Losing Eden: Ruskin and the Anthropocene in the Veneto and England

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Abstract
John Ruskin, nearly two centuries before Ghosh's (2016) call for action, would likewise struggle with his Victorian readers to convey his ecological and conservational concerns in his writings on the Venetian Lagoon and the English Lake District. Drawing on spatial theory and theology, this article will focus on Ruskin's unique sanctification of the natural and man-made spaces that he observed being spoiled and destroyed by humanity's touch, in an attempt to convey to his readers, the marked need to take accountability for their anthropogenic actions. This article will further focus on how Ruskin used his descriptions of these fragile landscapes and spaces to forewarn us of the imminent repercussions of our evolving Anthropocene age on the spaces and places we hold sacred. Ruskin recognised that for Venice, a city that maintains a dependency with its ecological and hydrological environments, the impact of the environmental crisis was dire – as we now know, if the world cannot radically reduce its carbon footprint, climate models show that sea-level rise is most likely to inundate Venice by 2100. This article will address how Ruskin, a spiritual-spatial thinker, forewarned us in his writings of the imminent repercussions of our evolving Anthropocene age on both our planet and our very souls.

Key-words: anthropocene, John Ruskin, sacredness, spatiality, spiritual-spatial, green-theology.

In February 1884, Ruskin delivered a series of lectures at the London Institution, in which he brought to the audience's attention a "series of cloud phenomena, peculiar to our own times", that were darkening the skies above the British Isles, and indeed, much of Europe (*The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century,* XXXIV. 9). His classification of this environmental and social phenomena as "the Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth century" highlights it as a most vital issue to scholarly study, given that up to that point it had "not hitherto received any notice from meteorologists" (*Storm-Cloud,*

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XXXIV. 9). During the lecture, Ruskin turned to his own "constant and close observation' of the heavens above" (*Storm-Cloud,* XXXIV. 10) – detailing any descriptions of troubling meteorological occurrences to be found in any literary sources coupled with his own sketches, and studies of art and architecture – to build his case for the storm-cloud's existence. In particular, he noted a new type of cloud, threatening and malignant, a "calamitous wind" that blew incessantly from all directions (*Storm-Cloud*, XXXIV. 31). This wind's "ceaseless action", of course, refers to the perpetual activities of his contemporary industrial Victorian society (*Storm-Cloud,* XXXIV. 31). As a result of their actions, an environmental phenomenon was beginning to occur ecologically that was going unrecognised by the scholarly community. Ruskin was no in doubt, these cloud phenomena were the result of direct human action on nature. Indeed, *Storm-Cloud* has been frequently read as an early instance of the emergence of the modern environmental awareness over the last few decades in Ruskin studies. There has been an increased tendency to take Ruskin's claims seriously, as Jesse Oak Taylor argues, and to treat Ruskin's "storm-cloud" within the discourse of environmental pollution that emerged in the nineteenth century (Taylor 2018: 8). In the introduction to their influential edited volume on Ruskin's general environmentalism and economic practices, Vicky Albritton and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson described Ruskin as "the first great intellectual figure to broach the idea that coal burning gave rise to anthropogenic climate change" (Albritton and Johnsson 2016: 14). Frederick Kirchhoff similarly notes that it has long been recognised that there is a correlation between the creation of Ruskin's storm cloud and a dramatic increase in industrial – largely coal smoke – pollution (Kirchhoff 1984: 134). In London, surrounded by "at least two hundred furnace chimneys in a square of two miles on every side" of him, all releasing their 'poisonous smoke' symbolically containing 'dead men's souls', Ruskin chose to confront the damaging interventions and advances of his historical age on human life and environment (*Storm-Cloud*, XXXIV. 33). The changes in the climate noted by Ruskin in his later writings are presumed to be rooted in the damage being done by industrial air pollution or the eruption of Krakatoa, with *Storm-Cloud* being a testament to his skills as a meteorologist and ecologist. Approaching the text within our twenty-first-century climate-aware mindset, Ruskin's *Storm-*

