

RILKE AND TOLSTOY

FLIES on the wall have all the fun at those famous meetings between great men of which such partial and tantalizing traditions remain. The untutored utterances of George III after his historic audience to Johnson in the Queen's Library would have formed a pleasing pendant no doubt to the classic phrase: 'It was not for me to bandy civilities with my Sovereign.' Yet sometimes to know more is to know less. The words: 'Mr Livingstone, I presume?' echoing through Darkest Africa entirely dominate the subsequent conversation, and epitomize the men and the moment in the grand symbolical manner. On the other hand, one cannot but regret that Napoleon should have been so laconic about Goethe, however much of solemn significance can be read into the words: 'Vous êtes un homme', and 'Voilà un homme'. Nor can one help wishing that Goethe himself had not waited sixteen years before writing up his guarded account of the interview. Yet in one's heart one knows that the balmy atmosphere of mutual admiration and high esteem which made this encounter so gratifying to all concerned precluded the possibility of psychological realism.

The notice Goethe wrote in his diary on 2 October 1824, 'Heine from Göttingen', is all that is known for certain about a very different kind of meeting, the course of which did not run smooth. Goethe, who was incapable of lying, never mentioned the occasion again; Heine kept a stricken silence for seven months. The eager, thrusting young intellectual had already laid his poems at Goethe's feet and now came to prostrate himself in person. If his brother Max is to be believed, a most trivial conversation took place which circled haltingly round the avenue of poplars between Jena and Weimar. Finally Goethe, aged seventy-five, asked Heine, aged twenty-seven, what he was occupied with at the moment. The latter had no more worldly wisdom than to own that he was working at a *Faust*. Goethe retaliated by enquiring acidly into his further business in Weimar; at which unmistakable hint Heine made himself scarce. The snub (for a snub of some sort there had been) rankled terribly. Heine kept it to himself and salved his hurt pride by private descriptions of Goethe's great sympathy and kindness, his shocking state of physical decay; his frivolity, materialism and egotism. The personal animus endured and was responsible for some cutting public criticisms, but never at the expense of Goethe's poetical genius. Heine's great

reckoning with the 'politically indifferent' pagan was made after the latter's death in *Die Romantische Schule*. It is vivid, brilliant and penetrated with violently mixed feelings of scorn and admiration, and it concludes with a fanciful account of the fatal interview eleven years before. Heine described Goethe in all the majesty of age, a sublime and awe-inspiring Zeus, to whom he could think of nothing more significant to say, than that the plums on the way between Jena and Weimar tasted very sweet. Compared with his private descriptions of a yellow toothless mummy, this public tribute to the personal beauty of the Olympian who had practically shown him the door speaks well for Heine's magnanimity.

Rilke's journeys to Russia once more recall Goethe to one's mind and prompt one to recapitulate all that Italy stood for in the latter's life. This however brings one up against the strange fact that Goethe was throughout hardly conscious of the real Italy he was travelling in, and certainly did not like it, except as a country peculiarly propitious to his classical dreams. After the first long visit, he returned once and never again, though the opportunities were innumerable, and though his plans to do so were many. But he remained away, living on his memories, and declaring to Eckermann towards the end of his life, that he had never really known what it was to be happy since he had left Italy. His unexpressed reluctance to repeat for a third time an experience which the second visit had greatly and avowedly dimmed favours the interpretation that it was an unreal Italy which he adopted as his spiritual home, invested with the arbitrary glamour of the portrait painted of him by Tischbein, reclining on an obelisk in Roman costume amidst marble bas-reliefs in the Campagna, with the Forum in the distance. Allowing for the difference in age, race and temperament, Rilke's relationship with Russia was a curious repetition of this emotional geographical history, even down to the portrait in a Russian peasant's blouse which was painted of him by Pasternak with the Kremlin in the background.

Goethe was seeking for Ancient Greece in Italy, Rilke set out to discover the Russian God, the Russian peasant and the Russian soul. *Das Stundenbuch* bears eloquent testimony to the religious inspiration which Russia granted him; and this perhaps accounts for the fact that the personal contacts were less fruitful. In my opinion he no more saw the real Russia than Goethe saw the real Italy, for Rilke travelled through that vast and tragic country almost in a trance. Twenty-four years of age, shrinking, sensitive, melting and gentle, the most melodious, nebulous and ethereal of poets (as he was then), living for poetry and for poetry alone, one rather shudders to think that he was bound on a

pilgrimage which was to include a visit to Tolstoy, that sublime but terrible genius of seventy-two, who was then, and had been for many years, a most virulent and damaging opponent of the 'illusion', as he called it, of art.

