

An Unpublished Essay on Leo Tolstoy by Peter Kropotkin

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An Unpublished Essay on Leo Tolstoy
by Peter Kropotkin

Edited by D. NOVAK

AMONG THE PAPERS left by Peter Kropotkin and hitherto unpublished, one of the most interesting is his essay entitled "Leo Tolstoy: His Art, His Personality." It was written in 1910, and before making final corrections Kropotkin gave the manuscript to the well-known anarchist historian Max Nettlau, hoping perhaps that eventually it would be edited and published. At this time, chiefly because of ill health, Kropotkin spent relatively long periods out of England, and did not work as much as usual.

In a note written on the wrapper in which he kept the manuscript Nettlau suggested, without being able to give any details, that a small portion of the essay had been published in America. However, I have been unable to discover any portion in print, or even a reference to it, although I found out that an article on Kropotkin by Tolstoy appeared in the Moscow *Utro Rosii* on November 12, 1910, shortly after Tolstoy's death. Regarding the manuscript as a whole Nettlau remarked with regret that it "*reste inédit*" in spite of the fact that it represents "*le maximum de ce travail de 1910 . . .*"

In his essay Kropotkin tried to supplement some of his views and appraisals of Tolstoy's work, as developed in his *Ideals and Realities in Russian Literature*, and present a more unified and integrated picture of Tolstoy as an artist. The essay is likely to evoke some criticism from modern students of Tolstoy. However, in spite of having been written forty-eight years ago (and perhaps also because of it), the essay is of special interest as a study of one famous Russian by another, and because it tells us something about Kropotkin as well as about Tolstoy.

The manuscript, as Kropotkin left it, was in need of editing: Kropotkin's English always needed revising, this usually being done for him by his English friends or editors. I have done this work with my wife's assistance, always trying not to interfere with Kropotkin's style. I have also checked the few references left by Kropotkin and supplied all the others, modernized the spelling in the transliteration

of Russian names, and used the currently accepted English titles of Tolstoy's works. Several passages in the manuscript, containing material closely related to other parts of the essay, were only lightly crossed through by Kropotkin, and probably would have been retained by him in the final version: they are given here in square brackets.

I wish to express my appreciation to the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam for giving me permission to edit and published the manuscript. I also wish to thank the Canadian Social Science Research Council and McMaster University for enabling me to carry out research in Europe for several months in 1956, of which this is one of the results.

There is some satisfaction in the fact that, after remaining unpublished for so many years, the essay is ready for print in 1958—the year in which the one-hundred-and-thirtieth anniversary of Tolstoy's birth is being commemorated.

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LEO TOLSTOY: HIS ART, HIS PERSONALITY

P. Kropotkin

PUSHKIN, Lermontov, and Gogol in the first half of the nineteenth century, and Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky in the second half, secured for the Russian novel a place of honour in world literature. One of them, Leo Tolstoy, after more than fifty years of writing, is generally recognized as one of the greatest novelists of the century, if not the greatest. This reputation is the more remarkable both because Tolstoy wrote in a language hardly known beyond the frontiers of Russia, and because he wrote about people whose life, habits, and modes of thinking are even less known than their language.

What was it that enabled Tolstoy to impress his contemporaries to such an extent? What was the nature of his art and his personality? What was his message to the world?

1. TRUTH: THE LEADING FEATURE OF TOLSTOY'S ART

It was certainly the religious and moral teachings of Tolstoy, and his attempts to live in accordance with them, which won for him immense popularity—a popularity so full of personal sympathy that in 1901, when a rumour spread of his arrest in Russia, millions of

people in Europe and America were ready to join in a colossal outburst of indignation. However, if his teaching appealed so much to all the civilized world, it was not only by virtue of its contents, nor because he tried to apply it in life—as reflected in Repin's famous picture of the Russian Count and great writer, dressed as a peasant and following a peasant's plough, which can now be found in the remotest corners of the world. It was also because Tolstoy's teaching was expressed not in the form of dry didactic tracts, but with all the irresistible power of Art, when Art is handled by a man of genius.

The contents of Tolstoy's message varied at different periods of his life, and his philosophy took different aspects. But whatever his creed and philosophy may have been at any given period of his life, and whatever literary form he chose, he always remained the great artist of 1852, when he produced a sensation in Russia by his first novel, *Childhood*, signed by the initials L. N. T.¹

After this Tolstoy resorted to the most varied forms of literary expression. He wrote tales, novels, dramas, philosophical treatises, socialist and anti-government tracts, and so on. But whatever form he used, he always remained, above all, a great artist. He might write a psychological novel, a drama of terrible realism, or a mediaeval "morality"; it might be a sketch on socialist political economy, an elementary tract on physics for peasant children, or a philosophical treatise on religion or on the most intimate depths of human conscience; a tale for children, reduced to the simplest elements of childish art, or his deeply moving *Confession*; an appeal to the nations for peace, or that powerful letter against wholesale hanging which he addressed in 1881 to the Tsar: always he appealed to the best, to the highest element in human nature, always he moved his readers to the very depths of their hearts, always he set them thinking.

All great artists have had that great power, but with Tolstoy there is in it something quite original, quite personal. What attracts us chiefly in his art is not the power of personality, such as we feel, for instance, in Shelley, nor the breadth of philosophical thought, as in Goethe, nor enthusiasm, as in Schiller. Neither is it, to use Brandes's words, the deep "philosophical melancholy" which we find in Turgenyev, nor even the beauty of his male and female characters. Tolstoy's art keeps us under its spell by means of something else, which is Truth: Truth, full Truth above all!

