

GORKY'S NOTES ON TOLSTOY.

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THE Russian men of letters appear to be careless with their manuscripts. One of Tolstoy's friends wrote down what Tolstoy said in conversation about the "degrading impulses of the flesh," but burnt it in the spirit lamp when making coffee, and also lost the notes of a conversation in which Tolstoy said "very pagan things on the symbolism of the marriage service." Gorky's notes which, bound together into a book, are among the most vivid things in literature,¹ were carelessly jotted down on scraps of papers, lost and fortunately found again; I say fortunately, for it would not be easy to overrate this rough material, which is so much more vital than official biography. As Tchekov once said, "Goethe's words are all recorded, but Tolstoy's thoughts are being lost in the air. That is intolerably Russian. After his death they will bestir themselves, will begin to write reminiscences and will lie."

Gorky's notes have the merit of being written during Tolstoy's life, and for himself alone. There is no attempt to touch up and create an imaginary type or to tread in a well-worn literary track. He is telling the truth, as he sees it; his book is an outpouring, not a compilation; and a record of little restraint and sophistication. The pictures of Tolstoy come and go, flash and disappear like figures on the screen, or like the remembered scenes presented by the consciousness and sensibility of childhood. The places in which the old man is present, the flaunting scenery of the Crimea or the damp autumn woods of Yasnaya Poliana, are no less sharp and clearly defined, whether Gorky wrote directly from nature as in the notes, or let his memory sift the subject as in the letter which concludes the book. All Tolstoy is to be found in it, his sense of sin, his pessimistic mood, his ascetic dread of women, the obsession of death and his condemnation of modern culture.

¹ Maxim Gorky, *Reminiscences of Leo Nicolayevitch Tolstoy*, London, 1920, p. 20. [This book is referred to hereafter as *Gorky*.]

In his attempt to understand Tolstoy, Gorky (who has the advantage of being himself a Russian) sees him as a great embodiment of all the defects of his nation, marked with all the stigmata left by the ordeals of the national history and fermenting with the "unhealthy ferment of the old Russian blood."² The old earth-man, as Merejkovsky calls him, stands before us in his very form and presence as he appeared sometime between September, 1901, when he settled at Gaspra, in the villa in the Crimea lent by the Countess Panin, and the autumn of the following year when he returned to Yasnaya Poliana. There is no effort at an artificial synthesis, the broken lights and sharp refractions of the scattered notes pierce like the noonday light into his subject. Gorky's feelings are strong and excessive, and the record is also strong and excessive, indicating, as in the greatest biographies, the essential of his subject by some outward detail.

We see Tolstoy, after his illness, "very lean and small and gray, sitting on the stone bench in the shade of the cypresses in the warmth of the Crimea, smiling at times so broadly "that even his cheek-bones beamed." His sharp little eyes, the most eloquent eyes Gorky has ever seen, seemed "a thousand eyes" under his shaggy eyebrows: his hands were wonderful, also, and intense with life, "not beautiful, and knotted with swollen veins, and yet full of a singular expressiveness and the power of creation—hands that trembled with eagerness when he held cards as if he were holding live birds instead of inanimate pieces of cardboard."³ With one touch after another Gorky fills in this portrait of the old man, sitting in a corner, tired and gray "as though the dust of another earth were on him," looking at everything with the air of a foreigner or a dumb man. He is alien to all around him, seeking rest and assurance and finding none, a monk who should have made his cell alone in the caverns of the desert, not in the comfortable house at Yasnaya Poliana.

