

# The State of the Art

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## RE-READING TOLSTOY: NEW DIRECTIONS IN TOLSTOY SCHOLARSHIP

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The act of re-reading may follow an earlier mis-reading or missed reading; it may be motivated by the need to re-evaluate, re-appraise, or re-habilitate what was read, or perhaps not read. The compulsion to repeat a textual experience could be interpreted by psychoanalytically oriented critics as the desire to complete a transferential mastery over meaning. Feminist and deconstructionist criticism demands re-reading in order to expose the indeterminacy of meaning, to recognize the unconsciously dominant ideology which informed and deformed previous readings, no matter how cogently objective and analytical critical procedures may have seemed within a prior context. The impulse to re-read may, finally, reflect a change in perceptions, in experience, and in the practice of the art of reading itself.

We re-read certain works every semester within the contexts of various curricular configurations; we experience the sensation of re-reading when our students express their own, unique, often naive reading experiences. The value of re-reading may, in this sense, be the generation of new insights, similar to those produced by the literary technique of estrangement (*ostranenie*). The sensation of renewed perception created by distancing readings over time thus resembles the novelty of experiencing readings from an "other" position or perspective.

There is no need to elaborate on the continuous process of the re-evaluation of literary works over time as different modes or movements are valorized by the academy, and the canon of a literary tradition is challenged or reconstituted. As a result of socio-cultural trends or curricular needs, previously over-looked or marginalized authors are promoted to new positions of prominence, while the "greats" may suddenly be dethroned, their reputation downplayed as over-rated. Trends in literary canonization are apt to reflect shifts in critical theory; or, as Hartmann has observed, the opposite is also the case: "every literary theory is based on the experience of a limited canon or generalized strongly from a particular text/milieu."<sup>1</sup> An example of this principle is the interconnection between the historical avant-gardes of Europe and Russia and their academic confreres, the Formalists and New Critics who privileged avant-garde artistic praxis in their critical formulations.

To recognize the historicity of evaluation in the humanities, we must also take note of the influence of successive generations of scholars within institutions and schools: the adoption of innovative theoretical and critical imperatives often signals the arrival of a new generation of scholars within the academy. Such a change in generations is indeed perceptible among recent Ph.D.s in Slavic Languages and Literatures who received their education in the 1980s. Formal training in modern languages, linguistics and comparative literature during this decade was dominated by Structuralist procedure, yet, simultaneously, the United States was bombarded by a series of European, especially French, post-Structuralist critical movements. The experience of this generation had not been vocalized; but to have been trained in the empiricist methodologies of linguistic poetics, close readings and Structuralist, grammarian or narratological approaches "indoors" (inside the classroom) was insufficient insulation against the theoretical turmoil one could hear raging "outdoors": the post-Structuralist deconstruction of any empiricist procedure and the skepticism of any communicative endeavor.

Since Slavic studies are comparatively recent areas of specialization in the West, dating from the early 1950s, it is not surprising that the field as a whole should experience dynamic shifts in focus and concerns, a turbulence which is augmented by the unique sociopolitical and ideological complexities of Russian and Soviet culture. Without adhering to a strict Kuhnian interpretation, one may note a definite transition between the path-breaking and foundation-laying of the first generations of Western Slavists, and the theoretical explorations of more recent generations.

These new generations have already had an impact on Slavic scholarship: in the choice of the Silver Age as the leading area of specialization; in an increased appreciation for literary works which invite complex literary analysis, and, finally, in the area which will concern us here, the re-reading, or re-evaluating of those major authors and texts which form the core canon of Russian literary history. Of these major figures, Tolstoy has been the most securely canonized in the West, and, paradoxically, was, until recently, the least studied major figure in Russian literature. Re-reading Tolstoy from a variety of new critical and theoretical perspectives promises to liberate the literary giant from his pedestal.

