

**A Humanist Reading of Tolstoy:
The Writings of Petr M. Bitsilli**

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Petr Mikhailovich Bitsilli introduced his essay, "The Question of Life and Death in Tolstoy's Art" ("Problema zhizni i smerti v tvorchestve Tolstogo," 1928)¹ with the assertion that the truly creative individual has a

certain basic focus which determines his work in its entirety... [He] always has one subject on which his attention is fixed; but unlike the ordinary maniac, his focus acts to strengthen rather than weaken his creative powers. For Tolstoy, Death was the subject on which his spiritual powers [*dusha*] were fixed.

I would like to suggest that Bitsilli's writings may be characterized by an equally intense creative focus, but that for him, "Life" was the subject on which his spiritual powers were fixed. Although this fixation on life is somewhat vague and all-encompassing, it forms the foundation of Bitsilli's humanism--an emphasis on the profound dignity and worth of individual man in his everyday life or existence within the universal frame of human and secular values accorded him by that very existence. This humanist vision both reinforces and reflects his interests as a scholar of history and literature, informing his reading of both, and providing the link between his professional study of history and his professionally avocational study of literature. As a historian, Bitsilli's scholarship centered on examining problems in Russian and world history, in particular, problems of cultural history--the latter extending back to the dissertation he defended at St. Petersburg University in 1917, entitled "Salimbene. Studies in Italian Life of the XIII Century" ["Salimbene. Ocherki italianskoj zhizni XIII veka"],² focused on the beginnings of Italian Humanism. Simultaneously, his compelling interests in literature appear to have dominated his own personal and cultural life as an active member of the Russian intellectual community in emigration from 1920 until his death in 1953. It is this humanist focus which determined his critique of Tolstoy, whose work he took as his measure for all subsequent literary endeavors.

¹P.M. Bitsilli, "Problema zhizni i smerti v tvorchestve Tolstogo," *Sovremennye zapiski* XXXVI (Paris, 1928), pp. 274-304.

²P.M. Bitsilli, *Salimbene. Ocherki Italjanskoj zhizni XIII veka* (Odessa: Tipografija Tekhnik, 1916), 390 pages.

Bitsilli's objective in the above-mentioned essay was to demonstrate that Tolstoy's mystical fixation on death was the key to his equally mystical fixation on life, that is, it suggested the solution to his perception of "death as an enigma which is the enigma of life itself." Consequently, for Bitsilli, the very name of Tolstoy came to symbolize "life." And even more striking, perhaps, Tolstoy's writings came to represent for him a symbolic model for "real life" in emigration, that is, the Russian "life force" [in the Bergsonian sense], that mystical source of renewal from which he could constantly draw his own creative inspiration and his sense of Russian and universal human values while residing in a world of alien and emigre culture, where death in life was a recognizable reality and an ever terrifying potential.

For example, in his *Brief History of Russian Literature* (*Kratkaia istoriia russkoi literatury*, 1934)³ Bitsilli introduced Tolstoy first as a "family man," distinguishing him from his literary compatriots, Turgenev and Goncharov, "who did not have families." To define Tolstoy's character still further, he emphasized his consciously moral commitment to the obligations of his position as a "landowner," while simultaneously stressing his personal "sympathy" toward his peasants and their way of life. Thus, Bitsilli's introduction of Tolstoy to the general emigre readership was first and foremost as a decent human being, as a secular moral force, and secondly, as an inspired literary genius capable of recreating for his readers in an original style and innovative manner, not only the way of life which he represented as a member of the landed Russian gentry, but Life itself as a complex and multifaceted gift.

Bitsilli's humanist focus emerged both directly--in his writings on Tolstoy as well as in his reviews of publications of Tolstoy's work--and indirectly, in his scholarship, critiques and reviews of other writers, wherein Tolstoy and his work were often presented, if only in passing, as a standard against which other literary works could be judged.⁴

³*Kratkaia Istoriia russkoi literatury. Chast' II-aia: Ot Pushkina do nashego vremeni* (Sofia: Izd. N.N. Alekseeva, 1934), pp. 41-49.

⁴Tolstoy is mentioned indirectly, for example, in Bitsilli's introduction of Dostoevsky in the *Kratkaia istoriia russkoi literatury*, see above, p. 49, and is juxtaposed to Chekhov in all the essays treating his work, see below; Tolstoy is also used as a measure or source of comparison in reviews as diverse as Bitsilli's critique of A.L. Bem's *U istokov tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* (Prague, 1936) and his assessment of Sirin/Nabokov's *Priglasenie na kazn'* in "Vozrozhdenie allegorii," *Sovremennye zapiski* LXI (1936), pp. 191-204.

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Consequently, it should also be noted here that Bitsilli's writings were all of a piece; that his book reviews or brief critiques were frequently extensions of his literary essays. In fact, each new essay could begin where the last one left off, or refer back to a point made in an earlier essay, while the reviews usually continued an argument or developed ideas discussed in his essays of the time.⁵

Bitsilli's commentary on Tolstoy, then, was continuous, expressed as it was both in his essays on Tolstoy, his essays on other writers of narrative prose, and in his review articles published throughout his years of emigration, from 1921, when he was appointed to the Faculty of History and Literature at the University of Sofia, until 1948, when he was retired without pension from the then Faculty of History.

Bitsilli's earliest writings on Tolstoy were brief reviews of newly published Tolstoy materials appearing in the emigre press: "The Genesis of War and Peace" ("Genezis Voyny i mira") appeared in 1926 in the Russian emigre weekly, *Zveno*, published in Paris; "How Tolstoy Wrote War and Peace" ("Kak e napisal Tolstoj Vojna i Mir") appeared the following year in the Bulgarian newspaper, *Iztok*.⁶ These were followed by two publications in 1928, one appearing in Sofia, the other in Paris.⁷ His Brief History of Russian Literature which appeared in 1934, was followed in 1936 by his essay "Notes on Tolstoy" ("Zametki o Tolstom"). His last literary observations pertaining to Tolstoy were included in his essays on Chekhov and Dostoevsky: Chekhov's Art (*Tvorchestvo Chekhova, opyt stilisticheskogo analiza*, 1942), "Notes on Chekhov's 'Story of an Unknown Man'" ("Zametki o Chekhovskom 'Rasskaze neizvestnogo cheloveka,'" 1948),⁸ and "The Problem of Internal

⁵For example, remarks in "Zametki o Tolstom" are referred to in "Vozrozhdenie allegorii," while his review of Bem's *U istokov tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* continues ideas expressed in his essays on Tolstoy.