But Rilke knew no misgivings. With his Russian friend Lou Andreas-Salomé (who had innocently wrought such havoc in Nietzsche's life) and her husband Andreas, professor of oriental languages in the University of Göttingen, he boldly set out to discover a country which, on the strength of a seven weeks' visit in 1899 and another of four months in 1900, was to become his permanent spiritual home. Both these visits were made in the spring and summer, so that the cruelty of a Russian winter was never among his experiences. Moscow at Easter and the steppe in flower henceforth and forever provided a misty background to his uprooted, nomadic existence; although, like Goethe, he omitted to return for a third time to the country of his choice.

There are three different full-length accounts of the visit made to Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana in May 1900. The first, for a long time the authorized version, was concocted in a letter to a Russian friend, Sofia Schill, the day after the event. The second, which one might call apocryphal, was an incomplete poetical reminiscence, the rough draft of a letter to his fellow-pilgrim Lou, to be found in his diary under the date of 15 September 1900. It was written in Worpswede on hearing that Tolstoy was very ill. The revised version which held the field at the end of Rilke's life is an oral description given to Maurice Betz twenty-five years after the visit.¹

One would naturally expect the last account to have gained in the glamour of distance what it had lost in accuracy. The reverse is the case. The impression the whole event made on Rilke was indelible. Time could not obliterate it; on the contrary it dissolved the mists of romance in which it had been shrouded. The devotion to truth learned from Rodin helped this process as well as the penetrating shrewdness of his French listeners; so that this late version of the visit is by far the most realistic and tallies more closely than the previous ones with what is known about Tolstoy in the last years of his life.

Rilke and Lou had called on Tolstoy in Moscow during the first journey to Russia in 1899. They had been given tea; and the young poet had laid

¹ R. M. Rilke, *Briefe und Tagebücher*, 1899-1902, Leipzig, 1933, pp. 37 ff. and 308 ff. M. Betz, *Rilke vivant*, Paris, 1937, pp. 153 ff. There is also the less detailed account reproduced from Rilke's conversation by Charles Du Bos in his *Extraits d'un Journal*, 1908-28, Paris, 1931, pp. 272 ff. This more or less tallies with Betz's account, though there are some variations in detail.

a copy of his *Zwei Prager Geschichten* into Tolstoy's 'kind old hands'.¹ The visit evidently lasted until after midnight,² and part of it at least was spent listening to Tolstoy's violent injunctions not to encourage popular superstition and folly by their presence at the Easter celebrations, even then taking place. The visitors, too tactful or too much overawed to advertise their contrary intentions, nevertheless stole away to witness and take part in that solemn festival.³ Rilke, quite dazzled by Tolstoy's personality and kindness, described him deliriously as the most touching of persons, 'the eternal Russian',⁴ wrote to him twice from Germany, and sent him another of his books.⁵ But he insisted on admiring him pre-eminently as an artist, Tolstoy's own opinions to the contrary notwithstanding.⁶

The acquaintanceship was therefore a very slight one, and Rilke and Lou were in some natural doubt as to whether or not they dared venture to call on Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana whilst they were staying at Tula. They were earnestly discussing the pros and cons of this plan in the train from Moscow, when a friend of theirs (Pasternak) introduced them to a friend of his (Bulansche), who was also a family friend of the Tolstoys. From that moment there was no looking back. From that moment also Russian organization reigned supreme. There were confusing doubts as to the count's whereabouts; complicated deductions based on rumours which proved to be misleading led to the despatch of an urgent telegram which produced no answer. This was followed by a sleepless night, a hopeless dawn, a false start, frantic enquiries; a railway porter, who shed light at last; a goods train, a country cart—and the two panting pilgrims were finally delivered rather early in the morning at Tolstoy's gates and tiptoed up the avenue to the house. These exciting details were poured out breathlessly to Sofia Schill as a prelude to the authorized version of the visit, which runs as follows. A servant took in their cards, the eldest son opened the glass door, and they were face to face with 'that aged man, whom one always approaches like a son, even when one does not wish to remain in the power of his fatherhood'. There he stood, older, whiter and more fragile than the year before, 'his clear shadowless eyes pondering the strangers, testing them deliberately, and involuntarily blessing them

¹ *B.u.T.*, p. 419; to Bonz, 20 April 1899.

