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Tolstoy's Esthetics and

The Modern Idiom in Art

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TOLSTOY'S ESTHETICS AND THE MODERN IDIOM IN ART

I

Lev Tolstoy, the reluctant genius and peasant aristocrat of Jasnaja Poljana, the artist and moralist with a great epic mind and, as the modern Russian poet Marina Cvetaeva once said, "small angry eyes," eventually excluded most of the modern Western literary heritage, with all its ancient roots and all its sophistication and refined esthetic sensibilities, from his understanding of what belongs to the nature and function of art.¹ The essay "What Is Art?," which articulates Tolstoy's ultimate position on these matters, expresses clear preference for the "cri de coeur" that he heard in the spontaneous, untutored art of "the working masses" and for a similar simple-minded emotional intensity in the work of popular writers pleading for universal love. Tolstoy's attitude certainly seems paradoxical, strangely limited when we think of it in the context of his own works representing entire universes of tremendous depth and scope unfolded before us with a skill and sophistication, and awareness of literary tradition that very few can hope to attain.

Those of us who, unlike Tolstoy, can appreciate both Baudelaire and "Uncle Tom's Cabin," Russian village songs and Wagner,² might in the comfort of our own wisdom look down upon Tolstoy for not being as broad-minded and generous as we are. But since it is Tolstoy's talent and wisdom, not ours, at issue here, it might serve us well to give some thought to his judg-

ments, particularly in view of their paradoxical nature. The present essay is, first of all, an attempt to describe some of Tolstoy's premises concerning art which, with Tolstoy, also inevitably involve the very nature of our civilization, and secondly, it is an inquiring look at some of the qualities of Tolstoy's own art which may help understand his aversion to the modernism of his day in literature and the arts.

Turning now to Tolstoy's premises, in order to think along with him we must here use the term "modern" to coincide with what some call the "New Era" in human history, beginning with the Renaissance. At that time, according to Tolstoy's reasoning in the essay, humanity underwent something like a rite of passage from sacral to secular systems of values, and so it was "born again" into a world without God, or, more precisely, without faith. Images of God without faith produced profane art with religious subject matter but without religious consciousness. This art then continued to spread through the centuries like an enormous amoeba, engulfing and perverting time, space and civilization until the present day.³ Now, after many surface changes which did not affect the godless void inside, the Renaissance tradition has developed into a way of life, and contemporary art fulfills the same function as art did when Renaissance began, namely, to be a means by which the ruling classes can maintain themselves in power.⁴

The very breadth and catholicity of Tolstoy's opposition to modern art distinguishes him from mere narrow-minded traditionalists of some particular creed, conservatives resentful of

change and of intellectual challenge. Here we have something else -- a kind of estrangement on an epic scale, when all the established conventions of thinking about art, all the rules of the game are rejected, as if forgotten, and the entire issue appears in a totally different light.² Tolstoy's essay on art communicates a sense of astonishment at the worthlessness of most of the conventional ideas in esthetics and also a sense of astonished understanding how really simple everything is when seen from the perspective of a deep and compelling feeling which, in true art, embraces both the artist and his audience.

This feeling underlies the entire essay "What Is Art?" and it communicates itself to us from every line. The full intensity of Tolstoy's commitment to the views on art expressed there becomes really striking when we realize that, although written late in his life, in 1898, and even after after some radical changes in his world outlook, the essay nevertheless summarizes what Tolstoy had said or thought about art since he first raised the issue in his youthful diaries. This makes the essay a reliable prism through which to view the full spectrum of Tolstoy's ideas. These ideas, as articulated in "What Is Art?," do not exactly represent a systematic theory of esthetics, if by that we mean a set of propositions derived from verified hypotheses. Instead, the essay, in spite of its appearance as a reasoned argument, reads more like a confession of emotionally held convictions, and it invites the language of imagery, along with that of scholarship, to describe it. One might say, we see the swelling of a tide -- ideas and emotions which have gathered

strength during long years of troubled encounters with a restless conscience, now cannot not be held back any longer; they demand to be stated with a force that simply sweeps aside any just or unjust objections by specialists on esthetics, scholarly minds grown either large or small by virtue of their own conventional rationality.

At the same time, the pattern of ideas in Tolstoy's essay, in spite of its many internal contradictions and occasional argumentative irrelevancies, does constitute a highly unified structure where almost every statement repeatedly reaffirms and illuminates every other from multiple new perspectives. Among such perspectives we find not only revised intellectual perceptions of esthetics, or unconventional attitudes to modern works of art by such authors as Baudelaire, Verlaine, Maeterlinck and others, but also moments in Tolstoy's personal life relevant to the esthetic experience: an opera rehearsal, or a peasant song to greet his daughter's birthday, or again a story about the deer-hunting rituals of a Vogul tribe in Siberia.⁴ It is exactly in this interrelationship between the intellectual and personal dimensions that thought in Tolstoy becomes feeling and feeling becomes life. We begin to grasp that the essay, just like the fiction, is in reality about Tolstoy and not about anything else; that it is an intense and powerful statement of self-realization.

