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Source: *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 261-268

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/309377>

Accessed: 04-02-2019 16:50 UTC

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PSYCHOLOGY, RHETORIC AND MORALITY IN *ANNA KARENINA*: AT THE BOTTOM OF WHOSE HEART?

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In 1896 Tolstoy noted in his diary that: “Art is a microscope which the artist fixes on the secrets of his soul, and shows to people these secrets which are common to all” (LIII 94). One of the aggravations that we, as readers of Tolstoy, suffer is that we sometimes resent his implication that the secrets which he “shows to people . . . are common to all.” Either we do not recognize them in ourselves or, while suspecting that they may be found to be lurking somewhere at the bottom of our hearts, we are loth to recognize them in ourselves. Tolstoy’s heroes are often in an even worse plight, since he bypasses without compunction their consciousness in order to show to us, but not to them, what is going on at the bottom of their hearts. As Gary Saul Morson has written, “In Tolstoy . . . at any given moment, much of a character’s thought remains unnoticed by the character” (205). The Tolstoyan monologic narrator is lord not only of his characters’ consciousness but also of the means, methods and devices for depicting it. As Johannes Holthusen and Wolf Schmid have contended (Schmid 305–6), consciousness (and the unconscious) is often depicted in Russian literature, in contrast to the general trend of modern Western literature, not through the personal or confessional text of the hero but (at second hand, so to speak) in a context “where the free mobility of the authorial sphere is maintained;” that is to say that the flexibility of an essentially monologic third-person narrative is exploited in order to convey what might more straightforwardly be expressed by one or more first-person narratives. An illustration of this principle is provided by Tolstoy’s use of the phrase *v glubine duši* (translated above, more vividly, by “at the bottom of [one’s] heart” and below, more literally, by “in the depth of [one’s] soul”). The pages which follow explore the application and implications of this phrase with particular reference to *Anna Karenina*, where it is used more insistently than in *War and Peace* and where its implications more frequently have reference to Tolstoy’s moral values.

It seems to me that the reader is bound to experience not only the aesthetic pleasure of recognition but also some moral unease when faced in *Anna Karenina* with sentences such as the following:

But this feeling was replaced by another: the desire not merely that [Anna] should not triumph but that she should receive retribution for her crime. [Karenin] did not admit this feeling, but in the depth of his soul he wanted her to suffer . . . (Pt.III chap.13; XVIII 297–98).

This letter achieved the secret purpose which Countess Lidija Ivanovna hid from herself. It hurt Anna to the depth of her soul (Pt.V chap.25; XIX 91).

This moral unease is caused by many complex factors. First, we are repelled by people who are motivated by the desire to hurt others, and Tolstoy's imaginative skill persuades us that we are meeting real people.¹ But, secondly, we are also repelled by people who insist that we really say, mean or desire things of which we feel ourselves to be wholly innocent; and both Karenin and Lidija seem here to be unaware of the motives that Tolstoy attributes to them. Thirdly, we are indeed uncertain of their level of awareness, as we may be of our own. And, fourthly, Tolstoy's authoritative assertions about the unconscious or barely conscious motives of his characters remind us that we are in fact reading a fiction that is created and hence dominated by its author.

One link between the passages quoted above is the fact that both contain the phrase "the depth of his/her soul." With respect to the question of awareness it is, of course, a spurious link because, in the second instance, it refers not to Lidija but to Anna who is very well aware that she has been hurt. In this instance the doubtful level of awareness is represented by speaking of "the secret purpose which Countess Lidija Ivanovna hid from herself." The phrase "in the depth of one's soul" is, however, normally used in both English and Russian precisely when there is doubt about the degree of awareness. It is, for instance, often used retrospectively and with a variable degree of accuracy in sentences such as "I knew in the depth of my soul that I ought not to have done that."² It is for this reason a useful tool in the hands of a writer like Tolstoy who deals often with less overt motivation, with speeches that are belied by thoughts and looks.³ The typically Tolstoyan note of moral condemnation enters with the implication that the given character is consciously refusing to face up to an aspect of his/her motivation that is revealed by the narrator and is morally culpable.

