

## Goethe und Tolstoi

*Th. Mann*

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'*Es ist der Geist, der sich den Körper baut*'<sup>1</sup> those words by Schiller are engraved on top of the entrance to the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard, and what words could be a more appropriate comment to the thesis of Mann in his essay written in 1922?

Mann makes a distinction between 'Geist' (spirit) and 'Nature'. Goethe and Tolstoy are the eminent manifestations of Nature embodied as Man, and he gives them almost godlike aspects. Opposed to nature there is spirit as exemplified as Schiller and Dostoevski. Nature is health, Spirit is sickness. The latter tries to transcend mere matter, to rise higher, to bring asunder the bonds that fetter us. It is associated with freedom, idealism, and sickness in the sense of being artificial and willed. A Schiller with his open neckline and scarf looks the very picture the public makes of his author, the same with Dostoevski, with his emaciated face and burning eyes. They do look like the spirited, tormented souls they project in their writings. While a Goethe looks like an officer, a well-heeled merchant or a bureaucrat, a slightly vulgar picture seemingly incompatible with his written works. The same with the ugliness and coarseness of a Tolstoy, but let this not fool you. Tolstoy may cultivate the image of a peasant, but his clothes are made out of the finest material, daily perfumed by his wife, which the great man prefers not to be aware of. The essence of nobility is to take the state for granted, knowing that no matter what, whatever the circumstances you will find yourself in, no one can deprive you of your distinction.

Goethe and Tolstoy were healthy people who lived to a ripe old age, while their counterparts were sickly and died young <sup>2</sup>. They took great pleasure in purely physical pursuits, unabashedly enjoying their virility. Goethe as a tireless scrambler up mountain sides, looking for geological strata, or Tolstoy abandoning himself to the pleasures of the hunt, so strong in fact that his most captivating pages in his fiction have to do with hunting (and war of course, which in the case of the classical battle, was simply hunting carried to an extreme). Thomas Mann obviously having had a classical German education is very familiar with Goethe, when it comes to Tolstoy he relies a lot on the reminiscences of Gorki, that book in which the author reports with his dealings with Andreyev, Chekov and Tolstoy, and which Mann, hardly surprisingly, considers Gorki's best book<sup>3</sup>.

Mann speaks, not without awe, of the *Naturkraft* that pervades the beings of both Goethe and Tolstoy, meaning the elemental forces of nature that shape them. To this

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<sup>1</sup> It is the spirit that builds the body.

<sup>2</sup> Dostoevski died at around sixty, which at the time was considered ripe, while Schiller died in his mid-forties

<sup>3</sup> I am familiar with the book. I found it in an English translation in the library of my American wife back in the 70's. I read it with pleasure and fascination, not to say the thrill with which so much our youthful experiences are imbued with. Surely this was by far the most rewarding book I found in her library

belongs a natural egocentricity. Not petty egotism with which it is frequently confused, but the inability to set limits to your ego, to allow it to pervade and ultimately enclose the whole world. Loving the world hence becomes indistinguishable from loving yourself. And conversely of course. Gorki speculates that Tolstoy might consider himself immortal, that Nature should make at least one exception and spare him death, he the most beloved of all the creatures Nature has given birth to. Mann considers the suggestion absurd, but yet not out of character, in spite of Tolstoy's rationality. Still, while feign such surprise, is this hope, nay say request, so singular after all? Absurd maybe, but surely not singular. Is this not what most of us believe deep inside, and why Gorki was able to divine it, seeing in Tolstoy the manifestations of his own deeper wishes? Tolstoy's obsession with death is, according to Mann, just another aspect of his earthiness, because what could be more brutally sensual than death, and a more pungent reminder that we are creatures of nature and imprisoned in its processes. In another reminiscence Gorki speaks about Tolstoy sitting in front of the sea, the waves lapping the shore, and in Gorki's mind he takes on the character of a stone, a timeless entity contemplating and being in communion with other timeless entities, such as the clouds, the sky, the waves. And Gorki experiences a deep satisfaction and reassurance that Tolstoy exists, and as long as he does he is somehow safe.

Tolstoy's excursions into spiritualism in later life, his renunciation of art, was truly out of character, and something that the more sober Goethe would never have succumbed to. Of course there is an intrinsic opposition between nature and art, after all is not the later spirited nature? But the special art of both Goethe and Tolstoy is what Mann calls *plastisch* and as such immoral. Mann does never tire in his essay of emphasizing the Pagan nature of their art, and thus finds the later intrusion of Christianity in the thinking of Tolstoy a deplorable aberration. Dostoevski is a Christian writer, obsessed with Christian morality, ready to be crucified. Tolstoy tries to crucify himself and it is a sorry spectacle<sup>4</sup>.

Goethe makes a clear distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical, the former belongs to art but not the later. Moral considerations should never be allowed to interfere with the handiwork of art. Of course, thinking about it, this is a moral standpoint, the moral imperative being to respect the claims of art. Tolstoy on the other hand, may make the same distinction, but his moral conclusion is different. *L'art pour l'art* is an abomination. By forming this conclusion he makes violates his inner convictions, according to Mann.

The intense interest Goethe nursed for natural science is, according to Mann, an outcome of his instinctive identification with nature? For an artist to depict the human form it is not enough just to see the surface, he also needs to know what is below the surface, to know the anatomy of the body, how the bones are configured. In his anatomical studies, Goethe was very much concerned with the function of the various parts, and consequently in the spirit of a true natural scientist, he was then able to predict and correctly interpret what he was looking for and what he had found, respectively. Although the *Farbenlehre* of Goethe is not held in any esteem by physicists, his contributions to anatomy are if

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<sup>4</sup> Admittedly the issue of crucification does not appear in Mann's essay, at least not explicitly, but it is a natural elaboration on the ideas that Mann presents as well as being indigenous to their general drift.

relatively humble, nevertheless solid. What about Tolstoy? Unlike the case of Goethe we are unable to point at anything definite, but nevertheless we are assured by Mann, that science lost a promising contributor in Tolstoy. That his interest in nature, supposedly for the same reasons as that of Goethe, was profound.

As to education for the masses Tolstoy was a champion and took a direct interest in it. His thoughts and ambitions on the matter were touchingly idealistic and naive. If the students were not coerced but attended school on their own volition and out of compelling curiosity, things would be very different. No doubt they would. But how to inspire such love of learning? First to discard anything that is not central to the child, such as the grammars of dead languages. But in the end, Tolstoy as educator is disillusioned, claiming that school is pointless for most pupils, that life teaches them what they need to learn and know, and much better than school. Yet another instance of the priority of nature over spirit i.e. nurture.

Spirit is democratic, while nature is nobility, meaning a strict and imperturbable hierarchy of classes. Tolstoy may have played at being just a peasant, as noted above, but he was definitely sure of his status and position in the order of things, and woe to those who thought they may transgress. Similarly Goethe was securely ensconced in his intrinsic superiority and the social level he was entitled to. He could in fact not imagine that had he been born say in another country, he would not have belonged to the upper strata of society with comfortable wealth to match. This might appear risible to us, not to say offensive to our sensibilities, but as noted initially above. What is natural may not always be desirable, at least not according to our norms and values, which are of the spirit and not god-given, except by a God created in our likeness.

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