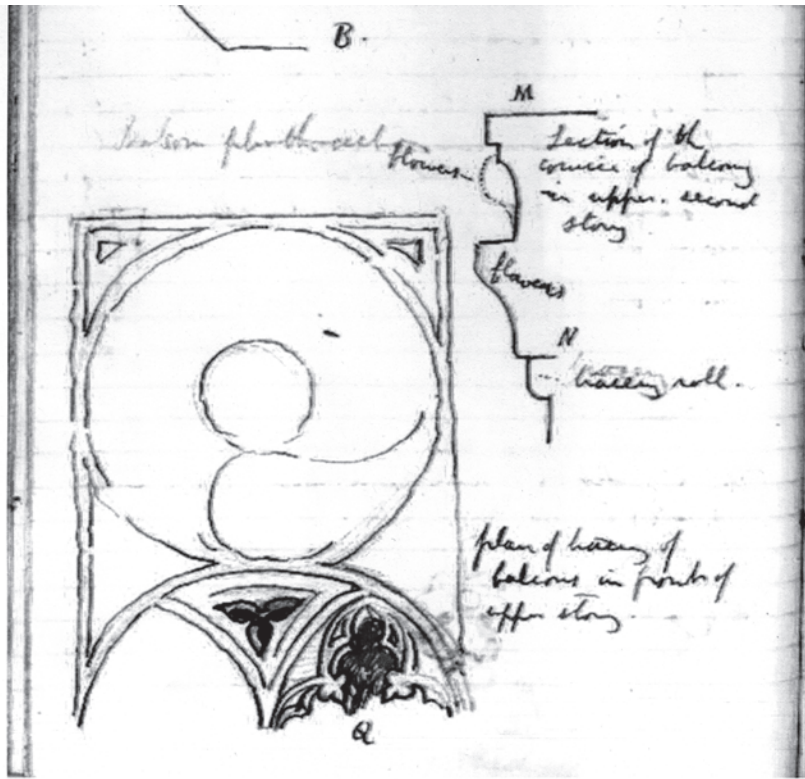
Figure 4. "House Book 1 f. p. 43." (Ruskin Foundation, Ruskin Library, Lancaster University.)