² Du Bos, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

³ L. Andreas-Salomé, *Rainer Maria Rilke*, Leipzig, 1929, p. 19.

⁴ *B.u.T.*, p. 12; to Hugo Salus from St Petersburg, 19 May 1899.

⁵ R. M. Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1892-1904*, Leipzig, 1939, pp. 71 f. and 75. The book was probably *Larenopfer*.

⁶ *B.u.T.*, pp. 34 f.; to Sofia Schill from Schmargendorf, 16 March 1900; about Tolstoy's *Resurrection*.

with an unutterable blessing'. The owner of these remarkable orbs recognized Lou at once and greeted her warmly; he then excused himself and retired, promising to be with his guests at two. Their anxieties allayed, they spent some time with the eldest son in the large reception-room, and then wandered through the wide, wild park for two hours. On their return the Countess Tolstoy was discovered in the vestibule arranging some books, and in no very pleasant humour. Icily inhospitable, she announced to the intruders that her husband was ill. Luckily they were able to say that they had already seen him, which cut the ground from under her feet, so that she was forced to allow them to enter, whilst she remained behind throwing the books about, and calling out angrily to some invisible person: 'And we've only just arrived!' Waiting anxiously in a little antechamber, they heard a young lady come in, accompanied by voices, violent sobbing, and the soothing tones of the old count, who then appeared before them, absent and distraught, asked them a few questions, and retired once more, whilst they wondered nervously whether they had come at an awkward moment. He was shortly back again however, and this time his whole attention was for them, and his great eyes encircled them. Words almost failed Rilke to describe what he felt when Tolstoy offered them as a glorious alternative to the family lunch, which they had been dreading but hoping for as a *pis-aller*, an hour alone with him in the beautiful park, in that landscape 'through which he had carried the heavy thoughts of his great life'. Being on a diet of white coffee, Rilke naïvely explained, the count had this hour at his disposal, and it was given as an unexpected gift into their hands. Thus, for a happy space, they walked through the abundance and beauty of that wild spring, Tolstoy picking herbs and flowers as he went, inhaling their aroma, and tossing them negligently away. He spoke in Russian, and Rilke understood every word except those which the wind carried off. So the walk was a good walk, he concluded triumphantly; the count seemed to grow in stature in the wind, his long beard waved, but his face remained tranquil, untouched by the storm. The two guests took their leave immediately on regaining the house and walked all the way back to Kolovska on foot, full of child-like gratitude and rich in the gifts his nature had bestowed on them. It had certainly been plain living and high thinking for the Tolstoys' guests that day; and there had undoubtedly been storms and scenes; but only the countess was to blame for these, not the fragile, fatherly, aged count, uplifting his soothing voice and distraught by the tantrums of his wife.

The apocryphal version is an attempt to recreate the impression made on

Rilke by the country, the park, the house, the pictures and the statues at Yasnaya Polyana, and his mood when he saw them. He kept to the fiction of a noble and harassed old man taming a shrew; but by reviving his own emotions he also reproduced such an atmosphere of loneliness and wistful waiting that one's heart aches for the two pilgrims at that most inhospitable shrine. 'At last' they found someone in the garden to take in their cards. And then they waited, and went on waiting; and a white dog came up to make friends with them as they stood hopefully outside the glass door. Rilke stooped to pat the dog, and on straightening himself suddenly beheld a pair of eyes peering out of a little old face, distorted by the flaws in the glass. The door opened and Lou slipped through, but it banged violently in Rilke's face, so that he crept in after the count had received Lou, and stood before his idol feeling rather too tall. Left alone with Tolstoy's eldest son, they went up a wooden staircase into a large bright reception-room with very little in it; so that they had time, and more than time, to examine the few portraits and statues very minutely. And then there was nothing to do but sit about and drink coffee, talking very little, gazing out of the window, listening to a bird with a 'creaking' voice, and 'finally' going out to look for it in the park. One hardly knows whom to pity most: the unwanted visitors or their deputy host, making painstaking conversation about portraits, birds and trees during the endless *séance* in the reception-room and the slow-moving walk in the park, from which they returned into the arms of the incensed countess, arranging her books, furious at the sight of them, and loudly complaining about their presence to some invisible person. An anxious half-hour among the walnut furniture in the little waiting-room now ensued. Lou and Rilke inspected the books in the glass cases and on the shelves; they tried to see the portraits; and all the time they were straining their ears to catch the sound of the count's footsteps. At last he was audible in the hall. But something had happened. Voices were raised, a girl was weeping, the count was comforting her; completely devoid of sympathy, the displeasing organ of the countess was also to be heard. This was followed by steps on the stairs, and by doors opening and shutting. Then Tolstoy entered. Coldly and politely, he put a question to Lou; but his eyes were not on either of them, although he turned towards Rilke and asked him: 'And what is your occupation?' As far as the latter remembered, he managed to reply: 'I have written one or two things.'¹ The fragment

