

Chapter 4

The critical foul

*Now the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make
thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very
opal.*

William Shakespeare.

TOLSTOY'S ideas on the reform of human society challenged so many assumptions, old and crusted, but logically indefensible, that attacks on him of various kinds became inevitable. One of these methods of attack, which should be regarded with contempt, was the literary equivalent of the deliberate foul in association football. The common description of this as 'playing the man instead of the ball' makes the analogy clearer. We have already come across examples in A.N. Wilson's chapter headed sarcastically 'The Holy man', with his implication that Tolstoy was weak-kneed, and his use of the emotive words 'looted', 'plundered' and 'robbed' to describe the omission of miraculous elements from Tolstoy's version of the gospels (Ch.3). In football the practice spoils the spectators' pleasure in a skilful game, gives a momentary unfair advantage, and, carried to extremes, turns a fine contest into a coarse brawl. The corresponding critical offence is to despair of refuting an author's ideas, and to call them into question by casting aspersions on the author personally. It can have the far more serious result of ensuring the general rejection of ideas that would have been capable otherwise of furthering human progress, or removing barriers to it.

Variations of this form of attack were to say that he was erratic and inconsistent, said one thing and did another, said one thing one day and another the next, and was generally

speaking liable to change his mind.

These accusations are true, as they are for the majority of mankind. Tolstoy's habit of mixing with the peasantry, and wearing their traditional grey flannel smock while at home, never completely replaced his pride in belonging to an aristocratic family. Similarly, Slavdom formed an important part of his sense of personal identity, but did not prevent him from being open to western influences, those, for example, of Rousseau and of Matthew Arnold. Then again, the unease induced in him by his landed property did not always stand in his way when he heard of more going at a bargain price. Most striking of all, but least relevant to an appraisal of his writings, is the contrast between his professed asceticism and his known continuing sexual activity past the age of seventy.

The diversity of his inconsistency may have set him aside from ordinary men in yet one more way; but it was this very diversity, this capacity for seeing life from so many points of view, that made him the great novelist that he was. It must further be urged in justification that some of his alleged inconsistency was a process of development from one phase of life to another, which he did not afterwards reverse. From a hunter and meat-eater he became a vegetarian and respecter of all animal life; and his guilt about landownership in the end overcame him to the extent that he gave away his estates, though only to his family.

It was probably his marriage to Sofya Behrs in 1862, and the satisfactions of family life, that began to make him as much like anybody else as he was capable of being. To begin with, his very physical appearance set him apart, as his eldest daughter Tatyana makes clear:

I remember him when he was still young. His beard was auburn, almost red; he had black, slightly wavy hair and pale blue eyes. Those eyes were sometimes gentle and caressing, sometimes merry, sometimes severe and inquisitorial. He was tall, broad-shouldered, well-muscled, yet very quick and dexterous in all his movements.

At that time his hair had not yet turned white and his face was still

unmarked by the suffering and the scalding tears that furrowed his features later on, during that period when he was searching so fervently and in such loneliness for the meaning of life.

As he grew older so he went white, began to stoop, and shrank in size, while his pale eyes became gentler, and sometimes sad.

We rarely heard reproaches from his lips, either as children or when we grew up, but when papa said something you didn't forget it, and you did as he said without fail.¹

The same eye-witness testifies to his children's love for him, his cleverness at inventing games and his general willingness to enter into their activities. All the same, before they knew what he was doing when he was shut up in his room alone, they sensed that it must have been both necessary and important. Even when Tatyana saw him do something that she felt to be horrible and disgusting, as when he took a wounded woodcock out of his game-bag and casually killed it with one of its own feathers, her shock was tempered by the feeling that if her father could do such a thing, perhaps it was not very bad. Later in life, of course, he would not have shot the woodcock in the first place.

Even more to the point is Tatyana's observation, remarkable for a child of nine years, of her father's relationships with other grownups. The family was spending the summer of 1873 on their estate on the steppes near Samara (the modern Kuibyshev); and Tolstoy would sometimes take them visiting. Here is what she has to say:

Papa could always find things to talk about that would interest the various people he met. With the mullah he discussed religion, with Mikhail Ivanovich he joked, and with the peasants he talked about spring sowings, horses, the weather ... And they all responded with trust and simplicity.²

This is what is commonly known as empathy, the power of entering into another's personality, and imaginatively experiencing his experiences. It made him a great novelist – this much has been generally acknowledged. It also gave him the capacity

for getting to the roots of the world's troubles, and seeing that half-measures, such as satisfy the conscience of the common run of humanity, would never bring about permanent results. General recognition of this quality has yet to come.

The overall impression Tatyana gives of him up to 1879, when the second of the great novels was finished, was one of a normal, but somewhat larger than life, father of a happy and united family. His later, unconventional activities and writings were indeed to divide it; but she shared his views and remained loyal to the end.

His life before his marriage had, in contrast, been erratic in the extreme, proliferating in plans for self-improvement, soon abandoned, broken resolutions to shun gambling or irregular sexual relations, and abortive attempts to choose a wife. The last of these attempts involved a certain Katerina Alexandrovna, about whom his sister Marya had written to him in September 1861:

If it were to work out, wouldn't you soon be asking yourself, 'Why did I do it?' Wouldn't you, one fine morning, quietly begin to hate your wife, thinking, 'If only I hadn't married ... ?'³

When Tolstoy protested about this estimate of his likely behaviour, Marya, in a letter reminiscent of a piece of dialogue by Molière, changed her ground, and advised him to propose. As she must have guessed he would, he then withdrew. What she predicted happened in fact with Sofya Behrs, not once but many times.

Nor was this all: his temper was subject to frequent changes from one extreme to another. On some days he could be the life and soul of a party, singing and dancing and playing games. On others, which his daughter evidently preferred to forget, he could be a surly recluse or even worse. On one occasion, he found the pregnant Sofya sitting on the floor tidying the contents of a drawer, and terrified the household with his berserk rage at what he thought to be an unwise activity. How do we account for this unpredictable behaviour? In an age that has known two world wars, and many minor ones since, there

must be few people who have had no experience of such cases – men, for example, who had been through the first, normally friendly and cheerful, but whom their wives were afraid to leave alone with their sons, in case they beat them savagely with a strap on some slight pretext. Then, when the second came with its air raids, they could be found crying underneath the table. Such can be the effects of prolonged exposure to shellfire; and Tolstoy spent two years under British and French shellfire in Sevastopol. They must have left their mark on him.

So far as I know, this explanation has not yet been advanced to account for his violent temper, so contrary to his Christian ethic of love. The main point to be made, however, is that none of this has the slightest relevance to his philosophy of life. It is useless to say: 'He blew hot and cold; he backed and filled; he flew off the handle for no reason at all; like the moon, he had an infinite number of phases; therefore his ideas are worthless'. They may or may not be; but at least they deserve to be considered separately on their merits.