But in 1845 he came to Lucca again, on his first continental tour without his parents, intent on researching the Italian old masters for the second volume of *Modern Painters*—architecture had not been on the planned agenda. Now, "with all [his] new knowledge and freshness of acceptancy, [he] found as if never seen before, the inlaid [Romanesque] architecture of San Michele" (*Works*, 4: 346). At this instant he could now perceive beyond the Gothic filigree beloved of Prout and comprehend the somber sheerness of such facades. Then, entering the church of San Frediano, "the pure and severe arcades of finely proportioned columns . . . , doing stern duty under vertical walls, as opposed to Gothic shafts with no end, and buttresses with no bearing, struck [him] dumb with admiration and amazement." There, he declared in retrospect, "he began, in the nave of San Frediano, the course of architectural study which reduced under accurate law the vague enthusiasm of my childish taste." (*Works*, 4: 346–347). In these once uninteresting streets he had now discovered, as he
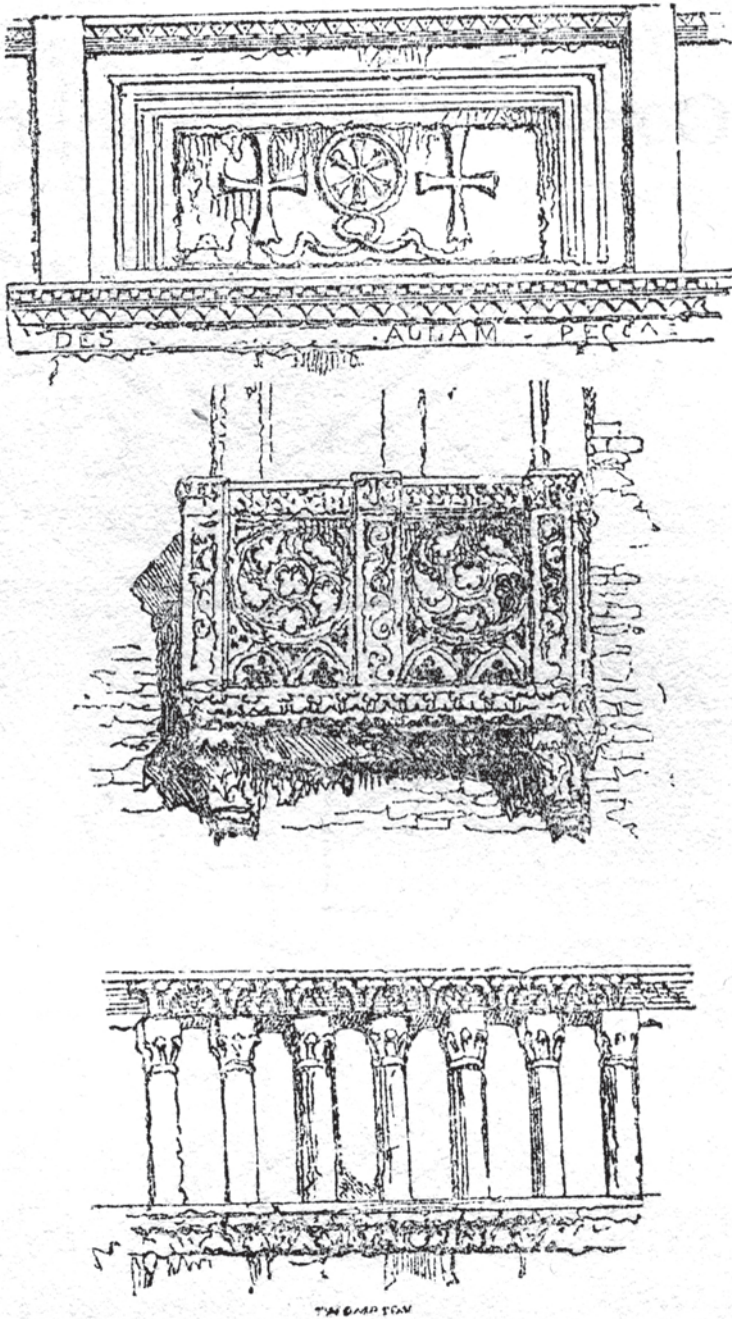
Figure 5. Casa Contarini Fasan, balcony detail from *Stones of Venice II* (central image).

Figure 6.  Façade of Casa Contarini Fasan. (Author's photo.)

wrote to his father, "enough in an hour's ramble after mass, to keep me at work for a twelvemonth." The buildings are now open to exegesis, living texts displaying the language of sculpture and pictorial iconography; here he found "church fronts charged with heavenly sculpture and inlaid with whole histories in marble." (Shapiro, 1972, p. 51). San Frediano is "all glorious dark arches & columns"; and he concludes "I must have a study of this Lombard church" (Shapiro, 1972, p. 51).