⁶P.M. Bitsilli, "Genezis Voyny i mira," *Zveno* 199 (Paris, 21/XI/1926), pp. 2-3; and P.M. Bitsilli, "Kak e napisal Tolstoj Vojna i Mir," *Istok* II: 56 (Sofia, 12/II/1927), p. 1.

⁷P.M. Bitsilli, "Tolstoi kato romanist. Literaturno-istoricheskoto mu znachenie," *B'lgarska Mis'l* III: 7/8 (1928), pp. 513-527, and "Problema zhizni i smerti v tvorchestve Tolstogo," *Sovremennye zapiski* XXXVI (Paris, 1928), pp. 274-304.

⁸P.M. Bitsilli, *Tvorchestvo Chekhova, opyt stilisticheskogo analiza* (Sofia: Pridvorna pechatnitsa, 1942). A German translation of this work accompanied by "Zametki o Chekhovskom 'Rasskaze neizvestnogo cheloveka'" (Sofia: Universitetska pechatnitsa, 1948) appeared as: Anton P. Chechov,

Form in Dostoevsky's Novels" ("K voprosu o vnutrennei forme romana Dostoevskogo," 1946).⁹ The Brief History of Russian literature¹⁰ intended for the Russian emigre community in Bulgaria and elsewhere, was a chronologically ordered collection of original essays on major themes and authors in Russian literature rather than a traditional literary-historical survey treating authors' lives and works. The section on Tolstoy developed Bitsilli's interests at the time of its writing. In addition, he authored numerous reviews of Russian literature and critical studies, including those by eminent Soviet scholars of the 1920s-1930s, for such emigre publications as *Sovremennye zapiski* (Paris), *Zveno* (Paris), *Chisla* (Paris), *Slavia* (Prague), *Russkaia Mysl'* (Sofia, Prague, Berlin, Paris), *Rul'* (Berlin), *Russkaia shkola za rubezhom* (Prague), *Slavishche Rundschau*, and so on.

Bitsilli was hardly alone among Russian emigre intellectuals to hold Tolstoy in such high regard. For example, in addition to defending *War and Peace* as the world's greatest novel, and writing a series of historical novels clearly based on techniques acquired from reading it, Mark Aldanov wrote in *The Riddle of Tolstoy* (*Zagadka Tolstogo*, 1923): "For me the divine nature of Tolstoy's genius is more than an ordinary literary metaphor."¹¹ In his essay "On Tolstoy" ("O Tolstom") he emphasized how difficult it was to write definitively about an author whose novels are so "life-like," claiming that "When you write about Tolstoy, you must forget definitive critical judgments. [You can only write] some incidental, fragmentary comments--nothing more."¹² Aldanov was intrigued by Tolstoy's technical

Das Werk und sein Stil, trans. by V. Seiveking (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1966); this German publication was subsequently translated into English as: *Chekhov's Art: A Stylistic Analysis*, trans. by T. Clyman and E.J. Cruise (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1983).

⁹P.M. Bitsilli, *K voprosu o vnutrennei forme romana Dostoevskogo* (Sofia: Universitetska pechatnitsa, 1946). An American reprint was made available in *O Dostoevskom: stat'i*, edited by D. Fanger (Providence: Brown University Slavic reprint series IV, 1966).

¹⁰P.M. Bitsilli, *Kratkaia istoriia russkoi literatury. Chast' II-aja: Ot Pushkina do nashego vremeni* (Sofia: Izd. N.N. Alekseeva, 1934).

¹¹Mark Aldanov, *Zagadka Tolstogo* (Berlin: Izd. I.P. Ladyzhnikov, 1923), p. 61.

¹²Mark Aldanov, "O Tolstom," *Sovremennye zapiski* XXXVI (1928), p. 266.

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capacity to create "verisimilitude" both in his character portrayal and in his creation of literary space: "Tolstoy was the first really to create three-dimensional space in literature."¹³

Furthermore, in his review of new emigre editions of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky published in Riga in 1928, Aldanov angrily rejected contentions in the Soviet press that the readership of the Russian classics had "slipped among the emigres." He asserted: "In emigration, the contrary is true, the readership of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is constantly growing--they are 'best sellers,' although, the other classics are falling far behind, including Pushkin."¹⁴ In the same essay, Aldanov refers somewhat ambiguously to the reception of the Russian classics by world literary figures, indicating that while most preferred Dostoevsky or Turgenev to Tolstoy, those who appreciated him included André Maurois, Thomas Mann and Leon Blum.¹⁵

On the other hand, there also seems to have been a serious division in the emigre community over which of the two Russian literary giants was most "Russian." Indeed, Bitsilli used a third of his review of A.L. Bem's *The Sources of Dostoevsky's Art* (*U istokov tvorchestva Dostoevskogo*)¹⁶ to defend Tolstoy against charges of "tendentiousness" and "artistic failure" for his allegedly "insufficiently Russian" characterization of Prince Shcherbatsky, and for expounding his own ideas and "not the ideas of the Russian people." Bitsilli countered Bem's citation of Dostoevsky's accusations in his *Diary of a Writer* (*Dnevnik Pisatel'ia*) discussion of Anna Karenina, finding it necessary to turn the tables and condemn Dostoevsky's "tendentiousness" which he perceived as stemming from his narrow concept of Russianness as opposed to Tolstoy's more universal, humanist portrayal of character. Bitsilli emphasized that the Old Prince was an example of the "living people" depicted in Tolstoy's novels, and hence, not only was he not merely a spokesman for "Slavophile ideas," but as a full-fledged human being, as an individual of dignity and worth, he was in no way merely a "mouthpiece." "For us," Bitsilli wrote, "the fact that the Old Prince says what Tolstoy might have said simply lets us know that he would have agreed with Tolstoy, not that Tolstoy was too tendentious.... Tolstoy lived amongst his people in *War and Peace* and in *Anna*

¹³Mark Aldanov, "O romane," *Sovremennye zapiski* LII (1933), p. 436.

