

## ROUSSEAU'S POLITICAL VISION AND TOLSTOY'S *WHAT IS ART?*

THOMAS BARRAN, BROOKLYN COLLEGE CUNY

From its appearance in 1898, Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* has had a troubled reception. Because the work criticizes much of post-Renaissance European art, including Tolstoy's own prose fiction, readers have usually separated it from the body of Tolstoy's works. Even many of Tolstoy's admirers simply dismiss the work as a product of Tolstoy's psychological peculiarities, or attribute it to the eccentricities of old age. Scholars have wrestled with the question of how one should read this essay, much of which seems exaggerated, intentionally provocative, absurd, paradoxical. Rymvydas Silbajoris in his recent study of Tolstoy's aesthetics, quite properly insists on the unity of Tolstoy's entire *oeuvre* with the major strivings of his life: "It may be true, after all, that the framework of aesthetics, or of the theory of art, is not appropriate for measuring the worth of Tolstoy's ideas and the manner in which they were expressed" (248).<sup>1</sup>

Silbajoris reasons quite correctly that *What is Art?* does not yield its meaning to a narrowly aesthetic reading; in fact, reading this book as a statement only of aesthetic theory virtually guarantees its misunderstanding. For all the space Tolstoy devotes to poetry, music and the plastic arts, *What Is Art?* remains a profoundly political document. The reluctance to concentrate on the social and political demands of the treatise has caused most of the problems with the public reception of this work. Tolstoy's artistic definitions and values can apply only to a society that has undergone a complete social and political transformation; obviously, people such as we, shaped according to the corrupt standards of an unjust social order, cannot be expected to comprehend the values of a transformed world. In order to understand *What is Art?*, we must read it as a political work containing both a critique of present civilization and a utopian outline of an ideal society.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>In *Tolstoy's Aesthetics and His Art*, Silbajoris writes, "The working hypothesis of the present study is that . . . Tolstoy's art and his esthetics are very intimately related; that, contradictions notwithstanding, his entire life, entire opus, are distinguished by a singular kind of internal unity and consistency, and that the nature of this internal unity of mind and heart, once understood, will lead to a much fuller appreciation of his genius." (9)

<sup>2</sup>I must qualify my use of "utopia" to describe Rousseau's and Tolstoy's projects without some qualification. I do not speak of utopias as *necessarily* fantastic and unattainable social projects. Rousseau and Tolstoy would probably have insisted that their idealized social orders are possible, whatever *we* might think of their prospects. George Kateb has distinguished and defined five varieties of utopian writing. I find his divisions quite applicable to this discussion. Both *Social Contract* and *What Is Art?* belong to Kateb's fourth category:

Fourth are those works, sometimes called philosophical anthropologies, in which the writer

Tolstoy's political vision encompasses more than mere institutional reform; he remained convinced that a change in the institutions of government alone would be futile without a complete transformation of the moral character of each citizen. Here his affinities with Jean-Jacques Rousseau are stronger perhaps than in any other area of his thought, for Rousseau's politics, more than those of any political thinker of his time, call for the complete psychological and moral regeneration of the individual and the citizen as a prerequisite of the renewal of political institutions.

I want to concentrate in this article on the evolution of certain social and political ideas that gain their final expression in *What is Art?*. I shall first discuss Tolstoy's pedagogical essays of the early 1860s, then such works as *What Then Must We Do?* (1883), before I proceed to the final consideration of *What is Art?*. I feel that Tolstoy derived these political ideas from Rousseau with very few modifications, since Rousseau elaborated politics in a larger sense, as a discipline that included virtually all human activity and provided an answer to Tolstoy's persistent question, "How must we live?" In the works I shall discuss, Tolstoy proceeds from critical to utopian discourse, as Rousseau did when he articulated his critique of civilization in his *Discourses* and then followed with the utopian project of *On the Social Contract*.

In the works leading up to *What is Art?*, Tolstoy articulates a thoroughgoing critique of European civilization that draws on the language and argumentation of Rousseau's *First Discourse* (1750) and *Discourse on Inequality* (1755). In *What is Art?*, he continues the Rousseauian critique, but contrasts the deficiencies of his present day with the outlines of a utopian vision in which art resumes the natural function it would have in a moral, egalitarian community bound by an almost mystical principle of unity.

