

On Cultivating One's Own Garden with Other People's Labor: Serfdom in "A Landowner's Morning"

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"It is true that slavery is an evil, but it is an extremely loveable evil." With these memorable words the young Lev Tolstoy characterized the institution of Russian serfdom.¹ Yet at the time that he wrote this cryptic, off-hand, and rather appalling diary entry in 1854, Tolstoy was also in the process of writing what was to become "A Landowner's Morning" ["Утро помещика"]—a story that depicts serfdom as anything but loveable. How can we make sense of the diary entry (an apologia, if equivocal, for human bondage?) alongside a text that represents this same system of bondage as an insurmountable barrier to living a good life? It may be that the best way to approach the profound contradiction apparent here is to think about genre, or more specifically, to think about what different genres aim to accomplish.

"A Landowner's Morning" describes a day in the life of a young nobleman who is trying, with little success, to communicate with and to help his serfs. The action is set in a countryside village [деревня], but the story is not an idyll; this village is the protagonist's ancestral home, but the story is not about a family. In fact, understanding what this text is *not*, particularly in generic terms, is crucial to understanding what it *is*. These distinctions come into focus when we consider "A Landowner's Morning" alongside *Childhood* [Детство], a novella

written in roughly the same period (1851-52) and set in the same environment. But unlike “A Landowner’s Morning,” *Childhood* is an idyll, and it *is* about family.² And these generic distinctions, as it turns out, make all the difference when it comes to the significance that each text implicitly ascribes to the institution of serfdom.

In *Childhood*, quite unlike in “A Landowner’s Morning,” we hear echoes of the diary’s assessment of serfdom as “an extremely loveable evil.” At this point in his life, as Anne Hruska has explained, Tolstoy was sometimes capable of seeing serfdom as loveable precisely because he could see it as being inextricably entwined with a stable social order that had at its center family love. If one conceived of serfdom in this way, emancipation was still a moral necessity, but it was also a threat, since it brought with it the “adulteration of social customs and traditional forms of life.”³ *Childhood*’s main focus is a certain “traditional form of life,” the life of an extended family with an organic tie to a particular rural place. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, *Childhood* is a “family novel” or perhaps a “provincial novel,” genres that have their roots in idyll and in folkloric temporality.⁴ Such forms place the clan (the family as it stretches across time, over generations) in an absolutely central role in both life and literature, fostering a cycle-of-life view of the world. As Bakhtin puts it: “Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this . . . corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one’s children and their children will live”; “the cyclical repetition of the life process [is] of crucial importance.”⁵

In large part because idyllic time emphasizes what is iterative, cyclical, and (therefore seemingly) inevitable, the idyll’s chronotope tends toward naturalizing the social order—representing the way things *are* as the way things *must be*—rather than toward critiquing it.⁶ And the “cyclic rhythmicalness” that “renders less distinct all the temporal boundaries between individual lives” invites us to believe that we are all somehow *in this together* (“this” being a system that is both organic and immutable), no matter what our positions in the social hierarchy happen to be.⁷ All of which, of course, proves helpful when it comes to construing serfdom as a relationship of love.

Furthermore, the fact that *Childhood*’s narrative stance is strongly informed by the point of view of a small boy helps to justify its naturalizing impulse, because for small children, what is—especially within the family—is the only thing that can be.⁸ Yes, this narrative point of view is intended to create—and

does create—the “estranging” effect that has been much emphasized in Tolstoy criticism, the estrangement that conveys social criticism by using the figure of the naïf (whether a child, a peasant, or a horse) to notice what others accept or ignore. Nonetheless, I would argue that the reader’s experience of seeing through little Nikolenka’s eyes is ultimately more naturalizing than estranging in its *overall* effect, because while the child’s point of view highlights local instances of injustice, in the end this point of view also helps to keep the narrative lodged more or less within the genre of the idyll. And since idyll is a genre suited to the placid representation of what “naturally” is and what has always been, it is not a genre that makes social criticism one of its chief goals.

