

*John Arthos*

## RUSKIN AND TOLSTOY: "THE DIGNITY OF MAN"

IN 1920 A ONE-TIME MEMBER of the English Parliament declared that Lenin, and Russian Communism generally, owed more to Ruskin than to Marx. Mr. C. F. G. Masterman went on to say that "the whole apparatus of government in what is called Bolshevist Russia carries out almost in detail the ideals of St. George's Guild. You have the same contempt for democracy and liberty, and the same determination that the ordinary man must put himself in the control of those self-sacrificing leaders who are determined to direct him the way that he should go."

It is easy to see nowadays how wrong Mr. Masterman was, but his remarks point, nevertheless, to a similarity of real consequence. He was right in recognizing that the Communists and Ruskin were agreed on the over-riding importance of work and on the political importance of the worker. They were also agreed in the temper of their criticism of the society they meant to set right. Ruskin's criticism was as ruthless as Lenin's. Shaw said, "Ruskin's political message to the cultured society of his day began and ended in this single judgment: you are a parcel of thieves." Ruskin himself was more sarcastic: "The upper classes of Europe have been one large Picnic Party. Most of them have been religious also; and in sitting down, by companies, upon the green grass, in parks, gardens, and the like, have considered themselves commanded into that position by Divine authority, and fed with bread from Heaven: of which they duly considered it proper to bestow the fragments in support, and the tithes in tuition, of the poor." Bolshevist vituperation was no stronger.

Ruskin and the Communists were alike in insisting that man is subordinate to law, but here the likeness ends. The laws of life as Ruskin formulated them were quite other than the laws of dialectical materialism, and the authority for political legislation had quite different sanctions. Indeed it is now plain to see that Ruskin had his eye on a truth that the Communists appear to have ignored as completely as the most extreme *laissez-faire* capitalists. In their concentration on polit-

ical authority they appear to have put aside one aspect of the nature of work and of the interest of the worker that in the long run may be of overwhelming importance. Like many capitalists they have found the seduction of machines irresistible, and they appear to have willingly given the workers up as hostages to increased productivity.

A report written for UNESCO in 1961 on "Craft and Contemporary Culture" states that modern industrial society has caused men to be "mere cogs, and given them less consideration than the machines they mind. It still forces them to live in huge, dirty insensate cities cut off from the clean air and sight of nature without which the spirit wilts; it sucks them from the human dignity of enjoying and taking a pride in work for which they are responsible, and has forced them to serve the machine rather than the machine them." East and West alike have taken the course that ends this way, and Ruskin's St. George's Guild refused it, and it refused it because the end in view was a radically different idea of man than Marx supported.

Mr. Masterman credited the Bolsheviks not merely with the principles of organization but with the ideals of Ruskin, but as it turned out the requirements of power led them to the assembly line. For Ruskin that would have been the dishonour he was trying above all else to stamp out. The means could never justify the ends, and in this instance, the means—the labourer himself—would be destroyed before he could use what he thought he was producing for himself: in the modern factory "it is not purely speaking, the labour that is divided;—but the men—broken into small fragments in terms of life, so that all the little pieces of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pen, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pen or the head of a nail."

So fragmented, Ruskin would say, anything that deserves to be called a man would be finally dissolved in the classless future world of the Marxists. All would be mere fragments, not only as workers but in their relationship to each other and to the State, and there would be nothing to put them together again, no principles of wholeness or of individuality and individual purpose. One of the articles of foundation of the Guild reads, "I will strive to raise my own body and soul daily into all the higher powers of duty and happiness; not in rivalry or contention with others, but for the help, delight, and honour of others, and for joy and peace of my own life." The man whose daily labour is making the head of a nail in mass production is not in doing that becoming more peaceful and more joyful, no matter how much thought he gives to the use of the nail. And his surrender to such an occupation deprives him of the means even of maintaining ascendancy over himself. There

is no place for love in such work, and so the time of the day spent in it is that much, and more, taken out of his life.

What man can take joy in is himself and the variety and complexity of his capacities to make things. In their full or nearly full use he can discover a kind of peace, which, in turn, sustains and enriches his willingness to be of use to others. The time and the thought spent in work should participate in the life of the whole day.