¹This statement appears to be mistaken. Professor Ernest J. Simmons, in his *Leo Tolstoy*, Boston, 1946, p. 88, says that Tolstoy "signed the manuscript with the initials of his first name and patronymic—'L.N.' . . ."

"The hero of my tale," he wrote at the end of his second *Sevastopol* story, "whom I love with all the strength of my soul, whom I have tried to set forth in all his beauty, and who has always been, is, and always will be most beautiful, is—the truth."²

"However banal it may seem to say so," he wrote later, "in everything in our life, and still more so in art, one negative quality is required above all: never to tell a falsehood. In daily life a falsehood is disgusting, but it does not destroy life, . . . while in art a falsehood destroys all connection between facts: everything goes to pieces."³

This love of truth is so great that, as a rule, Tolstoy does not invent the characters in his novels: he takes real men and women whom he knows well, mostly quite ordinary men and women. Of course, he does not give photographic portraits of them. The duty of the artist, he once said in a letter, is to notice those little traits which pass unnoticed by the ordinary man and, by means of these little, usually unnoticed, traits Tolstoy depicts the true character of a person better than could be done by relating the person's more important actions. Moreover, he makes the person representative of a certain type and, through these little traits, readily establishes a sort of familiarity, as though of old acquaintance, between the person portrayed and the reader.

From the biography of Tolstoy by P. A. Biryukov,⁴ whom Tolstoy himself supplied with biographical data and who had access to a mass of family letters, we now know who were the originals of all the chief heroes in Tolstoy's novels. In *Childhood*, in *Boyhood*, and in *Youth*, in which the life of children and young men is depicted with a strikingly life-like reality, and in which the author entirely identifies himself with the world of the children, Tolstoy told of his own childhood and youth. Every person mentioned in these novels is one of the Tolstoy family or one of their close friends. Only the events are altered.

The same is true of his Caucasus sketches (*The Woodfelling*, *The Raid*), as also of his three admirable sketches of the life in besieged Sevastopol (*Sevastopol in December, 1854*, *Sevastopol in May, 1855*, *Sevastopol in August, 1855*), and of his beautiful novel, *The Cossacks*. In all these, and especially in *The Cossacks*, we have real men whom Tolstoy knew. At the same time, under his pen, these men are endowed

²*Sevastopol in May, 1855* (trans. Isabel F. Hapgood), in *The Novels and Other Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi*, ed. Nathan Haskell Dole, New York, 1904, XI, p. 268.

³This passage does not appear in *What Is Art?* and I have been unable, so far, to find it elsewhere.

⁴P. I. Biryukov, *L. N. Tolstoy: Biografiya*, Berlin, 1921, 3 vols. First published in 1908.

with the completeness, the unity, and the distinctness of literary *types* that could have been created by the author's imagination.

In the years 1856–1859 Tolstoy published, among others, the following stories: the deeply moving *Notes of a Billiard Marker*, in which he told how a brilliant, extremely modest aristocrat, Prince Nekhlyudov, seized by his passion for gambling, sank lower and lower, only to end in suicide; *Two Hussars*, one of his best short novels, in which he depicted two types of hussar officers, one of the old and one of the new generation; *A Landlord's Morning*, in which he told of his experiences as a landlord; *Lucerne*, a short story of his own experiences in Switzerland; *Albert*, the story of a great musician who gradually sank to the lowest depths of life; and *Family Happiness*, in which he described his ideal of married life. All these stories are also partly autobiographical, and while the events are sometimes imaginary, the characters in them are real people whom Tolstoy knew. Sometimes he also depicts states of mind he himself experienced.

The effect he obtained by applying the same method to a great historical romance was truly wonderful. If *War and Peace* strikes everyone with the wonderful, life-like appearance of the large number of Russians depicted in this colossal work, producing an illusion of real life to an extent not found in any other historical novel, it was, we now learn, because Tolstoy managed to combine, in a way peculiarly his own, historical personages and real members of the Tolstoy family, and develop, parallel to the historical events, the romantic part of the story.

Several of the most realistic episodes in *War and Peace* are actual happenings of the national war of 1812 narrated to Tolstoy by his aunt. He rendered them so exactly that, after the appearance of *War and Peace*, his aunt used to read this work over and over, living again through that period of her life. Most of the best episodes, which make this work such a wonderfully real picture of the life of Russian noblemen (the hunt with Natasha, for example), are again based on events which really took place in the life of the Tolstoy family. The estate upon which the old Prince Bolkonsky lives with his daughter Marie, whom he loves and nevertheless tortures continually by his fanciful moods, and which engraves itself in the reader's memory, is Tolstoy's own estate, Yasnaya Polyana. He only transfers it from the province of Tula to that of Smolensk, on the route followed by Napoleon during his invasion of Russia.

There is no wonder that Turgenev, who fully appreciated real *truth* in every literary creation, wrote to a friend that he was reading *War*

and Peace for the fifth or sixth time, and that he found, especially in the third volume, passages of such beauty that no other writer in the world but Tolstoy was capable of writing them. As for Tolstoy's power of *creation*, Turgenev considered him far above other Russian writers, including himself: only Pushkin had attained such heights.