This article will review some of the works in press or in progress on Tolstoy by Slavists who received their Ph.D.s in the 1980s and whose work is inspired by recent developments in critical theory and practise. Several different methodological and theoretical approaches to Tolstoy are represented in the work of the scholars discussed here: New Critical close reading and mythological criticism; narratological investigations; comparative approaches with theoretical implications for the poetics of transmission, translation, influence and intertextuality; semiotic investigations; and post-Structuralism in its various avatars: Derridean deconstruction; feminist, or gender criticism; and socio-criticism. None of the scholars whose work is discussed here can be said to

mechanistically institute critical practises, rather, in the best spirit of contemporary criticisms, each pursues a selectively eclectic, or pluralist approach, with the creative freedom of bricolage. As a result, their work avoids the automatic recitation of jargon and is not imbedded or imprisoned within theoretical doctrine.

Even from the now traditional perspective of the New Criticism, a critical strategy which privileges texts exemplifying self-reflexivity and unity of purpose, Tolstoy's art has been perceived as "Life, not Art"<sup>2</sup>, a dismissive categorization of his masterstvo which places it beyond the realm of critical analysis. "There are times," wrote Lionel Trilling, "When the literary critic can do nothing more than point, and Anna Karenina presents him with an occasion when his critical function is reduced to this primitive activity."<sup>3</sup>

It would seem that the picture drawn by Philip Rahv in his 1946 essay, "The Green Twig and the Black Trunk," has conditioned many critics' readings of Tolstoy: "Tolstoy is the exact opposite of those writers, typical of the modern age, whose works are to be understood only in terms of their creative strategies and design.. .. Tolstoy was the least self-conscious in his use of the literary medium."<sup>4</sup> In part this view must be attributed to the Western bias that barbarizes Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as crude Russians and "natural" untutored talents. Dostoevskian iconography offers a portrait of the frenetic writer and tortured epileptic gripped by poetic madness, racing against publishing deadlines and gambling debts; conversely, the legend of Tolstoy poses him barefoot and clad in a peasant shirt, a writer whose works were cleaved from life with one mighty blow by the Creator. As Nabokov mythologized Tolstoy in his poem:

Yet there remains  
one thing we simply cannot reconstruct,  
no matter how we poke, armed with our notepads,  
just like reporters at a fire, around  
his soul. It's to a certain secret throbbing--  
the essence--that our access is denied.  
The mystery is almost superhuman!  
I mean the nights on which Tolstoy composed;  
I mean the miracle, the hurricane  
of images flying across the inky  
expanse of sky in that hour of creation,  
that hour of incarnation....For, the people  
born on those nights were real.... /5/

This mythic view of an Olympian Tolstoy, the conflation of Tolstoy and God, pictured by Gorky as "two bears in a den," simultaneously inspires awe, and arouses the reader's resentment at textual manipulations which entrap him/her in moral structures which seem to demand a virtuous or virtuoso criticism.

Three recent publication events have been largely responsible for revising this critical view and for revitalizing scholarly interest in Tolstoy. First, the reappraisal of Bakhtin's schematic classification of Tolstoy as the monologic author and textual authority, cast always as Dostoevsky's "other" or foil, was successfully challenged in a series of articles by Morson (1981), Shukman (1984), and Emerson (1985).<sup>6</sup> Morson's seminal investigation and proposals for elaborating a "poetics of didacticism"<sup>7</sup> revised our resentment against Tolstoy's authorial voice by re-adjusting our reading of that voice as textual strategy rather than doctrinaire lecturing.

