

1925

On Art

This is the first of Voronsky's more theoretical articles dealing with psychological aspects of the creative process, a theme to which he would often turn toward the end of the 1920s. By placing such emphasis on intuition, Voronsky would be accused, incorrectly, of "Bergsonism."

This is also the first article in which Voronsky devotes so much attention to Tolstoy's genius as a writer. He would return to this theme as well in subsequent articles.

I. INTUITION AND TECHNIQUE

PERHAPS IT WOULD be timely to recall, especially for the younger post-October generation, one famous scene recorded by L. N. Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*. This scene deals with the process of artistic creativity and is extremely important given today's literary chaos and discordance, when homespun critical concoctions and fabrications are passed off as Marxist revelations. Sometimes it is very useful to repeat what one has learned thoroughly at an earlier time.

We are speaking of the passage in the novel where Vronsky and Anna Karenina make the acquaintance of the artist Mikhailov. The few pages devoted to this meeting are filled with meaning, simplicity and artistic truth, and delve into the secret recesses of artistic creativity. Tolstoy writes:

From *Literaturnye zapisi* (Moscow: Krug, 1926), pp. 35–56.

He [Mikhailov.—A. V.] was sketching the figure of a man in a fit of anger. He had sketched him before, but had been dissatisfied with the result. “No, the other one was better.... Where is it?” He went back to his wife, and frowning, without looking at her, asked his eldest little girl where the paper was that he had given them. The paper with the drawing that he had thrown away was found, but it was dirty now and spotted with candle grease. Nevertheless, he took it, put it on his table, and, stepping backward and screwing up his eyes, began examining it. Suddenly he smiled and flung up his arms joyfully.

“That’s it! That’s it!” he said, and taking up his pencil he began drawing rapidly. A grease spot had given the figure a new pose.

He copied that new pose, and, suddenly remembering the energetic pose and prominent chin of a shopman from whom he had bought cigars, he gave the figure that man’s face and chin. He laughed with joy, for the inanimate, unnatural figure had become alive, and was just the thing. The figure was alive, clear, and well defined. It was possible to correct the drawing to accord with the requirements of the pose; it was possible and even necessary to place the feet further apart, to alter the position of the left arm, and to throw back the hair. But while making the corrections he did not alter the pose but only removed what interfered with its character. He removed, if one may say so, the coverings which partially obscured the figure, every fresh stroke making its energy and power more apparent and more as it had been suddenly revealed to him by the effects of the grease spot.¹

Let us set aside for the time being what L. N. Tolstoy writes about removing the coverings, and focus on another aspect. In our times the writers and critics from the so-called Left Front (LEF, “Gorn,” and here we must include the Formalists) are waging a rather energetic literary campaign against interpreting art as a creative act. “Creation,” “intuition,” and “inspiration” are greeted with derision; some consider these concepts bourgeois or aristocratic, others feel that they are unscientific. They try to replace them with “work,” “mastery,” “craftsmanship,” “energetic word-formation,” “device,” “technique” or “the making of things.” These and other like attempts clearly contradict, however,

1. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 467.

the facts which have been established both by psychologists and artists. They are also contradicted by what L. N. Tolstoy writes about Mikhailov. Indeed, the artist is several times “suddenly” struck by something; the grease spot suddenly gave the figure a new and necessary pose, the new pose suddenly helped him recall the chin of a merchant which proved to be more than appropriate, and finally, Mikhailov suddenly firmly understood that the figure was “well defined.” Intuition, inspiration, creativity or feeling are the names we give to opinions, truths, or the sum of notions and ideas of which we are certain, without being assisted by conscious, analytical thought. In intuition, necessary ideas and opinions are formed in the sphere of the unconscious. They erupt onto the surface of consciousness suddenly, immediately and unexpectedly. They are not the simple play of feelings and imagination. We know, we feel, or we sense that it is so, but this (intuitive) knowledge is not achieved through logic. If such is the nature of intuition, and it is, then in L. N. Tolstoy’s story about Mikhailov’s creativity we have the most typical example of artistic intuition. We are particularly convinced by the fact that the artist suddenly felt, sensed and inwardly understood that the figure was well defined. The artist can then think through and logically explain why the figure “defined itself,” or he can turn out not to be able to do this; but primarily, and most fundamentally, this “suddenly” is decisive. It guides the artist, it puts an end to searches and hesitation, and the artist then begins to work firmly, quickly and confidently.

The process of creativity is far from a somnambulistic state; it remains fully rooted “in common sense and memory.” Later L. N. Tolstoy stresses that Mikhailov “couldn’t work when he was cold,” or when he was “too agitated,” or when “he saw things too well”; the peculiarity of creativity lies only in the fact that it doesn’t proceed in the usual way that logical reflections do.

