

# The Significance of Count Tolstoi

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In what you have read of the writings of Tolstoi you have come to see that whatever may be the merit of his position, it cannot be accused of being conventional. As a thinker on moral and social problems, as well as an exemplar of his own principles, he is certainly outside of the ordinary highways of conventional thinking, not only in Russia, but quite as well in all other countries. Some men have even gone so far as to regard him as insane, while others look upon him as one of the great leaders and prophets of Russian social evolution, and as having a very far-reaching influence in countries as far remote as our own. The official opinion of the Russian is the same for him as it is for all other Russians whose ideas in any way threaten the social order of despotism. They tolerate him, because he has committed no open act against the government, but many of his writings of these later days are prohibited. His relations with the Russian Church present a humorous situation. Most men at least cling to the possibility that whatever may have been their conduct in life, there always remains for them the faint hope of a future reward, and eternal felicities. To Tolstoi, this hope is denied. At least if the Russian Church takes itself seriously, and if the infinite is as serious and as lacking in the sense of humor as the august rules of that Church, I can see no hope for poor Tolstoi. Not only has he been damned by the

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<sup>1</sup> This manuscript is one of—the first, as it happens—a series of 14 manuscripts that Earl Davis bound together with four twine loops. While this manuscript has no date, Earl Davis wrote another piece on Tolstoy after he died in 1910 (“Count Leo Tolstoi: A Tragedy of the Times”). From this text, it is clear that Tolstoy was still alive when it was written. As Tolstoy died in 1910, we can date the text prior to 1910, and certainly after 1907 when Earl Davis started typing his manuscripts. It is reasonable to date this piece proximate to that piece, which was written after Tolstoy died; so I have guessed 1909 as a likely date for this text.

Government in this life, but already the Church has taken time by the forelock, and damned him for all eternity. Yet in spite of that we read his books and are interested in his life. As we read and think, reflecting on the things that he says and does, we cannot refrain from asking ourselves the question as to whether or not this man is dreaming wild dreams and thinking vain thoughts, or is he somehow blindly grasping in his hand a real principle of life, that is establishing itself as a concrete reality in our modern society.

You are familiar with the brief facts of the man's life. Born in 1828 at Yasyana Polyana, where he now lives, he lived the typical childhood and youth of the Russian noble. He entered the army in the Caucasus, and after the termination of the guerilla warfare in Circassia. His writings of the army life had gained for him a recognition, beyond that due him merely on account of his social standing. Leaving the army at the age of 26, he goes to St. Petersburg. With a zest that has always characterized him, he entered upon a mission of a man of thought. He visited the continent and came in contact with the leading thinkers and workers there. This visit had a profound influence on him. He then passes through what may be called the romantic period of his life. Here he comes to serious doubt as he faces the sharp contrast presented to him between the romantic ideal conception of life as it was perceived in his imagination, and the hard cruel facts of life as he found them in Russian society. The following describes briefly his problem, and the way in which he escaped from his dilemma and doubt.

He had long believed "like so many other cultivated and liberal minds, that the narrow circle of savants and wealthy people to which he belonged constituted his entire world. As to the thousands of beings who had lived, or were living still, outside of him, were they not animals rather than men? I can scarcely realize today, so strange do I find it, that I should have fallen into such a mistake as to believe that my own life, that the life of a Solomon, that the life of a Schopenhauer, was the true or normal life, while the life of all these thousands of human beings was a mere detail of no account."

Fortunately for Tolstoi, the taste for country life, and his intercourse with the field hands, brought him to divine, that "if he desired to live and comprehend the meaning of life, he must find this meaning not among those who have lost it, who long to get rid of life, but among these thousands who create their life and ours, and who bear the burden of both." Having found only the leaven of doubt or negation among the men of his own society, he goes to ask the germs of faith, the elements of religion, among the poor, the simple, the ignorant, pilgrims, monksraskoliks, peasants. In them alone he finds agreement between faith and works. ... Seeing these simple souls so unanimous in their interpretation of existence, so obstinately bent on seeking the good by means of calm labor and patience capable of enduring any trial, Tolstoi again begins to feel love for men; and he endeavors to imitate these models. (Dupuy's *The Great Masters of Russian Literature*, page 226-7.)<sup>2</sup>

Thus we see the mental history that led Tolstoi to go back to the peasant life and become that by which he is now known the world over, a man of the nobility, yet living the outward life of the peasant. During this latter period of his life he has produced all his religious and sociological literature. Besides the influence that he has had in the immediate neighborhood of his own estate, he has exercised a large direct influence, and an almost immeasurable indirect influence on Russian life. The life is certainly interesting, but the question that I have in mind is not its interest but its significance. Is it important?