Second, Gustafson's synoptic and synthesizing study, Leo Tolstoy. Resident and Stranger (1986) queried the traditional perception of Tolstoy's oeuvre as cataclysmically divided between his pre- and post-conversion phases. Methodologically, Gustafson's incisive and probing close readings of key passages in the major prose fiction renewed possibilities for reading metaphor and imagery in Tolstoy as expressions of his "emblematic realism". Gustafson's subtle exegesis and recognition of Tolstoy's formal craftsmanship is a type of analysis found all too infrequently in the work of other scholars. Among those who have contributed close linguistic and structural readings of Tolstoy's prose works, studies by Parthé, Jahn, and Jackson have been influential.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Morson's Hidden in Plain View. Narrative and Creative Potentials in 'War and Peace' (1987)<sup>10</sup> reworked the Formalist conception of Tolstoy as re-writing Western narrative models. Morson's book creates a new vision of Tolstoy as deconstructionist, a shatterer of systems, a skeptic of "semiotic totalitarianism", who saw in the human predisposition to metalepsis, the impossibility of an accurate or ultimate inscription or narration.

The monuments of recent Tolstoy scholarship briefly surveyed above have relocated our reading of Tolstoy within contemporary critical and theoretical concerns. In the past decade, these concerns in literary scholarship have become more intimately engaged with problems of epistemology and philosophy and the awareness of narrativity as one particular instance of a problematized, logocentric discourse.

John Kopper addresses precisely the issue of Tolstoy's concerns with the construction of narrative in his forthcoming study of "Tolstoy and the Narrative of Sex: A Reading of 'Father Sergius', 'The Devil' and 'The Kreutzer Sonata'."<sup>11</sup> Beginning with Lotman's definition of what constitutes an "event" in narrative,<sup>12</sup> Kopper suggests that Tolstoy continually challenged himself by posing increasingly difficult problems in composition, setting himself the task of creating a satisfactory narrative from unpromising narrative propositions. Kopper summarizes his work as follows:

the "sex" stories of the late 80s and 90s [are] a working through the problem of making stories out of sexual conflict. [Tolstoy] set himself high hurdles in the "sex

stories": in Tolstoy's society male sexuality had few restrictions placed upon it and hence was not easily subject to narration: it rarely made "the good story". I conclude that Tolstoy takes a rather infertile semi-ological field and produces narrative....The stories themselves come to include and reduplicate many aspects of the sexual act....[thus] the "sex stories" are Tolstoy's metaliterature, a case where he reflects on his own earlier writings, and produces narrative out of his own struggle.

The questions of sexuality in Tolstoy and the "subject" of narration are also addressed in Stephanie Sandler's study of gender in War and Peace. Any feminist reading of Tolstoy which attempts to revise his image as misogynist is destined to run aground against damning biographical evidence recorded in his diaries, journals and his wife's account of their marriage. Yet, to read artistic work through the prism of biography as Ruth Benson has done in her book Women in Tolstoy<sup>13</sup> may deprive us of an appreciation of other modes and ideological commitments which may also be inscribed in the text. Recent feminist readings of Tolstoy, notably Barbara Heldt's revisionary essay, "Tolstoy's Path to Feminism,"<sup>14</sup> recovers Tolstoy's empathy towards women from his artistic oeuvre and places his concern with women at the center of his creative intentions. Sandler's work in progress, "Reading Gender in War and Peace", adopts this stance and pursues a reading of the novel's imagery, metaphors and presentations of sex roles to reveal Tolstoy's artistic design, which she defines as "the correlation of values with gender.... People are successful in the novel only when they manifest a generous presence of the so-called 'feminine' traits that history has taught us to despise." Sandler notes Tolstoy's exaltation of those attributes which are traditionally viewed as feminine—empathetic relating to others, reliance on intuition, the capacity for nurturing—and observes that these features characterize both Platon Karataev and Kutuzov. Similarly, Sandler explores women characters' acquisition of masculine traits, such as Natasha at the hunt, or the cross-dressing at the Rostov's Christmas celebration. She concludes that "Tolstoy is unusually willing to experiment with the stereotypes of gender and to imagine characters who transcend themselves and are thus most themselves by crossing gender boundaries."<sup>15</sup>

Reading Tolstoyan characters as the focal point of intersecting role models or culturally imposed paradigms also forms the central concern of Anthony Anemone's Derridean construal of Tolstoy's "The Cossacks," titled, "Tolstoy and différance: The Case of Kazaki". In Anemone's assessment,

Tolstoy's Cossacks is traditionally considered a problem text, whose crux revolves around the author's complex and unresolved relationship to Rousseau's notion of the natural as superior to the civilized. While Tolstoy tests this hypothesis in Cossacks, the results have seemed, to



most readers, ambiguous and unsatisfying....A deconstructive reading of Rousseau's influence on Tolstoy will highlight the problem in a different way.

