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THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

331

WHAT IS ART?

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WHAT IS ART?
AND
ESSAYS ON ART
BY
LEO TOLSTÓY

Translated by
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LEO TOLSTOY

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7 November (old style) = 20 November, n.s., 1910

What is Art? first appeared in 1898; the other essays in the years given in the Contents. In *The World's Classics* the Maude translation was first published in 1930, and reprinted in 1938, 1942, 1946, 1950, 1955, 1959, and 1962

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INTRODUCTION

TOLSTÓY was intensely interested at different times in many different subjects but was always interested in art. To no other topic did he recur so often and over so long a period of years. He tells us that it took him fifteen years to elucidate the ideas expressed in *What is Art?* the most important of the dozen essays he wrote on the subject; and he considered it the best arranged and best thought-out of all his philosophical works.

To expect that we—differing from him in race, upbringing, and time—should agree with him in all his likes and dislikes of particular artists, and works, and ideals, is to demand too much; nor did he attach importance to the particular examples he gave, for he remarks that: 'My old, inured habits may cause me to err, and I may mistake for absolute merit the impression a work produced on me in my youth.'

But it is of interest to see what general theory of art satisfied the author of *War and Peace*, *Anna Karénina*, and *Twenty-three Tales*, who was also one of Russia's greatest dramatists, besides being keenly interested in music and all the other arts.

In extracting the essence of his book let us follow the lines he indicated in an essay on an important classic which has aroused much discussion and been very variously interpreted. He advises us to: 'Read it, putting aside all foregone conclusions; read it with the sole desire to understand what is there said. But just because it is an important book read it considerably, reasonably, and with discernment, and not

haphazard or mechanically as though all the words were of equal weight.

'To understand any book one must choose out the parts that are quite clear, dividing them from what is obscure or confused, and from what is clear we must form our idea of the drift and spirit of the whole work. Then on the basis of what we have understood we may proceed to make out what is confused or not quite intelligible. That is how all kinds of books should be read. . . . To understand, we must first of all separate what is quite simple and intelligible from what is confused and unintelligible, and must afterwards read this clear and intelligible part several times over, trying fully to understand it. Then, helped by the comprehension of the general meaning, we can try to explain to ourselves the drift of the parts which seemed involved and obscure. . . . Very likely in selecting what is, from what is not, fully comprehensible, people will not all choose the same passages. What is comprehensible to one may seem obscure to another. But all will certainly agree in what is most important, and these are things which will be found quite intelligible to every one. It is just this—just what is fully comprehensible to all men—that constitutes the essence of the teaching.'

Reading Tolstóy's essays on art in that spirit, what is the marrow one can extract from them?

First, his explanation that art is: 'an activity by means of which one man, having experienced a feeling, intentionally transmits it to others.' This, Bernard Shaw says, 'is the simple truth: the moment it is uttered, whoever is really conversant with art recognizes in it the voice of the master'.

Tolstóy once remarked to me in conversation, that the sign of any great philosophy is that it generalizes a wide range of important ideas so that it can be explained to an intelligent boy of twelve in a quarter of an hour. Let us apply that test to his own philosophy of art, confining ourselves to the simplest examples.

If a boy out for a walk sees a bull coming towards him and is terrified, and if on reaching home he tells the story of how the bull coming towards him lowered its head and looked fierce, and of how he hurried away, stumbled, recovered his balance, climbed over a stile, and was happy to escape—and if he tells the story so that his parents are infected by his emotion and feel what he has gone through—he has achieved a work of art. So also if he did not see any bull, but only imagined how he would feel if he met one, and then recalling that feeling, imagined and told the tale so that his parents shared the feelings he had experienced, that too would be a work of art.

