ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION:

Rimvydas Silbajoris, Tolstoy's Aesthetics and his Art. Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1990. 319 pp.

It is said that some writers create their works to support their aesthetic theory, while others create an aesthetic theory to support their works. Silbajoris has demonstrated that Tolstoy does both. He shows how Tolstoy struggles throughout his oeuvre to create art that was true to life as he saw it and an aesthetic theory that justified this practice. To be sure, Tolstoy saw life differently at different stages in his career, but his aesthetic theory was constant, at least in his creative practice (one may ignore as thoughtless the few concessions to "pure art," such as in the letter to Botkin, quoted on pp. 21-22).

While emphasizing the essential unity of Tolstoy's oeuvre, Silbajoris also points out the "constant struggle of opposites" (p. 257) in Tolstoy's work. Mikhailovsky called it "the right and the left hand of Count L. Tolstoy." Even earlier, Apollon Grigoriev saw it as the artist fighting the doctrinaire moralist. Later, Isaiah Berlin would speak of the fox who tried to be a hedgehog. It must be pointed out that even the "randomness" (p. 257) of real life in Tolstoy's fiction is engaged in an unceasing struggle with the writer's moral and ideological preconceptions. Pierre Bezukhov is by no means the only character whom his creator guides through all the peripeteias of the novel "with a firm hand," as Dostoevsky put it.

Silbajoris' conception of an ideal "supertext" of which all of Tolstoy's writings are but variants is most attractive. Tolstoy's works were all basically confessional, their subject was the struggle of Lev Tolstoy for the truth of a good life, and since Lev Tolstoy was an artist, for truth in art.

A definitio per negationem will show how much substance there is to Tolstoy's position, so compellingly drawn by Silbajoris. Tolstoy despised Nietzsche and it was Nietzsche who said that the raison d'etre of art was to make life bearable. Vladimir Solovyov disliked Tolstoy's ideas and Tolstoy's art. His favorite author was E.T.A. Hoffmann and his favorite work "De goldene Topf," a work which, as almost all of Hoffmann's works, is a programme for an escape from real life into a world of creative enchantment. Needless to say, in Hoffmann, too, fiction and aesthetic theory are wed throughout, perhaps even more so than in Tolstoy. Hoffmann, by the way, was an associate justice of the Prussian Supreme Court and a competent, punctilious jurist--like Ivan Ilyich! This, he even lived a perfect separation of art from "real life."

The question is then: how is it possible that both Tolstoy and Hoffmann (and Nietzsche, too) are great artists? And moreover, how is it possible that even the products of Count Tolstoy's left hand ("What Is Art?" is largely written by his left hand) are certainly fascinating and probably great art? How is it possible that one profoundly disagrees with Tolstoy's judgement of Shakespeare, yet is fascinated by his argument? And, to turn the argument around, how is it possible that the escapist fiction of Hoffmann has a greater truth content than most realist works, as even Belinsky would admit? I believe that Silbajoris answers this question very well for Tolstoy: "Thus the rationalist, text-maker Tolstoy, in his mighty labor, actually produced but a context in which, as he believed, our feelings can respond to the miracle of art." (p. 257)

Thus, on a purely cognitive level, the net result of Silbajoris' penetrating study is that what matters in art is ultimately that undefinable je ne sais quoi, variously called dynamis (by Plotinus), "successful expression" (by Benedetto Croce), or "infectiousness" (by Tolstoy), a quality created by the interaction of the artist, his medium, and his audience.

As an afterthought, I would like to add these comments, without in the least taking away from Silbajoris' splendid achievement:

I disagree with the first sentence of the "Introduction": "Russia in the nineteenth century did not have a systematically developed body of scholarly thought on the discipline of esthetics" (p. 7). Silbajoris brings up Chernyshevsky in his study and in fact develops some cogent parallels between his aesthetic theories and Tolstoy's. Chernyshevsky's Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality (1855-56) was certainly a scholarly work, being his Master's thesis, and it certainly presented an aesthetic theory in a systematic way. Chernyshevsky's principal antagonist, Apollon Grigoriev, was also academically educated, though not a scholar, and like Chernyshevsky developed a consistent aesthetic theory which in some points strikingly anticipates Benedetto Croce's.