In intuition there is nothing divine or metempirical. An artist’s intuition begins its work much earlier, with the perception and gathering of material. In describing the meeting between Vronsky, Anna and Golenishchev with Mikhailov in the artist’s studio, Tolstoy writes:

With rapid steps he approached the door of his studio, and in spite of his excitement was struck by the soft light on Anna’s figure as she stood in the shadow of the porch listening to something Golenishchev was vehemently saying, and at the same time evidently wishing to look at the approaching artist. He was himself unconscious that as he approached them he seized

2. *Ibid.*, p.469.

and absorbed this impression, just as he had retained the tobacconist's chin and hidden it away where he could find it when it was wanted.²

... Although his artistic perceptions never slept, and although he was growing more and more excited as the moment approached when his picture was to be criticized, he quickly and shrewdly, from imperceptible data, formed his opinion of these three persons.³

Mikhailov's consciousness was occupied with the thought of how the visitors would evaluate his painting, but his artistic sense, quite apart from consciousness and unnoticed by the artist himself, gathered and perceived material. This process occurred intuitively. In doing this, Mikhailov did not gather material indiscriminately. He secreted away in his closet less than everything. He unconsciously absorbed things, but at the same time chose only those things which might be useful. He noted Anna's soft light, and with Vronsky he noted the cheekbones, in particular; he also recorded Golenishchev, "but," notes Tolstoy, "he also remembered that this was one of the faces he had mentally put aside with the enormous class of falsely important faces, faces lacking expression."⁴

Of course, while unconsciously making such a selection, the artist was doing what is characteristic of every mortal being. We often choose unconsciously, without selecting everything.

Man's ideas about the world develop from impressions received from the external world and reworked in accordance with the frame of mind and character of the given person. He perceives only what attracts his attention, and his attention is determined by interests dependent on his class milieu. The peculiarity of the artist lies only in the fact that he unconsciously separates out and notices only the typical; and this typical is not abstract, but concrete. It is an object and exists in the form of images.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, let us say to our opponents who speak out against intuition in artistic creativity that scientific creativity also rests to a significant degree on the very intuition which they so detest. V. I. Lenin's scientific prescience was undoubtedly linked to the work of intuition. It is no

2. Ibid., p. 468.

3. Ibid., p. 469.

4. Ibid., p. 469.

accident, indeed it is with complete justice that people say that Comrade Lenin possessed an enormous political sensitivity, i.e., intuition. The majority of scientific discoveries are made at first intuitively. The axioms in mathematics originated intuitively. An intuition may be true, or it may turn out to be false. The correct insights of the ancient Greeks, which were more intuitive than rational, were later proven and confirmed by analysis based on experience (atomistic theory, mutability, and so forth). On the contrary, other intuitions which we have, have proved to be illusory (free will). But even in art intuitive truths can also be confirmed or refuted with the assistance of analytical reasoning. Criticism is nothing but the translation of a work from the language of intuition into the language of logic. The first critic of a work is almost always the artist himself. But in the very process of creating the sketch by the artist Mikhailov (grease spot—new pose—merchant's chin, and certainty that the figure was well defined), analysis and judgment were absent. In short, intuition is present both in the artist and the scientist, but with the scientist it occupies a subordinate position, and with the artist a dominant one. The distinguishing feature of art is the image. The image is created predominantly through intuition. Great artists have been endowed with an enormous gift of intuition. L. N. Tolstoy's genius is powerfully rooted in intuition. Recall Blok's story about how he wrote the poem "The Twelve." The artist's ability to incarnate something, which was fundamental for him, is wholly intuitive. How could Tolstoy have written his astonishing Kholstomer without intuitive insight into it? One often hears from artists that they don't know what ideas they wanted to express in their works. This is because they cannot translate their intuitive discoveries into the language of logical, analytical arguments. Pushkin's words about poetry having to be a bit foolish are directed mainly at the gift of intuition. The history of art knows an incalculable number of instances when the artist expresses one thing in his work, and logically explains it in another way: analysis and logic differ from intuition. *Dead Souls* is a good example. The epigraph to *Anna Karenina* contradicts the work and is not supported by it. Tolstoy the artist always argues with Tolstoy the preacher and thinker.

There is no particular need to explain that artistic intuition is demanded not only from the writer, but from the reader as well.

If our rationalists were inclined to say that intuition alone is insufficient for the artist, that intuitive truths must be verified analytically, and that intuition must be brought into harmony with reason, then there would be no need to

object to posing the question in this way. Intuitive insights are “blind,” they have “no tongue,” and they can be wrong. The ideal artistic type is the artist in whom an abundant gift of intuition is combined with a refined analytical ability. Such was Goethe, and in our times so, too, is Anatole France. Nor is it true that intuition by its very nature is opposed to rational activity, or that reason destroys intuition. There is a certain opposition here, but, like all opposites in the world, it is relative; for intuition is nothing but the truths, discovered at some time by previous generations with the help of rational experience, which have passed into the sphere of the subconscious. But if the artist with intuition alone is blind, then the artist who has tried to create his works by relying solely on “device,” “technique,” and so forth, is impotent. He wouldn’t be able to create; he would revolve in a circle of abstract concepts, not images. The majority of tendentious works are composed in this way.

Today’s technicism and rationalism, which tries in art to replace “inspiration,” “creativity,” and “intuition” with “deliberate construction of things” or with “device,” is nurtured by complex social moods. For some people, form, device and technique have become self-sufficient and exclusive because they find the content of our Soviet reality to be far too alien. This is the point of view held by guild specialists, as Comrade Bukharin has correctly noted. They are too much divorced from the content of our epoch. Others, from the left camp, are overly attracted by the technicism of our age. They want to introduce machine-construction and electrification into art as well, without considering the nature of art. It seems to them that a work can be “constructed” much like any machine. But here is what deserves attention. Our Soviet reality is giving birth to a new layer of intellectuals. This layer is being formed from the newly-styled urban middle class, from the white-collar workers in Soviet establishments, from university students, and from the new, “solid” countryside. This is not a remnant of the former old intelligentsia, and it is not made up of sons of the factory worker; it does not include the Rabfak student, Komsomol member or party activist. Such an intellectual has links with the revolution and with the new forms of everyday life which are emerging. He has been leavened by the revolution, but he is distant from the proletarian milieu, although he has assimilated the “spirit of the times.” Superficial rudiments of Marxism and communism (usually vulgarized), rationalism, pragmatism, primitivism, love for things, a disdainful attitude toward all ideologies and “philosophies”—all these he has. He is almost a revolutionary, but has never participated in the

