

Tolstoy in Italian Criticism

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Abstract—This article, continuing the series of publications of the author on the subject “Tolstoy in Italy”, presents the material on the problem of apprehension of Leo Tolstoy’s work by the Italian literary criticism of the 50–70th of the 20th century. In Italy and other countries, the name of Leo Tolstoy, artist and philosopher, throughout decades oftentimes served for buttressing completely antagonistic political, moral and aesthetic theories. The author is reviewing the most significant, to her opinion, works and evaluations pertaining to the life and work of this outstanding Russian writer.

Keywords—Tolstoy; Italy; literary criticism; hero; anti-hero; modernism; nihilism; religion; personality

I. INTRODUCTION

The Venice conference dedicated to Leo Tolstoy in 1960, arranged and financed by the Italian Giorgio Cini Foundation together with the American Ford Foundation, marked the key milestone in the Italian study of Tolstoy’s writing in the second half of the 20th century. The event had brought together many well-known writers, scholars and public men from every corner of the world. Discussed topics touched on the problems of Tolstoy’s personality, his social and political ideas, religious system and the artistry.

II. THE VENICE CONFERENCE ON TOLSTOY IN 1960

The Venice conference in 1960 was of a paramount historical, literary and social importance—it exposed both an unfading worldwide interest in Tolstoy’s works and the existing keen battle of opinions around his artistic legacy. It became clear that in the course of time Tolstoy’s universal importance is only adding new aspects. Noteworthy is the increased general theoretical level of research and improved scientific analysis methods of the Italian literary criticism in the period under review, which is evidenced by the research of Tolstoy scholars as follows.

Researchers of Leo Tolstoy’s life and work in Italy have always been especially interested in the subject of “Tolstoy as missionary, prophet, and father of a new religious and ethical teaching.” That time in Italy was published quite a number of articles and books interpreting the literary great’s religious teaching. Meantime, his artistry seemed to stand aside or was being skated over like an obsolete phenomenon. Thus, Gino Nogara, the “Fiera letteraria” reporter, in his coverage of the conference wrote, “The awareness of our life’s instability at this time of unknown, worries and expectations are urging us to pay special attention to the moral and religious aspects of Tolstoy’s work” [1].

The conference discussions stirred controversy between the exponents of national science and a group of Western scholars around the importance for Tolstoy of his propagation of “non-resistance to evil by force”. Fellow nationals of the great writer, describing his ideological wealth, social severity and tremendous artistic power, were referring to the up-to-datedness of Tolstoy’s writing, his inexhaustible buoyancy and optimism. They cited his appeal to unity forms the core of the Tolstoyan work. Supporting stance of the national science, they claimed that his propagation of “non-resistance to evil by force” is running contrary to the writer’s zest for life and cold-eye realism. In his comments on the debate, Gino Nogara writes members of the Russian group would love to “ensnare” the great writer “on the side of Marxism”, and the reaction of their most active ideological opponents—Ernest Simmons, Marc Slonim, Renato Poggioli—was extremely stormy. The reporter cites the rejoinder of Salvador de Madariaga, Spanish theorist of literature, “Don’t try to convert Saint Mark’s follower into that of Saint Marx!” [2].

Vittore Branca, Secretary General of the Giorgio Cini Foundation, addressed his conference speech to “the loving respect to Tolstoy of Italian writers following in the footsteps of revolutionists and radicals of the later half of the 20th century”, of great significance for the Italians of Tolstoy’s work as source of spiritual strength, buoyancy and courage. This is supported by the Italian writer Carlo Levi, who said, “In 1934, I was put in Turin’s jail for my antifascist activities. Being all by myself in a prison cell, wherein communication with the outside world seems broken, Tolstoy helped me more than any other writer...” [3].