Yet the phrase is not usually used in *Anna Karenina* with the kind of derogatory and seemingly malicious intent with which it is used of Karenin in our first instance. There is a malice that is transferred to Anna when, on her last, distraught day, she attributes unworthy motivation to Vronsky: "If I leave him, in the depth of his soul he will be glad" (Pt.VII chap.30; XIX 343). But more often the phrase, while retaining the sense of a distinction between different layers of motivation, acquires rather a tone of light irony, as when Kitty accuses her husband of exaggerating while "rejoicing in the

depth of her soul at the strength of his love for her that was now expressing itself in his jealousy” (Pt. VI chap. 7; XIX 147). This is something that Kitty acknowledges to herself if not to others and that is morally positive. Morally neutral is the “only judgement” that Mikhailov has “in the depth of his soul” about his picture: “that no-one had ever painted a picture like it” (Pt. V chap. 10; XIX 37–38).

As the foregoing examples suggest, the phrase is used primarily with two sets of terms (usually verbs, occasionally nouns or adjectives); those that refer to awareness or cognition, and those that refer to feelings or emotions. The single verb that most often accompanies it in *Anna Karenina* is in fact *znat'* (“to know”): “in the depth of his soul, although he never formulated it to himself and had no suspicions, [Karenin] knew without a doubt that he was a deceived husband” (Pt. II chap. 26; XVIII 213); similarly with reference to Levin (“He knew in the depth of his soul that he would see her here today,” Pt. IV chap. 9, XVIII 402) and Vronskij (“Although he knew in the depth of his soul that society was closed to them . . . ,” Pt. V chap. 28; XIX 99–100).⁴ Other terms implying awareness that are used with the phrase in *Anna Karenina* include *ščitat'* (“to think/reckon,” Pt. III chap. 15; XVIII 303) and *verit'* (“to believe,” Pt. V chap. 13; XIX 46).

On the other hand, it is used just as often to modify terms that imply emotion: “But in the depth of her soul [Anna] already felt that she would not have the strength to break off anything . . .” (Pt. III chap. 16; XVIII 309), while Kitty did “find the strength to suppress in the depth of her soul all the memories of her former feeling for Vronsky” (Pt. VII chap. 1; XIX 249). Other terms implying emotion that are used with the phrase include *bojat'sja* (“to fear,” Pt. III chap. 32; XVIII 370) and *nedovol'nyj* (“dissatisfied,” Pt. V chap. 16; XIX 57). The distinction between these two sets of terms is, however, in itself less significant than what they have in common when conjoined with the phrase “in the depth of one’s soul;” for this implies not only a layer of the psyche that is more or less hidden but one into which ingress of fact or feeling is not subject to our conscious control. That is to say that such knowledge is not sought and such emotion is not willed; although, as we have seen, it may remain unacknowledged and can be, with some success, consciously suppressed, as it may be unconsciously repressed. It is not, therefore, surprising that among both the cognitional and the emotional terms there occur impersonal constructions that bear precisely this connotation of involuntariness: *prixodit' v golovu* (“to come into one’s head,” Pt. III chap. 1; XVIII 253) and *xotet'sja* (“to want/feel like,” Pt. III chaps. 13 & 26; XVIII 297–98 & 344). What Tolstoy is playing with is the acknowledgement of or failure to acknowledge feelings or knowledge that have entered unwillingly into a deep layer of one’s psyche.

