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John Ruskin

Excerpt

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THE STONES OF VENICE

VOLUME III

THIRD, OR RENAISSANCE PERIOD

CHAPTER I

EARLY RENAISSANCE¹

§ 1. I TRUST that the reader has been enabled by the preceding chapters, to form some conception of the magnificence of the streets of Venice during the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Yet by all this magnificence she was not supremely distinguished above the other cities of the Middle Ages. Her early edifices have been preserved to our times by the circuit of her waves; while continual recurrences of ruin have defaced the glory of her sister cities. But such fragments as are still left in their lonely squares, and in the corners of their streets, so far from being inferior to the buildings of Venice, are even more rich, more finished, more admirable in invention, more exuberant in beauty.² And although, in the North of Europe, civilisation was less advanced, and the knowledge of the arts was more confined to the ecclesiastical orders, so that, for domestic architecture, the period of perfection must be there placed much later than in Italy, and considered as extending to the middle of the fifteenth century; yet, as each city reached a certain point in civilisation, its streets became decorated with the same magnificence, varied only in style according to the

¹ [This chapter, with the omission of §§ 5-14 inclusive, forms ch. i. of vol. ii. of the "Travellers' Edition."]

² [Ruskin, it will be remembered, deprecated the idea that he supposed "Venetian architecture the most noble of the schools of Gothic": see *Seven Lamps*, Preface, 2nd ed. (Vol. VIII. p. 12), where he adds that "the Gothic of Verona is far nobler than that of Venice, and that of Florence nobler than that of Verona." See also the second letter in Appendix 13, Vol. X.]

materials at hand, and temper of the people. And I am not aware of any town of wealth and importance in the Middle Ages, in which some proof does not exist that, at its period of greatest energy and prosperity, its streets were inwrought with rich sculpture, and even (though in this, as before noticed,¹ Venice always stood supreme) glowing with colour and with gold. Now, therefore, let the reader,—forming for himself as vivid and real a conception as he is able, either of a group of Venetian palaces in the fourteenth century, or, if he likes better, of one of the more fantastic but even richer street scenes of Rouen, Antwerp, Cologne, or Nuremberg, and keeping this gorgeous image before him,—go out into any thoroughfare representative, in a general and characteristic way, of the feeling for domestic architecture in modern times: let him, for instance, if in London, walk once up and down Harley Street, or Baker Street, or Gower Street;² and then, looking upon this picture and on this,³ set himself to consider (for this is to be the subject of our following and final inquiry) what have been the causes which have induced so vast a change in the European mind.

§ 2. Renaissance architecture is the school which has conducted men's inventive and constructive faculties from the Grand Canal to Gower Street; from the marble shaft, and the lancet arch, and the wreathed leafage, and the glowing and melting harmony of gold and azure, to the square cavity in the brick wall. We have now to consider the causes and the steps of this change; and, as we endeavoured above to investigate the nature of Gothic, here to investigate also the nature of Renaissance.

§ 3. Although Renaissance architecture assumes very different forms among different nations, it may be conveniently referred to three heads:—Early Renaissance, consisting of the first corruptions introduced into the Gothic schools;

¹ [See *Stones of Venice*, vol. ii. ch. v. § 29 (Vol. X. p. 170).]

² [Gower Street is again selected, as a type of modern ugliness, in *Modern Painters*, vol. iii. ch. xvi. §§ 12, 13. Tennyson's "long, unlovely street" (*In Memoriam*, vii.) was Wimpole Street.]

³ [*Hamlet*, iii. 4.]

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Central or Roman Renaissance, which is the perfectly formed style; and Grotesque Renaissance, which is the corruption of the Renaissance itself.

§ 4. Now, in order to do full justice to the adverse cause, we will consider the abstract *nature* of the school with reference only to its best or Central examples. The forms of building which must be classed generally under the term *Early Renaissance* are, in many cases, only the extravagances and corruptions of the languid Gothic, for whose errors the classical principle is in nowise answerable. It was stated in the second chapter of the *Seven Lamps*,¹ that, unless luxury had enervated and subtlety falsified the Gothic forms, Roman traditions could not have prevailed against them; and, although these enervated and false conditions are almost instantly coloured by the classical influence, it would be utterly unfair to lay to the charge of that influence the first debasement of the earlier schools, which had lost the strength of their system before they could be struck by the plague.

