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Tolstoy's Poetics of Education

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Tolstoy was obsessed with education. In a letter from 1897, he famously remarked, "I see more and more clearly that education is the key to everything. There lies the solution to everything" (PSS 70:103). However, the object of his educational furor changed over time. First, he wanted to educate himself. Second, he wanted to educate Russian schoolchildren. And third, he set out to educate all of mankind. It is not an overstatement to say that even his literary activities served the general purpose of education. Tolstoy's literary debut was basically a documentation of his allegedly self-guided education as a child, a teenager, and a young man. His epic novels *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Resurrection* present the problematic biographies of their male protagonists as spiritual and moral learning processes. His major life crisis from 1878 resulted in an—at least loudly declared—retreat from fictional literature. He preferred to dedicate his writing time to the production of long treatises in which he explained his teachings to the world. He also engaged in an enormous epistolary project and campaigned for the truths he held via his vast correspondence. Most prominently, one could argue that his late essay "What is Art?" focused not on the aesthetic but on the educational function of literature.

In this article, I examine this "poetics of education." Education, I argue, bears a structural resemblance to literary communication: it requires a carefully constructed form that anticipates and guides the response of its audience. This dynamic is central to Tolstoy's own understanding of authorship. For him, a text was only successful if it was received precisely as the author intended. One might describe this principle, borrowing from Russian Formalist terminology, as an "установка на восприятие"—an orientation toward reception. Tolstoy's writings, both fictional and non-fictional, consistently reflect this orientation. I analyze Tolstoy's evolving "poetics of education" in three subchapters. First, I examine his early autobiographical trilogy as a narrative experiment in self-directed formation. Second, I turn to his efforts to institutionalize his pedagogical ideals through the establishment of schools and the composition of educational texts. Finally, I consider his late media and publishing projects as part of a broader attempt to reeducate humanity on a global scale.

Tolstoy's autobiographical trilogy

Tolstoy defies the conventional trajectory of the autobiographical genre by composing his life story not retrospectively at the end of his career, but rather at its inception. The primary objective of Tolstoy's autobiographical trilogy—*Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth*—is not to recount a completed process of personal formation but to assert authorial control over this very process. In Tolstoy's autobiographical project, education is not a transfer of knowledge from external authorities to the individual; rather, it is a self-directed and autonomous endeavor of the subject itself. In this schema, Tolstoy positions himself not as the recipient but as the architect of his own formation—in fact, he is his own educator. The act of writing and publishing thus becomes central to this self-educational project that needs public validation by the Russian educated classes. This perspective is underscored by the increasingly self-assured manner in which Tolstoy signed his early works. *Childhood* was published under the initials

"L.N.," *Boyhood* under the slightly more specific "L.N.T.," and *Youth* appeared with the full aristocratic signature, "Graf Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy." This progression signals not just growing authorial confidence but also the consolidation of a self-fashioned identity that demanded public acknowledgment.

In contrast to the European tradition of the *Bildungsroman,* Tolstoy's trilogy resists the genre's typical teleology. The concept of *Bildung*, most famously articulated in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, implies the gradual integration of an individual into the structures and norms of society—in Goethe's novel, this process is guided by a secret pedagogical elite. The literary form of the *Bildungsroman* presupposes a model of maturation in which the protagonist is shaped into a socially functional subject. This ideological framework, however, is inapplicable to Tolstoy's early autobiographical work. His trilogy does not chart the assimilation of a malleable youth into the Russian aristocracy or into the broader social order. On the contrary, it reflects Tolstoy's conviction that it is not the protagonist but society itself that is in need of education.

Tolstoy planned his narrative educational project as a tetralogy: *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Young Manhood* (Molodost'). The working title—"Four Epochs of Development" (Четыре эпохи развития)—is telling. The term "development" (rather than "Bildung" or "education") emphasizes an internal, organic process rather than externally imposed formation. "Development" suggests a natural unfolding—comparable, perhaps, to a snake shedding its skin—rather than a socially regulated course of education. This distinction is key to understanding Tolstoy's self-representation and his early literary ambitions. Tolstoy defines the most important points of the future novel in the following manner:

> Sharply identify the characteristic features of each epoch of life: in childhood, warmth and truth of feelings; in adolescence, skepticism, voluptuousness, self-confidence, inexperience, and [the beginning of vanity] pride; in young manhood, the beauty of feelings and the development of vanity and self-doubt; in youth, eclecticism in feelings, and pride and vanity are replaced by self-love, recognition of one's worth and purpose, versatility, and sincerity. (PSS 2:243)