Cloud can be assimilated seamlessly to a later tradition of mainstream political ecology. Drawing on spatial theory and theology, this article will focus on Ruskin's sanctification of the natural and man-made spaces that he observed being spoiled and destroyed by humanity's touch, as part of his attempt to convey to his readers the marked need to take accountability for their eco-phobic actions. In recent interdisciplinary scholarly practice, it has been typical to overlook Ruskin's religious rhetoric when writing on changes in nature and our relationship with the space around us, and to treat it as a mere literary device to bear down on his subject matter. Thomas H. Ford argues, for example, that Ruskin's claim of 'blasphemy' against the sacred earth is to be understood as metaphorical, rather than literal (Ford 2013: 287). However, this standpoint disregards Ruskin's extraordinary sacramental thinking in his observations of the divine in natural landscapes and in architecture. Alongside John Ruskin's recognised ensemble of talents – art historian, poet, draughtsman, philanthropist, social philosopher – there is a marked need to bring into light his prescience as a religious spatial theorist and spiritual ecologist, as well as highlighting his role as a prophet of the ecological tragedy awaiting humanity in the twenty-first century. This article will further focus on how Ruskin, from his spiritual-spatial standpoint, used his descriptions of these fragile landscapes and spaces to forewarn us of the imminent repercussions of what is now seen as our evolving Anthropocene age on the spaces and places we hold sacred. In his writings on the English Lake District and the Veneto, Ruskin questions what happens next in a period of history in which we are losing our bonds with the natural world, and whether this ultimately leads to a loss in our appreciation of the sacred and the divine in life and in the planet. As a result, he asks if we are truly losing our appreciation of the sacred earth, might we also be losing a part of ourselves as well?

At the time when he first published the lectures his argument encountered much ridicule, as Edward Tyas Cook suggests in his introduction to his and Wedderburn's volume on the lectures. On a surface level, Ruskin's thoughts in the lecture appeared to lack any clear theory or approach. His writing has the rambling quality of the 'prophet' he was proclaimed to be, with his lectures being interpreted as an opportunity to denounce the contemporary "wicked and perverse generation" (Cook 190: 23). Reflecting on

the turn of the century, Cook argues that "we shall presently see" that Ruskin's "sober, solid, material, and accurate" (1903: 23) words have indeed proven prophetic for our twentieth and twenty-first-century anthropogenic geological period of climate change, melting glaciers, destruction of rainforests, reduced agricultural yields and devastating pollution levels. The Anthropocene, a term borrowed from geology and climatology, is now used to describe our most recent geological period in Earth's history, in which human activity has been the dominant force in nature and had significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems (*National Geographic* 2021: 'Anthropocene'). Nearly two centuries before Amitav Ghosh's criticism of contemporary culture's failure to grapple with the idea of human-induced climate change, John Ruskin struggled with his contemporary Victorian readers to convey his spiritual, ecological and conservational concerns through his writings on the ecological and architectural sanctity of the Veneto region and the English Lake District (Ghosh 2016).

The (Violated) Sacredness of The English Lake District

As a child, Ruskin's family had repeatedly toured across the English lakes via horse-drawn carriage as a form of middle-class leisure tourism and as an opportunity to indulge in the young Ruskin's "pure childish love of nature" (*Praeterita*, XXXV. 218). Feeling like "he was born again" whenever he visited, Ruskin writes about his Lake-bound travels in his poem *Iteriad* (written at eleven years old), that the Lakes hills' pastoral "silvan beauty" always held a sense of mystery, unknown knowledge and spirituality for him (*Poems,* II. 287). When much older he would explain that at "every turn of crag or bend of bay", the spatial distinctiveness of the Lake District would constantly astound Ruskin in how it was "totally unlike anything" that he "saw, or read of, elsewhere" (*Praeterita,* XXXV. 95). Recounting his experiences of being carriage-led along the valley of the Lune at Kirkby Lonsdale, Ruskin recognises the rural space as "one of the loveliest scenes in England – therefore, in the world" (*Praeterita*, XXXV. 298). Clearly the north lakes of England held significant meaning to Ruskin in several ways, most chiefly as a space representing fond memories of childhood and as a central space for his developing mind and imagination.