¹⁴Mark Aldanov, "O Tolstom," pp. 264-273.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 266.

¹⁶A.L. Bem, *U istokov tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* (Prague, 1936).

Karenina, and he forces us to live with them as well. There can be no discussion of 'artistic failure' in this instance."

Thus, while Bitsilli was an enthusiastic admirer of Tolstoy for many reasons, including that of reinforcing values held by Bitsilli and the liberal segment of the Russian emigre community, he was very careful to defend Tolstoy from misreadings. In addition, while Bitsilli's humanist interpretation was directed toward an understanding of Tolstoy's worldview, he was not solely interested in it as a philosophical or polemical stance; rather, he sought to determine how that worldview was made manifest in Tolstoy's narrative prose.

Bitsilli's humanist focus emerged first and foremost in his treatment of the theme of death and life in the two essays published in 1928 mentioned above. He stated:

For Tolstoy, death was the subject on which his spiritual powers [*dusha*] were invariably focused. Death not as metaphysically accidental even though it was the inevitable end of life (as in Pushkin), but death as life's completion or conclusion and its negation, death as an enigma which is the enigma of life itself.¹⁷

It was precisely this "enigma of life itself" on which Bitsilli concentrated his attention in all his discussions of Tolstoy.

Second, Bitsilli recognized this "enigma of life" as the source of the particular kind of "reality" or "realism" that Tolstoy created, that is, the impetus behind Tolstoy's narrative genius, his capacity for making the reader "feel" the authenticity of the human life experience. Hence, in his juxtaposition of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Bitsilli emphasized Tolstoy's non-idealized expression of reality, indeed, his non-literary or even anti-poetic presentation of ideas and events as well as characters as opposed to Dostoevsky's more literary embodiment of ideas in his characters. And subsequently, both in his treatment of Tolstoy in his *Brief History of Russian Literature* and in his essays on Chekhov, Bitsilli sought to distinguish Tolstoy's process of characterization, methods of composition, and plot structure from that of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Third, Bitsilli also defended Tolstoy and his methodology against certain stereotypes that he recognized in current Tolstoy scholarship. For example, in his brief 1926 essay, "The Genesis of War and Peace," based on his reading of A.E. Gruzinsky's recent publication of the drafts of that novel, he

¹⁷P.M. Bitsilli, "Problema zhizni i smerti v tvorchestve Tolstogo," *Sovremennye zapiski*, p. 274.

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repudiated Aldanov's critique that Tolstoy's "synopsis of characters" served as proof of the "profound, wicked misanthrope within." Bitsilli declared:

This is not the place to dispute this formula; I will only say that this synopsis hardly provides the data for it. Rather, it is obvious that the synopsis was irrelevant to Tolstoy [as a reflection of his own life]. If we examine the naive, pedantic quality of its construction we see that [the characterizations] are merely puppets to test the situations to be used in the novel.... More important, we must ask the question in a slightly different way: not 'why' but 'how' did this all occur...? Precisely how were the phantoms [of the synopsis] transformed into the living people [of the novel]?"¹⁸

And in his 1928 essay, "Tolstoy as a Novelist" ("Tolstoj kato romanist"), he claimed that Tolstoy's novels must not be observed through the prism of current theories of literature which analyzed all nineteenth century novels on the model of classical tragedy.

The fullest accounts of Bitsilli's interpretation of Tolstoy appeared in the two essays published almost a decade apart in the Paris-based Russian emigre magazine, *Sovremennye zapiski* (1928 and 1936), in the B'lgarska mis'l' essay (1928), in the section on Tolstoy in the *Brief History of Russian Literature* (1934), and in his essays on Chekhov (1940s).

"The Problem of Life and Death in Tolstoy's Art" (1928)¹⁹ treated the much discussed theme of death in Tolstoy's writings.²⁰ First of all, as mentioned above,

¹⁸P.M. Bitsilli, "Genezis Voyny i Mira," p. 2.

¹⁹P.M. Bitsilli, "Problema zhizni i smerti v tvorchestve Tolstogo," pp. 274-304.

²⁰This theme has been treated in various ways both before and after Bitsilli's essay. It is possible that Bitsilli was stimulated by such pre-revolutionary writings as N.K. Mikhailovsky, "Khozyain i rabotnik L.N. Tolstogo" (1895), which focuses primarily on death in the later works, but attempts to treat Tolstoy's concept of "death" in general. Furthermore, Bitsilli directly mentions Mark Aldanov's *Zagadka Tolstogo* (reprint: Providence, R.I., 1969, of 1923 text) which treats of Tolstoy's "enigma," and Mathew Arnold's "Count Leo Tolstoy" in *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* (London, 1888), in his discussion of *Anna Karenina*. Other treatments of this theme over the past three decades are too numerous to mention here, however, one of the most clearly developed discussions of the question of death in Tolstoy's writings since Bitsilli is Richard F. Gustafson's *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and*

Bitsilli focused on the significance of death in Tolstoy's conception of life, with all its ramifications. Second, the examination of this problem led to Bitsilli's attempts to define Tolstoy's mysticism, as it affected his views of life and death, the relationships between individuals and the cosmos, and as it emerged throughout his writings. Tolstoy's mysticism [mistika] was then juxtaposed, on the one hand, to Dostoevsky's non-mystical vision, and on the other hand, to Schopenhauer's conception of Will (a subject treated in more detail in 1936).²¹ Finally, Tolstoy's worldview was discussed in terms of its stylistic expression in the basic narrative patterns of his literary texts, in his character portrayal, compositional devices, and in his overall plot structure.

