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NOTES ON SPATIAL FORM IN TOLSTOY

BY JAMES M. CURTIS

IN January, 1865, Tolstoy wrote to Mikhail Katkov, in whose journal *The Russian Messenger* the first section of *War and Peace* was to appear as *The Year 1805*:

I couldn't write a preface [Katkov seems to have requested one], no matter how much I tried to write as I wished. The essence of what I wanted to say consisted of the fact that this composition is not a novel and not a short story, and does not have a beginning such that all interest is annihilated by the denouement. I am writing this to you in order to request you *not to call my composition a novel* in the title, and perhaps in the announcement. (Tolstoy's italics)

There is an indirect clue to the significance of this seemingly capricious request (with which Katkov did not comply, much to Tolstoy's disgust) in a letter which Tolstoy wrote to his friend the poet Afanasy Fet, to whom he often confided his most intimate thoughts and attitudes. In the middle of May, 1866, he remarked in an offhand manner:

You know, in my present stay in Moscow, I began studying sculpture. I won't ever be an artist, but this pursuit has already given me much that is pleasant and instructive.

The fact that Tolstoy should have taken up sculpture while he was busily finishing *War and Peace* relates directly to his desire not to call *War and Peace* a novel, and to the reason why Tolstoy has been so badly served by most of his critics. One of the best-known articles ever published in the pages of *The Sewanee Review* helps to establish this relationship.

Joseph Frank's "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" is a landmark in contemporary criticism, and has certainly helped

many of us to view Pound, Eliot, Proust, and Djuna Barnes on their own terms. The central thesis of his essay is that modern literature constitutes "a complex presented spatially in an instant of time" and is thus a rejection of the temporally structured literature of the nineteenth century. Frank's insight is corroborated by Mircea Eliade, who had not read his essay, but in the conclusion to *The Myth of the Eternal Return* wrote of:

. . . recent orientations that tend to reconfer value upon the myth of cyclical periodicity, even the myth of the eternal return. . . . We believe we are justified in seeing in them, rather than a resistance to history, a revolt against historical *time*, an attempt to restore this historical time, freighted as it is with human experience, to a place in the time that is cosmic, cyclical, and infinite. In any case, it is worth noting that the work of two of the most significant writers of our day—T. S. Eliot and James Joyce—is saturated with nostalgia for the myth of the eternal repetition and, in the last analysis, for the ambition of time. (Eliade's italics)

Tolstoy seems wildly out of place in the company of Eliot and Pound (not to mention Djuna Barnes), but I wish to suggest here that a distinctive characteristic of his work, and especially of his two major novels, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, is spatial form. Tolstoy's instinct was entirely correct in his refusing to call *War and Peace* a novel, for the novel, then as now, was synonymous with temporal form. In taking up sculpture, he was moving from one medium to another, but employing the same basic principles in both.

While many of Tolstoy's generalizations on literature, such as his attacks on Shakespeare, are battle reports on the war he was continually waging with his host of private demons, several of his well-known comments on his own work reveal the extent to which he understood the theory of spatial form. In 1878, a minor Russian critic, Sergey Rachinsky, wrote Tolstoy that *Anna Karenina* had a "basic lack of architecture"; there were, he

thought, "two themes, not connected by anything". Tolstoy's reply contains an excellent description of spatial form:

Your judgement on *Anna Karenina* seems untrue to me. On the contrary, I am proud of the architecture—the arches are brought together [*svody svedeny*] so that it is impossible to notice where the keystone is. . . . The connection of the structure is made not in the plot and not in the relations (acquaintance) of the characters, but in an inner connection. . . . I would not argue with someone who said *que me veut cette sonate*, but if you wish to speak of a lack of connection then I can't help saying—truly you are not looking for it in the right place, or we understand a connection in different ways; but that which made this matter significant for me—this connection is there—look for it—you will find it.

In a letter which Tolstoy wrote to his close friend the critic Nikolay Strakhov, in April of 1876, he was even more explicit. Apropos of Strakhov's comments on *Anna Karenina*, he said:

In everything, in almost everything which I have written, the necessity of a collection of thoughts linked among themselves for expressing myself has guided me, but every thought expressed separately loses its meaning, [and] is frightfully degraded when it is taken from the linkage in which it is located. The linkage itself is composed not of thought (I think) but of something else, and to express directly the basis of this thought is absolutely impossible; it is possible only indirectly—by describing images, actions, positions in words.