Many scholars have already examined Tolstoy's relationship to Rousseau in general terms.<sup>3</sup> Tolstoy himself acknowledged a debt several times in his writings. One of his statements bears quoting here because it has a direct relationship to the Rousseauian inspiration of *What is Art?*. In a conversation he had in 1901 with Professor Paul Boyer of Paris, Tolstoy said:

Rousseau was treated unjustly, the greatness of his thought was unappreciated, and he was slandered in every which-way. I read all of Rousseau, all twenty volumes including his

---

attempts a definition of what is peculiar to man, of what is genuinely human rather than merely conventional, or of man's potentialities. These discourses are not always consciously utopian; they may be directed to individual reformation or to preparation for the afterlife. Furthermore, the discussion may be carried on without the reference to concrete social practices and institutions. That is, they aim to assess the various kinds of human activity, the various pleasures open to men, or the various styles of life made possible by civilization or science. (213-14)

<sup>3</sup>For general treatments of Tolstoy's relationship with Rousseau see Milan I. Markovich, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et Tolstoi*, Paris: 1928. See also I. Benrubi, "Tolstoi, continuateur de Rousseau," *Annales de la société Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, III (1907), 83-118.

*Dictionary of Music.* I more than delighted in him--I worshiped him. At the age of 15, I wore a medallion with his portrait around my neck in place of my natal cross. Many of his pages are so close to me, that it seems that I wrote them myself.<sup>4</sup>

Tolstoy's remarkable statement touches not only on Rousseau's writings, but his biographical image as well: that of the misunderstood visionary. Tolstoy himself rhetorically adopts this image for himself in *What, Then, Must We Do?* and *What is Art?*<sup>5</sup> Even Tolstoy's replacement of his natal pectoral crucifix with a portrait of Rousseau metaphorically expresses the exchange of one persecuted prophet for another.

When he says that some of Rousseau's writings affect him so powerfully that the boundaries between writer and reader seem to dissolve, Tolstoy places Rousseau directly within the context of the aesthetic theories he was developing in *What Is Art?*, which he wrote in 1898--three years before his conversation with Professor Boyer. In Section 15 of his treatise, Tolstoy describes the relationship that binds artist and audience when the work of art is genuine. The effect of true art, its capacity for "contagiousness" (*zarazitel'nost'*), consists of a sharing of affect rather than a one-way transmission of stimuli or information:

The main characteristic of this feeling lies in the fact that the perceiver merges (*slivaetsia*) with the artist to such an extent that it seems to him that the object he perceives was created not by someone else, but by himself, and that all that is expressed by this object is that which he himself had for a long time wished to express. (*PSS*, 30, 149).

Tolstoy's statement about Rousseau expresses the highest compliment he can pay to an artist; his work can so "infect" the reader that the boundaries between them will dissolve, awakening in the reader the feeling that his own thoughts are being expressed. Art, moreover, cannot infect unless the artist possesses sincerity. This word expresses a key feature of Tolstoy's psychology of creativity: the artist must not only have experienced the feelings he renders, he must transform them into art in response to a deep internal need, and for no other motivation than the satisfaction of that need. Thus for Tolstoy Rousseau not only represents the misunderstood prophet of the transformed world, but also embodies

---

<sup>4</sup>My source for this passage is the Moscow 1955 collection of Tolstoy's writings on literature, edited by F. A. Ivanova, p. 702. Silbajoris (33) locates its source in a 1928 lecture by Academician M. N. Rozanov entitled "Rousseau and Tolstoy."

