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# “Don’t Steal Rolls”: Tolstoy’s Symposium on Love, Literature, Women, and Wine

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## i. “Don’t Steal Rolls”: Tolstoy and Platonic Thought

In a diary entry dated 14 October 1897, Tolstoy claims that “when people are carried away by Shakespeare or Beethoven they are carried away by their own thoughts and dreams evoked by Shakespeare or Beethoven, just as people in love don’t love the object of their love, but what it evokes in them.”<sup>1</sup> This statement brings together two of the most problematic issues within Tolstoy’s entire body of art and thought – his views on aesthetics and love. Tolstoy’s essay “On Shakespeare and the Drama” (1906), for example, has attracted a significant amount of condemnation in the Western world for its argument that Shakespeare’s popularity and the firmly-established opinion that he is an artistic genius is one of the greatest delusions in the history of literature. At the same time, Tolstoy is famous for his long internal struggle to reconcile his own sexual desire with his religious and philosophical principles, eventually compelling him to completely renounce sexual activity even within marriage; while some have read Tolstoy’s attitude towards sexuality as “reflecting his ambivalence and free-floating hostility toward women,”<sup>2</sup> in the quote above, one can see how both of these issues are connected to Tolstoy’s larger project to bring his artistic, philosophic, and religious views into a single coherent system.

Indeed, his diary entry from 30 August 1894 illustrates the extent to which Tolstoy saw aesthetics and love as intrinsically connected. He writes that “novels end with the hero and heroine

married. Instead, they should begin with marriage and end with the couple liberating themselves from it,"<sup>3</sup> and one can see how this statement reflects the principles which eventually compelled Tolstoy to reject the conclusions of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* on aesthetic grounds. While Tolstoy's opinions regarding love, sexuality, and aesthetics traditionally have been the issues which are most irreconcilable with his celebrated realistic novels, Tolstoy's sense of the individual's place within the flux of historical time likewise can illuminate how the principles underlying Tolstoy's discourse on literature and on love are intimately connected to his discourse on history from the Second Epilogue of *War and Peace*.

In the Second Epilogue, Tolstoy writes that a just account of historical movement takes as its first step the renunciation of what he calls "the independence of personality" and "free will," which are "only...expression[s] for the unknown remainder of what we know about the laws of human life."<sup>4</sup> If Tolstoy in the Second Epilogue confronts historians for brainwashing readers into believing that historical personalities like Napoleon exercise their freedom over history rather than being subjects to historical processes, then this theory of history similarly doubles as a theory of the history of literature and a history of sexuality as well. Taking into account Tolstoy's sense of freedom and contingency, then the principles guiding his views on love and literature similarly reject those who glorify the volition and agency of the free individual and place him at the center of all universal processes. Thus, what I am interested in is Tolstoy's sensitivity towards the agency of the individual and how this agency is manifested within the constellation of historical, literary, and sexual experience. One can see in all three cases how Tolstoy energetically confronts the moments in history, literature, or sexual experience when narcissism and self-love are inscribed by each of their respective means of production, and what I would like to focus in this essay is how Tolstoy's ultimate rejection of the centrality of the individual in these three spheres is intimately connected with his experience as a reader of Plato. First, I focus on the motivations contributing to Tolstoy's dialogue with Plato by looking particularly at how Tolstoy "translates" Plato's *Symposium* into his own Russian symposium in *Anna Karenina*, and using Tolstoy's discourse on history, I will explore the possibilities when, in the terms of the *Symposium*, the act of reading (or one might say

the act of translation) transforms into an act of love.

ii. "Spring Water that Sets the Teeth on Edge":  
Tolstoy Reading Plato

Plato perhaps exerted the strongest influence on Tolstoy's art and thought of any writer throughout his long literary career. Tolstoy listed Plato's *Symposium* as one of the books which had made an impression on him during his youth, and during the winter of 1870, he voraciously began to study Greek. His wife notes in her diaries that after a theological student from Moscow arrived to teach him "the rudiments of the language":

