

THOUGHTS UPON GOETHE AND TOLSTOI

BY THOMAS MANN

[Last autumn Thomas Mann, perhaps the most distinguished critic and man of letters in Germany, delivered a lecture upon Goethe and Tolstoi, which attracted wide attention. The principal paragraphs of this lecture, including his rather original definition of great literary schools, are printed below.]

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WEIMAR and Yasnaya Polyana. To-day there is no place in the world from which such forces radiate as formerly from those. There is no salvation-bringing pilgrims' shrine to which men journey with the longing, hope, and reverence with which they thronged to those places in the beginning of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. We have descriptions of the court which Goethe held at Weimar, in those elder years when he had become more than a poet, more than the author of this or that masterpiece; when he had become a prince of life, the highest representative of European culture, morals, and humanity. He had his secretaries, his higher officials, and helpful friends. He was clothed with the dignity and honor of the high post which the world had conferred upon him. He sheltered behind these courtly formalities the vast secret reaches of his greatness, and thus withstood the influx of cultivated gentlemen, of princes, artists, and ardent youths, whose memory of their pilgrimage to his presence would throw a golden glow over the remainder of their lives — notwithstanding the chilling disillusion that the great moment of their audience often brought them. Again, about 1900, a little Russian village became the pivot and centre, the holy shrine, toward which the whole world

seemed to face. Its unending procession of pilgrims was even more varied, more international, than the one which visited Weimar; for during the interval, communication had become easier and the world had grown wider. South Africans, Americans, Japanese, Australians, sons of the Malay Archipelago, Siberian refugees, Indian Brahmans, members of every European nation, scholars, poets, artists, statesmen, governors, senators, students, generals, laborers, peasants, French politicians, journalists of every land and school, and young men — again young men from all quarters of the globe — were drawn there by some compelling influence. A Russian writer exclaimed: 'Who has not sought him with heartfelt greetings, with sympathetic encouragement, with tormenting questions?' His biographer, Birukov, says: 'These all visited that village, and returned home marveling at the words and wisdom of the great seer who dwelt there.'

Great words! Great thoughts! Yes, yes. But the words and wisdom which the seer bestowed were not invariably remarkable; nor were the conventional remarks of courtesy with which Goethe often received the people who waited upon him. The question is, did these pilgrims come to Weimar and to 'Bright Wood-Meadow' for great words and

thoughts; or were they not rather drawn there by a deeper and more elemental impulse? We risk being charged with mysticism, however, if we explain the magnetic force which attracts men from every part of the world to such a centre, as not intellectual but — I can only repeat my former word — elemental.

With respect to Goethe, let me cite Wilhelm von Humboldt, who remarked a few days after the death of the Master that the most marvelous fact was that this man, without willing it, and unconsciously, had exercised such an all-powerful influence merely by being what he was. He said: 'It is something quite apart from his intellectual creativeness as a thinker and poet; it lies in his great and unique personality.' Very well, but personality is a makeshift word for something which escapes definition and naming. Personality has nothing directly to do with intellect or with culture. It expresses a conception outside the field of reasoning. It takes us into the sphere of the mystical, the elemental, the natural. Another word which men often use when they seek a formula and a figure to denote the source of such a tremendous influence is 'a great nature.' But nature is n't intellect. These two represent, I fancy, the contradiction of all contradictions. Gor'kii not only did not believe in Tolstoi's Christian-Buddhist-Chinese doctrine of wisdom, but what goes farther, he did not believe that Tolstoi possessed that wisdom. Yet when he surveyed the venerable master, he confessed to himself with wonder: 'This man is like God!' What extorted this exclamation from his innermost being was not intellect; it was nature. And what the throngs of pilgrims who sought Weimar, and the remote Russian village named 'Bright Wood-Meadow,' obscurely hoped would regenerate and reinspire them, was not a

great intellect. They thirsted for the sight and intimate presence of a great vital power, of a grace-bestowing human nature, of a noble son of God. For a man need not be a disciple of Spinoza — as Goethe was, and knew why he was — in order to greet the favored children of Nature as favorites of the Divinity.

Schiller, even after he became an invalid, was kinder and more sympathetic to his visitors than was Goethe, as we know from the testimony of the actor Friedrich, who, as he said, 'took leave of this glorious poet with a consoled heart,' although he had left the reception room of Schiller's great contemporary with what he describes as a 'moral chill.' He relates that, 'Goethe's whole attitude impressed me as stiff and pompous, and I vainly sought to discover in his face anything that suggested the genial and charming author of the *Sorrows of Werther*, or of *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*. . . . I cannot describe how repelled and disenchanted I was by my unexpectedly cool and unkind reception. . . . I would have been only too glad to say to Goethe: "You wooden image, you never wrote *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre!*" But I choked down the words.'