Religious historian Otto Bollnow argues that sacred spaces or thresholds do not "necessarily need to exist" in a structure "artificially erected by man", they can also be found in nature, "in the sacred mountain or in other distinctive" landscapes (Bollnow 2011: 135). Thus, sacred spaces can be found in rural landscapes and can exist independently without man's influence or intervention. Forgetting similar effusions about his experiences in the Alpine landscape, Ruskin argues on visiting the Lake District that he does "not know in all my own country, still less in France or Italy" an environmental space more "naturally divine, or a more priceless possession of true 'Holy Land'" (*Praeterita*, XXXV. 299). For Ruskin, sacred rural spaces like the Cumbrian hills could offer the observer the ability to cross the threshold into the divine in a far less sacramental-focused way and offer a different religious experience of space and the natural earth. For early Christians, Philip Sheldrake highlights, God and their faith was to be worshipped "in whatever place they found themselves", whether architectural or natural (Sheldrake 2001: 33). Bollnow in *Human Space* acknowledges the work of Mircea Eliade and his discussions on the meanings of space and spatiality in religion. Eliade argues that sacred spaces are "power-laden" and 'significant' in comparison to profane spaces which do not hold the same meaning and significance in the human psyche (Bollnow 2011: 135). With his evangelical upbringing, as Emma Sdegno argues, the young Ruskin was already well practiced in this "enchantment and spiritual investment" in natural spaces and places (Sdegno 2015: 47). Evidently Ruskin's early Evangelical grounding in the treatment of sacred spaces developed his spiritual and environmental response, to borrow Eliade' phrase, his own "power-laden significant" spaces.

By Ruskin's death, not many places in England had escaped being altered by humans, "no matter how untouched", as William George Hoskins argues, we may have assumed the space to be on our first encounter (Hoskins 2013). Witnessing in the English Lakeland, "more ghastly signs of [the] modern temper than" he had yet "believed possible", a despairing Ruskin in his travels across the north of England documented the damaging interventions and exploitations of the Victorian age onto the geological and ecological sacredness of the fells, woodlands, valleys and settlements of the Eden-like landscapes he travelled across (*Fors Clavigera,* XXIX. 298). The gross expansionist materialism of the Victorian age

was reflected in the changes that Ruskin saw taking place in the English Lake District, where the picturesqueness and sanctity of the Lakeland expeditions of his childhood had been replaced by railway daytrips, purpose-built tourist attractions, and lavish holidays in hotels that ignored local building techniques.

During his return visit in 1847 as a much older adult, he was greeted by a considerably different experience to the inviolability of his childhood visits. During the same year the Kendal & Windermere railway was completed, signalling a rail expansion that would profoundly develop the region's tourist trade. Prior to the 1840s, as Christopher Donaldson notes, the district would have considered more than a few hundred travellers visiting the area the peak of the travel season (Donaldson 2018: 10). However, the annual number of tourists after the completion of the railway, Donaldson continues, would shoot up to the thousands (2018: 10). During this trip, Ruskin wrote frequently against railway incursions and the frenetic pace of contemporary life. While commenting on the new rail line to Keswick, he suggests that: "people were better taking 4 days to reach the lakes, and so approaching them, than now coming from London in nine hours and being projected very nearly into the lake out of a tunnel" (Donaldson 2018: 24). Ruskin was critical of the railway expansion into the Lake District not merely out of elitism but because as a mode of transport it prioritised the speed of travel, meaning travellers did not engage with the sacred beauty of the landscape they sped through.

Like Medieval and Romantic thinkers before him, Ruskin aligned himself with William Wordsworth's battle to keep the Lake District free of railway expansion and pollution. Writing three years before Ruskin's visit on the planning proposal of the new line, Wordsworth laments explicitly that the intrusion will violate the sanctity of the rural landscape, writing that the Cumbrian hills are:

> Sacred as a relic of the devotion of our ancestors deserves to be kept, there are temples of Nature, temples built by the Almighty, which have still higher claim to be left un-violated. (Somervell 2011: 14)

In a fit of despair (and perhaps a bit of haughtiness), Wordsworth concludes that the space should be protected only by those who understand its sacred and aesthetic importance. In *Praeterita*, it is

implicit that Ruskin also doubted the general populace's ability to contemplate and understand the sacred space of the lakes properly, and have their experiences enriched by an awareness of the spiritual, literary and artistic associations of the Lakes and their power. One could find, in Ruskin's opinion, "absolute peace and bliss" in the sacred space of the Cumbrian fells if only "they were studied in the right way" (*Praeterita*, XXXV. 95). As Robert Hewison notes, in Ruskin's lecture on the geology of the Lake District at the Friends' meeting house in Kendal, Ruskin claimed that all "that needed to be known of the world" would "be discovered in the rocks and flora of Yewdale" crags and the geology of the Lake District in general if only studied academically, emotionally, and spiritually (Hewison 1993: 329).

