

The *Guide to the Principal Pictures in the Academy of Fine Arts at Venice* (1877) was one of the first of Ruskin's works to be translated into Italian, preceded only by G. Pasolini Zanelli's edition of 'The Shrine of the Slaves', the First Supplement to *St Mark's Rest*, published by George Allen in 1885.² The *Guide* came sixteen years later, when Maria Pezzè Pascolato selected it for her anthology volume, *Venezia* (1901), which also included translations of *St Mark's Rest* and other Ruskin writings on Venetian art.³ Pascolato's translation is an important work of cultural mediation, and remains valuable for its historical reconstruction of Venice as it was in the early years of the twentieth century, in particular for the arrangement of paintings in the Accademia galleries. (Cook and Wedderburn made ample use of the volume in this respect.)

Since *Venezia*, last re-issued in 1925, no further translation of the *Guide* has appeared; its fate has essentially been no different from that of its English original. The focus of much attention and debate at the time of publication, it has been over-shadowed, over the years, by the 'greater' works of Ruskin's early and middle periods. The various Italian translations of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, *The Stones of Venice* and *Modern Painters*, which have succeeded one another since the early twentieth century, have helped Italian readers to consolidate their knowledge of Ruskin's writings on Venetian art up to 1860. Those readers may well be surprised by this *Guide*, and may find it an unsettling, even disturbing work—not just by reason of its content but also because of the terms in which that content is expressed. In his scholarly introduction to this new translation of the *Guide* (*Guida ai principali dipinti dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia*, published by Electa, 2014), Paul Tucker shows in detail that the Ruskin of the *Guide* and *St Mark's Rest* re-thinks the ideological, cultural and religious premises in which *The Stones of Venice* and other early works had been grounded. A no less deeply critical reappraisal of those writings imbues the language in which they are expressed, radically transforming their syntactic and lexical superstructure. Rigorously and methodically, Ruskin rejects the persuasive elaboration of his early rhetoric for a more immediate and essential rendering of the 'truth' of the object. While the syntax of *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice* was broadly *hypotactic* (i.e. made up of long sentences involving many subordinate clauses) that of the *Guide*, with its short sentences, participle and gerund verb-forms and the habit of making lists, is noticeably more *paratactic*, which is to say, based on straightforward syntax and basic sentence forms. Punctuation is frequently and

markedly used with 'cutting' and 'linking' functions, with the full stop, the colon and the dash, so ubiquitous in Ruskin's diaries and private correspondence, signalling pauses, accelerations, changes of direction and resumptions. If the early Ruskin's vocabulary had been copious and tended to *variatio*, that of this later Ruskin is generally spare and essential, with a tendency to *repetitio*. And the marked use of adjectives in threes in the early books gives way to a much reduced use of attributes in general and to the insistent repetition of a handful of plain terms, most of them seemingly neutral or, at any rate, barely connotative.

As the argument of the *Guide* develops and its aesthetic perspective gradually emerges, these terms begin to perform a crucial role in the argument—semantic and emotional refrains which guide the reader through it. Quite ordinary adjectives such as *quiet* and *bright*, verbs such as *amuse* and *enjoy*, and their respective derivations, are woven together to form a fine web of fixed, recurrent meanings and functions.

The present translation, made in close collaboration with Paul Tucker, aims at the highest possible adherence, both formal and semantic, to the original, whose figures of repetition and brevity are marked features, and could neither be reduced in number nor modified. *Variatio*—variation of vocabulary by means of synonyms—is generally encouraged in Italian, but in this case, it was avoided in deference to the *Guide*'s deliberate grounding in these and only these stylistic characteristics.

