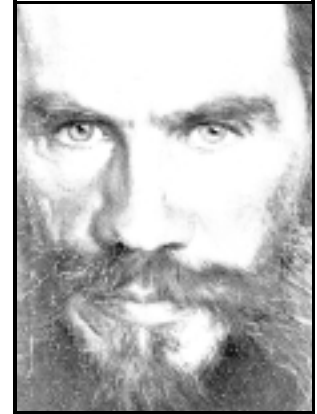
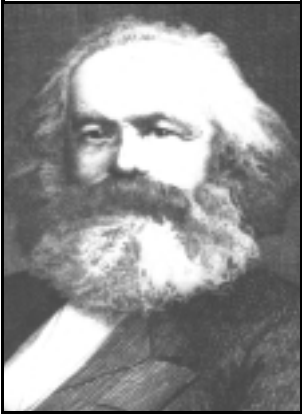


MARXISM OR TOLSTOYISM?



HENRY HAZLITT

It was one of Professor Irving Babbitt's favorite contentions that in all aesthetic movements America lags thirty years behind Europe. That thesis must receive disturbing support for anyone who turns to a re-examination of Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* which appeared in 1898. Here is Edmund Wilson, in a book not two years old (*Axel's Castle*), introducing us to the symbolists, to Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Huysmans, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and all the rest. Here is Max Eastman, in a book still more recent, deriding "the cult of unintelligibility". Both volumes are highly intelligent, and both attracted wide and deserved attention. Yet there was Tolstoy, thirty-five years ago, introducing the symbolists, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Huysmans, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and all the rest, to the Russian public of his day, and denouncing them for their dogma of obscurity.

What makes Tolstoy's views on art particularly interesting at the present moment is their striking similarity in some respects to those now held by the so-called literary Marxists. In some of their views, indeed, the new Marxists are probably much nearer to Tolstoy than they are to Marx. There are, of course, quite important differences. The ultimate criterion of the Marxist critics, as they see it, is an economic one. The criterion of Tolstoy's is economic only in the secondary and derived sense; primarily it is ethical and quasi-religious. The final aim of art, Tolstoy held, was to promote "the growth of brotherhood among men," to "unite men with God and with one another." In so far as Tolstoy looks forward to a classless society, he is on common ground with the Communists; yet he is sharply opposed to any class war, or to that art which aims at "uniting the people of one cult only to separate them yet more sharply from the members of other cults, and even to place them in relations of hostility to one another". He did not believe, in other words, that the way to bring about "brotherly love of all men" was to begin with a prolonged period of bloodshed and hatred.

Yet Tolstoy, like our present-day Marxists, was opposed to what he constantly calls "upper-class art", as well as to "upper-class science", and many of his phrases are strikingly Marxian (quotations throughout from Aylmer Maude's translation):

What the members of the upper classes who are occupying themselves with science most want is the maintainance of the system under which they retain their privileges ... Therefore one side of science, including theology and philosophy adapted to the existing order, as also history and political economy of the same sort, is chiefly occupied in proving that the existing order is the very one which ought to endure; that it has come into existence and continues to exist by the operation of immutable laws not amenable to human will, and that all efforts to change it are therefore harmful and wrong.

His denunciation of upper-class art is even more scathing. It is a mere amusement-art; it reflects an appallingly narrow range of feelings, and those feelings are nearly all contemptible:

The range of feelings experienced by the powerful and the rich who have no experience of labor for the support of life is far poorer, more limited, and more insignificant than the range of feelings natural to working people. People of our circle, aestheticians, usually think and say just the contrary of this. I remember how Goncharev, the author, a very clever and educated man but a thorough townsman and an aesthetician, said to me that after Turgenyev's *Sportsman's Notebook* there was nothing left to write about in peasant life. It was all used up. The life of working people seemed to him so simple that Turgenyev's peasant stories had used up all there was to describe. The life of our wealthy people, with their love affairs and dissatisfaction with themselves, seemed to him full of inexhaustible subject matter. One hero kissed his lady on the palm of her hand, another on her elbow, and a third somewhere else. One man is discontented through idleness, and another because people don't love him. And Goncharev thought that in this sphere there is no end of variety ... In reality almost all the feelings of people of our class amount to but three very insignificant and simple feelings — the feeling of pride, the feeling of sexual desire, and the feeling of weariness of life. These three feelings, with their offshoots, form almost the sole subject matter of the art of the rich classes.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



