

Review Article

LEV TOLSTOY AND JAMES JOYCE: POST-COMMUNIST NEGOTIANS

ANNA TAVIS, WILLIAMS COLLEGE

L.N. TOLSTOY. *Krug chtenia, Izbrannye, sobrannye i raspolozhennye na kazhdyi den' L'vom Tolstym mysli mnogikh pisatelei ob istine, zhizni, i povedenii*. 2 vols. (Moskva, Politicheskaiia Literatura, 1991).

DZHEIMS DZHOIS. *Uliss*. Translated by V. Khinkis and S. Khoruzhii, *Inostrannaia Literatura* #1-12 (1989).

NEIL CORNWELL. *James Joyce and the Russians* (London, Macmillan, 1992).

The charismatic power that Leo Tolstoy and James Joyce exercised over their contemporaries far surpassed the immediate literary influence of their texts. Each appealed to different constituencies of readers. Tolstoy's moral persona towered over the late 19th century. His ostensible goal was to *infect* his readers with moral *feelings* and urge them to moral actions, away from the artistry of literary texts.¹ Joyce, following in Tolstoy's footsteps, killed the 19th century by exposing the futility of its dominant genres and styles.² In contrast to Tolstoy, Joyce's aesthetic agenda did not concern itself with any moral or didactic ends; he chose to lose his readers in novelistic labyrinths without authorial guidance. He decided that as long as he achieved his literary agenda, he cared little about the accessibility of his technique.³

When traditional moral constraints began to crumble and old aesthetic boundaries were being redrawn by the end of the 19th century, Russia and the West often found themselves arguing on different sides of the ideological quarrel. Tolstoy and Joyce, likewise, fought political battles in the literary sphere, thus contributing to the ongoing

¹Tolstoy's definition of art as articulated in his essay *What is Art?* describes art as a type of human activity which consists in "one man's consciously ... handing on to others feelings he has lived through, and other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them." Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (London: Macmillan, 1982): 51. For a comprehensive treatment of continuity in Tolstoy's aesthetics see Rimvydas Silbajoris, *Tolstoy's Aesthetics and His Art*. (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1990).

²T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," in Manley, Seon, comp. *James Joyce: Two Decades of Criticism*. (New York: Vanguard, 1948): 201.

³As reported by Stuart Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses: A Study*. (New York: Vintage, 1955): 16.

debate over the place of authority in individual and social life, the nature of freedom and subordination, continuity and subversion.⁴ The contrast between two outwardly dissimilar aesthetic positions reflects the two writers' different understandings of the literary process. What it conceals, however, is their ultimate agreement on literary goals. The two writers' reputations fluctuate according to dominant ideological currents in Russia and the West. Most recently, the old tendency to polarize the two writers on ideological rather than literary grounds has surfaced again in Russia's post-communist wave of literary rehabilitations. Tolstoy was reinstated as authority once again after a brief period of interrogation. By contrast, Joyce's sensational Russian reentry was short-lived as the scales of popularity tipped in Tolstoy's favor. More specifically, Russian readers responded in the predictable traditional way to two recently rehabilitated texts; the reprint of Tolstoy's long forgotten *Reading Circle* (*Krug chteniia*)⁵ and the first publication of a complete Russian translation of Joyce's *Ulysses*⁶ have prompted Russians to reflect on those historical and social continuities which determine the nation's attitudes to its authors.

In Tolstoy's homeland, ideological considerations have prevailed over aesthetics in the discussions of Tolstoy's and Joyce's work. In the decade between the early 1920s and the early 1930s, the question: "What to do with Joyce?" became a hotly debated subject in the Soviet press. Joyce's early Soviet apologists argued on his behalf citing his democratic origins and his anti-religious attitudes; he was defended as a practitioner of left bourgeois art, a "dustman and grave-digger of the capitalist world who [was] bent over its corpse, inhaling the decomposition of the world in the depths of its open grave."⁷ Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's advocates argued, were neither "superficial men" of the Russian novels nor anarchists indulging in negative illusions or agitating against the state.

By the mid-1930s, it became increasingly clear that literature was no longer to be considered an expression of a writer's individuality. Initial Party attempts to absorb the best "bourgeois" writers like Joyce met with strong condemnation from the new party elite;⁸ the final blow to Joyce was delivered in 1934, at the First Congress of Soviet

⁴Anna Tavis, "Authority and Its Discontents in Joyce and Tolstoy," *Irish Slavonic Studies*, #12 (1991): 41-55.

⁵Tolstoy, *Krug chteniia. Izbrannye, sobrannye i raspolozhennye na kazhdyi den' L'vom Tolstym mysli mnogikh pisatelei ob istine, zhizni, i povedenii*. 2 vols. (Moskva: Politicheskaiia Literatura, 1991).