<sup>5</sup>Aylmer Maude reinforces this view of Tolstoy as the prophetic visionary of a future order. In a preface to his translation of *What Is Art?*, he writes: "No doubt most of those to whom [art] is an end in itself, who live by it, or make it their chief occupation, will read this book (or leave it unread) and go on in their former way, much as Pharoah, of old, hardened his heart, and did not sympathise with what Moses had to say on the labor question." *The Complete Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi* Vol. 4 (New York: Crowell, 1899) p. 340.

the very type of the artist who would live under the new order.<sup>6</sup>

As Silbajoris has pointed out most recently Tolstoy's observations of his peasant students' innate creativity in 1862 led him to a major reassessment of the importance of art in its relation to other important aspects of human life (41-67). At this early date, Tolstoy began formulating a critique that centered on art, but also encompassed the economic and social inequities of contemporary European society that distorted art and removed it from what he believed to be its crucial function: that of providing spiritual nourishment to the whole of society. During his pedagogical experiments on his estate, Tolstoy came to doubt the artistic value of masterpieces that could be appreciated only by the privileged classes. He became convinced that artistic creativity did not belong only to the elite. He claimed that his peasant pupils produced writing that surpassed Goethe's and had no equal in all of Russian literature. In one of his pedagogical articles of this period, he writes:

I am convinced that a lyric poem such as [Pushkin's] "I Remember a Wonderful Instance," or a piece of music such as Beethoven's last symphony, is not so unconditionally and universally good as the song about "Van'ka Kliushnika" or the refrain "Along the Mother Volga," and that Pushkin and Beethoven please us not because of any absolute beauty that

---

<sup>6</sup>In emphasizing Rousseau's biographical image in the statement to Boyer, Tolstoy restates his lifelong belief that the moral character of an artist bears a direct relationship to the quality of the artistic production. In this conviction, Tolstoy had predecessors and successors. The Russian writer Nikolai Karamzin articulated this moral aesthetic in 1793 in his essay "What Does An Artist Need?" Malcolm Cowley recently gave a pithy version of the Tolstoyan relationship of character to art in his memoir *And I Worked at the Writer's Trade*:

And so, by a long detour, we come back to the original question, whether character and art are correlated. The answer is that they are, but in a complicated fashion. Masterpieces can be produced by saints of art or of the church; they can be produced by rascals or crazies or even, at times, by accident; but I refuse to think that they can be produced by genuine scoundrels, "men without honor or virtue." The artist, no matter what his sins may be, is bent on giving himself away; the scoundrel has no choice but to hide himself as best he can. In the end he cannot help revealing his scoundrelism--not so much in his subject matter or in what he seems to be saying about it, as rather in the shape and sound, the color and rhythm of his words. False, false, the reader unconsciously feels, closing the book. Once I made in my journal a statement that needs to be qualified, but that still holds a general truth. "No complete son-of-a-bitch," I said, "ever wrote a good sentence." (266)

The question of the relationship of character to art has a relationship to the larger debate over inspiration vs. technique, spontaneity vs. rhetoric, naiveté vs. craft, style vs. substance, that has been continuing since Plato's critique of the Sophists. Richard Lanham provides a useful summary of this dispute and its cultural implications in the first chapter of his book *The Motives of Eloquence*. Lanham distinguishes two fundamental approaches: the view that art consists fundamentally of craft and skills, the representative of which he calls *homo rhetoricus*; and the belief (which Tolstoy obviously shares) that art must contain a true expression of a consistent central self, the representative of which he calls *homo serius*.

is in them, but because we are as corrupted as Pushkin and Beethoven, because Pushkin and Beethoven equally flatter our monstrous irritability and our weakness. We usually hear the outworn tawdry paradox, that in order to understand the beautiful one needs a certain preparation. Who said this? Why? What proves it? This is just an excuse used to wriggle out of the blind alley into which we were led by the falsehood of our path of development--the exclusive possession of our art by one class. (*PSS*, 8, 114)

His pedagogical experiments thus planted the seeds of two social and political convictions that would lie more or less dormant while he worked on his novelistic masterpieces, but which would emerge after his crisis of the late 1870s into full articulation. One was his radical egalitarianism, based on his empirical evidence gained in his pedagogical experiments, that the privileged classes have no monopoly on genius and that intelligence and creativity are distributed evenly among all classes. The other was his suspicion that the privileged classes were mystifying categories and definitions and manipulating the accessibility of art in order to perpetuate their position at the top of an unjust social order.