It must also be said that in *Anna Karenina* all the characters and many episodes are taken from real life. In the romance of Levin and Kitty we find, even in the smallest details, the story of Tolstoy's own married life and inner struggles.

II. TOLSTOY'S "IDEALIST REALISM"

Tolstoy was not the first writer to take living men and women as the characters of his novels. Gogol, Turgenev, Thackeray, Dickens, Spiehagen, Zola, Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, and others, did the same. But none of them save Gogol—not even Turgenev—succeeded in making his heroes so *alive*, so totally free from any *literary* artificiality, so much like ordinary men and women, as Tolstoy did. None of them, in this respect, was such a realist as Tolstoy.

However, the word "realism" must not be understood here in the sense that was given to it by Zola and other French writers. French realism was born from a protest against romanticism, and therefore inevitably resorted to exaggerations. The French realists considered it their duty to get rid of the old ideal characters, to reveal the bestial nature of man in its worst features, to throw off entirely the sentimentalism of the novelists of the earlier part of the nineteenth century, and to describe man in all his aspects, even without consideration of the reader's feelings of decency. They forgot that idealist tendencies in man are as *real* as any other.

In Russia, whose best writers had broken with romanticism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was no need of such a protest. Russian realism originated in a search for *sincerity*, in a protest—not against idealization altogether, but against *false* idealization. Therefore, at the hands of our best writers, beginning with Pushkin, and then even more with Turgenev, Grigorovich, Ostrovsky, and others, it became *realism* in the service of an *ideal*, i.e., Realist Idealism or *Idealist Realism*.

In adopting this literary manner, Tolstoy was not an innovator: he had not to create it, he only accepted it. He himself acknowledges his indebtedness in this respect to Grigorovich, and everyone feels his indebtedness, as regards form, to Pushkin and Turgenev. He mentions

also that in his first novel, *Childhood*, he was under the influence of Stendhal's *Sentimental Journey* [*Editorial note*: the reference should be to *Le Rouge et le Noir*]. But what he probably took from Stendhal was only the "familiar" way in which he treated the most trifling episodes, so as to produce in the reader a sensation of real life.

Always pursuing his ideal of Truth, Tolstoy abandoned the idea of creating such *types* of superior men and women as Turgenev did in Rudin, Bazarov, Helen, and others, as well as such unforgettable *types* of inferior men and women as Gogol had created. He preferred to deal with common men, to show what was *typical* in them, and to avoid any idealization of them.

From his very first steps in literature he liked to picture, in the most sympathetic colours, those simple, ordinary men of whom he met so many in the Caucasus and in Sevastopol. These are men who at a given moment may be heroic, but the moment before or after are the most ordinary people, with the most ordinary weaknesses; men who never *pose* but who possess a deep-seated sincerity which Tolstoy and the average Russian value most in life; men whose heroism consists more of tenacity in difficult entanglements or moments of real danger than of personal aggressiveness.

[Sincerity being what Tolstoy values most, every attempt at hypocrisy, or at mere theatricality, he pursues pitilessly. Because this want of sincerity is to be found particularly in the so-called civilized intellectuals, who understand that their privileged position in society is unjust but enjoy it so much that they try to justify it by all sorts of sophisms, Tolstoy simply feels aversion towards them. When he wants to produce a character truly sympathetic to himself, he takes it from the simplest peasants, or soldiers, or subaltern officers, and contrasts their simple sincerity with the clever insincerity of the upper classes. The insincere man of science who uses his knowledge to justify the upper class life suffers in particular at Tolstoy's hands.

Thus, in his art, Tolstoy shows a great affinity with the Russian school of his contemporaries, the "populists" (Reshetnikov, Levitov, and others, with whom I have dealt at length in my book, *Ideals and Realities in Russian Literature*).⁵ They also refused to create literary *types*, and showed their sympathy for the same ordinary people as Tolstoy did, while, of course, they did not have the literary talent necessary to write anything that might stand comparison with Tolstoy.] In this respect, then, while dealing with the problems of life in a way

⁵P. Kropotkin, *Ideals and Realities in Russian Literature*, London, 1905, chap. VII.

which makes him one of the world's greatest writers, Tolstoy remains a profoundly Russian writer.

Because Tolstoy does not create representative literary types in his novels, he necessarily produces a great many individual characters. One critic has counted 146 in *Anna Karenina*, and there must be more than 200 in *War and Peace*. Yet every one, down to the least important, is most carefully drawn, so that we at once recognize an acquaintance, and all are disposed with great skill in historical perspective, according to their importance in the development of events. At the same time, this multitude of characters has the advantage of giving us a feeling of real life. Besides, when Tolstoy deals with a great event, such as a national war, he succeeds in showing how and why the great events, which the historians, always given to romanticism and dramatization, attribute to superior individuals, are the work of the masses, composed of the infinitesimally small units of mankind.

It is evident that this approach of Tolstoy's also has its drawbacks. We do not find in his creations such unique characters as we have in Shakespeare's Hamlet or Richard III, in Goethe's Faust or Mephistopheles, in Ibsen's Brand, and so on. We also find none of those types of men and women who have inspired, and will continue to inspire, mankind to strive towards the great, the beautiful, the poetical. We miss them. We miss them especially in Tolstoy's female characters, although Anna Karenina is certainly wonderful, perhaps the best type of woman.