⁶Dzheims Dzhois, *Uliss*. V. Khinkis and S. Khoruzhii, *Inostrannaia Literatura* #1-12 (1989).

⁷Miller-Budnitskaia, R.Z. "Kommentarii k 'Pokhoronam Patrika Dignema'," *Zvezda*, 11 (1934): 137. Quoted in Cornwell, 107.

⁸Joseph Schull offers a comprehensive overview of the fragmented cultural politics characteristic of the earlier Soviet period. See "The Ideological Origins of 'Stalinism' in Soviet Literature," *Slavic Review* 51.3 (1992): 468-484.

Writers.⁹ Speaking at the Congress, Karl Radek announced that "conveying a picture of revolution by the Joyce method would be about as successful as using a fishing net to catch a Dreadnought."¹⁰ Joyce's works according to Radek, were "medieval, mystical, and reactionary." At the same time as Joyce's chances for recognition declined, Tolstoy's literary reputation was supported by the authority of the new Soviet state. The old-style iconoclast was easier to present to new Soviet writers as a model for emulation than the exiled Irish saboteur. Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy alone could teach them how to represent "what is typical in the individual," the Party declared.¹¹ The official endorsement of Tolstoy and banishment of Joyce eliminated all discussion and demanded the homogeneity of readers' responses.

The sudden collapse of the old Soviet system has sanctioned rushed denunciations of Stalinism as the sole obstacle to the diversity of opinion among Russians.¹² Tolstoy and Joyce found themselves waiting among others for triumphant re-evaluation and rehabilitation. Contrary to most expectations, it soon became apparent that for these two novelists, no immediate reversals of fortune would take place. Once the initial euphoria of liberation was over, nostalgia for the secure authority of civic-minded and idea-centered narratives set in.¹³ The old dichotomy between Tolstoy and Joyce was revived in readers' responses to Tolstoy's *Reading Circle* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. While Tolstoy's little known work was welcomed as a long-awaited national revelation,¹⁴ the complete Russian language text of *Ulysses* elicited a perplexed response. Readers' reactions to Tolstoy's *Reading Circle* may be read as an answer to the old question of "what to do with Joyce?"

Obviously, Tolstoy's *Reading Circle* and Joyce's *Ulysses* are two completely

⁹Emily Tall, "The Soviet Debate on Modernism in Western Literature, 1956-1970" (Ph.D. diss., Brown U., 1974) and more recently, E. Tall, "Behind the Scenes: How *Ulysses* was Finally Published in the Soviet Union," *Slavic Review* 49.2 (1990): 183-199; and E. Tall, "Correspondence between Three Slavic Translators of *Ulysses*..." *Slavic Review* 49.2 (1990): 625-633.

¹⁰*Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei 1934. Stenograficheskiy otchet.* (Moscow, 1934; reprinted Moscow, 1990): 316. Quoted in Cornwell, 104.

¹¹Karl Radek, "Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art" in *Problems of Soviet Literature*, ed. H.G. Scott (London, 1935). Republished as *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union. Maxim Gorky, Karl Radek, Nikolai Bukharin, Andrey Zhdanov and Others.* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977).

¹²Undifferentiated treatment of "totalitarianism" has been sufficiently criticized in the West, e.g. Hans Gunter, ed. *The Culture of the Stalin Period.* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

¹³Svetlana Boym, "Stalin's Cinematic Charisma: Between History and Nostalgia," *Slavic Review* 51.3 (1992): 536-543.

¹⁴Boris Sushkov, "Kogda my reabilitiruem L'va Tolstogo?" *Literaturnaya Gazeta* 14, 1990.

different authorial projects. By composing his *Reading Circle*, Tolstoy intended to replace the regular daily calendar of readings with a Bible of his own making.¹⁵ He selected and organized thoughts from humanity's best minds: Plato, Voltaire, Ruskin, the Buddhist and Chinese prophets. Every day of the calendar year started with a philosophical theme or moral proposition which was supported with four to fourteen relevant quotations. In this manner, Tolstoy intended to teach his readers how to live uncompromising lives and mold their characters according to moral maxims prepared by him for their edification. In the words of a contemporary Russian reviewer, one finds in Tolstoy's texts a total affinity between different stages in the evolution of moral maximalism in an individual's life; a five year old child ("First Grief"), according to Tolstoy, joins company with a sixteen year old young man ("Voluntary Slavery") and later in life shares allegiance to the doctrine with the wisest elders on this planet, from Socrates to Tolstoy himself.¹⁶ One cannot imagine a text more alien to Tolstoy's edifying project than Joyce's twenty-four hour odyssey through the human mind. To Joyce, it was important to send his reader on a journey of self-discovery through life's contingencies and contradictions. When confronted with these disparate literary models, a Russian reader is faced with the difficult choice between the comforting security of Tolstoyan realism and the continuing dislocation of Joycean modernism.