. . . Now, however, that 9/10 of all that is printed is criticism, for critics of art [we] need people who would show the senselessness of finding thought in an artistic work, and would guide readers in that infinite labyrinth of linkages of which the essence of art consists, and toward those laws which serve as a basis for these linkages.

Matthew Arnold declared that *War and Peace* was "not art, but

life itself". Henry James threw up his hands in despair before such "loose, baggy monsters", and Percy Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* made numerous criticisms of Tolstoy's technique in both the major novels. This way of looking at Tolstoy was recently elevated to the level of a critical principle in Jerome Thale's essay "*War and Peace: The Art of Incoherence*". All these intelligent, well-meaning men, from Rachinsky to Thale, have been looking for the temporal form of the typical nineteenth-century novel, and when they did not find it, assumed that there was no form at all.

The situation is not entirely gloomy, however. A few critics have sensed that there was something unique about the construction of Tolstoy's novels. One of the first of these was Andrew Lytle; in a pioneering article, he stressed the vital role of the image in *War and Peace*. With reference to the vastness of the work, and its themes, Lytle wrote, "No one person, then, could carry the burden of meaning. Only the recurring image could contain it." Lytle then traces the imagery surrounding Pierre Bezukhov, and concludes that "Natasha represents in the personal, private, and institutional life which she and Pierre make what Holy Russia represents in the mystical and finally the religious acceptance of the eternal, ever-recurring source of life." More recently, Ralph Matlaw has noted the resemblance between Tolstoy's comments about the architecture of *Anna Karenina* and "Proust's conception of his masterpiece as a cathedral". In his excellent introduction to the volume of criticism on Tolstoy which he edited for the "Twentieth Century Views" series, he does not relate this similarity between Tolstoy and Proust to the larger problem of spatial form, but goes on to point out with regard to Andrey Bolkonsky that in "some of the moments that he considers the best of his life and others that are among the most important—in all these he stands framed by a window or door, not in the freedom of earth and sky". This must have been one of the characteristic positions which Tolstoy had in mind when he

wrote to Strakhov. As Matlaw rightly comments, "Similar patterns of images and revelation by such detail . . . suggest readings and often clarify ambiguities that a more general discussion frequently cannot solve; but tracing such patterns in Tolstoy has yet to become a critical preoccupation." Both Lytle and Matlaw, then, have discussed spatial form without actually using the term. I offer here not a true investigation of spatial form in Tolstoy (to which I intend to devote a full-length study), but some observations on the ways in which Frank's essay illuminates the problem as a whole.

Frank's definition of spatial form as "a complex presented spatially in an instant of time" will serve as a point of departure. Tolstoy himself asserted that his two major works have precisely this form when he remarked to his wife that the essence of *War and Peace* was "the national idea" and that the essence of *Anna Karenina* was "the family idea". *War and Peace* is thus based on juxtapositions of nations, and *Anna Karenina* on juxtapositions of families. (Here, of course, is the connection which Rachinsky failed to find.) Frank's observation that in spatial form it is "necessary to undermine . . . the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and force him to perceive the elements of a poem juxtaposed in space rather than unravelling in time" reveals the reason why *War and Peace*, no less than Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, "has baffled even its most fascinated admirers". Neither work organizes relationships in temporal sequence, but according to underlying affinities.

Time, as an aesthetic and philosophical problem, was of enormous importance for Tolstoy. In the early 1850's, he wrote in the preface to his (never completed) *Novel of a Russian Landowner*: "Love, which constitutes the principal spring of life in novels, in reality constitutes the last." It is to this opposition to the temporal structure of love novels, in which the characters live happily ever after following marriage, that Tolstoy alluded when he wrote to Katkov that *The Year 1805* "does not have a

beginning such that all interest is annihilated by the denouement". An artist (or anyone for that matter) who rejects the concept of the sequential nature of time inevitably falls back on some sort of cyclical view. And Boris Eichenbaum, one of the great Tolstoy scholars of this century, has emphasized that the aggressive anti-historicism of Tolstoy's articles on pedagogy permeates *War and Peace*. The novel resembles a true epic not only in its length and use of epic similes, but also because "epic poems are written in cultures which do not distinguish between history and myth." There is certainly no clear distinction between history and myth in *War and Peace*. In his anti-historicism Tolstoy joins hands with the one writer who is perhaps more unlike him as a man than any other, Proust; Tolstoy no less than Proust was trying "to escape what he considered to be time's domination". Frank's treatment of the importance of memory for Proust is matched by Eichenbaum's dictum that "recollection for him [Tolstoy] is a basic creative process." (It is no coincidence that Tolstoy's favorite Pushkin poem was "Recollections".) Equally applicable to Tolstoy is Frank's discussion of Proust's aim to create:

. . . a work of art which should stand as a monument to his personal conquest of time. This his own work could do not simply because it was a work of art, but because it was at once the vehicle through which he conveyed his vision and the concrete substance of that vision shaped by a method which compels the reader to re-experience its exact effect.

