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# Tolstoy on Aesthetics

What is art?

H.O. Mounce



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In memory  
of  
Dick Beardsmore

## TOLSTOY ON AESTHETICS

Tolstoy's view of art is discussed in most courses in aesthetics, particularly his main text *What is Art?* He believed that the importance of art lies not in its purely aesthetic qualities but in its connection with life, and that art becomes decadent where this connection is lost. This view has often been misconceived and its strength overlooked.

This book presents a clear exposition of Tolstoy's *What is Art?*, highlighting the value and importance of Tolstoy's views in relation to aesthetics. Howard Mounce considers the problems which exercised Tolstoy and explains their fundamental importance in contemporary disputes. Having viewed these problems of aesthetics as they arise in a classic work, Mounce affords readers fresh insights not simply into the problems of aesthetics themselves, but also into their contemporary treatment. Students and interested readers of aesthetics and philosophy, as well as those exploring the works of Tolstoy in literature, will find this book of particular interest and will discover that reading *What is Art?* with attention affords something of the excitement found in removing grime from an oil painting – gradually, from underneath, there appears an authentic masterpiece.

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# Preface

Tolstoy believed that the importance of art lies not in its purely aesthetic qualities but in its connection with life, and that it becomes decadent when that connection is lost. This view has often been misconceived and its strength overlooked. My purpose is to correct the conventional view by giving a clear exposition of what Tolstoy really meant.

Students of aesthetics who are primarily interested in *What is Art?*, Tolstoy's main work in aesthetics, may wish to concentrate on Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10. They will there find a detailed exposition of the work, chapter by chapter. My exposition is critical where this is appropriate but my chief aim has been to bring out what is valuable and important in the work.

The more general reader who is primarily interested in Tolstoy as a man and as a thinker will find in the first two chapters an account of his life and of the background to his thought. Chapter 9 presents a detailed case study of the type of art to which Tolstoy is opposed. Since I believe that my work will be of interest to students of literature, I have concluded with a chapter on Tolstoy's famous view of Shakespeare. This view has often been criticized – for example, by George Orwell – as the result of prejudice. I show that this criticism is mistaken. Even those who disagree with Tolstoy's view can learn much about Shakespeare by studying it closely.

Student and general reader alike will discover that reading *What is Art?* with attention affords something of the excitement found in removing the grime from an old painting. Gradually, from underneath, there appears an authentic masterpiece.

Peter Lewis, Catherine Osborne, Ian Robinson and Carola Sandbacka have read this work, whether in whole or in part, when it was in manuscript. My thanks are due to them for their helpful advice. My thanks are due also to Helen Baldwin, who prepared the work for publication.





L. Tolstoy, taken from A. N. Wilson, *Tolstoy*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1988, between pp. 386 and 387.

# The Background

Tolstoy's *What is Art?* is a work that writers in aesthetics often note but rarely study with sympathy. It was written after his religious conversion, when he repudiated much of his earlier life, including his work as an artist. This is considered eccentric, and the explanation for his eccentricity – or so it is thought – lies ready to hand in his religious conversion. It belongs to the mythology of intellectual life in the present century that if a man takes to religion, he thereby sacrifices his talent. 'Reading the reminiscences of Tolstoy,' said D. H. Lawrence, 'one can only feel shame at the way Tolstoy denied all that was good in him, with vehement cowardice. He degraded himself infinitely, he perjured himself far worse than did Peter when he denied Christ. Peter repented.'<sup>1</sup> Lawrence here expresses, in an extreme form, views which are widely held. Tolstoy's greatness as a writer is not denied. But it is found in the two masterpieces of his earlier period, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. The later works may be discounted and, along with them, *What is Art?*

Now it will be important, at the start, to remove the above prejudice. After his conversion, Tolstoy was as prolific in his writings as he was before. For example, during this period he wrote *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *Resurrection*, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, *The Devil*, *Master and Man*, *Father Sergius*, *The Forged Coupon*, *After the Ball* and *Hadji Murat*. Most of these are masterpieces, the last being perhaps the most perfect short novel ever written. During this period he wrote also a host of parables which were modelled on those of the Gospels and which are unsurpassed in secular literature. In addition, he wrote numerous works dealing with social and religious problems, some of which – for example, the famous *Confession* – are themselves literary masterpieces. Those who suppose that Tolstoy sacrificed his talent to religious moralizing might give their attention to *The Forged Coupon*. This story traces the consequences for evil of a forged note as it passes from hand to hand. At a certain point goodness enters the story and its consequences are contrasted with those of evil. The work is certainly didactic, indeed overtly religious. It is also a marvel of narrative economy. The characters are more numerous than one finds in the average novel; every one is alive and Tolstoy handles them all within eighty pages. It is the work of a supreme master. Had Tolstoy never written *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, the work he produced in his later years would still have entitled him to a place amongst the greatest writers of his century.