More specifically, Bitsilli's observation that the center of Tolstoy's focus was "death as an enigma, which is the enigma of life itself," was developed with examples from both Tolstoy's correspondence and his fiction. He traced Tolstoy's discussion of death throughout his writings, indicating how he "began with a horror of death, of its mystery. Life cries out before death, a healthy man does not accommodate thoughts about it." Nevertheless, Bitsilli demonstrated how Tolstoy struggled toward an understanding of the process by which death confers meaning on life, and how Pierre became his model. Consequently, Bitsilli followed Pierre's responses to death in *War and Peace*, pointing out how he is a

remarkable symbolic expression of this.... He is present at the death of his father, and does not understand what is happening: he is bored and wants to sleep. He goes to an execution, and is not afraid, because he is convinced that he Pierre cannot be executed. He is present at the death of Karatayev...He stands calmly in front of Dolokhov's pistol...He sits on the Shevardino redoubt and looks around him with a joyous smile....He returns with Villarsky to liberated Moscow, and where Villarsky sees only death and destruction, Pierre sees only 'the unusually powerful force of life' of the Russian people. No matter how he strives, following the dictates of Masonry, to concentrate on the meaning of death, nothing comes of it for him. Death is powerless over him. He only gains strength from all the deprivations and horrors he experiences.

Stranger (Princeton, 1986).

²¹Bitsilli may be referring here to Lev Shestov, *Dobro i uchenii Tolstogo i Nitshe* (St. Petersburg, 1907), translated into English by Bernard Martin as *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche* (Athens, OH: 1969).

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He is the only one of all the heroes in *War and Peace* over whom time seems to have no power.

Thus, according to Bitsilli, Tolstoy presented Pierre as a character whose personality is unchanged. "Pierre fulfills the role of 'life-giver' in the novel." He functions as the "personification of the 'pure' idea of Life." Bitsilli reaffirmed this idea with the assertion: "[Pierre's] entire image is the categorical 'No!' with which Life challenges Death."²²

Nevertheless, in Bitsilli's account, Tolstoy also raised the spectre of death "depriving life of meaning" and hence, found it necessary to observe carefully as many cases of dying as he could. In examining Tolstoy's "morbid curiosity" about the process of dying, Bitsilli reviewed the numerous responses to death and dying occurring in his letters and in his diary entries. These include references to his brother Nikolai's death, to his wife Sophia Andreevna's being on the verge of death, and to his daughter, Maria L'vovna dying. Bitsilli concluded that while Tolstoy also saw in death the means for the observer to learn about it, easing him into his eventual face to face encounter, he sought more than rational understanding: "Observing carefully how people close to him died, it seemed as if Tolstoy became a participant in the mystery of death."

Furthermore, with respect to "the mystery of death" which Bitsilli viewed as the "dominant element characterizing Tolstoy's worldview,"²³ he noted that "if death were only the 'swallowing up' into 'nothingness'...it would only be negative and perhaps not so enigmatic." Therefore, to explain it further, he attempted to compare Tolstoy's "mysticism" with Dostoevsky's religiosity. According to Bitsilli, where Dostoevsky occasionally expressed mysticism, it was "connected with his illness; Tolstoy's mysticism is connected with his 'constitution.'"²⁴ In addition, he stated: "The mysticism of death was completely alien to Dostoevsky. He never describes dying. His heroes die instantaneously: either they are killed or they kill themselves." Zossima's death, he claimed, was not an exception, but was rather a study in parting; "it neither concerns the mystery of resurrection, nor revelation." In a further comparison, Bitsilli suggested their alternative

²²Bitsilli, "Problema zhizni i smerti v tvorchestve Tolstogo," pp. 274-275.

²³Ibid., pp. 276-277.

²⁴Ibid., p. 283.

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views of death were an outgrowth of different life experiences:

Dostoevsky experienced a horror of another kind: the horror of the death penalty, the immediate violence of being cut off from life.... catastrophes..., while Tolstoy participated in the mystery of dying many times long before he reached full consciousness of that age when a person becomes a witness of his own death.²⁵

Tolstoy's mysticism, then, according to Bitsilli, affected not only his view of death, but his view of life, and his worldview in general. Most important, that worldview was inscribed in the very style and structure of his novels. Thus, Bitsilli showed how birth and death were perpetually linked through mystical affinities. He enumerated various cases, including the death of Andrey's wife in War and Peace while giving birth to their son; the death of Levin's brother Nickolay in Anna Karenina simultaneously with the beginning of Kitty's pregnancy; and indeed, the exposition of the "plot" of War and Peace, which he claimed, began with the juxtaposition of life and death and then, "in the chain of episodes the duality of the mystery of life is underlined, the mystical affinities of beginnings and ends...."²⁶

Bitsilli further suggested that in this regard Tolstoy was indebted to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*).²⁷ Hence, the mystical connections between birth and death were not isolated instances. Similar unexplained connections and mysterious correspondences existed at all levels of the novel, between characters, for example, between Petya Rostov and Pierre, or even between Koznyshev and Karenin, and between the macro- and microcosms of the text. Consequently, Bitsilli also examined how certain technical devices of parallelism and analogy--some intentional, some perhaps unintentional--emphasize unexpected but essential bonds. A fine example occurs in the parallel introductions of Prince Andrei and Ippolit Kuragin, separated by only a few pages in the beginning of War and Peace. However, Bitsilli did not limit himself to examining patterns of characterization; he revealed how analogous characterological traits might suggest other affinities, and above all, the affinity of positive and negative characteristics in all human beings, in the totality or

²⁵Ibid., p. 276.

²⁶Ibid., p. 279.

²⁷Ibid., p. 279n.