The main lines of argument in the essay may be conceived in terms of three broad aspects of this one basic conceptual and emotional thrust: the aspect of feeling, of idea, and of time, or history.

The definition of art offered by Tolstoy is based altogether on the notion of feeling:

Art is a human activity consisting in this that one person consciously and by means of certain outward signs transmits to others the feelings which he has experienced, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them.⁷

Thus defined as feeling, art, in relation to science, is considered as one of these two basic modes of human activity through which we can know ourselves and our place in the universe. If so, then art is not a mere ornament, but a vital function of life. In order to be such a function, art must communicate immediately, totally and universally. It must therefore be simple. Complex encodings which involve special knowledge and are tied to some artistic tradition lack the necessary universality and are in effect not art. The experience of immediate and universal communicability, moreover, is itself an emotion at least as much as it is a necessary condition for transmitting one. In Tolstoy the concepts of universal moral relevance and immediate personal communicability tend to run together and become in turn synonymous with greatness in art, which itself is a luminous and spacious clarity, containing and transcending the full range and depth of important human feelings.

In What Is Art? the importance of any given feeling is perceived from two different, though related, perspectives. One could be called "the class criterion," because Tolstoy maintains

that originality, depth and rich variety of feelings can exist only among simple people who must every day confront the challenges of nature for their survival. The idle and corrupt upper classes can only have the same old pseudo-feelings of world-weariness, pride and lust. It is precisely the poverty of feelings accessible to these upper classes which forces their servants, or clowns, the modern artists, to resort to various tricks of their trade, simulating feeling by means of hermetic structures embedded in long - standing practices of self - imitating, therefore counterfeit, art full of baubles and trinkets, and sound and fury, signifying, as Tolstoy would have it, nothing.

The other perspective opens from the belief that feeling is one of the two basic means of comprehending reality. An emotion which seeks to become knowledge must of necessity also represent an idea. And if that emotion, transmitted in art, is universal and instantly communicable, then the idea must also be universally valid and immediately clear. As we can see, this makes the art and the idea in effect synonymous. Furthermore, whatever the rich variety of feelings which true and great art can evoke, the idea itself is really only one -- religious consciousness. In his essay, Tolstoy describes religion as the legend, custom and ritual accruing around the memory of an outstanding person who, in his time and for his time, understood the meaning of life, that is, the difference between good and evil, most clearly and most universally. This understanding, then, and not the person, custom or ritual, constitutes religious consciousness. It represents the highest human achievement of each given epoch, and it alone can illuminate the meaning of art

in that epoch. It is in this sense that Tolstoy defines religious consciousness as "nothing else but the sign of a new relationship between the human being and the world, a relationship continuously in the process of creation."⁸

This notion of steadily growing light is contradicted in the essay by Tolstoy's insistence that the plain working people throughout all history have instinctively understood the meaning of universal brotherhood and that, indeed, this is the reason why they have always immediately and fully recognized all true art -- in the same way, Tolstoy says, as an animal always knows exactly where to look for food. Not only the common folk, but also the truly great minds of epochs far removed from each other, for instance Jesus Christ and Gauthama Budha, are described by Tolstoy as having proclaimed essentially the same message of universal love. Enlightenment, then, is not really a process in history, often called progress, but a quality, or a mode of being human as long as one is untouched by corruption.⁹

In such a context, the Renaissance, in Tolstoy's view, was much more than a mere interruption in the flow of developing religious consciousness. It was, rather, a unique and catastrophic event which upset the stable and permanent condition of true knowledge underlying all civilizations. This knowledge is of God as infinitely the greatest Idea and eternally the ultimate reality.

Humanity, when it replaces God, becomes nothing but an abstraction, a common denominator without substance or meaning. There simply is no Anthropos in the way that there is God, and

the center does not hold. All the meaning life can hold relates only to isolated particular individuals, but then it also loses focus as an Idea. Thus, according to Tolstoy, the Renaissance epoch began the disintegration of all universal human values.

The first to go, of course, was faith itself: having begun to doubt that all the myth, ritual and ecclesiastic structure which has accrued around the memory of Christ possesses any transcendental meaning as religion, the ruling classes of the Renaissance said in their hearts that there is no God. It was, however, politically useful to sustain the faith of fools and thus the age began to build, along with its huge cathedrals¹⁰, also the religion, ethics and esthetics of deception.

In art the instruments of deception were the corpulent graces of what we would call today "atheistic humanism," offering the apple of sensual delight. The paintings of Raphael or Titian, and the plays of Shakespeare were among the earlier offshoots of this malignant growth which then branched out through time into the music of Beethoven, and into various literary schools and trends, to blossom forth, finally, in the mystic-barbaric stupidities of Wagner and symbolism.