III. GUIDO PIOVENE ON TOLSTOY’S HERITAGE

The speech delivered by Guido Piovene stands out from other conference speakers by the depth of his presentation of general aesthetic problems. Piovene introduces into the circle of present-day disputes on literature and art the problem of comprehending Tolstoy’s heritage and, above all, raises the issue of timeliness of Tolstoy as Artist in a sore battle between the naturalism and anti-realism tendencies in art, and against modernistic aesthetics in general. “All culture of the past should be examined first of all for the purpose of finding the ways it can serve us,” said Piovene. “One should never lose sight of such effective positive value” [4]. Outstanding writers of the past are helping us clarify, illustrate and precise our principles and positions, especially if their work, as for instance in case of Tolstoy, with its vigour and expressive power is not left behind, but rather is

still ahead and is our future, rather than our past. Marking the great influence of Dostoyevsky on most of Western writers, Piovene regrets how hard it is to find a true follower of Leo Tolstoy among novelists of the new generation. "To compose a Tolstoyan-like leaf is much more difficult for contemporary novelists than to imitate Dostoyevsky; and even a harder case is to reach inside ourselves such inner moral condition that would permit to write this leaf truthly" [5].

The most part of the speech Piovene focused on his review of the Tolstoyan realistic method, on the basis of which he criticised the modernist literature. The Italian writer is contradistinguishing two conceptual ideas of the hero – the realistic, which, clearly, Tolstoy's writing represents, and the modernistic. The realistic approach treats an individual according to his deeds and purposes; his action is driven by deliberate will, while under the modernistic approach, any behaviour of a hero is controlled by "unconscious motivation". The latter approach devalues any will or action and leads to destruction of the personality, turning it into an amorphous psychological stream, marks Piovene. He assumes that the contemporary prose, being exposed to heavy influence of the modernism, has come to the dead point, as psychological discoveries are already not anew and do not strike reader's imagination.

"Maybe, because of this feel of reek and satiety we experience the first urge to read again and more carefully Tolstoy the Master, though respected and celebrated but with a few practical followers, as he is so hard to follow" [6]. One of Tolstoy's biggest merits, gathers Piovene, is that his protagonists are always rightly distanced and placed in a sufficient historical breakaway. This right distance between the author and his protagonists forms, according to Piovene, the primary and basic protection of the human person, the protection of the character's integrity from the risk of anomie, incidental to modernist literature. Of great worth, marks the speaker, are this inner unity of an individual, centeredness and personal integrity of Tolstoyan protagonists, the balance in depiction of their characters' social and internal, political and psychological sides. Piovene insists that Tolstoy's traditions bear great effective importance for contemporary literature and, first of all, for achievement of primary targets, "... not an analytical breakdown of a person – we have already received all possible results from this – but the re-establishment of characters". "Reconstruction of a human character in narration, like the reconstruction of a human face in art, – means to believe in it, which presents the moral gain or rather "re-gain" [7]. Piovene rightly observes that this deals with both the art fundamentals and the attitude to a man in general. In his later reports and public speeches on sore problems of democratic culture development in Italy, the progressive Italian writer was raising issues touching on the responsibility of Italian intellectuals for the state of culture in the country.

IV. ALBERTO MORAVIA

One of the most active speakers at the Venice meeting was the writer Alberto Moravia, widely known in the West and Russia, master of psychological novel, whose views in

the 60s remained quite mixed. His anti-fascist and anti-religious beliefs intermingled with social skepticism, and the realism of his method was compounded at times by modernistic elements. While standing against the isolation of art from real-life, Moravia, at the same time, repeatedly stressed his disagreement with the principles of "tendentious", engaged art. The pathos of his conference speech became his negation, typical for a considerable number of art intellectuals in the West carried off by modernism, of the importance of Tolstoy. Acknowledging the enduring value of Russian classics, Moravia blankly denied any possible effect of the writer on contemporary literature. According to him, Tolstoy has long turned into myth as both the writer and religious thinker. No one can follow him in either one or other direction. Moreover, Moravia shelves Tolstoy among decadents of late 19th century. The following statements confirm such views: "Tolstoy had foreseen and anticipated crisis that would torn the West" [8]; "Tolstoy gradually subdues his magnificent coloring and turns from the classic into an almost expressionistic or existentialistic forerunner" [9]. Moravia's judgments on Tolstoy resonate with estimates given by the Soviet literary scholar and historian Boris Eichenbaum, who wrote that, regardless of seeming straightforwardness (...) of many of Tolstoy's judgments, there was a certain sophistication typical for the upcoming decadency period, the sophistication that requires especial notional accents, different emotional tint. Those very thrusts and accents, that very same 'sunsetness' and sophistication had transferred from Tolstoy's prose as an already irksome and discursive vehicle into the prose of Symbolists [10].

