

John Ruskin and Rudolf Steiner

The Archangel Gabriel and the Archangel Michael

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Towards the end of his life, when Ruskin was in Brantwood, he looked over the lake where there is the Old Man of Coniston, the mountain and the hill on the other side. Part of his depression was occasioned by the sort of experience he describes:

For the sky is covered in grey cloud. Not rain cloud, but a dry, black veil which no ray of sunshine can pierce, partly diffused in mist, feebleness, enough to make distant objects unintelligible, yet without any substance or wreathing or colour of its own, and everywhere the leaves of the trees are shaking fitfully as they do before a thunderstorm, only not violently, but enough to show the passing to and fro of a strange, bitter, blighting wind. Dismal enough had it been the first morning of its kind that summer, but during all this spring in London and at Oxford, through meagre March, through changelessly sullen April, through despondent May and darkened June, morning after morning has come grey and shrouded.

It looks partly as if it was made by poisonous smoke. Very possibly it may be; there are at least two hundred furnace chimneys in a square of two miles on every side of me, but mere smoke would not blow to and fro in that wild way, it looks more to me as if it were made of dead men's souls, such of them as are not gone yet where they have to go, and may be flitting hither and thither, doubting themselves of the fittest place for them.

These are not meteorological, but moral clouds; he sees them but he experiences them, not occasioned by the weather, but occasioned by something else – are these the souls of dead men?





Icon of Gabriel, Byzantine,
c. 1387–1395
Tretyakov Gallery

If there are such things as souls, and if ever any of them haunt places where they have been hurt there must be many above us just now displeasing enough.

Rudolf Steiner speaks about the effect of souls, and it is strange he uses the word souls. If you have been burdened by materialism in your life, what happens when you die and what happens to those thoughts that you have nurtured and carried? Steiner describes how the effect of having lived with materialism means that materialism becomes a cloud-like burden through which incarnating spirits, incarnating individuals, have to find their way. It is quite extraordinary, the affinity between what Ruskin describes with *If there are such things as souls*, with the effect of these clouds not being able to find their way to wherever it is they should go after death. And so Rudolf Steiner:

Thus we see that in these cases, when the threshold of death is crossed by souls who have not wanted to have anything...

I hope it is superfluous to say, but I do not believe that Rudolf Steiner got this idea from John Ruskin:

What are then, the aims of these initiates who really know very well that the human soul is a purely spiritual entity independent of the body, this materialism compels souls to remain bound to the material realm after death in order to be able to use these souls for their purposes.

So the context is a little more involved, but there is an affinity. Ruskin has this sense that what clouds his vision of the sun is the effect of the souls that have died and are not able to move on. Rudolf Steiner describes that from another point of view:

More and more as men passed into the spiritual worlds through the gate of death they bore with them the outcome of their materialistic ideas on the earth.

In another lecture Steiner gave in London in 1913, he describes the effect of this materialism in the atmosphere around the Earth as being a kind of second crucifixion with which human beings incarnating have to contend as they come down to the Earth. It is almost an unexpectedly material description of a spiritual process; perhaps we should not be surprised and should be willing to recognise there is a unity here, not a split between the spirit and matter.

I found it extraordinary that Ruskin describes something out of his perception that is immensely depressing for him because he cannot make sense of it. I am not saying it was not depressing for Rudolf Steiner, but he strove to understand this in a way that led to his contributing so that people could make sense of it, and perhaps begin to work with it. For Ruskin it was merely a reality that was

depressing. I think it also contributed to his unhappiness at the end of his life, which then expressed itself in what, I think, is recognised as depression and madness.

There is another beautiful thing in Ruskin's descriptions of Turner's painting, where he speaks about the sun. Ruskin's most precious insight into the sun comes through Turner's work.

Man is the sun of the world. More than the real sun. The fire of his wonderful heart is the only light and heat worth gauge and measure. Where he is, are the tropics. Where he is not, the ice world.

