

An Evergreen Lesson in Cultural Heritage: Ruskin, Tintoretto and the *Scuola Grande di San Rocco*

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Abstract John Ruskin was a writer on a wide variety of subjects, notably art, architecture and questions of social justice, which he always saw in relation to one another. His book *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), associates the skill of the medieval Venetian craftsman, his attention to natural forms and his care for his material, with Christian humility in the face of God's work. The quest for beauty was an ethical matter and art reflected the society that created it. Ruskin had been led to the study of Venice by his discovery in 1845 of the then-neglected painter, Jacopo Tintoretto, whose work in the *Scuola Grande di San Rocco* overwhelmed him. Tintoretto was not, of course, a medieval artist, but Ruskin believed he was trying to maintain the values of medieval Venice against the pressures of a decadent era. Moreover, Tintoretto had been working for an institution that combined care for art with social responsibility. This paper argues that, when in 1871 Ruskin founded a utopian charity called the Guild of St George, he had the Venetian scuole in mind. 'Guild' served as a rough translation of scuola. By this time, he was much preoccupied with Vittore Carpaccio and his work for the *Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni* as well. St George is the patron saint of England and Carpaccio's painting of him at war with a fire-breathing monster provided Ruskin with a perfect image of his struggle against the dragons of industrialisation and ruthless competition.

Summary 1 Ruskin, Venice and the ethics of architecture. – 2 Ruskin's discovery of Tintoretto in the *Scuola di San Rocco*. – 3 The Guild of St George. – 4 The Venetian Scuole.

Keywords Ruskin. Guilt. Tintoretto. Social justice.

1 Ruskin, Venice and the Ethics of Architecture

In Venice the name John Ruskin is a famous one. He is known as a writer on art and architecture, perhaps as a champion of Venetian art in particular, perhaps as one of those nineteenth century writers who juxtaposed the culture of their time with that of the high Middle Ages to the detriment of modern civilisation. In a number of books, most notably *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), he raised the status of medieval architecture in Venice, at that time widely despised in comparison to the work of the Renaissance, and called for the preservation of the surviving buildings, many of them then in a ruinous condition but threatened by a more sinister kind of destruction: misguided restoration.

When he died in 1900, his younger friend, the Venetian nobleman Alvise Zorzi caused a plaque to be raised to his memory on the hotel where he had lived during his last long visit to Venice. It appeared a matter of days after Ruskin's death and reads as follows:

JOHN RUSKIN
ABITÒ QUESTA CASA (1877)
SACERDOTE DELL'ARTE
NELLE NOSTRE PIETRE NEL NOSTRO S. MARCO
QUASI IN OGNI MONUMENTO DELL'ITALIA
CERCÒ INSIEME
L'ANIMA DELL'ARTEFICE E L'ANIMA DEL POPOLO
OGNI MARMO OGNI BRONZO OGNI TELA
OGNI COSA GLI GRIDÒ
CHE BELLEZZA È RELIGIONE
SE VIRTÙ D'UOMO LA SUSCITI
E RIVERENZA DEL POPOLO L'ACCOLGA
IL COMUNE DI VENEZIA RICONOSCENTE
P.
XXVI GENNAIO MDCCCC¹

I think this succinctly conveys the importance of Ruskin as Zorzi thought of him: not just an art critic, not just a historian, but *sacerdote* – a 'priest' of art, a champion of the craftsman, of the *craftsman's soul* as expressed in the work of his hand, and of the sacred value of great art and good workmanship: not matters of taste so much as matters of religion and ethics. Zorzi does not say, but perhaps implies, that Ruskin was – in the fullest sense of the word – what we should call a conservationist. The two men had stood shoulder-to-shoulder in defence of the Basilica of San Marco when in 1878 its western façade was threatened with rebuilding, which in Ruskin's mind meant destruction. A work of architecture, for Ruskin – indeed, any work of honest craftsmanship – bears witness to the spirit of its making in the preciousness of its unique materials – 'precious' is very much Ruskin's word – and the careful skill of its workmanship. The material *thing* is irreplaceable, but its *value* is beyond materiality.