revolutionary movement, and doesn't know it. He is somewhere around the party, and around the proletariat, but he will never be found in the party or in the milieu of the proletariat. He is developing his own way of life, his own habits and his own "inner core." This is something quite different from that of the ruling class, and he therefore tries to substitute rational accommodation for emotional affinity. And he has already registered some successes. He knows and has studied the life and mores of our organizations and establishments, he is "up to date" and often knows better than any communist what is needed and where. If he is a writer or poet, he takes one thing with a certain slant to one editor, and other things to others. He "states," "does" and "works." Here you don't need creativity: for one thing, who knows what will happen if you show your actual likes and dislikes, and, for another, there is demand—and all praise be to the creator—anything else is positively dangerous. He is more often than not drawn to the most left-wing tendencies, for he fears "lagging behind the times." The theory of "making" and "constructing" might very well suit the spirit of such a "positive" writer. I don't want to say that, for instance, the adherents of a Gosplan in literature, the constructivists of the latest type, are precisely people of this kind, but their theories might prove to be highly attractive to the many, many overly clever and always up-to-date people. This is highly probable. The theory of a Gosplan in literature simply demands that literary devices correspond to a basic theme. This theory is not new. What is new in this literary tendency, besides attempts to further lower poetry to the level of poetic prose within the bounds of poetry, what is new is a naked and open indifference to thematics, raised to a principle.⁵ What themes to choose, what to write about, how to evaluate a work from the standpoint of its content—these questions do not exist for the "Gosplanists." Therefore, for instance, the poetic visage of Ilya Selvinsky, one of the inspirers of a literary Gosplan, is concealed, dark and inscrutable. Today he gives us gypsy songs and feelings, tomorrow he gives us bandit songs, day after tomorrow, Red Army pieces. Now he gives us an anarchist's speech, then an article by Comrade Lenin, but what the poet himself "believes" in, what he himself feels, who he is for and who against—all this is unknown. As a result, I. Selvinsky's giftedness—and he is undoubtedly a gifted poet, although he is a bit heavy-handed—arouses bewilderment. Such "objectivism" is simply dangerous, and all the more so

5. See the anthology: *Gosplan of Literature*.

since it is disguised in an outwardly radical form. It is very appropriate for justifying unprincipled adaptability and can easily be made into an ideology for people who lack our Soviet emotional core, but who are “always prepared” to manufacture their “things” on demand.

Today there are many such people.

A modern artist who honestly intends to combine his talent with the strivings of the most advanced class in our times must not only study the ABCs of politics, and not only develop his powers of analytical and critical judgment; he must not only invent devices, but develop all his intuitive and instinctive capabilities in order to discover the newly unfolding future and the new life which is already upon us. Let him sense with his mighty gift of insight and then reproduce the earth’s new truth; let him draw from the wellsprings of this earth not only with his “lesser” reason, but also with all that is inherently “great” that lives and slumbers in the dark and little understood depths which lie beyond the threshold of his consciousness. This is not easy. Our feelings and intuition lag behind the spirit of the times far more than our reason. To be intuitively permeated with this spirit is more difficult than to assimilate it consciously. For this one must become entirely used to and enter into this new society both with one’s heart and mind. The rest—technique, style, form—will follow.

Here it would be fitting to recall the scene in Mikhailov’s studio before his painting Pilate’s Admonition:

“Yes, it is wonderfully masterly! How those figures in the background stand out! That is technique,” said Vronsky, addressing Golenishchev....

“Yes, yes, wonderful!” chimed in Golenishchev and Anna.

In spite of his elation, this remark about technique grated painfully on Mikhailov’s heart, and, glancing angrily at Vronsky, he suddenly frowned. He often heard the word “technique” mentioned, and did not at all understand what was meant by it. He knew it meant a mechanical capacity to paint and draw, quite independent of the subject matter. He had often noticed—as now when his picture was being praised—that technique was contrasted with inner quality, as if it were possible to paint well something that was bad. He knew that much attention and care were needed not to injure one’s work when removing the wrappings that obscure the idea, and that all wrappings must be removed, but as to the art of painting, the

technique, it did not exist. If the things he saw had been revealed to a little child, or to his cook, they would have been able to remove the outer shell from their idea. And the most experienced and technical painter could never paint anything by means of mechanical skill alone, if the outline of the subject matter did not first reveal itself to his mind. Moreover, he saw that if technique were spoken of, then he could not be praised for it. In all he painted and ever had painted he saw defects that were an eyesore to him, the results of carelessness in removing the shell of the idea, which he could not now remedy without spoiling the work as a whole. And in almost all the figures and faces he saw traces of wrappings that had not been entirely removed and that spoil the picture.⁶

Very many articles are now being written about artistic works from the formal point of view. In these articles one will find whatever one wants when it comes to detailed and even extremely detailed arguments about plot, composition, or rhythm; but it is never possible to know about what is being told in the given work and how the author-critic feels about it himself. A certain justification may be offered for formal deviations if we consider the scorn on the part of our revolutionary circles toward questions of form, something which has not been outgrown yet. In addition, the questions of a formal nature for the younger generation, which has something to say but which lacks the necessary cultural know-how, have undoubtedly become a serious matter. But no matter how important these questions are, we must never forget that they are only part of the issue. L. N. Tolstoy was right: the most skillful painter would be helpless despite all his technical mastery if a special content and the contours of this content have not revealed themselves to his eyes; on the other hand, whoever has these seeing eyes but lacks certain skills will not be powerless.

