

CHAPTER XI

TOLSTOY'S THEORY OF ART

LAST year I gave a short lecture in regard to a new theory of art, suggesting that the highest form of any kind of art ought to have the effect of exciting a noble enthusiasm and a sincere desire of self-sacrifice. I compared the ideal effect of such an art with the emotional effect of first love upon a generous mind, observing that the real influence of a generous passion is intensely moral, that it creates a desire to sacrifice self. But at that time I had not read Tolstoy's famous essay upon the very same subject. That essay re-enforces a great many truths that I have tried to dwell upon in other lectures; and no book of the present time has excited so much furious discussion. So I think that it is quite important enough to talk about to-day. As university students it is necessary that you should be fully acquainted with what is going on in the literary world; and the appearance of Tolstoy's book (it first appeared only in the form of magazine essays) is a very great literary event. It is entitled in the French version, "*Qu'est ce que l'Art?*"

Before going any further, I must warn you not to allow yourselves to be prejudiced against the theory by anything in the way of criticism made upon it. One of the most important things for a literary student to learn is not to allow his judgment to be formed by other people's opinions. I have to lecture to you hoping that you will keep to this rule even in regard to my own opinion. Do not think that something is good or bad, merely because I say so, but try to find out for yourself by unprejudiced reading and thinking whether I am right or wrong. In the case of Tolstoy, the criticisms have been so fierce and in some respects so

well founded, that even I hesitated for a moment to buy the book. But I suspected very soon that any book capable of making half the world angry on the subject of art must be a book of great power. Indeed, it is rather a good sign that a man is worth something, when thousands of people abuse him simply for his opinions. And now, having read the book, I find that I was quite right in my reflections. It is a very great book, but you must be prepared for startling errors in it, extraordinary misjudgments, things that really deserve harsh criticism. Many great thinkers are as weak in some one direction as they happen to be strong in another. Ruskin, who could not really understand Greek art, and who resembled Tolstoy in many ways, was a man of this kind, inclined to abuse what he did not understand, Japanese art not less than Greek art. About Greek art one of his judgments clearly proves the limitation of his faculty. He said that the Venus de Medici was a very uninteresting little person. Tolstoy has said more extraordinary things than that; he has no liking for Shakespeare, for Dante, for other men whose fame has been established for centuries. He denies at once whole schools of literature, whole schools of painting and whole schools of music. If the wrong things which he has said were picked out of his book and printed on a page all by themselves (this has been done by some critics), you would think after reading that page that Tolstoy had become suddenly insane. But you must not mind these blemishes. Certain giants must never be judged by their errors, but only by their strength, and in spite of all faults the book is a book which will make anybody think in a new and generous way. Moreover, it is utterly sincere and unselfish—the author denouncing even his own work, the wonderful books of his youth, which won for him the very highest place among modern novelists. These, he now tells us, are not works of art.

There is a qualification to be made in regard to all this. Tolstoy does not deny that most art that he condemns is art in a narrow sense; he means that it is not good art, not the

best, and therefore ought not to be praised. This being understood, I can better begin to explain his doctrine.

The first position which he takes is about as follows: A great deal of what has been called great art cannot be understood except by educated people. You must be educated and refined in a considerable degree, in order to understand the beauty of a Greek gem or statue, an elaborate piece of music, or a supreme piece of modern poetry. You must be trained to understand the beauty of what modern society calls beautiful. Take a peasant from the people, and show to him a great painting, or repeat to him a great poem, or make him listen to a grand piece of harmonized music; and then ask him what he thinks of these things. As a sincere man, he will tell you that he prefers to look at the picture in his village church, to hear the songs of beggar-minstrels, or to listen to a piece of dance music. This is unquestionable fact; nobody can deny it.

But the substance of a nation in any country, the mass of its humanity, is not cultured, is not rich, is not refined; it consists of peasants and workers, not of fine ladies and gentlemen. The cultivated class must always be small; the majority of a nation must always remain workers. And according to the common acceptation and practice of art, art is something which only the highly educated and wealthy can be made to understand and to enjoy. Therefore art is something with which nine-tenths at least, of the human race, can have nothing to do!