Next for the labourer's motto, "Every man his chance." Let us mend that for them a little, and say, "Every man his certainty"—certainty, that if he does well, he will be honoured, and aided, and advanced in such degree as may be fitting for his faculty and consistent with his peace; and equal certainty that if he does ill, he will by sure justice be judged, and by sure punishment be chastised; if it may be, corrected; and if that may not be, condemned. That is the right reading of the Republican motto, "every man his chance." And then, with such a system of government, pure, watchful, and just, you may approach your great problem of national education, or, in other words, of national employment. For all education begins in work. What we think, or what we know, or what we believe, is in the end of little consequence. The only thing of consequence is what we *do*: and for man, woman or child, the first point of education is to make them do their best. It is the law of good economy to make the best of everything. How much more to make the best of every creature! Therefore, when your pauper comes to you and asks for bread, ask of him instantly—What faculty have you? What can you do best? . . . Can you drive a nail into wood? . . . Can you lay a brick? . . . Can you lift a spadeful of earth? . . . Wherever death was, bring life; that is to be your work; that your parish refuge; that your education.

It seems plain enough that Ruskin underestimated the difficulties facing any such resistance to the industrial revolution as he proposed. For one thing he appears not to have understood how complex society is, how various and extensive its requirements. He seems not sufficiently to have weighed what is involved in the willingness of so many to submit themselves to drudgery and servitude for the sake of other rewards than the joy work can give. He seems to have made too little of the most ancient ideas that the main value of work, apart from what is produced, is in keeping men out of trouble. He seems also to have failed to understand well enough what is now spoken of as "morale"—a willing subjection of one's individual interest to the purposes of an organization. Above all, he fails to face the reasons why workers may be persuaded to sacrifice their proper joy and fulfilment for dubious ends.

Nevertheless, there is evidence everywhere to support him in his insistence on the fundamental importance of good workmanship as a stabilizer of relationships within a community, and as an enricher and invigorator of human life. For many, and often those among the most politically active, the measure of human respect is

determined by the quality of the work they do. Add to this everyone's interest in beauty and the disposition for something more religious than respect, honour, and one must agree that the criticism Ruskin makes of the machine points to needs that can be denied only at the cost of what the UNESCO report calls decay.

So much for a certain kind of pious reminder, fruitlessly pious, I am afraid, because the answers are so difficult to find, and the absolute goods of so much of machine production—electric lights, many drugs, vaster and vaster food production—are here for everyone to see.

But Ruskin's criticism has still another value that must be re-affirmed, perhaps with more effect. In glorifying work Ruskin also celebrates the ordinary conditions of existence. It is no other-worldly, classless society he puts before us, but a world of villages, with a tavern at one end and a chapel at the other, and cottages and workshops in between—what we should now call urban re-development. And just as a writer in the *New York Times* spoke of him as one of those whose ideas were alive in the Peace Corps, so one sees their continuing pressure in many efforts to establish patterns of conduct and organization that will enhance the opportunity for dignity and pleasure and love in life.

However diverse the conclusions that follow from Ruskin's teaching, there is the constant admission on all sides that he has had an important influence upon labour parties and the history of socialism in Great Britain, if not in Russia. (In the destructiveness of his criticism, however, there may have been an indirect result even there. For whatever it is worth, Tolstoy is said to have remarked that he was as much the disciple of Ruskin as Ruskin was of Carlyle, and this would at least open the way to the opinion that some part of his own devastating criticism of the *status quo* owed to Ruskin's lead.) Allowing for a certain disillusion even with its benefits, one might still think, as J. W. Mackail did in 1919, that the principles of *Unto This Last* continue to be at issue, and one might also believe, with Miss Joan Evans currently, that the British labour movement continues to honour an idea of the importance of beauty that it owes partly to Ruskin. In other regions of the world one might see little or no evidence of the continuing life in the ideas he held. There are notable exceptions, of course; the work of Gandhi, Coomaraswamy, Lewis Mumford, and various theorists of education continues to assert the value of what Ruskin valued, but as far as one may judge, his influence exists by and large more as a continuing protest than as a guide to effective change. One might judge that what Ruskin believed to be the main thing—that the only wealth is life, and it is to be spent in honouring nature and God—could hardly be said to be the informing idea of the welfare state.

Nevertheless, his criticism is vital; he continues to remind us that the discontents of modern society are not to be healed merely by more production and more consumption, and that there are other conditions that must be met in order to satisfy equally urgent demands of the nature of humans as humans. Ruskin says that there are definite conditions in the nature of work itself—of applying mind and hand to our tasks—that must be met if the worker is to be enriched rather than impoverished and exhausted by toil, and that must be met if men are not merely to approve but to respect what they make, and if they are to respect each other. Again the same UNESCO report would more than justify him:

The experience of having sought after perfection, without thought of praise or gain, but only to make something as well as it can be made, is to be freed for an eternal moment from the tyrannies of outer events and inner pressures. If we can remain true to this disinterested ideal even when the moment has passed it gives an inner touchstone by which to test the quality of experience and to give us standards of judgment in a confused and uncertain age.