How do things stand, however, when a work is divided into content and form?

For the artist Mikhailov, technique did not exist apart from content. Was he right or wrong here? He was right from his own standpoint, right as an artist. For an artist, during the process of creativity, his work remains single, whole and indivisible. Mikhailov did not therefore understand how one could divide this solitary whole, juxtaposing technique to content. In actual fact,

6. Op. cit., pp. 471–472.

during his creative work, what existed for Mikhailov as content and what as technique or form? Perhaps the content was the idea of a man who was in a fit of rage? But such an idea for an artist does not exist abstractly, it always is clothed in an image for him; an idea clothed in an image is already form, but form which fully coincides with content. On the other hand, perhaps, we could call form what is fixed on the paper or on the canvas as an open image and which is then freed from all that is superfluous and unnecessary? But if this fixing is called form, then it is indissolubly linked with content. The work of the artist is concrete. In the concrete, form and content are organically merged. The creative act is prolonged and sometimes very painful, but it does not break down for the artist into the links of a logical chain and therefore does not yield to separation.

In the very same sense, the aesthetic process of perceiving a work of art does not involve such a division. Aesthetically we perceive and evaluate a work of art as a single whole, since we perceive it concretely. But we can, and so, too, can the artist, translate the work from the language of images into the language of logic. As soon as we begin to do this, we cease to evaluate it concretely and begin to view it abstractly, rationally. Viewing something abstractly, we find it useful to divide the work into content and form, setting limits to both. Methodologically this is completely justified. Such a bifurcation helps us logically to evaluate a work from various points of view. First of all, we pose the question: what idea is expressed in a given work and what is its relative social weight? Secondly, we then try to answer the question of how it is expressed, fully or incompletely, using what devices, and so forth. In this way we divide a work into content and form. But in making such a division, we must not forget for a moment about its conditional nature. A work of art is concrete; it is inherently indivisible. In the sphere of analytical, critical evaluation, and in the interests of such an analysis, we view this indivisible unity from two sides: from its inner side (content) and from its outer side (form), but each point of view deals with a unified work. In speaking of form and content, we are considering one and the same thing, only from differing points of view.⁷ Form and content exist separately only in abstraction. This must never be forgotten, but it is precisely what is forgotten by those who look at content, ignoring form, and by those for whom all that exists is device.

We could ask the question: Is it permissible to translate a work of art from the language of images into the language of logic? There are those who

think that such a translation is pointless and impermissible. They are wrong. Works of art are products of the social consciousness of a given social class. In translating a work of art from the language of images into the language of logic we are clarifying for ourselves, as G. V. Plekhanov correctly put it: “what precise aspect of social (class) consciousness is expressed in this work.” And this has colossal significance in the social struggle.

II. REMOVING THE VEILS

For Tolstoy the basic task for an artist lies not in notorious technique, but in his special gift of insight. Only one who sees with his own eyes and hears with his own ears what is unique and particular in his surroundings is a genuine artist. And these special insights reveal themselves only to him. The realist-writer does not dream up, invent or create fantastic worlds; he doesn't engage in free play of the imagination, nor does he seek embellishments for their own sake. It is as if he were reading the secret code inherent in things, people and events. The goal of the artist is not to describe or tell a story masterfully and wonderfully. No matter how well he has mastered his palette, no matter how accurately and thoroughly he has described something, no matter how good a storyteller he is, he will be an unproductive artist, much like the fig tree by the roadside, if he doesn't have the ability to read this secret code in his own way, if he doesn't look at the world in his own way and see something which no one has seen before him.

“About his picture,” Tolstoy writes about Mikhailov, “the one at present on the easel, he had at the bottom of his heart a firm opinion: that no one had ever painted anything like it. He did not consider his picture better than all Raphael's, but he knew that what he wanted to express in that picture had never yet been expressed by anyone.”⁸

In real life we constantly encounter such “arrogance” on the part of the artist. We tend to see this as empty bragging or as scorn for others, but for the artist this is an expression of the fact that he sees the world and passes on what he has seen in his own way. Vronsky saw Anna a thousand times, he had studied every fold in her dress, he had each day observed the changing expressions on her face, and he loved her. Mikhailov saw Anna only a few

7. We could explain further using the analogy of matter and spirit. What from the objective point of view is matter, from the subjective is spiritual or psychical.

times, but he observed Anna with the special eyes of an artist and discovered in her what Vronsky had never noticed.

After the fifth sitting the portrait struck everyone not only by its likeness but also by its beauty. It was strange that Mikhailov had been able to discover that special beauty. “One needed to know and love her as I love her, to find just that sweetest spiritual expression of hers,” thought Vronsky, though he himself had only learnt to know that “sweetest spiritual expression” through the portrait. But the expression was so true that it seemed both to him and to others that they had always known it.⁹

A genuine scientist discovers the laws of nature, otherwise he is a narrow pedant, or in the best case a gatherer of facts; but the artist, too, makes such discoveries. Mikhailov discovered a new face with Anna, whereas Vronsky had never discovered anything in her. Darwin discovered and explained the origin of species. L. N. Tolstoy discovered Platon Karataev, Eroshka, Anna, Natasha, Pierre and Kutuzov. Each acted as a genuine innovator, but one proved while the other showed. The true artist, like the true scientist, always adds to what existed before him, otherwise he either repeats what has been established, or he simply describes things. Let his contribution be insignificant, let this particle fail to find full expression, but if it exists, then the artist, much like Mikhailov, has the right to think that he has passed on what no one before him has been able to do.