Two decades after his pedagogical experiments, Tolstoy again attacked the elite's monopoly on the life of the mind. In his "Speech on Popular Editions," (1884) he states:

All our lack of success comes from the confusion of concepts: the people (*narod*) and we--the "non-people" (*ne narod*)--the intelligentsia. This division does not exist. We all from the working peasant to Humboldt possess equally the same kinds of knowledge and we have no others . . . The difference between people arises only from the fact that knowledge is more accessible to some and less so to others. (*PSS* 25, 528)

At this stage, Tolstoy has concentrated his criticism only on the unfairness of exclusive possession of the arts and sciences by the privileged few. He has not yet begun to argue his second conviction, that the upper classes use this monopoly to perpetuate social inequality in order to secure their positions at the top of the order.

Two years later, Tolstoy developed this political argument in his book *What Then Must We Do?* (*Tak chto zhe nam delat'?*). In this work, Tolstoy states unambiguously that he is not attacking knowledge and art themselves, but rather the social and political consequences of their exclusive possession by the ruling classes. Tolstoy's arguments at this point share remarkable similarities with those of Rousseau in his *First Discourse*, where Rousseau contends that progress in the arts and sciences since the Renaissance has not brought about the moral improvement of humankind, but has only abetted the consolidation of tyranny and the petrification of the political barriers between the powerful and the impotent. Intellectual and artistic progress, according to Rousseau's critique, do not merely destroy the foundations of political equality; they actually rob individuals of the will to preserve political freedom:

While government and laws provide for the safety and well-being of assembled men, the sciences, letters, and arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened, stifle in them the sense of that original liberty for which they seemed to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilized peoples. (36)

Tolstoy shares Rousseau's vision of a world dominated by inequalities and arranged only to pervert what is natural and excellent in the majority of its population.

Adopting the rhetorical stance of the misunderstood prophet, Tolstoy presses his attack on the misappropriation of the arts and sciences by ridiculing the anticipated objections of the intellectual elite:

"But sciences, art! You are denying sciences and art, that is you deny that by which humanity lives!" They constantly present me with this—not really a response, but a device they use to discard my conclusions without really looking into them. "He denies science and art, he wants to return people to savagery; why even listen to him or talk to him?" But this is not fair. I not only do not deny science and art, but say what I say in the name of that which is true science and true art, and only so that it would be possible for humanity to emerge from that condition of savagery into which it quickly descends thanks to the false learning of our times, only for that reason do I say what I say. (PSS 25, 363-4).

Tolstoy here shows a strong identification with Rousseau, whose *First Discourse* elicited the same response from his critics. Rousseau insists that he is not denying the value of the arts and sciences per se, but that he deplors the misuse of these institutions in the service of despotism and the consolidation of state power: "How can one dare blame the sciences before one of Europe's most learned Societies, praise ignorance in a famous Academy, and reconcile contempt for study with respect for the truly learned? I have seen these contradictions, and they have not rebuffed me. I am not abusing science, I told myself; I am defending virtue before virtuous men" (34). Nonetheless, a host of critics ignored Rousseau's claim and accused him of being an enemy of enlightenment.

In *What Then Must We Do?*, Tolstoy develops his critique of the exclusive possession of the arts and sciences by one class. Artists and scientists have freed themselves from the need to do physical labor by imposing it on others, in the firm conviction that they are providing these others with something valuable in exchange for their labor. These mandarins, like the priests of antiquity, believe that their pursuits are the most important in the world. They advance a false claim about the "division of labor" according to which they occupy themselves with mental and spiritual labor while the rest of the population performs the necessary physical labor. "They want to think this, and it seems to them that in actuality an entirely just exchange of services takes place where in fact occurs the simplest and oldest type of violence" (PSS 25, 348). Learned people have perpetrated this colossal fraud in order to preserve a way of life constructed on inequality. They have defended this arrangement by citing a social contract, supposedly concluded at some indefinite time in the past, according to which "the producer of spiritual nourishment says: in order that I might give you spiritual food, you will feed me, clothe me, and clean up after me. The producer of physical food presents no demands and yields up the physical food, although he has not received the spiritual food" (PSS 25, 349). Once this supposed contract was concluded, the classes benefiting from this division of labor, which include those people in government, church, and the sciences and arts, work only to increase the power of their institutions, not for the good of the entire body politic. The

inequalities, once instituted, remain in place because the interest groups who benefit from them work only to perpetuate their advantages.