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universality of life itself--Universal-life [vsezhizn']. Thus, according to Bitsilli, in contrast to Dostoevsky,

Tolstoy's characters represent not ideas [ideology], but different forms of one and the same Life [life force] which pulsates in them and through them, demonstrating Life itself, and in which the 'good' and the 'bad' are blended together, that is, 'good and bad' from a human perspective, in which 'pure' Good and Evil do not struggle.

In this context, then, Bitsilli maintained that unlike Dostoevsky's novels,

There are no 'absolutely Evil' people in Tolstoy's, that is, those who serve evil for the sake of the special pleasure connected with it. Tolstoy's 'negative types' are people with a reduced life force, with lowered eroticism, and thus deprived of sensitivity, of capacity of understanding....²⁸

Furthermore, in addition to affinities determining individual character traits and "family traits," Bitsilli noted that certain affinities between the families involved both attraction and repulsion which, in accord with Tolstoy's mystical worldview, "must exist." He went on to show how those essential human characteristics were symbolically linked with the historical events depicted in the novel. Here Bitsilli developed some of Merezhkovsky's observations comparing Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.²⁹ He states:

In Tolstoy, as opposed to Dostoevsky, people are not 'personnages,' but living concrete beings who grow into new, broader concrete beings, families, nations.....The exposition of the plot involving complex relationships between the heroes of *War and Peace* is related to the exposition involving relationships between the Russian and Napoleonic empires. Similarly, the failure of efforts to bring Russia and France together....is paralleled by the failed attempts within the families [Andrei and Natasha, Nikolai and Sonia]...Then, like 1812, the highest point of the national tragedy, there is the final break between Prince Andrei and Natasha, the capture of Pierre....This is followed by the liberation of Russia and the 'renewal' of both Pierre and Natasha.

And Bitsilli concluded:

²⁸Ibid., pp. 280-281.

²⁹Dmitri Merezhkovsky, *Tolstoy as Man and Artist with an Essay on Dostoevsky* (London, 1902).

Since each form of life is only a part of Universal-life, then 'fate' and 'character' coincide and nothing happens as mere accident...because 'character' is the same as 'instinct'....A rationalist ...analyzes the life process at separate 'moments' perceived by him as independent entities; he freezes the flow of life and cuts it into pieces; he substitutes for the real flow of time flowing 'cinematographic' time, to use Bergson's apt expression. A mystic, indirectly experiencing Universal-life, does not need this fiction of dead, immobile points....He perceives how all seemingly individual lives are merged in the Universal-life, and consequently participate in the universal movement or flow of time....From this Tolstoy draws a conclusion which would have startled Leibniz: the most reliable knowledge is instinctive, obscure and unaccountable.

In "Tolstoy as a Novelist," written the same year, Bitsilli went so far as to state that "In Tolstoy everything, every episode, every detail [had] a symbolic meaning"³⁰ and thus everything was perceived as interrelated through Tolstoy's mystical vision of the universe or "Universal life." Bitsilli's rejection of classical tragedy as a model for analyzing Tolstoy's novels led him to compare War and Peace instead with the epic tradition of Virgil and Homer. In particular, he showed how Tolstoy's heroes were collective entities--family units and indeed, the Russian people as a nation--rather than individual personalities, and hence the plot structure was not based on dramatic action of individual heroes but on symbolic affinities between characters and the larger entities and movements portrayed in the novel. Indeed, in this essay, Bitsilli suggested that "the 'rationalist' Tolstoy was a precursor of the intuitivist Bergson."³¹ In further contrasting Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, he pointed out that while Tolstoy believed in the "mystical, monism, and the immanent, Dostoevsky trusted in dialectics, the transcendent, and dualism."³² Thus, Tolstoy's intuition of the unity of the universe was perceived as determining his worldview, his plot structure, his characters, and their function in the novel.

Bitsilli's second essay published in *Sovremennye zapiski*, although simply entitled "Notes on Tolstoy" ("Zametki o Tolstom"), developed his interest in the problem of such universal mystical connections or "affinities," or what he

³⁰P.M. Bitsilli, "Tolstoy kato romanist," p. 521.

³¹Ibid., p. 524.

³²Ibid., p. 525.

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referred to here as identification through "common birthmarks" [rodimye pjatna], not only in Tolstoy's writings, but in comparative literary history. This essay is primarily concerned with intertextual relationships based on the methodology of "birthmark" identification discussed as well in two other publications from 1936, the essay "Birth of Allegory" ("Rozhdenie allegorii"), written to show the striking concatenation of stylistic and ideological elements in the work of Saltykov and Sirin/Nabokov; and the review of A.L. Bem's study of Dostoevsky's sources, mentioned above.

In "Notes on Tolstoy," Bitsilli discussed the various types of intertextual connections, associations, and relationships between Tolstoy and his predecessors based on their "common birthmarks." Not only did he claim to share this method with A.L. Bem, but he was also careful to distinguish it from studies by the Russian Formalists, on the one hand, whom he claimed were predominantly absorbed by the question of the genesis of "stylistic devices," and from studies by traditional scholars of "sources and influences," on the other hand, whose work he claimed resulted primarily in the cataloguing of influences, significant and otherwise.

Bitsilli was concerned neither with stylistic devices alone nor with catalogues, but with problems of interpretation of the common aspects found in the writings of different authors. Thus, he demonstrated how the most significant "birthmarks" were revealed not in commonly shared ideas or themes, but in the less obvious aspects of the text, especially on the stylistic and structural levels of a given work. In many respects this essay was a precursor to more recent studies of "intertextuality" or "subtextual analysis."³³ In his essays on Chekhov, Bitsilli developed this method much further, demonstrating Chekhov's unique transformations with respect to his sources and common heritage.

In this context, Bitsilli also discussed in some detail the problems of analyzing influences and sources:

...it is natural to assume that Tolstoy ought to have had the greatest influence on Chekhov, not only because for him, as indeed for all of us, Tolstoy was the greatest master of narrative literature, but also because they were contemporaries and Chekhov knew him personally...and indeed, his influence is manifest in numerous aspects of Chekhov's art....