The development of the young protagonist in *Childhood* is conveyed through a narrative voice that, while grammatically in the past tense, deliberately cultivates the illusion of immediacy and presence. The narrator constructs a consciousness that refrains from reflective distance; instead, it evokes a heightened sense of the present moment, meticulously rendering details without the slightest lapse in memory. In the preface, Tolstoy explicitly distances himself from conventional literary stylization, stating his intention not to be "too literary" and to avoid "all the literary devices" to simulate the spontaneity and authenticity of direct speech. The narrative aims not at aesthetic ornamentation but at a truthful evocation of a former self, unmarred by retrospective interpretation or didacticism. When *Childhood* was first published by Nikolai Nekrasov in *Sovremennik* under the editorial title *The History of My Childhood*, Tolstoy took issue with the framing, as indicated in an unsent draft of a letter dated November 1852 (PSS 59:213–215). Tolstoy's objections were not merely semantic. Nekrasov's title imposed a retrospective structure and interpretive framework that Tolstoy consciously sought to resist. The phrase "history of" suggests a mature narrator looking back upon and interpreting his early life, whereas Tolstoy's intention was to reconstruct a younger self in its own temporal register—prior to the shaping influence of education and adult consciousness. *Childhood* aims to capture a natural state of being that precedes intellectual and moral development, offering a form of autobiographical fiction that is both immediate and unmediated.

At this point, it is essential to acknowledge the

profound influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on Tolstoy's intellectual and moral development. Among Western thinkers, Rousseau emerges as perhaps the most significant philosophical presence in Tolstoy's life and work. In a letter to Bernard Bouvier dated 7 March 1905, Tolstoy explicitly acknowledged this formative impact, writing, "Rousseau has been my master since I was 15 years old. Rousseau and the Gospel have been the great positive influences in my life. Recently, I had the opportunity to reread some of his works, and I experienced the same feeling of spiritual elevation and admiration that I felt when I read him in my earliest youth" (PSS 75:234). Tolstoy's own pedagogical program resonates deeply with Rousseau's concept of éducation négative—a method aimed not at the accumulation of knowledge but at shielding the child from the corrupting forces of society. To be sure, Rousseau's vision does not entail an endorsement of unrestrained individual freedom. In Émile, Rousseau invokes the social contract as a necessary framework, one that applies even to the ideally educated individual who remains untainted by the degeneracy of contemporary European civilization. Tolstoy adapts this model in his own literary project, particularly in his autobiographical trilogy. While he imposes a normative structure upon the protagonist's development, he simultaneously allows the protagonist to internalize these moral constraints. In *Youth*, for instance, the young narrator aspires to an academic career, articulating his ambitions within a self-regulating moral framework that reflects both the influence of Rousseau and Tolstoy's broader vision of ethical self-control:

> I will walk to the university every day (and if I am given a carriage, I will sell it and distribute the money to the poor) […]. I will summarize the lectures and even go through the material in advance so that in the first year I will be the first and will write a dissertation; in the second year I will also already know everything in advance and I can be placed directly in the third year so that at the age of eighteen I will graduate as the first candidate with two gold medals, then I will become a master and a doctor and will become the first scientist in Russia... I can even be the first scientist in Europe. (PSS 2:83)

The *poetics of education* in Tolstoy's autobiographical trilogy are grounded, above all, in the construction of a distinctive narrative *I*—a carefully orchestrated split between author, narrator, and protagonist. For contemporary readers, the fictional nature of this autobiographical account was not immediately apparent. In *Childhood* and *Boyhood*, the narrator remains unnamed, lacking a family name or explicit identification with the author. Chapter 24 of *Boyhood* bears the proud title "I." It is only in Chapter 3 of *Youth* that the fictional name Irten'ev is introduced. That means that the non-identity between narrator, protagonist, and author is stated publicly only five years after the publication of a text that was, in a misleading way, entitled "The history of my childhood." Clearly, Tolstoy wanted to raise the relevance of his text by pointing to its alleged autobiographical truth. Truth in literature has to be proven. And the best way to do this is to confess a misdemeanor or a crime. The best way to hide a big scandal is to lay bare a small scandal. Rousseau is of course the model for this strategy. And this is exactly what Tolstoy also does in this trilogy.

The autobiographical trilogy abounds with depictions of socially awkward and morally fraught situations, yet the narrator highlights one particular episode as especially formative—an experience that, he claims, would "haunt" him for years. Recalling the event in *Youth*, he writes: "This memory […] was terribly vivid and difficult for me for many years. I twitched and screamed for about five years after that, every time I remembered an unrequited insult" (PSS 2:123). Notably, the incident itself appears disproportionately minor in comparison to the narrator's intense and prolonged emotional reaction. It involves a youthful misstep: Irten'ev, in a moment of naïve arrogance or social obliviousness, lights a cigarette using the candle on the table of two dining gentlemen in a restaurant. One of the men responds with disdain, delivering a curt and humiliating rebuke: "vous aurez de mes nouvelles" "you'll hear from me" (PSS 2:120). In the cultural context of Tolstoy's time, this was an oblique expression to challenge someone to a duel.