Yet what of the alleged inferiority of the masses? Are they really inferior beings, are they unsusceptible to the highest and best emotions? What are these highest and best emotions that artists talk so much about? Are they not loyalty, love, duty, resignation, patience, courage—everything that means the strength of the race and the goodness of it? Has the peasant no loyalty, no love, no courage, no patience, no patriotism? Or, rather is it not the peasant who is most willing to give his life for his emperor and his country, to sacrifice himself for the sake

of others, to do in time of danger the greatest deeds of heroism, to sacrifice himself in time of peace for the sake of others; to obey under all circumstances? Is it not the peasant really who loves most? Who is the best of husbands and fathers? Who, in all that makes religion worth having, is the most devout of believers? Tell the real truth, and acknowledge that the peasant is morally a better man than the average of the noble and wealthy. He is emotionally better, and he is better in the strength of his character. Where do we find what is called human goodness? Where are we to go to look for everyday examples of every virtue? Is it around the wealthy people of cities, or is it among the people of the country, the people who cannot understand art? There is only one answer to this question, and it is the same answer that Ruskin made a long time ago. The poor are as a whole the best people. If you want to look for holiness in the sense of human goodness, you must look for it among the poor. Everything noble in the emotional life is there. The evil devices and follies of a few do not signify; the great mass of the people are good.

Well, the great mass of the people have nothing to do with art, though they are good. But what is art? It is the power to convey emotion by means of words, music, colour or form; it is the means of making people feel truth and beauty through their senses. And the common people cannot understand art! Then must we suppose that they have no sense of truth and beauty? Have we not already been obliged to recognize that the best of human emotion belongs to them? And if the mass of the people really possess every noble emotion, and if our so-called art cannot touch their hearts and their minds, where is the fault? It cannot be in the people; it must be in the art.

This leads to another question—is it really true that what we have been calling great art appeals to the best emotions of mankind? It cannot be true, Tolstoy boldly answers. If it were true, then the people would be touched

by it. They are not touched by it; they do not understand it; they do not like it. That is proof positive that it does not appeal to noble emotions. Then what does it appeal to? At this point of the essay Tolstoy's criticism is most telling and most terrible, though weakened by occasional mistakes. What we have been calling art, he says, appeals to sensualism and lust; but the peasant is chaste. He does not care for pictures of naked women, nor statues of nudity in any form; neither does he care for stories or poems suggesting sensuality. Sensualism is really weakness; the perfectly strong man cannot be a sensualist—his life is too normal and too natural; if you like, he is too good an animal to be unchaste. Most animals are chaste. But Western art, Greek art, Italian art, French art, has been through all these centuries unchaste, appealing only to the sex-instincts of the beholder. There are exceptions, no doubt, but in this way of considering the meaning of art we must consider the dominant tone. I am afraid that Tolstoy is quite right about that. I do not think that any one can controvert him.

Next, let us take literature. The peasant cannot understand fine literature; it makes no appeal to him. He has a very simple literature of his own, full of beauty—touching songs and touching stories about human virtue, and our best critics acknowledge that any poet can obtain the best and truest inspiration from the literature of despised peasants. You cannot say that the peasant is incapable of feeling literary emotions—on the contrary, he can give it, he can teach it; in England he taught it to every English poet since the time of Walter Scott, and to many before that time. The very greatest of Scotch singers was a poor farmer. So we must acknowledge that a peasant is no stranger to the highest form of literary emotion. But our fine literature, our literature of educated men, cannot interest him at all. Therefore, the fault must be in the art, not in the peasant. So let us consider what is the nature of those noble emotions which our highest literary art is supposed to express and to teach.

Here again we have Tolstoy's terrible criticism. Our greatest plays are plays on the subject of crime, murder, lust, adultery, treachery, everything horrible in human nature. Our novels, for the great majority, are stories of social life written with a view to keeping the sexual feelings of the reader slightly excited. Our poems have been for hundreds of years, a great majority of them, about sexual love, or about a foolish passion of some kind. I am only expressing Tolstoy's view very briefly; it would surprise you to discover how he masses great names together in this condemnation, and how very right he seems to me to be in spite of it; and then he tells us, "You never can appeal to the honest mass of people, you never can touch their hearts, with stories of lust and crime and luxury. They are too good to find pleasure in such things."

I will not dwell upon his arraignment of modern music and other branches of art, because the above illustrations are strong enough. His conclusion is this: "If art be the means of expressing and conveying emotion, then the noblest art must be that which expresses and conveys the noblest form of emotion. Now the noblest emotions are emotions shared by all men; and true art should be able to appeal to all men, not to a class only. The proof that modern art is not great art, the proof that it is even bad art, is that the common people cannot understand it."

We now come face to face with two serious objections.