There is a sentence in *The Stones of Venice* where Ruskin contrasts the meanings communicated by architecture with those by other arts. He says:

A picture or poem is often little more than a feeble utterance of man's admiration of something out of himself; but architecture approaches more to a creation of his own, born of his necessities and expressive of

1 The plaque is on Pensione Calcina, Zattere, Venice.

his nature.²

There is a Platonic resonance to this, one that is at once profound and practical: the irreducible *material* of which a building is made, touched by the physical hand and tools of the workman and shaped to the needs of his society, speaks to us of their *spiritual* condition. In a later book on Venice, *St Mark's Rest* (1877), Ruskin says this:

Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts; the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others; but of the three, the only quite trustworthy one is the last. The acts of a nation may be triumphant by its good fortune; and its words mighty by the genius of a few of its children: but its art, only by the general gifts and common sympathies of the race. (24.203)

And in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) - in many ways a prelude to *The Stones of Venice* - he denounces the nineteenth century practice of restoration in similar terms:

Neither by the public, nor by those who have the care of public monuments, is the true meaning of the word *restoration* understood. It means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed. Do not let us deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is impossible, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture... [T]he life of the whole, that spirit which is given only by the hand and eye of the workman, can never be recalled. Another spirit may be given by another time, and it is then a new building; but the spirit of the dead workman cannot be summoned up, and commanded to direct other hands, and other thoughts. [8.242]

This understanding of architecture - and indeed, of visual art in general - has made an incalculable contribution to modern thought: not just for practical designers - though it is worth noting that Ruskin was admired by such surprising figures as Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Gropius, to name but three - but for theorists and practitioners of conservation. It is very clear that the great Venetian architect and craftsman Carlo Scarpa (1906-78), for instance, looked to Ruskin for his principles

² Cook Wedderburn (1903-2), 10.213. Future references to this edition will be given inside the text in the form '10. 213'.

when, after the destruction of the WWII, he masterminded the architectural restoration of the Veneto. This is especially clear in Verona, a city Ruskin loved as much as Venice, and often discussed and described in Venetian contexts. Scarpa does not replicate and never seeks to suggest that all is now well – that the ruin wrought by war has never happened. Anyone looking with an educated eye at (for example) the Castelvecchio in Verona can see how the scars of war have been incorporated into the living building and how its ‘restoration’ has meant adding things to it that are juxtaposed to the surviving parts of the original building. Paradoxically, Scarpa’s modern modification of the building contributes to its meaning, enhances it, and yet conducts that meaning into our own time.

Scarpa’s taste is not like Ruskin’s taste. One would not expect that of a student of Le Corbusier’s, an artist steeped in the culture of Modernism. But one of the important things about Ruskin as a thinker is that it is possible to separate his *taste*, which is sometimes dogmatically expressed, from his *principles*, which often turn out to be adaptable to the changed conditions of modern life. The charity I work for, the Guild of St George, which was founded by Ruskin in 1871, is a case in point. We today describe the Guild – referring back to Ruskin’s original project – as “The charity for arts, crafts and the rural economy” and we see ourselves as giving expression to our founder’s values in the context of modern life. Created to deal with the problems created by mechanisation, industrial expansion and increased social mobility, it has survived, in my judgement, because we act according to Ruskin’s principles and not according to the accidents of nineteenth century taste. The difficulty of imitating what is imagined to be the taste of past eras is well illustrated by Ruskin’s role in a key movement of his day, the Gothic Revival. Few influenced that movement to the extent that he did, yet with a few exceptions, there was hardly a Gothic building of his lifetime that Ruskin felt able to praise. It is possible to think that he was excessively critical and yet broadly concur with the case he made. His aversion to such buildings arose in part from his own experience of working on one: the splendid, but flawed and incomplete, Oxford Museum of 1858. Now called the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, it was designed by the brilliant Irish architect Benjamin Woodward (1816-61), whom Ruskin did much to encourage. What Ruskin hoped to do with the museum was to combine his understanding of medieval methods of workmanship with a modern account of geological periods, such that the stonework of the building was itself an object of knowledge for the student and the system of carved decoration taught the orders of natural growth. He discovered that it was impossible to revive an artistic style without the way of life that gave rise to it, and that it was precisely that fact that made the ‘book’ of a nation’s art ‘wholly trustworthy’ in representing its past. Moreover, by an extraordinary irony that underlines the problems of thinking unhistorically, the Museum began to function in precisely the year,