This recalls the good citizen of Moscow, who left Yasnaya Polyana in Gor'kii's company, and for a long time could hardly catch his breath, but merely smiled wryly and stammered with awe: 'Now, now! That was a cold shower for you. He's stern! Phu! And I thought he was really an anarchist!' Perhaps, indeed very probably, he would have found Dostoevskii, had he visited him, more of an anarchist — if that means less stern; and that he would have departed from his presence with a 'consoled heart,' as the good actor Friedrich left the glorious Schiller.

None the less, neither Schiller's nor Dostoevskii's genius so consecrated a

corner of the earth as to make it a pilgrims' shrine. They were, to be sure, not old enough. They died too young. They never attained the patriarchal age of Goethe and Tolstoi. Nature denied them the dignity and the consecration of advanced years. She did not grant to them the privilege of reaping the fruits and experiences of all life's seasons, of rounding out a complete and harmonious existence.

Let me observe again, that venerability has naught to do with the intellect. An old man may be foolish and commonplace, but his white hair and wrinkles still command reverence. Old age confers a natural nobility, though 'natural nobility' is here a pleonasm. For nobility is always natural. A man cannot be ennobled; that is a silly misconception. He is noble by birth. It is inherent in his flesh and blood. Nobility, therefore, is in a sense physical, and it is upon physical qualities and not intellectual qualities that nobility has always laid the greatest weight. That gives this quality a certain trait of brutality, which has always been characteristic of what we consider noble in man. Was there not something brutal in the heathen-like pride with which Goethe exulted in his vitality and good preservation? For instance, note his remark to Sovet when he was eighty-one years old: 'Sömmering has died, scarce a miserable fifty-seven years old. What slackers men are who have not the courage to stick it out longer! I admire my friend, Bentham, though he is an ultra-radical fool. He still keeps in good health, though he is several weeks older than I am.'

Schiller and Dostoevskii accordingly — if I may pause to mention them a moment — were not granted the nobility of old age. They died comparatively young. Why? Because they were sick men — both invalids — the first a consumptive and the second an epilep-

tic. Let me raise here two questions: Was not invalidism a necessary and characteristic trait of both men — did it not constitute a deep element in their natures? In the second place, do we not regard illness in their instance as also wearing a noble aspect, a trait of aristocracy?

I grant this quality in their case is very different from that autobiographical aristocracy, that self-absorption and self-love, which I have just mentioned. It is a nobility which signifies a deepening, elevating, and strengthening of their human qualities — yes, of their human qualities — in a very different way, so that the noble attributes of a higher type of man are conferred upon them by their very physical frailty. Consequently, the expression 'natural nobility' is not so pleonastic as it seemed; for there is a kind of nobility which has no relation with the nobility which Nature confers upon her favorite children. Clearly there are two qualities which we designate by this name: the lifting-up and intensifying of man, either toward the Godlike, by the grace of Nature, or toward the Holy by the grace of another power which is the opposite of Nature, which represents emancipation from her, the eternal revolt against what she signifies; I mean by the grace of the spirit. The question which nobility is the higher, which form of human superiority is the finer, I would call the 'problem of aristocracy.'

This suggests a little philosophizing about illness — with all due discretion. Illness has two aspects, two relations to humanity and human worth. In one aspect illness lessens human dignity by overemphasizing the physical and unduly attracting attention to the body, by lowering man to the material plane. Under the other aspect, however, illness may be conceived as ennobling its victim. While it would be

going too far to say that illness spiritualizes nature, the two conceptions have much in common. Spirituality is conscious that it is the higher. It is a principle continually striving to emancipate itself from Nature, to disentangle itself from the material world. Spirituality is the quality which distinguishes and separates man from nature, which sets him apart from all other organic life, and the question — what I have called the 'aristocratic problem' — is whether a man is not superior precisely in the degree that he becomes independent and separated from Nature or the physical world: in a word, the iller he is. For what is illness but a process of alienation from Nature? Hebbel said epigrammatically: 'If your finger pains you, cut it off.' *'Aber so ist auch der Mensch, fürcht' ich, ein Schmerz nur in Gott.'* (But man, also, I fear, is only a pain in God.)