Let us try to place him, first of all in his relationship to the great writers and reformers of Russia, and later in his relationship to men outside the borders of his own country.

Gogel, the great Russian dreamer and romancer, was born in 1810. He is somewhat of a Voltaire, in his satire and his pungent criticism, of things as they are. After him

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<sup>2</sup> Ernest Dupuy, *The Great Masters of Russian Literature*, trans., Nathan Haskell Dole, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., 1886.

comes Turgenief, born in 1818. Turgenief probes to the very heart of the Russian social life. He lays open for public gaze in his books, the social and political rottenness, and corruption in Russian society. Like Zola in France, he was a realist, whose supreme work was to arouse the attention of men to the actual face behind their mask of respectability. I cannot find that there is any note of constructive work in Turgenief, but I am not sufficiently acquainted with him to say that positively. But at least he realized the need of constructive work, and one of the most interesting of his acts is his effort to popularize Tolstoi's work, and his last words, almost on his deathbed, were of Tolstoi.

These men, together with their European contemporaries, and their fellows of the spirit and purpose in this country, were the beginners of a great movement that we have not even begun to see the end of. The beginning of the eighteenth century saw the whole of Europe still under the grip of oppression. In spite of the Puritan movement which had shaken the idea of divine right, the restoration in England had permitted but a very small part of that revolutionary spirit to survive. But the history of the eighteenth century in Europe is recorded in the life of Voltaire, and it's tragic ending is to be found in the chronicles of the French Revolution. Voltaire is not so much the cause of the great change as he is the leader and the interpreter of it. One line in one of his plays, expresses the whole message of Voltaire and the 18<sup>th</sup> century, "Wake, Ye people, Break your chains."<sup>3</sup> His religious creed is significant, "I die adoring God, loving my friends, not hating my enemies, and detesting superstition."<sup>4</sup> Liberty, Fraternity, and equality were the watchwords of life among the radicals of those days. The French Revolution was the terrible expression of the ferment in Europe. In this country, men who were in sympathy with Voltaire, his thought and his purposes were

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<sup>3</sup> Voltaire, the nom de plume of Francois-Marie Arouet (1694-1778) French Enlightenment writer, historian and philosopher. This is a line from the libretto he wrote for Jean-Phillipe Rameau's opera, Samson (1733).

<sup>4</sup> Voltaire wrote this line on February 28, 1778, during his final illness, a few weeks before he died.

the leaders in the revolution here, and were the dominant forces in the establishment of the nation. Franklin and Jefferson were closely akin to Voltaire in their political and religious principles. Channing, still a student at Harvard at the time of the French Revolution, was in the midst of their celebration of that event. Liberty was the idea of his life, the overthrow of oppression. All of this both in Europe and in this country means in its broad significance that the mass of the people were arising to a sense of the worth of human life. If there is any one phrase that expresses the full significance of the growing movement it is the phrase, "the sense of the dignity of human nature."

But while that idea was coming to the surface to become a tremendous influence in modern life, people were yet aware of the fact that conditions as they then existed did not conform to this idea of the dignity of human life. Thomas Hardy in his famous book, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, closes the book with a scene and a sentence that is the unspoken feeling of thousands and the spoken conviction of many. Tess, a noble type of womanhood, in the face of circumstances that conspired to cheat her of every noble womanly right, at last driven to desperation by the cruel treachery in which she had been a victim, kills her persecutor. One is constrained to say that if ever the taking of life could be justified, it should be in her case. But she meets death at the hands of the law. The two people of all her life, who had been constantly true to her, the one, her sister, and the other, he who would have been her husband, are witnesses and actors in the following.

Upon the cornice of the tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes (i.e., the lover and sister) were riveted to it. A few minutes after the hour had struck, something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag.

Justice was done, and the President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess. And Durbeville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing. The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the earth, as if in prayer, and remained thus a long time, absolutely

motionless; the flag continued to move silently. As soon as they had strength, they arose, joined hands again, and went on.<sup>5</sup>

Thus do many feel as they note the play of forces upon human life, and the cruel injustice that often terminates it. Channing, in whom the conception of the dignity of human life was incarnated, felt the same pressing question. Consider the background of his mind when he says the following in an address to working men.