¹ Cf. Du Bos, *op. cit.*, p. 286; in this version, Rilke represented himself, not as having been asked the question, but as dreading it; since he would have had to answer 'poetry', and would have been lost in Tolstoy's eyes.

breaks off here, leaving one with the impression of two pathetically eager and timid worshippers trying for the best part of a day to approach their idol; barely granted admittance, herded up the stairs, shooed out of doors, scolded like two children, and banished into a waiting-room. Again it was all the fault of the countess; but Tolstoy did not seem to have recognized the young poet who 'always approached him like a son'.

That the countess was not wholly or indeed even chiefly responsible for the daunting reception of Lou and Rilke at Yasnaya Polyana becomes clear in the revised version of the story as told to Maurice Betz in 1925. It was now one of those stock tales for which Rilke was so famous in his day. Many of his friends mention it. Betz heard it twice, each time with different details and Charles Du Bos once, all in the same year. Rilke was a spell-binding talker. Let him but get going in congenial society, and there was no stopping him. He could keep his audience enthralled for hours on end whilst he created or recreated for their delight some dramatic, eerie, fantastic or humorous adventure. Inexhaustible in the invention or remembrance of details, carried away himself by the fascination of the game, he yet never in all these impromptu sagas struck a single false note. It is the absence of false notes in this last edition of the Tolstoy adventure, now definitely seen to be humorous, which makes it more credible than the letter to Sofia Schill and more realistic than the reminiscence to Lou. He may have exaggerated a little and he had forgotten some of the details. The irrelevant young lady had disappeared; the countess, no longer hurling books about in the vestibule, behaved rather better, if still far from well; for if she was the villain of the piece before, her part was now cut down to leave the stage free for the count. Gone was the warm reception of the first version, vanished away the unutterable blessing in Tolstoy's eyes. Rilke acknowledged now that he hardly even pretended to recognize Lou, withdrew after a very curt greeting murmuring something indefinite about seeing them later in the day, and left them *plantés là*, until Lev Lvovitch took pity on them.¹ He was (and this at last accounts satisfactorily for his prolonged absence in both the earlier versions) in a state of the most acute exasperation when they appeared; their arrival did nothing to soothe him; and before the morning was over, he was in a towering rage. Lou and Rilke had the fearful privilege of overhearing a most violent quarrel between husband and wife when they returned from their dismal ramble in the park. They

¹ In speaking to Du Bos, Rilke claimed that Tolstoy had subjected them both to a searching cross-examination before withdrawing. I think that this is one of the 'invented' details, since his almost immediate disappearance is a constant feature in all the other versions. Cf. Du Bos, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