The gap between the incident itself and its emotional reverberations in the protagonist's psyche signals a subtle but profound shift in the narrative structure. Indeed, there is a crime in Tolstoy's life that he never publicly acknowledged until the final stages of his life. As he confided to his biographer, Pavel Biriukov, shortly before his death, "You write all the good stuff about me, but you need also to write about the bad stuff. […] There is this crime that I committed with the maid Gasha, who lived in my aunt's house. She was innocent, I seduced her, she was expelled, and she perished" (1992: 317). In *Youth*, however, Gasha appears as one of the rare figures in Tolstoy's work who is named directly, though he alters her age. This deliberate alteration, paired with the posthumous confession, imbues the passage with a much more complex significance. Far from a mere account of "Preparing for the exam," as the chapter title suggests, this moment reflects a deep-seated guilt, conveyed indirectly through a narrative that obfuscates the gravity of the "crime." The passage in question reveals a striking tension between the protagonist's external actions and his internal turmoil:

> Or you are sitting behind a book and somehow concentrating all your attention on what you are reading; suddenly you hear female steps and the rustle of a dress along the corridor—and everything has jumped out of your head, and there is no way to sit still, although you know very well that, except for Gasha, Grandmother's old maid, no one could pass along the corridor. 'Well, what if it's suddenly her?' it comes to mind. 'Well, what if it starts now, and I miss it?'—and you jump out into the corridor, you see that it's definitely Gasha, but then you won't be able to control your head for a long time. (PSS 2:98)

In Chapter 32 of *Youth*, which shares its title with the novel as a whole, there is a second, seemingly unrelated reference to Tolstoy's "crime." Here, the narrator reflects on the comforts of life during a vacation in the countryside. Abruptly and without contextual preparation, an erotic fantasy emerges: "And so she appeared, with a long black braid, high breasts, always sad and beautiful, with bare arms, with voluptuous embraces. She loved me; I sacrificed my whole life for one minute of her love" (PSS 2:179). These two sentences, however, vanish just as quickly as they appear, dissipating like a fleeting ghost. This brief and disjointed passage is, in many ways, a self-illusory counterpoint to Tolstoy's later confession to his biographer, Pavel Biriukov. In the narrative, the woman takes on the role of the seductress, and the narrator portrays himself as the victim, claiming to have "sacrificed" his entire life for a mere moment of her love. This moment in the text illustrates a key artistic device: the reversal of moral responsibility, wherein the perpetrator's guilt is shifted onto the victim. The seducer is depicted not as the initiator of the illicit act but as the one who suffers. In the autobiographical text, Tolstoy hides his biographical guilt with two literary devices: First, he disfigures beyond recognition his sexual sin, and second, he changes the position of the subject and the object of the "crime."

Another significant device in Tolstoy's poetics of education is the appropriation of moral and even heroic behavior, as demonstrated through the character of Karl Ivanych. The benevolent and introspective teacher shares the story of his own life with the young protagonist, Nikolen'ka. Born illegitimately, Karl wins the lottery for exemption from military recruitment, while his biological half-brother loses. In a selfless act, Karl hands his winning ticket to his half-brother and enrolls in the army, thereby earning the respect of his stepfather.

This narrative exemplifies the idealization of moral conduct, framed within the context of an individual's sense of sacrifice and duty. In *Boyhood*, the protagonist constructs a similar narrative for himself and experiences a sense of moral elevation through a form of self-deception. Reflecting on his position, he muses, "'I am not the son of my mother and my father, not Volodya's brother, but an unfortunate orphan, a foundling taken out of mercy,' I say to myself, and this absurd thought not only gives me some kind of sad consolation but even seems completely plausible" (PSS 2:43).

Finally, Tolstoy's most sophisticated narrative strategy is the introduction of Dmitri Nekhliudov—a character who will rise to be the autobiographical protagonist of Tolstoy's last novel, *Resurrection*. Nekhliudov is a self-exonerating literary fantasy about a prince who seduced and left a servant girl, accepted his guilt, and literally paid with his "whole life" for his sin. Tolstoy presents a whole hall of mirrors of split personalities. The first split divides the I into the author, Lev Tolstoy, and the narrator-hero, Nikolaj Irten'ev. The second split occurs between Irten'ev and Dmitri Nekhliudov, who is presented as an alter ego of Irten'ev. There is even a contract of limitless sincerity between the two university friends. They vow to tell each other everything and to keep it secret from everybody else (PSS 2:208). Finally, there is a split in the personality of Dmitri Nekhliudov himself, who is composed of two halves: a good, warm, and kind benefactor and a cold, arrogant, and quick-tempered villain.

This is an important aspect of Tolstoy's poetics of education. Tolstoy partitions contradictory aspects of his own personality into different persons or different aspects of their personalities. Such a procedure allows him to transform an internal conflict in a person into a dramatic clash of two figures. Such a procedure has clear literary advantages. The quarrel between two voices can be presented much more convincingly as a drama with different personae than a deliberation within an individual consciousness. Moreover, such a transformation of life into literature can serve an educational goal. Tolstoy demonstrates, with the introduction of Nekhliudov, that the autobiographical self can transfer positive and negative aspects of his own personality to other individuals and integrate them after a dramatic development into one moral person. The auxiliary persons may disappear after their contribution to the education of the main protagonist. A difficult episode in life is transformed into literature, the literary text provides a solution to the biographical problem, and literature eventually shapes life in return.