One of the real weaknesses in Tolstoy's theory of art is his total misrepresentation of popular art and popular taste. Most popular art, and this includes Russian folk poetry and Russian folktales, violates all of the principles of "good art" as Tolstoy sees it; it is conventional, imitative, unrealistic, mannered, and often amoral (or even immoral). Dobroliubov was, rightly, deeply disappointed when he read Afanasiev's collection of Russian folktales, for they failed to live up to his populist mystique. Dostoevsky observed that

the Russian people love a "sentimental high style"--something Tolstoy detested.

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In his book Professor Silbajoris performs a great service for those who seek to understand Tolstoy whole. For too long we have thought of him as somehow bifurcated at about 1880: before his Confession he was dedicated to art; afterwards he turned to didacticism. To put it another way, anyone who reads him considers Tolstoy a great creative writer, but most regard his ideas on such subjects as aesthetics or the philosophy of history as harebrained. The dichotomy "fine writer/poor thinker" has been liberally applied to Dostoyevsky as well. Much as Bruce Ward in his Dostoyevsky's Critique of the West has demonstrated how little substance there is to such a view of Dostoyevsky, now Silbajoris has helped us to see that Tolstoy's aesthetic and intellectual approaches were in fact relatively consistent throughout his life. We must be grateful for that contribution.

In this comment on the Silbajoris study I should like to outline what seems to me an important key to Tolstoy's aesthetic theory which Silbajoris largely ignores. For, after rightly analyzing the development of Tolstoy's thought in 1857-62, he says nothing at all about the remainder of the 1860's, and very little about the links between Tolstoy and the group comprised of Nekrasov, Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov, and later, Pisarev, whose ideas gradually achieved dominance in the Russia of the 1860's. After all, we associate Tolstoy primarily with the Druzhinin circle in the later 1850's, and we know that group was at odds with the "radical democrats"; we know also that from 1863 to 1869 Tolstoy was at Yasnaya Polyana writing War and Peace, far from the maddening crowd and its radical aesthetic theories. But there are, it seems to me, very obvious connections between the negative arguments against art advanced by the radical democrats in the later 1850's and 1860's and those Tolstoy set forth more than thirty years later in What Is Art? Indeed there are a sufficient number to make it appear that Tolstoy must have been strongly influenced by radical aesthetic doctrine in the 1860's. If this is so, it would fit well with the persuasive case Gary Morson makes in his study of War and Peace that Tolstoy's aesthetic theory and practice in that novel were very radical indeed, although radical in a quite Tolstoyan way.

It is true that Tolstoy was not very close to any of the radical group except Nekrasov; in fact he was rather hostile

to Chernyshevsky in the late 1850's. However, by early 1862 he apparently had altered his view of Chernyshevsky, for at that time he wrote him a short but cordial letter asking him to review his new pedagogical journal. He could not have helped being acquainted with Chernyshevsky's basic aesthetic ideas, later developed by Dobroliubov and Pisarev, because they simply permeated the intellectual atmosphere. After he parted company with the Druzhinin circle (which he condemned roundly in his Confession) he must have been more susceptible than ever to the influence of radical aesthetic doctrine.

What are some of the elements common to the radical critique of art and the one Tolstoy set forth in the 1890's? For one thing, radicals and Tolstoy alike indulge in sweeping negation of accepted viewpoints: Chernyshevsky denounces all established aesthetic doctrine, Pisarev urges the destruction of aesthetics and art in toto, and Tolstoy negates most accepted literary reputations and approaches. Like Pisarev, who sought to drive all lyric poets out of Russian intellectual life, Tolstoy had little appreciation for poetry. Like Chernyshevsky, who had no use for music except possibly performances by the human voice, Tolstoy rejected music, and opera particularly, as hideously artificial. Tolstoy indicts literature for its lust-kindling descriptions, a point on which he agreed with Pisarev, who, in his magnificent assault on Pushkin ("Pushkin and Belinsky") denounced Onegin's creator as a man interested mostly in "close-up views of feet, cheeks, bosoms and various other interesting details of the female body." Like the radical critics generally, Tolstoy believed that intellectual endeavor should not support an unjust social order of the type which appeared to them to exist in contemporary Russia. Art, all of them felt, should have social significance, even a duty to be didactic, a concept that was anathema to Tolstoy's quondam friends of the Druzhinin circle.

This argument is brief, but I think it suffices to show that Tolstoy found much of his case against art in the ideas propounded by the radical critics. But he parted company with them when it came to positive prescriptions.