There is no need to confuse the artist’s special gift of insight with the desire to strike the reader by producing a beautiful turn of phrase, a special style, or a totally new work of art. Such a desire usually leads to pretentiousness, deliberate overrefinement, excessive floweriness and artificiality. The work becomes incomprehensible, and the reader, like Turgenev’s deacon, says to himself: “Dark is the water in the clouds,” and “Thus be it beyond our ken.” Many contemporary poets and prose-writers commit this sin. They confuse the ability of the artist to see what no one else has seen with a desire to astound the reader.

Not long ago, another group of writers, and critics in particular, vigorously advocated collective creativity, advancing it against aristocratic or bourgeois

8. *Ibid.*, p. 468.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 475.

individualism. Many superfluous words were devoted to this topic, and much that was simply nonsense was said. The essence of the matter is that an artist's creativity still remains individualistic. In this sense no proletarian writer differs in any essential way from the realist-painter Mikhailov. Reference to the collective character of creating a popular epos, songs or fairy tales is unconvincing because the latest research has shown that even here we almost always are dealing with individual creativity. Such arguments about collectivism are also dubious from a practical angle. Instead of saying to our young people: follow in the footsteps of our best realist classics, assimilate first of all what it was that they considered the basic task of artistic creativity, make room for your own eyes and ears, refract the world through the prism of your own individuality without breaking away from the proletarian collective. Instead of this they say: these are bourgeois vestiges; the proletarian writer differs fundamentally in the process of creativity from the Tolstoys, Pushkins and Gorkys. He is a collectivist, hence: Down with individualism in creativity! Down with creativity in isolation! Down with the individual and the particular! Let us create collectively, collegially! — All this is purely and simply left-wing infantilism. Our collectivists have heard the call, but they do not know where it comes from. We must struggle wholeheartedly against individualism in art during the age of decadence, during the age of the decline and disintegration of bourgeois society. Such individualism recognizes nothing but creativity for oneself and from within oneself. But in struggling against such social moods we must not declare a war against healthy individualism in creativity, which, nourished by reality, introduces what is unique and unrepeatable. It was precisely this kind of creative work that L. N. Tolstoy was showing us when he gave us Mikhailov. This will become clearer if we take a closer look at what Tolstoy says about removing veils.

In describing the process of Mikhailov's creative work, Tolstoy stubbornly repeats, as the reader will recall, that Mikhailov seemed to be removing veils from the figure: "He seemed to be removing veils from it, veils which prevented it from being completely visible," "He saw remains of veils which had not been fully removed," and so forth. What does this removal of veils signify? Mikhailov found the typical, a more complete expression of his idea, and at the same time the unrepeatable, the individual. The figure therefore came to life. But in the sketch not everything corresponded to the figure which had taken form in the individual type. The figure had to be stripped of everything

superfluous and accidental. Mikhailov “peeled” the figure. The expressive image “removing the veils” does not signify anything mystical; it is a wonderful means of describing how Mikhailov revealed in his work the particular which he had seen.

It must be noted, however, that Lev Nikolaevich stresses the passive role of the artist: “He wasn’t changing the figure.” The figure is given, it already lives its own life, and the task of the artist is to remove everything which prevents us from seeing it clearly. Here the writer’s understanding of realistic creativity borders on naive realism. It is as if the real world is populated by figures which are given to us in paintings, rather than having been created by the artist’s imagination. The imagined world of art is given realization, is materialized. The poet bearing the same last name as Lev Nikolaevich, A. K. Tolstoy, expressed the same view in the following lines:

There are many unseen forms and unheard sounds in space,
 There are many miraculous combinations of word and light,
 But only he who is able to see and hear can give them to us,
 He who has caught but a line of the form, or a sound, or a word,
 Yet brings the whole creation along with it into our astonished world.

Of course, such a description of the creative process and of the artist’s relation to the world around him bears a metaphorical character to a large degree. But this metaphor—the removal of veils—contains definite meaning, the metaphor is not fortuitous. And it is not fortuitous especially for L. N. Tolstoy. Here is not the place to dig deeper into the essence of the artistic activity of our national genius, but the imaginative expression, “removal of veils,” given all of Tolstoy’s naive realism, is the most appropriate approach to his creativity. In all of his works Tolstoy was primarily involved in removing veils. His genius was directed at revealing life. With Tolstoy, you don’t notice any artificiality, any writer’s license, any desire to impress the reader with some kind of affect. His great hand stripped away the veil, and the reader is greeted with life which he has seen a thousand times, but is also seeing for the first time. Tolstoy always proceeded from the complex and multifaceted to the simple and integral. It is no accident that they called him the great simplifier. There is something childlike in Tolstoy’s perception of the world, something primordially given. He opened up for us a life which is both primitive in its

