

# TOLSTOY'S 'WHAT IS ART?'

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T. J. Diffey

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Volume 4

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**T. J. DIFFEY**

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**TOLSTOY'S**  
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**T. J. DIFFEY**



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## CONTENTS

	PREFACE	
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	
1	INTRODUCTION	1
2	ART AS THE EXPRESSION OF FEELING	11
3	WORKS OF ART: EVALUATION AND CLASSIFICATION	56
4	COUNTERFEIT ART	89
5	ART, SCIENCE AND MORALITY	122
6	TOLSTOY'S POLEMIC: A POSTSCRIPT	147
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	154
	INDEX	162



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## PREFACE

This book has been many years in the making. It is written in the conviction that a reasoned examination of the view of art which Tolstoy put forward in his essay What is Art? has something of continuing importance to say in the philosophy of art. To evaluate Tolstoy's argument and not peremptorily to dismiss it as an embarrassing tirade of his last Messianic years is the proper response which his essay deserves.

By now my intellectual debts have accrued to too many people to be thanked here. I wish, however, to single out for mention my students, past and present, at the University of Sussex. In discussing Tolstoy's theory of art with me they have kept a sense of proportion, which is to say that it has engaged their interest while not silencing their scepticism regarding its more extravagant claims.

I am particularly grateful to Monroe Beardsley, Roy Edgley and Graham McFee for the encouragement they have given me, and for the care and painstaking critical attention they gave to an earlier draft of this essay. Finally, I owe a real, and not merely notional, debt to the works which are named in the bibliography (and to many that are not there), even when the ideas that I have absorbed from others appear transformed for better or worse, and no doubt worse, in my rendering of them.

T. J. Diffey

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

In writing a book about Tolstoy's theory of art I am adding another member to the extensive, and perhaps poorly regarded, class of books about books. Not that there has been much close attention paid to Tolstoy's theory, not at least in English<sup>1</sup>. However, not every gap in learning or scholarship must be filled. Sometimes there is good reason for silence. In Tolstoy's case the reason is surely the belief that there is no need to take seriously a theory of art which denies that most works of art in the European tradition since Shakespeare and Dante are works of art. Plainly this must be wrong; it must seem as absurd as a purported theory of religion, say, that denied Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc., were religions.

The sort of philosophy that I respect, however, does not have much regard for truth, plain or fancy, until it has understood that truth. I want to know why Tolstoy denies the name of art to much of Shakespeare or Beethoven. It is more important to the philosophy of art that we should know why Tolstoy is being absurd, if he is, than merely that he is being absurd. For what is often overlooked is that Tolstoy did not fall into his absurdities, as the complacent know them, out of ignorance. He did what he did with open eyes, hence the interest of his essay. If we follow him with an eye open to what he is about we may find in him a philosopher of art of some interest and power.

The received view of Tolstoy's theory of art is that it is a poor and foolish thing, which has to face the difficulty that it is the work of one of the world's great imaginative writers. People get round this by saying that after Tolstoy had written Anna Karenina he underwent a conversion. What is Art? belongs to the Messianic period at the end of

## Introduction

Tolstoy's life and need not therefore be taken seriously<sup>2</sup>. This explanation, however, merely provides a bad excuse for not thinking.

Tolstoy's essay is deeply pondered. Thinking about the subject occupied him, he says, for fifteen years<sup>3</sup>, so it is no hastily thrown together diatribe that he offers his readers. Our response should be to ask what Tolstoy is doing in What is Art? and how he does it. We should save our astonishment, if we must be astonished, for the fact that Tolstoy has presented us with a logically cogent and systematic theory, and this in addition to his achievement, already extraordinary, as a novelist. Indeed Tolstoy hoped that his work as an imaginative writer would attract public attention to his philosophical teaching<sup>4</sup>.

As a philosopher of art Tolstoy is concerned with first principles, but as Monroe Beardsley has observed, Tolstoy's work is 'so unorthodox in its main conclusions that its serious challenges have generally been shrugged off'<sup>5</sup>. Beardsley has also said that Tolstoy's argument 'is developed with great skill and consistency, and its startling rejections of nearly all the great works of music and literature, including his own, should make us examine the argument carefully step by step, for it deserves careful consideration, especially for the premises, not all explicitly stated, upon which it rests'<sup>6</sup>. These remarks of Beardsley have been the starting point for my investigation.

When I first encountered it some years ago Tolstoy's essay seemed pretty disturbing, though from the outset I was more curious about the arguments by which he reached his conclusions than shocked by them. If, with the passage of time and some pondering, the essay no longer seems as strange as it once did, I hope that this is not, as Tolstoy says of certain art, because over time one can get habituated to anything, 'even to the very worst things' (176-177). Rather, I believe it is true, as Aylmer Maude, Tolstoy's translator, says in his introduction to What is Art? that, 'As the years pass Tolstoy's masterpiece becomes better understood' (p. xiv).