Other phrases are, of course, used with an analogous effect, for instance

the simple “in one’s soul” (*v duše*, e.g. Pt.III chap.10; XVIII 287, quoted in n.3). But the addition of “depth” or, as often in *War and Peace*,⁵ “secret” emphasizes the private, subjective nature of the experience: when we are ourselves unaware or uncertain of something in the depth of our souls, in real life it is at best risky and often arrogant for another to claim knowledge of it. It is therefore entirely fitting that in *Anna Karenina* the phrase “*v glubine duši*” is used with reference to Levin twice as frequently as with reference to any one other character, since Levin is in so many—although not all—ways a self-portrait of Tolstoy, who in this sense has a more intimate knowledge of Levin than of the other characters.⁶ Tolstoy sometimes expressed his surprise at what Anna or Vronsky did;⁷ but, in so far as his analysis of Levin in particular was a self-analysis, he was entitled to a deeper understanding of Levin and a greater insight into the depth of his soul. It has been said that “Tolstoy endowed Levin . . . with his most delicate understanding of the multifold and complex movements of the psyche” (Bojko 92) and his sensitivity to the way people feel and think is apparent on numerous occasions. He it is, moreover, who enunciates the Tolstoyan principle that understanding of another is consequent upon love for him/her, when he says of his brother, Nikolaj, “I love him and therefore I understand him” (Pt.I chap.24; XVIII 91).⁸ Yet Tolstoy does not limit his portrayal of Levin to the latter’s understanding of himself and his perception of others, since he, as author, is at pains, sometimes with reference to the “depth of his soul” and sometimes without, to show that his narrator has a more profound knowledge of Levin’s own psyche and of others’ motivation than Levin himself has. Levin is, for instance, egregiously mistaken about the chief object of his love, Kitty, first with regard to her thoughts during the wedding ceremony (Pt.V chap.4; XIX 19) and later with regard to her feelings for Vasen’ka Veslovsky (Pt.VI chap.7; XIX 144–48); and at junctures like these Levin is duly corrected by the Tolstoyan narrator. One of the conclusions that he reaches in the very last paragraph of the novel is that there will continue to be “a wall between the holy of holies of my soul and others, even my wife” (Pt.VIII chap.19; XIX 399); that the wall between his soul and others should be relatively frequently breached by Tolstoy is both a sign and a consequence of the largely autobiographical nature of Levin.

Two Soviet critics have remarked on Tolstoy’s penchant for the phrase “in the depth of one’s soul” in *Anna Karenina*. Lidija Ginzburg quotes at greater length the passage where Karenin “knew without a doubt that he was a deceived husband” and is said to have “closed, locked and sealed the drawer” containing his feelings for his wife and son (Pt.II chap.26; XVIII 212–13; Ginzburg 338–39). She comments that this resistance to the obvious is caused by the desire to retain one’s accustomed forms of existence and image of oneself; and she concludes that “one knows what one does

not want to know.” Mixail Xrapčenko cites rather the passage where Anna feels in the depth of her soul that she will not have the strength to break off anything, as he writes of the many layers of Tolstoyan psychology (390–91); and he comments that for Tolstoy the deeper, more instinctual, layers are often more true than are the more conscious psychological layers. The émigré critic Efim Etkind, writing of the relationship in Tolstoy between the emotional world of one’s inner being, thought and word, spells out five such psychological layers and not only agrees that the deeper levels “enjoy a fundamental veracity” but adds that they are natural to Anna in particular (12–13). It is precisely this conflict between different psychological layers within one character, what he calls “the dialectic of polar forces of consciousness,” that is seen by Osmolovskij as the major development in *Anna Karenina* of Tolstoy’s psychological method (41). On the basis simply of what we have seen of his diverse use of the phrase “in the depth of one’s soul” it is possible to state that it can refer to at least three psychological levels: the level of what is not known at all by the given character but only by his author; the level of that of which the character is vaguely aware but which he/she is unwilling to recognize; and the level of what oneself recognizes but is unwilling to acknowledge to others. In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy makes a more insistent use of the interplay between these psychological layers than in earlier works like *War and Peace*.

But I began with the claim that the reader must be disturbed by Tolstoy’s authoritative penetration of psychological layers of which his characters are themselves unconscious or barely conscious. This is one aspect of what Wayne Booth, in a rather vexed argument, reports that Sartre would call “playing God” (50–52); and George Gibian does indeed write of the narrator of *Anna Karenina* that: “He is not on level with his own characters, but like a God, high up, watching from a superior vantage point” (321).⁹ Tolstoy is a peculiarly magisterial writer, both in the sense that his narrators are regularly omniscient and in the sense of his persistent and increasing didacticism. Throughout his career as a writer and as a reader he insists that what gives unity to a work of literature and what we, as readers, look for in it is above all the personality and views of the writer.¹⁰ And, conversely, he, as author, became increasingly intent on clarifying his philosophy of life and persuading his readers to accept his views and values. We recognize this and, for the most part, we hear him willingly. While the authorial harangues of *War and Peace* are “almost absent from *Anna Karenina*” (Šklovskij 200), Tolstoy has many ways of making his views clear so that Babaev, taking his image from Tolstoy’s remarks on the ‘architecture’ of the novel, can write that: “The unseen ‘keystone’ is the author’s general view of life” (163).¹¹ And one instrument that Tolstoy uses more and more in his later works in order to express the moral judgements that constituted his general view of life is the kind of psycho-

logical dissection for which he often employs the phrase “the depth of his/her soul.”¹²