Some commentators, such as Kristine Garrigan, accuse Ruskin of a disregard "for the major architectural qualities of plan, mass, and proportion," but here in this—one of the first studies under Ruskin's new rubric of "accurate law"—are all those things (Garrigan, 1973, p. 67). The cross-vista composition represents the tunnel-like drama of the aisle, and the palely lit space of the nave beyond framed by severely planar walls. As the Corinthian columns of the arcades rise and recede, Ruskin interchanges light and shade to allow their volumes to read against the shadows and lit surfaces beyond. Here is firm evidence in building of what Ruskin had learned from Turner, and especially from the dramatic architectural engravings of his *Liber Studiorum,* which evidence the artist's early experience in producing drawings for architects (Forrester, 1996, p. 58). San Frediano parallels the oblique composition and tonal drama of Turner's *The Crypt of Kirkstall Abbey* (1812). Interestingly, the same motif had also been sketched by Prout, and in the notes on his Educational Series of drawings made in the 1870s, Ruskin could now contrast Prout's "narrow sentiment fastening only on the picturesqueness of ruined masonry" with the "depth of Turner's sentiment" in his reading of the subject, which fastens "not on the physical but the moral ruin" of the abbey (*Works*, 21: 132). Here, the power of a symbolic theological language overrides that of the picturesque: Prout's is a "narrow sentiment" because, as Helsinger points out in the framework of languages outlined at the beginning of this essay, the conventional "signs of the picturesque . . . are primarily human languages" (Helsinger, 1982, p. 213), whereas in Turner's *Kirkstall,* his inspired imagination approaches the divine in its capacity for moral exegesis. To return the discussion back from English Yorkshire to Italy: in the famous passages at the very end of *Modern Painters* where Ruskin contrasts the two boyhoods of Turner and the serene Venetian artist Giorgione (1477/8?–1510), Kirkstall offers Turner "sound preaching . . . concerning fate and life. Here, where the dark pool reflects the chancel pillars, and the cattle lie in unhindered rest. . ." (*Works*, 7: 384). The moral message is that it is *cattle* caught in the shaft of light that probes the gloomy undercroft of the broken abbey "instead of priests' vestments." Ruskin then opposes this interpretation of moral decay, revealed by a decrepit architecture, to a vision of Giorgione's Venice where there "were indeed aged buildings . . . but none in decay." Giorgione grew up in the bright cities of Italy, and knew "only strength and immortality"; whereas Turner's

Convent Garden, London boyhood, "saw the exact reverse of this. . . . Meanness, aimlessness, unsightliness: thin-walled, lath-divided, narrow-garreted houses of clay, booths of a darksome Vanity Fair, busily base" (*Works*, 7: 385).

## Windows Near the Arsenal

In reading *The Stones of Venice,* Ruskin synthesizes all the languages outlined above to create a new pitch of architectural criticism, as we begin to understand if we interpret even a few fragments of Venetian workmanship from the vast body of drawings, measurements, and observations that underpin *The Stones of Venice.* The motifs taken here are a two-light and a single window from houses near the Arsenal—Venice's vast ship-building complex in the northeastern part of the city. As geologist, Ruskin is alert to the nature of the material, he notes its weathering, and records its working and the record it bears of the capacity and freedom of its carvers. We find imbricated what Hewison has called "the two discourses of [*Stones*], the rhetorical, and the technical" (Hewison, 2000, p. 63). Ruskin himself insisted that "the strength of the book" consisted in its "dryer or bony parts" (Bradley, 1955, p. 119). Commentators on Ruskin's criticism have tended to neglect this technical aspect of his discourse; even the published *Diaries* will often omit the anatomical passages with a laconic comment such as: "The omission consists of 14 more pages of Venetian architectural notes" (Evans & Whitehouse, 1956, p. 453). Yet these are the very "bony" armature of the work. Equally the related worksheets and notebooks have been only partially investigated.

In *Stones of Venice,* Ruskin tells the reader how to locate these Arsenal elements: "If the traveller desire to find them (and they are worth seeking), let him row from the Fondamenta San Biagio . . . and look, on his right, for a low house. . . . Let him go in at the door of the portico in the middle of this house, and he will find himself in a small alley, with the windows in question on each side of him" (*Works*, 10: 303). Ruskin's instructions lead to the Corte Contarina, an alley off the Rio de la Tana canal that runs beneath the southern wall of the Arsenal. As in the case with the Casa Contarini Fasan balcony discussed above, as presented in *The Stones of Venice* these windows near the Arsenal belie the level of scrutiny to which Ruskin subjected them. Ruskin was often frustrated by the limited illustration techniques of his time and stretched the skill of his engravers: in Plate 17, volume 2—displaying the "Windows of Early Gothic Palaces"—there are just two small line illustrations of these openings, with barely visible detail (fig. 7).