Or again: if a man passing through a crowded room treads on a lady's toe and causes her to shriek with pain so that her feeling is communicated to others—that is *not* a work of art, because her transmission of feeling is spontaneous and instinctive at the very moment she herself experiences it. But if the man passes her again *without* stepping on her toe, and it occurs to her to pretend that he has, and in order to cause others to share the sense of discomfort she had experienced she recalls it, and by voice and gesture expresses it, pretending that he has hurt her again, that might be a work of art. It would depend on how she used her voice and her

gesture. If she used them so that they infected others with her feeling, it would be art; but if voice or gesture failed to respond to her intention, the attempt would miss fire and would not be art.

The second point is even simpler. It is the difference between the *form* and the *feeling* of a work of art.

Take the action of music. Tolstóy says of one of the many feelings art deals with:

‘Sometimes people who are together, if not hostile to one another are at least estranged in mood and feeling, till perhaps a story, a performance, a picture, or even a building, but oftenest of all music, unites them all as by an electric flash, and in place of their former isolation or even enmity they are all conscious of union and mutual love. Each is glad that another feels what he feels, glad of the communion established not only between him and all those present, but also with all now living who will yet share the same impression, and more than that, he feels the mysterious gladness of the communion which reaching beyond the grave unites us with all men of the past who have been moved by the same feelings and with all men of the future who will yet be touched by them.’

But what are the conditions, what is the *form* of the art, which can accomplish this? Tolstóy quotes the remark of Bryulóv, a Russian painter, that ‘Art begins where the *wee bit* begins’, and adds: ‘The remark is true of all arts, but its justice is particularly noticeable in the performance of music. That musical execution should be artistic, should be art, that is, should carry infection, three chief conditions must be observed. There are many others needed for musical perfection: the transition from one sound to another must be

interrupted or continuous; the sound must increase or diminish steadily; it must blend with one and not with another sound; the sound must have this or that timbre, and much besides—but take the three chief conditions: the pitch, the time, and the strength of the sound. Musical execution is only then art, only then infection, when the sound is neither higher nor lower than it should be, that is, when exactly the infinitely small centre of the required note is taken; when that note is continued exactly as long as is needed; and when the strength of the sound is neither more nor less than is required. The slightest deviation of pitch in either direction, the slightest increase or decrease in time, or the slightest strengthening or weakening of the sound beyond what is needed, destroys the perfection and consequently the infectiousness of the work. So that the feeling of infection by the art of music, which seems so simple and so easily obtained, is a thing we receive only when the performer finds those infinitely minute degrees which are necessary to perfection in music. It is the same in all arts: a wee bit lighter, a wee bit darker, a wee bit higher or lower, to the right or the left—in painting; a wee bit weaker or stronger in intonation, a wee bit sooner or later—in dramatic art; a wee bit omitted, over-emphasized, or exaggerated—in poetry, and there is no contagion. Infection is only obtained when an artist finds those infinitely minute degrees of which the work of art consists, and only to the extent to which he finds them. And it is quite impossible to teach people by external means to find these minute degrees: they can only be found when a man yields

to his feeling. No instruction can make a dancer catch just the tact of the music, or a singer or fiddler take exactly the infinitely minute centre of his note, or a sketcher draw of all possible lines the only right one, or a poet find the only right arrangement of the only suitable words. All this is found by feeling. And therefore schools may teach what is necessary in order to produce something resembling art, but not art itself.'

Unless the form be adequate, no story, or song, or tune, or picture, or statue, or dance, or play, or ornament, or building, can convey its creator's feeling to its audience or spectators. Whether a thing is a work of art or not depends on its form. If a feeling, beneficial or harmful, is diffused by the infectiousness of its form, it is a work of art, and whether its creator was or was not prompted by feelings of social, political, religious, or ethical importance does not alter that fact.

The idea that the feelings conveyed must not be important feelings is a delusion that grew up because people engaged on the propaganda of certain views often have not been actuated by genuine feeling, or have lacked artistic power of expression; so that many critics have been deluded into supposing that a genuine feeling connected with a great movement could not be expressed by art. The grain of truth hidden in such opinions is, that no motive, however excellent or however important, will replace the essentials of a genuine work of art: real feeling and adequate form.