origins and pagan in its joyfulness. He freed life from all that modern civilization, the monstrous structure of social life, the savage relations between people, etc., have deposited on it in enormous dark layers. Investigate further how Tolstoy laid bare and removed the veils from human intentions, feelings and deeds, and how clearly he saw what was genuine behind what had been carefully concealed. Let us take one simple example for the purpose of explanation. In describing Nikolai Levin's death, Tolstoy writes: "All knew that he would inevitably die soon, and that he was half dead already. All wanted one thing only, that he would die as soon as possible. Yet all concealed this wish, kept giving him medicines from vials, sought out new medicines and doctors, and thereby kept deceiving him, themselves and each other." This is a typical passage, the likes of which can be found on virtually every page in Tolstoy. No one was able, with such undescrivable power, to depict and expose pretensions, falsity, lies and all things artificial or only for show. And that is because he saw life in a special way. He had a gift of seeing, in the very bowels of life, and in the most complicated or mixed up situations, what was simple, true and uncomplicated. Oh, he was quite capable of removing the veils! There was another man, in another realm, in the realm of social and political turmoil, who was able no less than Tolstoy to "remove the veils" which have hitherto cloaked our social life—Vladimir Ilyich Lenin....

The theory of removing veils superbly defines the essence of the artistic creativity of Tolstoy himself most of all.

Next. Tolstoy's naive realism can be best understood if it is explained using Belinsky's words from the article "The Poems of M. Lermontov" (and Tolstoy gives us reason to do just this). "Reality," we read in Belinsky, "is beautiful in itself, but it is beautiful in its essence, in accordance with its elements and its content, and not according to its form. In this regard, reality is pure gold, but unrefined, lying amidst heaps of ore and earth; science and art refine the gold of reality, and refashion it into exquisite forms. Consequently, science and art are not engaged in thinking up a new and unforeseen reality. They take from that which was, is and will be, ready material, ready elements, in short, ready content, and give them proper form.... Therefore, both in science and art, reality resembles reality to an even greater degree than in reality itself, and the work of art, based on invention, is higher than any fact."

We can fully subscribe to such an understanding of Tolstoy's naive realism and the removal of veils.

We must, however, make one necessary clarification, which is extremely important.

A person's conceptions about reality develop in dependence on the social milieu in which he lives. In a society divided into classes, this is always a class milieu. Therefore the artist, in depicting or transforming reality, in removing its veils, acts under the determining influence of the thoughts and feelings in the class which has exerted the strongest influence upon him. But classes are locked in a struggle against each other, defending their own interests in this battle. An artist's attitude to reality in class society is consequently determined by class contradictions. This extremely important truth, which was considered neither by Belinsky, nor even less so by Tolstoy, complicates the problem of the world of art and the world of reality.

I. S. Turgenev was very dissatisfied with critics who, in his opinion, were convinced that the author is relentlessly occupied in his writings with advancing his own ideas. He confirmed that the artist endeavors most of all to "precisely and powerfully" reproduce the truth, "the reality of life." This comment by Turgenev is only partially true. There can be no doubt that subjectively each genuine artist tries to depict the reality of life. He experiences the greatest happiness if he is certain that he has succeeded in doing so. It is also true that there are critics, and they have by no means become extinct in our times, who naively assume that the artist is engaged only in advancing his own ideas and is not worried about the reality of life. But there is no less doubt that, in depicting the reality of life, the artist sees this reality through the prism of the thoughts and feelings of his class. Objectively he introduces the ideas of his class, and nearly always does so unconsciously. Under the influence of these thoughts and feelings he reproduces the reality of life only to the degree that these thoughts and feelings allow him to. There are instances when the reality of life is rendered very one-sidedly, there are times when it is completely distorted, and there are times when this reality emerges sharply and clearly. The last instance usually happens if the artist reflects the thoughts and feelings of a class which is flourishing, or of a class which is on the rise, in short, of a class which at a given historical moment most clearly expresses the general interests of society as a whole, the interests of a movement forward.

From these considerations flow a number of extremely significant conclusions.

The artist who has understood the truth about the class character of art must

explain: in the interests of what class does he create his art? He is obliged to throw overboard all the insignificant theories about how art is above politics, how it exists for itself and is sufficient unto itself, how the artist is the “son of the heavens,” a celestial being, and so forth. If he is additionally convinced that his feelings and thoughts are on the side of the proletariat, then he must ask the question: how can he best “remove the veils” from surrounding reality in the interests of that class? This is by no means an idle question, especially in our era of the most strained class wars and battles. Elucidation of the truth about the class character of art would help many of today’s Soviet writers find their way in our modern literary world and avoid the errors, oftentimes very crude ones at that, which they are making.

The critic who has assimilated this truth and is evaluating a work must always explain: to what degree reality is objectively and precisely reproduced in the given work; whether artistic discoveries have been made in the work, and which ones; how one can explain the correctness or incorrectness of what the artist has done in depicting the “reality of life”; what falsehoods he has introduced due to his class subjectivism, or, on the contrary, to what degree class feelings and thoughts have helped the artist find “reality”; what is the relative social weight of these feelings and thoughts; how are they transmitted in the work of art, and so forth.

