Tolstoy and the Novel

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January 11-15, 2021

Yet another one of those bought but unread books in my library. The blue bookmark which came with every purchase at Harvard Bookstore. The bookmark is for 75-76 and the date on the receipt is December 29, and I presume 1975. Thus I must have spent Christmas and New Year in Cambridge that year, but unlike previous and subsequent Christmases I have no recollection of how such a Christmas and New Year was celebrated that time. Anyway the book cost me $ 1.95 and to that was added 10 cent sales tax. Much more cannot de teased out of the faded receipt which has been stuck in the book for almost half a century.

The author turns out to be the widower of Iris Murdoch, a critic and also a novelist on his own. I do not recall the name, but probably have read many of his pieces for the London Review of Books over the years. His credentials appear impeccable, yet reading literary criticism tends to be rather disappointing, unless it is opinionated and unabashedly subjective such as that of Harold Bloom; but as soon it starts to try to be objective and even have pretensions of being scientific it becomes labored, tedious and ultimately inane. Bayley is no Bloom, although both share a love of Shakespeare as the ultimate bard, and the initial chapters of the book (The Russian Background and Inevitable Comparisons) are indeed somewhat bland, but it does pick up when he comes to particulars. The largest section of the book concerns 'War and Peace' ostensibly a novel, but so much more, of which a third of the bulk of the book is devoted. Then comes a longer discussion of 'Anna Karenina' which is much more of a novel in the classical sense, and then the minor works of Tolstoy get their dues, like his semi-autobiography ('Childhood, Boyhood and Youth'), 'Resurrection', 'Ivan Illich', 'Family Happiness', 'the Cossacks' and pearls such as 'Hadji Murad'. But also non-fiction such as his 'What is Art?' I have read Tolstoy in Swedish and English translation, my Russian would not even be good enough to tackle the simplest of his fables. The first work I must have read by Tolstoy was 'Anna Karenina' in a Swedish translation. It was in the summer of 1972 definitely after I had already become quite familiar with Chekhov and Dostoevsky. I was joining my parents and brother on a continental trip and most of it was read on the trip. I was young and impressionable and it certainly made an impression on me, and quite different than that Chekhov and Dostoevsky had made, although in the confrontation with Karenin I was very much taken and thought of it as classical Russian one, and must have had Dostoevsky in vivid if unconscious memory. Three years later I read during a conference in Williamstown, Massachusetts, three novellas (Family Happiness, The Death of Ivan Illytch and Cossacks) of which only that of Illytch I remember, and not fondly at all, instead lingering on unpleasantly, meaning the story as such not its presentation. After that I felt ready to tackle 'War and Peace' which occupied me for the rest of the conference. I cannot recall that I have ever before nor after had such a total engrossing reading experience. The first thing I did waking up in the morning was to resume my reading from the evening before, than a quick break for

breakfast and then back to my room to take advantage of the short interval before the first talk in the morning. I went to lectures, I talked to people, but all the time I was so anxious to get back to the book. The last I remember reading of it is on the bus down to New York where I was to start on my first job ever, my Ritt Assistant professorship at Columbia University. I was twenty-five.

I also read his semi-auto biography and 'Kreuzer sonata' but I do not know how those readings chronologically fit into it all. Visiting a German friend in Paris in early summer 1975 I saw that he read 'the Kreuzer sonata' in a French translation. I have a weak recollection that I was already familiar with the story[1], which indicates that this was before the works above. If so this could also hold for the semi-auto biography.n But does it really mater?

A key concept when it comes to Bayley's discussion about Tolstoy it is solipsism. To Bayley (and Tolstoy?) this means something quite different from the existential threat that nothing but your own consciousness may exist. This is a claustrophobic scenario which is deeply unsettling. The notion of solipsism which seems to engage the author is a far more positive one, namely an exaltation of the personal ego. Tolstoy announces that consciousness tells you: I alone am, and all that exist is but me. Continuing. Freedom is the thing examines, inevitability examines. Freedom is the content, inevitability is the form. It is far from clear what this means.