If we allow ourselves to be disturbed by such strategies, it is ultimately the result of a combination of Tolstoy’s qualities as a writer. The omniscience about deep layers of psychological motivation in itself disturbs only the exceptional critic. But Tolstoy’s rhetoric is regularly made to subserve his ethics, even to the point that it sometimes employs tactics that are themselves morally questionable. When, for instance, a note of moral condemnation is added to the dissection of latent psychological layers, then we begin to feel that we are being too overtly manipulated either for Tolstoy’s age of realism or for our own age of post-modernism. And when this is applied to a character whom Tolstoy’s realistic genius has caused us to accept and know and, in some sense, to empathize with and to love, then we are reluctant to accept it as we are in real life when the deeper motives of a friend or our own motives are morally condemned. When Tolstoy asks us to accept that the deeper motives of a Karenin or a Lidija are more reprehensible than they themselves suspect, we may well find ourselves resisting the imputation, but doing so ultimately because Tolstoy is thereby suggesting that our own motives may be more reprehensible than we suspect. He is not merely “playing God” in general as lord of his own creation, he is in particular playing the convicting role of the third person of the Trinity in making us question the rectitude of our motives (cf. John 16:8 “when He comes, He will convict the world of sin”). Our verdict and, indeed, our criteria may differ from Tolstoy’s, but he has the right to try to lead us into this kind of self-analysis because, from childhood on, he had been analyzing himself. The rhetoric of moral condemnation, as a result, is an inseparable part of Tolstoy’s art. It is also congruent with his theory of art, which defined art as the conscious transmission by means of certain external signs of feelings from the artist to his recipient, from the writer to his reader, so that the reader experiences what has been experienced by the writer (XXX 65). Moreover, one condition or measure of his art is its sincerity, the degree, he wrote, to which “the artist has drawn it from the depths of his nature” (to quote Aylmer Maude’s translation of Tolstoy XXX 150). The dissection of psychological layers, when it is coupled with their moral evaluation, becomes, in this sense, one of the “external signs” by which Tolstoy seeks to infect us with his own guilt-feelings.

We have now come full circle. Having begun by noting the frequency of one particular phrase in *Anna Karenina* and having experienced a sense of unease at some of its occurrences, we have reviewed the ways in which it is used in Tolstoy’s novel. The “depth of one’s soul” turns out to have at least three levels and our unease is at its greatest when the reference is to the deepest of these levels: when Tolstoy seems to hold his characters morally at fault for something of which they are not conscious. At the same time it

is recognized that this kind of moralistic use of his psychological gifts stemmed from Tolstoy's own self-analysis and was inherent both in his rhetoric, which was increasingly aimed not merely at but against his readers, and also, when he came to formulate it, in his theory of art. To read Tolstoy in a Tolstoyan way requires a degree of humility.