1859, when the biblically inspired account of natural order embodied in its ornament was broken apart by the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Indeed, it was in the Oxford Museum that the famous debate on evolution between T. H. Huxley and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce took place.

2 Ruskin's discovery of Tintoretto in the *Scuola di San Rocco*

But Ruskin had been brooding on the relation between art and social order for some time – particularly since 1845. He had spent much of that year touring Italy and studying Italian art in preparation for the second of the five volumes of his first work, *Modern Painters*. A chance recommendation led him into the *Scuola Grande di San Rocco*, then in a sad state of neglect and dilapidation, and he was overwhelmed – in his account, unexpectedly – by the fifty-two great canvases of Jacopo Tintoretto. He had seen and thought well of Tintoretto before but had had no idea of the ambition, scope and accomplishment of his work. Judgements of Tintoretto in the mid-nineteenth century tended to concur with the account given of him by his contemporary Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Painters*.³ For Vasari the great Venetians were anyway inferior to the Florentines: he quoted Michelangelo as saying that Titian could not really draw, and himself spoke of Tintoretto as a careless painter who had undertaken ambitious schemes he lacked the skill to sustain. Ruskin in 1845 was a precocious and unshakably self-confident 26 year-old who, having published the first volume of his book to great critical acclaim less than two years before, was inclined to trust his own judgements against any sort of orthodoxy. His response to the pictures in the *Scuola* strengthened his belief in his 'own gift and function as an interpreter' (4.354), but his faith in his own powers of perception somehow coexisted with a surprising humility in the face of spiritual stature.

The first volume of *Modern Painters* had been primarily concerned with English painting – in particular, with that of J. M. W. Turner, which Ruskin wanted to champion and defend, as well as with several of his minor contemporaries. He praised these artists at the expense of the seventeenth and eighteenth century painters most admired in early nineteenth century England – in particular Claude Lorraine, Salvator Rosa and the Dutch landscapists. But between that first volume of 1843 and the second volume of 1846, Ruskin had come to know a body of art he had not before been aware of or had not sufficiently attended to, and this discovery now substantially modified the message of *Modern Painters*. The art in question was the Italian art which preceded Michelangelo and Raphael, and was

3 *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (1550).

still absurdly known (and judged) as 'primitive'. Ruskin began to study what he was to call the *Age of the Masters*, the Italian art of the Quattrocento. He began to value it much above the art he had been taught to admire: Raphael's, for instance, and Titian's (though he never lost his love of Titian the colourist). But having experienced this change of heart he was hugely discomfited when, on 23 September 1845, he entered the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, severely damaged by Austrian guns and generally disregarded, to discover a painter of a spiritual intensity comparable to Fra Angelico's but with the skill and dynamism of Titian and Michelangelo combined. Ruskin's editor E. T. Cook was surely right to suggest – though oddly Ruskin never said it himself – that he found in Tintoretto something of the bravura power, the broad spontaneity of execution, he had also seen in Turner: in Cook's phrase, "a spiritual and technical affinity" (4. xlv). It was a mystery. "I have been overwhelmed today", he wrote to his father, "by a man whom I never dreamed of – Tintoret. I always thought him a good & clever & forcible painter, but I had not the slightest notion of his enormous powers" (4: xxxvii). The following day he wrote again:

I never was so utterly crushed to the earth before any human intellect as I was to-day – before Tintoret. ... He took it so entirely out of me... that I could do nothing at last but lie on a bench and laugh. ... Tintoret don't [sic] seem able to stretch himself till you give him a canvas forty feet square, and then – he lashes out like a leviathan, and heaven and earth come together. (4. xxxviii).