First, you may say that the reason common people cannot understand great art is simply this, that they are stupid and ignorant. How can they comprehend a great work of literature when they cannot understand the language of literature? They can read only very simple things; to read a great poem or a great work of fiction requires a knowledge of the language of the educated. Common people, not being educated, of course cannot understand.

Very bravely does Tolstoy face this objection. He answers that the so-called language of the educated ought not to be used in a great work of art. A great work ought

to be written in the language of the people, which is really the language of the country and of the nation, whereas the language of the educated is a special artificial thing, like the language of medicine, the language of botany, or the language of any special science. And he tells us that he thinks it selfish and wicked and unreasonable to make literature inaccessible to the people by writing it in a special idiom which the people cannot understand. Moreover, he says that the greatest books of the world have never been written in a special literary language, but in the common language of the common people. To illustrate this he quotes the great religious books and great religious poems, the Bible and the books of Buddhism which, in the time of their composition, must have been produced in the living tongue, not in a special language. What reason can possibly be offered except a reason of prejudice for making literature incomprehensible to the masses? It is no use to say that with common language you cannot express the same ideas which you are in the habit of expressing through literary language. If you think you cannot utter great thoughts in simple speech, that is because of bad training, bad habits, false education. The greatest thoughts and the deepest ever uttered, have been written in religious books and in the language of the people. In short, Tolstoy's position is that the whole system of literary education is wrong from top to bottom. And this statement is worth thinking about.

Let me give you a quotation, showing his views about the incomprehensibility of art :

“To say that a work of art is good, and that it is nevertheless incomprehensible to the majority of men, is just as if one were to say of a certain kind of food that it is good, but that the majority of mankind ought to be careful not to eat it. The majority of men, doubtless, may not like to eat rotten cheese or what is called in England ‘high’ game—that is, the flesh of game which has been allowed to become a little putrid—meat much esteemed by men of perverted taste; but bread and fruits are only good when they

please the taste of the majority of mankind. And in the case of art it is just the same thing. Perverted art cannot please the majority of mankind; but good art should of necessity be something capable of pleasing everybody."

Now let me give you an interesting quotation which illustrates the degree to which what is now called great art seems unnatural to common people :

"Among people who have not yet become perverted by the false theories of our modern society, among artisans and among children, for example, nature has created a very clear idea of what deserves to be blamed or to be praised. According to the instincts of the common people and of children, praise rightly belongs only to great physical force"—as in the case of Hercules, of heroes, of conquerors—"or else to moral force"—as in the case of Sakya-Muni, renouncing beauty and power for the sake of saving man, or the case of Christ dying upon the Cross for our benefit, or as in the case of the saints and the martyrs. These ideas are ideas of the most perfect kind. Simple and frankly honest souls understand very well that it is impossible not to respect physical force, because physical force is a thing that of itself compels respect; and they also cannot help equally respecting moral force—the moral strength of the man who works for the sake of good; they feel themselves attracted toward the beauty of moral force by their whole inner nature. "These simple minds perceive that there actually exist in this world men who are more respected than the men respected for physical or moral force—they perceive that there are men more respected, more admired, and better rewarded than all the heroes of strength or of moral good, and this merely because they know how to sing, how to dance, or how to write poems. A peasant can understand that Alexander the Great or Genghis Khan or Napoleon were really great men; he understands that because he knows that any one of them would have been able to annihilate him and thousands of his followers. He can also understand that Buddha, Socrates, and Christ were great men,

because he feels and knows that he himself and all other men ought to try to be like them. But how is it that a man can be called great merely for having written poems about the love of woman? That is a thing which, by no manner of means, could he ever be made to understand."

Elsewhere he gives a still more amusing illustration. The common people, he says, are accustomed to look at statues of divinities, angels, saints, gods, or heroes. They understand quite well the reason for such images. But when they hear that a statue has been set up to honour a man like Baudelaire, who wrote poems of lust or despair, or when they hear of a statue set up in memory of a man who knew how to play the fiddle, that appears to them utterly monstrous. And perhaps it is.