It is true that *What is Art?* may be an exception. Even though he retained his power as an artist, Tolstoy might still have been foolish when he talked about art. It is possible; but it is not likely. For *What is Art?* is not the product of

momentary impatience or a fit of irritation but of prolonged reflection. The ideas contained in the work were first sketched some fifteen years before it appeared. Tolstoy continually reworked them until he had given them a form which satisfied him. In these circumstances it would be remarkable if they contained nothing of interest. Indeed, if that were so, it would itself make the work interesting. For we should then have the intriguing problem of how a man who had practised an art with supreme mastery nevertheless had nothing useful to say about it.

Nor need we be too impressed by the criticisms of those who disparage the book, for they fall into a familiar pattern. We may take as an instance the criticisms advanced by Henri Troyat, in his celebrated biography of Tolstoy.<sup>2</sup> His references to Tolstoy's view on art are intermittent and invariably disparaging. On his view, Tolstoy was advocating an extreme form of didacticism, according to which the value of art depends not on its aesthetic qualities but wholly on its moral content. We may note here a certain kinship with the prejudice we have just exposed. It is assumed that since Tolstoy sacrificed his talent to religious moralizing, he was bound to value art for its moral content rather than its aesthetic qualities. In fact Troyat's interpretation is in conflict with Tolstoy's explicit view. One of his main points in *What is Art?* is that no art has value, whatever its content, unless it has what he calls 'infectiousness'. He illustrates what he means by the example of a boy who vividly recreates for an audience his experience of encountering a wolf. It is obvious that this ability, which Tolstoy takes as essential to the artistic process, can be identified in an artist without one's *approving* of what he conveys.

It is obvious also that Tolstoy did not identify moral content with explicit moralizing. In this respect, he did himself a disservice, through faulty judgement, in *What is Art?* when he chose examples to illustrate the best types of art. Some of his examples are didactic in a bad sense. The passage is a favourite one with his critics, for it fits their preconceptions, few of them, for example, failing to quote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In this, they ignore Tolstoy's explicit statement that what he has chosen are mere examples of his view, which are of no intrinsic importance, for those who agree with his view but disagree with his examples may choose better ones for themselves. The view itself in no way implies that the best art should moralize. Indeed it is evident, if one reads him with attention, that Tolstoy did not identify moral content with paraphrasable content, nor yet with conscious moral intention. For him, the moral content of a work did not consist in some element which might be extracted from the work itself but in the attitude which pervades it. Moreover, the attitude which pervades it need not have been consciously intended by the artist himself. The point is evident in his praise for Chekhov's *Darling*. Tolstoy particularly valued this story because he believed that it had arisen from Chekhov's artistic instinct rather than from his conscious purpose. On Tolstoy's view, Chekhov had intended when he began the story to satirize its heroine but he had ended by making her

lovable. The point is even more evident in his essay on Maupassant, for it forms the very burden of the essay. Tolstoy held that Maupassant was a genuine artist whose attitudes to life had a corrupting effect on his art. The point of the essay, however, is to show that in his best work Maupassant transcends those attitudes, so that the attitudes which pervade his best work are in conflict with those he explicitly held.

*What is Art?* exhibits the supreme virtue of Tolstoy's later work. Repeatedly in his later work he raises a question which goes to the heart of the matter that concerns him, refuses to leave that question until he has found a satisfactory answer and then conveys it to his audience with unsurpassed clarity. It is remarkable how often the question turns out to be one that has occurred to all of us but which we have been afraid to express in case we make fools of ourselves. In this respect Tolstoy was entirely fearless. Sometimes he does make a fool of himself. For the question once raised turns out to rest on a prejudice. But we are better all the same for getting it into the open. The book has its faults. But one can learn more from Tolstoy when he is wrong than from most authors when they are right.