Tolstoy's desire to control the ever elusive and receding dichotomy between Nature and Culture is typical of the Western philosophical and literary tradition, which Derrida has called "the metaphysics of presence." It is another attempt to control the infinite play of différance and meaning in literary texts. The subverting of the major dichotomies established in the Cossacks (nature and culture, country and city, Cossack and Russian, innocent and corrupt, spontaneous and self-conscious, etc.) is then seen not as a sign of the artistic or philosophical immaturity of the author, but as the inevitable effect of the philosophical and linguistic culture in which Tolstoy is completely embedded.

Recognizing the effect of cultural contexts which subtly politicize the activities of reading and writing is at the basis of current trends in socio-criticism. Natasha Sankovich's preliminary exploration of Tolstoy's theories of cognition, as deduced from his fiction and other writings, are predicated on dialogic theories of the critic's responsibilities and the political implications of any communicative act.<sup>16</sup> Sankovich's dissertation employs a "reader-response method that examines the conventions, expectations and limitations of authorial reading....The authorial audience is the audience about whom the author has made certain assumptions concerning its values and beliefs." Sankovich determines four categories of consciousness in Tolstoyan epistemology: awareness, imagination, understanding and memory. Sankovich intends to explore the interaction of these four modes of consciousness within Tolstoy's oeuvre as they govern the production and reception of texts.

"Reception", or the perception or appropriation of an author or text(s) by another culture constitutes the major thrust of comparative literary studies represented here in the works in progress by Anna Tavis and Isabelle Naginski.

Tavis's book in progress, Rilke's Dialogues with Russia examines Rilke's fascination with Russian culture, which was embodied for him in the "overpowering image" of Tolstoy. Tavis finds that Tolstoy's crisis and "quarrel with art became paradigmatic for Rilke's image of Russia," ending in his rejection of Tolstoy. Thus, Rilke's writings on Tolstoy reflect his attempt to resolve his own artistic crisis, and to determine "the poet's individual quest to define his artistic mission." Tavis's chapter on Rilke and Tolstoy, "Rilke's Controversy with Leo Tolstoy" explores the intertextual relationship between Rilke's Über Kunst as response to What is Art?; the Tolstoy themes in the early variant concluding chapters of Malte Laurids Brigge; and the interpersonal relationship between the two artists as enacted in Rilke's two visits to Tolstoy. Examining these examples of "influence by negation" and intercultural dialogue enables Tavis to discuss the

"Tolstoy question" of the late 19th/early 20th centuries to explore the bi-valent characteristics of the politics of appropriation. Thus, Tavis concludes:

An examination of Tolstoy's role in Rilke's life may clarify and, at the same time, further complicate the general question of artistic "influences." The rightly chosen "negative" counterpart, the artist's unavoidable "other", may prove more potent for the artist's creation of his/her own personality than would a long succession of "positive" models. And the dialogic drama of influences, after all, is played out in the polyphony of texts. /17/

