

M. GORKY



LITERARY
PORTRAITS

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

LIBRARY OF SELECTED SOVIET LITERATURE

M. GORKY

LITERARY PORTRAITS



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

LIBRARY

1961

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

М. ГОРЬКИЙ



ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫЕ
ПОРТРЕТЫ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ

Москва

M. GORKY

LITERARY
PORTRAITS

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY

IVY LITVINOV

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
LEV TOLSTOI	9
SOPHIA TOLSTAYA	103
ANTON CHEKHOV	134
VLADIMIR KOROLENKO AND HIS TIMES . .	169
VLADIMIR KOROLENKO	220
MIKHAIL KOTSUBINSKY	257
NIKOLAI GARIN-MIKHAILOVSKY	271
MIKHAIL PRISHVIN	300

LEV TOLSTOI

This book is composed of random notes made by me when living in Oleiz. Lev Tolstoi then being in Gaspra, at first seriously ill, later recuperating from his illness. I considered these notes, jotted down carelessly on all sorts of scraps of paper, as lost, but lately discovered some of them. I have included also an unfinished letter written by me under the impression of Tolstoi's "departure" from Yasnaya Polyana, and his death. I give the letter exactly as it was written, without altering a word. And I have not finished it, for I cannot....

NOTES

1

CLEARLY THE IDEA that destroys his peace of mind more frequently than any other, is the idea of God. Sometimes this seems to be not an idea, but a tense resistance to something

by which he feels he is dominated. He does not speak about it as much as he would like to, but thinks about it continually. I don't think this is a sign of age, or due to a presentiment of death, more likely it comes from a fine human pride. A little from a sense of injury, too, perhaps—that he, Lev Tolstoi, must shamefully submit to the will of some streptococcus. If he were a naturalist, he would undoubtedly have created brilliant hypotheses, made great discoveries.

2

His hands are marvellous—ugly, disfigured by swollen veins, and yet extraordinarily expressive, full of creative force. Probably Leonardo da Vinci had hands like that. Anything could be done by such hands. Sometimes, when talking, he moves his fingers, gradually flexing and unflexing them, while uttering some splendid weighty word. He is like a god, not a Sabaoth, or a god from Olympus, but like some Russian god, “seated on a throne of maple wood, beneath a golden lime-tree,” and though he may not be so very majestic, perhaps he is more cunning than all the other gods together.

He has an almost feminine tenderness for Sulerzhitsky. For Chekhov he has a paternal affection, the pride of the creator may be felt in this love, but his feeling for Suler is tenderness, unceasing interest, and an admiration which never seems to weary the wizard. There may be something a little absurd in this feeling, like the love of an old maid for her parrot, her pug, or her puss. Suler is like some wondrous free bird from a strange, unknown land. A hundred such people as he would be capable of changing the face and the soul of some provincial town. Its face they would shatter, its soul they would imbue with a passion for restless, defiant genius. It is easy and pleasant to love Suler, and when I see how women neglect him, I am astonished and furious. But perhaps there is cleverly concealed caution beneath this neglect. There is no depending on Suler. What will he be up to tomorrow? Perhaps he'll throw a bomb, or join a choir of tavern singers. There is enough energy in him for three eras. He has so much of the fire of life in him that he seems to sweat sparks, like a red-hot iron.

But once he was very angry with Suler—Leopold (Sulerzhitsky), always inclined to anarchy, was fond of arguing hotly about the freedom of the individual, and L. N. (Tolstoi) always made fun of him when he did this.

I remember Sulerzhitsky once got hold of a slender pamphlet by Prince Kropotkin and, roused to enthusiasm by it, held forth the whole day to all and sundry on the wisdom of anarchy, philosophizing in the most excruciating manner.

"Oh, stop it, Lyovushka, I'm tired of it!" said L. N. crossly. "You're like a parrot repeating the one word—freedom, freedom, and what does it really mean? Supposing you were to get freedom in your sense of the word, as you conceive it—what would be the result? Philosophically speaking—a bottomless void, while in life, in practice, you would become an idler, a mendicant.