In all this sorry swamp, a particularly noxious weed is the theory and academic discipline of esthetics which began this meaningless cult of beauty in art. The philosophical underpinnings of it were built from the dried-out wisdom of Emmanuel Kant, who described the experience of art as "Urtheil ohne Begriff and Vergnuegen ohne Begehren". In this formula, Begriff and Begehren could be precisely the tolstoyan values, because he

too asked what art is and what does it strive for. Urtheil and Vergnuegen, on the other hand, might constitute the basis of modern esthetics in which, according to Tolstoy, we presume to judge art on the basis of beauty, while beauty becomes in effect synonymous with pleasure, and pleasure ultimately attains corruption. ¹¹

In such art, esoteric, counterfeit emotions that are bought and sold among the upper classes substitute for true feeling, pointless obscurities take the place of thought, and meaningless complexities of form, inaccessible to reason, pretend to be a means of communication. Lacking a basic idea and a universally valid definition, modern art loses all historicity and must substitute for it a continued process of self-definition in terms of its own hermetic norms and references, running perpetually around in its own vicious circle, far from the real concerns of life.

This, then is the reality of modern art as made strange by Tolstoy. It may seem even stranger that he rejected his own works along with the the rest as having nothing to contribute to the enhancement of religious consciousness.¹² The reason for this may be that worm of self-hatred which nibbles at the heart of every great moralist, but it is also possible that Tolstoy honestly perceived his works to be similar in their essentials to the counterfeit art of European civilization as it developed since the Renaissance.

This leaves us, Tolstoy's readers, with an interesting twofold challenge. On the one hand, remembering that every artis-

tic text is in some sense also its own theory of art, we may wish to check if the implicit metalanguage of Tolstoy's art about itself has points of relevance to the basic explicit statements made in his essay. On the other, it may be instructive to compare certain elements in Tolstoy's works with some of the examples of modern art which he emphatically rejected to see if there may not indeed be some important differences, either in specific techniques or in the quality of artistic imagination, which would account for Tolstoy's hostility. At this time, we will only undertake some tentative observations on that second challenge of comparison.

II

One of the persistent criticisms by Tolstoy of the French symbolist poets, such as Baudelaire, Verlaine or Maeterlinck, is that their works lack ordinary common sense. The implicit issue here is which of two alternative realities shall be chosen as a measuring frame to validate artistic language. Tolstoy bases his poetics on the illusion of actual life, achieved by the means of structuring a narrative discourse with minimal figurative deformations. The fragments of French Symbolist poetry cited by Tolstoy in the essay do not seek such an illusion at all and are in fact highly figurative not only in their metaphorical substitutions but also in that the very reality they deform is actually already a linguistic model, a compound of artistic codes developed in the ongoing tradition of art in our civilization. To take an example, one of the "Ariettes oubliées" by Verlaine

which Tolstoy quotes disapprovingly in his essay begins as follows:

Dans l'interminable
 Ennui de la plaine
 La neige incertaine
 Luit comme du sable
 Le ciel est de cuivre,
 Sans lueur aucune
 On croirait voir vivre
 Et mourir la lune.

The comparison of sand to snow rests on long-known associations in art between these two uncertain textures and the impermanence of life, the passing of time. The image of the waxing and waning moon in relation to unblinking, copper-hued sky opens possible associations with the symbolism of battle and death known in ancient literature. In the context of the entire poem, where we also find forest, mist, crows and wolves in fierce wintertime, these symbolic references may well suggest shrouded allusions to forgotten lives of heroic quest, or of warriors retreating to oblivion.¹³ Tolstoy, however, refuses to consider the text as written in the special language of artistic tradition within its own semantic field, and simply looks at it as if it were a direct attempt to convey an emotional response to actual landscapes seen in the world of nature, and calls it nonsense: "How can the moon live and die in a copper sky, and how is it that snow can shine like sand? All this is no longer merely incomprehensible, but also, under the pretext of conveying a mood, presents a collection of false comparisons and terms."¹⁴

Tolstoy, on the other hand, from the very beginning of his concern with art did not perceive that the associations issuing from literary and cultural tradition constitute a "reality" which

is to be "reproduced" by the artist; he felt, rather, that the material reality and the reality of human feelings outside the realm of literary conventions is the true concern of the artist. As early as 1853 Tolstoy noted in his diary that the true basis for a literary work is an accumulation of observations from actual life, and not other peoples' books:

The idea of writing down, on the basis of various books, one's own thoughts, observations and rules is altogether strange. It is much better to write everything down in a diary which one must attempt to keep regularly and accurately, than that it would amount for me to a literary work and for others -- some pleasant reading. At the end of each month, looking over this diary, I can select and extract from it everything that may be remarkable.¹⁵

The entire force of the creative effort is then focused upon the mystery of transforming reality from its actual mode of being into a medium consisting of words. The tension and frustration attendant to any effort to penetrate this mystery is well recorded in Tolstoy's diary in 1951:

I was relaxing behind the camp a minute ago. A marvelous night! The moon had just come up from the end the hill and shed its light on two small, thin, low

clouds; a cricket behind me was singing his unceasing, melancholy tune; a frog was heard in the distance, and near the aul dogs barked, tartars yelled; then again all would be quiet, and again all you heard was the chirping of the cricket, and the light, transparent cloud was floating past the close and the distant stars.