Connected to a positive spin on solipsism are imagination and the dread of death. Your imagination is of course all-powerful, and all can be taken away from you. Tolstoy's view on death is of course that it would be an unimaginable disaster and thus cannot really happen to him. Other people may die, they do it all the time, and you have become used to it, and can view it almost as a spectacle; but that you yourself would die, this cannot be fathomed. Should not God make at least one exception, and the exception should of course be Tolstoy[2]. As Tolstoy remarks: Death is the only real thing and should not exist.

Tolstoy is very suspicious of things which are 'made-up' and for that reason claims that he has no imagination. But this reveals a confusion as to what constitutes imagination. In mathematics you do not simply make up things, in fact you do not make up things at all, but you look and you need imagination in order to know where to look. The same goes for the creation of characters. Characters are often simply made-up in much inferior works of fiction, in true fiction you do not make up characters, because characters present themselves to you and you have to understand them and follow them, just as in mathematics you have to understand and follow arguments and see where they lead. You cannot predict in advance what your characters will do, you need to listen and find out. Thus for Tolstoy the creation of characters is not a voluntary act, but involves an involuntary recognition. This is how solipsism enters. Your imagination, so to speak, creates a universe. A universe which is both independent of you but ultimately created by you, but in no sense consciously and voluntarily. But not only Tolstoy is a solipsist, so are his characters, and that is why they come out so alive. This is because with solipsism comes self-sufficiency, what the Russians call самодоволност (samodovolnost)

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[1] But the book is not in my library, it could have been borrowed.

[2] I read that in Gorky's *Reminiscences of Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Andreyev* a book in my girlfriends library, and it must have been in 1973

a concept Bayley repeatedly returns to. The characters in the works of James, Conrad and Turgenev (and one surmises for most writers of fiction) have no life outside the mentality of their authors, meaning beyond the confines of the novel. The characters of Tolstoy are round, a roundness that goes beyond their fictional appearance. They exist independently of the context in which they accidentally appear. Of course this image of the rounded three-dimensional character as opposed to the two-dimensional cut out from cardboard is a stock-in-trade item of literary criticism on the most hackneyed level, and I recall encountering it already as a child being warned of inferior literature; yet of course when further explored it can illuminate. Bayley does so, or at least tries to do so by remarking that this roundness of characters is due to have been given real bodies, and for Tolstoy, the body is an indispensable premise of fictional reality. We know people both abstractly and concretely. Abstractly through mental interchange, but that can also be exercised by letter, and concretely by the awareness of their bodies, which gives to them a palpable existence in the world of things, just like tables and chairs. Abstractly we can in principle get to know characters in novels better than fleeting acquaintances in real life, except of course that the latter take up physical space, imposing their reality upon us, while that is beyond the power of a fictional character, but the illusion of their appropriation of space can be created, if not necessarily intentionally, but more in the nature of things. In fact on is tempted to conclude that whenever an author deliberately aims for an effect, it is more in the nature of trickery than creation. And this involuntary but natural and inevitable creation of character comes to the fore in 'War and Peace' and thus it cannot properly be classified as a novel, it transcends any genre into which it is being pressed. A good work of art, Tolstoy writes to his friend Alexander Goldenweisser[3] can in its entirety be expressed only by itself. In fact as Bayley stresses, the enjoyment of the book is immediate rendering the rôle of the critic superfluous, in fact we never need to worry about what Tolstoy is up to. An abridged version of the book, as suggested by the critic Percy Lubbock[4], would be, according to Bayley intolerable. In fact people who read and enjoy War and Peace have a hard time remembering what is in it, just as they may have a hard time remember things in their own lives, but not in novels. Novels are artifices with plots and structures that mean something and whose meaning needs to be understood and worked out, and thus stick in memory (this effect is even stronger when mathematical arguments are presented); in War and Peace there is nothing to work out, just as in life, only to be accepted as it comes. This, if anything is a testimony to its realness. A real slice of life, existing on its own, a complete solipsistic universe, you either take or leave.

