

# Lombroso and Tolstoy

An anthropologist's unwitting gift to literature.

Paolo Mazzarello

More than 7,000 participants attended the twelfth International Medical Congress of Moscow in August 1897. Among the prominent scientists there was Italian anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, who presided over a session dedicated to mental illness.

Lombroso was world famous for his theory that genius was closely linked with madness. According to him, genius and madness were two faces of the same psychobiological reality — as in a non-Euclidean space in which the two extremes touch. A man of genius was a degenerate, an example of retrograde evolution, in whom madness was a form of biological compensation for excessive intellectual development.

This regression, the theory stated, produced its own phenotypic stigmata, such as the cranial asymmetry of Pericles, Kant and Dante; the sub-microcephaly of Descartes; the small stature of Horace, Plato and Epicurus. According to Lombroso, the thirteenth-century scholar and patron saint of natural scientists, Albert the Great, “was of such small stature that as he kissed the Pope’s foot, the Pontiff ordered him to stand up, thinking he was on his knees”<sup>1</sup>.

Lombroso’s participation in the Moscow Congress inspired him to test his theory about the pathology of genius. Why not meet Leo Tolstoy, the supreme genius of world literature, in his natural habitat, to scrutinize his features and confirm his theories by seeing Tolstoy’s degenerative aspects with his own eyes? Like a naturalist embarking on a tour of South America to test his evolutionary theories, Lombroso decided to take himself to Tolstoy’s home, known as Yasnaya Polyana. For Lombroso the writer represented the “true disguised genius of alienation ... in whom, one might say, the sicker the body, the more sublime the [intellectual] products”. He imagined Tolstoy would be “cretinous and degenerate-looking”<sup>1</sup>.

On arriving at Tolstoy’s house, Lombroso found himself face to face with a soldierly-

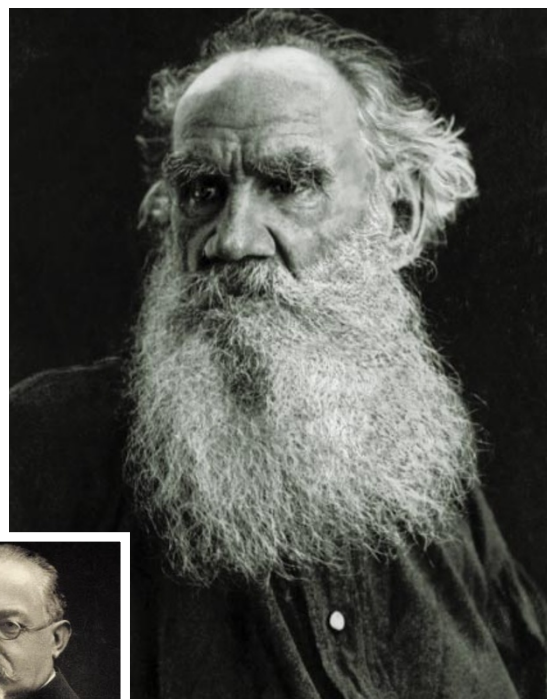
**T**his episode produced a lasting literary mark on *Resurrection* — the last great Tolstoy novel.

looking old man, whose penetrating eyes and severe bony face seemed more like those of a good, solid peasant who had served in the army than those of a thinker. Physically there was nothing degenerate about him. His attitude was calm, correct and friendly; there was certainly method in his ‘madness’. But when the conversation took a turn that opposed Tolstoy’s ideas, Lombroso realized the “total impossibility of engaging him in debate without irritating him”<sup>2</sup>. In particular, they argued about the criminological issue closest to Lombroso’s heart: the theory of the born delinquent. According to this theory, certain types of criminals had suffered arrested development at an early stage and were therefore the most ‘atavistic’ type of human being, without hope of reform. Society has the right to defend itself from this kind of delinquent, argued Lombroso, even by means of the death penalty, just as a man defends himself from wild animals without blaming them for not having been born lambs.

Tolstoy remained deaf to these arguments. “He knitted his terrible eyebrows,” Lombroso records, and hurled menacing glances from his deep, penetrating eyes. Finally he erupted: “All this is nonsense! All punishment is criminal!” Human beings have no right to judge their fellows, Tolstoy continued, and no form of violence is admissible under any circumstances.

Lombroso could not understand this attitude, which he found eccentric: the product of a sick and violently passionate mind. Whereas on the evening of 27 August 1897, Tolstoy noted in his diary: “Lombroso came. He is an ingenuous and limited old man.” (At 61, Lombroso was seven years younger than Tolstoy.) In January 1900 he added, about Lombroso’s theories: “All this is an absolute misery of thought, of concept and of sensibility.”

Some months after this visit, Tolstoy rewrote his last great novel, *Resurrection*, which had previously only existed in draft form. In the definitive text of *Resurrection*, Tolstoy added, among other things, a detailed description of the legal process and punishments current in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century, in which Lombroso’s anthropological theories were discussed and rejected as immoral. Delinquency was not “evidence of degeneration of a delinquent



Age of reason: Lombroso (left) expected Tolstoy (above) to be “cretinous and degenerate-looking” because of his genius. Tolstoy found Lombroso “an ingenuous and limited old man”.

CORBIS

type of monstrosity, as certain obtuse scientists explained them to the government’s advantage”, he wrote. When prince Dmitry Nekhlyudov (alias Tolstoy), the main character, seeks an answer to the problem of criminal deviance in Lombroso’s books, he finds that the more he reads and the more attentive he is to Lombroso’s words, the more disappointed he becomes. During a trial the public prosecutor quotes Lombroso and the latest ‘scientific’ theories on heredity, evolution and the born delinquent, to support his case against a prostitute falsely charged with murder. “He’s going too far,” the president of the court comments to a colleague. “A very stupid fellow,” the colleague agrees.

Lombroso’s visit to Tolstoy was a failure on the intellectual plane. The genius and the madness of the two men had not been able to come into contact because they were too divergent to find a point of mutual understanding. However, this ‘scientific’ episode produced a lasting literary mark on *Resurrection* — the last great Tolstoy novel. ■

Paolo Mazzarello is at the Volta College, University of Pavia, and at the IGBE-CNR, Via Abbiategrasso 207, 27100 Pavia, Italy. His account of Lombroso and Tolstoy, *Il genio e l’alienista* (Bibliopolis, Naples, 1998), is soon to be translated into English by David Mendel.

1. Lombroso, C. *L’uomo di genio* (Bocca, Torino, 1894).

2. Lombroso, C. in *Tolstoj nelle memorie dei contemporanei* (ed. Opul’skaya, L.) 185–189 (Raduga, Moscow, 1984).