From the first day, the forty-two-year-old pupil threw himself into Greek grammar with a passion, pored over dictionaries, drew up vocabularies, tackled the great authors, [and] . . . in a few weeks[,] outdistanced his teacher. He sight-translated Xenophon, reveled in Homer, discovered Plato and said the originals were like 'spring water that sets the teeth on edge.'<sup>5</sup>

Armed with a knowledge of Greek, Tolstoy repeatedly placed Plato alongside Schopenhauer as the two writers who "set a true objective for philosophy and...seek the meaning of life without dividing into their constituent parts the essential things which make up the life of every man."<sup>6</sup> If Tolstoy esteems Schopenhauer because of their shared view of preferencing the cosmological scale of historical time over the importance of the effect of an individual, then Tolstoy's affinity for Platonic thought is intimately connected to its all-encompassing implications on the subject of love and sexuality. Because this totalizing principle which permits Tolstoy to place Schopenhauer and Plato in the same category emerges in its most comprehensible form in *War and Peace*, it is necessary to turn to the Second Epilogue to restate Tolstoy's understanding of "freedom" and "inevitability" (необходимость) and their roles in determining the course of historical movement.

Tolstoy's theory of history comes out of the conviction that all action is governed not by a single individual's act of volition but instead by every last individual who partakes in an event. He writes that

So long as histories are written of separate individuals, whether Caesars, Alexanders, Luthers, or Voltaires, and not the histories of all, absolutely all those who take part in an event, it is quite impossible to describe the

movement of humanity without the conception of a force compelling men to direct their activity toward a certain end.<sup>7</sup>

Tolstoy uses this computational approach to construct a theory of history which places emphasis on every single individual present; at the same time that a historical moment is constituted by these "histories of *all*," likewise our sense of an individual's freedom is governed almost exclusively by our ability to judge the infinite number of factors influencing an individual at any given moment.

Tolstoy proposes that if we consider an individual in isolation and do not take into consideration the influence of the external world, time, and the causes leading to an action, the individual surely appears to possess freedom. He suggests that if we see an individual's "connection with anything what[so]ever – with a man who speaks to him, a book he reads, the work on which he is engaged, even with the air he breathes or the light that falls on the things about him – we see that each of these circumstances has an influence on him and controls at least some side of his activity."<sup>8</sup> The difficulty in observing and judging the totality of these circumstances has discouraged historians from subscribing to this God's-eye-view perspective on history and led them to believe that the most important force directing historical movement is the freedom of the individual, for, Tolstoy writes, "when we do not at all understand the cause of an action...we ascribe a greater amount of freedom to it.... [W]e recognize in it more individuality, originality, and independence."<sup>9</sup> While Tolstoy ultimately believed in varying degrees that an individual does indeed possess a type of moral freedom in the spiritual realm (and I will qualify these terms in a moment), the effect of Tolstoy's theory of history by calling into question the privileged position of the individual on the larger historical scale and the privileged position of freedom on the human scale can be seen as remarkably reminiscent of Freud's proposition of the three blows to the megalomania of Western culture. In fact, the Second Epilogue effectively mirrors each of the stages in which Freud argued humanity's self-importance was challenged – in the cosmos through the explosion of the geocentric universe, in the animal kingdom through the theory of evolution, and in the mind through psychoanalysis.

On the cosmological scale, Tolstoy self-consciously aligns himself with Copernicus, and just as the explosion of the geocentric universe elicited a radical rethinking of the individual's

position in the world, so too does Tolstoy's theory of history. The effect that shifting our sense as free individuals to participants in the movement of historical inevitability is conceived by Tolstoy as commensurate with the heliocentric universe where our planet is no longer the center of all the heavens. He writes:

From the time the law of Copernicus was discovered and proved, the mere recognition of the fact that it was not the sun but the earth that moves sufficed to destroy the whole cosmography of the ancients.....

As in the question of astronomy then, so in the question of history now, the whole difference of opinion is based on the recognition or nonrecognition of something absolute, serving as the measure of visible phenomena. In astronomy it was the immovability of the earth, in history it is the independence of personality - free will.....