I thought: let me go and describe what I saw. But how do you write this down? You have to sit behind an ink-stained table, take a grey piece of paper, ink; smear your fingers and write letters on the paper. The letters will make words, the words -- phrases, but how can you transmit feeling? Isn't there some way to transfer to someone else the look in one's own eyes at the sight of nature? Description is not enough. Why is prose and poetry, happiness and misfortune bound up so closely? How is one to live?¹⁴

We may note how quickly the concern about communicating that mysterious something which constitutes both reality and feeling, immanent in both nature and man, becomes translated into a question in the moral dimension. The question "how to write" is really a question "how to live"; for Tolstoy, this is the crux of the difference between mere literature and serious art.

Verlaine suffers again for his incomprehensibility in another "Ariette" containing the lines: "Cela ressemble au cri doux/ que l'herbe agitée expire". The premise of such a metaphor is not common sense or verisimilitude, but the entire configuration of Symbolist thought around the notion of correspondances, itself an end product of a long line of images in the history of art, ranging from Ovid's Metamorphoses, with the human cry of anguish enchanted in trees and grass as the angry gods transform their human rivals, through medieval mystic symbolism implicit in the tapestries with mille fleurs which echo subtly and intricately the complex profundities of human and mythological events being portrayed, and finally, to the common romantic imagery of later time. Tolstoy will have none of all this. In his own works, the sounds made by grass are very different indeed from those in Verlaine. The readers of Anna Karenina might recall the faint crackling noise made by the grass pushing through last year's dry foliage, as Konstantin Levin hears it in his fields on a Spring-time morning.¹⁷ This is not an artistic image validated by tradition, but an actual sound in nature. The emotion which here communicates itself to the reader comes, first, from the astonished recognition of how sensitive is Tolstoy's perception, and second, from the reader's knowledge that, at this point in the novel, Levin is painfully trying to teach himself solitude while life is opening out all around him. Then we begin to see the structural function of this little detail: the faint crackle of grass is actually a voice coming, ultimately, from the moral dimension. Tolstoy has now learned that, in order to unite the reflection of reality and the meaning of the question "how to

live?," the writer needs a context, a narrative structure that frames a single experience. In the grand design of the novel, this is one of hundreds of little impressions which Tolstoy allows to accumulate in our minds, all of them growing into some sort of subliminal knowledge that Levin's solitude cannot endure, that the energy of life will overcome it and bring him and Kitty together again. When this happens, in an irresistible flood of joy,¹⁸ we have already been prepared by the author to comprehend the full depth of this inevitability.

In other words, Tolstoy works not through metaphorical deformations, as does Verlaine, but through the placement of delicately perceived facts exactly where they will link up with the most crucial events and with the most powerful emotional associations. A similar effect is achieved with the help of another small sound, this time from War and Peace: the "i piti piti i titi" of the constantly rising and falling edifice of tiny glass needles which Prince Andrey sees in his delirium after being wounded at Borodino.¹⁹ A meaningless visual and auditory hallucination, it yet symbolizes the unsubstantiality of intellectual constructs by which Andrey had tried to live, and in this sense serves as structural counterpart to the watery globe which Pierre sees in his crucial illuminating dream. The symbolic dimension of both arises from this juxtaposition and not from any metaphorical quality in the images themselves. In the literal context, Prince Andrey's cobwebs of brittle light may quite simply represent what his feverish eye can see in the reflection of dust particles in the air in the ebb and flow of flickering

light in the hut, and the sound -- just a delirious ringing in his ears. Thus one might say, perhaps, that in Tolstoy it is not the metaphor which encodes reality, but reality which contains the metaphorical meaning. Pierre's dream is thus much too coherent to be anything but a symbol, but its meaning is explained on the spot by Pierre himself, in his understanding that everything is one and everything is God.²⁰

The figurative language of art will inevitably make functional equivalents of different categories of entities, so that, say, flowers can become representations of people, or thorns of suffering, and in the end we may, for example, get such a description of the agonies of unwanted womanhood, as in Shakespeare's line about "the rose that withers on the virgin thorn". Tolstoy did not think much of Shakespeare, but he, too could not avoid using daily objects or nature as figurative equivalents to human beings or to their states of mind. There is, however, a difference of principle which may be seen, for instance, in Baudelaire's use of the metaphor of roses as a signifier of a complex cultural and artistic tradition in the poem "Duellum" which Tolstoy quotes and utterly refuses to understand, as distinguished from Tolstoy's own treatment of people and flowers as mutually equivalent modifiers without an additional cultural dimension, in the same syntactic unit. Baudelaire writes like this:

Dans le ravin hanté des chat-pards et des onces
Nos héros, s'entreignant méchamment, ont roulé,
Et leur peau fleurira l'aridité de ronces.²¹

Torn, bloody skin, thorny brambles, roses. The full effect of

this text requires our awareness of the symbolic function of thorns in the tradition of Christian imagery of faith which begins with the wreath of agony crowning the head of Christ. Suffering and holiness, linked with suffering, love and beauty, helped create the medieval mystique of knighthood, blood and roses. As Baudelaire enters this chain of images, his poetic language becomes completely literary inside the framework of the artifices and artifacts of culture which constitute multiple subtexts both for the image and for the entire poem.²² What Baudelaire offers is neither a description of reality nor the experience of any given individual, but an utterance which becomes an event in the history of culture in art.

With Tolstoy, we have a very different process. The initial figure of speech may be quite direct and simple, clear without any subtexts, but then it will go on producing widening circles of associations surrounding a crucial experience in the life of a particular person. In Anna Karenina Tolstoy says that a staircase leading to the ballroom "was decorated with lackeys and flowers".²³ Young Kitty, who is climbing this staircase, past all these lackeys looking like potted plants, is herself all dressed in fluffy white and looks just like a flower. This is the evening when, abandoned by Vronsky, she does in effect become a sort of "wallflower," because only a few anonymous young men, nobodies, practically equivalent to the lackeys on the staircase, would come to ask her to dance. Thus an image initially employed to convey the atmosphere of exciting promise for Kitty as she enters the festive hall develops in the end into a picture of

lonely dejection. This is fully consistent with the development of the plot, since the ballroom scene marks the beginning of Anna's tragic love affair and Kitty's painful liberation from her enchantment with Vronsky. All such frames of reference, however, remain strictly within the novel itself and do not enter into any of the baudelairean semantic fields, overgrown as they are with their bloody brambles. Similarly, the well-known passage in War and Peace about Prince Andrey and the oak tree in Spring does not expand toward any contexts of death and resurrection as these may have been established in literary tradition, but stays within the bounds of one individual's personal experience. The seemingly dead and dry old oak tree functions as a substitution for Prince Andrey, empty of heart and hope, on his way to Otradnoe, where he will meet Natasha. The mighty oak with its new green foliage is again Andrey, on his way back, full of love and dreams. The point, however, is that the parallel between Andrey and the oak is not an instance of pathetic fallacy, or a metaphor, or even a simile developed by Tolstoy in his role as a narrator, but rather a direct insight into the thoughts and feelings of Andrey himself, for it is he, and not the author making poetic figures, who responds in this manner to nature, saying in his mind to the tree: "you are right a thousand times".²⁴ There are some things which Andrey does not know at the time, but Tolstoy does, and these pertain to the ultimate structuring of the novel. Andrey will be both, the dead oak in his own death, and the young leaf in the life of his son, and in this sense the moment in the forest contains the hero's future.

This refusal by Tolstoy, both in his essay and in his art,

to submit to the realm of literary conventions and to substitute metaphorical associations for an unmediated link between experience and outside reality may be seen as an effort to sustain the simplicity and truth of spontaneous human feeling, the only kind that can infect others, and to avoid the intellectual dimension, because it is there that word games begin and the skills of artifice become more important than the telling of truth. To put it differently, what meaning there is in art must reside, for Tolstoy, in the quality of feeling being communicated and not in what Roman Jakobson once called the poetic function, that is, in the construction of poetic language as a message about itself. This kind of message, in the tolstoyan view, is no message at all, but rather an inherent absurdity, comparable, as Tolstoy contemptuously notes in the essay, to twirling one's legs with amazing speed on the stage, or to producing wagnerian sequences of musical motifs, or compiling aggregates of words to surround and obscure any kernel of common sense. It is nowhere evident in Tolstoy's essay that he considered artistic language to be a code capable of transcending its self-referential function to engender and communicate new emotional realities through the very complexity of its structural relationships. On the contrary, his criticism of Wagner, Shakespeare and the French Symbolists, as well as his description of counterfeit art in terms of imitations of emotions already once conveyed in previous works, or in terms of verbal tricks to create an illusion of feeling, amounts to a strong denial that any new aspects of reality could be perceived in the textures of artistic language

as such, that any new information could be engendered in the channel of communications itself as the original message passes through it. Artistic language must be meaningful in terms of something outside itself, and that meaning must already be there before the language to carry it is even born. Tolstoy would not have understood W.H. Auden's dictum that a poem should not mean but be, because for him meaning is the prerequisite of being. Neither did Tolstoy accept the programmatic lines of Verlaine: "Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise, / Ou l'Indécis au Précis se joint". He could not imagine what new meanings, or feelings, could possibly emerge from an encounter between precision and ambivalence.²⁵ A work of art first has something clear, new and important to say and then it says it, and we are instantly caught up in the powerful emotion of the saying.