The size of the major works of the two men, and their large casts of characters, coupled with this essential similarity of orientation, produce other affinities. Like Proust, Tolstoy uses what Frank calls "discontinuous presentation of character":

Every reader soon notices that Proust does not follow any of his characters through the whole course of the novel:

they appear and re-appear, in various stages of their lives, but hundreds of pages sometimes go by between the time they are last seen and the time they re-appear. . . .

However, Frank's qualification that "when they do turn up again, the passage of time has . . . changed them [Proust's characters] in some decisive way," marks a major difference between Tolstoy and Proust. There is a strong sense of permanence in Tolstoy's characters, especially secondary characters, who adopt similar postures, and perform similar actions, throughout any given work. Even such characters as Vasily Denisov in *War and Peace* and Stiva Oblonsky in *Anna Karenina*, who cannot be called secondary, remain essentially unchanged at the ends of the works in which they appear. Character development in Tolstoy is a subject of staggering complexity, of course, and cannot even be touched on here, but the cyclical movement inherent in spatial form leads one to suspect that qualitative change would be rare in major figures as well.

Everyone who writes about Tolstoy has occasion sooner or later to remark on the strongly visual quality of his prose; his sensitive description of the painter Mikhailov in *Anna Karenina* suggests his felt affinity with painting as well as sculpture. It is pleasing, therefore, to find a precise correlation in his narrative technique to the fact that "the Impressionist painters juxtaposed pure tones on the canvas, instead of mixing them on the palette, in order to leave the blending of colors to the eye of the spectator." Tolstoy noted in his diary in late December, 1853, by which time he had done a good deal of writing:

The manner of writing in small chapters, adopted by me from the very beginning, is the most comfortable.

Every chapter must express only one thought or only one feeling.

These "small chapters" of from two to five pages which he con-

tinued to use throughout his career correspond precisely to the Impressionists' "pure tones". Even Tolstoy's wife, ordinarily so unperceptive about his writing, noted in 1873 when he was working on his abortive novel set in the time of Peter the Great, "This is mosaic work." Truly, the analogy of a mosaic as an entity composed of discrete pieces of color which merge into an organic whole, is a very fitting one for the large novels.

Where specific narrative technique is concerned, no one is closer to Tolstoy than Joyce. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Tolstoy's name in a book in which Joyce figures prominently, Melvin Friedman's *Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Technique*. As Friedman shows, Tolstoy used a stream-of-consciousness technique in the very first work he wrote, *A History of Yesterday* (1851, but published only in 1928). Eichenbaum has noted the curious fact that Tolstoy did not continue writing in this manner. *Childhood*, his first published work, closely resembles several works of Russian literature of the time; it is much more traditional, and much less innovative, than *A History of Yesterday*. Tolstoy did not continue with stream of consciousness as such, I think, because of his excruciating self-doubt and fear of criticism. He did, however, make a great breakthrough when, in *Sevastopol in May*, he learned to combine third-person narration with insight into the characters' minds through interior monologue. Significantly, it was the Russian critic Chernyshevsky who coined the term "interior monologue" in a review of the Sevastopol stories.

Frank discusses the self-effacement of the author by Joyce, which "allows him to refrain from giving any direct information about his characters: such information would immediately have betrayed the presence of an omniscient author." Tolstoy is usually considered one of the most intrusive of all authors, and it is odd to think that he tried to avoid technique which "would immediately have betrayed the presence of an omniscient author", but this is indeed the case. Kathryn Feuer has shown in her brilliant

but—sadly—unpublished dissertation (Columbia University, 1965) that it was precisely Tolstoy's obsessive desire for self-effacement of the author that caused him to spend many months in searching for a beginning for *War and Peace*. She comments:

So intense was Tolstoy's concern with the illusion [of self-effacement] that he tried to eliminate not only author's commentary which was personal or polemical in tone, but even neutral author's exposition. He dispensed not only with a polemical historical introduction but also with a factual historical setting of the novel's beginning. And if an author betrays his presence by stating on his own authority that in a certain year a certain event took place, does he not equally reveal himself by stating that a character was twenty years old, was melancholy, and had black hair? So Tolstoy seems to have reasoned, for he sought to eliminate from the novel not only historical explanations but also character explanations and introductions, and indeed all statements of characters' thoughts and feelings made on his own authority.