A key component of the evangelical faith is the tendency towards the active expression and felt experience of the Gospels and Psalms in daily life (Bebbington 2004). Spiritual experiences in space and places are realised individually and are impossible to articulate given the limited nature of our symbolic language. Due to this lack of language, one must rely on this independent, self-immersed and lived experience of the sacred space. For the believer to be able to find the presence of the divine and sacred within any space, they must actively look for the sacred in the *right* way. While Ruskin may seem, both in his period and ours, like a perturbed, old, privileged man complaining about new and novel advancements, he importantly identifies a shift in society's relationship with nature and the sacred in daily life, and he railed against both human life and extra-human life being valued not in spiritual or moral importance but in economic units and rejected the propensity for experiences based on immediate availability and the superficial.

Many fortunes were made by the expansion of the rail network and commercialisation of these once rural spaces, as Donaldson argues, but Ruskin warns us in his writings that there were also a great many things lost or destroyed, and among these was a more traditional, and slower, way of life (Donaldson 2018: 10). For Ruskin, the railroads were just another example of the mechanisation and uniformity of the production output of the Industrial age, Ruskin visualised railroads with the same eye, so that people became "very little different from being a parcel", bundled up and distributed from point A to point B with little thought given to personal experience

or thought (*Modern Painters*, V. 370). For Ruskin, the railway was yet another symbol of the country's obsession with wealth, accumulation, and material values over moral and spiritual fears. Viewed from our perspective we can see that ethical concerns like working class human rights, the restorative value of nature on human psyche, and traditional 'ethical trade' in respect to local ecosystems, were shunned away instead for a more consumerist and expansionist ideal during the era. Post-Victorian and Post-Enlightenment western society is founded on these capitalist principles of perpetual growth, swiftness, and wealth. Compelled by the fury to accumulate wealth, as Eugene McCarraher argues, capital has become in our modern age an insatiable ecological predator, always on the lookout not only for new areas of human life to commodify, but also for new, untapped ecological "frontiers" of unpaid work/space (McCarraher 2016). In our Anthropocene age, Naomi Klein suggests, there is no other option for daily life and business than the presiding extractivist and nonreciprocal relationship with nature (Klein 2014). If the steam engine could be thought to be the ultimate icon of the Industrial Revolution, highlighting the larger social values of rapidity, production, and expansion (both in land and invention), steaming ahead no matter the cost, then it is reasonable to appreciate how Ruskin, and writers like Wordsworth among many others before him, could argue that Nature and Sacred Cities like Venice have been left behind in the rush. In Ruskin's opinion, these spaces were changing in significance and meaning from sacred spaces of devotion and learning to a potential (to misapply Wordsworth's turn of phrase) "un-violated" financial asset ready to be consumed.

A Desecrated Paradise: Venice and her Islands during the Nineteenth-Century Railway Boom

On a holiday exploring Italy in the 1840s, reminiscent of the colossal railway expansion taking place in England, Ruskin was horrified to discover the railways had arrived even within the hallowed city of Venice. Arriving by gondola to the city Ruskin writes of his horror at seeing:

> the railroad bridge, conspicuous above all things. But at the end of those dismal arches there rises, out of the wide water, a straggling line of low and

confused buildings, which, but for the many towers which are mingling among them, might be the suburbs of an English manufacturing town. (*The Stones of Venice*, IX. 415)