But an idea, or an emotion, are not really indivisible and timeless instances in the mind. They are not even just the end products of some internal processes measurable within their own time dimensions. Instead, they are continuing open-ended processes, structures capable of constantly assimilating new information and opening new relationships. This is true of complex modern art as much as of Tolstoy's own works which also engender new realities of tremendous complexity and scope in the very process of their composition. Inevitably, for Tolstoy as well as Baudelaire, an artistic structure is more than the sum of its parts, and also more than its pre-existing, underlying Idea. To say "vengeance is mine and I shall repay" does not at all adequately describe what happens in Anna Karenina, nor does the idea of universal love fully resolve all the agonies of the dying

Ivan Ilyich. Tolstoy is a universal artist precisely because he created a universe, even if he wished to say only one thing, and Shakespeare's "wooden O" is also an entire world, even though Tolstoy denied that there was anything in it.

The difference between Tolstoy and what he called "modern" art may be an issue of modeling. An artist who consciously works with the norms of literary convention, whether he follows or breaks them, is in effect building a model of his perception that art is something else than reality. Tolstoy, on the other hand, is interested in communicating the joy of his discovery that he and the world are really the same, and he builds a model not of art but of that emotion. It follows then that the artistic principle of artistic deformation is alien to the spirit of Tolstoy. He would not construct an image of the outside world in such a way as to make it a counterpoint to or an equivalent of some person's inner world that is itself already deformed to represent some particular instance in the history of civilization, rather than an aspect of the real experience of being. This is one reason why Tolstoy objects to Mallarmé's idea on the use of allusion and symbol in art. Tolstoy quotes the following from Mallarmé, calling it a defense of obscurity: "It is the perfect usage of mystery which constitutes a symbol: to evoke an object little by little in order to show a condition of the soul, or inversely, to choose an object and to release from it a condition of the soul through a series of decodings."²⁴ What Mallarmé seems to propose is the use of indirections and symbolic allusions in order to distill from reality some ultimate equiv-

alent of a unique and exclusive condition of the mind. This is a process in which the direct belonging of the soul to the reality surrounding it becomes increasingly irrelevant as we approach the mystery. With Tolstoy, the relationship between the outer and inner world is based on their unity: what we have are different configurations of one and the same entity, not two different things. It is a unity in which the ego is dissolved in the general being of everything. In his "Travels Notes in Switzerland" (1857) Tolstoy noted: "omnipotence is when you lose the consciousness of yourself; helplessness is when you dwell upon self consciousness in isolation".²⁷ Years before, in his youthful diaries, Tolstoy described rather clearly how such "omnipotence" feels: "the same leaves on which I sit make up the outline of the forest; the same air I breathe constitutes the blueness of the sky".²⁸ This sort of unity is based not on correspondances but on the literal truth of how things actually are.

The Soviet critic E. Kuprejanova has pointed out that in Tolstoy's landscapes, for instance, a barrier is removed between the depiction of the outer world and the expression of the inner one. So in The Cossacks, the breathtaking magnitude of the mountains as seen by Olenin for the first time reveals itself as an inner process of conscious discovery, manifest only as a growing sense of wonder, of the infinitudes of the hero's own soul.²⁹ Conversely, what Prince Andrey understands under the Austerlitz sky is not only the distant majesty of the moving clouds, but also, and more particularly, that these clouds have given an answer in terms of infinity free from time and space to

his question about the meaning of his own finite, time-bound life.³⁰ There is no meaning in anything that is separated out, be it art or life itself, because all things are one. On a very deep level of human experience, a sense of this unity becomes something like a force, or a presence shaping human destiny in Tolstoy's novels and short stories.

In War and Peace, this kind of directly felt continuum between the people and the land acquires the aspect of a configuration of the enormous elemental power of Russia which no ambitious individual, such as Napoleon, who makes abstract patterns in his mind can ever hope to overcome. Tolstoy's idea that religious consciousness is a sign of new developing relationships between the human being and the world has this specific meaning in application to his works. The joy of reading Tolstoy consists of a gradually intensifying feeling of discovery, of learning what these new relationships are and how they come to the human mind.³¹

In contrast, the kind of unity Tolstoy perceives in modern art pertains not to reality but only to the artistic device. This is his main objection to Wagner who tried to unify music and poetry into a single esthetic entity, quite forgetting that each has its own requirements and, so to speak, semiotics, incompatible with the other. Not only words or phrases in Wagner have their own musical motifs, tunes, but so do his characters, objects, institutions and even ideas. All these motifs can then be juxtaposed and manipulated in various ways to make up a musical artifice, a structure conveying some semblance of the

mythological artifices we see on the stage, which in turn try to construct a semblance of life as divorced from all true human affairs. The result is known as modern art which, according to Tolstoy, it is definitely not.