If Balzac had been a banker he would never have instructed his readers in such detail on the business of banking; had Proust been a count, he would never have pursued the lives of aristocrats with such relish, the author remarks, the reason being that if so they would have taken it for granted, like fish take water. Only by learning and conquering a

[3] (1875-1961) was a good friend of Tolstoy, working as a pianist and composer, winning a Gold Medal for piano as a young man and student at the Moscow conservatory.

[4] (1879-1965) an essayist, critic and biographer and also a good friend of Henry James, is known for his *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) which purveyed a rather formal view of novels, in a Jamesian spirit, but nevertheless exercised considerable influence on contemporary writers, Virginia Woolf vacillating between admiration and disgust.

world initially separate from, not to say alien to them, did they feel this need to share what they so painfully and obsessively had appropriated. Tolstoy took the world he was born into, the world of Russian aristocracy for granted, and moved in it as the true insider he was, and felt no need to instruct his readers to his secrets and peculiarities seen from the outside. Unlike James and Balzac, we are told, was not interested in society as such, and he paints an epic, not of society but of individuals of that society, and being a Count himself, he was only interested in such individuals and never felt the urge to explore other societies. And one should hence not interpret his sentimental interest in the Russian peasantry as a desire to branch out; had he really interested himself in their plights, he would have become both frustrated, by his inability to really penetrate, and aghast at what he nevertheless would encounter. He had no interest in say students, teachers, factory workers, bankers and businessmen and the societies in which they move. Now, he was anchored in the Russian aristocracy, but there was very little magic in that aristocracy having been mostly formed by decrees of Peter the Great. Tolstoy did not need to go back many generations to find his founding father, a diplomat rendering his Tsar Peter some services. The Russian aristocracy formed in fact a foreign element in Russian society, a thin veneer, more at home (or at least pretending so) in French than Russian. But Tolstoy was a solipsist, sufficient onto himself, and that artificiality was of no concern although he always inveighed against artificiality and demanded that everything should be natural and evolve naturally, as he had thoroughly appropriated that society in his own image, it lived and thrived inside himself, so it did not really matter what it did outside.

It may be tempting to think that Tolstoy wrote War and Peace down as Mozart wrote down a symphony. All flowing out by irresistible force with no hesitation or deliberation. Far from it, he made many drafts and false starts. I once read the Notebook of Dostoevsky for his writing of 'the Idiot'. This was truly fascinating, becoming privy with the way the author played with his characters, trying them out, letting them metamorphose, their sex being secondary frequently changing, and the Idiot initially presented as an evil character, traces of which no doubt still remain in his final incarnation as that of ideal goodness. This points to an interesting view of characters, as fleeting Platonic entities (something which to the unwary may seem a contradiction in terms) seeking a particular sensual projection. I do not know whether similar notebooks of Tolstoy exist, and if so whether they would exhibit the same chaotic fluidity. Bayley thinks of Tolstoy as a rationalist in the spirit of Kant, while Dostoevsky is a student of Hume, insisting that reason should be the slave of the passions. In a Kantian universe of rational discourse, things would appear more distinct and orderly, but one in which passion rules, everything would be in a flux.

To write a historical novel, or rather to form a narrative to take place in the past attracted Tolstoy but he found that it was not easy, he flirted for some time to engage with the Decembrist movement, but it did not seen congenial to him and his imagination. Historical narratives present their own special problems and fallacies, as we tend to find in the past what we want to find, and imagination may too easily degenerate into mere 'making up'. But in War and Peace he found the proper setting. It is interesting to speculate whether the tenor of the society twenty years before the birth of Tolstoy did as significantly differ from the one he encountered as a young man some forty years later. Could anybody like me born 1950, evoke a society of the 1920's and 30's with the same

accuracy and confidence, which Tolstoy certainly did?

