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“The Truth of Nature is a part of the Truth of God; to him who does not search it out, darkness; to him who does, infinity.”- John Ruskin, 1843

## Beauty, Nature, and *Laudato Si*: Locating John Ruskin’s Naturalism within the Framework of Theological Aesthetics

Dean Messinger

### Introduction

“We pledge to promote the study and circulation of Mr. Ruskin’s writings; to exemplify his teachings; and to aid his practical efforts of social improvement,” thus read the constitution of the Society of the Rose, a group of Ruskin-inspired philanthropists and religious leaders.<sup>1</sup> For most, John Ruskin was a classic Victorian art critic and historian, yet for a more discerning group, like the members of the aforementioned society, he was also a theologian. While his most famous works of literature range from architectural history to landscape painting, almost all his works discuss or hint at his own theological insights. Ruskin’s reflections regarding the experience of God through beauty, the sacredness of nature, and the immorality of industrial society inspired thousands in England and around the world and continue to have large impact on the cultural and societal history of Britain. Today, the theological and cosmological musings scattered throughout his writings and speeches can be given new meaning in light of contemporary theological aesthetics. More importantly his insights and deep relationship with nature can inspire us to understand more fully the call of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* to become better stewards of this beautiful, truthful, and sacred Earth.

Theological Aesthetics is a theological methodology that centers on the sensual mediation of the divine, that is, how experiences of God are perceived by the senses. Central to this is an understanding of beauty as divine communication, and as a means of fulfilment. “It is after all the struggle of human life to have a larger share in the beauty of life,” theologian Von Ogden Vogt wrote at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Theologian Richard Viladesau explains how theological aesthetics is at work in the lives of all Christians, writing: “We [as believers] have experienced moments in which our faith in God – or our conviction that there is a God – was confirmed, strengthened, or validated through our being touched by

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Woodson-Boulton, *Transformative Beauty: Art Museums in Industrial Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, “Theological Aesthetics” in *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 2.

beauty, whether encountered in nature, in works of art, or in the character of persons.”<sup>3</sup> These profound experiences are what aesthetic theologians study and it is with this understanding of theological aesthetics that I will look at the works of John Ruskin exploring their new relevance in light of *Laudato Si*.

### **Ruskin and his Theology**

Having been born in 1819 and having died a few days after the turn of the century, John Ruskin serves as an excellent witness to the innovations, tumults, and radical changes of the 19th century. Ruskin was not only a witness however, but an active agent in the changes, promoting social and environmental causes and critiquing the systematic injustices of the industrial society growing around him. Two interconnected issues plagued his conscience the most: the squalor and inequality caused by industrial capitalism, and the heartbreaking absence of beauty this caused, both in human society and in the environment. “Life without Industry is sin,” Ruskin wrote in 1888, “but Industry without Art, brutality.”<sup>4</sup>

What is unique about Ruskin was that both the social inequality and the lack of beauty were for him a matter of faith. Theology, most notably a united and alive cosmology that was the source of divine truth and a deeply held belief in the power of beauty and art in the experience of said divine truth, played a prominent role in his aesthetics as an art critic and his ethics as a social critic. To analyze Ruskin’s theology, it must first be understood that “governance of the world under divine law was the starting place for Ruskin’s Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> In his work, *Modern Painters*, Ruskin explains that “God appoints to every one of his creatures a separate mission.”<sup>6</sup> This belief in a universe full of meaning and designed by God was the basis of all his theological assertions. This belief can be seen in the journals Ruskin kept during his journeys throughout Europe. While gazing out of the forests of France, Ruskin recorded: “The woods, which I had only looked on as wilderness, fulfilled I then saw, in their beauty, the same laws which guided the clouds, divided the light, and balanced the wave. ‘He hath made everything beautiful, in his time,’ became for me thenceforward the interpretation of the bond between the human soul and all visible things.”<sup>7</sup>

### **John Ruskin as an Aesthetic Theologian**

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 104.

<sup>4</sup> John Ruskin, “Nature of Gothic” in *The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from His Writings*. Eds. John D. Rosenberg (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 98.

<sup>5</sup> Francis O’Gorman eds. *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 145.

<sup>6</sup> John Ruskin, “Modern Painters” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*. Eds. John D. Rosenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 145.

<sup>7</sup> John Ruskin, “The Col De La Faucille” in *The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from His Writings*. Eds. John D. Roseberg (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998.), 514.

One striking similarity between Ruskin and contemporary theological aesthetics is that both identify beauty as an essential factor in the experience of God. John Ruskin understood two types of beauty in the world: “beauty that reveals God’s immutable attributes [and] vital beauty [that] discloses living creatures’ perfections.”<sup>8</sup> He later defined the summation of these beauties as “*that which deserves to be loved... it is just the vital function of all our being.*”<sup>9</sup> This belief is multifaceted, implying that beauty is a revealer of divine truth, and thus it is imperative for all to enjoy beauty. This belief is echoed by theologians, most notably in Cecilia González-Andrieu’s definition of theological aesthetics in the *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the United States*. She states that theological aesthetics is “the assertion of humanity’s desire and need of beauty for ethical action, and more explicitly states that if humans cultivate and follow that desire (as a pointer) it will point to the source of all beauty in God and its historical and timeless incarnated revelation in Christ.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, John Ruskin can be seen as a proto-aesthetic theologian, recognizing the human need for beauty and the powerful ways in which beauty can relate us to God.

