

AN INSTANCE OF CONVERSION.

BY OSCAR L. TRIGGS.

I.

COUNT Leo Tolstoi, with respect to his personal history, may be said to describe a series of contraries: He is a Russian opposed to Muscoviteism, a revolutionist who offers no resistance to evil, a follower of Christ who abjures Christianity, an artist who mocks at beauty, an author who disbelieves in copyright, a noble who preaches brotherhood, a man of seventy-three years who says he is but twenty-eight.

The explanation of this strange and complex history is found in the fact of his spiritual conversion in 1873. Before that date he was a Russian count, an atheist, a nihilist, an artist of the aristocratic school. But turning from this past and accepting Christianity in the terms of the Sermon on the Mount, it was not long before he left the palace for the fields, and began to write according to a new definition of art. In Christianity and in what I will call Peasantism his whole life is now contained. Christ gives him the principle of the new life, the peasant shows how it may be accomplished.

In conversation with Henry Fisher, Tolstoi gave the following account of his "new birth": "It's all so life-like, I might have experienced it yesterday: A beautiful spring morning, God's birds singing and His insects humming in the grass. My horse, tired of the great burden which I, brute-like, imposed upon his back, stood still under the wooden image of the Christ at a cross-road. I was so absorbed in the contemplation of the scene that I indulged the beast, allowing the reins to rest upon his neck while he rummaged for young grass and leaves. By and by a group of moujik pilgrims intruded upon my resting-place, and without knowing what I was doing I listened to their prayers. It was the most wholesome medicine ever administered to a doubting soul. The simplicity

and ignorance of the poor moujik, the confiding moujik, the ever-hopeful moujik, touched my heart. I came from under that cross a new man. When I led my beast of burden—God's creature like myself—away, I knew that the kingdom of God is within us, and that the literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount should be the crowning rule of a Christian's life." From this it appears that a peasant was the agent of Tolstoi's redemption. And Peasantism, working on in the heart of the man, disrupting his old ideas, carried forward to completion the transformation that began with a spiritual conversion. To present the whole history of Tolstoi it would be necessary, therefore, to consider the play and interaction of those two forces. It is possible, however, to separate them in thought and to trace the line of Peasantism independently.

Specifically Peasantism displayed its effect in Tolstoi in two ways. It determined the spirit of his philosophy of life and formulated in particular one of his few practical precepts for conduct, and it furnished him a standard of judgment with reference to which he criticised the current forms of religion, government, and art.

Consider the temper of his practical philosophy: By way of negation he has said, "Offend no one, Take no oath, Resist not evil." For personal commands he wrote, "Be pure, Love mankind." Then with the full force of Peasantism upon him he said, "Do thou labor." This precept dates from the writing of *Anna Karenina*, which was published in 1875. From the time that Levine saved himself from pessimism by dwelling a day in the fields with the mowers, Tolstoi has proclaimed the doctrine of labor.

Then take into view his social criticisms. The ideas advanced to condemn the present order are those of an average, respectable, intelligent peasant. It is as if a peasant spoke. Is it not, indeed, a peasant's broad and elemental face that confronts us in his pictures? It seems that a man, born out of his due place in the palace, found in the fields at length the place to which he was destined by his very nativity,—a place in nature and among realities.

To make this latter critical attitude altogether clear one feature only of his Peasantism may be selected for exposition, his ideas on art.

A brief historical survey will be sufficient to clear the ground for Tolstoi's definition of art. For about two centuries art has been defined in terms of beauty. The theory of art as beauty arose among the wealthy and cultured classes of Europe in the eighteenth century, its scientific formulation being due to a German

metaphysician, Baumgarten, who flourished about 1750. From that time to this the field of art has been narrowing and refining, the artist withdrawing more and more from life, and within his special realm developing technique and abstracting form, until what is called the Fine Arts alone receive recognition, and among fine artists only the most dexterous to manipulate form, win the plaudits of the cultured world. For two centuries, in short, art has been developing chiefly along aristocratic lines. Criticism, likewise, has been called to serve the requirements of a society devoted to pleasure. The decision as to what is good art and what not has been undertaken by the "finest nurtured." The natural result of the refining process has been the creation of an art from the enjoyment of which the great masses of men are excluded.

Now Tolstoi is one of a small company of men who perceive the necessity of a new order of art. The spirit of the new day is universality. A culture that does not carry with it the whole people is doomed to failure. And this universality is to be gained, not through the extension of aristocratic culture among the people, not through the education of the masses in the philosophy of the classes, but through a new philosophy and a new criticism that shall meet the demands of a democratic society and result in an art that shall be in its own nature universal in character. I do not see that democracy means either levelling up or levelling down; it means life on wholly new terms. The art of feudal society will be destroyed root and branch and a new art rise that shall start from the broad basis of the people's will. For the old art is based on privilege; the new art will not be simply the extension of privilege but the utter rejection of privilege. Whitman gives what he well calls "the sign of democracy" in the following sentence: "I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms."