But though without the right *form* no work of art can exist, it is a fact that, when we have genuine works

of art, it makes a great difference whether the feelings they spread abroad are such as to benefit or to injure mankind. That is Tolstóy's third main point.

To say that it does not matter, would be to declare that art dwells in a water-tight compartment and has no vital relation to human life. But as the artist himself is a human being and cannot well cut himself in two, whatever makes life in general better or worse must relate to him—unless indeed he be the kind of specialist of whom Tolstóy says: 'These people grow savage over their specialized and stupefying occupations and become one-sided and self-complacent specialists, dull to all the serious phenomena of life, and skilful only at rapidly twisting their legs, their tongues, or their fingers.'

This brings us to the fourth and last of the main planks of his theory of art, namely, the justification of the importance we attach to it. Were art merely a matter of dexterity and technical skill it would be comparable to billiards, cricket, or professional chess-playing. But we rightly attribute to it a far greater importance; for it is art that shapes, forms, and develops man's feelings by the general diffusion and contagion of those that artists express. And as our feelings influence our thoughts, our beliefs, our activities, and the whole of our lives, there is much sound sense in the remark quoted by Fletcher of Saltoun that, 'If a man were permitted to make all the ballads' [which in Fletcher's time stood for music, poetry, and the whole of art] 'he would not care who should make the laws of a nation.' For, indeed, the lawgiver would be but wax in the artist's hands.

That is why art may and should be 'an organ co-

equally important with science for the life and progress of mankind'.

The need of distinguishing the form of a work—on which its powers of infection depend—from the feelings it conveys (the real 'subject-matter' of a work of art) was to Tolstóy so obvious that though he expressed it, he does not specially emphasize or insist on it but merely states it incidentally. Some readers have overlooked this essential point, and that no one may suspect me of having invented it (I would gladly claim it as my own were I entitled to do so) let me draw attention to the passages in which he states it.

In Chapter XII he says: 'Infection is only obtained when an artist finds those infinitely minute degrees of which a work of art consists, and only to the extent to which he finds them.'

In Chapter XIV he says: 'If a man is infected by the author's condition of soul, if he feels this emotion and this union with others, then the object which has effected this is art. . . . And not only is infection a sure sign of art, but the degree of infection is also the sole measure of excellence in art.'

'The stronger the infection the better is the art, as art, speaking now apart from its subject-matter, that is, not considering the quality of the feelings it transmits.'

These passages taken together are a plain statement that what constitutes a work of art is its excellence of form, and that on that its power to transmit feeling depends. Tolstóy puts this assertion in a distinct chapter from that in which he deals

with the 'subject-matter' of art, that is to say, with the quality of the feelings art transmits, and argues that those feelings which make for the betterment of human life are preferable to those which make life worse, and should be encouraged if we wish the world to improve.

Gray evidently anticipated Tolstóy's perception when he said that art could

'heap the shrine of luxury and pride
With incense kindled at the Muses' flame'.

Tolstóy co-ordinated, amplified, and elucidated the ideas Fletcher and Gray had previously expressed, and he has so combined them as to present for the first time in literature a reasonable, convincing, and complete theory of the relation of art to other human activities and to life in general.

It should be unnecessary to explain that when Tolstóy says that an artist 'hands on to others feelings he has lived through' he means what he says. Were an explanation of the word 'feelings' needed, it would be found in the paragraph immediately preceding his definition of art, which says: 'The feelings with which the artist infects others may be most various—very strong or very weak, very important or very insignificant, very bad or very good: feelings of love of one's country, self-devotion and submission to fate or to God expressed in a drama, raptures of lovers described in a novel, feelings of voluptuousness expressed in a picture, courage expressed in a triumphal march, merriment evoked by a dance, humour evoked by a funny story, the feeling of quietness transmitted by an evening landscape or by a lullaby, or the

feeling of admiration evoked by a beautiful arabesque—it is all art.’