The world does not consist only of these *negative* types which Tolstoy has so admirably represented in such numbers. It has also its positive types, men and women who have something of their own to add to the sum of mankind's progress—their word to say, their feeling to express, be it only in a limited circle. If these positive types were not better than Pierre, Sonichka, or Captain Timokhin in *War and Peace*, or Levin in *Anna Karenina*, human progress would be in poor straits. Even the soldier Platon Karataev in *War and Peace*, who admirably reflects the common sense of the Russian nation in times of calamity and who will remain one of the most memorable of Tolstoy's characters, shows no other way of reacting to events—even in his mind—than to take them as they come.

There is another feature of Tolstoy's art which stood in the way of his gaining a strong hold upon human minds in his first series of works, which began in 1852 with *Childhood* and ended in 1877 with *Anna Karenina*. It was that with all his love for truth and justice, we did not see him suffer when he saw the falsehood, the injustice, and the

emptiness beneath the philistine morality, as did Shelley, Ibsen, Turgenev, and so many others, who felt the need of an ideal, longed for it, searched for it, and suffered from not finding it. We do not find this in the first series of Tolstoy's works, and only from his *Confession* do we learn how deeply he suffered from precisely this cause, especially when he saw that he himself was coming to a compromise with that falsehood, that injustice, and that emptiness.

Finally, while *love* became Tolstoy's chief watchword after his crisis of 1876-1878, it is striking to see how it was missing in all his writings prior to that crisis. He spoke satirically in one of his letters of Turgenev's love scenes in *On the Eve*. This was, however, as we now know from himself and his biographers, because he never knew that form of love which Turgenev knew so well, this "most beautiful of all dreams," to which Wagner, as he wrote to Liszt, was going to erect so beautiful and elevating a monument in *Tristan and Isolde*.

The result was that in the representation of the higher features of human nature Tolstoy never reached in his first creations the heights which we find in the poems, dramas, and novels of Western literature. Tolstoy did not create such heroes as would strive to influence the march of progress, and did not even notice them in Russian life, although there were hundreds of them in all classes of society at the very time he wrote his best works. He seems to have doubted the very possibility of such people's existence until, in 1878-1881, he came to know men and women who sacrificed their well-being and their lives for their ideals; and then the thought of one of them, Sophie Perovskaya, going to be hanged worried and tortured him so much that he wrote to Alexander III a powerful letter asking that no executions should take place. Until then he suspected that all that was described as heroism was mere submission to unavoidable necessity, if it was not something like the military heroism concocted in the battle reports of the General Staff.

He did not understand active heroism and aggressive self-sacrifice in those early years, and this is why his best work, *War and Peace*, will never appeal to men as strongly as so great a work of art might appeal. This is also why in his much later work, *What Is Art?* Tolstoy repudiated the idea of art without a great, deep, leading inspiration.

III. THE PERSONAL ELEMENT IN TOLSTOY'S ART

An objective description of men and events, artistic though it may be, will not be sufficient to produce a great writer. Art requires also

the subjective element of the author. This element Tolstoy contributed by bringing into all that he wrote his own passionate *seeking* for the highest truth, his own inner struggles, the drama of his own life.

Speaking of Tolstoy's art, one of his friends, Sergeenko, wrote: "Among Russian writers Lermontoff exercised the greatest influence on L. N. Tolstoy. To this day he cherishes a warm feeling for him, and values in him that quality which he calls *seeking* [for truth and higher ideals of life]. Bereft of that quality, he considers the talent of a writer incomplete and, as it were, defective."⁶ Tolstoy possessed this quality in the highest degree. In one way or another, with full sincerity, he introduced into all his works of art his own seeking for truth and the bitter struggles between the aristocratic tradition, the epicurean habits of the man of the world that he was in his younger years, and the revolt of his reason and his moral conscience against the current ethics of the privileged classes. Like Amiel in his *Journal intime* he seemed to say, "Am I not an interesting subject for your studies?" And the subject proved to be so deeply human, and so representative of modern thought, that beside the beauty of description it represents the chief attraction in Tolstoy's art.

Irtenev in *Youth*, Nekhlyudov in *Notes of a Billiard Marker*, Olenin in *The Cossacks*, Pierre and partly Andrey in *War and Peace*, Levin in *Anna Karenina*, Pozdnyshv in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Nekhlyudov in *Resurrection*—all these are representative of Tolstoy's inner self and its struggles. Turgenev and we, the readers of Tolstoy's novels, have grumbled at times about the endless inner struggles and duality of Olenin, Levin, and others, and wished to see that duality terminated in one way or another. But these struggles were in Tolstoy himself and they lasted until, stripping himself of his epicurean leanings and of his doubts about the possibility of a sincere, honest life and self-sacrifice for the common cause without the commands of the Christian religion, he frankly accepted Rousseau's ideas about social injustice which had attracted him from his younger years, and he worked out at last that religion, that world-view, and those socialist conclusions, to the development of which he has consecrated the last thirty years.