The dialogic model and the cross-cultural fertilization of literary texts is also the focus of Isabelle Naginski's forthcoming book Literary Traffic. French Writers and the Nineteenth-Century Russian Novel. Naginski focuses on French influences in the rise of the Russian novel, elucidating "how the originality of the Russian novel was made possible...through the appropriation of a certain number of influential French genesis-texts." Part Three of her book deals with Tolstoy and his relationship to Rousseau ("Two Savages at the Opera") and Stendhal ("On the Battlefield", "The Mythology of Childhood," and "The Narrative Eye"). Naginski employs a Bakhtinian framework to explore the process of textual transmission and the "mosaic of quotations"<sup>18</sup> which constitutes "haunted discourse" (*discours hanté*). Naginski's examination of the haunting of Tolstoy's discourse by Stendhal relies on cases of direct and verifiable influence (for example, Stendhal's Waterloo scene in La Chartreuse de Parme and Tolstoy's military descriptions in War and Peace), as well as noting the curious and intriguing cases of parallel thematic development which she describes in both authors' proclivity for "autobiographical reduplication, that is, the constant and repeated projection of self into their literary works."

The problematic of self-construction via narrative, the autobiographical impulse which inspires the recherche de temps perdu, is the subject of Andrew Wachtel's forthcoming book, The Battle for Childhood. Like Naginski, Wachtel explores Tolstoy's Childhood in mythological terms as the attempt to recapture a "golden age." Wachtel sees Tolstoy's autobiographical work as paradigmatic for the 19th century Russian autobiography, represented in the novels of Aksakov, Gorkij, Belyj, and Bunin. Wachtel also offers a mythological reading of Anna Karenina in his article "Death and Resurrection in Anna Karenina."<sup>19</sup> Wachtel notes the occurrence of a single myth of death and resurrection transposed into two modes in the novel: the theme is treated in Christian terms in the story of Levin and Kitty, while pagan and Roman imagery appear in Anna and Vronsky's myth.

While the studies surveyed here adopt a variety of methodologies and theoretical orientations, one common thread among them is the

value and importance placed on Bakhtin's literary theories of dialogism, polyphony and absolute language. The shared appreciation for Bakhtin in part reflects a contemporary vogue which counterpoises Bakhtin's dialogism to Derridean relativism. Yet, the citation of Bakhtin throughout the scholarly works reviewed here represents more than the desire to flaunt the Slavic possession of a literary theorist who has gained celebrity in the West. Bakhtin's importance as a reader of Tolstoy, and the implications of this type of reading for Tolstoy scholarship in general was discussed above (see note 6). Bakhtin's ultimate value for the future of literary criticism is still an unfinalizable potential. As Bakhtin himself observed of scholarship in the humanities,

It is hardly possible to speak about necessity in the humanities. It is scientifically possible only to disclose the possibilities.... /20/

Some of the possibilities created here by re-reading from alternative perspectives within a diversity of contexts set the stage for new critical encounters with Tolstoy. The plurality of scholarly approaches, the re-voicing and revising of earlier critical views, results in a multiplicity of interpretations which is commensurate with the vastness of Tolstoy's own creation. As Bakhtin remarked concerning the interplay of the familiar and the new in scholarship:

Both of these aspects (recognition of the repeated and discovery of the new) should merge inseparably in the living act of understanding.... Thus, understanding supplements the text: it is active and also creative by nature. Creative understanding continues creativity, and multiplies the artistic wealth of humanity. /21/

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Amy Mandelker's article, "A Painted Lady: The Poetics of ekphrasis in Anna Karenina" is in press at Comparative Literature. She has a book in progress, The Framing of Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Novel of Adultery, which explores the semiotics of imagery in Anna Karenina and other European novels of adultery from a socio-critical and feminist perspective.

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#### NOTES

1. Geoffrey Hartmann, "A Short History of Practical Criticism," New Literary History 10 (1978-9): 501.
2. Matthew Arnold, "Count Leo Tolstoy," (1887) in Henry Gifford, ed. Leo Tolstoy. (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971): 63.
3. Lionel Trilling, The Opposing Self (1955) in Edward Wasiolek, ed. Critical Essays on Tolstoy. (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986): 148.