Before dealing with the book in detail, we must set it against the background of Tolstoy's life. He was born on the 28 August 1828, at the family estate of Yasnaya Polyana, the grandson of Prince Volkonsky, a former military commander and ambassador to the King of Prussia. In 1800, for reasons which remain unclear, the Prince withdrew from public life and retired to his estate, where he remained until his death some twenty years later. In the Prince's day, Yasnaya Polyana had the qualities in miniature of a feudal state. The gate was guarded, night and day, by two armed sentinels. Every morning, at seven o'clock, a group of musicians, gathered from amongst his serfs, assembled beneath the Prince's bedroom window and awakened him to the sound of music. Gorky records that Tolstoy, late in life, when he mended his own shoes and dressed in a peasant's blouse, would sometimes startle his visitors, if he considered them impertinent or condescending, by suddenly revealing the bearing and authority of an aristocrat.<sup>3</sup>

He had something else in common with his grandfather. The Prince was a devotee of the Enlightenment, a friend of reason, an enemy of superstition. His favourite reading was in the French Encyclopaedists. He was followed in this by his grandson. The thinkers of the Enlightenment saw in history a progress from darkness into comparative light. The cause of darkness, they thought, was chiefly mystification, perpetuated by priests in the interests of the wealthy and powerful. The cure for mystification lay in the clarity of reason, it being axiomatic amongst them that any belief should be dismissed as mystification which could not be made entirely clear. It followed for them that the corruptions of the past, being largely the product of conspiracy, were not inherent in human nature. It is in the institutions imposed on human nature, not in human nature itself, that evil lies. Tolstoy absorbed these attitudes at an early age and they

became engrained in his mind. We shall find in *What is Art?*, for example, that he attributes the corruptions of art entirely to the wealthy and powerful and takes for granted that simple people are free from those corruptions, that he links the best art with the most *progressive* form of religion and that the mark of a progressive religion is its comparative freedom from theology and dogma, these being forms of mystification, the product of priestcraft.

The influence of the Enlightenment is seen also in Tolstoy's treatment of his opponents. As his critics remark, in dealing with his opponents he is often impatient and sometimes unfair. Here he did himself a disservice. For his critics infer from his treatment of his opponents that his own views are the product of mere bias. Nothing could be further from the truth. Tolstoy's views are almost invariably the product of prolonged study and reflection. This is true, as we shall see, even where he holds a view, such as his view of Shakespeare, which at first sight seems outrageous. He had the true thinker's inability to accept a view until he had made it entirely clear to his mind. Once he is convinced, however, it is a different matter. All hesitation disappears. Confronted by opposition, he charges. The reason is that, like the thinkers of the Enlightenment, he easily believed that opposition to the truth arises not so much from honest error as from *mystification*. Behind such opposition, he was only too ready to assume, there lies some sinister interest concerned not to reveal but to obscure the truth. Isaiah Berlin has remarked that Tolstoy's faults are really the opposite of those which his critics attribute to him.<sup>4</sup> No one, for example, was less inclined than Tolstoy to be attracted by impractical and muddle-headed mysticism. It would be more plausible to accuse him of being unduly influenced by those thinkers who in the eighteenth century devoted themselves exclusively to reason.

Prince Volkonsky's only child Marya was unmarried at his death. In her thirties she married a handsome but impoverished nobleman, Nicholas Tolstoy. One might have suspected that the inducement, on his side, had something to do with his impoverishment. In fact, the marriage was a happy one. Leo was the fourth of their children, all of whom were boys. They had a fifth child, a daughter, but Marya died shortly after her birth. After the father's death, the family estates were divided amongst the children. The family home at Yasnaya Polyana was assigned to Leo. It remained his home throughout his life.

In his youth, Tolstoy had difficulty in fixing on a purpose in life. He attended the university at Kazan but left without taking a degree. In December 1850, his eldest brother Nicholas, who was serving with the Russian army in the Caucasus, returned home on leave. At the time Tolstoy had fallen into the habit of gambling and was losing money. Nicholas persuaded his brother to join him when he returned to his regiment. It was while serving in the Caucasus that Tolstoy published *Childhood*, his first work. The fault with most young writers is that they are primarily interested in themselves and constantly intrude themselves on their readers. It is only with effort and much practice that they learn to write more objectively. Tolstoy wrote in that way from the start. Vivid re-creation