And what about the presence of the reader: that *you* who is so insistently rebuked, reprimanded, exhorted and scolded in the *Guide*? How was Italian with its three pronouns for the English one—the familiar *tu*, the polite *Lei* and the plural *voi*—to register that person in its text? An older generation would have settled for *voi*, rather as a French writer would use *vous*; that is what Pascolato, for instance, uses as do all other translators without exception, but it is a usage which skates over the issue of who is being addressed and exploits the ambivalence of the English second person (both singular and plural). It is a form which, though widely used in Italian until a few decades ago, is hopelessly outdated today. Instead, we opted for *tu* and, in doing so, were guided by precise clues in the text. There are passages in Part II where Ruskin explicitly addresses the *British traveller* and the *modern British man of business*, but at such points one might suppose that he was picking out selected figures from among his readership. The singular reference of the pronoun is unequivocally manifested, however, in the use of *yourself* in one particular passage—at

once intimately paternalistic and complicit—in which Ruskin surprises his reader-visitor by removing him temporarily from the Galleries: *So (always supposing the day fine,) go down to your boat, and order yourself to be taken to the church of the Frari*. It is clear from this that the *Guide* finds its whole mode of communication on a familiar, one-to-one relationship, teacher to pupil, master to disciple, intimate to the point of being at times, almost brutally intrusive.

And here we find confirmation of the textual coherence of a work which is stylistically and rhetorically so much tighter and sparer than Ruskin's previous writings, moving in radically and provocatively new directions. Himself a guide *sui generis*, at once both aesthetic and spiritual, Ruskin leads his visitor through the galleries of the Academy and the 'sacred' sites of Venetian art addressing at once the mind, the eyes and the 'heart' of his reader. The same singular mode of address underpins *St Mark's Rest*, from which this volume offers an extract (the 'Shrine of the Slaves'), together with a fragment (not used at the time) from 'Carpaccio's Ape'. Such examples confirm the stylistic continuity that links these texts, written during the same period and arising out of the unified vision discussed in detail in Tucker's Introduction. The singular status of the *Guide*'s addressee—and the same is true of *St Mark's Rest*—appears all the more marked when we contrast it with passages (included here among the Supplementary Texts) taken from numbers of *Fors Clavigera* which date from the same period but explicitly address more than one singular reader: 'the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain'.

Lastly, among the challenges the *Guide* poses for an Italian translator are the complexities of those inter-linguistic passages for which the sources are Italian. In his attempt to recover the vestiges of Venice's historical and cultural past, Ruskin turned for the *Story of St Ursula* told in *Fors Clavigera* (and given here in the Supplementary Texts) to the English version by his pupil James Reddie Anderson, which was based on Francesco Zambrini's 1855 collection of legends of saints' lives,⁴ while for Veronese's famous interrogation before the Inquisitors he used his friend Edward Cheney's translation from the Venetian-language original held in the Venice Archives.⁵ Often presenting himself as sponsor of these researches, Ruskin does not summarise these texts but reprints them in full, thus expressing his deliberate intention to adhere to their sources by offering translations which bear linguistic traces of their originals. If Ruskin, therefore, presents us with translations from Italian to English that are as faithful as possible to their

sources, though in modernised versions, it seemed appropriate to reproduce as far as possible the original Italian versions but without obsolete, archaic or dialect forms and features. In so doing I hoped to give the Italian reader a taste of how the Ruskin of the 1870s thought of a good translation: one which ‘aims straight, and with almost fiercely fixed purpose, at getting into the heart and truth of the thing it has got to say; and unmistakably, at any cost of its own dignity, explaining that to the hearer, shrinking from no familiarity, and restricting itself from no expansion in terms, that will make the thing meant clearer’ (*Works* 31.116).

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NOTES

1. This article is based on my Translator’s Note to the *Guida ai principali dipinti dell’Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia*. I wish to thank Jeanne Clegg, Stuart Eagles and Clive Wilmer for their precious help in making the English version up to ‘what Ruskin and the *Guide* deserve’.

2. For a list of Italian translations of Ruskin’s works, see my *Saggi su Ruskin: Stile Retorica Traduzione*, Venezia, 2004, pp. 149-53; also in D. Lamberini (ed.), *L’eredità di John Ruskin nella cultura italiana del Novecento*, Firenze, 2006, pp. 241-246.

3. Maria Pezzè Pascolato (1869-1933) came from a family very active in Venetian political and social life. After taking a degree in letters and philosophy at the University of Padua and spending some

years in Tuscany, she returned to Venice in 1896, where she became deeply involved in promoting children’s and women’s education. The founder of the first children’s library in Italy, and first translator of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales, she wrote several novels for children and poems in the Venetian vernacular. She also translated extensively from the English—Carlyle and Thoreau as well as Ruskin.

