

John Ruskin and Rudolf Steiner

The Archangel Gabriel and the Archangel Michael

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Part I

Good evening dear friends! The weather outside is amazing, isn't it? If you think of Ruskin's love of Turner, and Turner's love of the elements, the weather outside is a good accompaniment to this evening's theme.

I was at Emerson College for 17 years but the year I joined was the year in which Francis Edmunds died, so I was never able to ask him a question that I really wanted to ask him that I later asked Elisabeth Evans. Emerson College is named after Ralph Waldo Emerson; some people think of Emerson as the American counterpart to Goethe. We have spoken about Ruskin as the Anglo-Saxon voice of the same impulse, and I wanted to ask Francis, Why did you name the new building at Emerson (Ruskin Hall) after Ruskin? When I asked Elisabeth later on, she went into a kind of dreamy melancholia and said, When we were married we spent our honeymoon in Florence and the book that accompanied us was 'Ruskin's Mornings in Florence'. This is a slim volume in which he describes his early morning excursions to the churches and other monuments, and so much of what he describes there is still visible in the way it was when he saw it. I know that Elisabeth's answer came from her heart, but I did not quite feel that it addressed the deeper level of my question. I am grateful for that because it meant that I had to try to find out the answer myself. How far I have managed to get to that answer is the theme I would like to share with you this evening.

I do not know how important the biography of Ruskin is for the purposes of our theme this evening; some details you may or may not know. Ruskin's parents were very different. His mother was a strictly religious woman who encouraged young John to read the Bible every day of his youth. If you





The Annunciation (detail) with
St. Gabriel the Archangel by
Pinturicchio, 1501

are familiar with Ruskin's writings, you can really see how the King James Version was so formative in Ruskin's own capacity for language. His father was a sherry merchant who represented a particular sherry house in Portugal and travelled around the great houses of England with samples of sherry in the hope that these wealthy clients would buy the products. Very often, the young John accompanied his father on these tours around the stately homes of England. His father was a wealthy man in his own right but they went to houses where the people were even wealthier, so for John it was quite an experience to come into these immensely elegant and large places. The architecture was a formative impression for him but even more so were the pictures he found on the walls there; from a young age he was enthralled by art. When he was 15 he was given a book of pictures of Italy, with little engravings of Turner's original water colours of Italy, and this also sowed a seed in the soul of young John that came to fruition later in his life.

It is quite a contrast; his father was a sherry merchant and his mother a Bible-reading, straight-laced woman. If you go to Brantwood, the house that Ruskin later acquired, there are two contemporary portraits of his father and mother, and the contrast is extraordinary. Between them is a portrait of young John, who must have been about two at the time. His parents must have been expecting a girl because he's dressed very much in young girls' clothes, happily floating through the atmosphere. I recommend a visit there because the place is still imbued with his presence. Howard Hull who maintains it so beautifully is very keen that the place should remain not a monument to a man who is now 100 years dead, but a monument to the living reality of his impulses. The garden is a wonderful affirmation of Ruskin's own horticultural interests.

He was also interested in geology; he gave lectures on geology before the science of geology was properly recognised and contributed to its establishment as a science. People were of course already interested in it but he spoke about the structure of the Earth in a way that had not been done before. Aonghus Gordon has spoken about Ruskin's agrarian influence: he had ideas for land and ideas for the economy.

Ruskin was a wealthy man and was invited by many of the successful industrialists of the time to Manchester and Birmingham to give lectures on art because he had become well known as an authority on art and architecture. When he was invited to these places he was actually very disappointing. Instead of lecturing on art he lectured these wealthy industrialists on the evil influences of the ways they had become so wealthy, and he was regarded as quite a traitor to his class. He was evidently of their class, and yet he criticised the

way they made their money, and the way the poor, who had made them so much money, were bonded to an industrial machine that had brutal and unjust ecological and social consequences. So he was not regarded by his peers as loyal to what they expected of him, and this really leads to a deeper aspect of Ruskin. He championed Gothic and the particular lives of those artists and craftsmen who were responsible for Gothic art. He travelled to Venice where he wrote, and drew beautifully the architecture he admired there.