[Many causes must have contributed to the development of that element in Tolstoy's nature, and one of them must have been the many remarkable, unusual men and women in the Tolstoy family, and the frequency of dramatic episodes in their lives.] How deeply Leo Tolstoy, only eight years old at the time, must have been im-

⁶P. A. Sergyeenko, *How Count Leo Tolstoy Lives and Works* (trans. Isabel F. Hapgood), New York, 1899, p. 36.

pressed by the sudden death of his father in a street in Tula, apparently poisoned by his servant, and then by the agonies of his father's mother who could not believe that her son was no longer alive, and by her death nine months later (Leo's mother had died six years before). One has only to think of all the gossip, the half-spoken words, the whispers that must have gone around the family and their numerous retainers, and imagine the impression they produced on the gifted, imaginative boy! One can also think of the impression made by the tragic history of his father's sister, his aunt Alexandra Osten-Saken, whom her husband, becoming insane, compelled to leave the house in a hurry one day and to flee in a carriage and then, thinking that they were pursued, shot her through the breast and left her by the roadside, continuing his mad flight, while she was saved from death by a passing peasant woman. One understands why the image of death and the fear of it continually appear in Tolstoy's writings. [We also find among the members of the Tolstoy family a continual struggle between the deeply Christian influences, exercised by the aunts Osten-Saken and P. I. Yushkov, Tolstoy's brother Dmitri, and his sister Mary who actually joined a convent, and the influences of the French rationalist philosophy.] The result of all these conflicting influences was that even in his boyhood Tolstoy took to philosophising, passing from asceticism to philosophical epicureanism and scepticism, and ending in a complete abandonment of religion at the age of eighteen, which, however, did not prevent him from praying later on, at the serious moments of his life.

As early as 1847, when Tolstoy left the University, he began to look seriously upon the duties imposed by life. We see it in his *Landlord's Morning* where he tells of his experiences in attempting to improve the conditions of his serfs. Then came long interruptions in this serious mood, during which he gave himself with full passion to the dignified life of the *jeunesse dorée* (of which we find traces in *Notes of a Billiard Marker* and in his *Confession*), and from which he escaped only by joining his brother Nicholas in the Caucasus and entering military service there as a non-commissioned officer.

Here, in these new surroundings, his literary talent began to develop; but here, also, he—an admirer of Rousseau, whose medallion portrait he wore round his neck at the age of fifteen and whose *Contrat social* he had with him even during the mountain raids—faced for the first time the great problems of life. Here he—an aristocratic epicurean, a worshipper of the *comme il faut*, full of the prejudices of his own class and circle—came face to face with two peoples who knew nothing

of these prejudices, and whose moral superiority to men of his own class the young Tolstoy had several times to recognize: the Circassians, who fought for their liberty and were capable of the greatest sacrifices for the mere sense of honour and friendship (like Sado, who once saved Tolstoy's life at the risk of his own, and at another time saved him from the clutches of a heavy gambling debt); and the Russian Cossack settlers on the prairies of the Terek, a hardy race of pioneers whose qualities Tolstoy could not but admire.

A few years later, in 1855, his stay with his battery in the dreadful Fourth Bastion in besieged Sevastopol gave further, still deeper impulse to his thoughts. He could watch the quiet resignation and sense of accomplished duty with which scores of thousands of men of the people faced and met death without a word, not only during the excitement of a hand-to-hand battle but also during the long hours of enervating waiting under the fire of the enemy. By the side of these men he saw the officers with their petty interests, their talk of advancement, their feeling of caste, even within minutes of death. All this made him reflect upon the problems of the organization of society much more deeply than was possible for his literary contemporaries in St. Petersburg who knew only city life, and of it usually only the life of their own "intellectual" circles.

Here, at the early age of twenty-six, rose before him the menace of death and the question that was asked by Solomon and Schopenhauer, "What for?" which in his later years inspired some of his most deeply felt works. It was in the trenches of Sevastopol that he began to see, in himself and his comrades, discordant, contradictory motives, and the incessant struggle of the highest aspirations of man with his lower instincts, which made him suffer. It was in these trenches, also, that his love for the stoical qualities, for the lack of affectation, and for the sincerity of the peasant masses—the love which he had felt in his youth at Yasnaya Polyana—developed more fully, together with his contempt for epicureanism, the affectation, and the insincerity of the educated classes. He began to realize the tragic consequences of this contrast for mankind.

After his return from Sevastopol, when he plunged once more into the life of the St. Petersburg and Moscow *jeunesse dorée*, the inner struggles which went on in this passionate nature must have been terrible at times. We see from his *Notes of a Billiard Marker* that he was too strong, too conscious of his own strength and of the great artistic power which had revealed itself in him to fall into those alternations of wild passion and whining remorse which so often were

seen in those times among men of his class. He could not even seek salvation from his own passions in mysticism, as Gogol, Dostoevsky, and several other Russian writers had done. Then, the illness of his brother Nicholas soon took him away from his Moscow and St. Petersburg associations. He went abroad with his brother who, after lingering for two years, died in his arms (his death is described in *Anna Karenina*), and once more the questions, *What for? What is the use of life?* rose before him. He returned home shortly before the abolition of serfdom, when all intellectual Russia was talking about education of the peasants, and started his *Yasnaya Polyana* school. With all his energy and passion he developed and applied here his ideas of free education—far freer than anything that had been advocated by Rousseau or Pestalozzi, [and certainly similar to those which were developed twenty-five years later by another great artist and poet, William Morris, in *News from Nowhere*.] At the same time he edited a review, *Yasnaya Polyana*, and the papers he wrote for it (they comprise a whole volume of his works, but seem to be still quite unknown among the English-speaking nations) are full of the most valuable suggestions in this respect. He also accepted the post of peace mediator between the liberated peasants and their former owners. In this busy life he certainly had no time for self-analysis, but his views on the existing organization of society and its injustices were strengthened.