Was it not Nietzsche who called man 'the sick animal'? And did he not mean by this that man transcends an animal precisely to the degree that he is sick? It is the supremacy of the spirit, this overbalancing of the spiritual against the physical that we call illness, which bestows dignity on man; and the genius of illness is more human than that of health.

You revolt against this. You refuse to accept this truth. But in the first place, illness in its philosophical sense does not imply disparagement or inferiority. It is a condition which should be viewed as impartially as health. For either illness or health can be noble. In the second place, let me remind you that Goethe identified Schiller's literary attitude, his sentimentalism, with his illness — after having identified the contrast between natural and sentimental, with the contrast between classical and romantic.

He remarked one day to Eckermann: 'The distinction between classical and romantic poetry which everybody is now discussing, and which has caused so much strife and controversy, had its origin with myself and Schiller. In my own poetry, I portray only objective conduct and recognize only this. But Schiller, who worked wholly on the subjective plane, considered his method the right one, and wrote his essay upon naïve and sentimental poetry to defend his views against mine.' On another occasion Goethe said: 'A new expression has occurred to me, which designates fairly well the relation of the classical to the romantic. I would call the classical healthy and the romantic sickly. If we distinguish between the classical and the romantic in this way, we shall soon have a clear idea of the difference between them.'

This gives us a classification where naïve, objective, healthy, and classical are in one category, and sentimental, subjective, pathological, and romantic are in the other category. So we can properly call him a member of the romantic school, who intellectually and spiritually stands aloof from Nature — in sentimental isolation and alienation of spirit from her; and who simultaneously suffers and delights in this conscious dualism of nature and spirit. Nature is happy — or she seems so to him; for he himself is tortured by the romantic dualism which estranges him from her. Does not all understanding love for our fellow men rest upon a sympathetic, brotherly, and compassionate recognition of this almost hopeless plight? Yes, indeed, there is a patriotism of humanity, which is inspired by this conviction: one loves his fellow men because he, too, is a sufferer, — because he is one of them himself.

BACK TO NATURE—AN EXPERIMENT THAT FAILED. I

BY WILHELM RHENIUS

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I HAD the good fortune to discover a sympathetic soul, on the steamer to South America, in a broken-down schoolmaster of middle age, who was so thoroughly disgusted with himself, his superiors, his pupils, and the rest of the civilized world as to be a man after my own heart. Since we were going to a country where family names counted for nothing, it was enough to call him Max. He was a man about forty, below medium height, rather thickset, and bore the title of Doctor—and looked it. He was not only married but had his wife with him, a comely little lady in the thirties. She was a brave soul who shared the opinions of her husband and who was prepared, according to her own account, to face all the hardships of the wilderness. They had no children, so it is hardly necessary to say that they carried with them a terrier and a canary bird.

Since our sentiments and our prospects were so strikingly alike, we agreed to share our common fortunes in the New World. However, that was a subject we did not discuss until the sea calmed down. During the first stage of the voyage, we were as utterly indifferent to our future as to our past. Even the canary bird and the terrier were seasick. The latter answered to the name 'Rats'—when he felt like it. Madam Louisa apparently suffered least, for she had duties to perform which kept her up—duties to her dog and her canary bird. The Doctor, however, suffered doubly, from seasickness and from a disproved theory.

He had decided that an infallible cure for this malady would be to lie flat on one's back and put a heavy weight on one's stomach—meanwhile, presumably, praying for better weather. He tried this treatment with a fair-sized steamer trunk, but it was so heavy that his eyes fairly started from their sockets and there was danger that if he continued it he would succumb, if not to seasickness, to other more earthly ills. So, at the urgent entreaties of his wife, he substituted a hand satchel weighing some fifty or sixty pounds.

After trying that one whole day, he struggled up on deck in the evening, worse than ever.

But these things passed, and after we left Madeira the sea was as smooth as a floor and the heavens were cloudless. With this change our interest in the future revived.

'I am so happy,' said Madam Louisa to me, 'that you are coming too. My husband is so dreadfully impractical.'

'Good, unsuspecting soul!' I thought to myself.

'Dear child,' said the Doctor, 'we are all beginning a new life, and so we must start in to learn from the beginning. But I hope that we have inherited instincts from our ancestors which will facilitate our return to a primitive existence.' Unhappy school-teacher, if he had only known!

'We shan't have to buy anything,' said Madam Louisa with sparkling eyes. 'How glorious to produce everything yourself, by hunting, fishing, and tilling the soil.' Suddenly turning to