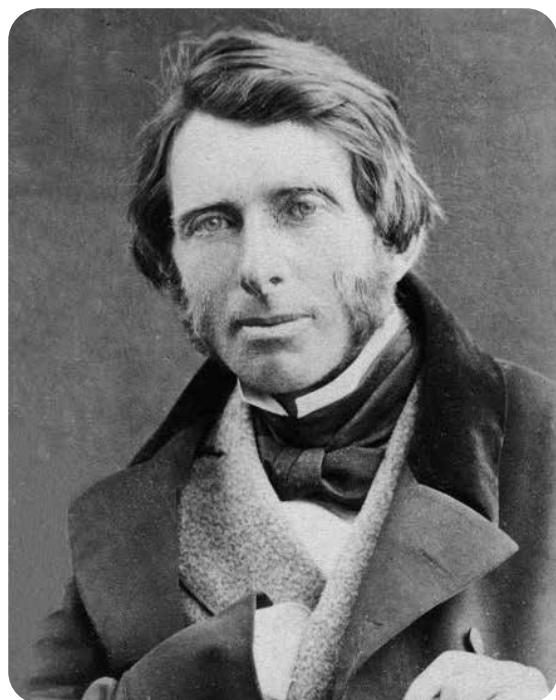
You have to forgive him for saying man rather than human – we know what he means. If you are even fleetingly familiar with the work of Rudolf Steiner you will recognise the affinity there. At the heart of Rudolf Steiner's work is an understanding of the mystery of Golgotha and the significance of a spiritual being who one can really recognise as the Sun being. Christ is the being who is at home on the Sun, who left the Sun to connect his destiny with the evolution of humanity on Earth. So what we can recognise as the 'Grail impulse' is that where the human being recognises that the Divine may still be in nature and may still be in heaven, but the first place where we can encounter it now after the mystery of Golgotha in this Grail sense, is in the hearts and in the blood of the human being. It is wonderful that Ruskin senses that and puts it in his own words.

Rudolf Steiner brings exactly the same perception in a much more conscious and spiritually elaborated context, and speaks about the Sun quality that is there as a potential in each human being as a result of the incarnation 2000 years ago. It seems very clear to me that there is an affinity, a spiritual brotherhood, between John Ruskin and Rudolf Steiner. Aonghus mentioned the Guild of St George, and legends of St George. Perhaps the best known one is where George kills the dragon and thereby rescues and releases the maiden from the danger of being devoured. This image appealed immensely to Ruskin because he saw the dragon as the monster of the Industrial Revolution, and the degrading and barbaric circumstances in which most people in Britain lived at that time. He saw the image of what the human being *could* be which I have already referred to as the 'dignity of the human being', and the championing of that as being a kind of 'George Crusade'.

The nature of that is to recognise the injustices in the world and to wish to change things by changing the circumstances on the Earth – creating museums where the relatively less well-educated and cultured people could come and see beautiful things. It is a hopelessly impractical expression of a beautiful impulse, that beauty should be shared, not just by those who are rich enough. How



10th-century gold and enamel Byzantine icon of St Michael, in the treasury of St Mark's Basilica



1863

John Ruskin

wonderfully true that contradiction is. You know it in your own lives where you have an ideal and then you come up against your inability to do anything that is really effective, at least at the beginning. I do not feel I need to apologise for referring to this aspect of Ruskin, because I think it affirms the human being in the struggle towards something that is not always immediately attainable. It is the struggle in that direction that is spiritually significant, not the Earthly success, and that is a reality, of course, that Rudolf Steiner knew as well.

We can find the failures in Ruskin's life and we should not ignore them because they belong to the biography of an individual who strove in the most Michaelic way but whose vision was limited to George. On the other hand, Rudolf Steiner recognised this Archangelic being, who in 1879 rises to a higher rank among the hierarchy of angels and becomes the time spirit, an Archai, taking over from Gabriel. Now a Michael epoch, when Michael is the 'Spirit of the Time' as Steiner calls it, has a very different gesture to that of George.

It is essential that George kills the dragon, otherwise on Earth the Princess would not be saved. But an understanding of Michael lives in almost all the ways in which this Archangel has become an Archai is depicted. Michael never kills the dragon because from a spiritual point of view you cannot get rid of and deal with challenges in that way. The spiritual reality is that the dragons within our soul, and within the world, have to be engaged with to be known, through engaging with them and eventually maybe also by transforming them. This is the implicit, not always explicit, Manichaeian essence of anthroposophy. Evil is not something to be got rid of or denied, but a challenge to engage in a way that we can then develop a strength that we did not have before. In that sense, I think it is right to say that evil has an evolutionary task.

Of course, for Rudolf Steiner this was not a new idea; I am not sure how Ruskin would have responded to a (rather simplistically stated) great spiritual truth like that. In his concept of championing George, it is really a question of killing the dragon so the princess can be liberated. Rudolf Steiner does not say very much about George, but you can see that Michael is the spiritual counterpart, where the dragon represents a challenge to work with in a transformative way and not under the illusion that you can simply kill or get rid of the beast.