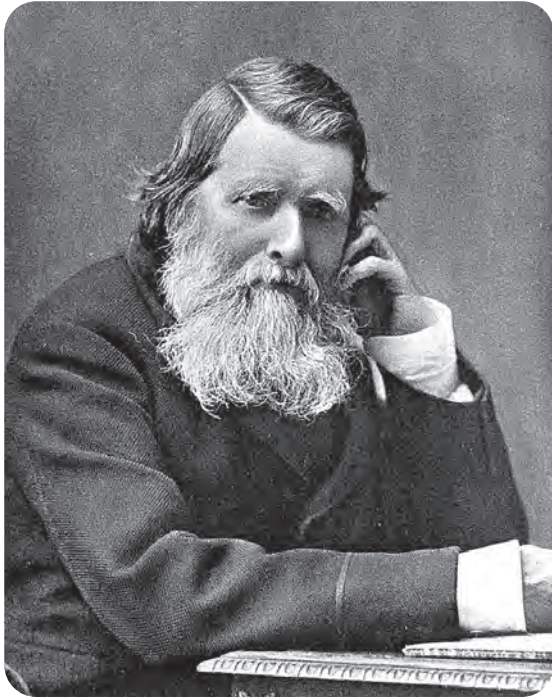
I think we can read a lot of what Ruskin wrote about art and architecture with a gentle understanding of a taste that perhaps we don't necessarily share today. I think the most significant aspect of Ruskin was not his work as an art historian or critic; indeed as an artist he was superb, and the way in which he drew and painted was exemplary. What stands out for me particularly is the championing of dignity of the human being. He could see that what was happening in the world, and particularly in Britain at that time, was a degradation of the human being, and how the human being had become a slave to an industrial mechanistic structure that had made a few people very wealthy, while most people lived in slums.

Ruskin published a series of articles that later came out in a book known as *Unto This Last* – the titles of his books are always a little enigmatic, because unless you are well versed in the classical history and biblical analogies they do not immediately reveal what the books are about. *Unto This Last* is a description of an economic system that in a way prefigures the whole of what Rudolf Steiner brought in the threefolding. He speaks about a healthy economy in which people give what they can and take what they need - Karl Marx did not have the monopoly on this wisdom, and certainly Steiner was able to bring that aspect of a healthy social economic life without it being embedded in the materialism it so often later was. Ruskin does not speak about it in a threefolding way, but when you read this book you see there is a wish to acknowledge a healthy economic life that of course was anathema to the people of his own day. One example of that, he says that the doctor will be prepared to die in the cause of his vocation. He will not say he cannot treat a certain patient out of fear of catching his disease. A priest will be prepared to die in pursuit of his vocation. Obviously, a soldier is prepared to die in pursuit of his calling. Why is a merchant not prepared to die in pursuit of his calling? Would a merchant be prepared to venture into dangerous circumstances in order to procure the goods that the people at home either need or just want?

So there is a kind of radical thinking there that had a profound effect on Tolstoy and Gandhi in particular. Gandhi speaks about having come across



Archangel Michael by Aleppo, tempera on wood, 16th century



1882

John Ruskin

Ruskin inherited a fortune when his father died. His father had bought him several original Turner paintings that are no longer in Brantwood; can you imagine Ruskin's bedroom had a few original Turners on the walls? They have replaced them now with copies of course. He had a beautiful cabinet made for the original Turners he acquired during his life and you can see the cabinet in Brantwood.

His vision of the dignity of the human being came to strange expressions sometimes. It was an impulse in which Ruskin wanted to make museums available for the ordinary, less well educated and maybe more culturally deprived, where they could see beautiful things. He imagined there would be a museum with jewels in it for example, so that people could come and admire beauty. A noble impulse, but as you can imagine not an entirely successful one. The poor did not then go to museums and look at jewels necessarily.