In *What, Then, Must We Do?* Tolstoy draws as well on the arguments of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. In this work, Rousseau provides a genetic narrative that examines the origin of the social and political inequalities he described in his *First Discourse*:

The stronger did more work; the cleverer turned his to better advantage; the more ingenious found ways to shorten his labor; the farmer had greater need of iron or the blacksmith greater need of wheat; and working equally, the one earned a great deal while the other barely had enough to live. Thus does natural inequality imperceptibly manifest itself along with contrived inequality; and thus do the differences among men, developed by those of circumstances, become more perceptible, more permanent in their effects, and begin to have a proportionate influence over the fate of individuals. (154-55)

The accumulation of property and privilege by the few at the expense of the many, what Tolstoy calls "the simplest and oldest form of violence," occurs during the initial formation of society. Once the strong have their possessions, however, they face the threat of organized predation. Moreover, they remain vulnerable to claims on their wealth because they have no formal, articulated moral or legal right to it.

Rousseau offers the idea that at some unrecorded time in the development of civil society, the people who had become powerful and rich perpetrated a fraudulent social contract with their poorer fellows in order to perpetuate the advantages they had gained through violence.<sup>7</sup> In order to put an end to the threats and to bolster the pre-existing fact of their possession with an affirmation of its legitimacy, the rich, in Rousseau's reconstruction of human political history, perpetrated "the most deliberate project that ever entered the human mind," i.e. the contractual foundation of civil society:

Such was, or must have been, the origin of society and laws, which gave new fetters to the weak and new forces to the rich, destroyed natural freedom for all time, established forever the law of property and inequality, changed a clever usurpation into an irrevocable right, and for the profit of a few ambitious men henceforth subjected the whole human race to work, servitude, and misery. (160)

While Rousseau provides an actual genetic narrative, describing in detail the progress from the state of nature to that of extreme social inequality, and the sanctioning of this progress by a fraudulent social contract, Tolstoy argues that the elite classes of his time merely assume that such a contract was concluded in the past and cite it as a defense of their privileges. It hardly matters in Tolstoy's version whether the contract was actually

---

<sup>7</sup>This original social contract differs from the contract described in Rousseau's political work *On the Social Contract*. The historical contract concluded in *Discourse on Inequality* occurred when possessions and power were already in the hands of the few. The ideal social contract would not permit this unequal distribution, since its very reason for being involves the prevention of private interests.



concluded at some time in the past, whether the elite classes merely assume that it was, or whether the contract was express or implied: Tolstoy utters the essence of his genetic narrative in the phrase "the simplest and oldest form of violence."

The old man whom Nekhlyudov meets at the end of the novel *Resurrection* reproduces exactly Rousseau's account of the origins of civil society. When asked by an English visitor what he thinks should be done with people who refuse to obey the law, the old man replies: "The law! First they stole everything, took all the land, all the wealth away from people, took it all for themselves, killed all who opposed them, and then wrote a law that nobody should kill or steal. They should have written the law first" (404). Tolstoy does not differ from Rousseau's version. Rousseau simply devotes more time to imagining the historical circumstances of the contract.

Confronting this situation in which an unjust political system and self-perpetuating intellectual monopolies mutually reinforce each other, Rousseau in *On the Social Contract* and Tolstoy in *What Is Art?* contrast the present state of affairs with utopian alternatives. Rousseau locates his vision in the secular tradition of Natural Law, which regards the legitimate state as one founded by a social pact; Tolstoy refers to his ideal commonwealth as one based on true Christian principles. These differences in naming have little significance, for the new social order of both thinkers functions according to the same social dynamics.<sup>8</sup> For both thinkers, the new social order does not call for a mutation of human nature, but rather a return of natural relationships among people.