In one unforgettable passage Gorky brings the old man before us. "I was," he writes, "walking over to him at Gaspra along the coast, and behind Yussupov's estate, on the shore among the stones I saw a smallish angular figure, in a gray crumpled, ragged suit and crumpled hat. He was sitting with his head on his hands, the wind blowing the silvery hairs of his beard through his fingers. He was looking into the distance out to the sea, and the little greenish waves rolled up obediently to his feet and fondled them as though they

² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

were telling something about themselves to the old musician. It was a day of sun and cloud, and the shadows of the clouds glided over the stones, and with the stones the old man grew now bright and now dark. He, too, seemed to me like an old stone come to life, who knows all the beginnings and ends of things."⁴ Gorky is not alone in recognizing Tolstoy's kinship with nature. Nature was always his best friend, as he used to say—"She is cold and exacting, repulses me and hinders me, yet nature is a friend whom we keep until death and into whom we shall enter when we die." He shared in the life of nature; he was born anew in the spring. "March and April," he wrote, "are my best months for work". toward the close of autumn he became torpid: "To me it is the most dead of all seasons, I do not think, I do not write; I feel agreeably stupid."⁵

But Gorky did not only take notes of the old man's bearing habits and appearance in these astounding fragments. He shows us the inner Tolstoy, like a god, it is true, but not a god of Greece or Judea, "a kind of Russian god, who sits on a maple throne under a golden lime-tree, not very majestic, but perhaps more cunning than all the other gods,"⁶—a god, but also a man raised above the herd, and with the instinct of his class to compel and dominate still strong in him.

"What he himself did not need," says Gorky, "he gave to people as though they were beggars; he liked to compel them, to compel them to read, walk, be vegetarians, love the peasants and believe in the infallibility of the national-religious reflections of Leo Tolstoy."⁷ In spite of his communist theories he remained to the last an aristocrat. "Peasant to him means merely—bad smell"; he always felt it and involuntarily had to talk of it, as Gorky (the peasant) notes. "If any one contradicted him, then suddenly, under his peasant's beard, under his democratic, crumpled blouse there would rise the old Russian *barin*, the grand aristocrat; then the noses of the simple-minded visitors, educated and all the rest, instantly became blue with intolerable cold. It was pleasant to see this creature of the purest blood, and to watch the noble grace of his gestures, the proud reserve of his speech, to hear the exquisite pointedness of his murderous words."⁸

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵ *Letters to Fet*, May, 19, 1861; *Further Letters to Fet*, October, 1869.

⁶ *Gorky*, p. 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

The Manichee Tolstoy of the *Kreutzer Sonata* shows disconcertingly through Gorky's pages, and here are shown not Tolstoy's theories alone but his own deep personal feelings. The feeling of hostility to women is no new thing in him, for he warned himself as early as 1847 "to look upon the society of women as upon a necessary unpleasantness of social life, and as much as possible to keep away from them."⁹ Woman, as Gorky saw, he looked at with implacable hostility,¹⁰ and he loved to punish her. "Is it the hostility of the male who has not succeeded in getting all the pleasure he could, or is it the hostility of the spirit against the 'degrading impulses of the flesh,'" Gorky asks; but leaves his question unanswered. But of one thing he is quite certain; that is, Tolstoy was never a happy man. In Tolstoy's own words, "The Calif Abdurrahman had during his life fourteen happy days, but I am sure I have not had so many."¹¹ The fact frequently mentioned by Gorky that Tolstoy's conversation was coarse with the coarseness of a Russian peasant;¹² his resentment against the flesh which is not the "obedient dog of the spirit" but its master; his half-serious proposal to tell the truth about women only when he is safe in the coffin with the lid over him,¹³ all point to a deep disillusion, a hidden complex.

Gorky will have nothing to do with the canonization of his master. "He is great and holy because he is a man, a madly and tormentingly beautiful man, a man of the whole of mankind,"¹⁴ sometimes coarse, inconsistent, intolerant as a Volga preacher, but yet in the next breath the "sounding bell of this world,"¹⁵ the greatest of the Russians. "There is something in him," he cries, which makes me desire to cry aloud to every one: 'Look what a wonderful man is living on this earth.'¹⁶

To Gorky, Tolstoy's silence was more significant and greater

⁹ Quoted in P. Birukoff, *Biography of Leo Tolstoy: His Life and Work* (Eng. tr.), Vol. I, London, 1906.