While writing this Introduction I have, however, opened a book by Mr. Hugh I'Anson Faussett in which some thirty pages are devoted to the discussion of Tolstóy's views on art, and I find in it the extraordinary statement that Tolstóy tries to define the word ‘feeling’ by the phrase ‘flowing from their religious perception’. As every reader may see for himself, those words are taken from a subsequent page, where Tolstóy is not defining art at all, but is saying that people have always attached special importance to that part of the activity of art which flows ‘from their religious perception’. This need not, however, trouble those who take the theory as Tolstóy states it and not as the critic interprets it.

How far Tolstóy went beyond the understanding of art current when he wrote the book at the end of the nineteenth century is indicated by the fact that its first reviewers were quite unable to understand what he was saying, and even now, thirty years later, some of our ablest critics—as in the instance just cited—seem unable to believe that he meant what he clearly and emphatically said, and still feel impelled to attribute to him preposterous theories, as though when he spoke on the subject he knew most about—that of art—Tolstóy became a semi-imbecile whose raving they are quite competent to correct. The attitude calls to mind the Russian saying about ‘the sick who send the hale to bed’. As the years pass Tolstóy's masterpiece becomes better understood, the confusion caused by the critics dies down, the facts and people concerned are seen in better proportion, and

the value of an understanding of the part that art plays in human life becomes more generally recognized.

The question of the interaction of art and life is no doubt complex, and when anybody holding strong convictions, as Tolstóy did, expresses his sympathies or antipathies for certain feelings—let us say, for those favourable to pacificism or to militarism—he must encounter opposition from people whose feelings run counter to his own; and so, if the theory of art as outlined above is not clearly grasped, people may think they are differing about art when they are really differing about ethics.

It is certain that a Roman Catholic, an Evangelical, a Unitarian, an Atheist, and a worshipper of Venus, Bacchus, Mars, Moloch, Mammon, or Mumbo-Jumbo, each ardent in his peculiar faith, cannot all approve of the same feelings; but whatever feelings men have may be strengthened or weakened by artistic expression.

To think sanely we must separate the two complex problems, and take them one at a time, not allowing the importance of morals to prevent us from understanding the nature and influence of art.

It has so long been common to regard morals as an obstacle to art, that the fact is not readily grasped (especially by those who are concerned mainly with art for the sake of pleasure) that art can promote any kind of feeling, and may therefore ally itself with any religious or irreligious tendency you please. The Puritans disliked art because they realized that the beauty of cathedrals and of church music helped to preserve the influence of an established religion they

disapproved of, and they therefore diligently chipped the noses off the church statues. It took them a long time to realize that in oratory, as well as in satire, in prose, in verse, and in hymns, art could afford them valuable aid. Only by art can the influence of art be successfully countered, and there is nothing in Tolstóy's theory that a reasonable man need reject, whether he agrees or disagrees with Tolstóy's ethics and consequently with the instances he quotes of works he considers good 'in the subject-matter', that is to say, good in the quality of the *feelings conveyed*.

I have here dealt with *What is Art?* because it is by far the most important and complete of Tolstóy's writings on the subject. The other essays are chiefly of value as preliminary steps to the theory there propounded or as supplementary applications of it.

In *Schoolboys and Art* we have a glimpse of the experience which proved to Tolstóy that peasant children can appreciate art, and can also—as stories written by some of them showed—create works of art themselves once the mechanical difficulties are removed from their path; and that convinced him also that the first requisite of artistic appreciation is the possession of 'that simple feeling familiar to the plainest man and even to a child, that sense of infection with another's feeling—compelling us to rejoice in another's gladness, to sorrow at another's grief, and to mingle souls with another—which is the very essence of art'. That is why he affirms that a peasant, a child, or even a savage, may be susceptible to the influence of art, while a sophisticated man who has lost 'that simple feeling' may, though highly educated, be immune to art.

On Truth in Art is a simple explanation, for children, of the fact that an invented or even fantastic story may be artistically true and convey a true feeling.