Although Rousseau freely admits that the political institutions based on his ideal social contract belong to the realm of convention and artifice, they nonetheless restore and preserve what is most natural in humanity--the autonomy and independence human beings enjoyed in the primal condition described in the *Discourse on Inequality*. By introducing the concept of the general will, Rousseau changed the Enlightenment view of statecraft as the production of artifacts such as fixed laws and constitutions into a vision of government as the constant expression of the vital single will of its constituents. To be sure, constitutions and legislation occupy an extremely important part of Rousseau's scheme, but

---

<sup>8</sup>Tolstoy claimed that he differed from Rousseau in rejecting only false-Christian civilization, while Rousseau rejected all civilization. In a diary entry dated 6 June 1905, Tolstoy writes:

I am compared to Rousseau. I am very much indebted to R[ousseau] and I love him, but there is a great difference. We differ in that R[ousseau] denies all civilization, whereas I deny false-Christian civilization. That which is called civilization is the growth of humanity. Growth is inevitable, one can not say of it that it is good or bad. It is,--there is life in it. As in the growth of a tree. But a branch, or the powers of life growing in the branch, are wrong and harmful if they suck up all of the impetus of growth. This is the case with our false civilization. (PSS 55, 145)

One could argue, however, that any historical example of Tolstoy's true Christian civilization occurred as far back in time as any of Rousseau's ideal classical republics, and that the prospects for its earthly restoration are equally as remote as the possibilities of establishing a republic based on Rousseau's social contract.



these formulae become null once they no longer exist as the expression of the general will.

Rousseau returns government to a more elemental condition than the classic liberal conception of the state as an aggregate of separate orders, each pursuing its own interests, yet coexisting and benefitting the whole with these separate pursuits. For Rousseau, the general will does not foster consensus or compromise, but rather operates as the unanimous will of a body of people when all private interests are excluded or ignored. "In order for the general will to be well expressed, it is therefore important that there be no partial society in the State, and that each citizen give only his own opinion" (61). In the absence of private interests, these individual opinions coincide, and the general will emerges as an overriding principle uniting the constituents in an almost mystical fashion. Book IV of Rousseau's *Social Contract* begins with the following utopian paragraph:

As long as several men together consider themselves to be a single body, they have only a single will, which relates to their common preservation and the general welfare. Then all the mechanisms of the State are vigorous and simple, its maxims are clear and luminous, it has no tangled contradictory interests; the common good is clearly apparent everywhere, and requires only good sense to be perceived. Peace, union, and equality are enemies of political subtleties. Upright and simple men are hard to fool because of their simplicity; traps and refined pretexts do not deceive them. They are not clever enough to be duped. When, among the happiest people in the world, groups of peasants are seen deciding the affairs of State under an oak tree, and always acting wisely, can one help scorning the refinements of other nations, which make themselves illustrious and miserable with so much art and mystery? (108)

Accessibility of the language and processes of government, full participation of the members of the body politic, and the uniting of all individual wills into a single overriding general will--only these features constitute a legitimate political entity.

In *What Is Art?*, Tolstoy does for the aesthetic experience what Rousseau does for political activity in *On The Social Contract*: he transforms it from the production of artifacts into a vital process of social interaction. Sovereignty for Rousseau, like art for Tolstoy, must remain a process, a type of metabolism. As Silbajoris observed, for Tolstoy, "art is not something that *is* but something that *happens* between the artist and his audience" (18).

Rousseau and Tolstoy have removed what they consider to be the artifices and conventions separating humanity from itself. Their utopian projects call for the restoration of an activity they consider to be essentially and naturally human--the flight from the isolation of the self and the striving toward communality. Rousseau's ideal commonwealth would foster such a sense of belonging that the citizen would prefer death to exile. Tolstoy's aesthetic psychology features the dissolving of the boundaries between individuals through participation in an artistic event. A true work of art does that which, in the consciousness of the perceiver, annihilates the boundaries between him and the artist, and not only between him and the artist, but also between him and all the other people who are taking in that work of art. In this liberation of the personality (*lichnost'*) from its isolation from other people, from its loneliness, in this melding of the personality

(*sliianie lichnosti*) with others lies the main attractive power and the characteristic of art. (439)

While Rousseau dwells on the political structures of the legitimate state, Tolstoy assumes radical social and political equality and concentrates on the cultural sphere, specifically on artistic creation/performance that gives the community an emotional awareness of the highest aims of its organization. Tolstoy's treatise restores to the artistic event--the successful expression by an artist of his deep feelings through his art, and the reception of this art by an audience--its original and natural social role as dynamic dissolver of self.