Tolstoy reiterates the psychological division of Dmitri Nekhliudov's character in *Resurrection*, most explicitly in Chapter 14, where the omniscient narrator offers a direct reflection on the protagonist's behavior upon recognizing Katiusha:

> In Nekhliudov, as in all people, there were two human beings. One aspect of Nekhliudov is spiritual, seeking only his own good, which would also benefit other people; the other aspect is an animal man, who seeks only his own good and is willing to sacrifice the well-being of the entire world for it. [...] And in Nekhliudov, during these two days [...], an internal struggle, unconscious to him, went on without ceasing. (PSS 32:53)

In Chapter 28 of *Resurrection*, Tolstoy offers a nuanced psychological portrait of Nekhliudov's moral instability. This oscillation between ethical resolve and relapse might be termed the "Pinocchio principle": sincere intentions are continually thwarted by the seductions of worldly life. The narrator observes that Nekhliudov had undergone periodic moments of acute moral clarity following stretches of inner stagnation.

Nekhlyudov had already experienced more than once in his life what he called "cleansing of the soul." He called soul cleansing a state of mind in which he suddenly, sometimes after a long period of time, realizing a slowdown, and sometimes even a stoppage of his inner life, began to clean out all the rubbish that had accumulated in his soul and was the cause of this stoppage. After such awakenings, Nekhlyudov always made up rules for himself that he intended to follow forever: he wrote a diary and began a new life, which he hoped never to change again—'turning a new leaf,' as he told himself. But every time the temptations of the world caught him, and he, without noticing it, fell again, and often lower than he had been before. (PSS 32: 102)

The process of self-education—according to Tolstoy's conviction—implies the discovery of the 'inner god' in every person: "The God who lived in him awoke in his consciousness. He felt himself to be him and therefore felt not only freedom, cheerfulness, and joy of life, but felt all the power of good" (PSS 32:108). The ultimate goal of self-education is—in Tolstoy's conception—self-deification.

Tolstoy's attempts to institutionalize his educational ideals

As we know from many diary entries, Tolstoy was a lazy and lousy student. It is possible that the failure of his own studies sharpened his awareness of the importance of public-school education. His first foray into formal educational practice came in the autumn of 1849, when he established a village school on his family estate at Yasnaya Polyana. However, this initial effort was short-lived, as Tolstoy soon departed for military service in the Caucasus and later participated in the Crimean War. A decade later, in 1859, he founded a second school in Yasnaya Polyana, an institution to which he devoted himself with considerable passion and intellectual investment.

In July 1860, Tolstoy undertook an extended study tour of Western Europe, observing German, French, and English educational systems. His reactions were often critical, particularly toward the rigid and authoritarian structures of continental schooling. After visiting a school in Kissingen, he recorded in his diary: "Terrible. A prayer for the king, beatings, learning is all by heart, intimidated, emaciated children" (PSS 48:26). Similarly, he was disturbed by the militarized atmosphere of orphanages in Marseille. English private schools, by contrast, left a more favorable impression on him; he appreciated the relatively respectful treatment of students and the more humane atmosphere they fostered. Tolstoy's educational philosophy drew heavily on the rationalist and anti-institutional principles of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, particularly those articulated in the pedagogical novel Émile. As a teenager, Tolstoy had already read Rousseau's collected works with fervor. In a letter dated October 25, 1891, he listed the texts with a "tremendous influence" on him in his youth: alongside Émile and the *Confessions*, he cited the Sermon on the Mount, Gogol's tale "Viy," and Dickens's *David Copperfield* (PSS 66:66—68).

His reverence for Rousseau reached near-religious proportions; as he confessed to the French Slavist Paul Boyer in 1901, "I had a cult of Rousseau. I wore his portrait in a medallion around my neck like an image of a saint" (Herlth 2014:478). Following Rousseau, Tolstoy advocated for a "negative education"—an approach that eschewed early integration into society in favor of shielding the child from the corrupting forces of civilization. He viewed the child not as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge, but as an autonomous moral being, a "small adult" whose development should be guided rather than coerced. Central to this vision was the belief, derived from both Rousseau and Christian doctrine, that a "general eternal law was inscribed in the soul of every human being" (PSS 8:333).

> Dickens, in *David Copperfield*, offers a depiction of the traditional English school that closely aligns with Tolstoy's own critique of formal education. The schoolroom is described as a site of emotional and physical neglect, evoking a powerful sense of abandonment and decay:
>
> "I gazed upon the schoolroom into which he

> took me as the most forlorn and desolate place I had ever seen. I see it now. […] There is a strange unwholesome smell upon the room, like mildewed corduroys, sweet apples wanting air, and rotten books" (Dickens 112).

David Copperfield was also a role model for Tolstoy's own writing because the narrator-hero appears from the very beginning as an adult and describes his childhood from an adult perspective. He even gives an—albeit ironically broken—account of his own birth. "To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously" (Dickens 29).