There are many psychologists who say that if these conditions are not met the consequences are more violently destructive than the decay the UNESCO report speaks of, or the spiritual aridity that haunted Ruskin. Freud long ago speculated on the cause of "the delay of the machine age"—why it was, when so many of its elements were at hand, that mankind refused to make the use of technology that recent centuries have exploited. The answers that many of his followers continue to give are not very different from Ruskin's although the terms in which they speak, of course, are greatly different.

Machines, this reasoning goes, feed the idea in humans of what omnipotent power is like, and they also acquaint them intimately with the idea of control over great distances. As those ideas become more fully understood, humans come increasingly to fear persecution by those very powers, the more so since they are able to work from the greatest remove. They discover that in exchange for a world in which they worked with their hands—where the forces of nature inherent in the material of their work submitted to laws that were also the laws they themselves sought to serve—they have given themselves over to a world in which power and law effect themselves automatically. The smoothly running and efficient machine the worker tends impresses upon his consciousness and his psyche an idea that is finally overwhelming, that the powers of nature may be autonomous. He is persuaded—now that the machine has gained the status it has—that the merely human, the pride a man has when he thinks he is in control of what he is making, must be repressed because it is irrelevant and obstructive. It interferes with the working of the machine as well as with the smooth processes of the universe.

"While spurning pagan ego-centric thought, the inhuman machine mirrors a predominantly paranoid, a less defined and therefore a more nebulous form of self." The language is necessarily technical, but it communicates all too well the general consciousness of which Stuart Chase, Charlie Chaplin, the Surrealists, and countless others have spoken again and again. "Unsettlement, rootlessness caused by the machine on a vast scale, are easily accounted for from a hundred different approaches; yet none of them, nor all of them together, help us to understand how man *created*, rather than how he suffered, a culture in which he is so far from being at home; in which, while producing in a few years more material than in all the centuries together, he failed to project any charged emblem, any mode of identifying himself affirmatively with that culture." "We dislike our civilization for the vastness uncovered within us and without; it obliterates perspective, it encloses. Much of the force of modern art lies with the conviction, in Malraux's words, that the concept of man in harmony with himself has become spurious."

With the best will in the world, Mr. Stokes, in summarizing this line of thought, does not turn psychological language into the clarity of Ruskin's categories, but one can see all the same that he comes to Ruskin's answer: "If men are to be well contained in an ever-expanding, ever-contracting milieu, psychological circumstances must need be such that, while using machines to the uttermost, they are able to temper the 'philosophy' of the machine with the various wisdom of the body-ego, by the embrace of trusted objects, by the outward turning in rivalry with the external world that art achieves."

One may doubt how well Tolstoy understood Ruskin. It is true he said he was a great man—"les grandes pensées viennent du coeur." He also said, by his ultimate standard, on seeing photographs of Ruskin, in full face and in profile, "He was like a Russian peasant." If he meant passion and intensity and endurance, of course—but he meant more than that, he meant that peasants are like Ruskin, and nothing could be much farther from the truth than that. Ruskin, on his side, said that Tolstoy was "the one man in Europe who was carrying out the work he had hoped to do himself." One understands that this, too, had truth in it, but it was also a profound misconception.

What called out to each of them was indeed a similar disposition. When Sir Sidney Cockerell told Tolstoy that Ruskin felt a continual grief that he had not been able to renounce all possessions, Tolstoy exclaimed, "That is it. We do not

become Christians until late in life, and then there are ties." This is where the real sympathy is. Ruskin was indeed haunted by the idea of abnegation—as Miss Alice Meynell said, his whole life was a regret that he could not do as Saint Francis did. Tolstoy, as is universally known, was driven by the same desire, although more confusedly, and in a form that was finally, I think, so far from being Franciscan as to be un-Christian. It was something other than a peasant that defined the Franciscan movement. And on the other hand, Ruskin's failure to follow that path did not come from a despising of the world but from the quality of his love for it, the love of beauty and the love of work.

The strength of Ruskin is that he supposed that anything like satisfaction and anything like honour relate to activity in the world, and particularly in making things for use. He similarly related honour, love, and beauty to ethics. All this in the world about us, and not in a transcendental element.