In his later fiction, Tolstoy developed similar relationships between art and the dissolution of the boundaries of the self. The relationship between art and death recurs in Tolstoy's imaginative literature, for reasons that become clear in *What Is Art?* One thinks of the moment in the story "Master and Man" when Brekhunov lies atop the peasant Nikita to keep him warm during the blizzard: "He understood that this was death, and was not at all disturbed by that either. He remembered that Nikita was lying under him and that he had got warm and was alive, and it seemed to him that he was Nikita and Nikita was he, and that his life was not in himself but in Nikita. He strained his ears and heard Nikita breathing and even slightly snoring. 'Nikita is alive, so I too am alive!' he said to himself triumphantly" (320-21). The approach of death removes Brekhunov from his isolation and obsession with material gain by dissolving the boundaries between him and Nikita. In this case, the nearness of death brings an awareness of the higher meaning of life and has the same effect on Brekhunov that art would ideally have on a receptive audience.

In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy develops a similar relationship between art and dying. The artist Mikhailov in Part V, Chapter XI sees painting as the process of "removing the shell of the idea," that is of removing accretions from something already present and restoring it to the whole. "He knew that much attention and care were needed not to injure one's work when removing the wrappings that obscure the idea, and that all wrappings must be removed, but as to the art of painting, the technique, it did not exist" (431). A few pages later Tolstoy describes the death of Levin's brother, Nicholas. Mary Nikolaevna, Nicholas' common-law wife, tells Levin that the end is near because Nicholas "has begun to clutch at himself." This puzzles Levin:

"Clutch? How?"

"Like this," she said, pulling at the folds of her stuff dress. And Levin noticed that all day long the sick man really kept catching at himself as if wishing to pull something off. (458)

Mikhailov's concept of art as a process of removing coverings corresponds to Nicholas' attempts to peel away his very flesh--both want to remove that which separates and isolates essences from the rest of the world. Here again art operates as the communicator of moral truths that would also occur to a person at the approach of death.

*What is Art?* explains the historical diversion of art from its original purpose as part

of the larger perversion of primitive Christianity from an egalitarian social organization to a hierarchical institution. What was once a vital organizational force, uniting people and propelling them toward a moral existence beyond themselves, degenerated when small groups within the society appropriated a sacerdotal function. Ecclesiastical Christianity replaced the true Christian community when churchmen began to work only for the security and enrichment of their institution.

The return of art to its proper function in society is only a part of the larger restoration of primitive Christianity in its social and political manifestations. Here, each member of the community would relate directly to God and to neighbors without hierarchies or intermediate associations.<sup>9</sup> The profoundly political role of art as a centripetal force in Tolstoy's Christian commonwealth emerges in the following passages from Section 16 of his treatise:

The essence of Christian consciousness consists in the acceptance by each person of a filial relationship to God and proceeding from it the unity of people with God and among themselves, as is stated in the Gospels (John 17: 21), and therefore the contents of Christian art are such feelings as facilitate the unification of people with God and among themselves. . . .

Art, each type of art in and of itself, has the property of unifying people. Each art works in such a way that people, receiving the feeling transmitted by the artist, are united in soul, firstly with the artist and secondly with all people who receive the same impression. . . .

Christian art is only that which unites all people without exception--either that which evokes in people a consciousness of the sameness of their position in relation to God and their fellows, or that which evokes in people one and the same feeling, albeit the simplest, but not contrary to Christianity and proper to all people without exception. (*PSS* 30, 157)

For both Tolstoy and Rousseau, the historical enemies of unification are those partial societies which arrogate a middle position and only aggravate the citizen's desire to split off from the community and pursue the narrow interests of class and self.

---

<sup>9</sup>Both Rousseau and Tolstoy condemn the role of partial societies within the larger socio-political organization. Tolstoy objects to them because of the pressures they can exert on an individual to pull away from the community and follow his or her own selfish interests. Artists perform according to the demands of these interest groups rather than from compelling internal need; thus they produce counterfeit art, tailored to attract and please those who have money or power. While not all people can be artists, Tolstoy learned from his pedagogical activities of the 1860s that artistic genius occurs randomly in all segments of the population, so the ideal community must welcome the free expression of those members who feel a powerful internal compulsion to express themselves through art with no hope of private enrichment or secondary gain.