Further, claiming that at the close of his days Tolstoy falls into "the blackest nihilism, the reviewer tries to dovetail his theory of Tolstoy's intellectual development with "the ultimate ruin of European humanism" in the time following two world wars of the 20th century. It is difficult to accept such thesis towards both Tolstoy and the ways of humanist thinking development in the West. The Tolstoyan negation refers to the exposure of bourgeois morals and bourgeois social institutions. Nevertheless, as for the true spiritual values, Tolstoy never was the nihilist, as he always profoundly believed in the moral rectitude and the heartfelt beauty of the nation.

Much earlier, in 1958, Moravia published his book "The Month in the USSR". In the chapter "The Anti-hero of Russian literature", the Italian discourses upon the human types introduced by our literature to the world culture. He concludes that works of Russian writers utterly lack true heroes, who would represent the human greatness completely and explicitly. Such greatness, according to Moravia, may bear the traits of self-absorption, injustice and even moral taint. "Ironically, – writes Moravia, – the type of a Russian that the Russian literature of the 19th century had introduced to the world literature, looks more like an anti-hero, mediocrity and inward bankrupt, and herefrom comes that pessimism of defeat, which transferred from the Russian novel into the European novel and remains there through the present." Review of Tolstoy's works bases on the same subjectivity: "Even the classic and Homeric Tolstoy

displays kind of a bankrupt mediocrity, though other features are also appropriate for him). Prince Andrei – a man of refined and pure, though unaccomplished feelings, – also turns up a bankrupt mediocrity. Bezukhov displays the averageness with a generous mindset... Tolstoy does not have a hero, only an anti-hero. I dismiss that this anti-hero represents the exclusive and permanent character of the Russian people. However, the fact is that the Russian novel failed to give us a hero, good or bad, and that, in a broad meaning, literature of each nation presents its reflection. Russia presented to us the anti-hero. Let us wish that one day she will give us the hero.”

V. RENATO POGGIOLI AND PSYCHOLOGISM OF TOLSTOY

The second half of the 20th century marks the increased interest of the Italian literary criticism in Tolstoy's psychologism. In this context, very representative seem the ideas of the Italian literary critic Renato Poggioli on Russian literature and Leo Tolstoy's writing, in particular. His book "The Fenix and the Spider" (Harvard University Press, 1957) observes the Russian literature history for hundred years from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century. The book pays a special attention to Vasily Rozanov and Leo Tolstoy. Poggioli gathers that the entire Russian literature is in tune with Rozanov's vision of a man, according to which "any man is good, whatever his personal integrity» [11]. The author studies how the insight into the Russian soul influenced works of the classics and new masters of prose. Assuming that man's soul is divine, absolute and eternal, while the art is a writer's medium in expression of his views on man's soul, the author accepts only one source of art – an artist's ego. According to Poggioli, it is for Dostoyevsky and Rozanov who had better than others revealed the eternal, unchangeable sides of man's soul. The author develops further Rozanov's idea that man's soul should slump to the level of a spider in order to express its grand and bright truth after that, overcoming everything selfish. Poggioli believes that Rozanov had lived and worked like spider, while Tolstoy had tried to strike a balance between the low and high ego needs. It would be appropriate to cite the quotation describing Rozanov's attitude towards Tolstoy: "Tolstoy, indeed, surpasses the entire Russia not only in one head but in several heads, many heads. How very he was like the Californian millinery larch among young pinery of its homeland. It is Remarkable. Quite remarkable. It is the greatness. Needless to twaddle on his theology" (Vasily Rozanov, *Fallen Leafs*).

