Masaryk and Tolstoy

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The following is a translation of a section of Karel Čapek's book Hovory s TGM (Conversations with Thomas Garrigue Masaryk) entitled "Masaryk a Tolstoj" ("Masaryk and Tolstoy") describing three visits the first president of the Czechoslovak Republic paid to the great Russian author, both at his palatial home in Moscow and his famous estate Yasnaya Polyana. The passage is rendered from Michael Heim, Zlata Meyerstein, and Dean Worth, Readings in Czech (Slavica Publishers, UCLA Slavic Studies, 13, Slavica, 1985), pp. 58-60.

Before I looked up Tolstoy I'd had no time to learn about him through his readings, as I had Dostoevsky, so I really wanted to get to know him well personally. First I visited him at his palatial home outside of Moscow. I remember as if it were yesterday how he showed me his study, unable to conceal a certain pride. It had a rustic wooden ceiling you could touch with your hands, but which had been put in later under the original, higher ceiling. In this peasant room there was a desk and a comfortable leather armchair and a couch - things which certainly didn't belong in this rustic chamber. He had a wooden cuckoo clock which, he boasted, had cost only thirty-five kopecks. He went around in a belted peasant "rubashka" shirt and in shoes he had sewn himself, so you can believe that they were sewn poorly. He invited me for tea into the main chamber - all black velvet, the way houses of the nobility were at the time. The countess offered him the usual jam, but he just sucked his tea through a piece of sugar like a peasant and didn't seem to notice her. After tea we went out into the park; we talked about Schopenhauer, whom Lev Nikolaevich understood only poorly. In the middle of saying something he suddenly stopped like a peasant who has reached the border of his estate and invited me to follow him - in a way which struck me as forced, phonily primitive and unnatural.

Lev Nikolaevich next invited me to Yasnaya Polyana. I rode out there from Tula in a "kibitka," a sort of covered wagon. The bridge in front of the village was so dilapidated that the horses would have broken their legs crossing it, so we had to detour around it. We got to the manor house just before noon. They told me that Lev Nikolaevich was still asleep, because he'd been up all night talking with Chertkov and his other guests. So to kill time I went over to the village. It was dirty and wretched. There was a young peasant working in front of one of the huts; I got into a discussion with him and saw some kind of a rash under his open shirt - syphilis. In another hovel I saw an old woman working herself to death all alone

on top of a filthy stove. I went back to Tolstoy's house. A young man named Gay had come to see him, the son of a painter, a disciple of Tolstoy who had gone so far in adopting the "simple life" that he'd come to visit the author from far away on foot because, apparently, the railroad wasn't peasantly enough for him. He was so infested with lice that he had to bathe and scrub himself down right away. Tolstoy himself told me that this man had drunk from a syphilitic's glass in order to hide the repugnance he felt and not to humiliate the man. He thought about this but not about keeping his own peasants from getting infected. And when he started to talk about how we ought to adopt the simple life, that we ought to live like peasants and so on, I asked him: "Well, what about your house and salon, those armchairs and couches? And what about the miserable life of your peasants? Is that part of the simple life? You don't drink, but you smoke cigarette after cigarette; if you're going to have asceticism, it should be consistent. The peasant lives poorly because he is poor, not to be an ascetic." And I told him what I had seen in his village, the dishevelment, the diseases, the filth and all that. "Good God, don't you see it? A great artist like you can't observe that? Sewing your own boots, walking instead of taking the train, it's all just a waste of time; think how many good things could be accomplished in that time!" I quoted him the English proverb "Cleanliness is next to godliness," and our Czech one "Cleanliness is half of health." In a word, we didn't understand each other. The Countess was a sensible woman; she didn't like to see Tolstoy foolishly giving everything away, she was thinking of her children. I can't help it; in this disagreement between her and Lev Nikolaevich I had to side with her.

My third visit to Tolstoy took place just before his death, in 1910; by then he and his wife had completely broken apart in their inner life. He was very nervous and had trouble controlling himself. At that time he had a Czech physician, Makovický, attending to him and the village. Makovický was utterly devoted to Tolstoy and his teachings; he kept a piece of graphite behind a fingernail and used it to write down in a notebook he had in his pocket what Lev Nikolaevich said. Simplicity, live the simple life. My God! You can't solve the problems of the city and the countryside with sentimental moralizing and proclaiming the peasant and country dweller as a model for everything; agriculture today is being industrialized, too, it can't get along without machines, and the peasant needs a better education than his father or grandfather - we still have a lot of incorrect views and inherited prejudices about all this at home, too.

The thing they argued about most was non-resistance to evil; Tolstoy didn't understand that it was not just a matter of violent resistance; it was a struggle against evil all along the line; he didn't see the difference between the defensive and the offensive. He thought, for instance, that the Tartar invaders, if the Russians hadn't resisted them, would have given up

violence after a little bit of killing. My own tenet was this: if someone attacks me and is going to kill me, I'll defend myself, and if I absolutely have to, I'll kill my attacker. If one of us has to be killed, let it be the one with the evil intention.