The more profound the influence of one artist on another, however, the more concealed it is, and the less does the "pupil" make use of the "teacher's" work as material.... Generally speaking, in analyzing influences, and indeed, the

³³See, for example, the studies of Kiril Taranovsky or Omry Ronen.

sources of any work of art, one must distinguish between kinds of borrowing; to wit, what comprises the plot [sjuzhet] and the fable or story material [fabula], and what pertains to the means of expression.

...Borrowings, citations and plagiarisms do not in themselves offer evidence of influence; they only permit conjecture. Genuine influence is revealed in style, tone and outlook on life.... Every artist has, figuratively speaking, his "birthmarks"—his stereotypes, clichés, recurrent lexicon, images and set phrases—which testify to his view of life, his "fixations," and his creative "complex."³⁴

"Notes on Tolstoy" contained sections on Tolstoy and Flaubert, with special reference to "La légende de Saint-Julien l'hospitalier,"³⁵ on Tolstoy and Schopenhauer, following up some of the affinities discussed in both the 1928 essays and elsewhere, and on Tolstoy and Shakespeare.³⁶ One of the most telling segments of this essay concerned the interpretation of the sources and models for Tolstoy's female characters.³⁷ Bitsilli demonstrated that Tolstoy essentially rejected the Russian literary tradition for the Shakespearean and, indeed, for the English tradition, which he perceived as the source for the non-idealized, non-romanticized personality models of such women as Natasha Rostov, Dolly Oblonsky, and to a certain extent even Anna Karenina, the "authentic" wives and mothers who inhabited an authentic world. He differentiated them from the idealized vehicles of ideological values dominating the novels of Pushkin, Turgenev or Goncharov, for example, from the inhabitants of their ideal literary worlds.

This emphasis on the portrayal of "authentic" characters expanded on Bitsilli's interpretation of Tolstoy's stylistic innovations in the presentation of a reality inhabited by

³⁴Citations from Bitsilli's essays on Chekhov refer to the English translation [with some major amendments] included in Peter M. Bitsilli *Chekhov's Art: A Stylistic Analysis*, translated by Toby W. Clyman and Edwina Jannie Cruise (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1983), p. 4.

³⁵This connection was further developed by Elizabeth Trahan in "L.N. Tolstoy's *Master and Man*: A Symbolic Narrative," *SE EJ* 7 (1963): 258-68.

³⁶Various types of connections between Tolstoy and Shakespeare have been discussed in several essays, for example, G. Wilson Knight, *Tolstoy and Shakespeare* (London, 1934), and George Gibian, *Tolstoy and Shakespeare* (The Hague, 1957).

³⁷See also: Ruth Crego Benson's *Women in Tolstoy: The Ideal and the Erotic* (Chicago, 1973).

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"living people" as fundamental to his worldview found in his 1928 essays and again in his *Brief History of Russian Literature*. In both instances, he attributed Tolstoy's genius to his capacity to create esthetic images which involve the reader in the "real world" that he created, and consequently, in the "experience of Universal-Life...", in the instinctual experience of life rather than in the abstract or ideal world of philosophical ideas [ideology], again in contrast to Dostoevsky's literary world. Bitsilli stated:

In depicting real life, Tolstoy also endeavored to reveal its meaning in esthetic images. His realistic novel is thus also a philosophical novel which brings him close to Dostoevsky. However, Dostoevsky approaches the subject of the meaning of life differently and his philosophical novel differs radically from Tolstoy's. The foundation of Tolstoy's wisdom was rather to experience human life in the course of changing generations, and natural life in the movement of its changing phenomena, and thus Universal-life, life as the Cosmos, life subordinated to the mysterious divine will which can only be understood as Goodness.³⁸

As opposed to earlier novelists who were more deeply influenced by the dramatic techniques of classical tragedy, Bitsilli explained that Tolstoy's narrative method was neither to describe his characters nor their situations, nor to employ literary masks, but instead to depict through the gradual revelation of processes and affinities, through hints, conversations, and repetitions of character traits or visual identification marks the personalities of his heroes and to indicate their affinity with the overall narrative structure as it was similarly revealed. Bitsilli stated:

Tolstoy never gives detailed descriptions of his heroes. He was convinced that to describe a person, to present a final, finished moral and physical portrait was impossible, false to nature, to reality. Anyone can verify how difficult it is to define the externals of a familiar person, and the more familiar, the more difficult, because in seeing a person constantly, you see him differently; the smallest changes in clothing, hairstyle, coloring, body position, etc alter the overall picture...You can say that someone is handsome or ugly, but it is difficult, even impossible, to explain why. [eg, Ippolit and Hélène] Similarly, you can have a conception of someone's soul and simultaneously find it difficult to decide if he is intelligent or stupid, good or evil, simply because such epithets are too general, too abstract, and consequently

³⁸P.M. Bitsilli, *Kratkaia istoriia russkoi literatury*, p. 49.

inapplicable to a concrete individual... the same person can be both.... Different tendencies, drives, capabilities are mixed up and struggling within the same human soul—the spiritual entity of a personality can be sensed, guessed in this admixture, but it is impossible to formulate the personality precisely, definitively. Therefore, Tolstoy does not provide the psychological characteristics of his characters; he limits himself to hints, and more frequently, he presents them as they speak and act, as they reveal themselves before us.... In general, the speed and degree to which the reader identifies with Tolstoy's characters is proportionate to the sympathetic nature of their personalities... a quality which Tolstoy valued extremely highly. The opposite is equally true; only the insensitive, morally obtuse are simultaneously incapable of love and of hatred. In this way, the same personality can arouse both our sympathy and antipathy, and for the same reasons. [e.g. Nikolai Rostov and Prince Andrei]³⁹