In certain respects, indeed, time has caught up with Tolstoy. His views on science (276-288) with their emphasis on the social responsibility of science seem less far-fetched now than they did only a few years ago, when the prevailing wisdom which was the doctrine of science for science's sake was rarely questioned. Tolstoy's repudiation too of what

is now called élitism in art is a familiar attitude these days particularly among young people. And today we are scarcely perturbed when somebody suggests that our evaluations of art are contingent upon our own historical situation:

How many of the works we in Europe smugly call 'world classics' will really prove so when there is a global culture? How much of Shakespeare, Goethe, Dante, Tolstoy or Racine will have meaning for the rising generations of Asia and Africa?

'Macbeth', it seems, translates readily to Africa and Japan. 'Phèdre' is imaginable in most languages and civilisations. But a good deal we treasure as universal doubtless will turn out of purely parochial interest, while works we consider peculiarly rooted in their time and place may find wider relevance than we foresaw. I shouldn't be surprised if the second class included Peer Gynt ...<sup>7</sup>

That there is life and power to disturb in Tolstoy's philosophy of art is evinced by the wide range of responses which it has provoked. These run from the admiring to the denunciatory; from Tolstoy as 'the one truly titanic figure in our history' (of the concept of art)<sup>8</sup> to him as 'the shrill voice of the literary fishwife'<sup>9</sup>.

Ranged in admiration are Roger Fry:

In my youth all speculation on aesthetic had revolved with wearisome persistence around the question of the nature of beauty ...

It was Tolstoy's genius that delivered us from this impasse, and I think that one may date from the appearance of What is Art? the beginning of fruitful speculation in aesthetic<sup>10</sup>.

and Francis Sparshott: 'a work which writers on aesthetics always mention but seldom take seriously. But very seriously it should be taken, as the attempt of an honest, brave, observant and intelligent man to clear his mind of the cant with which all talk about art is clotted'<sup>11</sup>.

In their fascinating book Wittgenstein's Vienna, Janik and Toulmin tell us that in Vienna in the 1890s a lively interest was taken in Tolstoy's writings, and notably in What is Art? 'which effectively discredited the fashionable aestheticism

## Introduction

of the time, and revived interest in art as the main channel of moral communication'<sup>12</sup>.

At the other extreme are the (incompatible) charges that What is Art? is incoherent<sup>13</sup>, a 'disgraceful and silly pamphlet'<sup>14</sup> and that Tolstoy 'knew what art was, and knowing crucified it'<sup>15</sup>.

On the other hand, though few readers, W.H. Auden thinks, 'probably, find themselves able to accept Tolstoy's conclusions in What is Art?, ... once one has read the book, one can never again ignore the questions Tolstoy raises'<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless Tolstoy is mistaken, Auden thinks, in denying the gratuitous in art: '... he tried to persuade himself that utility alone, a spiritual utility maybe, but still utility without gratuity, was sufficient to produce art, and this compelled him to be dishonest and praise works which aesthetically he must have despised'<sup>17</sup>.

Arnold Hauser thinks that in 'the estrangement of art from the broad masses and the restriction of its public to an ever smaller circle Tolstoy had recognized a real danger' but sees Tolstoy's rejection of refined art and 'fondness for the primitive, "universally human" forms of artistic expression', as 'a symptom of the same Rousseauism with which he plays off the village against the town and identifies the social question with that of the peasantry ... it is inconceivable', he remarks,<sup>18</sup> 'that a man who created such artistically exacting works as Anna Karenina and The Death of Ivan Ilych accepted without reservations out of the whole of modern literature apart from Uncle Tom's Cabin, only Schiller's Robbers, Hugo's Misérables, Dickens' Christmas Carol, Dostoevsky's Memoirs from Underground and George Eliot's Adam Bede'<sup>19</sup>.

Władysław Tatarkiewicz, the Polish historian of aesthetics, has mildly observed that the doubts about the usefulness and value of art felt in antiquity are not shared today: 'Tolstoy is alone in his condemnation of art'<sup>20</sup>. Samuel Alexander (in a chapter entitled 'Some Errors') objects rather that Tolstoy misconstrues the value of art. Like Plato he judges its value by its supposed utility and consequently he approves only those works which have a good educational effect. This, Alexander says, is to disregard the real impulse to art and to degrade it 'to a mere educational contrivance in the work of satisfying another and quite different impulse, that towards morality'<sup>21</sup>. Of course, these errors, if that is what they are, do not nullify influence, and indeed Tolstoy's essay has not been without its

influence on artists. Frances Spalding has recently drawn attention, for example, to its influence on Rockwell Kent, who on his second reading of What is Art? discovered 'a sense of purpose that he had hitherto lacked. Tolstoy's conclusion, that good art is that which actively promotes "the brotherly union of mankind", placed Kent's paintings at the centre of his existence as a social being. It left him convinced that art must unquestionably have "a social value; that is ... it must be addressed, and in comprehensible terms, to the understanding of mankind".'<sup>22</sup>

Putting art to social uses is an idea which arouses strong feelings. Jerome Stolnitz describes What is Art? as 'one of the oddest books in the literature of aesthetics and ethics. It is magnificently wrong-headed, in its exclusion of the aesthetic values of art and in its exaggeration of art's moral import. Yet it is the testament of a visionary and saint-like old man, proclaiming the good society for all.'<sup>23</sup> Louis MacNeice is not concessionary but in his condemnation of Tolstoy moves towards Rilke's attitude:

And I have no patience with those who think that poetry for the rest of the history of mankind will be merely a handmaid of communism. Christianity, in the time of the Fathers, made the same threats; all poetry but hymns was bogus, no one was to write anything but hymns. It is significant that it was Tolstoy, the most vehement of recent Christians, who handed over this destroying torch to communism (see his fallacious polemic What is Art?)<sup>24</sup>.

