

INTRODUCTION TO W. VON POLENZ'S " DER BÜTTNERBAUER"

by Leo Tolstoy

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Last year an acquaintance of mine, in whose taste I have confidence, gave me a German novel, Von Polenz's *Der Büttnerbauer*, to read. I read it, and I was surprised to find that this production, which appeared about two years ago, was almost unknown to people.

This novel is not one of those imitations of artistic productions which are in our time produced in such enormous quantities, but a real artistic production. This novel does not belong to those descriptions of events and persons, which present no interest whatever and which are artificially connected among themselves for no other reason than that the author, having learned how to handle the technique of artistic descriptions, wishes to write a new novel ; nor to those dissertations on a given theme, which, clothed in the form of a drama or a novel, also pass in our time among the reading public for artistic productions; nor to those productions, called decadent, which particularly please the modern public for the very reason that, resembling the raving of a maniac, they are something of the nature of rebuses, the guessing of which forms a pleasant occupation and at the same time is considered to be a sign of refinement.

This novel does not belong to any of these, but is a really artistic production, in which the author tells what he must tell, because he loves that of which he tells, and does not speak with reflections, with hazy allegories, but by the simple means with which artistic contents can be rendered, by poetic pictures, – not fantastic, unusual, incomprehensible pictures, which are united without any inner necessity, but by the representation of the most ordinary, simple persons and events, which are united among themselves by an inner artistic necessity.

This novel is not merely a real artistic production ; it is also a beautiful artistic production, uniting in the highest degree all the three important conditions of a really good production of art.

In the first place, its contents are important, in that they deal with the life of the peasantry, that is, the majority of men, who stand at the basis of every social structure and who in our time are passing, not only in Germany, but also in all the other European countries, through a grave change of their ancient structure of centuries. (It is remarkable that almost simultaneously with the *Büttnerbauer* there has appeared a French novel, René Bazin's *La Terre Qui Meurt*, which deals with the same subject ; it is quite good, though less artistic than the *Büttnerbauer*.)

In the second place, this novel is written with great mastery, in a beautiful German, which is particularly powerful, when the author makes his characters speak in the coarse, manly Plattdeutsch of the labouring classes.

And, in the third place, this novel is all permeated with love for those men whom the author lets act.

In one of the chapters, for example, we have a description of a man who, after a night passed in drunkenness with his companions, early in the morning returns home and knocks at the door. His wife looks out of the window and recognizes him ; she showers him with curses and is intentionally slow in letting him in. When, at last, she opens the door for him, he rolls into the house and wants to go to the large living-room, but his wife does not allow him to go there, lest the children should see their drunken father, and she pushes him back. But he takes hold of the door-posts, and struggles with her. Though he is usually a peaceable man, he now suddenly gets irritated (the cause of the irritation is this, that on the previous day she took the money given to him by some gentlemen out of his pocket and hid it), and in his madness throws himself upon her and, seizing her by her hair, demands his money.

" I will not give it to you, never ! " she replies to his demands, trying to free herself from him.

" I'll die, but I won't give it to you ! " she says.

" You will!" he yells, knocking her off her feet. He falls upon her, and continues to demand his money.

Receiving no answer, he in his drunken fit of anger wants to strangle her. But the sight of blood which runs down her brow and nose from underneath her hair arrests him : he feels terribly at what he has done, and he stops beating her and, tottering, reaches his bed, where he falls down.

The scene is true and terrible. But the author loves his heroes and adds one small detail, which suddenly illumines everything with such a bright ray of light that he makes the reader not only pity, but even love these men, in spite of all their coarseness and cruelty. The beaten wife comes to her senses, gets up from the floor, wipes her bloody head with the lower part of her skirt, feels her limbs, and, opening the door to the room in which are her crying children, quiets them, and then seeks her husband with her eyes. He is lying on his bed just as he fell down upon it, but his head is hanging down from the head of the bed and is filling with blood. His wife walks over to him, carefully raises his head, and puts it on the pillow, and only then adjusts her clothes and detaches a handful of hair which has been pulled out.

Dozens of pages of discussions will not tell everything that is told by this detail. Here the consciousness, educated by tradition, of conjugal duty, and the triumph of the set determination not to give

up the money, which not she, but the family needs, are at once revealed to the reader ; here also we have the offence, and the forgiveness for the beating, and pity, and, if not love, at least the recollection of the love for the husband, the father of her children. But that is not all. Such a detail, by throwing a light on the inner life of this woman and this man, at the same time illuminates for the reader the inner life of millions of such husbands and wives, of those who have lived before and who live now ; it not only inspires respect and love for these people who are crushed by work, but also makes us stop and wonder why it is that these physically and spiritually strong people, with such possibilities of a good life of love, are so neglected, so crushed, and so ignorant.