Ruskin had begun to think that Italian art was falling into decay by the mid-sixteenth century but here was a giant who had lived and worked till 1594. This revelation led him to the next stage of his life's work:

Tintoretto swept me away at once into the 'mare maggiore' of the schools of painting which crowned the power and perished in the fall of Venice; so forcing me into the study of the history of Venice herself; and through that into what else I have traced or told of the laws of national strength and virtue. (35.372)⁴

As a result, he put *Modern Painters* on ice for several years and settled down to write, first, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and then *The Stones of Venice*.

The precise words Ruskin uses are important: *the laws of national strength and virtue*. In other words, Ruskin became convinced that the

4 "È faticoso lo studio della pittura, e sempre si fa il mare maggiore", said he[Tintoretto], who of all men was least likely to have left us discouraging report of anything that majesty of intellect could grasp, or continuity of labour overcome" (4:27).

beauty of Venice had its roots in the virtues of Venetian *life*. Not the life of contemporary Venice, which he saw as demoralised and impoverished, but the life of the people who had built and lived and worshipped in the buildings he admired, the Byzantine and Gothic houses and churches of the Middle Ages. The special value of Tintoretto, surely – though to my knowledge Ruskin nowhere explicitly states this – was that he had achieved what he did, a religious art of deep conviction and intensity, in a Venice that had begun to lose the spiritual virtues that spoke to him from the walls of the Frari or San Marco. It is possible to argue that there is a great deal in the life of medieval Venice that will not bear moral examination – the whole saga of the siege of Constantinople, for a single and significant instance – but I shall defer that issue for a while.

Ruskin saw in Tintoretto a struggle not unlike the one he had written of in regard to Turner and was feeling in himself: the need to hold on to an innocent Christian faith and goodness in a society increasingly turning towards materialism, greed and – to use a favourite word of his – infidelity. I suspect that by ‘infidelity’ he meant not only a betrayal of Christ and his teachings but, more broadly, an abandonment of the truths of good craftsmanship and accurate observation. He seems indeed to have thought of these disciplines, spiritual and vocational, as two sides of the same coin. It should be stressed that he considered Tintoretto, despite his best endeavours, damaged by this infidelity. He did not think him uniformly successful and, lavish as his praise of the painter is, he can also be disarmingly severe with him when he fails to live up to his own standards. Anyone who looks at a lot of Tintoretto’s paintings knows that they are – to use an English colloquialism – very ‘hit-or-miss’ and there are probably more failures than triumphant successes. But when he *is* successful, Ruskin’s praise knows no bounds. For instance, when in an appendix to *The Stones of Venice*, having given a thorough account of every Tintoretto in the Scuola, he comes to *The Crucifixion*, he simply declares:

I must leave this picture to work its will on the spectator; for it is beyond all analysis, and above all praise. (11.428)

3 The Guild of St George

Tintoretto’s *Crucifixion* was beyond analysis and praise partly because its value was as much moral and spiritual as artistic. He was conscious of Tintoretto as contributing – with commitment and some passion – to a charitable institution. Unfortunately, Ruskin’s observations on the Venetian *scuole* are scattered and hardly coherent. It is nevertheless beyond doubt that the historic presence in the city of corporations of lay people dedicated to charitable works and at the same time acting as patrons of

major art impressed him greatly and inspired him in his hopes for a better world - in particular a better England, as he saw it, freed from its industrial and commercial bondage. It seems almost certain that he had the *scuole* in mind when, in 1871, he founded St George's Company.

