LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

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It is not the church we want, but the sacrifice; not the emotion of admiration, but the act of adoration; not the gift, but the giving.

So let us not ask of what use our offering is to the church: it is at least better for us than if it had been retained for ourselves. It may be better for others also: there is, at any rate, a chance of this; though we must always fearfully and widely shun the thought that the magnificence of the temple can materially add to the efficiency of the worship or to the power of the ministry.[1]

And I look upon those pitiful concretions of lime, out of the kneaded fields about our capital—upon those thin, tottering, foundationless shells of splintered wood and imitated stone—upon those gloomy rows of formalized minuteness, alike without difference and without fellowship, as solitary as similar—not merely with the careless disgust of an offended eye, not merely with sorrow for a desecrated landscape, but with a painful foreboding that the roots of our national greatness must be deeply cankered when they are thus loosely struck in their native ground; that those comfortless and unhonoured dwellings are the signs of a great and spreading popular discontent; that they mark the time when every man's aim is to be in some more elevated sphere than his natural one, and every man's past life is his habitual scorn; when men build in the hope of leaving the places they have built, and live in hope of forgetting the years they have lived; when the comfort, the peace, the religion of home have ceased to be felt; and the crowded tenements of a struggling and restless population differ only from the tents of the Arab or Gipsy by their less heathy openness to the air of heaven, and less happy choice of their spot on earth; by their sacrifice of liberty without the gain of rest, and of a stability without the luxury of change.[2]

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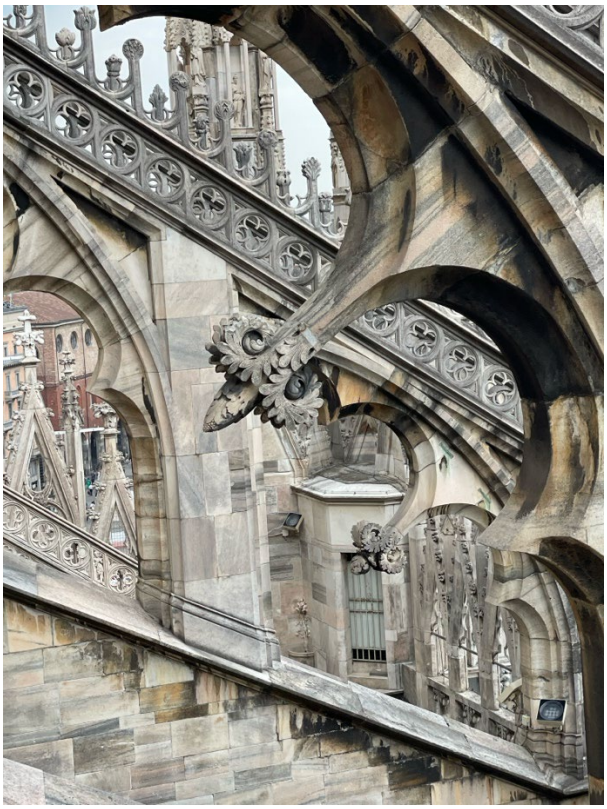
[1] John Ruskin, Seven Lamps of Architecture; 19.
[2] Ibid., 180.



John Ruskin was a different voice when it came to his description of architecture, especially when he wrote of the Gothic cathedral. Where others described the transition from early to late, or compared and contrasted the English and the French, Ruskin spoke of intent, a metaphysical intent.

The life and purpose of a Gothic cathedral can be seen as simply a place of worship. It is, for all intents and purposes, a church, a space where people gather to pray, to sing, to meditate. Be it the Romanesque with its earthly orientation or the Gothic with gaze focused upward, whether the altar is in the crux of the cross or the fenced context of mystery constructed by the Orthodox, the function of the building is seen first and foremost in adoration, glory to God, and then, secondarily, a place of healing. Herein God is given praise and people are made better, they "gain . . . rest" and they experience the "luxury of change."

What makes Ruskin a unique voice is that he took this twofold purpose and did more than describe the context, he sought to articulate how is the "rest" achieved by the architecture, and how is the "luxury" a necessary component for change. In this, Ruskin is a metaphysical theoretician more than he is an art critic who clarifies the changes in style or the influences of one artist upon another.

Yet, his greatest gift, which you can see above in the long quotation is that he viewed all architecture this way, from the family home to the "stones of Venice" where the greatest of Gothic vision was achieved. Ruskin viewed small homes in Venice to be just as likely a place of healing as the Cathedral of Saint Mark. You can hear this in his claims of "better" and "gain." Ruskin is chastising the poorly made dwellings surrounding London, but he is also lamenting the need to "escape" and the lack of "rest" and most importantly the need to be "elevated." Perhaps most important for our consideration is the idea that whatever we build is meant to gain memory or to achieve oblivion.

As William Turner was far ahead of his time in the medium of painting, his "impressionism" would not find full expression for decades, so was Ruskin ahead of his time. What John Ruskin was seeking to articulate was the relationship between the good, the true, and the beautiful and how these change us. In the full presence of the good, the true and the beautiful, the worshipper in a Gothic cathedral can be lifted from misery, "the sacrifice of liberty without rest," to the freedom of health, rest, wholeness. It is not just the words spoken, or the hymns sung, or the hand of fellowship offered; it is not just the sacramental meal or absolution of the priest, it is also the walls, the transept, the buttress, the statue, the gargoyle, the window. All of these elements can heal. And what is more, without them, the space can render the soul spiritless, can lead to "popular discontent."

It is important to note the difference Ruskin is seeking. He is not looking to describe the architecture; he is looking to convey its power. This power is not simply what is ornate or elegant or embellished, it is the act of "sacrifice". Sacrifice for Ruskin is how we become

not only the one who gives, but the offering as well. The lamp of sacrifice, once it is cast upon the monument and the memorial, exposes the power, or the absence of power, of the statue, the tomb, the dedication, the arch, the obelisk, the wall, the cascading waterfalls, even the monumental base.

What Ruskin provides for us when we consider a monument like Grant on his horse looking over the Mall is a question: does this work of art and its place, does this symbol and image, heal, elevate, restore, honor a sacrifice, a willingness to give one's life, or a need to confess a wrong? Does this piece of art create a place that lifts us or does it lead to greater discontent? Does the architecture pay what we owe and thus create freedom from debt?