War and Peace is not a perfect book, strange would it be would that be the case. He does use some of the standard tricks authors avail themselves in writing realistic novels, while dispensing with others. When he avails himself of tricks, such as convenient co-incidents he does not unnecessarily call attention to them, and often he does change them subtly. The trick of making strange (*Verfremdung* in German), often used by Voltaire and Swift for satirical purposes, is put to dramatic uses by Tolstoy. But there is no prevalent tone to be discovered in the book, Tolstoy has no use for that and achieves the illusion of reality nevertheless. Then a discerning reader may be shocked at the occasional lapse of Tolstoy when he resorts to cheap tricks that are frequent among lesser writers, but in such a huge organic enterprise as is War and Peace one cannot expect that good taste will always prevail. Tolstoy also had the propensity to pack in a lot of details in his narratives, for which he has been both censured and admired. But in general this does not produce tedium, as in the case of Gorky, where you often find your mind wandering when exposed to his barrage. Yet, with Pushkin and Turgenev, you may have the tone of a ball say conveyed by a simple sentence, with Tolstoy it has to be painted by an abundance of detail; but as this might not be noticed, it does not really matter. As suggested above, the narrative of War and Peace has a directness so you are never aware of the hand of the author. Then there are gaffes of chronology and some unrealistic dreams, such that the nightmare suffered by the dying Prince Andrew would be more appropriate to someone healthy and very much alive rather than someone whose life is ebbing out, at least according to the opinion of Bayley. Bayley also finds it remarkable the domination of female principles in the book, and sexuality is predominantly seen through women not men, whose sexuality makes Tolstoy uncomfortable.

Bayley makes a substantial digression on what he calls Pastorality and which he tries to define and convey, maybe not with convincing success. It seems to have to do with making everything characteristic in a novel, meaning that it has to comply with certain preset conditions. An example is that a detective story, i.e. a story of a crime, must have a detective whose tasks to accomplished are already known to the reader. The detectives themselves may differ a lot, but their function and means of operating are more or less set out in advance. As an example of a pastoral novel, Bayley brings up 'Nostromo' by Conrad, and also classifies the entire Comdeie Humaine by Balzac as a gigantic pastoral enterprise. Furthermore pastoral experiences abound in daily life, whenever we feel we need to act a part, socially recognized and sanctioned. Such acting is not natural and exhibits a lack of freedom. Chaucer starts out by describing his set of characters in pastoral terms, meaning that each character is not presented as an individual but as a type; but all this evaporates when he makes them speak and hence appear as individuals. Shakespeare likewise avoids pastoral by endowing his protagonists with individuality. This is particularly clear in the case of Falstaff, of whom Tolstoy heartily approves as he does not behave like an actor, i.e. pastorally, but ends up speaking in his own way, being proper to himself, thus Falstaff deflects Shakespeare's original intentions, as the latter has to follow his character and end up doing something else. The originality of some of the characters of Chaucer, is pointed out by Harold Bloom [5], especially of the widow from Bath, whom he sees as a forerunner

[5] In a review in XVIIb of Bloom's *the Western Canon*

to Falstaff.

'Anna Karenina' is very different from 'War and Peace'. It is a novel, while the latter is not. It is more structured and a reader has less problem remembering what it is all about and retaining the essentials of its plot. According to rumors Tolstoy received the inspiration for the novel from learning of a woman who committed suicide throwing herself in front of a train. This became the character Anna, whose suicide was in fact preordained in a Calvinistic sense, not the result of the independent development of a character taking a path unsuspected by the author. Thus the fate of Anna is the fate of the novel. It makes for a perfect novel with the apposite aesthetics, not a slice of life. Still 'Anna Karenina' needed several drafts, maybe more than that of 'War and Peace' being more artful in the sense of artifice. It was a deliberate creation, although with Tolstoy's customary skill, this could be concealed. Tolstoy dismisses the work of Kipling and Zola, precisely because from the very first the intentions of the authors are obvious and hence all the details involved in the narratives feels superfluous and only appear dull. The best works are those in which the author loses sight of his intentions being distracted and derailed by his love for his characters. Tolstoy may love Anna, but he never loses sight of her eventual suicide.