Such truly artistic features, which are revealed only through the love of the author for what he writes about, may be found in every chapter of the novel.

. This novel is unquestionably a beautiful production of art, as all those who read it will agree. And yet this novel appeared three years ago, and, though it was translated in Russia in the M'ssmyer of Europe, it has passed unnoticed, both in Russia and in Germany. I have lately asked several literary Germans whom I have met about this novel, – they had heard Polenz's name, but had not read his novel, though they had all read Zola's last novels, and Kipling's stories, and Ibsen's dramas, and D'Annunzio, and even Maeterlinck.

About twenty years ago Matthew Arnold wrote a beautiful article on the purpose of criticism. According to his opinion, it is the purpose of criticism to find what is most important and good in any book whatever, wherever and whenever written, and to direct the reader's attention to what is important and good in them.

Such a criticism not only seems to me indispensable in our time, when people are deluged with newspapers, periodicals, and books, and when advertising has been so widely developed, but on whether such criticism will make its appearance and will gain authority does the whole future of the enlightenment of the whole cultured class of our European world depend.

The overproduction of any article is harmful ; but the overproduction of articles which do not form an end, but a means, when people regard this means as an end, is particularly harmful.

Horses and carriages, as means of transportation, garments and houses, as means of protection against the changes of weather, good food, as a means for the preservation of the strength of the organism, are very useful.

But the moment men begin to look upon possession of the means as an end, considering it good to have as many horses, houses, garments, and articles of food as possible, these articles become, not only useless, but absolutely harmful. This fate befell printing also in the well-to-do circle of men of our European society. Printing, which is unquestionably useful for the vast masses of the little

educated, has in the midst of the well-to-do people for a long time served as the chief instrument for the diffusion of ignorance, and not of enlightenment.

It is very easy to become convinced of this. Books, periodicals, especially the newspapers, have in our time become great financial undertakings, for the success of which the largest possible number of purchasers are needed. Now the interests and tastes of the largest possible number of purchasers are always low and vulgar, and so, for the success of the productions of the press, it is necessary that the productions should respond to the demands of the great majority of the purchasers, that is, that they should touch upon the low interests and correspond to the vulgar tastes. The press fully satisfies these demands, which it is quite able to do, since among the number of workers for the press there are many more people with the same low interests and vulgar tastes as the public, than men with high interests and a refined taste. And since, with the diffusion of printing and the commercial methods used with periodicals, newspapers, and books, these people receive good pay for their productions, which supply the demands of the masses, there results that terrible, ever growing and growing deluge of printed paper, which by its mass alone, to say nothing of the harm of its contents, forms a vast obstacle to enlightenment.

If in our time a bright man from among the masses, who wants to educate himself, have access to all books, periodicals, and newspapers, and be allowed to choose his own reading, all the chances are that in the course of ten years, reading assiduously every day, he will be reading nothing but foolish and immoral books. It is as unlikely that he will strike a good book as it would be to find a marked pea in a bushel of peas. The worst thing about it is this, that reading nothing but poor works, he will more and more corrupt his understanding and taste. Thus, if he does strike upon some good work, he will either not understand it at all or will understand it perversely.

Besides, thanks to accident or to masterly advertising, certain poor productions, like Hall Caine's *The Christian*, a novel which is false in contents and not at all artistic, and of which a million copies were sold, obtain, like *Odol* and *Pear's Soap*, great popularity, which is not justified by their merits. This great popularity makes an ever increasing number of men read these books, and the fame of an insignificant and frequently harmful book keeps growing and growing like a snowball, and in the heads of the vast majority of men, again like a snowball, there is formed a greater and ever greater confusion of ideas, and an absolute inability to comprehend the value of literary productions. And so, in proportion as the newspapers, periodicals, and books – printing in general – become more and more disseminated, the level of the value of what is printed falls lower and lower, and the great mass of the so-called cultured public sinks more and more into a most hopeless, self-satisfied, and, so, incorrigible ignorance.