In 1846 the most prominent symbol of invasive modernity was the near completion of the railway bridge to the mainland which, as Ruskin wrote to his father, cut "off the whole open sea & half the city, which now looks as nearly as possible like Liverpool at the end of the dockyard wall" (Shapiro 1972: 198). For such a sacred and historical city such as Venice to fall to the pressures of modernity like the industrial foggy towns of England would be a tragedy. At its height, Venice was for Ruskin the epitome of moderate Republicanism and moral governance, renowned as Haitsma Mulier argues, for the "excellence of its institutions and harmony of its rulers" (Mulier 1980: 11). In Ruskin's opinion, the balanced and righteous nature of early Venetian government was expressed through the "honest" and magnificently crafted Byzantine, and thus Christian, architecture (*Stones*, IV. 104). As David Barnes highlights, the seventeenth-century ecclesiastic cleric Botero argues that pre-Renaissance Venice was "*come vergine intatta*" ("like an immaculate virgin") and maintains the example "*par excellence* of an unspoiled, just, and Christian state" (Barnes 2009). The Venice of the past was sacred to Ruskin, a paradigm of the union of art and labour in service to society and religion, her "perfection of beauty" or "endurance of dominion" no less remarkable in the city's "final period of her decline" (*Stones*, IX. 17). Due to its past significance, both religious and cultural, Venice and her islands were clearly "power-laden, significant" spaces for Ruskin. In his spatial thinking, the 'garden', constructed islands of Venice were alive with a history that imbued them with sacredness and mythology in Ruskin's eyes (*Stones*, X. 62). Ruskin thinking on Venice's unique spatiality, recalls the dramatist and actor Andrea Calmo's words (1510–1571), which state that the Venetian islands are "a terrestrial Paradise, – a place of nymphs and demigods!" (*Stones*, X. 62). As Ruskin himself recognises, "Dead" Venice's past importance and historical narrative is "hallowed" to him in its cultural, religious and spatial significance, and the young Ruskin appears disappointed to find that society no longer recognises the city's significant value (*Stones*, IX. 17). The importance of the Veneto as 'significant' space in Ruskin's

life is clear. Crucial occupational, intellectual, and emotional growth and choices were made during Ruskin's time in the Veneto and, as Jeffrey L. Spear and John Dixon Hunt argue, would shape his later career as an architectural historian, and social and economic thinker (1983: 117). On witnessing the invasion of the railway on the sacred body of Venice upon his arrival, Ruskin was witnessing an example of Paradise being besieged and falling victim to the damaging interventions and exploitations of the Post-Victorian and Post-Enlightenment culture's Anthropocene philosophies and choices.

Venice's Intrinsic Architectural Sacredness and Ruskin's Desperate Attempts to Preserve It

In *The Stones of Venice,* Ruskin flexes his analytical muscles in combining an aesthetic reading of art and architecture with a theological exploration of the sacred and divine. In his readings of St. Mark's and other sacred architectural spaces in *Stones*, as Stephen Kite highlights, Ruskin combines his exhaustive analysis "of art and architecture" with the "intensity of evangelical exegesis of allegory and typology, inculcated in Bible readings at his mother's knee" (2009: 112). For Ruskin, architectural spaces designed for specific sacred purposes "such as churches, mosques and temples" offer a designated space where the devout can worship, learn, or offer prayer and meditation to their God. Maxwell K. Baum argues that the meaning of sacred spaces lies beyond their "basic programmatic need", they represent sites of "human needs, [personal and societal] expression, and ritual" (2017: 14). On a semiotic and iconographic level, sacred architectural spaces offer us an aesthetic opportunity to confront Ruskin's own thoughts on space and spatiality and what it truly means for a space to be intrinsically sacred.

In "St. Mark's", Ruskin seeks to describe on a fundamental level the architectural and artistic details, merits, and limits of Basilica di San Marco. For Ruskin, the basilica of St. Mark's in Venice was not just a "piece of architecture" but stood as a "jewelled casket and painted reliquary, chief of the treasures in what were once the world's treasuries of sacred things, the kingdoms of Christendom" and the "most precious building in Europe" for its vital sacredness (*St. Mark's Rest,* XXIV. 413-4). St. Mark's stands out here because of its religious significance and transcends the limits of a normal