This is why, Feuer continues, "narration through the perceptions of its [the novel's] characters, and the restriction of what is told to what the characters can perceive from a particular, specified position" is "one of the most frequent narrative methods of *War and Peace*". Tolstoy's narrative style, like Joyce's—to whom Feuer refers in passing—is one "which externalized the autonomous reality of events by representing them as objects of the characters' perceptions". Feuer's generalization here explains why Tolstoy used the "peepshow" technique of describing an event through a character's perceptions, and why expressions such as "It was apparent that. . ." are frequent in his work.

Possibly because of the enormous cultural significance of *War and Peace*, more attention seems to have been paid to it than to *Anna Karenina* in this regard, but in fact *Anna* contains the clearest approaches to a total merger of narrative and stream of consciousness in the nineteenth century. Especially striking is the

description of Anna's last day, when her emotional turmoil lends itself beautifully to this technique. As she rides to the train, her thoughts and reflections on her situation are interwoven into the sights which she sees on the streets. But it is only as she enters the train that there is an interpenetration of her mood and omniscient narration.

The bell rang out; some young men came by, *monstrous*, *audacious*, in a hurry, and also attentive to the impression which they were making; Pëtr [Anna's servant] also came through the waiting room in his livery and boots, with his *dull animal* face, and came up to her in order to accompany her to the railroad car. The loud men fell silent when she passed by them along the platform, and one whispered something about her to the other, naturally something *vile*. She went up the high step and sat down alone in the coupe on the springed, torn seat which had once been white. Her bag shuddered on the spring and lay still. Pëtr, with his *fool's* smile raised his cap with the braid on it at the window as a sign of farewell; the *audacious* conductor slammed the door and latch. A lady, *monstrous*, with a bustle (Anna mentally undressed this woman and was horrified at her ugliness), and a girl, laughing unnaturally, ran by below. (My italics)

This appears to be omniscient narration—all the more so since the parentheses set off Anna's conscious thought processes from the remainder of the paragraph. The adjectives, however, reveal the true state of things. Words such as "monstrous" and "audacious" suggest that the whole scene is presented *as Anna sees it*, that we have here an externalization of the "peepshow technique". Anna's self-loathing which within hours will find its final expression in suicide is projected onto the men, as she has been projecting onto Vronsky her own infidelity to Karenin. Notice, too, the repetition of adjectives: the men and the conductor are "audacious"—although they do nothing which can be

so described. The men and the lady (a symbol of Anna, with her daughter by Vronsky, whom she cannot love?) are “monstrous”. One can also consider the fact that the man whispered “something about her, naturally something vile”, as Anna’s projection; the statement stands midway between omniscient narration and Anna’s stream of consciousness. But it is neither.

The fact that the adjectives “monstrous” and “audacious” reappear with reference to different individuals in this paragraph from *Anna Karenina* raises the problem of word repetition in Tolstoy. Startling similarities exist between Tolstoy’s description of spatial form in his 1876 letter to Strakhov, and Frank’s comments on this aspect of Joyce’s style. Tolstoy mentioned the “infinite labyrinth of linkages” in which “every thought expressed separately loses its meaning, [and] is frightfully degraded when it is taken from the linkage in which it is located.” Frank might almost have had this passage in mind when he wrote that “Joyce composed his novel [*Ulysses*] of an infinite number of references and cross-references which relate to one another independently of the time-sequence of the narrative; and, before the book fits together into any meaningful pattern, these references must be connected by the reader and viewed as a whole.” And “this . . . is practically the equivalent of saying that Joyce cannot be read—he can only be re-read.”