Rousseau deplures private interests because each one constitutes in itself a general will that conflicts with the general will of the larger community. In Rousseau's society, the citizen must express his private opinion without modifying it according to the demands of factions or interest groups. The political communication of Rousseau's citizen corresponds very closely to the artistic communication of Tolstoy's artist.

The similarities that Tolstoy's aesthetic writings share with Rousseau's political critique and the theory of *On the Social Contract* ultimately point to an origin in the psyches of both writers. Jean Starobinski, in his brilliant study *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La Transparence et l'obstacle*, describes Rousseau as obsessed with the impossibility of human communication:

Dans le premier *Discours*, Rousseau fait déjà entendre la plainte qu'il répêtra inlassablement dans les années de la persécution: les acmes ne sont pas visibles, l'amitié n'est pas possible, la confiance ne peut jamais durer, aucun signe certain ne permet de reconnaître la disposition des coeurs. (15)

This painful inability to rely on his fellow humans led Rousseau to construct his ideal commonwealth in such a way as to foster unanimity and minimise the private competitive and acquisitive urges that would lead citizens to betray one another. In his treatment of personal relationships, Rousseau longed for a condition of transparency that would allow two separate souls each to experience the other's thoughts and feelings without mediation. Tolstoy had the same longings. Hints at a longing for transparency emerge in *Anna Karenina* Part IV, Chapter XIII, when Levin and Kitty "read each other's minds" by guessing each other's thoughts from only the first letters of the unsaid words. The two phases, resident and stranger, that Richard Gustafson uses to define the two emotional polarities of Tolstoy's existence, mark his fluctuations between the states of warm communality, featuring an openness of souls and diminution of the sense of self; and the painful isolation when access to the souls of others is hindered by an opaque covering. Tolstoy hoped art would provide him with the longed-for transparency, as he reveals in an early diary entry: "The letters will make words, the words --phrases, but how can you transmit feeling? Isn't there some way to transfer to someone else the look in one's own eyes at the sight of nature?" (Quoted in Silbajoris, 17). Perhaps this is the reason Tolstoy articulated his hopes for the restoration of human community, social justice and political equality in a treatise entitled *What is Art?*

## WORKS CITED

- Berlin, Isaiah. "Tolstoy and Enlightenment." *Tolstoy: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Ralph E. Matlaw. Twentieth-Century Views. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 28-51.
- Cowley, Malcolm. --*And I Worked at the Writer's Trade: Chapters of Literary History, 1918-1978*. New York: Viking, 1978.
- Deraathea, Robert. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps*. Paris: Vrin, 1988.
- Gustafson, Richard F. *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986.
- Kateb, George. "Utopias and Utopianism." *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Paul Edwards. Vol. 7. New York: Macmillan, 1967. 212-15.
- Lanham, Richard A. *The Motives of Eloquence*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1976.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The First and Second Discourses*. Trans. Roger D. and Judith R. Masters. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964.
- , *On the Social Contract, with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy*. Ed. Roger D. Masters. Trans. Judith R. Masters. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978.
- Silbajoris, Rimvydas. *Tolstoy's Aesthetics and His Art*. Columbus: Slavica, 1991.
- Starobinski, Jean. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle, suivi de Sept essais sur Rousseau*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.
- Tolstoy, L. N. *O literature: Stat'i, pis'ma, dnevniki*. Ed. F. A. Ivanova et al. Introd. L. D. Opul'skaia. Moscow: GIXL, 1955.
- , *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. 90 vols. Moscow: 1929-58.
- , *Voskresenie. Povesti, rasskazy*. Moscow: Xudozhestvennaia lit., 1976.
- , *Anna Karenina*. Ed. George Gibian. Trans. Aylmer Maude. New York: Norton, 1970.
- , *Short Novels: Stories of God, Sex, and Death*. Ed Ernest J. Simmons. Vol. 2. New York: Random House, 1966.