"piece of architecture". To employ Eliade's distinction, St. Mark's Basilica is a "power-laden" space, imbued with huge significance for its Christian visitors. However, despite its status as the 'most precious building in Europe', St. Mark's came under threat from city-wide restoration to the architectural and ecological "majesties" of the city during the nineteenth century (*St. Mark's Rest,* XXIV. 413-4). As Pilutti Namer highlights, during this period this history was being steadily dismantled with the replacements of "capital, columns and covering marbles" of St. Mark's north façade and the original one being broken down and sold to tourists: Ruskin writes of this enterprise: "To my bitter sorrow, [I] was able to hold in my hand, and show to my scholars, pieces of the white and purple veined alabasters, more than a foot square, brought here in Venice out of the wreck of restoration" (Namer 2016: 28). Robert Hewison, in his seminal work *'The Paradise of Cities': Ruskin on Venice*, reflects on Ruskin's relationship with Count Alvise Piero Zorzi in their efforts to stop any restoration efforts taking place on St. Mark's (Hewison 2009: 11-87). During a period of drastic restoration (but in effect, modernisation) measures during the mid-1800s, Ruskin and Zorzi, among many Italian architects, attempted to halt these harsh "as new" restorations, represented, for example, by the style of the French gothic revival architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc whose approach to restoration the Englishman despised. It is through their passionate rhetoric that St. Mark's and many other sacred sites within Veneto islands remain the eclectic mix of Byzantine and Gothic they are today. In a letter written by Ruskin to Zorzi referenced in *St. Mark's Rest*, Ruskin reflects that the "catastrophe in Venice" (the invasive restoration work) "surpasses all" other devastations in "its miserableness". St. Mark's, he claims which:

> was the most rich in associations, the most marvellous in beauty, the most perfect in preservation, of all the eleventh-century buildings in Europe; and of St. Mark's, precisely the most lovely portions were those which have been now destroyed. (*St. Mark's Rest*, XXIV. 407)

In *Stones,* Ruskin ask his readers to challenge their perception of the architectural sacred spaces of Venice; to move from simply seeing the stone buildings as relics of the past like Eugène Le Duc, and instead begin to appreciate and consider the "power-laden"

importance and value of the spaces both architecturally, historically, and above all, spiritually.

In all of his writings on religious architecture, it is clear that Ruskin believes that sacred architectural spaces should strive in their design, phenomenologically and spatially, to connect to their visitors on a deep emotional level. Non-sacred architecture is merely, as Baum highlights, a "building" or "construction", striving not to be anything more than an "enclosed space and economy" fit for a physical or financial purpose (2017: 48). In contrast, sacred architecture are spaces which are meant to be felt and experienced internally. While they are built with a purpose to incite devotion, they represent to their visitors so much more in spiritual and emotive terms. Clive Wilmer argues that Ruskin's appreciation of the "sacred value of great art and good workmanship" relied not on contemporary tastes of Post-Victorian and Post-Enlightenment society (evidenced in Viollet-le-Duc's work), but on much more important reflective matters of "religion and ethics" (2017: 546). Ruskin seethed against the mechanisation and modernisation effects of the industrial age on the whole of central Europe, believing it to induce monotony and unhappiness for all. Ruskin goes on in *Stones* to deliberate whether the crumbling state of St. Mark's in the "present neglect" he found it in, was evidence of "the decline of the Venetian character, or how far this church is to be considered as the relic of a barbarous age" (*Stones*, IV. 91). In an increasingly secular age, the past seemed ignorant and dull in comparison to the cultural, artistic, political and economic developments of the Renaissance In "The Quarry", post-Renaissance Venice is represented as a space where "Christianity and morality, courage, and intellect, and art [are] all crumbling together in one wreck" (*Stones*, I. 45). Distinctions that have guided the artistic hand and mind in the past are seemingly becoming blurred and forgotten. Imbued meaning in architecture, art and life are no longer being acknowledged by general society. Ruskin predicts that this change within us as humans destines us to a fall from grace "just like that of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden", with the punishments for our worldly crimes already happening in the "fall of Italy, the revolution in France" (*Stones,* I. 45).

Ruskin's connections between Christian architecture and national vitality enables the "general reader", as suggested in *Stones,* "to

form a clearer idea of the importance of every existing expression" through history "of Venetian character through Venetian art" and architecture (*Stones,* IX. 18). In Ruskin's judgement, it is in reading a nation's art and architecture that we can assess a nation's spiritual and ethical condition and depth. In *Stones* Ruskin deliberates whether the crumbling state of St. Mark's in its "present neglect" is evidence of "the decline of the Venetian character, or how far this church is to be considered as the relic of a barbarous age", an age which appeared dull compared to the Renaissance and the prosperous Victorian period (*Stones*, IV. 91). In our modern period, as visually witnessed in the degradation of Venice, Ruskin believes that "feeble sensualities" in art and architecture have overtaken truthful "representations of Christian subjects", with that which is understood to be sacred "cast aside" (*Stones*, IX. 45). On his visits to St. Mark's, a young Ruskin would witness a space under occupation (by the Austrian army) and the piazza in front of the basilica is described having a:

> continuous line of cafés, where the idle Venetians of the middle classes lounge, and read empty journals; in its centre the Austrian bands play during the time of vespers, their martial music […] – the march drowning the miserere, and the sullen crowd thickening round them […]. (*Stones*, IV. 84)

For Ruskin the spatiality of Venice is defined by this alleged disenchantment with the sacred. The limited spiritual effect of St. Mark's witnessed by him on the city's residents proves just how far society has fallen. Observing passers-by at St. Mark's, it is noted in *Stones* that one will "not see any eye lift to it, nor a countenance brightened by" its' façade or its presence: "priest and laymen, soldier and civilian, rich and poor, pass by it alike regardlessly" (*Stones*, IV. 84). Ruskin finds sacred architectural space completely ignored; the "meanest tradesmen […] push their counters among entrances of the basilica" with the basilica's exterior "foundations" acting as "seats" to all, and, in one of the many piazza's cafés you will find the "Madonna […] enthroned above ten or a dozen large red casks of three-year-old vintage" (Stones, IV. 84). In this age of profit, expansion and modernisation, it is clear that Ruskin believes that we have lost our sense of the sacred and are unable to appreciate it. As

evidenced in his descriptions of St. Mark's, the intrinsic values of these Christian sacred spaces, objects and experiences have become powerless and frankly, redundant, in a modern society focused on economic growth – "Gods" have become "without power [...] men without humanity" (*Stones*, IV. 45). Witnessing the destruction of the remaining 'character' of the Venetian historical and conservational heritage, Ruskin understood that his contemporary society's increasing speed of marketisation, modernisation and disregard of anything sacred was reflecting a tremendous and damaging shift in society's relationship with the earth and their rapport with the sacred and divine. In his introduction to "The Quarry", Ruskin suggests that Venice in her prime, like Tyre before her, was an example of Paradise on earth in 'her loveliness' like that of "Eden, the garden of God" (*Stones*, IX. 17). However, the reader is forewarned that just like Eden, we may through our own errors lose Venice as well. While the stories of Tyre and Venice "may read" like a "lovely song" of human ingenuity and courage, we must not "close our ears" to their warning (*Stones*, IX. 17). In a prophetic moment of our current Anthropocene era, Ruskin warns of the dangers of not appreciating the sacredness and treasures of the space around, and that abuse of the earth given by God will lead to humanity's destruction (*Stones*, IX. 17).

Rising Seas, Sinking City: Venice's Watery Liminality

At Venice's conception and during its early growth, its people worked with its surrounding ecological landscapes to preserve the city and allow it to thrive into the empire. However, with the introduction of the Mestre industrial estates and the allowance of petrol boats and trains into the city, the importance of this working relationship with the surrounding ecology of the islands was forgotten in the effort to update the city in the post-industrial revolution world. However, in the twenty-first century, we see Venice and her islands constantly under threat by the power of nature reclaiming it, and further destruction by man caused around the globe. Due to the melting icecaps, pollution and over-fishing, the ocean waters that gave birth to Venice consistently threaten to re-claim the city and to make it level with the waters that surround it. Venice is still plagued by record high tides and a settling landmass, and, as Jane Da Mosto

and Caroline Fletcher highlight, the city presents one of the world's great conservation challenges due to its unique ecological space (2004: 3).