In the first case it was necessary to renounce the consciousness of an unreal immobility in space and to recognize a motion we did not feel; in the present case it is similarly necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist, and to recognize a dependence of which we are not conscious.<sup>10</sup>

Moving down from the cosmic sphere, challenging the self-love of mankind in the realm of history can meaningfully be compared with the effect that evolution has had on conceiving the individual's place within historical movement. And while Tolstoy would surely have resented any comparisons to Darwin, some evolutionary biologists - such as Stephen Jay Gould - occasionally use *War and Peace* as a literary analogue for evolution when arguing that contingency plays a vital role in the evolutionary process. Gould, in his magnum opus *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, writes that "although contingency has been consistently underrated (or even unacknowledged) in stereotypical descriptions of scientific practice,...our great novelists have reveled in this theme, as Tolstoy devoted both [epilogues] of *War and Peace* to explaining why Napoleon's defeat in Moscow in 1812 rested upon a thicket of apparently inconsequential and independent details, and not upon any broad and abstract claim about the souls of nations or the predictable efficacy of Russia's two greatest generals, November and December."<sup>11</sup>

For Tolstoy, sexuality's influence over an individual's subjectivity is also roughly analogous to what Freud calls "the psychological blow to human nature." Again, while one would imagine that Tolstoy would resent the methodological foundations of psychoanalysis, Tolstoy's iconoclastic tone and approach in the

Second Epilogue is in many ways echoed when we hear Freud describe this third stage:

Psychoanalysis has sought to educate the ego. But these two discoveries – that the life of our sexual instincts cannot be wholly tamed, and that mental processes are in themselves unconscious and only reach the ego and come under its control through incomplete and untrustworthy perceptions – these two discoveries amount to a statement that the ego is not master in its own house.<sup>12</sup>

While the trauma inflicted upon the self-love of mankind primarily occurs on the cosmological scale in *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina* is structured by the principles evocative of Freud's psychological blow to the centrality of the free individual, and one can witness this discourse woven into Tolstoy's translation of Plato's *Symposium* in the novel.

### iii. "Don't Steal Rolls": Tolstoy's Symposium

From the very first page of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy establishes that love and sexuality are at the core of the ensuing chaos of the novel, writing that "everything was upset in the Oblonskys' house. The wife had discovered an intrigue between her husband and their former French governess, and declared that she would not continue to live under the same roof as him."<sup>13</sup> Stiva Oblonsky's infidelity towards his wife disrupts the peace of the nuclear family, and the novel called *Anna Karenina* begins its signification of its title character when Anna Karenina – Stiva's sister – arrives to restore order. A few chapters later – when the narrative moves to the Shcherbatsky house – Tolstoy similarly frames the question of how a girl ought to choose her husband in the ideological chaos of the age:

The French way, of parents deciding a daughter's fate, was not accepted, and was even condemned. The English way, of giving a girl perfect freedom, was also rejected, and would have been impossible in Russian society. The Russian way, of employing a professional match-maker, was considered monstrous, and was laughed at by everybody, including the Princess [Shcherbatskaya] herself. But how a girl was to get married, or how a mother was to get a daughter given in marriage, no one knew.<sup>14</sup>

At this point in his life Tolstoy still placed some currency in the nuclear family and saw marriage as the ideal place to synthesize

physical and spiritual love, and one can sense the Princess's palpable anxiety that for Kitty "intimacy might be followed by love and that her daughter might fall in love with some one who had no intention of marrying or was not fit to be her husband."<sup>15</sup> As such, the issues underlying Tolstoy's ensuing symposium are not inscribed by pederasty or intercrural sex but by the anxiety of how to properly set love into motion and whether marriage serves its purpose as the proper telos for love.