In denouncing upper-class art Tolstoy did not, like the Marxians, contrast it with “proletarian” art but with what he called “universal” art. His conscious objective was not an art that would reflect the ideals of one class rather than another, but one that would reflect the universal ideals of mankind. But here he fell into several confusions. He rejected the upper classes as essentially perverted; he looked upon their education as at bottom a mere indoctrination with false and base ideals; he dismissed all professional critics as “erudite, that is, perverted and at the same time self-confident individuals”; and he ended by taking as his real critic, in effect, the Russian peasant. Tolstoy in his youth had been tremendously impressed by the works of Rousseau, and it is obvious that Tolstoy’s peasant is the exact equivalent of Rousseau’s noble savage, the “unspoiled” and “natural” man. Strict adherence to this ideal compelled Tolstoy to glorify ignorance, and he did not shrink from the logic of his choice. “To say that a work of art is good but incomprehensible to the majority of men is the same as saying of some kind of food that it is very good but most people can’t eat it.” The analogy is unfortunate, for nothing makes clearer than geographic and historical comparisons the extent to which the taste for certain foods is a matter of habit and custom and palate-training. And what of, let us say, the differential calculus? Is it any less valid because it is difficult to understand? Tolstoy comes almost to the point of facing this question. “A speech delivered in Chinese may be excellent, and yet remain incomprehensible to me if I do not know Chinese; but what distinguishes a work of art from all other mental activity is just the fact that its language is understood by all.” This begs the entire question, and violates all plausibility. Just as, if we do not understand Chinese, we cannot appreciate what is excellent in Chinese, so we cannot appreciate what is excellent in our own language until, after years of growth and training, we have learned that language. And we cannot appreciate what is excellent in art until we have mastered the language of art.

How did Tolstoy come to make his cardinal error? It goes back, I think, to his original definition of art. “Art,” he holds, “is a human activity consisting in this, that one man, consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them.” This definition holds a valuable truth, for it is obvious that the effectiveness of all art depends upon this infectiousness: indeed, “infectious” and “effective” are here almost synonymous. But while infectiousness is an indispensable condition of art, it soon becomes evident that it is not the essence of it, though Tolstoy clearly believes that it is. “There is one indubitable sign distinguishing real art from its counterfeit - namely, the infectiousness of art. ... And not only is infection a sure sign of art, but the degree of infectiousness is also the sole measure of excellence in art.” It immediately occurs to one to ask how one is to measure degree of infectiousness. Degree in whom? As a criterion, infectiousness by itself is both relative and subjective. It may reflect no more than a relationship between a particular work of art and a particular spectator. A callow youngster who might be deeply infected by a dime novel would not be infected at all by *Paradise Lost*.

Tolstoy never really confronted this problem. He denounced all the Wagnerian operas as counterfeit art, but he never explained how they came to infect the Wagnerites. When he did touch on the question, he begged it. The people who liked “upper-class art” were “perverted” (and “perversion”, in Tolstoy, often seems to mean precisely what most of us would call education), while the peasant’s sense of smell in such matters was as sure as a hound’s. And Tolstoy’s peasant, as I have hinted, was never the real peasant, but an idealization: he was, in fact, a small edition of Tolstoy himself. “Such feelings as form the chief subjects of present-day art — say, for instance, honor, patriotism, and amorousness — evoke in a working man only bewilderment and contempt, or indignation.” Well, I for one presume to doubt that the depiction of amorousness evokes either bewilderment or indignation in the average working man; and I do not believe that that workman would refer, like Tolstoy, to “odious female nudity” or “women’s naked bodies and all sorts of abominations”. The movies, burlesque, and the tabloids get along quite well today by working on precisely the opposite

theory. Moreover, if “infectiousness” were really the surest sign of art, then art depicting amorousness and women’s naked bodies ought to stand very high.