In his writings on the city, it is clear that Ruskin appreciated that Venice stood as a sacred space where humanity worked in unison with nature to create a seemingly impossible city. It is customarily important to visuo-spatially interpret the sea and land as separate independent entities, to dilute the threat of the unaccountable and unpredictable power of the sea. However, as in the case of Venetian islands, it is futile to place mental boundaries where physical boundaries constantly shift. Humans desire the separation of water and land, when in reality, nature consists of a liminal mixture of both. Venice and her islands act as a space that defies permanence – its boundaries are perpetually changing, and its inhabitants are constantly on the move. Stephen Kite argues that it is Venice's unparalleled "openness to flow, penetration and diverse energies" that invites the "responses of numberless writers, filmmakers, artists and architects" to attempt to understand the unique spatiality of the city (Kite 2008: 275). From the city's beginning, the islands of the Venetian lagoon's identity as a space relentlessly in motion has maintained its "to quote Eliade" "power-laden" significance to the world in its distinctiveness. While the city can be criticised as a site of damaging human intervention on a unique environmental site (in the destruction of the marshy lagoons that the city was built upon), Ruskin in his writings clearly appreciates the success and ingenuity of the medieval Venetian empire. Initially a small occupation of a waterscape, the site became through the Venetian peoples' innovation a huge site of urban development. This near-worship of the city's past found in many English writers' experiences of the Veneto (including Byron's, Shelley's, James's) creates a myth that is still pervasive in today's tourist interpretation of Venice – that while the lifeblood has long been drained, the urgency remains to experience the liminal floating city before the geographical space is lost entirely. As Hibbert argues, the city's intimate relationship with the surrounding Adriatic Sea and its wetland, which provided Venice with protection and sustenance, including its famous historical mercantile worldwide trade network (1997: 7).

However, historically as well as today, the city is subject to the uncertainty of the ocean, including the ebb and flow of daily

tides, rising water levels, and the slow sinking of the city. Ruskin stresses the extremely narrow margins of tidal flux that made the city possible:

> Had deeper currents divided their islands, hostile navies would again and again have reduced the rising city into servitude; had stronger surges beaten their shores, all the richness and refinement of the Venetian architecture must have been exchanged for the walls and bulwarks of an ordinary seaport […] Had the tide been only a foot or eighteen inches in its rise, the water access to the doors of the palaces would have been impossible [...] Eighteen inches more of difference between the level of the flood and ebb would have rendered the doorsteps of every palace […] treacherous [...] The streets of the city would have been filled up, and all the peculiar character of the place and people destroyed. (*Stones*, X. 14)

For Ruskin, Venice exists as a liminal sacred space poised on the edge of destruction, barely enduring from one tide or destructive human to the next. In ecological terms, areas which divide the land and the sea, such as coastlines, are vitally important, particularly in terms of sustainability and repairing damage caused by pollution. Furthermore, Ruskin recognised that for Venice, a city that maintains a dependency with its ecological and hydrological environments, the impact of the environmental crisis was dire – as we now know, if the world cannot radically reduce its carbon footprint, climate models show that sea-level rise is most likely to inundate Venice by 2100. Ruskin appreciated the extremely narrow margins of tidal flux that made the city possible, knowing that our destructive Anthropogenic actions could lead to "the peculiar character of the place and people" being "destroyed" by the Adriatic and by our damaging interventions (*Stones*, IV. 14). It is clear that Ruskin appreciated that the city did not emerge from nothing and that the ecological conditions that offered its creation deserve respect and conservation support to control the miracle of the Venetian islands.

A Dire Warning

Using his studies of art and landscape as a tool to bring his concerns into public conversation, Ruskin in his writings challenged the dualism of "nature" and "society", ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, sacred and capitalist. In our current period of climate change, we

are witnessing the repercussions of our Anthropocene era in which nature and the sacred earth will no longer be forced into sacrificing for the infinite needs of capital and advancement. What constitutes sacred space has over time undergone an evolution of wider purposes and meanings. However, in Ruskin's opinion humanity's devaluation of the significance of the sacred and the divine during modernity directly correlates to our mistreatment of nature and the earth. Ruskin's approach can allow us to further understand a core conceptual and moral problem posed by anthropogenic climate change. Witnessing the destruction to all he held sacred, Ruskin tells us to keep in mind the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. Ruskin was beginning to witness the proof that the Earth and its biosphere was not infinite; and that to deplete and disregard it and think ourselves the dominant force above it, would come with very dangerous and damaging consequences not just on human and extra-human life but would also further damage moral character. Man-made climate change began 1871 asserted John Ruskin, as Thomas H. Ford argues, in the two lectures he delivered in February 1884 at the London Institution (2011: 287-299). However, Ruskin additionally reminds us in his wider works, that by seizing the fruit from the "tree of knowledge" (*Genesis* 2:16-17) in Eden, similar to the advancements in technologies, industry and knowledge in modernity, we too will be expelled from our own Eden, and will suffer the imminent repercussions of our evolving Anthropocene age.

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