In his report on "The School of Yasnaya Polyana in November and December of 1862," Tolstoy supported the same conceptualization of the children as small adults:

> The pupils are people—smaller than we are, but still people with the same needs, and they think according to the same rules as we do; they all want to learn, and that is the only reason they go to school; therefore, they will also very easily come to the realization that one must submit to certain conditions if one wants to learn. But more than that, they are not just people but a community of people united by one thought. (PSS 8:34)

Tolstoy's pedagogical philosophy was grounded in the principles of non-coercion, adaptability, and an unwavering respect for the innate dignity of the child. Rejecting punitive disciplinary measures, his school at Yasnaya Polyana was structured around a radical flexibility: there were no fixed schedules, compulsory attendance, or grading systems. Instruction was limited to the winter months, while in the summer, peasant children returned to agricultural labor. Approximately thirty children attended the school regularly, often joined by a handful of adults who participated informally in the lessons. However, Tolstoy's educational model was not purely anarchic. While external structures were minimal, internal discipline was maintained through an appeal to students' self-regulation and moral autonomy. The core pedagogical value was love—a principle Tolstoy later equated directly with divinity. In his 1863 treatise *Progress and the Definition of Education*, he emphasized that affective bonds between teachers and students were essential to any authentic learning process:

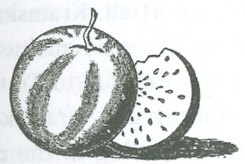
> In all the schools founded according to the convictions of the school in Yasnaya Polyana, the same thing happened: the teacher fell in love with his school; and I am sure that the same teacher, even under the best conditions, could not fall in love with a school where the children sit on benches, are controlled by bells and are beaten on Saturdays. (PSS 8:348–349)

In the later stages of his educational engagement, Tolstoy moved beyond theoretical reflections and turned to the practical task of producing instructional materials. He began by composing a *Reading Primer* aimed at adult learners with no prior literacy skills. Building on this foundation, he developed a more advanced *New Primer* in the mid-1870s, followed by the publication of four textbooks in 1875. These readers consisted of short, accessible texts—fables, fairy tales, or novellas—crafted to foster reading comprehension and convey simple moral lessons.

Central to Tolstoy's pedagogical method was his conviction in the primacy of the written letter. He firmly rejected the phonetic method, which had gained popularity in German pedagogy and emphasized the acquisition of speech sounds prior to the introduction of written symbols. Instead, Tolstoy advocated for the traditional spelling method, which had been officially discontinued in Prussia in 1872. This methodological choice reflected his broader philosophical stance: Tolstoy regarded the visual form of the letter as more stable and trustworthy than the transient and subjective nature of spoken sound.

— 5 —

А А а *А а а*



II.

БА, ЧА, ГА, МА, КА, ЛА, ВА, СА, ЖА, НА, ЗА, ДА,
БИ, РІ, МИ. ЖІ, ТИ, ЛІ, ФИ, ЗІ, НИ, КІ, ХИ, ЩІ, ЧИ,
БО, МО, ЦО, СО, ЗО, ФО, КО, ДО, ШО, ЧО, ГО, ЛО,
ДУ, ГУ, НУ, ЛУ, БУ, ХУ, ТУ, ДУ, МУ, ПУ, РУ, ЦУ,
ВЫ, ШЫ, ТЫ, ЗЫ, ЦЫ, НЫ, ДЫ, ЧЫ, ЖЫ, ЛЫ, КЫ,
СЮ, ВЮ, ЦЮ, ТЮ, ЛЮ, МЮ, БЮ, ЗЮ, ФЮ, ЩЮ, КЮ,
МЯ, ДЯ, ЧЯ, ЗЯ, ФЯ, СЯ, КЯ, РЯ, БЯ, ЛЯ, ШЯ, ГЯ,
ВЕ, ГЪ, КЕ, ШЪ, НЕ, ВЪ, ПЕ, РЪ, ХЕ, ЩЪ, МЕ, ХЪ,
БЁ, ЖЁ, ЗЁ, ТЁ, РЁ, ДЁ, ЛЁ, НЁ, СЁ, ПЁ, МЁ, ЩЁ.

III.

1. ШУ-БА, РУ-КА, ЛЮ-ДИ, ПУ-ЛЯ, ВИ-ЛЫ, ЗИ-МА, ЛИ-ПА, ЗА-РЯ, ДЫ-РА, ВИ-НО, МУ-ХА, РЫ-БА, ТУ-ЧА, КУ-ЧА, БА-НЯ, МУ-КА.

2. ТРА-ВА, СТУ-ЧИ, КРЫ-СА, КЛЮ-ЧИ, БЛЮ-ДО, ТРУ-БА, КРИ-ВА, ГРУ-ША, ГРИ-ВА, ГЛИ-НА, КНИ-ГА, ЦВЪ-ТЫ, КРЫ-ША, БЛИ-НЫ, СПИ-ЦА, ГЛА-ЗА, ГРИ-БЫ, ДВЕ-РИ.