So at the onset of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy puts these issues into dialogue by translating Plato's *Symposium* into a Russian *pir*. Stiva Oblonsky and Konstantin Levin sit down to an extravagant dinner that consists of three dozen Real Flensburg oysters, *potage printanier*, *turbot*, *sauce Beaumarchais*, *poulard à l'estragon*, *macédoine de fruits*, and – of course – an endless bottle of champagne. The occasion for the dinner is that Levin has returned to Moscow to propose to Kitty Shcherbatskaya, and in Tolstoy's symposium, Stiva and Levin each ruminate on the trials and tribulations of love over the course of the meal. Generally speaking, the Oblonskys and the Levins embody the two diametrically opposed and seemingly irreconcilable lifestyles that determine the trajectory of *Anna Karenina*. The first instance when Levin and Stiva meet in the novel, the narrator provides a telling description of their friendship:

Levin and Oblonsky were almost of the same age; and...were fond of one another as friends who have come together in early youth often are, in spite of the difference in their characters and tastes. Yet, as often happens between men who have chosen different pursuits, each, while in argument justifying the other's activity, despised it in the depth of his heart. Each thought that his own way of living was real life, and that the life of his friend was – illusion.<sup>16</sup>

The differences between the two families are striking: Oblonsky is plump, extravagant, superficial, a womanizer, an urbanite, an officer worker; Levin is athletic, reserved, pensive, a faithful husband, a landowner, a farmer. Their attitudes on the subject of love and what constitutes a "true life" and what constitutes a life of "illusion," naturally, are no exception.

When their conversation addresses the tumult preceding the symposium – that "everything was upset in the Oblonskys' house" – Levin refuses to entertain the possibility that he is capable of adultery and likens it to theft: "It's quite incomprehensible to me. It's as if...just as incomprehensible as if I,

after eating my fill here, went into a baker's shop and stole a roll."<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that the "roll" here is a "калач", which is a type of bread typically used only during religious holidays and weddings, harkening back to the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, which also equates flesh with bread. Interestingly, the "калач" reappears later in the novel in a telling scene when, after having his marriage proposal accepted, Levin treats himself to a cup of coffee and a "калач" is served too:

Levin tried to drink a little coffee, and put a piece of roll [калач] into his mouth, but his mouth decidedly [didn't know what to do] with it. Levin [spit it out,] put on his coat, and went out to walk again.... All that night and morning Levin had lived quite unconsciously, and felt quite outside the conditions of material existence. He had not eaten for a whole day, had not slept for two nights, had spent several hours half-dressed and exposed to the frost, yet he felt not only fresher and better than ever before, but quite independent of his body.<sup>18</sup>

This passage illustrates how Levin's body viscerally rejects any possibility of *eros*, and the fact that he uses this symbol of the "калач" to confront Stiva calls attention to the dichotomy between *eros* and *agape* in this scene.

Stiva delivers a passionate rebuttal to Levin's admonition, and responds by appealing to Levin's sensual side: "Why not? Rolls sometimes smell so [good] that one can't resist them!"<sup>19</sup> Both men are amused at the metaphor, but Stiva quickly becomes more serious in order to justify his eroticism. He ultimately sees his affairs as inevitable because of his insatiable sexual appetites and excess of libidinous energy.

What is to be done? Your wife gets older, and you're full of life. Before you've time to look round, you feel that you can't love your wife with love, however much you may esteem her. And then suddenly love turns up, and you're done for. . . . But what is to be done?<sup>20</sup>

The question, "What is to be done?" – or in Russian, "Что делать?" – is loaded with philosophical significance, particularly in Tolstoy's ethics.

In a letter to N.N. Strakhov in 1875 – the same year he began writing *Anna Karenina* – Tolstoy claims that the purpose of philosophy is to answer all of Kant's questions in order to find the meaning of life. In response to Kant's question – "Что делать?" – Tolstoy distinguishes between self-love and love of the all. He

writes that:

[I]n childhood we desire the self, live in the self, love the self, but in old age we live not for the self, desire something beyond the self, love not the self, and that life is only a transition from love of the self (i.e. from the individual life, from this life) to love not of the self (i.e. to a general life, not this life), and therefore, to the question 'what is to be done?' I would answer: 'Love not the self,' i.e. I would resolve each moment of doubt by choosing the way in which I might satisfy love not of the self.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, when Stiva poses the question “what is to be done” about his erotic drives, Levin’s unequivocal answer is “Don’t steal rolls.” Even while the trajectory of *Anna Karenina* deviates from this position – flesh inevitably becomes part of the marriage equation for Levin and Kitty even if it generates a whole new set of existential crises for Levin – the abnegation of self-love implicit in Levin’s imperative “Don’t steal rolls” is the underlying link between Tolstoy’s theory of history and discourses on love and aesthetics.