The short *Introduction to Amiel's Journal* does not deal with what is generally considered to be 'artistic' work, but—apart from the fact that the *Journal* is literature of 'elegance, and (in passages) apparent choiceness of phrasing'—its inclusion in this book may be justified by Tolstóy's statement that the different kinds of literature—philosophic, hortatory, and artistic,—merge into one another.

The *Introduction to Seménov's Peasant Stories*, though those stories are not known in English, is valuable because it comes near to Tolstóy's final view of art and helps the reader to understand the view expressed in *What is Art?*

The *Introduction to the Works of Guy de Maupassant* is, next to *What is Art?*, the most valuable essay in the book. It would indeed be hard to find a more penetrating and appreciative essay on any modern writer.

On Art, written only a couple of years before *What is Art?*, marks the stage in Tolstóy's progress towards an elucidation of the problem, immediately preceding its achievement. Much in it comes very near the mark, but it contains some propositions which he afterwards discarded, and is a much barer, more purely intellectual, treatment of the matter, and is therefore less attractive. The writer does not let himself go, nor display his personal sympathies and antipathies in the attractive fashion of *What is Art?*

Tolstóy's Preface to *What is Art?* is an emphatic protest against the mutilation of his work by the Russian censor, but incidentally it is an almost unique

instance of a great writer's preferring a translation of his work to the original as it was published in his own language.

The absence of copyright in Tolstóy's work has long led to a scramble among publishers, so that no less than forty-nine of them have published one or more of his works in England or America, and it became quite a puzzle for readers or booksellers to know which versions to consider reliable. The indication given in this Preface by Tolstóy has, however, considerably helped to obtain recognition for the Tolstóy translations now appearing in the 'World's Classics' series.

The article on von Polenz's novel *Der Büttnerbauer* is excellent, apart from what it says on that particular work, in its treatment of the function of criticism and of the fact that the really great literature of the past is being constantly pushed aside by a flood of works 'of no artistic merit, printed and circulated by millions under the guise of artistic productions'.

The *Afterword to Chékhov's story*, 'Darling' is a happy example of readiness to appreciate excellence in other writers—in this case in Tolstóy's personal friend A. P. Chékhov. Incidentally the article expresses his disagreement with the women's movement prevalent when he wrote. But that need not concern us here for it does not touch the question of art. As the story *Darling* was not written by Tolstóy it is not included in this book. A translation of it is included in the larger, illustrated volume, *Tolstóy on Art*, which contains other matter not included here.

It only remains to mention that six of the pictures alluded to in *What is Art?* are also reproduced in *Tolstóy on Art*, and that the bulk of what has been said

INTRODUCTION

xix

of *What is Art?* in this Introduction appeared first in an article in the musical monthly, *The Sackbut*, and is here reproduced by kind consent of Miss Ursula Greville, the editor of that periodical. Of the influence of music on Tolstóy, and his particular likes and dislikes in that domain, we may read in his eldest son's article on the subject in *Family Views of Tolstóy*.

AYLMER MAUDE.

GREAT BADDOW,
CHELMSFORD.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	v
I SCHOOLBOYS AND ART (1861)	1
II ON TRUTH IN ART (1887)	9
III INTRODUCTION TO AMIEL'S JOURNAL (1893)	12
IV INTRODUCTION TO S. T. SEMĚNOV'S PEASANT STORIES (1894)	17
V INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKS OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT (1894)	20
VI ON ART (c. 1895-7)	46
VII TOLSTOY'S PREFACE TO 'WHAT IS ART?' (1898)	65
VIII WHAT IS ART? (1898)	70
APPENDICES TO <i>What is Art?</i>	289
IX PREFACE TO VON POLENZ'S NOVEL <i>Der Büttnerbauer</i> (1902)	313
X AN AFTERWORD, BY TOLSTÓY, TO CHÉK- HOV'S STORY, <i>Darling</i> (1905)	323
INDEX	329