4. Philip Rahv, "Tolstoy: The Green Twig and the Black Trunk" (1946) in Henry Gifford, ed., 22.
5. Vladimir Nabokov, "Tolstoy." Translated by Dmitri Nabokov.
6. Morson's article first appeared as "Tolstoy's Absolute Language," in Gary Saul Morson, ed. Bakhtin, Essays and Dialogues on his Work. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981): 123-44. The issues raised concerning Bakhtin's reading of Tolstoy were addressed by Ann Shukman, "Bakhtin and Tolstoy," Studies in Twentieth Century Literature, Fall 1984: 57-74 and Caryl Emerson, "The Tolstoy Connection in Bakhtin," PMLA Winter 1985.
7. Gary Saul Morson, "The Reader as Voyeur," in Harold Bloom, ed. Tolstoy. (NY: Chelsea House, 1983).
8. Richard Gustafson, Leo Tolstoy. Resident and Stranger. (Princeton: PUP, 1986). As I compiled this review and spoke with young scholars I knew who were working on Tolstoy, an interesting common experience emerged: that of having studied with Professor Richard Gustafson, either as an undergraduate or graduate student at Columbia University and Barnard College; or of having been inspired by his recent book. While Professor Gustafson might prefer to disclaim having founded a "school" of Tolstoy scholarship, the colleagues with whom I spoke all wished to acknowledge the debt of enlightenment and inspiration we owe to his teaching and writing.
9. Robert L. Jackson's "Chance and Design in Anna Karenina" in Peter Demetz, et al., eds. The Disciplines of Criticism: Essays in Literary Theory, Interpretation and History (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968) is one of the few studies which brilliantly integrates Tolstoy's imagery with his structural design. Parthé's close readings of linguistic and grammatical patterns in Tolstoy are unique examples of this approach: see, for example, Kathleen Parthé, "Death Masks in Tolstoi," Slavic Review 41 (1982): 297-305, and by the same author, "Tolstoy and the Geometry of Fear," Modern Language Studies XV:4 (1985): 80-94. Gary Jahn's exploration of railroad imagery in "The Image of the Railroad in Anna Karenina," Slavic and East European Journal 25 (1981), is an example of a thorough and probing investigation of one productive image in Tolstoy. This list is not intended to be comprehensive, simply to indicate some outstanding examples of unusual methodological approaches to Tolstoy.
10. Gary Saul Morson, Hidden in Plain View. Narrative and Creative Potentials in 'War and Peace'. (Stanford: SUP, 1987).
11. John Kopper, "Tolstoy and the Narrative of Sex: A Reading of 'Father Sergius,' 'The Devil' and 'The Kreutzer Sonata'" in Hugh McLean, ed. In the Shade of the Giant (Berkeley: UCP, 1989).
12. Iurii Lotman, Struktura khudozhestvennogo teksta. (Providence: Brown UP, 1971).
13. Ruth Crego Benson, Women in Tolstoy. The Ideal and the Erotic. (Urbana: Univ. Illinois P, 1973).

14. Barbara Heldt, Terrible Perfection. Women in Russian Literature. (Bloomington:, Indiana UP, 1987).
  15. Stephanie Sandler, "Reading Gender in War and Peace." Unpublished manuscript presented at AATSEEL, Chicago, 1985.
  16. Natasha Sankovich, "Understanding the Critic's Role." Unpublished manuscript, 1988.
  17. Anna Tavis, "Rainer Maria Rilke and Tolstoy. Writing the Story of the Prodigal Son." Unpublished paper presented at the Seminar on "Representation and Identity," Williams College, 1988.
  18. Julia Kristeva, Critique, April 1967: 440-1.
  19. Andrew Wachtel, "Death and Resurrection in Anna Karenina," in Hugh McLean, ed.
  20. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Extracts from 'Notes' (1970-1971)," in Morson, ed., 180.
  21. Mikhail Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71," in Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, Translated by Vern McGee. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds. (Austin: Univ. of Texas P, 1986): 142.
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