The context of his 1851–1852 diary description of these openings vividly demonstrates the exegetical milieu from which his criticism arose, as his detailed architectural notes immediately follow Biblical commentary on the book of Ezekiel.[3] Thus, on page 34 of the diary, a paragraph
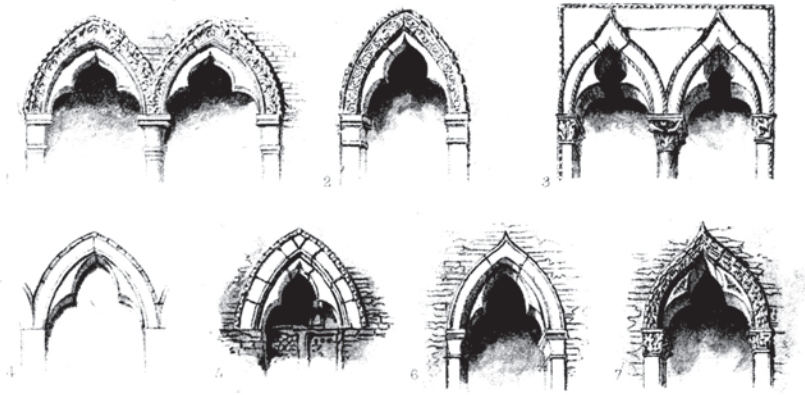
Figure 7. Detail of "Windows of the Early Gothic Palaces" from *Stones of Venice II* (*Works,* 10: 302). Arsenal windows are the double- and single-light group at top left.

on the "Renaissance" makes clear that for Ruskin this movement was emphatically not a rebirth: the twelfth verse of Ezekial, chapter 7, notes as "especially applicable to Venice and the description of 'the end' not as the night, but as *the morning.*" Ezekial's warning prophecy that "the time has come. The day has arrived," encapsulates one of the great themes of *Stones* that the first glimmer of the Renaissance was in actuality a false dawn.[4] In Ruskin's evangelical training, the Bible is read at once as a real story of lives and events *and* typologically in the sense that prophets of the Old Testament—such as Ezekial above, or Moses—are "types" of Christ, symbolically foreshadowing the events of the New Testament. Equally, the earth is real *and* metaphorically a manuscript written by God, and in all visible creation, including works of architecture, we can read the truths of God insofar as they are true to Nature (Hewison, 2009, pp. 50–51). While we can make Ruskin almost a modern, the great spectator of the nineteenth century anticipating the Walter Benjamin- or Henry James-ian world of the *flâneur,* in passages like these—conjoining technical description and Biblical description—he seems strangest to us. But his perceptual genius can only be fully understood if we accept this peculiar adjacency of the particular and the prophetic. Later he raged at those who praised the "style" and the "pleasant sounding tune" of the prose in *Stones,* but never "praised the substance . . . occasionally tasting its roughness, here and there, as a bitter almond put by mistake into a sugarplum." (*Works,* 11: 232). These studies of "Windows at the Tana" were made in February 1852 at the very end of his Venice fieldwork; his time in Venice, from September 1851 to June 1852, was mainly devoted to writing the second and third volumes of *The Stones of Venice.* But, as his biographer E. T. Cook

notes: "Neither Ruskin's literary work, nor his artistic pursuits, nor social distractions interrupted his religious studies and exercises. Here at Venice, while at work on *The Stones*, he wrote 'a commentary of 90 pages on Job'" (Cook, 1911, p. 270).

As always in Ruskin's Venice fieldwork system, the Diary cross-refers to the relevant notebooks and worksheets; in this case worksheets numbers 205, 206, and 207 (fig. 8).[5] There is a pathetic framing to the notes and studies at this time; the same diary notes "December 30th, 1851. Turner buried" (Evans & Whitehouse, 1956, p. 476). While on worksheet 205, Ruskin wrote: "Sketched February 9th 1852 in the afternoon the day of Mr Prout's death." The passing then of the two great mentors of Ruskin's readings of architecture examined here. Worksheet 205 carefully records the molded brick detail of the arch as Ruskin enthusiastically notes in the diary: "Nothing can be more exquisitely sharp than the ornament on 205 . . . and all evidently moulded not cast." As always he is alert to that vital nuance of difference that, in his view, was slain by that sham dawn of the Renaissance: "Note *leaf* for flower in third brick counting down on the right. Small flowers all of different sizes." In chapter 7 on "Gothic Palaces" of the published text of *Stones of Venice,* volume 2, he stresses the "exquisite mouldings, not cast, but *moulded in the clay by hand*, so that there is not one piece of the arch like another" (*Works*, 10: 303). To this point in his analysis there is a technical objectivity in the reading of the scroll ornamentation, with Ruskin's sketching hand also evidently relishing the parasitical picturesque of the weathered outer mouldings of the arch. But the "Gothic Palaces" chapter follows the famous "Nature of Gothic" chapter 6, and the points he stresses on hand molding clearly refer to the "characteristic or moral element" of Gothic "Changefulness" and the "perpetual variety" evident when the worker is not enslaved: "Wherever the workman is utterly enslaved, the parts of the building must of course be absolutely like each other" (*Works*, 10: 204). John Unrau—one of the few scholars to have paid close attention to Ruskin's "bony," or more technical, analyses—stresses his fascination with irregularity in two-dimensional composition, as in his obsessive measurement of difference in the arcades of Venetian Byzantine palaces (a documentation that precedes the "Nature of Gothic" essay) (Unrau, 1978, chap. 2).