It was not till 1878 that St George's Company became the Guild of St George. For the rest of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Guilds now become a feature in the cultural landscape, mainly but not exclusively in the Arts and Crafts Movement, which looked to Ruskin as its prophet and progenitor. From the 1880s on, we hear of the Art Workers' Guild, founded by the architect W. R. Lethaby and others, A.H. Mackmurdo's The Century Guild and C.R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft. In the early twentieth century, there is the Catholic Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic founded by the sculptor and designer Eric Gill, and some craft Guilds are still active today - for example, the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen, founded in the 1920s from some of the earlier groupings. All these Guilds were concerned with the discipline and well-being of the workman in an industrial age. There were also Guilds that were entirely social and charitable in their orientation. There is, for instance, a radical movement in the Church of England called the Guild of St Matthew, which was founded by the Christian Socialist Stewart Headlam. Very much influenced by Ruskin, it worked for the poor and destitute in cities and, like the Guild of St George, is still active today. And in the early twentieth century a syndicalist movement in the British Labour Party, acknowledging the influence of Ruskin and William Morris, came to be known as the Guild Socialist movement. Certain key thinkers in English ethical Socialism were associated with it: G. D. H. Cole, R. H. Tawney and J. A. Hobson.

The word had not been much used since the Middle Ages, when Guilds were a key feature of daily life. According to Wikipedia,

A guild is an association of artisans or merchants who control the practice of their craft in a particular town. The earliest types of guild were formed as *confraternities* of tradesmen [my emphasis]. They were organized in a manner something between a professional association, a trade union, a cartel, and a secret society.⁵

The early medieval universities were regarded as guilds or confraternities of scholars, and something of that character is still to be found in England in the Fellowship system of Oxford and Cambridge Colleges. It is clear that *confraternità* is also the word commonly used to this day to describe the Venetian *scuole*. The *scuole* were, as one editor of Ruskin puts it,

5 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guild>.

lay confraternities, [which] had much in common with other European guilds, although they flourished longer. Membership was based on a common craft or nationality, a particular religious cult, or a charity to which the members devoted themselves.

Members were bound by their *scuola*'s code of rules, pledging themselves, in particular, to come to the aid of fellow members in distress. An annual subscription provided the necessary funds, and where a surplus was available this was frequently put towards refurbishing the premises. Many of Venice's leading artists contributed to this end and thus the *scuole* came to play a very important role as patrons of the arts. (Whittick 1976)

There are several things to notice in this description. The first is that the *scuole* were brotherhoods or fellowships. They were not engaged in commerce or competition; they were dedicated to serving the societies they lived in, both the surrounding society and the membership of the *scuola* in question. This is still so in the Scuola di San Rocco today, as its current *Statute* indicate:

Scopi principali della Scuola, oltre alla manutenzione degl'insigni monumenti d'arte e della Chiesa votiva, erano e sono: la mutua assistenza fra i Confratelli, l'esercizio della carità verso i poveri, specialmente malati, l'aiuto ai carcerati o alle loro famiglie, nonché la somministrazione di sussidi dotali a donzelle maritande e ciò sempre nei limiti dei bilanci annuali debitamente approvati.⁶

There are considerable similarities between this and Ruskin's Guild of St George, as I hope to show.

The second thing we should notice in the brief account of the *scuole* that I have quoted is the fact that they were *patrons of the arts*. Today that is what they are mainly remembered for, but what Ruskin insists upon in his valuations of Venetian art and his plans for his own *scuola*, the Guild of St George, is the proximity (in their practices) of art, craftsmanship and charitable deeds. We tend to go to the Scuola today as if to a gallery where the work of a great painter is to be seen, and we often thereby miss the true significance of the paintings. Like the Gospels themselves, these paintings focus on the irreducibly physical expression of human need: the need for food, drink, clothing, health and healing, and relief from pain – but it is these physical facts that embody the spiritual gifts of God and call forth from the human observer – in intention, the *confratello* (or since 1977, *consorella*) of the Scuola – equivalent acts of charity. One of the key things

6 *Statuto della Scuola Grande Arciconfraternita di San Rocco in Venezia.*

Ruskin learns from Tintoretto is that 'holiness' is not a feebly ethereal attribute pertaining to the righteous, but adherence to the primary law of the universe, which he calls (in *Modern Painters V*) 'the Law of Help', the business of giving material help where it is needed by another, the help of neighbour to neighbour, such help embodying the love of God: 'the Helpful One', as Ruskin calls him. It is as far as it possibly could be from the capitalist values of free competition and enlightened self-interest:

Government and co-operation [says Ruskin in both *Modern Painters V* and his treatise on economics, *Unto this Last*] are in all things and eternally the Laws of Life. Anarchy and competition, eternally, and in all things, the Laws of Death. (7:207)

Tintoretto, of course, was a professional artist and earned money as the decorator of the Scuola San Rocco, but many of his paintings were given to the confraternity *gratis*, and, though it is clear that they were sometimes given in order to attract further paid commissions, the fact remains that Tintoretto was not notably well paid for the extraordinary haul of paintings, some of them among the largest ever painted at that date.

I do not want to force an easy connection between the *scuole* and the Guild of St George. The original purpose of the Guild was, as Ruskin says,

simply the purchase of land in healthy districts, and the employment of labourers on the land, under the carefulest supervision, and with every proper means of mental instruction ... this is the only way of permanently bettering the material condition of the poor. (30.17)

This was in response to Ruskin's frustrated sense that the country he lived in was said to be so wealthy, despite the fact that so many of its citizens appeared to be so poor.

I have listened to many ingenious persons who say we are better off now than ever we were before - he wrote - I do not know how well off we were before, but I know positively that many deserving persons ... have great difficulty in living in these improved circumstances... For my own part, I will put up with this state of things, passively, not an hour longer'. (27.12-13)

The concerns, therefore, were urban poverty and rural decline. Ruskin wanted to save agriculture from industrial conditions of labour and production and to preserve the countryside from pollution and squalor. He wanted a healthy life for those who worked on the land and nutritious food for consumers. He believed that human beings needed contact with beauty and the natural world just as they needed food and drink: that the poor

in slums and factories, deprived of such things, starved inwardly. He also associated the love of nature with our response to it in art and craftsmanship. He originally hoped that the Guild would be based on communities which would have their own schools, libraries and art galleries. It was a utopian conception, pre-industrial economically but distinctively post-Enlightenment in its sense of the human potential in everyone. It arose from Ruskin's despair at the condition of industrial England, a competitive society obsessed with profit, which, indifferent to the beneficence of nature, appeared to care nothing for the weak and unfortunate. The Guild had and has no single base, so it has never served a single community as the *scuole* can and do. But there are nevertheless similarities to the *scuole*. Ruskin seems to have thought that the first duty of any citizen – certainly of any Christian – was to deal directly with the trouble on one's doorstep, the immediate suffering of one's literal neighbour. If one could not deal with that, there was no hope of solving the large issues of society. This principle was clearly at the heart of the *scuole*, too, as Ruskin was clearly aware.

4 The Venetian Scuole

Ruskin announced the inception of 'St George's Fund' in a series of "Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain", which he called *Fors Clavigera*. The series continued, with a few interruptions caused by illness, till 1884 and was eventually published as a four-volume book. I have no time to go into the significance of the strange title or the idiosyncrasies of this extraordinary work, except to say that it is a sort of running commentary on the problems of his day as Ruskin saw them, constructed with improvisatory brilliance in the intervals of a manically busy life. In this strange context, he set down his plans for what was to become in the course of its writing the Guild of St George – its rules and principles, its accounts, news of its activities, his dreams (often wildly unrealistic) for its future. That was by no means the sole purpose of *Fors*, but anything Ruskin raised as a topic in it was likely to be interwoven with the business of the Guild.

For instance, in Letter 75, written in March 1877, Ruskin turns his attention to the first patron saint of Venice, St. Theodore, as he appears with his crocodile on one of the two columns at the entrance to the Piazzetta. Ruskin had been writing a brilliant account of those two columns in what he calls his 'little Venetian guide' (29:61), *St Mark's Rest* (also 1877), and the subject had spilt over into *Fors*. It led him in particular to the Scuola named after that early patron, the Scuola di San Teodoro, and to what he calls the *precious mariegola* (29:64n) of that confraternity, which he had been studying in the Museo Correr. A *mariegola* – *Maria regola*, I suppose – is a document including the rule and articles of association of a lay order. It is, as Ruskin expresses it in *Fors*, Venice's

Mother Rule of St. Theodore, - the Rule, from the thirteenth century down, of her chief Club, or School, of knights and gentlemen.