To be sure, both the radical critics and Tolstoy believed that art should promote the good of society (Dobrolyubov wrote that art should promote a social order under which "everyone live well". But the radical critics rejected traditional Christian ethics, holding that social good could be achieved through rational reform of the political system. In other words, they searched for a collectivist solution guided by reason. Art, if it needed to exist at all, should simply communicate rational understanding and knowledge in its own particular way; Pisarev thought that in an ideal society literature and journalism would coalesce.

Tolstoy, on the other hand, rejected rationalism and all its works--including natural science, from which Pisarev expected great things--and argued that art must transmit emotions to individuals together into a healthy collectivity. And the transmission of emotion through art is not susceptible to rational analysis.

As for the content of that emotion, Tolstoy sought it in the ethical teachings of Christ, while denying Christ's divine nature. But even then Tolstoy remained within the tradition of the Eastern church, as may be seen from his fondness for quoting Christ's words "I am the path [way], the truth, and the life." The split between the Western and Eastern churches was rooted in large measure in a dispute as to whether Christian belief should be formulated in discursive language, and in particular whether the Church required a written creed to which believers were expected to subscribe. The Eastern church regarded the notion of a written creed with suspicion; for them Christ was, not the teacher of a formal set of doctrines, but "the way," the living example for others. The Western emphasis upon a written creed, upon rational analysis and doctrine, opened the door first to rational criticism of that doctrine, then rationalism, and finally atheism of that Western type to which the "radical democrats" adhered. Tolstoy was an atheist of the Eastern type, and so rejected art as a mode of discursive analysis but defended it as a transmitter of feeling with Christian ethical underpinnings. That is why he sought to influence others through didactic literary works; had not Christ done the same in teaching the good through didactic stories called parables?

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Tolstoy's Aesthetics and His Art is an energetic and thoroughly researched analysis and defense of Tolstoy's definition of art both as it appeared in his overtly theoretical works and as it was realized in his fiction. Frank Silbajoris understands that the essay "What is Art?" was not so much the product of Tolstoy's later life, as it was the summary of the thoughts and concerns of fifty years. Silbajoris properly places the essay at the center of this book, leading up to it and away from it in ways that make it very clear to the reader where he thinks the essay fits in the entire Tolstoy "text/context."

While I might have structured the argument differently--spending more time on the essay itself since its details are not well known to most Slavists--my principal objections are not to the Silbajoris book, but to sections of Tolstoy's essay

on art and to his statements on this subject from the second half of his career. The Silbajoris argument that I find least compelling is that Tolstoy is deliberately provocative in What is Art? in order to get the reader's attention, that he "makes it strange" for his own clever reasons and that one ought not to hold him to his very odd opinions and unreasonable suggestions. We are asked always to see Tolstoy whole--where he is unassailably great--and never to stop too long on any particular passage or statement. In my own writing on Tolstoy, I started from the linguistic-stylistic analysis of passages of great intensity and worked my way towards an understanding of whole works and important themes such as "death in Tolstoy." While this may seem at times a narrowing approach, it certainly avoids an obvious--to me--misreading such as the claim in Tolstoy's Aesthetics and His Art that Tolstoy looked forward to death.

If we are only allowed to see Tolstoy "whole" where every thought links up to every other thought, then we are left with a very abstract body of ideas which holds much less interest than his fiction. I do not see such consistency in Tolstoy: some works are pure genius while others are flat, repetitive, and even mean-spirited. Some of his ideas on art are of great aesthetic and moral significance while others are more than slightly ridiculous. There is a disturbing tendency in Tolstoy's later years to assume an imperious tone when discussing the big questions. He could be against every manifestation of nasilie (coercion) and yet be intent on forcing others--albeit nonviolently--to his way of thinking and his solutions. When one is in the midst of Tolstoy studies, this may seem the product of caring genius, but when one has left this area for the Soviet period as I did a few years ago, the authoritarian rhetoric has a very familiar and unattractive resonance. Tolstoy, so alert in his art to every nuance of speech and gesture, is deaf to his own voice; how else could he claim that "The Kreutzer Sonata" had no didactic or moralizing intent? Was this yet another example of his "making it strange"?