In harmony with this thought Tolstoi seeks to start a new definition of art: "To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself, then by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling,—this is the activity of art." "Art is a human activity, consisting in this, that one may consciously, by means of certain external signs, hand on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them." Or in other words, "Art is the infection by one man of another with the feelings experienced by the infector."

This may be called the definition of Peasantism. Observe its grounds. It puts aside the conception of beauty altogether and defines art in terms of experience. That is, it ceases to consider art as a means of pleasure but as one of the conditions of human life. Art, then, is one of the two organs of human progress. By words we exchange thoughts; by art we exchange feelings. Thus considered, art is primarily a means of union among men, indispensable for the life and progress towards the well-being of individuals and of humanity. The ideal of excellence of such an art is not exclusiveness of feeling, accessible to a few, but universality; not obscurity and complexity, but clearness and simplicity. Its motive will be sociological, that is, moral and altruistic. It will draw from the primal sources of religion.

The value of contemporary art, when adjudged from the ideal of universality, seems small. The experience of the ruling classes as they have come to record in art, amounts to hardly more than three: the feeling of pride, the feeling of sexual desire, and the feeling of the weariness of life. Upon these themes poetry especially has played endless changes. But these are by no means universal feelings,—they are those of an idle pleasure-loving aristocracy. Before such art the peasant stands bewildered. He has no attachment to it. All his own rich life is unreflected there. And lest it be thought that the experiences of the peasant are barren and uninteresting, Tolstoi insists that the world of labor is rich in subject and materials for art. He points to the endlessly varied forms of labor; the dangers connected with that labor on sea and land; the laborer's migrations, his intercourse with his employers, overseers and companions, and with men of other religions and other nationalities; his struggles with nature and with wild animals, his association with the domestic animals; his work in the forests, the plains, the fields, the gardens, the orchards; his intercourse with wife and children, not only as with people near and dear to him but as with co-workers and helpers in labor, replacing him in time of need; his concern in all economic questions, not as matters of display or discussion, but as problems of life for himself and family; his pride and self-suppression, and service to others; his pleasure of refreshment; and above all his devotion to religion.

But to set off the value of one life against that of another is no part of Tolstoi's definition. The judgment of a peasant is no more to be respected than the judgment of the "finest-nurtured." What the new theory shows is the shifting of the æsthetic ground

from what is special to what is universal, from what is form to what is experience.

To illustrate Tolstoi's definition by reference to concrete instances of popular art is not easy. Tolstoi's own illustrations seem trivial in comparison with the great works of the past that may be mentioned to prove the aristocratic definition of beauty. And of course the simple explanation is that a mature illustration of popular art does not exist. The rise of the people is a phenomenon of the last hundred years. Whereas for centuries the field of art has been held by the artists of aristocracy. To-day the professional artists are everywhere on the side of tradition. And criticism for the most part upholds the standards of culture. Outside of Millet's portraiture of the peasant laborer and Whitman's poems exploiting the average man, one does not know where to go for a large illustration of an art that springs from popular feeling. One painting at the World's Fair may, however, be mentioned. This was a picture recording an almost universal experience, the breaking of home ties, and few stood before that picture whose eyes did not wet with tears. As might be expected, this painting is pointed to by the professional artist as an instance of bad art, yet it was very generally applauded by the people. Art, says Tolstoi, is an infection,—that picture is infectious.

II.

From many signs it appears that this is the moment of transition. All the features that accompany transition are exhibited in the works of Tolstoi himself, as well as in the works of kindred spirits, John Ruskin and William Morris. These men with respect to "fine writing" illustrate almost the best that can be done in the creation of works springing from the sense of beauty. But catching glimpses of the new thought, and becoming advocates of a new definition of art, they gave up art on the old terms of exclusion and labored in the interests of the people. This change of face is not due to "perverted vision," as their critics would have us believe, but to the new revelation they have caught from the mountain tops of their observation. With this change of attitude moreover the inconsistencies with which these authors are charged could hardly be avoided. One may not wish to defend inconsistency, but in their case it is not difficult to explain. A river that meets the incoming tides from the sea is uncertain during the hour of transition whether to resist its own traditions or strive to overcome the new tendency. Would it not be strange if even when in the grasp of the sea it did not have memories of its flow through the upper meadows and be taken with sudden ardor to reassert its past?