§ 5. The manner, however, of the debasement of all schools of art, so far as it is natural, is in all ages the same; luxuriance of ornament, refinement of execution, and idle subtleties of fancy, taking the place of true thought and firm handling: and I do not intend to delay the reader long by the Gothic sick-bed, for our task is not so much to watch the wasting of fever in the features of the expiring king, as to trace the character of that Hazael who dipped the cloth in water, and laid it upon his face.² Nevertheless, it is necessary to the completeness of our view of the architecture of Venice, as well as to our understanding of the manner in which the Central Renaissance obtained its universal dominion, that we glance briefly at the principal forms into which Venetian Gothic first declined. They are two in number: one the corruption of the Gothic itself; the other a partial return to Byzantine forms: for the Venetian mind having carried the Gothic to a point at which

¹ [See Vol. VIII. p. 98, and author's note there.]

² [2 Kings viii. 15.]

it was dissatisfied, tried to retrace its steps, fell back first upon Byzantine types, and through them passed to the first Roman. But in thus retracing its steps, it does not recover its own lost energy. It revisits the places through which it had passed in the morning light, but it is now with wearied limbs, and under the gloomy shadows of evening.

§ 6. It has just been said that the two principal causes of natural decline in any school are over-luxuriance and over-refinement. The corrupt Gothic of Venice furnishes us with a curious instance of the one, and the corrupt Byzantine of the other. We shall examine them in succession.

Now, observe, first, I do not mean by *luxuriance* of ornament *quantity* of ornament.¹ In the best Gothic in the world there is hardly an inch of stone left unsculptured. But I mean that character of extravagance in the ornament itself which shows that it was addressed to jaded faculties; a violence and coarseness in curvature, a depth of shadow, a lusciousness in arrangement of line, evidently arising out of an incapability of feeling the true beauty of chaste form and restrained power. I do not know any character of design which may be more easily recognised at a glance than this over-lusciousness; and yet it seems to me that at the present day there is nothing so little understood as the essential difference between chasteness and extravagance, whether in colour, shade, or lines. We speak loosely and inaccurately of “overcharged” ornament, with an obscure feeling that there is indeed something in visible Form which is correspondent to Intemperance in moral habits; but without any distinct detection of the character which offends us, far less with any understanding of the most important lesson which there can be no doubt was intended to be conveyed by the universality of this ornamental law.

§ 7. In a word, then, the safeguard of highest beauty, in all visible work, is exactly that which is also the safeguard of conduct in the soul,—Temperance, in the broadest

¹ [Compare *Seven Lamps*, Vol. VIII. p. 52.]

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sense ; the Temperance which we have seen sitting on an equal throne with Justice amidst the Four Cardinal virtues,¹ and, wanting which, there is not any other virtue which may not lead us into desperate error. Now observe : Temperance, in the nobler sense, does not mean a subdued and imperfect energy ; it does not mean a stopping short in any good thing, as in Love or in Faith ; but it means the power which governs the most intense energy, and prevents its acting in any way but as it ought. And with respect to things in which there may be excess, it does not mean imperfect enjoyment of them ; but the regulation of their quantity, so that the enjoyment of them shall be greatest. For instance, in the matter we have at present in hand, temperance in colour does not mean imperfect or dull enjoyment of colour ; but it means that government of colour which shall bring the utmost possible enjoyment out of all hues. A bad colourist does not *love* beautiful colour better than the best colourist does, nor half so much. But he indulges in it to excess ; he uses it in large masses, and unsubdued ; and then it is a law of Nature, a law as universal as that of gravitation, that he shall not be able to enjoy it so much as if he had used it in less quantity. His eye is jaded and satiated, and the blue and red have life in them no more. He tries to paint them bluer and redder, in vain : all the blue has become grey, and gets greyer the more he adds to it : all his crimson has become brown, and gets more sere and autumnal the more he deepens it. But the great painter is sternly temperate in his work ; he loves the vivid colour with all his heart ; but for a long time he does not allow himself anything like it, nothing but sober browns and dull greys, and colours that have no conceivable beauty in them ; but these by his government become lovely : and after bringing out of them all the life and power they possess, and enjoying them to the uttermost,—cautiously, and as the crown of the work, and the consummation of its

¹ [Capital 9 in the Ducal Palace : see *Stones of Venice*, vol. ii. ch. viii. § 78.]

music, he permits the momentary crimson and azure, and the whole canvas is in a flame.

§ 8. Again, in curvature, which is the cause of loveliness in all form;¹ the bad designer does not enjoy it more than the great designer, but he indulges in it till his eye is satiated, and he cannot obtain enough of it to touch his jaded feeling for grace. But the great and temperate designer does not allow himself any violent curves; he works much with lines in which the curvature, though always existing, is long before it is perceived. He dwells on all these subdued curvatures to the uttermost, and opposes them with still severer lines to bring them out in fuller sweetness; and, at last, he allows himself a momentary curve of energy, and all the work is, in an instant, full of life and grace.