Within my memory, in the period of fifty years, there has taken

place this striking lowering of the taste and common sense of the reading public. This lowering may be followed out in all the branches of literature, but I will point out only the most perceptible examples, as known to me. In Russian poetry, for example, after Pushkin and Lermontov (Tyutchev is generally forgotten), the poetic fame passes at first to the doubtful poets Maykov, Polonski, Fet, then to Nekrasov, who is entirely devoid of the poetic gift, then to the artificial and prosaic versifier Aleksyéy Tolstoy, then to the monotonous, weak Nadson, then to the absolutely untalented Apukhtin, then everything becomes mixed, and there appear versifiers, and their name is legion, who do not even know what poetry is or what that which they write means or why they write.

Another striking example is that of the English prose writers : from the great Dickens we descend, at first, to George Eliot, then to Thackeray, from Thackeray to Trollope, and then begins the indifferent manufactures of a Kipling, Hall Caine, Rider Haggard, and so forth. Still more striking is this in American literature: after the great galaxy, – Emerson, Thoreau, Lowell, Whittier, and others, suddenly everything breaks off, and there appear beautiful editions with beautiful illustrations and with beautiful stories, and novels, which it is impossible to read on account of the absence of any and all contents.

In our time the ignorance of the cultured crowd has reached such a pass that all the really great thinkers, poets, prose writers, both of antiquity and of the nineteenth century, are considered obsolete, and no longer satisfy the high and refined demands of the new men ; all that they look upon either with contempt or with a condescending smile. As the last word of philosophy is in our time regarded the immoral, coarse, inflated, disconnected babbling of Nietzsche ; the senseless, artificial conglomeration of words of all kinds of decadent poems, which are held together by rhyme and measure, are regarded as poetry of the highest calibre ; in all the theatres they give dramas, the meaning of which is not known to any one, not even to the author, and novels which have no contents and no artistic merit are printed in editions of a million copies and are distributed under the guise of artistic productions.

" What shall I read, in order to complete my education ? " asks a young man or girl, who has finished at a higher institution of learning.

The same is asked by a literate man from the masses, who can understand what he reads and who is searching after real enlightenment.

To answer such questions it is naturally not sufficient to make a naïve attempt at interrogating prominent men as to what books they consider to be the best.

Nor is one aided by the subdivision of writers into classes, tacitly accepted by European society, of the first, second, third, fourth

order, and so forth,—of geniuses, very talented, talented, and simply good writers. Such a subdivision does not help us in a true comprehension of the merits of literature and in the discovery of what is good amidst a sea of what is bad, and even bothers us in it. To say nothing of the fact that such a division into classes is very frequently incorrect and maintains itself only because it was made long ago and is accepted by all, such a division is harmful, because very mediocre things will be found among the authors considered first class, while most excellent things may be found in the authors of the last division. Thus a man who will believe in the division of the authors into classes, and that in a first-class author everything is beautiful, and in the authors of a lower class or in those who are entirely unknown everything is weak, will only get mixed up in his comprehension and will lose much which is truly useful and truly enlightening.

Nothing but the true criticism can answer the most important question of our time of the youth of the cultured class, in search of culture, or of the men of the masses, in search of enlightenment. Not the criticism which now exists and which sets itself the task of lauding productions that have gained popularity and of discovering justificatory or hazy philosophico-æsthetic theories for these productions, nor the criticism which busies itself with more or less wittily ridiculing poor productions or the works from a hostile camp, and still less the criticism which has flourished in our country and which sets itself the task from the types represented in a few authors to determine the direction of the motion of all society, or in general, à propos of the literary productions, to express their economic and political ideas.

The answer to this vastly important question as to what we shall read out of the mass that is written can be given only by the true criticism, the one which, as Matthew Arnold says, will make it its aim to bring to the front and point out to men everything which is best, both in past and in present writers.

On this, whether such a criticism will appear or not, an unselfish criticism, belonging to no party, understanding and loving art, and whether its authority will be established with sufficient firmness to overcome the financial advertisements, does in my opinion depend the solution of the question as to whether the last rays of enlightenment in our so-called cultured European society will perish, without extending to the masses, or whether the enlightenment will be regenerated, as it was regenerated in the Middle Ages, and whether it will extend to the majority of the masses, who now are deprived of all enlightenment.

The ignorance of the public as to the beautiful novel of Polenz, as well as to many other good productions, which are drowned in a sea of printed trash, while senseless, trilling, and simply nasty productions of literature are discussed on all sides, invariably praised and disseminated in millions of copies, has evoked these thoughts in me, and I seize upon the opportunity, which will hardly present itself again to me, to express them, if only briefly.