It is hard to forget in the current Russian political climate that the opposition between Tolstoy and Joyce has remained a lingering ideological quarrel up to the present day. Characteristically, the opposition between Tolstoy and Joyce has never been an issue in the West where the process of questioning old paradigms of thinking is well underway. Political challenges to Marxist aesthetics on the one hand and the reopening of Bakhtinian dialog about formerly inaccessible textual meanings on the other, have provided a new scenario for the study of Tolstoy's and Joyce's personal and literary projects. Morson's study of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* introduced a radical re-evaluation of narrative and creative potentials in Tolstoy's prose.¹⁷ Morson has demonstrated that Tolstoy, like Joyce, created from potential. Speaking for Joyce, Dominic Manganiello has convincingly argued against Joyce's reputation as an "apolitical" writer. According to Manganiello, Joyce preached his own kind of ideology, a way of political thinking which resembled Tolstoy's vision of socialism without Marxism and anarchism without violence.¹⁸

Neil Cornwell's new study *James Joyce and the Russians* works well as a chronicle of Joyce's meandering journey through Russian cultural politics in the wake of Tolstoy.

¹⁵Tolstoy, "Predislovie," *Krug chteniia*: 18.

¹⁶Boris Sushkov, "Neizvestnaia kniga klassika," *Knizhnoe Obozrenie* 35 (1991): 3.

¹⁷Gary Saul Morson, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in War and Peace* (Stanford, CA: Stanford, 1987).

¹⁸Dominic Manganiello, *Joyce's Politics* (London: Routledge, 1980): 232.

An established British literary scholar, translator, editor, and the author of an acclaimed biography of V.F. Odoevsky,¹⁹ Cornwell puts to good use his insiders's understanding of complex entanglements between literature and politics in Russian culture. Cornwell's study focuses on different aspects of Joyce's contacts with Russia and, conversely, examines the evolution of Russian attitudes towards Joyce. Part One, "Russia and Joyce," examines Joyce's personal accounts of Russia and the Russians; Part Two, "Joyce and Three Russian Contemporaries," treats literary parallels between Joyce and his Russian counterparts; and the concluding Part Three, "Joyce in Russia," analyzes the history of the Soviet reception of Joyce's work from the early revolutionary days through the post-perestroika reassessment of old values. Although Cornwell limits his treatment of Tolstoy to one subchapter, "Tolstoy and the Rest," his entire survey bears direct relevance to the discussion of interconnectedness between Tolstoy and Joyce in the Russian context.

Needless to say, the story of Tolstoy's and Joyce's precarious Russian liaison is in itself instructive. Viktor Shklovsky was among the first to launch the idea of Tolstoy's stylistic anticipation of Joyce's "stream of consciousness." In the heyday of Russian Formalism, Shklovsky argued that had Tolstoy finished his first literary experiment, *The History of Yesterday* (1851), we would have had before us a book similar to the one Joyce was going to write many years later.²⁰ Other literary analogies readily offer themselves following Shklovsky's insightful proposition; the two novelists shared a common interest in Shakespeare and Homer, they demonstrated a propensity for the autobiographical form, and they were equally concerned with the minutiae of conscious and unconscious life. Even though Tolstoy dedicated his last years to writing confessions and prophetic statements, he had opened the doors of modernism for his younger Russian contemporaries. In the wake of Tolstoy's narrative experimentations, Bely, Rozanov, Nabokov, and Eisenstein in cinema, continued to work tirelessly at methods of representing interior psychic processes.²¹

There is no question that young Joyce was worlds apart from elderly Tolstoy on questions of religion, art, and the artist's role in society (not to mention his position on

¹⁹Neil Cornwell, *The Life, Times and Milieu of V.F. Odoevsky, 1804-1869*. (London: Athlone, 1986): ix-x.

²⁰V. Shklovsky, *Povesti o proze: razmyshleniia i razbory*. 2 vols. (Moscow: Khud. Literatura, 1966), II: 212.