But in “A Landowner’s Morning,” instead of an idyll’s celebration of rural ways or patriarchal family ties, we encounter something like an adaptation of the eighteenth-century *conte philosophique* [philosophical tale], a genre designed not to meditate on the rhythms of a life in tune with some version of nature, but rather to *test ideas against hard facts*, thereby subjecting our assumptions about the existing social order to radical, rational critique. In direct contrast to the idyll, the philosophical tale is well adapted to social criticism and even political propaganda, particularly under a government determined to censor subversive ideas (a fact that was clear to Louis XIV at the moment of the genre’s birth, when he banned François Fénelon’s *Les Aventures de Télémaque* [*The Adventures of Telemachus*] in 1699 for its allegorically-expressed attack on absolutism).⁹

A standard reference work explains that the *conte philosophique* aims to subject “everything that [has] been taken for granted . . . to a kind of radical positivist (analytical and empirical) critique.”¹⁰

The philosophical tale may be defined as an episodic narrative, more imaginary than realistic, structured by frequent changes of scene resulting from travel, and controlled by a central theme—optimism, destiny, progress, relativism, natural law—that involves the problem of evil. The unfolding of the plot confirms, undermines, or otherwise qualifies the idea under consideration by testing it against a series of concrete experiences and observations in the world at large.¹¹

At the center of the philosophical tale, then, is a quest for truth, or more narrowly, for a correct and clear-sighted relationship between theory and practice, both in an individual’s life and in the organization of society.

At the center of “A Landowner’s Morning” is the young protagonist’s quest for “the ideal of happiness and justice” as Tolstoy saw it.¹² Indeed, as Boris Eikhenbaum notes, the story serves as clear evidence that even in his youth Tolstoy had little patience for art that lacked “a clear, practical aim.”¹³ Tolstoy’s intentions are clear in his notebooks: the text that ultimately became “A Landowner’s Morning” was to be not only “dogmatic” and “instructive,” he declared, but also “serious and useful,” a “useful and good book,” a “good and useful thing.” This is indeed a work of literature “with a goal”: “in my novel I will lay out the evil of the Russian government.”¹⁴

When we think about how the *conte philosophique* seeks truth by posing philosophical and political questions in the form of a story, we realize that much of “A Landowner’s Morning” is written in what we might call the interrogative mode: the narrative is largely taken up by the many queries the landlord poses to his serfs (and by the serfs’ predictably evasive replies, which are often questions as well). These endless little questions help explain why it makes sense to read the story in light of its engagement with the big question that dominated Russian intellectual life in the decade leading up to 1861, i.e., the “peasant question” [“крестьянский вопрос”]. Clearly, even though Tolstoy eschews open ideological polemics, “A Landowner’s Morning” is an intervention in the debate over serfdom; more specifically (as I will discuss below), it is in dialogue with two other texts that played crucial roles in this debate, Gogol’s *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* [Выбранные места из переписки с друзьями, 1847] and Turgenev’s *Notes of a Hunter* [Записки охотника, 1852].

After a brief account of the composition and publication history of “A Landowner’s Morning” and an overview of its contents, I will analyze the techniques Tolstoy uses to dramatize the estrangement that is built into the noble/peasant relationship: the shifting and evocative vocabulary used to designate social positions, the main character’s scripted but ultimately desultory circuit through the village, the weird question-and-answer format that structures much of the narrative, and the symbolic geography of the space it depicts. The unnamed village of “A Landowner’s Morning,” which is never clearly situated on the map of Russia, is presented to us as repellently alien—a broken, crooked, fragmented, *illegible* space that reflects less the peasants’ reality than the landlord’s despairing sense of “his” people’s impenetrability.

Tolstoy worked on what would finally appear (in part) as "A Landowner's Morning" on and off for several years, from 1852 until its publication in *Notes of the Fatherland* [*Отечественные записки*] in December 1856. The range of his activities during this period can only be described as astounding: he fought in the Caucasus and the Crimea (including, of course, at the Battle of Sevastopol), gambled, womanized, and read voraciously; he wrote *The Cossacks* [*Казачи*, 1863], "The Raid" ["Набег," 1852], "Notes of a Billiard Marker" ["Записки маркера," 1855], *The Sevastopol Tales* [*Севастопольские рассказы*, 1855–56], *Childhood* (1852), *Boyhood* [*Отрочество*, 1854], *Youth* [*Юность*, 1857], and other important works; he sold the main house at Iasnaia Poliana to pay gambling debts, gambled away the proceeds of the sale, and devised plans to found a new religion; he participated in Moscow and Petersburg literary circles, enjoyed his fame, argued and reconciled with Turgenev, made friends with the poets Fyodor Tiutchev and Afanasy Fet, drank with gypsies, mourned his brother's death, and almost fought a duel.¹⁵ Through it all he was continually adding to the diaries and correspondence that recently inspired the organizers of a conference devoted to Tolstoy's work to call their event "The Over-Examined Life."¹⁶