Bitsilli also attempted to show how Tolstoy differed from his predecessors in creating characters perceived by the reader not as significant for the development of the action or simply as participants in events, but as "living human beings" existing for their own sake.... Thus, with respect to composition and plot structure, Bitsill developed the ideas presented in his essay, "Tolstoy as a Novelist." Hence, he remarked

...the structure of Tolstoy's novels is also essentially different.... His plot does not consist of a central episode around which secondary episodes coalesce, that is, he has no elements of..."intrigue;" rather he consciously opposes to [traditional intrigue] what he calls "chains" of events and human fates. Most events bring people together or separate them, be they of private or universal significance, related to family life or to the life of the nation—and everything moves toward the final union of the two main families—the Bolkonskys and Rostovs—despite the original failure to unite them. These events are not connected as in a drama, but as a result of the chain of events there exists what "must exist"—that is, in the sense that the spiritual particularities which distinguish the Rostovs demand their fulfilment in the spiritual qualities of the Bolkonskys, and from this point of view, the union of Nikolai Rostov and Princess Maria is more positive and rational than the failed union of Natasha and Prince Andrei, because they each had too much will to even make a successful spiritual union. . Pierre Bezukhov, who is as developed spiritually as Andrei, is gentler and more acquiescent in his personal

³⁹Ibid., pp. 45-46.

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relationships; thus, he better fulfils the needs of both Natasha and himself. Hence, there is a certain internal necessity to which people subordinate themselves unconsciously despite their efforts, their wills.⁴⁰

Finally, Bitsilli achieved his understanding of the philosophical and spiritual values inherent in Tolstoy's novels by initiating his discussion with the suggestion that just as Tolstoy's characters could be compared to the lives of ordinary human beings, so his plot could be understood as determined by the "necessity" of life.

People, unaware of [their actions] serve something that is higher, more powerful, wiser than themselves, and their dependence...appears in all aspects of their activities. True wisdom lies in subordination to fate, in unjudgemental faith in the common sense of universal-life and hence, in the common sense of private life. Such is the wisdom of Tolstoy's simple folk, such as Platon Karatayev. Only one who serves the interest of the whole is free from the fear of death. A person living for himself alone, seeking no more than to make sense of his own private life, will encounter only despair; because his entire life will lose its meaning in death.

Bitsilli concluded by affirming Tolstoy's mystical view of life and death with reference to Tolstoy's own biography and his personal psychological struggle:

Tolstoy never tired of reminding the reader about death as the end of individual life not in order to scare him, but to prepare him—to free him from the fear of death by reminding him that personal life is only a part of universal life. To live not for oneself but for others means to be victorious over death.... The theoretical foundations of Tolstoy's teachings are extremely simple. The essential inner struggle he carried on with himself in order to assure himself of his own teachings, was a battle not of ideas, but of the heart; Tolstoy expended his greatest efforts in struggling against his attachment to the joys of life; against his capacity to get angry and express hatred, to find beauty in the phenomenon of power, he expended major efforts to appear himself as a living example of acceptance, of refusing to fight evil with force—this is the basis of his teachings.

Just as he keenly perceived key stylistic elements in Tolstoy's narrative by juxtaposing his worldview and creative process to Dostoevsky's, so Bitsilli determined key features

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 46-47.

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in Chekhov's style in comparative analyses with other writers, namely, Turgenev and Tolstoy.

Indeed, after 1936, most of Bitsilli's observations of Tolstoy appeared in the context of his essays on other writers of narrative prose. In particular, each of the essays on Chekhov contained significant comparisons with his master, Tolstoy. In his essay on Chekhov's story, "The Privy Councillor," Bitsilli summed up his understanding of Tolstoy's worldview, presented in greater detail in his earlier essays, but here finding its most succinct formulation:

I feel it necessary to dwell on the similarities in the world views of Chekhov and Tolstoy. They have in common a Heraclitian-Schopenhauerian feeling for the life process, a striving towards liberation from all kinds of partial manifestations through death, death as a fusion with the universe, a tendency towards simplification as the first stage on the road to liberation.⁴¹ It is precisely the spiritual affinity of these two major "artists of life" which explains why there are so few direct and obvious similarities (in lexicon, structure, etc.) between them, but such a great number of the kind which, although barely discernible, upon careful reading, prove to be especially significant. As a writer, Chekhov was in no way a "Tolstoyan" or a "student" of Tolstoy, precisely because he was inwardly and spiritually so close to him. He exposed his monadic character, so much akin to Tolstoy's, while pursuing his own artistic odyssey.... Nevertheless, it is just as significant that their artistic paths did cross at times, and that Chekhov found so much that was his own in Tolstoy.⁴²

Thus, it can be said that Bitsilli's essays on Tolstoy culminated in his essays on Chekhov, and that, in addition, his study of Chekhov's art further clarified his understanding of the problem of affinities--"common birthmarks"--both in Tolstoy's writings and as a phenomenon of literary history. For example, in his discussion of Chekhov's story, "The Bishop", Bitsilli perceived a link between the literary technique of simplification and the social philosophy of spiritual purity in the creation of certain character

⁴¹Bitsilli's note: "See I.A. Bunin's remarkable book *Osvobozhdenie Tolstogo* (Paris, 1937)—the most profound book ever written about Tolstoy."

⁴²Peter M. Bitsilli, *Chekhov's Art: A Stylistic Analysis*, pp. 162-163.