NOTES

- 1 In the same novel, Tolstoj indicates the connection between imaginative power and a sense of the real when he writes of Karenin that, "like Lidija Ivanovna and other people who shared their views, he was utterly devoid of profundity of imagination, that faculty of the soul thanks to which images summoned up by the imagination become so real that they require congruity with other images and with reality" (Pt.V chap.22; XIX 81–82). This is not only a rather complicated sentence but, at first glance, it seems to reverse Tolstoj's argument, which is to ridicule their evangelical beliefs as incongruous with reality. One would have expected him to say that imagination was precisely what was required in order to accept such beliefs. What he is saying is clearer in the longer draft for this passage: ". . . become so real that one cannot deal with them just as one wishes, that the image summoned up by the imagination simply does not admit other, contradictory images or ones that cannot be put alongside the first image. But people who are devoid of this faculty can imagine what they like and can believe in whatever they imagine" (XX 432).
- 2 E.g. Tolstoj, in Chapter 3 of his *Confession*, writes of ". . . my desire to teach, although I very well knew in the depth of my soul that I could not teach anything that was needed because I did not know what was needed" (XXIII 9).
- 3 Examples of this are numerous, but I shall adduce only two from *Anna Karenina*. One example of the distinction between what is said and what is thought occurs when "Levin saw that [Dolly] was unhappy and he tried to comfort her, saying that it did not prove anything bad, that all children fight; but, as he said this Levin thought in his soul: 'No, I shall not be artificial and talk French with my children; but my children will be different . . .'" (Pt.III chap.10; XVIII 287). An example of the clash between words and looks is provided by an addition made in the *Literaturnye Pamjatniki* edition: "'I want you to go to Moscow and to ask for Kitty's forgiveness,' said [Anna]," (Pt.II chap.7; XVIII 147) "and a little light twinkled in her eyes" (Tolstoj, *Anna Karenina* 121).
- 4 The phrase itself is less frequent in *War and Peace* than in *Anna Karenina*, but the concept of "knowing while not knowing" is already quite familiar: "Princess Mar'ja did not know that before seeing her future sister-in-law she was already prejudiced against her through involuntary envy of her beauty, youth and happiness;" "but in the presence of Anna Pavlovna not only did no-one dare to think about it but it was as if no-one even knew it;" "[Nikolaj] did not exactly know but in the depth of his soul felt that . . ." (Bk.II Pt.V chap.7, Bk.IV Pt.I chap.1 and chap.6; X 319–20 and XII 4 & 25).
- 5 In *War and Peace*, Tolstoj uses several variants of "the most secret depth of [her] soul" (Bk.II Pt.III chap.12, X 189; cf. Bk.II Pt.II chaps.8 & 10, X 93 & 106; Bk.III Pt.II chap.8, XI 136). In *The Brothers Karamazov* Pt.V Bk.VII chap.1, Dostoevskij's narrator, typically, juxtaposes three synonymous phrases: "Fr.Paisij . . . secretly, to himself, in the depth of his soul expected almost the same" (XIV 296).
- 6 The same appears to be true of Pierre in *War and Peace*, although there the phrase is used so relatively sparsely that the statistics are less meaningful.
- 7 V. I. Alekseev and G. A. Rusanov both recall Tolstoj as saying that he "could say the same about Anna Karenina" as Puškin said about his Tat'jana: "I should never have

- expected that of her.” (*L. N. Tolstoj v vospominanijax* [1978] I 256 and [1955] I 232). Tolstoj himself wrote to Straxov that Vronskij’s attempted suicide came to him “completely unexpectedly but indubitably” (LXII 269).
- 8 Cf. the significance that Tolstoj gives to love in the process of Sereža’s education (Pt. V. chap.27; XIX 97–98).
- 9 Booth is in fact intent on countering such extreme views as those of Sartre. For a brief survey of critical views of this facet of Tolstoj’s writing see Morson 42–46.
- 10 V. G. Čertkov recorded Tolstoj as saying in 1894: “In every literary work the most important, valuable and convincing thing for the reader is the author’s particular view of life and everything in the work that is written on this view. The integrity of a literary work consists . . . in the clarity and definiteness of the author’s own view of life which pervades the whole work” (*L. N. Tolstoj v vospominanijax* [1978] II 119). Similarly Tolstoj XLVI 182 (1853), LXIII 149 (1884) and XXX 18–19 (1894).
- 11 Bojko, Schultze 133–40. For the ‘architecture’ image see Tolstoj LXII 377–78.
- 12 In *Hadži Murat* he writes of “the depth of his/her soul” in such a way as to draw a contrast between spoken words and unspoken feelings (chap.8; XXXV 40), between what one knows and the fact that one does not want to know it (chap.15; *ibid.* 71), and between what one actually feels and what one would like to feel (chap.24; *ibid.* 107). Cf. Tolstoj’s comment on his own family in his diary for 27 December 1889: “. . . I think that [my play, *The Fruits of Enlightenment*,] is having some influence on them and that in the depth of their souls they are feeling ashamed and hence bored” (L 194) and *Resurrection* Pt.II chap.27: “In the depth of his soul [Toporov] himself did not believe in anything” (XXXII 297).

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