“But meditate a little first” he goes on, “on that Venetian word ‘Mother-Law’” something very different he implies, with heavy irony, to the kinds of law that prevail in modern capitalist England. This *mariegola*, he says, is “ever watchful, merciful, life-giving” (29:62-3), like a mother brooding over her child.

This feminine aspect finds its complement in the main purpose of Ruskin’s letter, which is to celebrate the knightly role of St Theodore, but before he goes on to that he gives an elaborate footnote, which includes a long “account of the nature of the *Schools* of Venice, of which [San Teodoro] was the earliest”.⁷ This account is by one of his contemporaries, a man named Edward Cheney:

Though religious confraternities are supposed to have existed at a much earlier period, their first historical mention at Venice dates from the middle of the thirteenth century. They were of various sorts; some were confined to particular guilds and callings, while others included persons of every rank and profession. The first object of all these societies was religious and charitable. Good works were to be performed, and the practices of piety cherished. In all, the members were entitled to receive assistance from the society in times of need, sickness, or any other adversity.⁸

The ‘Confraternità Grandi’ (though all had the same object) were distinguished by the quantity, as well as by the quality, of their members, by their superior wealth, and by the magnificence of the buildings in which they assembled; buildings which still exist, and still excite the admiration of posterity, though the societies to which they owed their existence have been dispossessed and suppressed [as they were by Napoleon after his conquest of Venice].

The ‘Confraternità Piccole’, less wealthy, and less magnificently lodged, were not the less constituted societies, with their own rules and charters, and having their own chapel, or altar, in the church of their patron-saint, in the sacristy of which their *mariegola* was usually preserved. Many of the confraternities had a temporal as well as a spiritual object, and those which were composed exclusively of members

7 The account is taken, he tells us, from Cheney (1867-8).

8 Cfr. the prayer ‘for the whole state of Christ’s Church’ in the Church of England’s *Book of Common Prayer* (1662): “And we most humbly beseech thee, of thy goodness, O Lord, to comfort and succour all those who, in this transitory life, are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity”.

of the same trade regulated their worldly concerns, and established the rules by which the Brothers of the Guild should be bound. Their bye-laws were subject to the approval of the Government; they were stringent and exclusive, and were strictly enforced. No competition was permitted (29:64-65n).

When he noted this – though he makes no mention of the fact – Ruskin was engaged in a struggle with lawyers to determine what his charity should be called. It was to have been St George’s Company, perhaps “a Club, or School, of knights and gentlemen”, an army of Companions. But legally – and there was and is great irony in the fact – a Company in modern English law has nothing to do with companionship. It is a body that has combined in order to make profit in competition with other companies – precisely what Ruskin’s brothers-in-arms were not supposed to be interested in. When the following year he settled on the word “Guild” not yet widely in use as a modern category, he surely remembered Cheney’s account of the *mariegola* and “the rules by which the Brothers of the Guild should be bound”.

But to return to St Theodore as a model for Guild activity:

St. Mark is [the] standard-bearer [of the Venetians] in the war of their spirit against all spiritual evil; St. Theodore their standard-bearer in the war of their body against material and fleshly evil: not the evil of sin, but of material malignant force ... St. Theodore ... is the Chevalier, or Cavalier, of Venice, her first of loving knights, in war against all base-ness, all malignity; in the deepest sense, St. Theodore, literally ‘God gift’, is Divine life in nature He is first seen ... in the form of a youth of extreme beauty; and his first contest is with a dragon very different from St. George’s... (29-62)