One of the key points of the book makes the sketch "The Portrait of Tolstoy as Alceste". Exploring the writer's moral and ethical quest, the author suggests the character of Alceste, Moliere's hero, as the prototype of Tolstoy. He explains, for instance, the temporary skepticism of Lyovin (Anna Karenina) by the fact that the love for the humanity is intimately connected with the contempt for individuals; and outlines Tolstoy's major Alcestian conflict—the disagreement of his high blood and gentle breeding with the democratic spirit of new times. Poggioli holds that Tolstoy's ardent yearning for his noble past had remained forevermore. It had been only suppressed and shut away in the depths of

Tolstoy's personality as the basis of Alcestian scorn of ideals and people of his day. Poggioli's article "Leo Tolstoy as Man and Artist", on one hand, judges the great writer harshly enough, telling us that in his heart the old man kept to be a Russian nobleman used to obedience, attendance and honoring, and that, to all intents, he never fully believed that man is born for the good [12]. On the other hand, the paper presents some very profound observations, such as "He understood the 'self' as 'the heart' lead by inner sensation, which represents the voice of spirit"... "This abiding concern about own mentality is demonstrating both the humble shame of a sinner and an arrogant pride of the chosen, which entangles self-hate and self-love in one inseparable bundle". On the novel "War and Peace": "This spanless poem in prose anthems the continuous resurrection of life from the ashes of historical processes".

VI. ANTONIO GRAMSCI AND OTHER REVIEWERS

Of significant interest are the theoretical works on literature and art by Antonio Gramsci who raises crucial problems of national culture and generally important issues of cultural development of the humanity. In his "Commitment of Tolstoy and Manzoni to the People" Gramsci counters judgment of a certain Adolf Faggi, according to whom the novel "The Betrothed" by Manzoni fully complies with the Tolstoyan religious art appreciation. Gramsci sees a world of difference between the true nationality of Tolstoy and Manzoni's attitude towards the people. Tolstoy's instinctive and ingenuous wisdom of the people, occasionally unveiled by an accidentally dropped word, turns into the source of light for an educated person, predetermining his mental crisis. This, according to Gramsci, is the most outstanding bright feature of Tolstoy's religion, as he understood The New Testament democratically. On the contrary, the Christianity of Manzoni wavers between the jansenistic aristocratism and Jesuit paternalism towards people. Gramsci believed that no syllogisms of Manzoni about people can compare to the genuine nationality of Tolstoy, whose people itself is the source of moral and religious life.

In 1953, in the article "Tolstoy and We" the renown Slavonic scholar and translator Pietro Zveteremic, addressing the actuality of the Tolstoyan heritage, writes, "The power of Tolstoy the Artist is in his realistic discovery of life, in the skill of creating deeply genuine human characters and covering live and burning problems, creating the holistic and complex world. This is enough to put his art on the side of progress..." [13].

Noteworthy also is the opinion of the literary critic Ignazio Ambrogio, whose wide-ranging article "Tolstoy" focuses on Tolstoy the Thinker, and, particularly, on the balance in the writer's work of two sides – intellectual and artistic [14]. Ambrogio recollects a truly stunning impression made on the literary world of the West by the novel "War and Peace" of Tolstoy: "The first readers of "War and Peace", brought up on compact and logically knit novels of W. Scott and Dickens, were shocked or, at least, perplexed by a well new and innovative writing, wherein episodes and figures are seemingly flowing and piling up naturally and without an

evident and clear-cut relationship, as in a magical lamp; and wherein a purely artistic description includes the academic reasoning, which turns the narration into historical and philosophic chapters of the epilogue”.