George Dickie and Richard Sclafani in the General Introduction to their book Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology, in which they include an essay by Stanley Bates on Tolstoy's theory of art, suggest that the main reason why his theory is studied is his fame as a novelist, 'for few philosophers believe there is great philosophical merit to Tolstoy's theoretical writings on art'<sup>25</sup>. And Bates quotes Turgenev who thought it a misfortune when a self-educated man like Tolstoy sets out to philosophize. 'He invariably climbs onto any old broomstick [and] invents some universal system that seems to provide a solution to every problem in 3 easy steps'<sup>26</sup>. Though as Dickie and Sclafani go on to say, Bates argues that Tolstoy's theory cannot be dismissed, and not simply because Tolstoy was a great novelist



## Introduction

but because he has valuable philosophical insights to offer as well. I share that view.

Tolstoy's essay then has elicited a wide range of judgements but perhaps in particular two prevail: hostility and admiration, but where there is admiration this is not without some reservation or qualification. Tolstoy's admirers feel that there is something in his position without always being sure exactly what its merits are. It will be the aim of this study then to sift the claims of 'Tolstoy's great and uneven work'<sup>27</sup>, in the conviction not that Tolstoy's position is correct but that he is asking the right questions and that to follow his argument through is to learn some important lessons in the philosophy of art.

Undoubtedly one source of its appeal to many people is that Tolstoy offers a comprehensive view of art which is attractively free from unnecessary quibbling and logical hair-splitting and which, as Wilson Knight has well said, has a rock-like simplicity<sup>28</sup>. This simplicity, however, though not illusory is deceptive. For to explore Tolstoy's argument is to bring us to face some of the most important questions that lie at the heart of our response to art.

I was originally drawn to Tolstoy's essay by the seriousness and importance he attaches to art. Before I was convinced to the contrary, moreover, by the arguments in contemporary aesthetics that we can have 'no general definition of art'<sup>29</sup>, that is, a definition that specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions something must satisfy to be a work of art<sup>30</sup>, my innate prejudices were all in favour of an expression theory of art of the general kind that Tolstoy propounds.

The allure of Tolstoy's vision of art purified and reformed, then, is that it offers to take art, or a substitute for art, seriously, and promises simplification and to remedy the bewilderment that the experience of art in the modern world may bring. At the same time, Tolstoy presumes too much. The social exclusiveness and snobberies which he attaches to art do not belong to art itself but to the cults which grow up around it. This distinction between art and its cults is of course one that Tolstoy does not and could not accept. He takes it as axiomatic that in attacking the cult of art he is attacking art itself.

It is not part of my purpose to argue that Tolstoy should have drawn some distinctions here, though I do think, notwithstanding some positions in

the sociology of art to the contrary, that works of art are to be distinguished from the social classes for which or in which they were created. Indeed Marx's famous difficulty about why Greek art should continue to give aesthetic pleasure in the vastly different society of Victorian England<sup>31</sup> is for me not a difficulty but a characteristic of art, namely that art transcends its origins. Here I prefer Tolstoy's prejudice, he takes it as given, that a work of art is or should be universal. Or as Arnold Hauser puts it, 'Tradition owes its existence to the fact that cultural structures outlast the socio-historical conditions of their origin, and can live on, as it were, without roots'<sup>32</sup>. How this happens is no doubt a problem but that it does is not (unless one wishes to identify a work of art with its social origins). At any rate, it is not a problem for Tolstoy and therefore in this study of Tolstoy's arguments I do not explore it further. The need in any case to press against Tolstoy any distinction between art and its cults must steadily diminish as serious art, and therefore any snobberies connected with it, seems to move to the margins of social importance. Tolstoy took art and established works of high art as the enemy; but so far from its being the case, as Tolstoy thought, that art of its very nature excludes ordinary people, there is no less applicability to art in Collingwood's remark that the poor are the last guardians of a tradition<sup>33</sup>. I would sooner look to them for a respect for art that I should not expect to find among their betters. Indeed as long ago as Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy (which Tolstoy alludes to in his 'Preface to Von Polenz's Novel "Der Büttnerbauer"'), the idea that 'sweetness and light' were to be found in the upper classes as a characteristic of those classes and not merely of enlightened individuals in and at odds with that class was already regarded as implausible. However, this is to embark upon the kind of question that needs to be kept subordinate to a systematic study of Tolstoy's theory which I shall now attempt.

When I refer in this book to Tolstoy's theory of art I shall mean, unless otherwise indicated in the text, Tolstoy's belief that the following propositions are true:

(1) Beauty cannot serve as a basis for the definition of art (116-117).

(2) Art is the activity of handing on to others by means of certain external signs feelings one has lived through so that others are infected by