We began to speak of objectivity and precision in art. These words make some people shudder. Pardon me, but what is preached is non-class, universally human, eternal, absolute art! It is therefore useful to remind people once again what has been written about objectivity not only by such nobles as Tolstoy and Turgenev, but also by Plekhanov, the best theoretician among Marxists when it comes to questions of art. What can be more subjective than conceptions of beauty? When it comes to taste, people say: to each his own. And nevertheless, in Plekhanov’s opinion, there do exist objective measures of beauty. Objecting to reproaches that he, Plekhanov, was allowing for the existence of an absolute criterion of beauty, Georgii Valentinovich wrote:

I do not think there is, or can be, an absolute criterion of beauty. People’s notions of beauty do undoubtedly change in the course of the historical process. But while there is no absolute criterion of beauty, while all its criteria are relative, this does not mean that there is no objective possibility of judging whether a given artistic design has been well executed

or not. Let us suppose that an artist wants to paint a “woman in blue.” If what he portrays in his picture really does resemble such a woman, we shall say that he has succeeded in painting a good picture. But if, instead of a woman wearing a blue dress, we see on his canvas several stereometric figures more or less thickly and more or less crudely tinted here and there with blue color, we shall say that whatever he has painted, it certainly is not a good picture. The more closely the execution corresponds to the design, or—to use a more general expression—the more closely the form of an artistic production corresponds to its idea, the more successful it is. There you have an objective criterion (“Art and Social Life”).¹⁰

If it is possible to speak about an objective criterion in people’s judgments about beauty, then there is even less reason to deny the existence of such a measure in questions concerning the relationship of the world of art to the world of reality. People who denied the existence of an objective criterion were rebuked by Comrade Plekhanov for committing the “sin of extreme subjectivism.” But precisely such a sin is being committed by those comrades among the On-Guardists who, having assimilated the idea that art in a class society bears a class character, go on to assume that this excludes any possibility of raising the question of objectivity in art and of answering it in a positive manner. Besides reading Plekhanov, it would be very useful for them to think carefully about what Tolstoy wrote concerning Mikhailov, especially about the removal of veils.

Tolstoy’s thoughts about removing the veils have by no means lost their significance even now and in other contexts. Our editorial offices are now being inundated by many manuscripts of prose and poetry. Never before in Russia have so many novellas, stories and poems been written as today. This is a welcome symptom. When we hear that in city so-and-so of the Ustiy Province a literary group “Pereval” has been formed, or that at such and such factory they have formed a section of the group “October,” this alone testifies to the enormous cultural growth of the USSR. A significant number of the manuscripts are written in a literary, literate and even style, endowed with knowledge of the latest technical devices. Nevertheless, their main insufficiency

10. G. V. Plekhanov, “Art and Social Life,” *Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), p. 685.

is obvious. The majority of prose writers and poets have not learned that the genuine artist must remove the veils from life, must make artistic discoveries (even the most insignificant), and must be able to see what is unique. They are writing battle sketches from the Civil War period, and they are recounting surprising and unusual incidents, most often from the epoch of revolutionary struggles; here we find shootings, and the Cheka, and White Guardists, and kulaks, and generals of the White armies. What they forget is that art does not yet exist in the simple description of episodes or in engaging tales if they do not contain a significant amount of artistic thought, if the artist doesn't try to remove the veils from this thought. An episode, event, fact or adventure becomes an artistic fact only when the artist, in accordance with the profound and apt comment by A. K. Tolstoy, having "caught but a line of the form, or a sound, or a word ... brings the whole creation along with it into our astonished world." In separate parts, in details, in separate paintings one must be able to uncover this whole; then the part, the trifle and the incidental become typical for the whole, and we become amazed. We perceive this as something new. A tale about a moth which some person has caught, inserted into a story "just like that," for padding, stands beyond the bounds of art, no matter how well it is done. But a tale about the very same moth in the scene where Karenin visits the divorce lawyer (during the reception and consultation with Karenin, the lawyer catches the moth), belongs to the realm of artistic perfection. Thanks to this moth the reader gets a clear picture of the lawyer, of his recently decorated apartment, of Karenin's state of mind, and their relationship to each other. What emerges is the whole.

In Gogol's *The Portrait* the moneylender in the Asian robe with diabolically destructive eyes leads artists to ruin by demanding that they be too "faithful to nature," that they render "with literal exactitude every insignificant trait." The downhill slide for the artists began with copying. In contrast to such copying, Gogol offered a complex of sublime thoughts and feelings, transforming reality in the work of art and allowing the artist to penetrate its "inner code." Tolstoy's removal of veils is quite distant from copying (naturalism).

A major obstacle in artistic creativity is obliviousness to what must inspire the writer or poet. Very often our circles and schools interfere in this realm. We have witnessed the development of so many literary schools, associations and tendencies; and at times such narrow circle-spiritedness, such group self-satisfaction and self-promotion, such intolerance to what are essentially

closely related groups dominates in them, that, because of these circle interests and demands, the writer sometimes completely forgets about the elementary demands placed upon him by art. What are initially well-conceived groups soon turn into ones which cripple the artist, distract him from creative activity, and lead him astray. Another section of writers force their productions to fit ready-made patterns which are rented for the occasion. In both instances what is produced is something deliberately forced, artificial, bogus, and therefore unconvincing.

In light of what has been said, it would not be detrimental if a number of people thought carefully about the lines Tolstoy wrote about Vronsky. We know that Vronsky became interested in painting when he was abroad, and at one time began to paint quite earnestly.

As he had a capacity for understanding art, and for true and tasteful imitation in the art of painting, he supposed himself to have the real thing essential for an artist, and after hesitating for some time which style of painting to select—religious, historical, realistic, or genre painting—he set to work to paint. He appreciated all kinds, and could have felt inspired by any one of them; but he had no conception of the possibility of knowing nothing at all of any school of painting, and of being inspired directly by what is within the soul, without caring whether what is painted will belong to any recognized school. Since he knew nothing of this, and drew his inspiration, not directly from life, but indirectly from life embodied in art, his inspiration came very quickly and easily, and as quickly and easily came his success in painting something very similar to the sort of painting he was trying to imitate.