²¹See among others, Peter Barta, "Childhood in the Autobiographical Novel: An Examination of Tolstoy's *Childhood*, Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist*, and Bely's *Kotik Letaev*," in *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England, and the World: 2, Comparison and Impact*, eds. Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok. (Tübingen: Günter Narr, 1987): 49-55.

sexuality).²² Nonetheless, Joyce's political views dovetailed with Tolstoy's at many points. When Joyce first learned about Tolstoy's philosophy of non-violent resistance to evil he was captivated by the entire project. Joyce's source, Elzbacher's anthology on anarchism, was a pioneering volume examining various trends in anarchist thought and included chapters on Bakunin, Kropotkin and Tolstoy.²³ Tolstoy's improbable recipe of anarchism and pacifism appealed to Joyce and he enthusiastically embraced Tolstoy's doctrine of "non-resistance to violence."²⁴ Like Tolstoy, Joyce renounced nationalism and patriotism as equally unnatural, irrational, and destructive concepts and was repelled by the idea of subjecting the "non-invasive" individual to external will. Joyce left a remarkable comment concerning the nature of his interest in Russian literary style. It was not the Russian ability to take the reader on an "intercranial journey" that set him thinking about Russian literature, rather, it was the Russians' "scrupulous instinct for caste."²⁵ Joyce openly admired Tolstoy as a formidable Russian landowner who donned his aristocratic garb in order to join his people. Even though he remained skeptical about the sincerity of Tolstoy's cross-dressing (scratch the peasant and you will find an upper-class aristocrat with the feudal memory of his ancestors and a St. Petersburg accent),²⁶ he vigorously defended Tolstoy against the attacks of the "liberal" Western press. Joyce became particularly irate when at one time a British reporter accused Tolstoy of ignorance on the issues of war and peace. "Does that impudent, dishonorable journalist think he is equal to Tolstoy, physically, intellectually, artistically, or morally?" Joyce fulminated in response to his brother.²⁷ Stanislaus shared his brother's admiration of Tolstoy's heretical disregard for official hierarchies. "A man who can dispense with the Tsar in a sentence that would not suffice for a door-porter in one of his novels, has a fund of

²²Some comparative studies of immanent literary "devices" have been occasionally enlivened with references to Tolstoy's and Joyce's shared personal idiosyncrasies: their common fear of thunderstorms, their hydrophobias and their much discussed "monogamy." John Henry Raleigh, "Joyce and Tolstoy," in *Literary Theory and Criticism. Festschrift. Presented to René Wellek in Honor of his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Joseph P. Strelka. (Bern; New York: Peter Lang, 1984): 1137-1157.

²³Manganiello, *Joyce's Politics*: 72.

²⁴Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, tr. Aylmer Maude. (London: Oxford UP, 1971): 1099.

²⁵Joyce to Stanislaus, *Letters of James Joyce*, in 3 vols., eds. Stuart Gilbert and Richard Ellmann. (New York: Viking, 1966), II: 106.

²⁶Joyce's reference to Petersburg demonstrates that he did not trouble himself with the details of Tolstoy's biography. Joyce to Stanislaus, *Letters*, II: 106

²⁷Joyce to Stanislaus, *Letters*, II: 107.

dishonorable thought equal to any journalist's," he concurred.²⁸

The infrequency and informality with which Joyce referred to Tolstoy's creative work may suggest that he was more willing to comment on Tolstoy's politics than to praise his literary virtues. For example, Joyce described Tolstoy's moralistic fable "How much Land Does a Man Need" as the greatest short story ever written.²⁹ He might have even had a hand in translating the story from German into English, Joyce's biographers suspect.³⁰ *Anna Karenina*, in Joyce's only reference to the novel, was remarkable because it exposed the Russian government's hypocrisy in thrusting the ignorant populace into the Russo-Turkish War. Tolstoy's last novel *Resurrection* earned Joyce's praise for the author's eloquent condemnation of the Orthodox Church. Joyce's most positive evaluation of Tolstoy's artistic genius is prefaced with a crescendo of understatements; "He is never dull, never stupid, never tired, never pedantic, never theatrical. He is head and shoulders over the others."³¹ We can always speculate to what degree filial anxiety over a strong precursor played a role in Joyce's reticence concerning Tolstoy's literary merits. One thing is obvious in this connection: even though Joyce shared Tolstoy's view that literature should usher in the spiritual liberation of people, he emphatically opposed Tolstoy's subjugation of art to propagandistic purposes. To take an active role in politics, Joyce insisted, would compromise the artist and would limit the effectiveness of his artistic message.

In the final analysis, both writers aimed at the individual's transformation through art. Joyce was primarily concerned with the fragility of the individual, hence his preference for subtle innuendos over browbeating. By contrast, Tolstoy always envisioned a congregation at his feet, hence the tone of urgency in his sermons.

²⁸Stanislaus to Joyce, *Letters*, II: 119.

²⁹Joyce to Stanislaus, *Letters*, I: 364.

³⁰The translation was published in *International Review* 2.6 (31 May 1916).

³¹Ellmann, *James Joyce*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), 217.