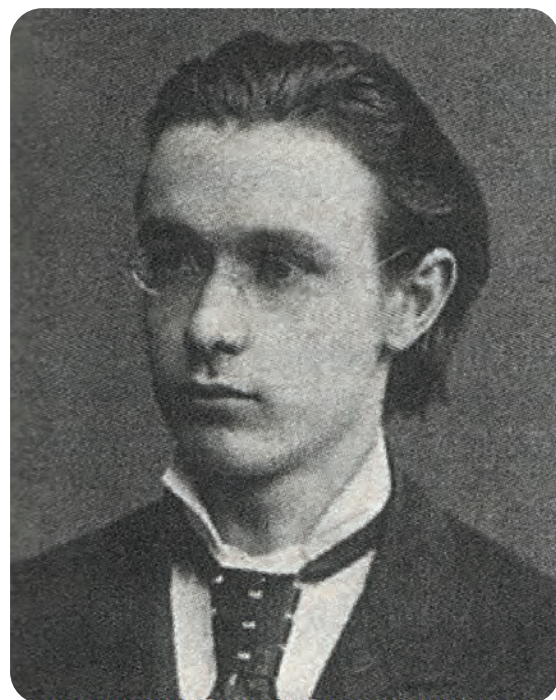
In his house in Brantwood there was an ice house. If you were fortunate enough you might have land to dig a space where the temperature was sufficiently low for ice to be maintained. Why did they want ice? It was not a question of refrigerating food. The main reason these middle and upper class people wanted ice was to impress their friends by having ice in their cocktails. This was the main reason for having ice in those days. Ruskin thought, I'll open my ice house to the poor in the village for them to take advantage of this. A wonderfully noble initiative but you can imagine not many people in his village had any reason to have ice. When he was a professor at Oxford he realised that it was important the students engage in some sort of physical or

Unto This Last while he was still in South Africa. He read it on a train journey from Cape Town to Johannesburg and he said it changed his life. What does that mean, 'it changed his life'? I think we can recognise that when something changes your life, it is not actually that it changes your life, but it wakes up something that you have always been carrying that can now come to expression. That is how I understand these life changing moments; it is not that now I am different, it is that now I am liberated from something that prevented me from realising actually what my deepest longings are. Let us stay with the expression 'it changed his life', and you can see it liberated a deeper impulse that he came with. That is the nature of our experience with the outside world, the task of the material world we live in. An external encounter awakens us to something that we carry within us. This is the essence of anthroposophy, and it came to expression for Gandhi, and it also came to expression for Tolstoy. Tolstoy was not a poor man. He had land and endeavoured to treat the serfs in a human way, which also made him quite unpopular amongst his fellow aristocrats in Russia.

manual activity, so he thought it would be a wonderful idea if they built a road. Oscar Wilde and Alfred Milner were students at Oxford when Ruskin was a teacher; as their teacher he said they all had to go out and build this road. There was not a need for a road at that point but they all engaged heavily in rock breaking and road building because Ruskin felt it was good to be physically engaged, even though the road served no purpose.

I am not unwilling to mention these rather bizarre aspects of Ruskin's life because I do not think in any way they diminish the stature Aonghus so rightly accorded him in his introduction tonight. I think it helps to see that Ruskin was a human being who had a vision of the dignity of the human being – I cannot put it in any other way – and some of his efforts to achieve that were more successful than others. I think at the end maybe we can look at the significance of failure, because towards the end of his life Ruskin suffered bouts of depression and even madness between intervals of lucidity in which he wrote some of his most beautiful and lyrical work. So you have to ask yourself why it was? Such a great thinker, someone who was so impressive, someone who could see the need for change and was so immensely gifted as an artist, both in what he did and also in his recognition of art, what does it mean at the end of one's life when you experience a 'closing in on yourself' – what does that actually mean? I think it has to do with his own perception on one level of his inability to realise the aspirations and ideals that he so actively cherished and actively worked towards.