After his marriage in 1862, new interests arose for Tolstoy, as he began to write the great epic of the Russian national war of 1812, into which he introduced all the great questions that worried him, and his own inner struggles.

It is now known that he began this work with the intention of divesting Napoleon of the glory with which history had crowned him, and to contrast this insincere and theatrical man with a mild, soft, gentle, and religious Alexander I, as Tolstoy imagined him. He was completely unable to understand Napoleon and entirely overlooked the immense influence which the young Bonaparte had acquired over the minds of men, when he was imbued with the ideas of the advanced Jacobins, when he inspired with enthusiasm the *sans-culottes* armies and carried with him the conquered nations, among which the survivals of serfdom, the rule of the *camarilla*, the supremacy of the clergy, and the concentration of land in a few hands were abolished.

Tolstoy, however, was on his own ground and obtained powerful results when he made his readers feel that historical events develop independently of the will of those individuals to whom historians

attribute importance, and that it is the state of mind and the actions of the masses which decide the battles and shape the events of universal history. He showed with an irresistible force of fact the unimportance of those who think that they are making history by their orders, and pitilessly revealed the ocean of petty ambitions and personal intrigues stirred up by every war. In contrast, he dwelt lovingly upon the unknown heroes who provide the real force of resistance to every army. Finally, in *Pierre* he expressed his own doubts and seeking for truth.

Marriage at first gave Tolstoy the necessary repose of mind to devote himself entirely to artistic creation. Yet his inner struggles between the epicurean who enjoys wealth, the pleasures of a landlord's life on a beautiful estate, and "family happiness," on the one hand, and the socialist who feels that he has no moral right to all this wealth, on the other hand, continued unabated. Moreover, married life did not give him such happiness as he had expected. His wife and later also his sons were not in sympathy with his higher strivings, and ridiculed them. Thus while writing *War and Peace*, Tolstoy put into Andrey's mouth those sad words about marriage: "Never, never get married, my friend! This is my advice to you. Do not marry until you have come to the conclusion that you have done all that is in your power to do . . ."⁷ which Biryukov mentions in his biography of Tolstoy. Those with whom he was in contact in Moscow, especially after his quarrel with Turgenev, belonged to the extreme wing of the *Moscow Gazette* reactionaries, so that Tolstoy broke with them, even with his great personal friend, the poet Fet, when he lived through his crisis of 1878-1881.

The discord between his life and his ideals grew stronger and stronger. After finishing *War and Peace* he tried four different subjects for another great historical romance (the Decembrist conspiracy, Peter I, the conspiracy of Mirovich under the Empress Catherine II, Perovsky and Nicholas I), but soon realized his inability to feel in sympathy with these periods, and abandoned them. Suddenly he began to write *Anna Karenina*, into which he introduced his own romance in the story of Levin and Kitty, the happiness it gave him, as well as his own strivings and seeking for something better.

Of the literary beauties of this novel—the best he wrote from the point of view of literary construction, the deepest for the conception and development of characters, and full of the most beautiful scenes,

⁷*War and Peace* (trans. Nathan Haskell Dole), in *The Novels and Other Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi*, I, pp. 35-6.

especially of family life—I do not wish to speak here and refer the reader to what I wrote about it in my book on Russian literature.⁸ I must only add that it is now known that in 1877, when Tolstoy was finishing this novel—“this dull and purposeless *Anna Karenina*,” as he put it in a letter—his thoughts were far away from family life with its surroundings and ways of thinking about which he had just written: he had evidently begun to hate them.

IV. TOLSTOY'S RELIGIOUS CRISIS

Tolstoy has told with great sincerity, in his *Confession*, about his religious crisis.

In 1876 he began to feel what he describes as “arrests of life.” At such moments he lost all incentive to live. When they had passed, he seemed to be once more the same man, full of the joy of life, but they returned, only to become more difficult to throw off.

Every writer knows moments of discouragement, especially when he sees, as Tolstoy did, that his latest creation (*Anna Karenina* in this case) does not attain the perfection and significance of the previous one (*War and Peace*). But there was something else in these crises, deeper than mere discouragement. A Schopenhauerian pessimism, a Faustian despair pervaded his being. “Lyovochka always says, “his wife wrote to her sister in September, 1876, “that everything has ended for him, that he must soon die, that nothing more gives him pleasure, that he has nothing more to expect from life.”⁹

Whether there were any immediate reasons to accentuate this pessimistic mood we do not know and, of course, if there were, they would hardly be mentioned in *Confession*. We are certain, however, that Tolstoy now felt more keenly than before the incompatibility of his higher ideals of life with the life he was leading and apparently was doomed to lead, plunging more and more deeply into its philistinism. He suffered from the same contradictions that produced Schopenhauer's pessimism, from the same gnawing illness from which thousands upon thousands of intellectuals suffer the world over. Repudiating the violence of a revolutionary solution, as he did, he was vainly looking for what might help change these conditions and, like Faust, was falling into despair.

In *The Cossacks*, published in 1863, he expressed through Olenin the view that “Happiness consists in living for others. This also is clear.

⁸See Kropotkin, *Ideals and Realities in Russian Literature*, 126–8.

⁹Biryukov, *L. N. Tolstoy*, II, p. 319.