The curves drawn in Plate 7, opposite p. 268 of the first volume, were chosen entirely to show this character of dignity and restraint, as it appears in the lines of nature, together with the perpetual changefulness of the degrees of curvature in one and the same line; but although the purpose of that plate was carefully explained in the chapter which it illustrates, as well as in the passages of *Modern Painters* therein referred to,² so little are we now in the habit of considering the character of abstract lines, that it was thought by many persons that this plate only illustrated Hogarth's reversed line of beauty,³ even although the curve of the salvia leaf, which was the one taken from that plate for future use, in architecture, was not a reversed or serpentine curve at all. I shall now, however, I hope, be able to show my meaning better.

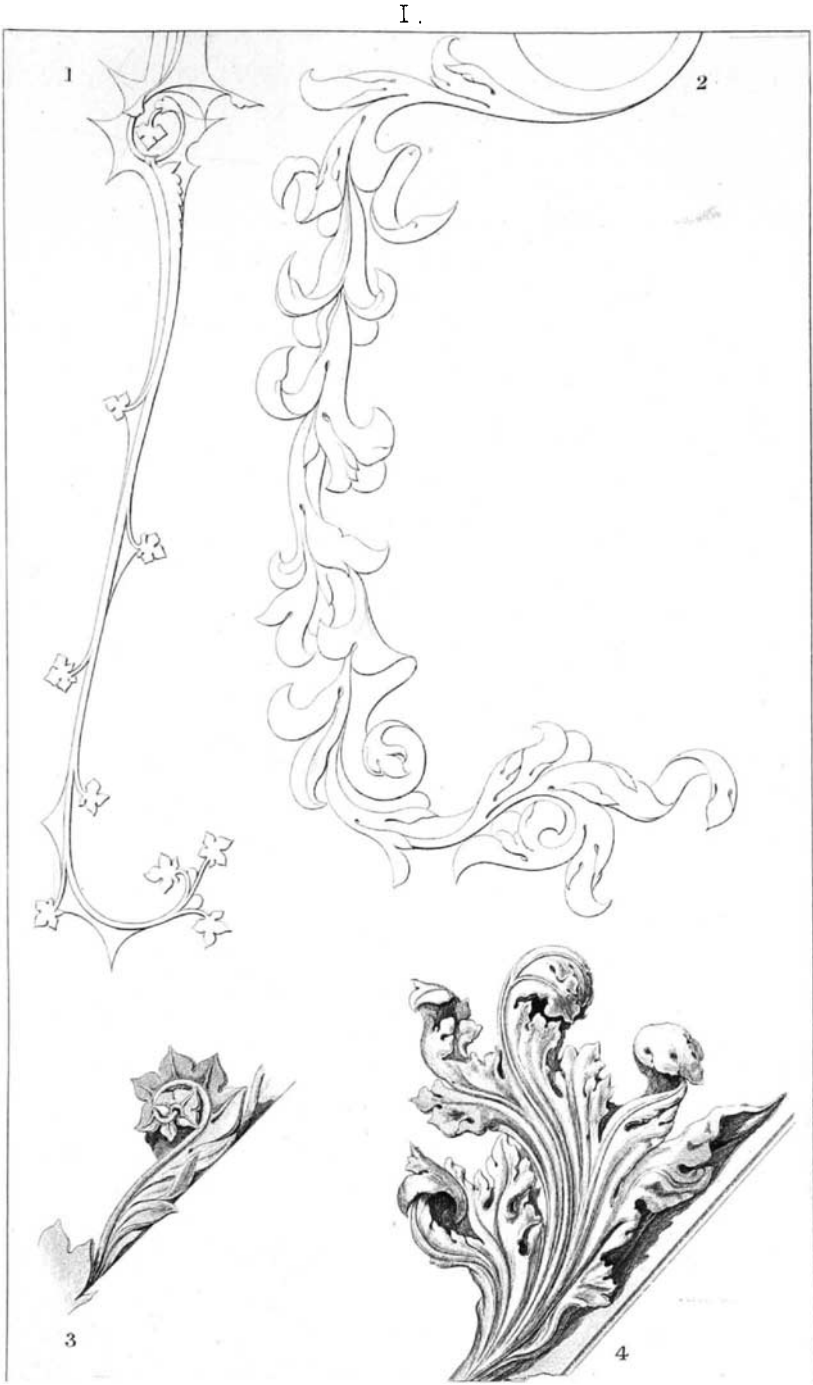
§ 9. Fig. 1, in Plate 1, opposite, is a piece of ornamentation from a Norman-French manuscript of the thirteenth

¹ [See *Modern Painters*, vol. ii. (Vol. IV. p. 87).]

