CHAPTER 5

The Thin White Line: Palladio, White Cities and the Adriatic Imagination

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Over the course of centuries, artists and architects have employed a variety of means to capture resonant archaeological sites in images, and those images have operated in various ways. Whether recording views, monuments, inscriptions, or measurements so as to pore over them when they came home and to share them with others, these draftsmen filled loose sheets, albums, sketchbooks, and heavily illustrated treatises and disseminated visual information far and wide, from Europe to the margins of the known world, as far as Mexico and Goa. Not all the images they produced were factual and aimed at design and construction. Rather, they ranged from reportage (recording what there is) through nostalgic and even fantastic representations to analytical records that sought to look through the fragmentary appearance of ruined vestiges to the “essence” of the remains and reconstruct a plausible original form.

Although this is a long and varied tradition and has not lacked attention at the hands of generations of scholars,1 it raises an issue fundamental for the larger questions that are posed in this essay: Were we to look at these images as images rather than architectural or topographical information, might they emerge as more than representations of buildings, details and sites, measured and dissected on the page? Might they also record something else, something more ineffable, such as the physical encounters with and aesthetic experience of these places, elliptical yet powerful for being less overt than the bits of carved stone painstakingly delineated? Furthermore, might in some cases the very material support of these images participate in translating this aesthetic

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response to the ruins and transmit it? And if so, what does it convey that may have slipped between the words and lies locked in the materiality of the paper on which the images are recorded?

**Ancient Stones on White Paper**

The images that were made as reportage are images of the ruins as they are—or, more often, as they might be, because they are never quite untouched by the artist's perspective. Scattered, partially buried, and decaying, the ruins of an ancient site present the vestiges of an urban coherence and magnificence irretrievably lost that interrupt the present unexpectedly and challenge understanding as well as any sense of permanence. Sebastiano Serlio’s “Roma quanta fuit ipsa ruina docet” on the title page of his *Terzo Libro* (Venice, 1540), which wraps all of lost Rome with its past tense into the nebula of oblivion (Fig. 1) is iconic of this type of presentation. But if the decayed grandeur of Rome appealed to some, especially poets and artists, the desire to reconstruct this past was its corollary and appealed to others. Indeed, the two approaches may be seen as the yin and yang of the Renaissance engagement with the past, one of them melancholy, the other constructive. And the sketchbooks and treatises of the architects, groaning with reconstructions of the orders, of temples and other buildings, testify to this curiosity driven by practicality.

However, sometimes more than observation and analysis pierces through even these apparently factual representations. For example, Andrea Palladio’s illustrations of the temple at Pola in Capodistria, in his *Quattro Libri* (Venice, 1570) like a number of other images depicting temple sites in the same treatise, exhibit a somewhat bizarre presentation that has not been addressed thus far. In fact, Palladio’s single, compact image of the temple of Pola (Fig. 2) emerges as an interpenetration of several images—views, details and sections—connected by cutouts, raking angles, superimpositions, and overlaps. The images nestle inside one another, compelling the viewer to decipher the resulting composition with some difficulty, and forcing the architect or patron for whom such an image was intended to puzzle it out, literally to twist and rotate the sheet in order to read it—in short, to work at it. The treatment of scale in this compound group of images adds yet another layer of interpretive complexity. The large scale is small (the overall view of the temple), the small scale is large (the ornamental details), and the shift from one to the other vertiginous,

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