Furthermore, Ruskin believed that the greatest beauty was that found in nature, fashioned by God. Ruskin wrote, “the greatest landscape painters mirrored the moral lessons stamped on the creation from time immemorial, for nature’s beauty reveals God’s glory.”<sup>11</sup> This profound statement perfectly captures the power of beauty and nature in Ruskin’s theology. For Ruskin, nature was the most beautiful because it was God’s well-ordered creation whose diversity, mystery, and abundance were themselves reflections of God. In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin praises nature’s well-ordered diversity as the source of its mysterious beauty:

Nature is never distinct and never vacant, she is always mysterious, but always abundant... Abundant beyond the power of the eye to embrace or follow, vast and various beyond the power of the mind to comprehend, yet there is not one atom in its whole extent and mass which does not suggest more than it represents; nor does it suggest vaguely, but in such a manner as to prove that the conception of each individual inch of that distance is absolutely clear and complete in the Master’s mind, a separate picture fully worked out.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> David M. Craig. “Naves and Nukes: John Ruskin as “Augustinian” Social Theorist?” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2004), 340.

<sup>9</sup> Ruskin, “Modern Manufacture and Design,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, 276.

<sup>10</sup> Gonzalez-Andrieu, “Theological Aesthetics” in *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the United States*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> David M Craig. “Naves and Nukes: John Ruskin as “Augustinian” Social Theorist?” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2004), 340.

<sup>12</sup> Ruskin, “Modern Painters” in *The Genius of John Ruskin*, 24-25.

In this piece Ruskin asserts his belief in a unified universe alive with God’s love and beauty. The unity of diverse parts found in the universe is what Ruskin, and many contemporary theologians today, view as beauty. “The tendency to dismember and separate everything,” Ruskin wrote, “is one of the eminent conditions of a mind leaning towards vice and ugliness; just as to connect and harmonize everything is that of a mind leaning towards virtue and beauty.”<sup>13</sup> For Ruskin, that which was beautiful, was a united world. This profound cosmological statement hints at another through line between Ruskin and contemporary theological aesthetics, that of a unified, divinely ordered cosmology.

Ruskin describes his understanding of the universe best through the journal entries he kept while travelling in the French Alps. Much like John Muir and Yosemite, Ruskin’s spirituality was enlivened by the stunning natural beauty of the Alps, and he found new ways to express his theological ideas through nature. In his journal, he explains his unified cosmology as witnessed in the Alps: “If there be hardship, there must be at least innocence and peace, and fellowship of the human soul with nature... The wild goats that leap along those rocks have as much passion of joy in all that fair work of God as the men that toil in the fields among them. Perhaps more.”<sup>14</sup> This “*passion of joy in all that fair work of God*” experienced by the mountain goats and Alpine farmers is the experience that theological aesthetics wishes to capture. Furthermore, both animals and humans can find joy in God, as they are both apart of his unified creation.

For Ruskin, observing the wonders of nature was the singularly transformative way of experiencing God’s love. Ruskin relished experiences of God through nature, as he explains how,

My entire delight is in observing... The living inhabitation of the world – the grazing and nesting in it- the spiritual power of the air, the rocks, the waters, to be in the midst of it, and rejoice and wonder in it, and help it if I could- happier if it needed no help of mine – it was the essential love of Nature in me, this the root of all that I have usefully become, and the light of all that I have rightly learned.<sup>15</sup>

This mindfulness and awareness of beauty is one of the key lessons theological aesthetics seeks to impart, something Ruskin understood firsthand. In fact, John Ruskin’s love of nature was so profound that he had to defend himself from accusations from Christian authorities of the time who accused him falsely of worshipping nature as a god. In response, Ruskin wrote: “I am trying to prove

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<sup>13</sup> O’Gorman, *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Ruskin, *The Genius of John Ruskin*, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Ruskin, “The Col de La Faucille” in *The Genius of John Ruskin*, 514.

to you the honour of your houses and hills; not that the Church is not sacred – but that the whole Earth is.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Natural Beauty, Industry, and the Call to Action**