After looking at these particular differences between the art of Tolstoy and that of the modern writers whom he rejected, it seems possible to say that his feeling about art expressed in the essay and his insights as a writer do run a parallel course, imply similar conclusions or ideas. This is not at all strange, even in view of Tolstoy's rejection of his own art, because throughout his life he maintained an astonishing consistency with himself as well as an equally astonishing desire to denounce and contradict everything he did and everything he believed at some particular point in time. On a number of specific occasions it seemed to Tolstoy that he had radically changed his views and actions, but now, as we look at him from the perspective of time, all these upheavals were more like reconfirmations of the inner necessities embedded in his soul and in his mind. So also with his own works: rejected by him, they continue to serve his basic convictions, or basic instincts -- they continue to be what Tolstoy could not help: being himself.

FOOTNOTES

¹ In the essay "What Is Art?," Lev Tolstoj. Polnoe sobranie sočinenij. Jubilejnoe izdanie (Lev Tolstoy. Complete Collection of Works. Jubilee edition; henceforth referred to as PSS), Vol. 30, 1951, p. 125, Tolstoy says: "It is solely due to the critics who in our times still praise rude, savage, and, for us, often meaningless works of the ancient Greeks: Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and especially Aristophanes; or, of modern writers, Dante; Tasso, Milton, Shakespeare; in painting -- all of Raphael, all of Michelangelo including his absurd 'Last Judgment'; in music -- the whole of Bach and the whole of Beethoven, including his last period, -- thanks only to them, have the Ibsens, Maeterlincks, Verlaines, Mallarmés, Puvis de Chavannes, Klingers, Boecklins, Stucks, Schneiders; in music, the Wagners, Liszts, Berliozes, Brahmses, and Richard Strausses, etc., and all that immense mass of good-for-nothing imitators of these imitators, become possible in our day." Quoted according to: Leo Tolstoy. What Is Art? and Essays on Art, Aylmer Maude, trans. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 197. All references to What Is Art? will be from this, Maude, translation.

² Uncle Tom's Cabin is listed by Tolstoy, alongside such works as Hugo's Les Misérables, Schiller's The Robbers, Dostoevsky's Memoirs From the House of the Dead, and others, as an example of good art: "transmitting both positive feelings of love of god and one's neighbours, and negative feelings of indignation and horror at the violation of love." Maude, pp. 241-2.

Tolstoy devotes the entire Chapter XIII of his treatise to a scathing criticism of Wagner's Nibelungen Ring.

³ In "What Is Art?", PSS, 30, 178, Maude, p. 178, Tolstoy says: "The art of our time and of our circle has become a prostitute. And this comparison holds good even in minute details. Like her, it is not limited to certain times, like her, it is always adorned, like her it is always saleable and like her it is enticing and ruinous.

⁴ See What Is Art?, PSS, 72, Maude 133: "Not in the depth of their hearts believing in the Church teaching -- which had outlived its age and had no longer any true meaning for them -- and not being strong enough to accept true Christianity, men of these rich, governing classes -- popes, kings, dukes, and all the great ones of the earth -- were left without any religion, with but the external forms of one, which they supported as being profitable and even necessary for themselves since these forms maintained a teaching which justified the privileges they made use of."

⁵ We are using the term "estrangement" here in the sense in which the Russian Formalist critic Viktor Šklovskij used a propos of Tolstoy's artistic method: to de-automize our perceptions, so as to make everything seem as if seen for the first time, so as to "make the stone stony again".

⁶ In his essay, Tolstoy contrasts a performance of Hamlet, which he saw and did not like, with a ritualistic reenactment of a deer hunt by the Vogul tribe in Siberia, of which he had heard (actually, from Čexov). Tolstoy describes the Vogul play in such a manner as to, in effect, create an exciting and emotionally

infectious little tale of his own, thus making moot the question of Vogul superiority to Shakespeare. See PSS, 147, Maude, 225-6.

7 PSS, 65; Maude 123.

8 PSS, 86; Maude 151

9 The inherent nobility of human beings before they become corrupted by civilization is an idea very close to the thought of Rousseau; Tolstoy was often compared to Rousseau in various ways. Tolstoy himself, however, made the following distinction between himself and the French author: "They compare me to Rousseau. I am much indebted to Rousseau and I like him, but there is a big difference. The difference is that Rousseau rejects all civilization, while I reject just the falsely Christian. That which is called civilization is the growth of humanity. That growth is necessary, and there is no point in considering whether it is a good thing or not." PSS, 55, 145.

10 It is interesting to note that John Ruskin had thoughts on the architecture of the Renaissance which come quite close to Tolstoy's position of moral condemnation. Ruskin felt that in Renaissance architecture: "there is indeed an expression of aristocracy in its worst character; coldness, perfectedness of training, incapability of emotion, want of sympathy with the weakness of lower men, blank, hopeless, haughty self-sufficiency. All these characters are written in the Renaissance architecture as plainly as if they were graven on it in words." John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice, Vol. III, 1890, p. 60. Even in general, the Renaissance coldness Ruskin speaks of could be meaningfully compared to Tolstoy's objections to art without emotion, both in

Renaissance and in the modernism of his own time.