I am not sure why St Theodore’s dragon is so different from St George’s, but both are monster-slaying saints with roots in classical mythology, connected (as Ruskin was aware) with such figures as Hercules and Theseus. In the classical world such figures stand for the power of human civilisation to drive out darkness and institute order, culture and the rule of light. In the Christian dispensation their battle is primarily with evil and their actions echo the apocalyptic battle of St Michael the Archangel against Satan, Prince of Darkness. The primary significance of St George for Ruskin is almost too obvious to mention. He is the patron saint of England and stands for England whenever she sets herself against evil or tyranny. Such a significance on its own, however, would have carried little weight for Ruskin, who wanted above all to question English values as they appeared in his own era, and the dragon is quite as much a symbol of England as the saint. As Marcus Waithe has put it, ‘he came to associate dragon-slaying with the fight against social injustice. The dragon represented not just

the enemy of mankind, but also the fire and smoke expelled by England's industrial enterprises.

St George also had other associations, and is regarded if not as the patron of Venice - no saint can challenge St Mark - then as one of the city's chief protectors along with San Rocco and San Teodoro, all three of them patrons of Venetian *scuole*. As a saint originating in the Eastern Mediterranean, possibly in Palestine, St George has come to represent the city's imperial role in the Levant: the patron of both the Greek and Dalmatian elements in the Venetian population. It was through that population and through another of the *scuole* that Ruskin's troubled patriotism, his love of Venice and his deep concern with myths and images of evil came creatively together.

In 1869 he discovered another painter who was to seize his imagination as only Tintoretto and Turner had done before. This was Vittore Carpaccio, who always gives his name on his pictures as Victor Carpathius, suggesting that he was of Slavic origin. Ruskin became obsessed with Carpaccio and in particular with the St Ursula cycle in the *Accademia*, originally yet another of the *scuole*, that of the *Carità*. But the first painting that seized him, then surprisingly little-known, was that of St George and the Dragon in the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni - St George of the Dalmatian Slavs - a charity founded in 1451 by Slavic benefactors, to aid poor sailors who were fellow-countrymen. Few pictures provide a better mirror for Ruskin's moral vision: the death and waste created by the dragon, the desolation of the city in the background and the constant purpose of the knight. In 1872 Ruskin made a drawing after Carpaccio's picture; he followed it with a strikingly beautiful watercolour of the saint's head and shoulders, and then gave both drawings to St George's Museum, the educational collection he created for the Guild in Sheffield. Commenting on the head, Marcus Wait he goes on to note the absence of a helmet:

In *Fors Clavigera* ... [he writes] Ruskin noted of Carpaccio's representation that "His St. George exactly reverses the practice of ours", in that "He rides armed, from shoulder to heel, in proof - but without his helmet". (27:475) He explains that "the real difficulty in dragon-fights [...] is not so much to kill your dragon, as to see him; at least to see him in time, it being too probable that he will see you first". We might consider [St George's] Museum in this, symbolic, light. It is an attempt to 'see' the dragon first, to take the initiative in the fight to teach better ways of witnessing the world.

It is worth reflecting just for a moment that if you needed a translation of the words Scuola di San Giorgio you could do worse than 'Guild of St George'.

Ruskin was pleased whenever he could find or create a bond between Venice and England, even if the implications of that bond were not of the happiest. So he relished the fact that a picture by a Venetian artist he loved could be used as a symbol of ethical and spiritual good in his native country. Long before he thought of the Guild of St George, he had been preoccupied with the legends of dragons and other monsters as symbols of evil and with those heroes who slay them as the preservers and champions of civilisation. The English artist he most admired, J. M. W. Turner, has a dragon that Ruskin reflects upon in depth in the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters* (1860). This is *The Apple of Contention in the Garden of the Hesperides*. The garden is, of course, 'protected' by this monster, and one can already see how, for Ruskin, it was going to symbolise the ills of modern society: the greed for profit, the oppression of the weak and the poisoning of divine nature. It is clear that the dragon's fire and smoke represent the mills of the polluting industrialists and that St George is anyone who resists or speaks out against a vicious economic order: in this case, St George is Turner, and perhaps Ruskin himself.

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