¹⁰ *Gorky*, p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹² "Of women he talks readily and much, like a French novelist but always with the coarseness of a Russian peasant. I remember my first meeting with him and his talk about Varienka Oliessova and *Twenty-six and One*. From the ordinary point of view what he said was a string of indecent words." *Gorky* p. 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

than his conversation: he has "some thoughts of which he is afraid." And this only occasionally and in hints slipped through into his conversations, though hints of it were also to be found in the notebooks of his diary which he gave Gorky to read. It seems to have been negation of all affirmations, the deepest and most evil nihilism which has sprung from the soil of an infinite and unrelieved despair, from a loneliness which, probably, no one but he had experienced with such terrifying clearness. "I often thought him to be a man who in the depths of his soul is stubbornly indifferent to people," says Gorky, "he has gone too far away from them into some desert."¹⁷ He had, as Gorky said in another connection, isolated himself from the life of Russia, and was no longer listening to the voice of the people, but "hovered over Russia at too great a height." He was raised above the people like a pillar-saint, perhaps to his own undoing.

Tolstoy, like his contemporaries Gogol and Dostoyevsky, had been seized after his moral revolution by the fever of religion. As early as 1859, Turgenieff had exclaimed, "If only Tolstoy would not philosophize all might yet be well," and in his later years, in Gorky's phrase, "the thought of God incessantly gnawed at him."¹⁸ as he traveled through the deserts of thought in search of an all-embracing truth which he never found—"One of these pilgrims who all their life long, stick in hand, walk the earth, traveling thousands of miles from one monastery to another, from one saint's relics to another, terribly homeless and alien to all men and things. The world is not for them, nor God either. They pray to him from habit and in their secret soul they hate him:—Why does he drive them over the earth, from one end to the other?"¹⁹

His religion was not Christianity. In his later years the feeling of the unity of religious truth in history and the kinship of Christ with the line of sages, Buddha, Laotse and Isaiah, became more accentuated until he denied that he had any predilection for Christianity. In a letter written in 1909 to the painter Jan Styka,²⁰ "The doctrine of Jesus," he writes, "is to me only one of the beautiful doctrines which we have received from the ancient civilizations of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁸ His preoccupation met with little sympathy from Countess Tolstoy Tolstoy felt obliged to apologize to her when he spoke of God in his letters "Do not be vexed, as you often are, when I mention God, I cannot help it, for He is the very basis of my thought" (quoted in Romain Rolland, *Tolstoy*, Eng. translation, London, 1911, p. 135).

¹⁹ *Gorky*, p. 11.

²⁰ Printed in *Le Théosophe*, Jan. 16, 1911.

Egypt, Israel, Hindustan, China and Greece. . . . Truth, moral and religious, is everywhere and always the same." "I think," writes Gorky, "he regards Christ as simple and deserving of pity, and though at times he admires him, he hardly loves him. It is as though he were uneasy, if Christ came to a Russian village, the girls might laugh at him."²¹

Tolstoy's flight Gorky assumes to be exclusively a desire on his part to create a legend, a despotic inclination to "turn the life of Count Leo Nicolayevitch Tolstoy into the saintly life of our blessed Father, Boyard Leo." The unfinished letter written under the influence of Tolstoy's flight and death, which concludes the book, was written at white heat, and does not allow for determining factors such as Tolstoy's position in his own household,²² and his real wish for isolation. The wish to leave his Yasnaya Poliana had been ripening for a long time, for in a letter to his wife in July, 1897, he gives his reasons for his going away. "As the Hindus, who at the age of sixty retire to the forests, as every religious old man desires to devote the last years of his life to God, and not to jokes, games, gossip and tennis, so I, reaching my seventieth year, with all the strength of my soul am seeking rest, isolation, and if not absolute harmony, at least not a lying contradiction of my life with my convictions and conscience." What is surprising in Tolstoy's life is not his final going away, but his long endurance.

²¹ *Gorky*, p. 10.

²² With his children the rift was wide. M. Leroy Beaulieu, who saw Tolstoy with his family at Yasnaya Poliana, says that "when the father was speaking the sons barely concealed their weariness and unbelief." "His faith had only slightly affected two or three of his daughters of whom one, Marie, was dead. He was morally isolated in the heart of his family." "He had scarcely any one but his youngest daughter and his doctor to understand him."—*Revue des Deux Mondes*, Dec. 15, 1910.