Maybe this is the point at which we can consider what the relationship to Rudolf Steiner is in this theme. I would like to read two extracts from Ruskin and then say something about Steiner that belongs to that. I think that Ruskin's greatest artistic achievement was the recognition, acknowledgement and championing of Turner. Turner was very well known and very wealthy in his own time. If you know something about the way Turner developed, his early work has a kind of realism to it which is very pleasing to a certain mind. The development of Turner is to let go of the need to represent reality in a recognisable way. He begins to paint not what we would ordinarily see; the way in which the drama of the elements plays itself out in colour and light on the canvas is not immediately recognisable. Of course, he was heavily criticised for this indistinctness in his art. Ruskin recognised that through this way of depicting the drama of the elements that Turner was on to something very special. There is a particular description – there are two actually – where Ruskin is describing Turner painting water. There is one of the falls at Schaffhausen, but there is also a description of the sea:



1882

Rudolf Steiner



Aiming at these grand characters of the sea, Turner almost always places the spectator not on the shore, but twenty or thirty yards from it, beyond the first range of the breakers... The surge and weight of the ocean in the gale on a comparatively level shore but the Land's End, the entire disorder of the surges when every one of them, divided and entangled among promontories as it rolls in, and beaten back part by part from walls of rock on this side and that side, recoils like the defeated division of a great army, throwing all behind it into disorder, breaking up the succeeding waves into vertical ridges, which in their turn, yet more totally shattered on the shore, retire in more helpless confusion; until the whole surface of the sea becomes one dizzy whirl of rushing, writhing, tortured, undirected rage, bounding and crashing, and colliding in an anarchy of enormous power; subdivided into myriads of waves, of which every one is not, be it remembered, by a separate surge, but part and portion of a vast one, actuated by internal power, and giving in every direction the mighty undulation of impetuous line which glides over the rocks and writhes in the wind, overwhelming the one, and piercing the other with the form, fury, and swiftness of sheet of lambent fire.

All four elements are there, there are the rocks, there is the water, the wind, and in the end, the fire. He did not do that consciously, yet you can see there is a canvas - a dead, lifeless canvas, and what does it inspire in him? Life is not in the canvas, but the life that is depicted in the canvas inspires this life in Ruskin so that he can bring this scene to life in his own words.

If you are familiar with the lectures that Rudolf Steiner gave after he visited Tintagel in pursuit of Arthur, this is what Steiner describes of the sea in Tintagel:



When one stands on the actual site of the castle and gazes with the eye of spirit at the stretch of sea which an intervening cliff seems to divide into two, there, in a comparatively short time, one can perceive a wonderful interplay between the light and the air, but also between the elemental spirits living in light and air. One can see spirit beings streaming to earth in the rays of the sun, one can see them mirrored in the glittering raindrops, and one can see that which comes under the sway of earthly gravity, appearing in the air as the denser spirit beings of the air. Again, when the rain ceases and the rays of the sun stream through the clear air one perceives the elemental spirits intermingling in quite a different way. There, one witnesses how the sun works in earthly substance and seeing it all from a place such as this, one is filled with a kind of pagan piety. From above, the sunlight is reflected in manifold forms in the waves of the air, the interplay of elemental nature from above and below reveals the full power of the sun, and displays it in such a way that man is able to receive it into his being.

I actually came across these descriptions by Rudolf Steiner before I came across the ones by Ruskin. Tintagel is a place I love, and I do not have the eye of the seer, I cannot see the elemental beings. But when you go there, and you see the water and waves, you can imagine with spiritual perception this turbulent drama of the elements is of course imbued with the spirit realities that Rudolf Steiner saw and described, and which Turner saw and painted, and which Ruskin recognised. But it is this ‘sun element’ that particularly invites us to recognise a connection between John Ruskin and Rudolf Steiner.



King Arthur's Castle off Tintagel Head (detail), by D. Murphy, Cornwall, circa 1910