So both Ruskin and Steiner perceive the ills in the world, and they perceive what is not working and what is not right. Before laying the foundation stone for the first Goetheanum in 1913, Rudolf Steiner very explicitly acknowledges the longing for something that would go beyond the evil that he recognises has a kind of pervasive reality in the world as he sees it. His response to the

perception of this pervasive hindrance to spiritual health is to build a building (the Goetheanum) where the architecture, the sculpture and the painting will be a historical expression of what we have come out of in the past. It will be a place for something to be spoken in the present, for the future. So Rudolf Steiner's response is an artistic reality, his attempt in the diseased culture he recognises that is around him, to build something that would be healing in a transformative sense. I think the building in itself, and that whole impulse, is profoundly Michaelic. That is, to begin as he does, before he lays the foundation stone, to affirm the presence of those forces that hinder our spiritual development, and then to lay the foundation stone for a building that would serve as a place where art could begin a socially transformative and healing process.

Before the building was completed, it burnt down, and one could immediately think it failed. There are failures, so Rudolf Steiner's life is also an example of that. He did not manage to do everything he wanted to do, but these failures did not lead to depression or 'inward lookingness', although there was a moment where he felt he should withdraw because the world did not understand what he was doing. Even that thought was the necessary opposing idea against which he could say he would do it in a more public way, and would not be pushed back. It is not the purpose of this comparison to say that he was able to do what Ruskin was not able to do.

In this Anglo-Saxon idiom of the conscious soul, failure is an absolutely essential ingredient in the biography that strives for spiritual self-knowledge. Rudolf Steiner's task was different. Ruskin perceived the world illuminated by a spiritual reality that was not always conscious – it was powerful in him, but he did not always have an understanding of actually what it was that moved him. He realised that the world was not as it should be and that he wished to change it, and that capacity to see that the world is not as it should be is a profoundly spiritual illumination. It was not, however, an illumination he penetrated with his consciousness. Ruskin therefore wanted to change the world and slay the dragon in the name of freedom of the human being, to liberate people from the shackles of the social and economic system that was so degrading.

Rudolf Steiner's perception of the same world was no less insightful but it was illuminated by a spiritual dimension that he understood. He strove in the movements for agriculture, medicine and education to create conditions in which humans could grow and achieve their humanity, but this striving on Earth for better conditions was compelled by a spiritual understanding. His whole life impulse was to contribute to, accompany and support an evolving understanding of the human being, not necessarily one that could be changed immediately.



1905
Rudolf Steiner

The burning of the Goetheanum was not the only disappointment Rudolf Steiner experienced. There were other moments in his life where what he wanted to do seemed impossible. Ruskin experienced that. Poets contemporary with Ruskin like Wordsworth and Coleridge had a particular dynamic that speaks to the dynamic between Ruskin and Steiner.

Wordsworth wrote a poem *Intimations of Immortality*; Coleridge was writing in tandem. Then they fell out with each other and so the development of their poems did not go as they had planned. Wordsworth lamented the fact that he no longer perceived the light in nature that he perceived when he was a child. *The light has gone*, he said. He tried to deal with this disappointing experience by resolving it with a philosophical understanding that things change, and we grow up, but these things will always be there in memory and for others. Coleridge's solution to the problem was a very different one. In his much shorter poem, *On Dejection*, he realises that we can expect nothing from nature that we do not first give.

Lady, we receive but what we give.

It is a wonderful precursor to the differences between organic and biodynamic farming. Coleridge understands that his disappointment at not getting anything is actually something he has to resolve within himself. What is he going to give nature? He thinks that he has failed. At the end of his poem, Wordsworth concludes that he has solved the problem. Coleridge, on the other hand, knows what the answer is, and actually thinks he has failed. My contention is that Coleridge came much further than Wordsworth because thinking you have failed, knowing you have not done what you wanted to do, has a quality of self-knowledge in it. That is much more significant for the future than having solved the problem so you can retreat into your comfort zone.

I am being very harsh on Wordsworth. I love his poetry, but in this comparison I really feel you can see how Wordsworth retreats into the known, where Coleridge remains isolated in the unknown. That is some of the quality of Ruskin – how do we deal with failure, and the experience of failure? One way or another we have all experienced failure or shame, but whether or not you get beyond that, having made the effort, the endeavour in a noble quest, is spiritually inextinguishable.

Thank you for your attention with these unfinished thoughts. It is wonderful to be at Ruskin Mill, where Ruskin is acknowledged. Ruskin is sometimes ridiculed in England because some of his ideas are so one-sided in terms of art. The tragedy of his personal life is something some people gloat over in quite a sensational way. I think his recognising and championing of Turner and this impulse for the human being to achieve the conditions in which the human being can *become* human, is where we can acknowledge, 200 years on from his birth, that his impulse actually has something for the future. Thank you.