Christianity is the only effectual remedy for the fearful evils of modern civilization—a system that teaches its members to grasp at everything, and to rise above everybody, as the great aims of life. Of such a civilization the natural fruits are, contempt for others rights, fraud, oppression, a gambling spirit in trade, reckless adventure, and commercial conclusions, all tending to impoverish the laborer and to render every condition insecure. Relief is to come, and can only come from a new application of Christian principles, of universal justice and universal love to social institutions, to commerce, to business, to active life. (Page 63 Works.)<sup>6</sup>

I state this only to illustrate a point that might be well established by evidence, that back there at the beginning and well along into the 19<sup>th</sup> century there existed very clearly a recognition of the fact that if human life is in any way a thing of dignity, that the conditions of our modern civilization make against it instead of for it, or as Hardy says, "The President of the immortals had ended his sport with Tess." The eighteenth century had produced the ideal of the worth of life in itself, but it had not produced the conditions that give us the right to assume that this principle of the dignity of human life had become an active working principle in everyday life. In fact this

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), English novelist and poet. He wrote *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in 1891. This quote is from the conclusion of the novel.

<sup>6</sup> William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), leading American Unitarian minister. This quote is from his 1840 text, "On the Elevation of the Labouring Classes" in *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing*, London: Routledge & Sons, p. 100.

sharp contrast between the moral ideal constructed during the eighteenth century, and the attempt to make the conditions square with those conditions may be regarded as the master purpose of all the efforts of the nineteenth century. During that century much has been accomplished and there still remains stupendous tasks to be dealt with in this century in which we are living. As one looks over the developments of the last three centuries he realizes the meaning and the truth of the statement that the mills of the gods grind slowly but they grind exceedingly fine.

Now, in order to understand the place which Tolstoi holds in relation to this great movement, and especially in the Russian social and political life, we have to understand just how he faced these problems and just what he proposed to do.

It is very fair to say that he understood the seriousness of the situation not only in his own country, but in the greater world. Any one of his writings produced after he had entered upon the third period of his moral and intellectual development either give a clear cut exposition of the influence of the social order on the lives of individuals and society. His novel, *Resurrection*,<sup>7</sup> is one of the most searching inquiries into the conditions of modern society as he found it in Russia. Over and over again he points out the fact of the influence of conditions and circumstances upon moral conduct. The opening lines of the 23rd chapter of the book from which you have been reading states his opinions on the subject. "I saw that the cause of the suffering and depravity of men lies in the fact that some men are in bondage to others." I do not know that any man could more clearly state in a few words the essence of the learning and wisdom gleaned from the experience of the nineteenth century. It makes no difference whether you approach the scholar or the man of affairs; the criminal or the reformer, the theologian or lawyer, everywhere you will find that the answer to your question as to the cause of suffering and depravity in human life will be answered by the great leaders of the nineteenth century in precisely the same terms that Tolstoi uses in this short sentence

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<sup>7</sup> *Resurrection*, first published in 1899, by Leo Tolstoy, was the last novel published by Tolstoy,

that some men are in bondage to others. Freedom from bondage has been the constructive watchword of all progress during the last hundred years.

Thus far, at least, Tolstoi is in harmony with the leaders of the age. He is at one with the revolutionist of Europe, and with Channing, Parker and Emerson in this country.

Now when it comes to a consideration of the practical question as to how man should acquire this freedom from bondage, so much to be desired, he falls into the same error that many are falling into today. He is not quite able to go the full length of the principles to which he is pledged. He will not submit to the authority of the state, nor to the authority of the church, nor to the authority of the Bible, but that is as far as he can go. He is not enough a child of his time to cut clear from all authorities and acquaint himself first hand deity as did Emerson. He falls back upon the authority of Christ, and especially upon the teaching of Christ as it is interpreted by Tolstoi. In his interpretation of the life and the teachings of Christ he makes the doctrine of non-resistance the central and crystalizing force of his life.

Tolstoi's answer to all the social and moral problems of his time is a religious answer. We are to find our way out of our troubles by the application of Christianity to human life. But the Christianity which he would have applied is not the Christianity as it is commonly applied in the churches, but a Christianity involved in a new interpretation of the gospels.

His religion, properly speaking, takes as its foundation the maxim of the Evangelist, "Resist not the one that is evil." And it is not in an allegorical sense, it is by the letter, that these words of Jesus must be understood. The law laid down by Jesus' disciples of this world, which is the law of conflict. This doctrine of Jesus, which is sure to give peace to the world is contained wholly in five commandments:

1. Be at peace with everybody. Do not allow yourself to consider anyone as low or stupid.

2. Do not violate the rights of wedlock. Do not commit adultery.
3. The oath impels men to sin. Know that it is wrong, and bind not yourselves by any promise.
4. Human vengeance or justice is an evil. Do not, under any pretext, practice it. Bear with insults, and render not evil for evil.
5. Know that all men are brothers, and sons of one father. Do not break the peace with any on account of the difference of nationality.

