

"We Are at Once Both Shamed and Embled"

Solzhenitsyn: The Cry of a Wounded Eagle

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LITERATURE AT ITS best ennobles as well as illuminates the spirit of man. Rarely, however, does the life of an artist give life and muscle to works of greatness which by themselves will live in consciousness as long as people can read. But such is the case, with Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose Nobel lecture, smuggled somehow out of the Soviet Union, was published the other day. It was a cry forged in hell and aimed at the highest and most delicate sensibilities of mankind.

Solzhenitsyn is an artist living within the legacy of Stalin. He has survived labor camps and cancer wards, disrepute in his own country and the denial of his right to receive and enjoy literature's highest prize. Yet he loves his country and refuses to leave. But, he remembers.

"In order to mount this platform, from which the Nobel lecture is read, I have climbed not three or four makeshift steps but hundreds and even thousands of them. Unyielding, precliptous, frozen steps, leading out of the darkness and cold, where it was my fate to survive, while others—perhaps with a greater gift and stronger than I—have perished.

He then inveighs against the systematic destruction of the best literary talent of his nation, asserting that literature is the living memory of a nation through which the rich fabric of one nation's life can be transmitted to the rest of the world. He suggests that literature can help establish one value system for the world in place of the several systems now existing. The danger to a nation which destroys its literature is described this way:

But woe to that nation whose literature is disturbed by the intervention of power. Because that is not just a violation against freedom of print; it is the closing down of the heart of the nation, a slashing to pieces of its memory.

But the lecture is not simply about Solzhenitsyn's hard times in Siberia or even about recent literary history in the Soviet Union. Rather, it tries to grapple with the struggle of evil against good in the world and the roles of men and nations in that struggle. From the particular death of Soviet literature in Stalin's camps, he raises his eyes and makes a general and forlorn sweep across the globe. He concludes that violence and "Dostoevsky's devils . . . are crawling across the whole world in front of our very eyes, infesting countries where they could not have dreamed of . . ."

Against this tide, Solzhenitsyn sees moral decay besetting the West. It prefers ease and comfort, he suggests, to the sterner tests of fidelity to mankind. He derides the United Nations for being unable to give force and vitality to what he considers to be its finest work, the Declaration of Human Rights. In the face of barbarity, he concludes that the twentieth century has adopted the "spirit of Munich."

There is much in all of this. Comfort is pleasant and "going along" is easy. Humans are down alone and are afflicted with the consequences of loneliness throughout life. Insecurity and fear are endemic and they



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lead to a herding instinct and to greed which, in turn, diminish the possibilities of courage. Moreover, the twentieth century world is overpowering with the size of its structures, the power of its weaponry, the range and versatility of its other technology, capacity to bombard with information and, most of all, its capacity to overwhelm and disorient individual sensibilities.

In such a world, facile minds and tongues and shallow sophistication replace wisdom, wealth, and mindless groupiness become the frail guardians against loneliness and fear. It is a world in which cries of moral outrage can be dismissed as the

pranks of maladjusted children or the bemused blithering of a naive dupe. It is a world in which evil and its next of kin, self interest and apathy, come most naturally to most men and in which a firm act of will is required for a person to project a vision or an act of honor against the prevailing stream. And, if men are fearful nations are insecure. Strength, power and wealth are often substituted for decency, honor and justice.

In such a setting, Solzhenitsyn raises a standard of morality that is so high as to suggest dismissal on the ground of unrealism. But, the power of his life and the strength of his art make it impossible for us to dismiss him or his message. And, if we do, we risk grave error. Listen again:

" . . . we are threatened by destruction in the fact that the physically compressed, strained world is not allowed to blend spiritually: The molecules of knowledge and sympathy are not allowed to jump over from one half to another. . . . Within a muffled zone, it costs nothing to reinterpret any agreement, even simpler—to forget it . . ."

But, the question remains, can one person make a difference? Alexander Solzhenitsyn, by his art and by his life has inspired many people. And, in inspiring some of them, he apparently has saved himself, or at least he believes it to be so, for he claims that a world wide brotherhood of writers has saved him. For his own part, the writer's part, the artist's part, Solzhenitsyn clearly believes that a man can make a difference. He believes that violence can only thrive in an atmosphere of falsehood and that it is the obligation and the glory of the artist to hurl thunderbolts of truth into the maws of death.

Courage, then, and the search for the best good discernable and the relentless pursuit of it are the lessons Solzhenitsyn teaches us. It is clear from his example that a person can make a difference and that no nation ought extinguish either the songs of its gentlest birds or the cries of its strongest eagles, for if it does so, it does so at its peril and it diminishes all of us everywhere.

So it is with Solzhenitsyn. He is an extraordinary embellishment of the human spirit. In the face of his strength, his talent, his integrity and his life's fidelity to his own ideals, we are at once both shamed and emboldened. That is, perhaps, a dearer prize than any he could ever have received in Stockholm.