Man is endowed with a craving for happiness; therefore it must be legitimate. If he satisfies it egotistically—that is, if he bends his energies toward acquiring wealth, fame, physical comforts, love—it may happen that circumstances will make it impossible to satisfy this craving. In fact, these cravings are illegitimate, but the craving for happiness is not illegitimate. What cravings can always be satisfied independently of external conditions?—Love, self-denial.”¹⁰

Yet continually Tolstoy had to ask himself: What is it that might bridle the lower instincts of man when they run counter to the welfare of other men? When he thought that religion might be such a power, he saw that the established religions, with all the mystical additions to their ethical tenets, could have no effect upon those who do not accept these mystical elements. As early as March, 1855, during his stay in Sevastopol, he wrote the following in his diary:

Yesterday a conversation about Divinity and Faith suggested to me a great, a stupendous, idea to the realisation of which I feel capable of devoting my life. That idea is the founding of a new religion corresponding to the present development of mankind: the religion of Christ but purged of dogmas and mysticism—a practical religion, not promising future bliss but giving bliss on earth. I understand that to accomplish this the conscientious labour of generations is necessary. One generation will bequeath the idea to the next, and some day fanaticism or reason will accomplish it. *Deliberately* to contribute to the union of man by religion, is the basic thought which I hope will dominate me.¹¹

On the other hand, having grown up in the country, and having come to love the peasants, their work, their modes of thought, he could not remain blind to the great economic problem of “land for those who cultivate it,” and the altogether incredible poverty to which they are doomed. Thus, on August 18th, 1865, he wrote in his diary the following most remarkable passage, published by Biryukov:

The mission of Russia in world history consists in bringing into the world the idea of a socialized organization of land ownership.

“*La propriété—c’est le vol*” will remain a greater truth than the truth of the English constitution, as long as mankind exists. It is an absolute truth, but there are relative truths resulting from it—applications. The first of these relative truths is the Russian people’s conception of property. The Russian people refuse to recognize property in land—the property which is most solid, most independent of one’s own labour, and which more than any other interferes with the right of people to acquire property. This is not a dream—this is a fact . . . This idea has future. The Russian revolution

¹⁰*The Cossacks* (trans. Nathan Haskell Dole), in *The Novels and Other Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi*, XI, pp. 104–5.

¹¹Aylmer Maude (ed), *The Private Diary of Leo Tolstoy, 1853–1857* (trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude), New York, 1927, p. 114.

can be founded only on this idea. The revolution will not be against the Tsar and despotism, but against private property in land.¹²

Worried by such problems, Tolstoy felt nothing but utter contempt for those who are led by the motives of personal enrichment and the desire to prepare a cosy nest for themselves and their families. Worse still, he saw that he himself was becoming one of them.

One can easily conceive the terrible conflicts in Tolstoy between his passionate desire to "drink from the cup of pleasures to its bottom," and his higher impulses: the desire to accomplish something great and his despair at seeing that he could not resist even the commonplace philistine life which claimed him, absorbed him, and trampled under its feet all his ideals.

The result was that the question, "What for—what are all these riches and fame for?" rose so sternly before his mind that he began to see suicide as the only escape from the terrible contradictions of life and the pangs of his conscience. He wrote to his friend Strakhov in November, 1876: "I am intellectually asleep and cannot wake up. . . . it is painful to be ending one's life without having a respect for it—and such respect can only be attained by meaningful work."¹³ This work he could not find. In such a frame of mind, when the idea of suicide became so familiar that a certain hook on the wall of his room began to claim his attention and he was afraid to go out hunting with a loaded gun, he came to the conclusion that the only way out was to embrace the religion in which so many of his family had sought refuge and, better still, to accept the simple faith of those whom he had always admired in their work and resignation, the Russian peasants. "They have," he said to himself, "a knowledge of the sense and aim of life," which he had not, and he tried to do as they did. He accepted the Greek Orthodox creed of the masses, even with all those elements which his reason had hitherto repudiated. He began to accomplish with determination all the rites prescribed by the Russian Church. He went to Kiev to visit the catacombs of the saints venerated by the Russian people, he made pilgrimages with peasants (which he enjoyed immensely so long as they were tramping the roads), he visited the Optina Pustyn monastery; but the result was a growing disgust for the deceit that the priests and monks practised on primitive minds.

For some time he adhered to this faith, although certain dogmas and rites (prayers for the rulers, for the success of their armies, etc.)

¹²Biryukov, *L. N. Tolstoy*, II, p. 80.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 320.

revolted him. As Biryukov says, "he was ready to sacrifice anything to be able to stay in the quiet harbour which he had reached after so many sufferings . . ." ¹⁴ But at last he gave it up and gradually returned to the idea which had been in his mind in 1855—the idea of a universal rationalist religion which his reason could accept.

Such a step was the more unavoidable as the crisis he had lived through had not a purely religious origin. It had to do also with the recognition of the equality of man, the denial of anyone's right to acquire wealth by the exploitation of the labour of others.

Tolstoy, of course, read Turgenev's *Virgin Soil*, published in 1877, and although as a rule he did not read newspapers, he heard of the ovations which the Russian youth gave the great writer when he came to Russia the next year. Even if he had not known it before, he must have learned then that the Russian youth, which his best friends treated with such hatred, was doing exactly what he had longed to do in his Yasnaya Polyana school days, what he had preached in his Yasnaya Polyana educational papers and in *Lucerne*. In my lectures on Russian literature at the Lowell Institute in Boston in March, 1901, I ventured to suggest this, ¹⁵ and now we know from Biryukov's and Maude's work that Tolstoy actually met, and was deeply impressed by, people who belonged to the great *narodnik* ("Go to the People" or "populist") movement of the years 1870–1878.