The weakness of Tolstoy is that he proposes one satisfaction and one satisfaction alone, the satisfaction of escape. One after another of his protagonists—from *The Cossacks* to *Resurrection*—explores ways of transforming society or even particular communities—and ends always in giving up, not because the labour of reform is too difficult or requires too much patience—the energy and patience are always heroic—but because he wants what he cannot have, and at the same time finds the failure sweet. The girl in *The Cossacks* has the true way that the civilized man admits he is cut off from:

Every day I have before me the distant snowy mountains and this majestic happy woman. But not for me is the only happiness possible in the world; I cannot have this woman! What is most terrible and yet sweetest in my condition is that I feel that I understand her but that she never understands me; not because she is inferior: on the contrary she ought not to understand me. She is happy, she is like nature: consistent, calm, self-contained; and I, a weak distorted being, want her to understand my deformity, and my torments!

And when it is not his recognition of incapacity to return to the simplicity of nature that he accepts as his destiny, it is his recognition of his incapacity to be a Christian as he defines it: "life in the spirit is death in the body; in the spirit is life and good, in the body darkness and evil." If he cannot be one with nature, then he will proscribe the body, and the body turns out to be not only flesh, but civilization.

For him who sincerely suffers at seeing the sufferings of those about us, there is a very clear, simple, and easy means, the only possible one for the cure of the evils surrounding us, and to enable us to feel that we are living legitimately—the same that John the Baptist gave in reply to the question: "What then must we do?" and which Christ confirmed: not to have more than one coat and not to have money, that is, not

to make use of other people's labour, and therefore, first to do all we can with our hands.

For a while his heroes exult in the labour of peasants, in sharing their toil, in learning their skills. But the result is never honour, nor the satisfactions of art—these are corrupt, except in Homer, or some other peasant far enough removed in time to escape being brought to scrutiny. It is not using, or being of use, that Tolstoy cares about, but communion—communion with life under wholly different conditions than any we know about, not with life as it is but with the dream of another life where there is nothing that possesses any human definition.

His perceptions of the range of human selfishness lead him to as devastating a criticism of human motive as Stendahl could supply him with, but in the supposed service of reform. He leads us to believe he means to improve the world by purging it of its evil, and that he knows of ways of going about it. But all his remedies turn out to be ways of abandoning it. His criticism of abuses—of exploitations, of cant and hypocrisy, of barbarousness—are made on the authority of the Enlightenment, the right and the impulsion to unmask all belief as all pretension. When *he* calls the bourgeoisie a parcel of thieves, he does not, like Ruskin, mean to show them how to deserve their fortune. Nor is he like Marx, setting class against class in order to transcend class. He is merely another Stendahl to whom reality is the exercise of one's judgment upon the acts and beliefs of others, the exercise of judgment and the vaunting of it. But Tolstoy goes Stendahl one better—he concludes that judgment must remain in the mind and not share in the conduct of affairs; once that is undertaken all evil follows, and the loss of joy in being a judge:

After gaining a personal knowledge of the prisons and the halting-stations, Nekhludof recognized that the chief crisis among the convicts which might be summed up as drunkenness, gambling, brutality, and those shocking crimes committed by convicts, including cannibalism, are neither accidents nor the phenomena of degeneration, mental and physical, and as certain of those scientists have declared, greatly to the satisfaction of governments, but that they are the inevitable result of the colossal error that one group of human beings has the right to sit in judgment on and to punish another.

The effect of Tolstoy's criticism is primarily and all but comprehensively destructive. He keeps on coming back to the religion of the hermit, to the cults of the *Philokalia*, to the religion of love which is never of the love of humans or the love of the ways of humans. As Jane Addams and Aylmer Maude discovered, after the deepest testing of his doctrines that their capacities allowed, the cult of non-violence is in the end the cult of self-destruction; and what is true of that doctrine is true also of every line of Tolstoy's criticism of society. Nothing is to be left but God and Tolstoy—neither war, nor marriage, nor commerce, nor a church. As Sir Isaiah

Berlin remarks, in contrast with Tolstoy the diseases of Gogol and Dostoevsky look like sanity. And this is the disease he even reasons into Anna Karenina—her retreat is not finally from betrayal or loneliness or madness, but a mere retreat from life itself.

The scope of the criticism is not as remarkable as its profundity. When one allows for the biases of nature that distorted his reasoning, what remains is an all too persuasive criticism of the failure of the middle class as of the failure of the aristocracy to place the honour and sanctity of individuals as the touchstone of social thought and management, and in not merely the failure, but the denial of what each individual, by the fact and presence of the life within him asserts and asserts consciously, instinctively and perennially—his own primary importance, not as a member of society, or as the father of children, or as the image of God, but as the mere self-consciousness of the life in nature, present in him as in no other part of creation.