So, having led the reader of *Stones of Venice* down the canals of Venice to this text in brick, and having drawn its form and praised its variety, Ruskin asks the reader to "let me pause for a moment." Reader, or is it a listener in the pew at this point? For this loaded pause between the reading of a text and its exposition is a curate's rhetorical device. As noted in relation to Ezekial's prophecy, Ruskin works within the evangelical tradition of scriptural interpretation, interplaying the reality of persons or things and their allegorical and symbolic role, and placing equal emphasis on both signifier and signified. George Landow explains how, under

Figure 8. John Ruskin. Worksheet 205. (Courtesy of The Ruskin Museum, Coniston, Cumbria.)

the influence of the typological tradition of evangelical scriptural inter-
pretation, Ruskin maintains "a balance between the formal elements of a
painting [and] its aesthetic surface" or as here, an architectural element
"and its complex significances" (Landow, 1971, p. 321). These and other
elements build in *Stones* to a larger warning to England not to follow Tyre
and Venice into oblivion. Mechanized England, and its increasingly en-
slaved workers, can learn also from this tiny arch, "the real use of brick":
"Our fields of good clay"—intones Ruskin from his pulpit—"were never
given us to be made into oblong morsels of one size. They were given
us that we might play with them, and that men who could not handle a
chisel, might knead out of them some expression of human thought."
Against this mechanical production of repetitive one-sized morsels stands
the infinite variety of the brick and terracotta "architecture of the clay
districts of Italy" where "every possible variation of the material is found
exemplified" (*Works*, 10: 303). And he concludes by observing that "the
best academy for [England's] architects, for some half century to come,
would be the brick-field; for of this they may rest assured, that till they
know how to use clay, they will never know how to use marble" (*Works*, 10:
304). "How to use clay" has become a fundamental ethical question in the
making of architecture. In Ruskin's typological reading of scripture, it was
profoundly symbolic that the journey of Israel began in reaction to the
bondage of the building site; the Jews were led out from the brickfields of
Egypt and "*labour without hope*" (*Works*, 28: 562). He develops this theme in
"Letter 64" (April 1876) of *Fors Clavigera* at a time when in these, and texts
like *Unto this Last* (1860), his social critique had led him from art criti-
cism to questioning the nature of wealth itself, and into fierce attacks on
the servility produced by modern political economy (*Works*, 28: 561–86;
*Works*, 17: 25–118). He raged that industrialization was returning human-
ity to Egyptian levels of enslavement.

## Conclusion

The city is a text whose surface can at times be read as plainly as a book;
but it is also a bewilderingly complex *thing*, an artefact as immeasurable as
the Alps. Ruskin deconstructs its physical spaces and palimpsest-like sur-
faces through a process of fragmenting and vignetting and then, as in the
window examples above, reconstructs these as literary spaces through the
varied modes of discourse we have examined—technical, symbolic, and
rhetorical. In turn, the literary reconstruction partakes of the character of
building. He calls his readers to a labor that seems more than metaphori-
cally manual in the first volume of *The Stones of Venice* where, in ourselves
building from "Quarry" to "Cornice and Capital," we take hold of the con-
structive logic of Gothic and its moral law of "Changefulness"—that sense
of the free worker visible in the arches near the Arsenal. So, in his im-
portant new study, *The Craftsman* (2008), Sennett asks how a supposedly