I have thought of a second strong objection to Tolstoy's position, an objection which he himself has not dwelt on—a philosophical objection. It is customary now-a-days to consider superior intelligence as connected with a superior nervous system. Many persons, I am sure, would be ready to say that the common people cannot understand high art, because of the inferiority of their nervous system. Compared with educated and wealthy people, they are supposed to be dull, therefore incapable of feeling beauty. They live, in Europe at least, among miserable conditions of dirt and bad smells. How could they appreciate the delicate fine art of civilization? I say that many persons would argue in this way, but no clear thinker would do so. As a matter of fact, in modern Europe the best thinkers, the best artists, the best scholars, really come from the peasant class. Some farmers have been able with the greatest difficulty to give their children a better education than the average. Even in the great English universities some of the highest honours have been taken by men of this kind, proving as Spencer said long ago that the foundation of a strong mind is a strong body. I know what Tolstoy would say about the aesthetic refinement of the nervous system. He would simply say that what is called exquisite nervous sensibility

is nothing more than hyper-aesthesia—that is, a diseased condition of the nerves. But leaving this matter aside, let me seriously ask a question. Is a common peasant of the poorest class really insensible to beauty? Or what kind of beauty shall we take for a test? The European standard of art holds the perception of human beauty to be the highest test-mark of aesthetic ability. Is the common man, the most common and ignorant man of the people, insensible to human beauty? Is he less capable, for example, of judging the beauty of woman than the most accomplished of artists? Now I do not know what you will think of my statement; but I do not hesitate for a moment to say that the best judge of beauty in the world is the common man of the people. I do not mean that every man of that class is better than others; but I mean that the quickest and best judges of either a man or a woman are the very same persons who are the quickest and best judges of a horse or a cow.

For after all, what we call beauty or grace in the best and deepest sense, represents physical force, with which the peasant is much better acquainted than we are. He is accustomed to observing life, and he does it instinctively. Beauty means a certain proportion in the skeleton which gives the best results of strength and of easy motion in the animal or the man. Suppose again that we consider the body apart from beauty; what does it mean? It means the economy of force; that is, a body should be so made that the greatest possible amount of strength and activity is obtained with the least possible amount of substance. To say that a man accustomed to judge an animal cannot judge a human being is utter nonsense. Such a man, in fact, is the best of all judges, and seldom makes a mistake. Now history of course has curious instances of the recognition of this fact by great princes. In the time of the greatest luxury of the Caliphs of Bagdad, when the Prince wished to find a perfectly beautiful woman to be his companion, he did not invariably go to the governors of provinces or to the houses

of the nobility in search of such a woman. He went to the wild Arabs of the desert, to the breeders of horses, and asked them to find the girl for him. A memorable example is that of Abdul Malik, the fifth Caliph of the house of Ommayad; he asked a common horse trader how to choose a beautiful woman, and the man at once answered him, "You must choose a woman whose feet are of such a form, etc."—naming and describing every part of the body and its best points exactly as a horse-trader would describe the best points of a horse. The Caliph was astonished to discover that this rude man knew incomparably more about womanly beauty than all his courtiers and his artists. The fact is that familiarity with life, with active life, gives the best of all knowledge in the matter of beauty and strength. Once in America I had a curious illustration of what such familiarity can accomplish in another way. At a certain meeting of men from many parts of the country, there came into the assembly a common man of the poorest class who could tell the exact weight of any one in the assembly. You must remember that every man was fully dressed. All agreed to pay him something for proof of his skill, for it is very difficult to tell the weight and strength of a man in Western clothes. Well, the man took a little box, put it on the ground, and asked each person present to step over it. As each person stepped, he cried out the weight; and the weight was almost exactly as announced in every case. Afterwards I asked him how he did this extraordinary thing. He answered, "When you lift your leg to step over the box, I can see the size and line of the front muscle of the thigh, and from that I can tell any man's weight." There is a good example of what natural observation means.

But to return, in conclusion, to the subject of this essay. I think it will give you something to think about; and certainly it confirms the truth of one thing which I have often asserted, that the sooner Japanese authors will resign themselves to write in the spoken language of the people, the better for Japanese literature and for the general dis-

semination of modern knowledge. I think this book is a very great and noble book; I also think that it is fundamentally true from beginning to end. There are mistakes in it—as, for instance, when Tolstoy speaks of Kipling as an essentially obscure writer, incomprehensible to the people. But Kipling happens to be just the man who speaks to the people. He uses their vernacular. Such little mistakes, due to an imperfect knowledge of a foreign people, do not in the least affect the value of the moral in this teaching. But the reforms advised are at present, of course, impossible. Although I believe Tolstoy is perfectly right, I could not lecture to you—I could not fulfil my duties in this university—by strictly observing his principles. Were I to do that, I should be obliged to tell you that hundreds of books famous in English literature are essentially bad books, and that you ought not to read them at all; whereas I am engaged for the purpose of pointing out to you the literary merits of those very books.