4. Francesco Zambrini, *Collezioni di leggende inedite scritte nel buon secolo della lingua italiana*, Bologna, 1855.

5. A transcript is now available in Terisio Pignatti, *Paolo Veronese. Convito in casa Levi*, Venezia, 1986; and Maria Elena Massimi, *La cena in casa di Levi. Il Processo riaperto*, Venezia, 2011.

John Ruskin. *Guida ai principali dipinti nell’Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia*. Edited by Paul Tucker. Translated into Italian by Emma Sdegno. Electa, 2014. 224 pp. 25 Euros.

Ruskin’s *Guide to the Principal Pictures in the Academy of Fine Arts at Venice*, published in two parts in 1877, has never been much noticed. It was one of the books which Ruskin wrote to educate the ordinary English tourist and, as such, belongs with *Mornings in Florence* and *St Mark’s Rest*. Indeed, according to Companion Paul Tucker, the editor of this new Italian translation, it may originally have been intended as part of *St Mark’s Rest*, and much of what Ruskin wrote—for instance, about Carpaccio’s St Ursula cycle—seems to have been almost randomly divided between that book and the *Guide*. It is certainly the case that, at this stage in his life, Ruskin was manically writing more books than he would ever have been able to finish and all of them are effectively incomplete. Several, moreover, are touched from time to time with that note of near hysteria that, in the course of this same year, 1877, betrayed Ruskin into his conflict with Whistler. In February 1878 his mind broke down altogether and it does not seem to me mistaken to suggest that the extremes of emotional response that damage, for instance, *Mornings in Florence*, are the rumblings of an approaching avalanche, though Tucker is surely right to insist that, when Ruskin wrote the *Guide*, he had not yet lost his grip on reality.

As it happens, however, despite one or two extreme judgements, the *Guide to the Academy* is a balanced book: witty, valuably reflective and felicitous in its conversational style. A dozen years ago, I photocopied the Library Edition text, which is little more than forty pages long, stapled the pages together and took them round the Accademia Gallery, reading as I went. There is no better way of reading Ruskin on art. There were one or two problems of

identification: many pictures have been moved, transferred to the reserve collection or sent back to their original homes, and the system of numbering has more than once been changed. But Paul Tucker has worked it all out and gives the reader the correct modern references, so the first value of this Italian edition is that it can easily be used: which is also the first of many reasons why I think the publishers have made a mistake in declining to publish an English-language edition.

Despite those problems of identification, my experiment proved to me for the umpteenth time how closely, accurately and intelligently Ruskin sees. The judgements were, of course, eccentric if measured against the hierarchies accepted in Ruskin’s day, and many of them will still seem strange now. But if you are willing to consider the possibility that the fifteenth century (‘the Age of the Masters’) produced greater art than the age of Michelangelo, and that Vittore Carpaccio is a greater artist than Titian, Veronese or even, by this stage, the revered Tintoretto, you can surrender yourself to a civilised engagement with Ruskin. By the standards of his later work, there is not much rant or hyperbole. One reason why the book is neglected, as Tucker points out, is that Ruskin simply refuses to do what guidebooks normally do. He declines to cover the ground with a supposedly neutral perspective and ignores the accumulated judgements of the centuries. Carpaccio’s *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* is ‘the best picture’ in the whole Gallery; Titian’s *Presentation of the Virgin* is ‘To me, simply the most stupid and uninteresting picture ever painted by him.’ The latter remark is something of an exception; when Ruskin dislikes a picture, he doesn’t on the whole



bother to mention it, unless there is something valuable to be learnt from it. It isn’t clear to me, for example, that he even knew who Tiepolo was: the most spectacular artist of the era he most disliked is simply disregarded.

The virtues of this approach, such as they are, and the part played by this remarkable book in the context of Ruskin’s criticism, are well laid out in Tucker’s introduction, which, meticulously scholarly, is followed by nineteen double-columned pages of even more scholarly endnotes. The plates are excellent and they, too, are thoroughly annotated. It is very strange that the publishers in this era of mass tourism have refused to publish an English text—a normal thing to do even with books not originally written in English and not by classic authors. For the English Ruskinian—and for the