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types,⁴³ while in his essay on "The Kiss," he juxtaposed the two author's concepts of literary and philosophical "resolution":

[Chekhov] was a man of the nineteenth century. No other age was so permeated with the spirit of historicism, the experience of real time, which found expression in the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Bergson, and in music.... As we know, Tolstoy, the greatest nineteenth century writer of "real" life, was taken with the teachings of Schopenhauer; moreover, all of Bergson's philosophy is contained in nuce in Tolstoy's discourse on the historical process in *War and Peace*. Chekhov goes even further than Tolstoy here. While Tolstoy is still unable to part with the idea of a tragic or happy resolution of the life process, in Chekhov the concept of a resolution—of completion, attainment of a goal—simply does not exist.⁴⁴

In addition, some of Bitsilli's keenest insights into problems of characterization emerged in comparisons of Tolstoy's and Chekhov's narrative techniques. In his essay on "Impressionism" and esthetic coherence, Bitsilli attempted to distinguish the determining characteristics of "impressionistic" or synthetic reproduction of reality from its "analytic" counterpart. He pointed out how Chekhov recognized Tolstoy's stylistic techniques as based on hints rather than empirical data:

...Coherence or unity in prose is based on the indispensable interdependence of concrete phenomena, or events, and their reflection in the conscious mind—what Tolstoy has called "chains" or "linkages."

...Prose tends toward a realistic or mimetic reproduction of life, poetry toward a symbolic or impressionistic one....Hence prose requires an exhaustive reproduction of concrete details, although each detail need not be shown directly. The exposition of a single characteristic, a trivial detail is in some cases sufficient for the reader to perceive the whole. This, as we know, was Tolstoy's method, so superbly noted by Chekhov: "Tolstoy's heroes are perceived as 'whole,' he wrote to Suvorin in Oct 27, 1889. 'Their past and present are deduced from hints, but you would not say that these heroes do not satisfy you.'⁴⁵

⁴³Ibid., pp. 155-156.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 181.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 44-45, 53-54.

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In another essay he claimed that the careful association of emotions with physical traits served to provide the characters with a peculiar poignancy as well as a simplicity or ordinariness, which resulted in an authenticity prompting readers to identify and sympathize with them as "living human beings."

The magnetic lifelike quality in [Chekhov's] work results from the fact that nothing is expounded or explained; rather, it is *shown*. The psychic element is never isolated from the physical; emotions experienced by a character are concretized, since they are shown together with their associations, which relate to the realm of sensual perception. They are typically shown through hints suggesting the associations, in the manner of Tolstoy, and with the same rigid consistency. It follows, then, that no character is ever delineated as independent, existing "in and of himself"; he is not defined, but shown—again as in Tolstoy—as he is seen at a given moment and in a given milieu by another person. More accurately, he is seen...as a part of all that is *hic et nunc* given to the viewer... In the final analysis, no matter how insignificant Chekhov's characters, they are in no way nonentities; however similar they may be to each other...they are nevertheless individualized, and made to come alive. It is as if they were people resurrected in our minds,...whose lives had once been a part of our own. We thus identify with the characters—as we do with those of Tolstoy—and begin to pity them; we are seized by a sense of anxiety, an agonizing and yet enrapturing experience of life's inexpressible mystery, concealed in all its countless manifestations—so similar to one another and yet unique in their ephemerality and apparent uselessness. It is as if we recognize ourselves in these people...; we sense that what has happened to them could have happened to us; and it begins to seem that indeed it has.⁴⁶

And elsewhere, he concluded:

Chekhov and Tolstoy share a dynamic perception of man and life. However...Chekhov is more one-sided than Tolstoy and, therefore, more consistent. Tolstoy refused to depict his people through "portraiture," or to characterize them exhaustively, because he considered man too complicated...every man is at times intelligent and stupid; good and wicked.... Despite this, Tolstoy sketched his characters impressionistically, with separate strokes; herein lies his incomparable mastery. Each of his figures has his character indelebilis, although it is impossible to define its essence

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 166.

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precisely. Thus, each figure also has his own destiny. As a result, the Tolstoyan roman fleuve, despite its dynamic character, bears a similarity to classical tragedy with its static character. In Tolstoy, the intrigue concludes either tragically or with a happy ending.⁴⁷

On the other hand, Bitsilli's insights into differences in their manner of character portrayal emerged through statements contrasting Chekhov with Tolstoy and Shakespeare on the one hand, and Dostoevsky on the other.⁴⁸

In addition, the essays on Chekhov treated a variety of stylistic and compositional problems, touching on Tolstoy's use of lexicon and syntax, including syntactical devices such as the connective "i" [and], and such "impressionistic" lexicon as "it seems" [kazhetsia]; his use of particular figures of speech, such as metonymy and personification; and even his use of conversations as a literary convention. For example, in comparing Chekhov and Tolstoy, Bitsilli clearly defended Tolstoy's language usage from those who considered

his language often incorrect and careless, and thus inferior to that of Turgenev or Gonchcharov.... If what he shows is well shown, then his means are also well chosen. The impression created by a work of literature is the sole and absolute criterion of its artistic, i.e. literary excellence.⁴⁹

Moreover, Bitsilli was careful to point out how the speech patterns presented in Tolstoy's narrative, the conversations of his characters, and the exposition of themes were all organically integrated into the construction of his plot:

...[I]n [Tolstoy's works], personal and intimate conversations, as well as abstract subjects, are organically connected to each other and to the exposition of the plot; a consistent tone of everyday speech is maintained throughout.⁵⁰

In conclusion, Bitsilli's critique of Tolstoy was humanist in its orientation and continuous throughout his writings. It was characterized by his particularly intense focus, like Tolstoy's, on Life or Universal-Life (vsezhizn'), and consequently, on the perceived affinities between the

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 111-112.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 124-125, 128.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 1.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 27.

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complexities and mysteries of the universal life process and the eternal creative process. Bitsilli's humanist approach to Tolstoy, more specifically, his investigation of Tolstoy's mysticism and the theme of death and life in his writings--the "enigma of life itself"--was closely associated with another of his major interests, the problem of affinities or the identification of "common birthmarks," foreshadowing current work in intertextuality or subtextual analysis. Bitsilli's interpretation of Tolstoy also seems to have determined the direction of his studies of narrative prose in general and, more specifically, his reading of Chekhov, which may be considered the culmination of his critique of Tolstoy. What is more, Bitsilli's response to Tolstoy reflected his own humanist orientation and his ideals as an active member of the Russian intellectual community in emigration as well as Tolstoy's impact on a major segment of that community.

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