There were two kinds of iurodivye 'holy fools' in Russia; some acted the way they did for medical of spiritual reasons. Others chose "holy foolishness" as the only way to take an ethical stance before society and its rulers. To make Tolstoy "whole," to insist that even his most bizarre statements fit within a grand scheme, is not to enhance the whole but to diminish it. The negative reactions to What is Art?--which Silbajoris carefully records--are not hard to understand. It is possible to have the greatest respect for Tolstoy and yet to feel--like Tchaikovsky--that it is best to "avoid meeting Tolstoy on the street, lest...conversation should turn to the arts" (296). What is Art? is curious, provocative reading, perhaps a bit of aesthetic "holy foolishness," but it is not

the high point of Tolstoy's work on aesthetics. That can still be found in the fiction, which had no need of theory to make it comprehensible or great.

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Rimvydas Silbajoris's Tolstoy Aesthetics and His Art is an important contribution to the study of Tolstoy's fiction. I am especially gratified by this new work because it confirms in many ways a number of positions I took in my own Leo Tolstoy, Resident and Stranger. After all, the "working hypothesis" of Silbajoris's book is that "contradictions notwithstanding," Tolstoy's entire life, entire opus, are distinguished by a singular kind of internal unity and consistency," a commitment "to one lifelong quest for the kind of knowledge that would give him peace--a sense of belonging with everyone else in a universe which is meaningful"(p.9). Furthermore, this new study of Tolstoy's aesthetics corroborates my thesis that this quest is grounded in self-articulation and marked by the three moments of experience, image, idea: "Tolstoy's personal quest for moral value invariably extends to the very act of writing fiction, of breathing life into people who must then seek answers to the questions that plague their own creator. As these answers emerge, they become a kind of metalanguage about art itself and can ultimately be articulated also in theoretical terms, as Tolstoy finally did in his essay." Silbajoris concludes, as did I, that these assumptions imply a particular kind of relationship between the parts of the Tolstoyan text: he sees that the major treatise on aesthetics What Is Art? is "consistent in its basic propositions with everything that Tolstoy had always either consciously believed or instinctively felt about art" and that one may read this essay for "insights" into the "mystery of his tremendous creative achievement" (pp.12-13).

This shared vision has allowed Silbajoris to rework several of my observations on Tolstoy's poetics. What I had called the "journey of discovery" has been revisited apparently with Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope in mind: Tolstoy's argument that time and space are in essence modes of human communication...or of human awareness of the self in dimensions that cut across those of outer reality is confirmed many times over in the great novels themselves" (p. 259). What he says of Nekhliudov's journey can stand as his generalization about this Tolstoyan chronotope: "he gradually learns that he is withdrawing from outer to inner reality of

space and time and that this is at the same time a movement from the point at which the notions of meaning and purpose of life do not apply toward the meaningful, therefore real, realm of morality. In other words, time and space in Tolstoy's fiction become aspects of that parabola curving toward religious consciousness" (p. 260). Likewise, my conception of the "paradigmatic action," understood as the building block of the whole in which the part is like the whole, is expanded in conception and translated into a different kind of literary language: "a single sign acquires the quality of what is called a 'fractal' in mathematics, a particular fragment that repeats the structure of the whole and thus, in literary terms, becomes a kind of multivalent synecdoche, a part which yet embodies in itself the potential to expand and be a complete world. Therefore, the integrity of a Tolstoyan text is such that the feeling in it also functions as the underlying idea and is present in its entirety at every single point and must be so perceived by the reader. All this makes any given text in its turn a single 'sign' which must, as Tolstoy demands in his essay, communicate itself instantaneously, universally and in its totality" (p. 253).

The most creative and stimulating part of this book on Tolstoy's art deals with the quality of his realism, which I tried to characterize with the label "emblematic realism." Although Silbajoris does not treat this subject in the detail it deserves of discuss it even in one place, his remarks are very insightful and well worth taking into account. This theme first surfaces in his provocative discussion of the relationship between Tolstoy's pedagogical experience and ideas to his practice and theory of art (Chapter Two). Silbajoris quotes Tolstoy's reading of Fed'ka's story, "A Soldier's Life," to show how a creative reader can find meaning in bare detail, but then correctly observes that in Tolstoy's major fiction the meaning of a bare detail is determined by the context in which it appears. Silbajoris's own creative reading of the meaning of Nikolai's smile at a particular point in War and Peace is a brilliant example of how this works (and of Silbajoris's abilities as a reader). Silbajoris then argues, quite convincingly, that this contextual impact on the bare image is what Tolstoy means by "simplicity" of feeling in art and further that "Tolstoy's own art is at its greatest when an infinite variety of feelings and ideas become focused together in a single glance or in a seemingly inconsequential movement, or gesture, or a fleeting moment of special awareness" (p. 76). He later relates this notion of contextual impact to Tolstoy's concern for the "wee bit" (p. 176) and also argues that this is how Tolstoy's images become metaphoric: although "drawn directly from nature, without metaphorization,...their symbolic implications will emerge from their context and links with other elements