By putting this doctrine into practice, man can realize a happiness in life, and there is no happiness in life except in this path. (Dupay, pages 331-2.)<sup>8</sup>

The above seems to me a fair statement of Tolstoi's constructive line of reform. Bondage is the cause of suffering and depravity, therefore bondage of all forms must be eliminated from life. Property involves a form of bondage, therefore we must eliminate property, and enter into a communistic order of society. Class distinctions must be eliminated, and a practical demonstration of the old religious formula of fraternity among men must be put into practice. Acting upon the doctrines which he preached, Tolstoi took up his abode on the estate where he was born. He did all that he could do to eliminate the artificial distinctions which segregated him from the peasants on his estate. He began to wear the garb of the peasant, to eat the food of the peasant, to spend a certain part of each day in doing work such as the peasants do, plowing, working in the field, and being one of those among whom he lived. All this outward evidence of an inward grace of fraternity has become a part of his life. This freedom from bondage, both in property and in social distinctions has become the ideal of his life, and true to it, he follows where it leads him. Through his devotion to that he makes his contribution to the problems of his nation, and his time. How great and far reaching that contribution will be we have no means of determining at this short range. At least he has realized the significance and in part the cause of the great social problem of the times. Also he has a remedy which to

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<sup>8</sup> Ernest Dupuy, *The Great Masters of Russian Literature*, trans., Nathan Haskell Dole, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., 1886, pp. 331-2.

him, and indeed to many others, is an absolute remedy. He does not fear to apply the remedy at whatever the costs. He is doing something and in the long run, I believe that the world will confirm the opinion held by many today that Tolstoi is one of the greatest influences in Russian life. In the great awakening of Russia, his life and his influence is bound to have a softening and uplifting effect that will do much toward toning down the wrath of an outraged people in that great day when the Russian nation is called to the bar of revolutionary justice to answer for its atrocities against human life and a dependent people. It is possible that the influence of Tolstoi, without being in the least a compromising influence, may serve to give to that time of judgement a tone of justice and enlightened conduct that was so lacking in the great French Revolution of a century ago.

Yet one cannot fail to see that in the position of Tolstoi there is a certain artificiality that does not sound true. It is not so much an evidence of insincerity on his part, as it is a product of his earlier training, and the narrowness of his life. We have to recognize that the narrowness of which we are speaking is not so much a narrowness which may be ascribed to the faults in the man himself, as a narrowness that may be ascribed to the limitations of the conditions, both social and political, under which his years of maturing development were passed. It is difficult to teach an old dog new tricks. In spite of himself Tolstoi was unable to free himself from the bondage which he so much feared and loathed. Denying the authority of the government, and the authority of the state, he does not escape authority, but quietly hides his head under the authority of Christ's teaching of the doctrine of non-resistance. This is the compass by which he steers himself. He applies this principle wherever he can discover its applicability. I would not be the first to deny the importance of this principle, and I can see that it has a tremendous influence in our modern life, and it is coming more and more to be applied, as for example in dealing with criminals and other delinquents against the social order. Yet we must confess that it is only a method of procedure and not an aim or a purpose of life or society. There are conditions where it works admirably, but there are also conditions under which it would seem to be futile. As a method we may use it where it will work, but we are not bound to follow it always. We are under no obligations to submit to the authority of any person's statements. Here is where Tolstoi

falls back into the unconscious obedience to the early training, and the provincialism of his life. In other words, his remedy for present conditions is reactionary in its nature, and not progressive. To state what I have in mind, I would say that he has seen a great light, and his eyes have been dazzled by it, and he has protected them by the common method of putting on the lens of other people's ideas. This seems to me the first fundamental criticism of Tolstoi. The second criticism that one feels the necessity of offering is the natural corollary of the first. The form of his life, his living among the peasants as he does, is not natural. He may eat the bread that they eat, and wear the clothes that they wear, and do the work that they do, but he cannot feel as they do, nor can they feel as he does. He cannot think as they do, nor can he expect them to think as he does. While his life is humble and simple, yet the very artificiality of the clothing, etc., cannot be escaped from. There is a lack of spontaneity about it all, that I am unable to escape feeling. The thing is not entirely spontaneous to him, he is constantly bowing in submission to an external authority. Even though that authority be as great and noble a one as Jesus, still the result is inevitable. Conduct, if it is at all unconventional, must be spontaneous, and not studied, it must come from the bottom, and not be worn. I do not mean to say that Tolstoi is a hypocrite or that he lives as he does for the effect of it, but it just escapes becoming completely satisfying because of his obedience to an authority that is not his own.