trembled in that little ante-room as they listened in despair to vociferations which made it clear that they ought to depart. And yet they held their ground when, during a short lull, the countess tried to turn them out. Only to hear the tempest break forth again with redoubled violence when they were left alone. The countess was sobbing, Tolstoy was shouting, doors were slammed, and the tumult, in which other persons now became involved, withdrew into the interior of the house. A sinister silence was followed by the appearance of the count to the petrified visitors. Exhausted, exasperated, with trembling hands and blank eyes, he had some difficulty in placing them, asked them a few questions at random, and vanished again without listening to the answers. Whisperings were now heard on the other side of the door; an imploring female voice, and Tolstoy's softened replies. The worst was over. Shortly afterwards their erratic host reappeared carrying a walking-stick, his eyes were quite lucid, indeed strangely piercing. 'Would you like to lunch with the others or walk with me?' he asked in a loud voice, in which impatience and irony were mingled.¹ They chose, as we know, the latter alternative, and Tolstoy strode along beside them, talking volubly and as if to himself, tearing up grasses and flowers as he went, inhaling them and flinging them down. Gradually he came to himself, but he remained an awesome figure; elemental power, force and majesty were present in everything he said. His enormous ears; his long, wild, disordered hair; his dilated nostrils, inhaling the spring with a kind of sensuality; his flowing beard; his ample prophetic gestures and his terribly acute and penetrating eyes remained forever indelibly stamped on Rilke's mind. The gentle, fragile, stooping old man of the authorized version was a counterfeit; this was the authentic Tolstoy, terrible, pitiless, majestic.²

Nous parlâmes de beaucoup de choses différentes: du paysage qui nous environnait, de la Russie, de Dieu, de la mort... Comme il parlait russe et s'exprimait avec vivacité, je ne comprenais pas toujours toutes ses paroles.³

Das Gespräch geht über viele Dinge. Aber alle Worte gehen nicht *vorn* an ihnen vorüber, an den Äußerlichkeiten, sie drängen sich hinter den Dingen im Dunkel durch. Und der tiefe Wert von jedem ist nicht seine Farbe im Licht, sondern das Gefühl, daß es aus den Dunkelheiten und Geheimnissen kommt, aus denen wir alle leben. Und jedesmal, wenn in dem Klange des Gesprächs das Nichtgemeinsame bemerkbar wurde, ging irgendwo ein Ausblick auf auf helle Hintergründe tiefer Einigkeit.⁴

These two passages, put in their inverse chronological order, show the canvas upon which the version to Sofia Schill was embroidered. It also

¹ Du Bos, *op. cit.*, p. 288, 'a violent voice'.

² *Ibid.*, p. 288.

³ Betz, *op. cit.*, p. 158; the omission marks are not mine.

⁴ *B.u.T.*, p. 41; the italics are Rilke's.

illustrates a marked characteristic of Rilke's letters which partly accounts for the difference in atmosphere of the oral and written descriptions of the visit to Tolstoy. Rarely indeed, although then with supreme effect, did Rilke write naturally, directly, simply and vividly to his friends. He preferred the abstract to the concrete, poetry to prose. The interesting (and lofty) topics of conversation were muffled up in the letter and hustled into the region of darkness and mysteries. Rilke's inadequate knowledge of Russian was camouflaged behind the supposedly esoteric nature of Tolstoy's utterances. The differences of outlook, grandiloquently transfigured into a shadowy 'something' not held in common, demanded their part of that protective colouring with which Rilke enveloped the disturbing visit to Yasnaya Polyana. He could not bring himself to acknowledge openly that the grand, terrible, almost demoniacal old man was not the benignant being whom he had dreamt of approaching like a son. The only revenge Rilke took on Tolstoy for refusing to play a paternal part was to represent himself as no longer wishing to remain under the might of Tolstoy's fatherhood. He used the word *Gewalt* which also means violence, and expressed in that one ambiguous term his shrinking horror at the sight and the sound of an elemental Russian in an elemental rage, a horror so profound that it took him twenty-five years to overcome it. There was another painful aspect of the situation which he did not care to face. He had made so little impression on Tolstoy in Moscow that the latter did not recognize him in Yasnaya Polyana. Worse still, he was probably all too well aware that, even during the walk through the park, Tolstoy was still unconscious of his personality, and had no idea that he was a poet. Shortly before his death the Russian denied that he had ever met the young man who had gone through so much to achieve that humiliating encounter. Lou and Rilke were merely a maddening interruption to an urgent succession of family scenes, which their presence probably brought to a climax. The whole *ménage* was only anxious that they should be off. Not an easy thing to acknowledge, especially when bound up with the shock of disillusion and the pain of blighted hopes. There is therefore at least as much sensitiveness as magnanimity in Rilke's reticence about the cruelly negligent fashion in which he and Lou were treated by the sublime old man, whose horror and weariness of such visitors could not be controlled that day.