#### iv. The Task of the Reader: Love

It’s clear that Tolstoy took up the “Don’t steal rolls” stance when he attempted to challenge self-love in favor of this “love of the all.” If one could reconfigure this binary pair of self-love versus “love of the all” into the dichotomy between the love of the flesh and the love of the spirit, the subtitle to Tolstoy’s *Commentary on the Gospels* – “Victory of the Spirit over the Flesh” – embodies this very transition that characterizes Tolstoy’s later writings. As I’ve attempted to argue, the narcissism and over-inflation of an individual’s place in the universe implicit in the glorification of the flesh compels Tolstoy to eventually reject the temporal nature of the flesh altogether.

If we recall for a moment Socrates’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium* when Diotima elevates creative beauty above temporal beauty and preferences its immortality, she figures this relationship in terms of birth:

...everyone would rather have such children than human ones, and would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets with envy and admiration for the offspring they have left behind – offspring, which, because they are immortal themselves, provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance.<sup>22</sup>

As such, one can see why the notion of a "genealogy" is such a pregnant term when it comes to describing the relationship between two authors or texts. If the "gene" in biological terms is what is passed on from parents to children in the temporal realm, then the literary genealogies that emerge in this intertextual space illuminate the types of authorial interrelations that are so often reduced by these theories of "influence" or "intertextuality" alone.

For an author to take on the genes and characteristics of another author, the creation of a genealogy can easily be seen as emerging out of a strong act of respect – or perhaps one may say – of love. Gayatri Spivak suggests in "The Politics of Translation" (1992) that the intimacy implicit in the act of reading is indicative of the presence of love of the text, which grants the reader permission to "transgress from the trace of the other – before memory – in the closest places of the self."<sup>23</sup> Spivak's claim that "translation is the most intimate act of reading"<sup>24</sup> introduces the paradigm of "translation" as an essential relationship central to the synthesis of inter-cultural and inter-historical literary movement. The paradigm of translation, then, would imply that the central problem is fundamentally located in linguistic difference, though Spivak maintains that "language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries" and as such "our stake in agency keeps the fraying down to a minimum except in the communication and reading of and in love. (What is the place of "love" in the ethical?) The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow."<sup>25</sup>

So, if we are to bring Tolstoy's discourses on love, history, and aesthetics together, his translation of Plato's *Symposium* into *Anna Karenina* sets up a literary genealogy predicated upon the very principles of love espoused by Plato. Furthermore, Tolstoy uses this clear link to Platonic thought ideologically and genealogically to authorize his attack on what he sees as the artists of the Western world whose production consists entirely of the flesh. I will close with the suggestion that Tolstoy's attitude towards Western artists such as Shakespeare is not – as Harold Bloom would have us believe – an act of poetic misprision but instead an act of love.

## ENDNOTES

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3. *Ibid*, 32.
4. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, ed. George Gibian, trans, Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 1072.
5. Mary Foertsch, "Tolstoy and Greek: A Speculation about Anna Karenina," *Cambridge Quarterly* 23.1 (1994): 20.
6. *Ibid*, 21.
7. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1050.
8. *Ibid*, 1066.
9. *Ibid*, 1068.
10. *Ibid*, 1073-74.
11. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structures of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), 1340.
12. Sigmund Freud, "A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-analysis," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1954-1974), 140.
13. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, ed. and trans. George Gibian, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 1.
14. *Ibid*, 41.
15. *Ibid*.
16. *Ibid*, 16.
17. *Ibid*, 37.
18. *Ibid*, 366-67.
19. *Ibid*, 37.
20. *Ibid*.
21. *Tolstoy's Letters*, ed. R.F. Christian (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), 288.
22. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 57.
23. Gayatri Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 370.
24. *Ibid*, 372.
25. *Ibid*, 370.