Illustrations: Lev Tolstoy: ABC (Azbuka). St. Petersburg 1872

Tolstoy applied the same pedagogical principles to the teaching of mathematics. Rather than beginning with the decimal system, he introduced students to binary and other limited number systems. This method served to underscore the constructed and arbitrary nature of the decimal system, encouraging learning children to view numerical operations as conceptually grounded rather than representing an absolute norm. Central to his approach was the active role of the teacher, whom Tolstoy saw not merely as an instructor but as an interpreter. The teacher was expected to articulate words aloud and clarify their meanings, thus facilitating an experiential and dialogic learning process.

The significance Tolstoy attributed to his educational work is evident in a letter dated January 12, 1872, in which he reflects on the profound personal importance of his *Primer*:

> In recent years I have been working on a primer that I want to publish. It is difficult for me to say what this very tedious work means to me. My proud dream is that with this primer two generations of Russian children, from the children of the Tsar to the children of the peasants—in other words, everyone—should learn to read and gain their first poetic impressions. Now that this primer is finished, I can die with peace of mind. (PSS 61:269)

And on November 27-28, 1878, in a biographical note to Nikolai Strakhov, he mentioned his pedagogical works in one breath with his epic novels. He sums up the time since his marriage and writes, "In these sixteen years, *War and Peace*, the *ABC* and *New Primer for Reading* and *Anna Karenina* were written" (Paperno 2014, 82). The mentioned primer, which was sold for just a few kopecks, was indeed a great success. By the end of the century, around one million copies had been printed.

Tolstoy's media projects to reeducate mankind

The late Tolstoy continues to provoke and unsettle. Gilbert Keith Chesterton expressed his irritation at what he called the "small and noisy moralist who inhabits a corner of this great and good man." Thomas Mann dismissed him as "the son of nature Tolstoy, stuck in the absurd and half-wild." Similarly, George Steiner criticized the relentless output of the "pamphleteer" Tolstoy, finding fault with the multitude of "lapidary tracts" he composed with unwavering stubbornness (Schmid 2010, 110).

Such critiques, however, fail to recognize the significant shift in Tolstoy's intellectual trajectory following his spiritual crisis of 1878. In the years that followed, his primary concern was not the production of literary works for aesthetic enjoyment, but rather the education of a global audience. This reorientation is most clearly articulated in his treatise *What is Art?* (1899), where Tolstoy explicitly defines the guiding principles of his literary practice. His theory of "moral infection" has its roots in his earlier works. In *War and Peace*, for instance, Tolstoy does not condemn Napoleon because he was a dictator or usurper. Napoleon is portrayed as a deeply problematic figure because he transforms even the horrors of war into an aesthetic spectacle (Gerigk 149–155). When Napoleon encounters the wounded Andrei Bolkonskii on the battlefield, he remarks, "Voilà une belle mort!" (PSS 9:356). This moment anticipates Tolstoy's later rejection of the aestheticization of life in art. In *What is Art?*, Tolstoy asserts that the task of the writer is not to create beauty or evoke pleasure, but to "infect" the audience with a morally valuable emotion (PSS 30:27–203).Tolstoy invested his entire life's energy in propagating a moral "pandemic," utilizing the most modern media techniques available to him. In 1884, his close associate, Vladimir Chertkov, established the publishing house *Posrednik* (The Mediator), which operated until 1925. Over the following years, Tolstoy's folk tales and religious tracts were published in affordable editions with large print runs, making his works accessible to a wide audience. In the first four years alone, *Posrednik* distributed approximately 12 million pamphlets to the public. Initially, these editions were offered free of charge, though they were later sold at a modest price of eight kopecks per copy. The publishing success of *Posrednik* can be attributed not only to Chertkov's ability to significantly reduce the cost of production through mass printing but also to the financial support he received from his wealthy mother, who provided an annual grant of 20, 000 rubles (Ruud 1990).

Tolstoy's physical appearance also became a subject of public fascination and artistic focus. As early as 1869, Pavel Tretyakov expressed interest in commissioning a portrait of the famous writer for his Moscow gallery. However, it was not until 1873 that Ivan Kramskoi managed to convince Tolstoy to sit for a portrait. Kramskoi painted two nearly identical images; one remained with Tolstoy, while the other was donated to Tret'iakov. During these sittings, Tolstoy and Kramskoi engaged in long conversations, leading to the creation of the character of the artist Mikhailov in *Anna Karenina*, whose views on art reflect Kramskoi's own artistic theories.

In the early 1880s, the renowned artist Ilia Repin met Tolstoy in Moscow and produced a series of portraits in oil, charcoal, watercolor, and pencil. Some of these portraits were reproduced as chromolithographs, quickly reaching a broad audience. Repin is largely responsible for shaping the now-iconic image of the bearded, elderly Tolstoy, depicted either engaged in his literary pursuits or working the land in a peasant's smock.

In 1884, the artist Nikolai Ge visited Tolstoy at his estate in Yasnaya Polyana, where he painted portraits of the writer, his wife, and his daughter. Ge, who had undergone a profound religious transformation, had failed in his attempts to visualize biblical themes. However, disillusioned with this endeavor, he found a kindred spirit in Tolstoy's simple, agrarian lifestyle, which led him to create a series of works that depicted the writer as a farmer, reflecting his personal affinity with Tolstoy's philosophical and spiritual convictions.