"skills society" can bring out the craftsman in each person. Sennett points out that Ruskin (a collector of medieval missals) accused the "abominable art of printing [as] the root of all mischief—it makes people used to have everything of the same shape" (2008, p. 112). Against the rigidity of type, notes Sennett, is the "grammar" of Gothic stonework of the *Seven Lamps*, this is a " 'flamboyant' grammar, one form generating another sometimes by the stonemason's will, sometimes simply by chance" (p. 112). Thus Gothic architecture is as fluent, grotesque, and imaginative as the hand-scribed vellum of a missal; the so-called Renaissance, as mechanical, rigid, and repetitive as typesetting. In the wider context of Ruskin's argument, whether he was pro- or anti-machine is probably irrelevant. The larger question is that men, women, and society as a whole will continue to need to work on, or with, material things. What is radical in Ruskin's thought, argues Sennett, is that he "sought to instill . . . the desire, indeed the demand, for a lost space of freedom; . . . a free space in which people can experiment, a supportive space in which they could at least temporarily lose control. This is a condition for which people will have to fight in modern society" (p. 114). Sennett's writing shows that Ruskin's readings of buildings as texts retain the capacity to encourage new social readings of the nature of freedom.

The text-building analogy is also explored in a recent installation by Jorge Otero-Pailos that enigmatically hovers between page-like film and substance. His *The Ethics of Dust: Doge's Palace, Venice, 2009,* for the 53rd La Biennale di Venezia, radically re-reads Ruskin's central "text" of the Doges Palace. Otero-Pailos turns filth into film by casting in latex the "stains of time" from a soiled wall of the loggia of the Ducal building. This remarkable work—inspired by Ruskin's *Ethics of the Dust*—has been described as "a writing of dust, which in its very form and substance, is directly drawn from the stones of Venice" (Burgio, 2009, p. 43).

I hope to have demonstrated that these surfaces of text and building are analogous, that we can in some sense build texts and read fabrics. As invoked by Ruskin, the visualization of architecture became, as we have seen, far more than just a picture. As products of complex cultures, buildings call for the density of interpretation that Ruskin gives them—a "thick description" in the best sense. The reader must persist—in Ruskin's case perched up ladders in freezing winters—for buildings can be slow to reveal themselves, their meanings layered in dense palimpsests difficult to transcribe. Earlier we discussed the crucial typological aspect of Ruskin's readings; as Caroline Van Eck points out, "one of the many fascinating aspects of typological interpretation is that it forces its practitioner to pay very close attention to all the details of the object of interpretation." (1994, p. 201). Yet, evidently many commentators on Ruskin continue to privilege the rhetorical aspect of his readings, rarely paying this very close attention to what might be regarded as the drier, even technical

features. This essay strives to foreground all the details of the object of interpretation as in the arches near the Arsenal. Only by taking seriously all aspects of Ruskin's representation, can we discover that potent fusion of the empirical and evocative that is distinctive in his readings of architecture.

## Acknowledgments

## Notes

1. Subsequent references to *The Works of John Ruskin* will be written in the style, *Works*, 10: 269.
2. In a wide ranging interpretation of Ruskin and allegory, George Landow (1971) explores Ruskin's typological language and its roots in the exegesis learned in Biblical readings at his mother's side.
3. "Diary 1851–52 (MS 08)," p. 36, Ruskin Foundation (Ruskin Library, Lancaster University).
4. The quote from Ezekial continues: "The time has come. The day has arrived, let not the buyer rejoice nor the seller mourn; for wrath is against all their multitude." After twenty-two lines of close architectural description Ruskin returns to Ezekial: "Things Holy & Profane. Observe with respect to cleanliness as a sacred thing, the regulations in Ezekial 44. 17–22."
5. Worksheets 205 and 206 survive in The Ruskin Museum, Coniston, Cumbria, and Ruskin Library, Lancaster University, respectively.

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