¹¹ Cf. What Is Art?, Chapter III.

¹² It should be noted that Tolstoy made no claim that his choices of bad art to be condemned were based on any true understanding. Rather (Maude, 246) he said that his own taste, corrupted as it was, could not really be regarded seriously. He did "consign my own artistic productions to the category of bad art," except for two short stories, but this also seems rather an off-hand remark in a footnote; Tolstoy made his self - condemnation much stronger and more explicit in his "The Confession".

¹³ PSS 98; Maude, 165.

¹⁴ Tolstoy, "What Is Art?", PSS, Vol. 30, p. 99; Maude 165.

¹⁵ Tolstoy's diary, October 23, 1953. PSS, 46, 179.

¹⁶ PSS, 46, 65.

¹⁷ See Anna Karenina, part II, Chapter XV, Anna Karenina. The Maude Translation. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1970, p. 148: "In the intervals of profound silence last year's leaves were heard rustling, set in motion by the thawing of the earth and the growth of the grass.

'Just fancy! One can hear and see the grass growing,' thought Levin, as he noticed a wet slate-colored asped leaf move close to the point of a blade of grass."

¹⁸ See particularly Part IV Chapter XI.

¹⁹ See Leo Tolstoy War and Peace. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1966, p. 1022.

²⁰ War and Peace, ibid., p. 1181.

²¹ PSS 30, 94; Maude, 161.

²² In his comments, Tolstoy says that there is not a single poem in Baudelaire "that would be simple and understandable without a certain effort -- an effort rarely rewarded, since the feelings transmitted by the poet are both mean and evil" (PSS, 30, 94; Maude 161).

²³ Anna Karenina, Norton, p. 70.

²⁴ As for Tolstoy himself, very early on he was quite dubious about ascribing human sentiments to nature: "I don't know how others daydream, but from what I have read and heard, they do it quite differently from me. Some say that, looking at beautiful nature, thoughts come about the greatness of God and the insignificance of man. Others say that mountains, it seemed were saying something and the leaves something else again and that the trees were calling somewhere. How can such thoughts occur? You have to work at it to stuff your head with such nonsense". Tolstoy's diary, PSS, 46, 80-1.

²⁵ Unless, of course, such an encounter is a process depicted by the narrator as going on in a character's mind. There are numerous examples from Tolstoy's works of his great skill in operating precisely with such grey areas in order to convey the inner world of a person.

²⁶ PSS, 30, 91; Maude 158.

²⁷ PSS, 5, 196.

²⁸ PSS, 5, 202-3.

²⁹ See E. N. Kuprejanova Estetika L.N. Tolstogo. Moscow:

USSR Academy of Sciences, Institute of Russian Literature, 1966, p. 140.

³⁰ This is precisely the issue that most concerned Tolstoy in his "A Confession," when he described the inexorable sinking of his own mind into the deep void of meaninglessness. It is interesting to note how, even though Tolstoy's characters are shown to have resolved their moral and philosophical dilemmas, Tolstoy himself had to encounter them over and over again in his own life.

³¹ In this sense, G. N. Iščuk notes that: "The main peculiarity of the effect of War and Peace resides in the emanation of powerful esthetic impulses, demanding of the reader that he should expand the horizons of his understanding of the world and of his own soul." G.GN. Iščuk, Problema čitatelja v tvorčeskom soznanii L.N. Tolstogo (The Problem of the Reader in the Creative Consciousness of L.N. Tolstoy). The Kalinin State University, 1975, p. 54.

43. Stalin, "Industrialization of the Country and the Right Deviation in the CPSU (B)" (November, 1928), Works (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1949-1954), XI: 259.

44. Stalin, "The Tasks of Business Executives" (February, 1931), Problems of Leninism, pp. 365-366.

45. "Za otechestvo" (For the Fatherland), Pravda, June 9, 1934.

46. Stalin, Pre-Election Speech of February 6, 1946, translated in The Strategy and Tactics of World Communism: Supplement I (U.S. House of Representatives Document no. 619, 80th Congress, 2nd Session, Washington: G.P.O., 1948), pp. 170, 177.

47. Stalin, Answer to Pravda Correspondent, Pravda, March 14, 1946 (translated in The New York Times, March 14, 1946).

48. Marxizm-Leninizm o voine i armii (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1968), p. 262.

49. Milovidov and Kozlov, op. cit., p. 138.

50. Ibid., p. 260.

51. Marxizm-Leninizm o voine i armii, p. 289.

52. See Richard Pipes, Survival is Not Enough: Soviet Realities and America's Future (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), esp. pp. 41-44.

53. Marxizm-Leninizm o voine i armii, p. 90.