And so from such a Rousseauistic affirmation, such a complex of romanticism and Slavic orthodoxy and egocentricity, he lays about until nothing is left but a wasted life—the last years run out in torment and an intransigent rejection of what moderate solace the companionship of a family might have offered a man less insistent on perfection.

Ruskin, too, is a child of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution. He understood as well as Tolstoy that the structure of European society had been undermined, and he was as willing as Tolstoy to continue the work—it was a society he partly allowed himself to think was not worth saving. The difference is that Ruskin held nothing against society as such, the imperfect system of arrangements by which individuals and peoples rise to heights they could not attain in the jungle. And Tolstoy considered society to be the enemy of that aspiration and fulfilment man attains in abnegation, abnegation even from the task of continuing the race.

Ruskin's answers: man must live; when all the waste and destruction of life and nature is allowed for, there remains the need to satisfy each individual's sense of his own importance. The only thing that gives him importance that can be justified is the application to tasks that support what is useful and also beautiful, and his satisfaction comes in part from all there is in this that is a service to others, and in part from what there is in it that satisfies his idea of making the best use of himself. Behind all this is the affirmation that this is what the forces that rule the universe approve. This harmonizes with what men understand as the principles of growth and proportion and harmony in nature. No differently than in the formation of snow crystals or leaves, except in nobility and consciousness, men in their

work obey the same laws. And in this service is our freedom, our emancipation as men, and our satisfaction:

There is not any matter, nor any spirit, nor any creature, but it is capable of a unity of some kind with other creatures; and in that unity is its perfection and theirs, and a pleasure also for the beholding of all other creatures that can behold. So the unity of spirits is partly in their sympathy, and partly in their giving and taking, and always in their love and these are their delight and their strength; for their strength is their co-working and army fellowship and their delight is in the giving and receiving of alternate and perpetual good; their inseparable dependence on each other's being, and their essential and perfect dependence on their Creator's.

Tolstoy, too, wants whole men—but this can only be if they give themselves only to God, and neglect the beautiful; to God, and neglect the world; to truth at the expense of society. And even if he merely preaches this, forgoing practice, avoiding the labour of forming a trade union or a guild or a church, the result, it would appear, is a form of asceticism in which ennui and exasperation are more pervasive even than on the assembly line. And indeed, I think part of the answer to Mr. Stokes's question is here—modern man has given autonomous nature its authority over him because he is romantic, as Marx and Hegel were, acting as if it is only feeling that matters, and as if the world of thought and action are without significance. Tolstoy's asceticism is the stripping away of the worlds of action and the worlds of thought in favour of the love of the disembodied, a state of mind all too like the state of suspension of the life of many minders of machines.

And however gladly Ruskin would have traded his life for the life of Saint Francis, there would have been no difference in this, in the cherishing of the concrete and the human.

The theme of Ruskin has become expanded by psychologists to include the expanses of anthropology, the spectrum of cultures, the territory of the unconscious, and the formation of the race. These are terms of which Ruskin was ignorant and despite all his religiousness, his acceptance of miracle and mystery, of the all but miraculous power of beauty and the organic relationship of nature to art and thought and conduct, one must believe that, unlike Malraux, he is ultimately on the side of the Greeks, on the side of the idea that harmony of nature is effected by the rule of the mind over the body:

The dignity of man depends wholly upon this harmony. If his task is above him he will be undignified in failure; if he is above it, he will be undignified in success. His own composure and nobleness must be according to the composure of his thought to his toil.

I think Ruskin went too far in reducing all religion to the religion of work. But his "disciple" missed the point completely, and too many critics of contemporary industrial life neglect Ruskin's emphasis in favour of the distorting spirituality we see in Tolstoy.

## SEAGULL

*Sanford Sternlicht*

A seagull dives from earth into the deep  
And restless ocean of the air like one  
Small boy tossed skyward, flapping at the sun  
Upon a bed-spring gyre, yet crouched to leap  
Once more in wanton joy. The soarer climbs,  
With ape arms long and handless up each rung  
Of rising heat, the throne of height; among  
The shell-bursts blows and boasts and mimes  
The Osprey, nodding to the speck-ship on  
His fish-path, on his teeming whale-way green  
With plunder. Now darts an arrowhead upon  
A blurred blue shaft! Swift scoop of Heaven glean  
A slither soul all twist and bend. Between  
The quilts and covers of the sky, begone!