As was but to be expected, Rilke regaled his friends with glowing accounts of Russia and Tolstoy when he got back to Germany. He mentioned such descriptions several times in his diary, and everyone who

knew Rilke at all well knew about the visit to Yasnaya Polyana both then and during the rest of his life. But the allusions to Tolstoy in the published correspondence are scarce, particularly to his books. Rilke read *What is Art?* some time before going to Russia, and deprecated it greatly. He also read *The Cossacks* in Russian, *Resurrection* in German, the latter in 1900, and began *War and Peace* in Russian in April of the same year, that is to say before the visit to Yasnaya Polyana. He may or may not have finished it; he never referred to it again. In July 1904 he said that he was spelling out Tolstoy's essay on war in Swedish (he was then in Sweden); and that it impressed him as 'touching, great and helpless; full of the obvious; but the obvious has never yet convinced the masses, their supporters or their leaders'.¹

The next time that Tolstoy's name was mentioned in Rilke's letters was on the occasion of the Russian's sensational death, when Rilke, who was on the eve of a voyage to Africa, wrote to his wife that he could think of nothing but this tragedy. He had been rather wilfully unreal about Tolstoy in 1900 to hide his disappointment, and also because he was then too young and immature to understand the full significance of that gigantic genius. Realization was now coming to him gradually, and with it a fuller comprehension of the irreconcilable difference between them. The short but pregnant passage in the letter to his wife shows an intellectual grasp of Tolstoy's destiny which was beyond him in 1900. He spoke of his ambitious attitude to truth; and of the way he had forced life time and again to be the barometer of his soul; adding that the colossal pressure thus induced had driven the fluid column of his actions far beyond the scale of conscience, where no readings could be taken.²

The same note of great admiration and dispassionate comprehension was struck again in 1913 about the publication of Tolstoy's correspondence with the Countess Alexandrina Solstaya:

...die Gestalt Tolstois ergibt sich aus diesen Blättern unmittelbarer, rührender, als ich sie je einsah; was die persönliche Berührung mit ihm vermittelte, sein Nichtanderskönnen, sein Im-Recht-Sein hinter allem Irrtum, dies alles, was mich damals so völlig ergriff, strömt von diesen Seiten, mit der natürlichen Wärme des mühevoll und freudig Lebendigen, unüberhitzt, auf einen über...³

And again, even more emphatically in 1914, of the same book and to the same friend:

Ist der Gerechte, wie ich es verstehe, dieser fast voreilig ans Hiesige verbrauchte Heilige, so könnte Tolstoi als besonders deutliches Beispiel einer solchen Erscheinung

¹ R. M. Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-6*, Leipzig, 1930, p. 203; letter to Clara Rilke from Sweden.

² R. M. Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren, 1907-14*, Leipzig, 1933, p. 115; letter to Clara Rilke in 1910 from Paris.

³ *B.* 1907-14, p. 299; to Eva Cassirer from Munich in 1913.

gelten—und doch: stand man ihm gegenüber (ich sah ihn in viel Ruhe 1899 in Moskau, das Jahr darauf an einem unvergeßlichen Frühlingstag auf seinem Gute¹), stand man ihm gegenüber—: ich zweifle, ob ich es vermag, Ihnen hinreichend zu versichern, wie sehr dann aus seinem Wesen heraus das andere überwog, das reine, das engelische Rechthaben, das der Zeit nicht achtet und durch sie durch hinüberstrahlt, sie ein für allemal überholend.¹

This handsome tribute to Tolstoy's extraordinary personality pales beside the fine description of him as the poet of death to be found in that famous letter about God and death written during the last war. Rilke had obviously been reading Tolstoy at the time, as the passage (which is too long to quote in full) shows. The conclusion seems to combine memories of Toledo and El Greco's pictures with the remoter recollection of a strange spring walk in formidable company:

Dieser Mensch hat an sich und an anderen viele Arten von Todesangst beobachtet, denn auch noch seiner eigenen Furcht Beobachter zu sein, war ihm durch seine natürliche Fassung gegeben, und sein Verhältnis zum Tode wird bis zuletzt eine großartig durchdrungene Angst gewesen sein, eine Fuge von Angst gleichsam, ein riesiger Bau, ein Angst-turm mit Gängen und Treppen und geländerlosen Vorsprüngen und Abstürzen nach allen Seiten — nur, daß die Kraft, mit der er auch noch den Aufwand seiner Angst erfuhr und zugab, im letzten Augenblick, vielleicht, wer weiß es, in unnahbare Wirklichkeit umschlug, plötzlich dieses Turmes sicherer Boden, Landschaft und Himmel war und der Wind und ein Flug Vögel um ihn —.²