Mikhailov thought that Vronsky was a dilettante in art. We have no shortage of such dilettantes. But often even those whom you cannot call dilettantes, like Vronsky, are inspired not immediately by life, but indirectly by this or that type of art, by a tendency, school or circle infected moreover by a narrow craft or corporate spirit. It is fine if the artist is inspired by one or another type of art, but the problem is that circles and organizations are directing their activity mainly to coincide with the seizure of the editorial boards of journals, newspapers, publishing houses, and so forth. What this produces—is for all to see.

The group of writers who are predominantly from the older layer of intel-

lectuals suffers from other shortcomings. These writers are free from group inspiration, but they too are not inspired directly by life, but by flaccid, overly subjective feelings which are distant from living reality. They have created their own petty and closed little worlds and assume that everything revolves around them. They do not hear the powerful voices of life, they do not see how the new is being born amidst the agony, sorrow and joy, under an insane degree of tension. They write for themselves, for dozens or for hundreds, while hundreds of thousands neither understand nor know them, nor want to know them. They think that they are not understood due to ignorance and lack of culture, that their feelings are too refined and unique for the “mob,” and that their discoveries are accessible only to the chosen. What is new causes wonderment, but once he had become amazed by Anna’s portrait which had been painted by Mikhailov, Vronsky immediately became resigned; he perceived and understood the special expression of her face, from which the artist had removed the veils. The misfortune today, however, lies in the fact that our subjectivists in art are not understood by people of their own cultural level, by people of no less feeling and thought. Even more bitter is the fact that they don’t understand themselves. Solipsism in art, just as in philosophy, always leads to such a failure of understanding. Among us today there is a thirst for life, and people who are eager to pursue it, but both people and life must be approached in the Tolstoyan manner: one must first of all be eager to observe intently and listen carefully.

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In his book *What is Art?* L. N. Tolstoy viewed the distinguishing feature of art to be the fact that it, art, is a way of communicating between people by means of feelings. G. V. Plekhanov was correct in objecting to this formulation: “It is not true ... that art expresses only people’s feelings. No, it expresses both their feelings and their thoughts, but expresses them not abstractly, but in living images. Herein lies its main distinguishing feature” (“Unaddressed Letters”).

Indeed, Goethe’s *Faust* expresses not only Goethe’s feelings, but his whole philosophical outlook; *Anna Karenina* expresses not only feelings, but many of Tolstoy’s thoughts. Plekhanov was quite justified in saying that Tolstoy is acceptable “only from here to there.” With this in mind, Tolstoy-the-artist is incomparably closer to us communists than Tolstoy-the-preacher, or Tolstoy-

the-thinker. In particular, the definition of art which flows from the wonderful pages where he describes Mikhailov's acquaintance with Vronsky and Anna confirms Plekhanov's definition of art, and not that which Tolstoy provided in his book about art. From all that Tolstoy told us about the process of artistic creativity, it follows that genuine realistic art, in "removing the veils" from living reality, does this, unlike science, by means of images; and unlike religion, these images are neither whimsical nor fantastic. Herein lies the distinguishing feature of art. By defining art as a means of emotional infection, Tolstoy acted to the advantage of his own religious and metaphysical views. He wanted to subordinate art to religion, for religion, too, is a means of emotional infection, particularly in its latest stages. Here Tolstoy spoke not as a realist and an artist, but as a thinker and an idealist. This should never be forgotten by those comrades who prefer to use Tolstoy's definition given in his theoretical book which is thoroughly permeated with a religious spirit.

Basing ourselves on what has been said, we have good grounds for asserting that the distinguishing feature of art is that it cognizes and expresses the reality, life, feelings and thoughts of people, not abstractly, however, but in the form of images. And to this we shall now add that the main organ through which art functions is intuition; artistic cognition is intuitive. Comrades who have objected to such a definition (of cognition), and who have referred in this to Plekhanov (Lelevich, for example), did so because of a profound misunderstanding. Later they began to state that I had expressed a correct, but insufficient and vague idea, supposedly leaving out the class nature of art. But I did not overlook the class struggle; the conditional and methodological character of several of the ideas expressed by me earlier I stressed then and I stress now. You don't have to force an open door. Where does such "vagueness" come from? It originates in a one-sided (and here I mean not a methodologically, but a mistakenly one-sided) explanation of the class nature of art. Here's what we get from the On-Guardists: since the artist willfully or not reflects in his works the interests of a given class, he cannot be useful to another class; there are no objective criteria; neither a bourgeois writer nor a fellow-traveler can be useful to the proletariat, since they cannot give us objectively valuable things. Such an explanation of the class principle, of a class approach to literary productions borders on class relativism. That is why we have had to, and have to now, "vaguely" call to mind and advance certain elementary Marxist assumptions. In another literary argument, let us say, with people who deny

the class character of art, it would be necessary, on the contrary, to emphasize precisely this class character, as Plekhanov justifiably did in his debate with the Narodniks, with Merezhkovsky, Ivanov-Razumnik and others. But in his debate with the Machists, for example, he cautioned against the sin of subjectivism and insisted on the existence, both in science and in art, of objective criteria.

Each in its own time and place.