in the structure of the narrative" (p. 167). "Tolstoy works not through metaphorical deformations..., but through the placement of delicately perceived facts exactly where they will lind up with the most crucial events and with the most powerful emotional associations" (p. 169). It is regrettable that Silbajoris did not develop further this theory of contextual impact, for it would be good to have a number of examples demonstrating the variety and effect of this approach to metaphorization. Silbajoris, however, could not really do this within the structure of the book he has written. This structure--the chronological development of Tolstoy's ideas in several chapters, followed by a chapter on their realization in his art, and then two chapters on the reception of these ideas--does not allow Silbajoris to develop the many insights that he has on both Tolstoy's ideas and his art. This is a book that calls for a thematic organization of the material.

Silbajoris's procedure is to focus on the central and often well-known issues in order to find them new meaning. The best example of this is his exploration of Tolstoy's basic idea that art is infection. He continually draws our attention to the fact that this theory of infection entails an act of communication, a moment of contact, and he reminds us of the moral and religious significance of this for Tolstoy. It is this element of communication in the infection that Silbajoris sees as the link between Tolstoy's art and his pedagogical activity: "education is intense personal contact, an exciting emotional experience shared by the teacher and his students. It is this feeling of excitement, of infection with emotion, that makes Tolstoy's pedagogical activities relevant and important to his definition of art" (p. 49). But since "the art of teaching, in Tolstoy's school, came down to the art of learning how to communicate one's feelings," (p. 66) the pedagogical experience raises the central paradox in Tolstoy's theory of art. If "in depicting the world, a writer depicts his way of feeling its existence, thus really himself," and therefore "any depiction of reality will be modified by the factor of the author's personality..., the question becomes not only how to write but also who will understand it" (p. 18). The issue and role of the reader in the aesthetic event therefore had to emerge in Tolstoy's theory. I agree with Silbajoris's conclusion that Tolstoy never really resolved this issue. But Silbajoris derives from this theory that includes the reader one important point that he repeats a number of times. For Tolstoy "art is not something that is but something that happens between the artist and his audience" (p. 18) or in another and significantly different version "art is thus not some static concept or entity, but a dynamic process, an event that is continuously happening between the object of art and the beholder" (p. 107). Herein is the problem. How is the artist

or his feeling embodied in the work? Silbajoris has given some answers to this question, especially in his discussion of metaphorization, but again he raises an issue he does not really explore in depth, because his structure will not allow him to do this. This book wants a chapter devoted to "the character of the author as expressed in the work" (PSS, 45,182; 1853).

I could quibble about some details. Why is the function of art "to amuse and to instruct" characterized as "Aristotelian" (p. 183); the phrase is, I believe, a translation of Horace's prodesse et delictare. Or why is Plato's conception of art characterized as "metaphysical and symbolic" (p. 247), when his specific discussion of art in The Republic is based on the idea of mimesis, by which he meant the tendency of the audience to imitate the behavior of the gods or heroes (and for this reason Plato would ban Homer)? I have some concern about one methodological procedure: the late metaphysical ideas of Tolstoy are generally derived not from Tolstoy's own statements, but from Makovicky's recollections of those statements and thus somewhat less that reliable; this could have been obviated by relying on Tolstoy's diaries. I regret that Silbajoris was not able to develop his notion of Tolstoy's "self-punishment" and that he did not expand on his discussion of Tolstoy's reading of the story of Joseph, which has so many implications for his major fiction. There are, as always, minor errors, including some problems in translation, especially from French. But all of this is mere detail. Silbajoris has written a most provocative book on the relationship between Tolstoy's art and his ideas about art. The book is marred not by the minor errors, but by the inhibiting structure which does not allow for clear development of the many important insights. The lack of an index exacerbates this problem tremendously. The reader, therefore, must make a special effort to get out of this book what is genuinely there.

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