Wherein lies the tragedy of 'Anna Karenina'? Wherein lies the tragedy of the affair between Anna and Vronsky? Anna and Vronsky are caught in a pastoral situation. Their affair only makes sense in the society in which they live and are embedded. They play with aplomb the parts assigned to lovers in their society, but once they are separated from it they find themselves in a void. Their attraction is not based on real love but on convention, the distinction of which is not discernible until they are cast off. It is symptomatic that Vronsky derives his greatest joy and happiness when he is on his way to meet her. Then he is in his elements and plays the part of the romantic lover to his satisfaction. When he meets her as an individual to an individual, it is different.

In his extended pamphlet 'What is Art?' [6] he expounds on his views on art with a mixture of crankiness and striking astuteness. His views exasperates most readers of letters. The effectiveness of the book derives to a large extent not on its positive aspects but on its rejection if what is usually taken for granted. Tolstoy takes umbrage to the idea of amusing yourself with art. Art is serious business and should be taken seriously and not trifled with frivolously. Art should have applications, meaning that music should engage men to march or people to dance, as far as it does neither it is just an agitation. Bayley notes that Tolstoy perceives with great clarity the connection between 'art for art's sake' and the new morality due to Nietzsche and his followers. This certainly does not endear him to the notion. He notes that the pursuit of effects have made art coarser not more refined, and that 'art for art's sake' has aimed for a pure effect, and as such the modern aestheticism has become the religion of a new barbarity. Tolstoy's general dismissal of Shakespeare annoys Bayley and he explains it by a lack of education. Tolstoy should have educated himself by reading more Shakespeare and learning more English. True, Tolstoy should be lauded for his efforts to reveal the insensitivity of those who profess to adore the great, but that is not the same thing to reveal that the great are not great. Tolstoy goes out on a limb asserting that great art is only great as far as it is accessible and comprehensible to everyone, a populist sentiment if any. His real target, according to

[6] That book is reviewed in VI March 2009

Bayley, is not counterfeit art being mistaken for great art, but bad art which gets accepted and standardized. This is why, Bayley asserts, that much of what he has to say about art is still so relevant today. Tolstoy disliked public art, as well as public government, and of course, Bayley assures us, he would have been abhorred by modern television.

In discussing 'the Cossacks' Bayley remarks that the main protagonist Oleniev, the young men who sets out from Moscow on his Caucasian adventure, is one of those people you get to know so well so quickly that you get bored with them. He is critical of the story, the episodes are to invented and not true to life. Admittedly much of the charm of it is lost in translation, and he gives examples. There is no development in the story, as noted above, we as readers quickly learn what Oleniev amounts too and he does not change. In spite of its shortcomings, or maybe rather because of them, 'the Cossacks has exercised much influence, and he highlights the case of Hemingway. You can learn a lot from it as a writer, you can learn nothing from 'War and Peace'. In contrast to 'the Cossacks' the work of 'Hadji Murad' and 'the Live Corpse' are the only ones of his late works which found favor with him. The first, which I have read in a Swedish translation, is a powerful work, and what you most retain is the powerful depiction of the eponymous hero being killed, of how he experiences the blow to his head, as the soft beats of a hammer. To become privy to the last moments of a man dying, in fact being brutally killed, is an invitation to intimacy which is painful to witness.

Comparing Chekhov with Tolstoy, Bayley remarks that for Chekhov his characters are cases not people to explore and get to know, but patients to be looked after and taken care of. As to the heritage of Tolstoy in modern Soviet literature Pasternak with his 'Dr. Zhivago' comes closest. But Zhivago, as Pasternak himself, is foremost a poet, with the temperament of a poet, something most people, not being poets themselves, have a hard time understanding. 'Dr. Zhivago' is foremost a symbolic work. Coincidences which in a writer like Tolstoy is merely props for the plot, in Zhivago becomes a thing in itself, in fact turned to symbolic uses. The characters of the novel do not really come off, especially not Lara, the great love of Zhivago, then their common daughter, whom none of them got to know, does come off with much more life and paplability than her mother. At least according to Bayley, although she is only seen in passing in what is essentially an epilogue.

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