Meeting these people must have been a revelation for Tolstoy. Here were men and women who shared his own socialistic thoughts, with the same "populist" shade of opinion, as respectful of the peasant masses as he was, giving the same importance to the land question, and attributing as little importance to government as he did. Moreover, Tolstoy could not accuse them of insincerity as he accused his literary "liberal" friends who shared in theory the ideas of the socialists but led a life contrary to them. The *narodniks* of those years lived the life of the peasants, and for doing so they did not require the commands of religion: their own need to live a life in accordance with their ideals was sufficient.

Tolstoy met one of them, V. I. Alexeev, in 1878, when he invited him to teach mathematics to his children. Alexeev had been a member of our circle of propagandists at Orel, ¹⁶ active among the workers on

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹⁵See Kropotkin, *Ideals and Realities in Russian Literature*, pp. 134–5. The lectures on Russian literature delivered by Kropotkin at the Lowell Institute in Boston served as a foundation for this book.

¹⁶Kropotkin refers here to his own participation in the *narodnik* movement, which he discussed in greater detail in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, Boston and New York, 1899, pp. 304–35.

the railway and in the neighbouring iron works, and later on, when mass arrests began in 1873, he went with several others to found a communist colony in Kansas. He accepted the post with Tolstoy after much hesitation, first lodging in a peasant house in the village, but gradually became friendly with Tolstoy and remained so even after he left Yasnaya Polyana. This is what Tolstoy wrote to him in the autumn of 1881: "You were the first man (touched by education) whom I knew, who not in words but in spirit confessed the faith that has become for me a clear and steadfast light. That made me believe in the possibility of what had always dimly stirred in my soul. And therefore as you have been, so you will always remain, dear to me."¹⁷

Through Alexeev, Tolstoy made the acquaintance in 1878 of several others of our comrades of the great trial of One-hundred-and-ninety-three. Thus he mentions in a letter to Strakhov "three of the best representatives of the extreme socialists—those who are now on trial."¹⁸ It is known that one of them was Malikov, a peace mediator during the abolition of serfdom, whom I knew very well in the years 1872–1874 as one of the most devoted propagandists of our circle at Orel. Tolstoy also met Bibikov, another peace mediator, a remarkable man who belonged to the circle of Nechaev, and Orlov, who spent two years in prison over the Nechaev affair. "He also is ascetic in life, provides for nine people, and lives rightly," Tolstoy wrote about Orlov.¹⁹

One easily understands the impression these people must have produced on Tolstoy by their sincerity, their simplicity, their self-sacrifice, and their lives led in full accordance with their ideals. He understood, as he himself says, that he *was* right in his ideals, that the life he longed for *was* possible, and he certainly grasped the effect the teachings of such men, confirmed by the example of their lives, could have on the peasants and workers, particularly when he met the peasant Syutaev and his family. Syutaev and his sons had been tombstone makers at St. Petersburg, but abandoned this business, considering it immoral, "forgave all their debtors" in accordance with the Lord's prayer, and retired to a village where the father took on the duties of village shepherd. In common with some factions of the Russian Nonconformists, the Syutaevs repudiated the Orthodox Church and the State with its laws, and led an honest, laborious life in a small community of their own. The sons refused to serve in the army and were sent to prison.

¹⁷Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy: Later Years*, London, 1911, p. 94. First published in 1910.

¹⁸Biryukov, *L. N. Tolstoy*, II, p. 346.

¹⁹In a letter to Alexeev, quoted in Maude, *Life of Tolstoy*, p. 97.

Tolstoy was charmed by the Syutaev family, by "their fearlessness in facing the great problems of human conduct, their scorn at conventional shams," as Maude put it.²⁰ ". . . we are in full agreement with Soutáef to the smallest details . . ." Tolstoy wrote to Alexeev.²¹ And he saw to his immense astonishment that Syutaev's solutions, for instance that of the problem of the orphans in Moscow, which worried Tolstoy after the census in which he took part in 1882, was simpler and infinitely nearer to the spirit of Christianity than anything Tolstoy himself had said or done, with all his knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, and his learned interpretation of the Gospels.

Altogether, it was impossible for Tolstoy to keep aloof from the great question of *social* organization which deeply moved Russia at that time, and still does. It was not merely a question of religion, of *faith*, that he had to solve, as his wife quite unconsciously put it in a striking form in the following lines: "That state of melancholy used to befall you long ago; you say, 'From lack of faith I wished to hang myself.' And now? You are not without faith now; then why are you unhappy? Did you not know before that hungry, sick, unhappy and bad people exist? Look more carefully, and you will find merry, happy, and good people also. May God help you—but what can I do in the matter?"²² The contrast between the two conceptions of life and justice could not have been expressed more tersely.

Tolstoy himself felt that he could not stop where he was. In 1881–1884 he actually developed the ideas which he has defended ever since. He saw that the chief problem of life in modern society was a social one. In his endeavour to find a religious basis for it he soon perceived that the Christian teaching as given by the Churches would not do. He worked first to refashion Christianity as it must have been in the first centuries of our era, and then returned to his previous conception of religion, that of Rousseau. It is based not on a blind faith in this or that teaching, elevated though that teaching may be, but on a *rational* faith that might suggest a higher conception of life to men of all possible religions and of all possible systems of philosophy.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 93.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 97.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 153.

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