Ruskin’s belief in the transformative spiritual power of nature was what made him so averse to the ravages of the Industrial society that was arising around him. Towards the end of his life, as the 19th century came to a close, he called industrialization and its side effects the “great storm cloud of the nineteenth century” both figuratively and literally referring to the sooty air pollution produced by factories. In fact, Ruskin was one of the first ever to call attention to air pollution. In a lecture delivered in 1884, Ruskin said: “I propose to bring to your attention a series of cloud phenomena, which, so far as I can weigh existing evidence, are peculiar to our own times; yet which have not hitherto received any special notice or description from meteorologists.”<sup>17</sup> The clouds he describes are, of course, smog and pollution, a first-time experience for 19th century Europeans. For Ruskin though, these clouds represented “a corrupted exhalation of earth, a provocation of the human imagination by a nature abused.”<sup>18</sup> Ruskin saw the defilement of nature in the name of industry as perhaps the greatest sin being committed by humanity. Far ahead of his time, Ruskin decried industrial capitalism while it was still in its infancy for its destructive impact on the environment, which thus made it an affront to God. Not only air pollution, but the growing problem of water pollution also grabbed Ruskin’s attention, declaring to the public: “You do as you always... turning every river of England into a common sewer, so that you cannot so much as baptize an English baby but with filth, unless you hold its face out in the rain; and even that falls dirty.”<sup>19</sup> It is here that Ruskin finds common ground with *Laudato Si*, the papal encyclical calling the world to take better care of our common home.

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis is echoing the works of Ruskin, intentionally or not, by calling attention to the harm wrought on the Earth by industrial capitalism, the theological implications of this disaster, and the succeeding theological imperative to stop it. In his opening appeal, Pope Francis explains how the Earth now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life (LS 2).<sup>20</sup> Using evocative and descriptive language, the Pope hopes to

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<sup>16</sup> Ruskin, *The Genius of John Ruskin*, 93.

<sup>17</sup> Ruskin, “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Genius of John Ruskin*, 462.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Wheeler. *Ruskin and Environment: The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1995), 98.

<sup>19</sup> O’Gorman, *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015.

bring attention to our current environmental crisis.

Ruskin, in his time, was also raising alarm bells like the Pope. In a lecture entitled “The Future of England”, Ruskin also uses evocative language to paint a picture of a future England whose natural beauty is eroded by industry in order to inspire a real change of heart. John Ruskin was appalled that England had become the industrial powerhouse of the world, and that more work was expended destroying the environment than protecting it. In the lecture Ruskin declares: “How did it come to pass that the strength and life of the English operative was spent in defiling ground, instead of redeeming it, and in producing an entirely valueless piece of metal, which can neither be eaten nor breathed, instead of medicinal fresh air and pure water?”<sup>21</sup> Ruskin warned that this behavior was damaging to the Earth, to society, and to all peoples.

Ruskin in fact was one of the earliest to notice the connection between social injustices and environmental injustices. In his “The Future of England” lecture, Ruskin explains how: “We have blackened every leaf of English greenwood with ashes, and the people die of cold; our harbors are a forest of merchant ships, and the people die of hunger... Are we to think that the earth was only shaped to be a globe of torture?”<sup>22</sup> Like Pope Francis, Ruskin is attempting to wake England from a sleep of ignorance. Not only is Ruskin calling attention to the environmental disasters, but he is at the same time drawing connections between the social ills of the time, like hunger, and the environmental crisis. Again far ahead of his time, Ruskin decried the low wages and oppressive hours workers dealt with, and criticized capitalism for taking the soul out of labor. If we did not exploit the environment, Ruskin believed, we would not need to exploit workers. The interconnectedness between social justice and environmental justice expressed by Ruskin here is also highlighted by the Pope in *Laudato Si*.

In fact, the interconnectedness between social and environmental justice is central to the message of *Laudato Si*. Just as Ruskin called us to see the connection between environmental degradation and the maltreatment of workers and of the hungry, Pope Francis calls us to contemplate the “inseparable bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.”<sup>23</sup> This is so important because it instantly universalizes the Pope’s message. Protecting the environment is not only important because Christians have a responsibility to God and creation, an intentionally theological argument, but because people everywhere suffer from the effects of environmental degradation, the poor being the most vulnerable. This shared belief in the connection between social justice and environmental justice is what makes Ruskin

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<sup>21</sup> Ruskin, “The Future of England Lecture,” 7.

<sup>22</sup> Ruskin, “The Future of England Lecture,” 141.

<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015.

so ahead of his time, and what makes the Pope Francis’ call even more immediate and concerning.

### **Conclusion**

In light of Ruskin’s work, expressed a century before *Laudato Si*, the immediacy of the situation should be felt by all. Ruskin’s inspiring interactions with nature, where he recognized beauty as a form of divine communication, can serve to motivate society to embrace the Pope’s call to protect beauty around the world. His engagement with aesthetics and morality, his cosmological understanding of the unity of the world, and the sheer veracity of his work situates Ruskin in the greater timeline of theological aesthetics, making assertions not made again for many years. Ruskin himself recognizes this, writing: “I have been long accustomed, as all men engaged in work of investigation must be, to hear my statements laughed off for years before they are ever examined or believed, and I am generally content to wait the public’s time.”<sup>24</sup> Ruskin would be glad to hear that the time has finally come for his works to be both examined and believed, as they are given a new importance and immediacy in the light of *Laudato Si*.

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<sup>24</sup> Ruskin, “The Future of England Lecture”, 10.

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