This was not the last word however. On 26 February 1924, two years before his death, in answer to a question about writers who had influenced him, Rilke did full and meticulous justice to Russia and his Russian journeys, enumerating Turgenev, Pushkin, Lermontov, Nekrasov and Fyot as writers of personal importance to him, but saying nothing about Tolstoy. Later in the year, approached with a definite *questionnaire* by Hermann Pongs, he rather emphatically denied that Tolstoy had influenced him at all, beyond confirming his emotional discovery of Russia. It was the literal truth; although when he went on to say that Tolstoy had embodied for him in 1900 the tragic destiny of one who had totally misunderstood his task in life, this was a retrospective conception of the man whose gigantic stature and problematical nature were revealed to Rilke gradually with the passing of the years. And alas, there was a sting in the tail of one of those endless sentences which wind their serpentine way through so many of Rilke's letters:

Die Begegnung mit Tolstoi (dessen moralische und religiöse Naivitäten keinerlei Anziehung auf mich ausübten, — kurz vor meiner zweiten Reise hatte ich die schmäbliche und törichte Broschüre 'Was ist Kunst?' zu allem Überfluß in die Hände bekommen) bestärkte so in mir genau das Gegenteil von dem, worauf er es bei seinen Besuchern mochte angelegt haben: unendlich entfernt, seiner willkürlichen Absage recht zu geben, hatte ich, bis in sein unwillkürlichstes Benehmen hinein, den Künstler die heimliche Oberhand behalten sehen, und gerade angesichts seines von Weigerungen

¹ B. 1907-14, p. 326; to Eva Cassirer from Paris in 1914.

² R. M. Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1914-21*, Leipzig, 1937, p. 93; to L.H. from Munich in November 1915.

erfüllten Lebens, steigerte sich in meinem Innern die Vorstellung von dem Rechthaben der künstlerischen Eingebung und Leistung; von ihrer Macht und Gesetzlichkeit; von der schweren Herrlichkeit, zu dergleichen berufen zu sein.¹

It was certainly a manifestation of the artistic temperament at its most unbridled which had made the day at Yasnaya Polyana forever unforgettable to Rilke, but where had the reverence vanished with which the young man had so tremulously regarded it? And where had the mystical consciousness gone of that deep concord between Tolstoy and himself in spite of those things 'not shared in common'? The whole passage bears the stamp of long-delayed resentment, which is particularly striking since there is no other sign of this emotion in Rilke's spoken and written comments on Tolstoy. This sharp little stab of spite is almost Heinesque, and would surprise no one if it had come from him. For amongst the many failings of that desperately vulnerable character, Heine's malignancy as a foe, his merciless repayment of the slightest score, stand out starkly. Whereas Rilke's apparent meekness, his incapacity to feel anger under whatever provocation, have been stressed and interpreted both favourably and unfavourably to the poet time and again. There is however proof in his letters and in his works that this mildness was misleading. He certainly rarely showed anger; but he was capable of harbouring bitter grudges over a very long number of years. The attack on Tolstoy is not an isolated instance of this capacity. Nevertheless, in so gentle a nature it is hardly more surprising than the softened feelings later expressed about Goethe by the notoriously vindictive Heine.

Both poets had undergone the unnerving experience of meeting the supreme genius of their times and of being found wanting in that inexorable balance. Both had been treated arrogantly, and neither had made the slightest impression on their chosen deities, who ignored their offerings of first fruits, and remained indifferent to their presence. Heine was too clear-sighted not to realize what had happened. He resented it bitterly. Rilke refused to acknowledge the truth, and continued to swing the censer. Completer understanding came to both of them gradually, easing the hurt pride of the one by illuminating the nature of Olympianism, vexing the mind of the other by stressing the unresolved discord between the spirit of life and art. The vision of Olympianism remained one of Heine's greatest experiences and inspired some of his finest pages. The revelation of the tormented soul of Tolstoy bore no poetical fruit.

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¹ Letter to H. Pongs in *Dichtung und Volkstum*, Stuttgart, 1936; dated from Muzot 21 October 1924.