Tolstoy’s judgements of actual artists were appalling, and shortly after the middle of the book the reader’s interest declines as the argument moves from the relatively plausible to the clearly absurd. Tolstoy begins by dismissing the symbolists for their affectation and obscurity. Then he throws out such writers as Remy de Gourmont, Pierre Louys and Huysmans for their “erotic mania”. Soon one becomes aware that he is calling Goethe’s *Faust* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* “simulated” art. He rejects all of Wagner and finds Beethoven’s later symphonies “artistic ravings”. He condemns the work of the Greek tragedians, of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus, as well as that of Dante, Tasso and Milton as “brain spun” and “invented”. And in a mere footnote he consigns all his own artistic productions to the category of bad art. What is saved from the wreckage? What art is admirable? Some peasant songs, Millet, and a few obscure paintings portraying poverty, brotherly love, or pity, Schiller’s *The Robbers*, Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* and *A Christmas Carol*, Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, Dostoyevsky’s work, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

What had happened? A doctrinaire had had the courage of his doctrines. And what was wrong with those doctrines? Is not “to unite all men” a noble aim to set for art? No doubt. But such an end, like that of happiness, may often be more successfully achieved obliquely than directly. And it is not the sole end of mankind. The ends of man are irreducibly pluralistic, and so, likewise, are the ends of art.

The appalling conclusion of Tolstoy’s *What Is Art?* should serve as a warning to some of our present “Marxist” critics. The proletarian for whom they want literature hereafter to be written is not the actual proletarian, any more than Tolstoy’s peasant was the actual peasant; he is merely an idealised creature, a potential creature - the proletarian as he might become if they could edit him, if they could transmogrify him, if they could vaccinate him with just those elements of bourgeois culture which they approve of, and withhold those of which they have come to disapprove — if, in short, they could make him into a little copy of themselves. If they think that the aim of art should be primarily to arouse the masses to a class struggle, they are giving it a very dubious mission. If they think, more broadly, that the aim of art should be to speed the day of a just and humane and classless society, they are giving it a very noble mission. But they should never forget that even such an aim cannot sum up all the ends of art and man.

Nor from Tolstoy could the new Marxists learn only the weaknesses and pitfalls in their approach; they could learn, also, part of its possible strengths. A sincere and powerful mind like Tolstoy’s could not write a book, no matter how wrongheaded its main conclusions, without filling it with many penetrating incidental truths. He was right in seeing in the cult of unintelligibility a sign of decadence, and in the obsession with new forms a symptom of anaemia. For when writers have something genuinely fresh to say, something that they vehemently desire to communicate, they do not engage in these little games of half-revelment, half-concealment. It does not occur to them, as it did to Mallarmé, that “to name an object is to take away three fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which consists in the happiness of guessing little by little”. When they have something real to say, they let the matter dictate the form, not the form the matter. Tolstoy was right, too, in condemning the obsession with sex in art, not for the superstitiously prudish and ascetic reasons that he sometimes gives, but on the wiser ground that this obsession is a sign of a narrowing of the circle of feelings and interests covered by art, a warning signal of impoverishment. He was right in his analysis of much “upper-class art” as the work of idle and satiated men. He was right, finally, in rejecting the view that the function of art is primarily to amuse, and in holding, rather, with whatever mystical and religious confusions, that art must reflect the entire range of man’s values, the whole sense of his destiny. Amusement art might give us *The Mikado*; it could never give us *Macbeth*. “Art is not a pleasure, a solace, or an amusement; art is a great matter.” And to that perception the author of *War and Peace*, and of *Anna Karenina*, always held fast.