The burgeoning cinema industry also sought to capture the figure of Count Tolstoy on film. In 1908, during his eightieth birthday celebrations, a St. Petersburg cinema proprietor financed a trip to Yasnaya Polyana, where the ailing Tolstoy was filmed on the veranda of his residence. The following year, two additional short films were produced, one depicting Tolstoy at a railroad station and another in Moscow. These films were successfully screened in numerous Russian cities. While Tolstoy himself was reserved about his public appearances, his wife, Sofiia Andreevna, supported the filmmakers' efforts, eager to see her celebrated husband immortalized in everyday contexts. Tolstoy's death in 1910 became one of the first major media events in Russia. Upon the announcement of his passing, Russian film companies swiftly dispatched cameramen to Astapovo to capture the funeral procession and the crowds of mourners. Simultaneously, crews filmed scenes at Yasnaya Polyana, documenting Tolstoy's horse, his home, and his beloved haunts. Within three days of developing the film negatives, leading companies such as Pathé and Khanzhonkov sold over 500 copies of the footage (Аннинский 1980).

In the final decades of his life, Tolstoy had transformed into a public figure of immense stature. He maintained an extensive correspondence, striving to respond to all letters personally. His home at Yasnaya Polyana increasingly became a destination for petitioners and seekers of advice. Tolstoy received most visitors with patience, no longer viewing his primary role as a writer of literature but as one engaged in a broader social mission. Yet the overwhelming number of requests led him to seek new methods of extending his influence.

After 1877, Tolstoy withdrew from fiction writing, focusing instead on religious tracts. However, he soon recognized that these works alone would not allow him to reach the broad audience he sought among the Russian populace. In response, he began writing prose that was simpler and more accessible to less educated readers. Still, this approach left him dissatisfied, as the folk tales he produced continued to carry the stigma of literary adaptation, an issue he was determined to overcome. In his *Confession* (1882), Tolstoy wrote:

> I was considered a wonderful artist and poet. I—an artist, a poet—wrote, taught, without knowing what. I was paid for it, I had excellent food, a place, women, society, I had fame. Therefore, what I taught was very good. [6] This faith in the meaning of poetry and in the development of life was faith, and I was one of its priests. To be its priest was very profitable and pleasant. And I lived in this faith for quite a long time, without doubting its truth. (PSS 23:5)

Given these circumstances, it is unsurprising that Tolstoy eventually transitioned from author to editor. Throughout his reading, he carefully noted the thoughts of various authors who resonated with him. Rather than engaging with complex philosophical systems or worldviews, he focused on isolated sentences that he could integrate into his broader project of synthesizing various religious and philosophical doctrines. Tolstoy's interest was not in profound engagement with the authors themselves, but in the potential impact their words might have on his audience.

His first major editorial project was *A Calendar of Proverbs for the Year 1887* (Календарь с пословицами), which drew from existing Russian collections of proverbs and folk wisdom, supplemented by his own observations and annotations. Over time, Tolstoy shifted his focus from folklore to the works of prominent authors. In 1894, he published an abridged Russian edition of Henri-Frederic Amiel's voluminous diary, followed by an 1895 edition containing selections from John Ruskin.

In the final decade of his life, Tolstoy further refined his approach to anthologies. No longer satisfied with merely selecting and organizing quotations, he devised reading plans, structuring individual prose pieces and aphorisms according to dates. The reader was expected to engage with a specific portion of the material each day. In 1903, Tolstoy published *Thoughts of Wise Men for All Days* (Мысли мудрых людей на каждый день), and in 1904, he compiled a *Reading Circle* (Круг чтения). Both works are expressions of his efforts to shape the moral and intellectual development of his readers

through carefully curated, accessible texts.

Tolstoy began revising his *Reading Circle* as early as 1907, and the revised edition was published in 1909 under the title *For All Days* (На каждый день). The principal distinction between the two anthologies lies in the enhanced systematization of the content in the revised version. In *For All Days*, Tolstoy organized the thoughts into a structured format, assigning specific themes to each day of the month. These categories, presented in a tabular form, include: Faith, soul, one soul in all, God, life as union, love, sins, seductions, superstition, the present as the only true existence, the absence of evil, the absence of death, afterlife, the bliss of life, etc. The revised version also contains regular reading tables, with maxims tailored both for special target groups such as children or those without religious belief.