Applying the analysis of Tolstoy’s writing, Ambrogio convincingly refutes Benedetto Croce’s art criticism criteria. Thus, in accordance with Croce’s aesthetics, as it is known, every “logical”, “intellectual” element in a writer’s work is non-artistic and false, and the criticism is expected to separate the wheat of poetry from the non-poetry chaff. If this theory in the analysis of “War and Peace” were followed, all historical and philosophic digressions might be simply discarded, imputing them to Tolstoy as a “poor thinker”, and afterwards devote the body and soul to the intuitive contemplation of artistic beauties. This was the way of reading Tolstoy, marks Ambrogio, which the idealistic criticism stuck to for decades. However, such manner of reading deprives the art and Tolstoy’s poetry of many nuances. This does not allow grasping the very essence of the Great Russian literature – the literature of ideas, – characterized by and valuable for specifically this inclusion into the depiction structure of essay-type historical, psychological, religious and philosophic forms. It is these historical and philosophic speculations, according to the reviewer, which create a special intellectual and moral atmosphere, binding the entire piece, and form the core of the entire rich and complex range of problems of «War and Peace”.

Ambrogio points to the untruthfulness of vulgar-sociologic interpretation of Tolstoy as «the bard of nobility” the same as, for instance, the invalid pronouncements by Georgy Plekhanov’s such as “Tolstoy’s mind entirely retreated into his talent” or that “Tolstoy in the role of thinker demonstrates childish helplessness”. He is against “the straightforward oppositeness in Tolstoy of a great progressive artist and a weak conservative thinker. Because of the array of Tolstoy’s views reflects the identity of the historic period and real historic inconsistencies, it is impossible to rend his reason from the prejudice or identify the poetry, artistic merits with everything progressive in his concept, and “non-poetry” with retrogressive. Ambrogio assumes that the critical method cannot consist of an abstract acceptance or non-acceptance of an artwork’s ideological world. It must base on the historical investigation of the depth, complexity and consistency, with the help of which these ideas – «true” or “false”– take shape of the poetic tissue of an artwork; and shortcomings unveil themselves whereat such ideas stay as mere bare schemes.

VII. ETTORE LO GATTO

The most sophisticated researchers of Leo Tolstoy’s work in Italy of late 20th century were the Russianists of the older generation that stood out in science in the mid-20s. They were both researchers and translators of Tolstoy’s works. Ettore Lo Gatto, the internationally known Italian scientist and Slavist, author of many books dedicated to the Russian literature history, translator of Russian classics, and the founder of the Slavic department at Rome University, where he remained the first professor of Russian literature

for nearly 50 years. He wrote fundamental works on Russia’s history, philosophy, art, ethos and public life.

Lo Gatto researched a good deal of Leo Tolstoy’s writings. Besides the articles, he had dedicated to Tolstoy very expansive chapters of his “Russian literature history”, reprinted in several editions. The author is the active supporter of a holistic approach to the study of the writer’s life and work. As early as in 1928, in his piece “Spiritual wholeness of Leo Tolstoy”, the young researcher sets the goal to determine the binding of all sides of the grand Tolstoyan creation, and arrives at a conclusion that such “uniting tissue” is formed of “Tolstoy’s belief in religious meaning of human life in all of its aspects” [15]. Otherwise, writes Lo Gatto, we would have the great novelist, brave educationalist, religious rebel, but not Leo Tolstoy. In the same article, the researcher raises the problem of Tolstoy’s artistic technique. Defining realism as «the artistic reach and vivid description of truth», Lo Gatto asserts that the entire program of the Tolstoyan art has always been true-to-life. In the preface of Italian edition of “The Childhood”, highlighting the in-depth authenticity of narration and delicate tenderness of feeling, Lo Gatto writes about the artistic style of Tolstoy, free from an over-exaggerated description of feelings, so typical for most Italian writers [16]. On the contrary, Tolstoy always keeps in mind that under the most strong and noble feelings are hidden petty feelings up to banality; and that daily life with all its material needs hold the key of man in the most wild moments [17]. Lo Gatto names Tolstoy’s ability to “penetrate deep into the soul along with the maximal simplicity of external details” the best asset of his realistic method [18]. Notably, Tolstoy’s usual «projection of a man through the prism of self” lends his entire writing “the character of grand autobiography” [19]. But for the autobiographical nature of his writing, Tolstoy stays the universal, inexhaustible ingenious artist and genius.

The great achievement of Leo Tolstoy before the humanity, the high import of his work, according to Lo Gatto, is that the writer had enlarged and deepened the affinity of the people.

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