Clearly, it is possible to multiply at will examples taken from an “infinite labyrinth of linkages”; however, perhaps two additional examples which relate to basic problems in Tolstoy will serve to conclude this survey of spatial form in his works. Tolstoy is often said to be anti-Romantic, but actually he disliked only one aspect of Romanticism, the self-assertion of neo-Byronic heroes such as Pechorin in Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time*. He reacted against the positivism of the 1860’s by linking together natural processes through the use of the word “mysterious”. This word (*tainstvenny*), which is one of the most revealing aspects of his pervasive heritage from Romantic poetry,

recurs throughout *War and Peace*. (It may be appropriate to mention here that Tolstoy's translators, too, are unaware of the spatial form of his work; they dissipate his incomparable artistry by rendering "mysterious" alternately as "strange" and "baffling". They feel that it is somehow not good form to use the same word so frequently, and feel called upon to improve the style.) Thus, early in *War and Peace*, as Lise Bolkonsky gives birth, "the *mystery*, the most *triumphant* in the world, continued to *take place*." Death, too, is a natural process, and therefore also mysterious. After Prince Andrey dies, Natasha and Countess Marya "cried from the pious reverence which gripped their souls before the consciousness of the simple and *triumphant mystery* which had *taken place* before them". (My italics in both quotes.) When the peasants refuse to supply Princess Marya with carts, the reason is "the mysterious streams of popular Russian life whose causes and significance are inexplicable for contemporaries". The will or spirit of the troops is irrelevant in an encounter—the historical essays notwithstanding—for at the battle of Borodino:

But although toward the end of the battle the people felt the full horror of their act, although they would have been glad to stop, some incomprehensible, mysterious force continued to guide them.

These references to "mysterious" actions culminate, like most of the imagery in the fiction, in the historical essays which appear toward the end of the work. In the first epilogue, we read of "the mysterious forces which move mankind (mysterious because the laws defining their movement are unknown to us) . . .". The animosity toward academic historians in the essays derives from the fact that they try to discover these unknowable laws.

Examination of a minor character like Petya Rostov is helpful in gaining a general view of the significance which *leitmotifs* play in the entire life of a character. Another part of Tolstoy's Ro-

mantic heritage, his presentation of the spontaneity and inherent wisdom of children, appears here. Thus, as early as 1805, when the Rostovs receive a letter from Nikolay, and the subject of Natasha's feeling for Boris Drubetskoy comes up, Petya remarks, "She was in love with the fat man in glasses. . . ." He is referring to the first Moscow scene, Natasha's name-day, at which she danced with Pierre. Petya immediately perceives the affinity between them, and predicts here their marriage, which takes place years later. But Petya is not to experience such happiness himself, for he dies in a guerrilla skirmish in 1812. Two references in the text clearly anticipate his early death. After the hunt scene, he accompanies Natasha and Nikolay when they go to see "Uncle". He is tired after his strenuous day, and dozes off. Still asleep, he is taken out "like a dead body" and put into the sled which will take him home. In 1812, he is frustrated in his desire to volunteer, and tries to make a personal appeal to the emperor, but in the press of the crowd receives such a blow in the ribs that he loses consciousness, and is helped to a place of safety by a priest. Thus, the "dead body" simile and his subsequent rôle as a victim adumbrate his death in battle. No reader, however attentive, could possibly catch the interrelationships among these widely scattered events the first time he read *War and Peace*, and it is safe to say that of the five-hundred-plus identifiable characters in the novel at least the first hundred have typical actions, postures, and images which are associated with them. It is because of just this kind of thing that Tolstoy, no less than Joyce, "cannot be read—he can only be re-read".

As the title of the present study indicates, this is a collection of notes, an essay in the root meaning of the word. I have suggested here that comparing Tolstoy with, say, Jane Austen or Flaubert because all three were nineteenth-century novelists, is severely misleading. The organizational principles of his work clearly resemble those of the works of the major authors of the Modernist movement; it is one of literary history's finer ironies that

Proust and Joyce are heirs of the Symbolist poets whom Tolstoy bitterly denounced in *What Is Art?*. The implications of this fact, and the reasons for it, raise extremely complex problems for the literary historian as well as for the literary critic. For example, it seems highly improbable that spatial form in nineteenth-century Russian literature is limited to Tolstoy. The old master himself asserted that spatial form was the rule, not the exception; in an article called "Several Words on the Occasion of the Book *War and Peace*" Tolstoy stated publicly what he had written privately to Katkov, namely that *War and Peace* is "not a novel", and that:

The history of Russian literature since the time of Pushkin not only presents many examples which depart from European [*i.e.*, temporal] form, but doesn't give a single example to the contrary. Beginning with Gogol's *Dead Souls* to Dostoevsky's [*Notes from*] *the House of the Dead*, in the new period of Russian literature there is not a single work of art in prose which rises at all above mediocrity which would fully fit into the form of the novel, narrative poem, or short story.

While it betrays Tolstoy's love for flat, universal statements, this judgment may well prove to be true, as his judgments about his own work are true. If so, a re-assessment of the methodology currently used by Russian scholars, and the assumptions implicit in that methodology, may be in order.