A notable difference in the revision is Tolstoy's consistent omission of literary texts in *For All Days*. The texts in the revised edition are predominantly philosophical and didactic, with Tolstoy's own works appearing less frequently than in the original *Reading Circle*. In most cases, Tolstoy retells the works of other authors, adapting them to fit his own ideological framework. In these adaptations, he often makes subtle alterations to the narrative structure and content to align the works with his moral and philosophical principles. A prime example of this approach is Tolstoy's adaptation of Guy de Maupassant's short story *Le Port* (1889). In Maupassant's original, a sailor visiting a brothel in Marseille fails to recognize the prostitute as his own sister, a failure he experiences as a personal tragedy. Tolstoy, however, reframes the encounter, using the sailor's recognition of his sister as a broader moral epiphany, where he comes to the realization that all prostitutes are, in a sense, "sisters" to sailors. Tolstoy not only reinterprets the original plot but also renames Maupassant's story, presenting it as *Sisters*, underscoring his moral reimagining.

This tendency toward reworking the works of others is also reflected in the aphorisms included in *For All Days*. While some of the maxims are authored by Tolstoy himself, others are attributed to their original authors. However, even these borrowed maxims are frequently paraphrased to suit Tolstoy's stylistic preferences and ideological stance. In the preface to *For All Days*, Tolstoy addresses this practice, acknowledging the difficulty in providing precise references for many of the borrowed thoughts. He states:

> I have borrowed the thoughts collected here from a very large number of writings and documents, a list of which is appended at the end of the book. Those thoughts for which no author is indicated either come from collections in which the authorship is also missing, or I am the author. The other thoughts probably bear the signature of their authors, but unfortunately, when compiling them, I neglected to note exactly which works they were borrowed from. (PSS 43:VIII)

In his later anthological works, Leo Tolstoy displays a pronounced disregard for the original contexts of the texts he cites, even when engaging with extended quotations. A striking example is his inclusion of a polemic by Friedrich Nietzsche directed against the Christian Church. Despite Tolstoy's otherwise unequivocal rejection of Nietzsche, whom he identified as a paradigmatic figure of modern decadence, he appropriates the philosopher's critique for his own purposes.

Tolstoy arranges these heterogeneous aphorisms into thematic units, each assigned to a specific calendar day. The number of entries per day generally ranges from four to nine. The numbered sequence of these maxims may be interpreted as a deliberate hermeneutic device: Tolstoy appears to suggest that the aggregation of discrete utterances results in a cumulative moral argument, resembling a kind of ethical syllogism.

The performative dimension of these collections is further underscored by Tolstoy's engagement with

emerging media technologies. In 1909, he recorded selections from his anthologies on gramophone discs in four languages—Russian, French, English, and German. These recordings were subsequently circulated across Europe, contributing to the broader dissemination of his moral teachings.

The late anthologies reveal a facet of Tolstoy often marginalized by the literary establishment, which tended to dismiss the output of his late years as symptomatic of eccentricity or fanaticism. Yet it is precisely his obsessive and relentless energy as a spiritual entrepreneur that foregrounds the significance of his late religious journalism. In these texts, Tolstoy—already renowned as the author of *War and Peace*—deploys a full arsenal of literary forms, from aphorism and parable to short prose, in order to present his "narrative theology."

At the core of Tolstoy's project lies the conviction that he fulfills a godly mission. He articulates this self-perception most forcefully in the fifth and, by his own account, "most important" point of his testament dated March 27, 1895: "I do not wish that people close or distant to me praise me. And if they want to understand my writings, they should advance to those sections, in which—I know it for sure—the godly force has spoken through me and use them for their lives" (PSS 53:16).

Tolstoy's radical approach extended even to the canonical texts of Christianity. In the final year of his life, he criticized the evangelist Matthew for using "too many words" in the Sermon on the Mount, remarking, "This is worse than Dostoevsky" (Makovickij 392). This comment not only underscores Tolstoy's demand for moral clarity and literary economy but also reflects his uncompromising stance toward both sacred and secular texts alike.

In the final phase of his intellectual trajectory, Tolstoy transposed the strategies he had previously employed in both his autobiographical trilogy and his pedagogical experiments into what would become his most ambitious and universal educational endeavor. The anthology *For All Day* constitutes a culmination of his effort to instruct not a specific readership—such as the peasantry or the morally wayward aristocracy—but humanity as a whole. Again Tolstoy split his personality into other personae, although now their names were neither Irtenyev nor Nekhliudov, but Plato, Buddha, Kant, John Ruskin, and the like.

The anthologies combined this synthesis of several voices into Tolstoy's own voice with a curated reading regime. The author imposed the mode of reception onto his readers and explained the sense of the assigned texts, just as the teacher in the village school would do.

As in his *ABC reader*, Tolstoy started from the letter and later explained the meaning of the combination of letters. The same holds true for Tolstoy's treatment of the godly word. God, in Tolstoy's view, is not the Christian God, but it is the unity of life and love. Tolstoy congratulates himself with exceptional hermeneutical skills and produces a synthetic version of the four gospels that is better than anything the evangelists themselves possibly could have written.

Most prominently, Tolstoy presented his own summary of the Gospel in the final chapter of the novel *Resurrection*. In the first step, Tolstoy reduces the Ten Commandments from the New Testament to five, and finally to one: "Search for the Kingdom of God and everything else will come to you" (PSS 32:444). In Tolstoy's view, the Kingdom of God is within man, and the way there is described in Tolstoy's own godly word.

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