² [The references to the present edition are: Vol. IV. pp. 87, 88.]

³ [In Hogarth's portrait of himself in the National Gallery (No 112), there is a palette with the "Line of Beauty and Grace" marked upon it, and the date 1745. He explained the mystery in 1753 by publishing his *Analysis of Beauty*, in which he propounded the doctrine that "a winding or serpentine line was the source of all that is beautiful in works of art." "No Egyptian hieroglyphic," he there says, "ever amused more than my 'Line of Beauty' did for a time. Painters and sculptors came to me to know the meaning of it, being as much puzzled with it as other people."]

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Temperance and Intemperance,
In Curvature.

I. EARLY RENAISSANCE

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century,¹ and fig. 2 from an Italian one of the fifteenth. Observe in the first its stern moderation in curvature; the gradually united lines *nearly straight*, though none quite straight, used for its main limb, and contrasted with the bold but simple offshoots of its leaves, and the noble spiral from which it shoots, these in their turn opposed by the sharp trefoils and thorny cusps. And see what a reserve of resource there is in the whole; how easy it would have been to make the curves more palpable and the foliage more rich, and how the noble hand has stayed itself, and refused to grant one wave of motion more.

§ 10. Then observe the other example, in which, while the same idea is continually repeated, excitement and interest are sought for by means of violent and continual curvatures wholly unrestrained, and rolling hither and thither in confused wantonness. Compare the character of the separate lines in these two examples carefully, and be assured that wherever this redundant and luxurious curvature shows itself in ornamentation, it is a sign of jaded energy and failing invention. Do not confuse it with fulness or richness. Wealth is not necessarily wantonness: a Gothic moulding may be buried half a foot deep in thorns and leaves, and yet will be chaste in every line; and a late Renaissance moulding may be utterly barren and poverty-stricken, and yet will show the disposition to luxury in every line.

§ 11. Plate 20, in the second volume,² though prepared for the special illustration of the notices of capitals, becomes peculiarly interesting when considered in relation to the points at present under consideration. The four leaves in the upper row are Byzantine; the two middle rows are transitional, all but fig. 11, which is of the formed Gothic; fig. 12 is perfect Gothic of the finest time (Ducal Palace,

¹ [This ornament comes from a Book of Hours, *circa* 1300, formerly in Ruskin's library. Its origin, however, is North-East France, somewhere between Saint Omer and Arras. The spray is part of an initial which comes on folio 84b. The Nativity engraved in *Modern Painters*, vol. iii. (Fig. 1), is from the same manuscript, which is there referred to (ch. iv. § 9 n.). On the subject of "temperance and intemperance" in curves compare *Modern Painters*, vol. iv. ch. xvii. § 10.]

² [Vol. X., opposite p. 431; for further references to the Plate, see below, p. 276.]

oldest part); fig. 13 is Gothic beginning to decline; fig. 14 is Renaissance Gothic in complete corruption.

Now observe, first, the Gothic naturalism advancing gradually from the Byzantine severity; how from the sharp, hard, formalised conventionality of the upper series the leaves gradually expand into more free and flexible animation, until in fig. 12 we have the perfect living leaf as if just fresh gathered out of the dew. And then, in the last two examples, and partly in fig. 11, observe how the forms which can advance no longer in animation, advance, or rather decline, into luxury and effeminacy as the strength of the school expires.

§ 12. In the second place, note that the Byzantine and Gothic schools, however differing in degree of life, are both alike in *temperance*, though the temperance of the Gothic is the nobler, because it consists with entire animation. Observe how severe and subtle the curvatures are in all the leaves from fig. 1 to fig. 12, except only in fig. 11; and observe especially the firmness and strength obtained by the close approximation to the straight line in the lateral ribs of the leaf, fig. 12. The longer the eye rests on these temperate curvatures the more it will enjoy them, but it will assuredly in the end be wearied by the morbid exaggeration of the last example.

§ 13. Finally, observe—and this is very important—how one and the same character in the work may be a sign of totally different states of mind, and therefore in one case bad, and in the other good. The examples, fig. 3 and fig. 12, are both equally pure in line; but one is subdivided in the extreme, the other broad in the extreme, and both are beautiful. The Byzantine mind delighted in the delicacy of subdivision which nature shows in the fern-leaf or parsley-leaf; and so, also, often the Gothic mind, much enjoying the oak, thorn, and thistle. But the builder of the Ducal Palace used great breadth in his foliage, in order to harmonise with the broad surface of his mighty wall, and delighted in this breadth as nature delights in the sweeping freshness of