"If you were free according to your conception, what would there be to bind you to life, to human beings? Look—the birds are free, but they build nests. You would not go in for building a nest, you would just satisfy your sexual instincts wherever you found yourself, like a tom-cat. Only think seriously for a moment and you will see, you will feel, that in the ultimate

sense of the word freedom is a void, a vacuum, mere formless space."

Knitting his brows angrily, he paused for a moment and added more gently:

"Christ was free, and so was Buddha, and they both took on themselves the sins of the world, voluntarily entered the prison of earthly life. And nobody has ever gone further than that—nobody! You and I—what have we done? We all seek freedom from our duty to our neighbour, although it is precisely this sense of duty which has made human beings of us, and but for this sense of duty we should live like the animals. . . ."

He chuckled.

"And yet we are now arguing about how to live nobly. Not much comes from this, but at the same time not a little. Look! You argue with me till you are black in the face, but you don't strike me, you don't even swear at me. If you really felt yourself to be free, you would slaughter me—that's all."

And after another pause, he added:

"Freedom—that would mean that everything and everyone agreed with me, but then I would no longer exist, for we are only conscious of ourselves in conflict and opposition."

Goldenweiser played Chopin, drawing the following thoughts from Lev Nikolayevich:

"Some German princeling said: 'If you would have slaves, you must compose as much music as possible.' This is a just reflection, a faithful observation—music dulls the mind. No one understands this so well as the Catholics—our spiritual fathers could never reconcile themselves to Mendelssohn in the church, of course. A Tula priest assured me that Christ himself was not a Jew, although he was the son of a Hebrew god and his mother was a Hebrew woman. He admitted this, but nevertheless declared: 'It is impossible.' 'What then?' I asked him. He shrugged his shoulders and said: 'This is a mystery to me.'"

"If anyone was an intellectual, it was Prince Vladimirkko of Galich. As long ago as the 12th century he was daring enough to say: 'The time for miracles has passed.' Since then six hundred years have elapsed, and the intellectuals keep on assuring one another: 'There are no miracles.' But the people believe in miracles just as they used to in the 12th century."

"The minority need God because they have everything else, the majority, because they have nothing."

Or rather I would say: the majority believe in God out of cowardice, and only the few from fulness of soul.*

"Do you like Hans Andersen's fairy tales?" he asked thoughtfully. "I did not understand them when they were published in Marko Vovchok's translation, but ten years later I picked up the book and read them again, and suddenly I realized quite clearly that Hans Andersen was a lonely man. Very lonely. I know nothing about his life. He was a confirmed rake and wanderer, I believe, but that only strengthens my conviction that he was a lonely man. And therefore he turned to the children, believing (but this was an error) that children have more compassion for others than grown-ups have. Children pity no one, they don't know what pity means."

* To avoid misinterpretation I would state that I regard religious writings as purely literary; the lives of Buddha, Christ, Mahomet, as imaginative fiction.

He advised me to read the Buddhist Catechism. There is always something sentimental in the way he talks about Christ and Buddhism—there is neither enthusiasm nor pathos in his words, not a single spark of the heart's fire. I think he considers Christ naive, worthy of pity, and though he admires him in some ways, it is unlikely that he loves him. And he seems to be afraid that if Christ were to come to a Russian village the girls would laugh at him.

Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich, who seems to be a clever man, was there today. His bearing is modest, and he does not say much. He has nice eyes and a good figure. His gestures are restrained. L. N. smiled at him, talking sometimes in French, sometimes in English. In Russian he said:

“Karamzin wrote for the tsar, Solovyov wrote lengthily and tediously, and Klyuchevsky wrote for his own pleasure. He was a deep one; at first you think he is praising, but when you look deeper, you realize he is cursing.”

Someone mentioned Zabelin.