"A Landowner's Morning" has its origins in the unfinished *Novel of a Russian Landowner* [*Роман русского помещика*, 1851–57], a work conceived by Tolstoy to be a full-scale novel that would address large issues and be populated by characters of many different social strata.¹⁷ By the time "A Landowner's Morning" came out, Tolstoy had essentially abandoned the longer project, and he did not see the published story as a fragment of a work that remained in progress.¹⁸ But, of course, "A Landowner's Morning" shares many features with *Novel of a Russian Landowner*, most notably, perhaps, what Tolstoy consistently described as the "goals" that motivated his writing on this topic, as noted above.¹⁹

"A Landowner's Morning" opens with a letter from nineteen-year-old Prince Nekhludov, who is attempting to explain to his skeptical aunt why he has abandoned his university studies in Moscow to devote himself to the management of his estate and the good of his peasants.²⁰ Nekhludov's letter is written in the fall, a few months after his arrival in the village and eight or nine months before the June morning on which the entirety of the story's action will take place. In "childish handwriting" (and originally, we are told, in French),

Nekhludov recounts that he arrived to find his estate in terrible shape and his peasants living in destitution—and what responsibility could be more pressing or more “sacred,” he asks, than his duty to “these seven hundred human beings for whom I must answer before God?”²¹ Nekhludov tells his aunt that he is quite sure he was “born for” this life; it is his “calling”; on his estate he will be able “to do good and to love the good.” The aunt, writing in response, attempts to dissuade him, diagnosing not only her nephew’s “desire to appear original” but also the futility of his plans for remedying the serfs’ misery: “The poverty of few peasants is an unavoidable evil, or an evil which may be addressed without forgetting all one’s own obligations to society, to one’s family, and to oneself.”²² The two letters serve as an introduction to the main body of the story, which is devoted almost entirely to Nekhludov’s Sunday-morning village tour and his “interviews” with peasants who have, for the most part, petitioned the master for some kind of charity.

Page after page bristles with question marks as the landlord tries to extract information from his serfs (Why did you sell your only calf? Why do you refuse the new hut I am offering you? Why did you not tell me earlier that you need wood for repairs? Why do you lie to me?). And as often as not, the serfs answer with questions of their own (With what am I to feed a calf? How could I possibly live in that strange new hut? Why would I think it permissible to ask the master for everything? Would I dare lie to you?). Sometimes Nekhludov’s endless questions strike us as simultaneously rhetorical and desperately sincere, as when he tries to get a dissolute peasant to see that the charity he is requesting of the master comes out of other peasants’ labor: “But where does the master’s grain come from? . . . Who has ploughed the field? Who has harrowed it? Who has sowed it, harvested it? The peasants, yes? . . . Why then should I give it to you, and not to others?”²³

As these endless interrogations suggest, clearly what interests Tolstoy is not the protagonist as an individual, but rather the large questions that underlie all these smaller ones, the most important of which seems to be: “How can a landowner live a good life given current social arrangements?” The answer is that he cannot. The story itself makes this abundantly clear, but if we need further confirmation we can refer to a notebook entry of 1855: “The main idea of the novel must be that it is impossible for an educated landowner of our time to live a just life with [i.e., while relying on] slavery.” Not only did Tolstoy intend

his narrative to serve as an exposé of rural poverty and its causes, but as late as August 1855 he wanted it to “demonstrate the means for correcting” these problems: he wanted to *answer* the questions he was posing.²⁴ Clearly, when Tolstoy was writing, goals were never in short supply (as another diary entry of this period asserts, “Writing without aim or hope of utility [is something] I definitely cannot do.”)²⁵

All the more interesting, then, that “A Landowner’s Morning” is emphatically inconclusive. One of the most telling moments in the story is when Nekhliudov, having just been confronted with new evidence of his serfs’ seemingly immitigable poverty, asks abruptly and reflexively, “But why are you so poor?”²⁶ The hapless peasant stares back in silence until the master elicits from him an account of the “*cercle vicieux*,” or “vicious circle,” as Nekhliudov labels it in his mind, that has led this peasant and his family to such extremes of material want.²⁷ The peasant’s explanation of his indigence—his land is not fertilized because he has no livestock because he cannot grow enough grain to feed livestock because his land is not fertilized—is both watertight and vaguely reminiscent of Samuel Beckett. The remedies suggested by the peasants themselves (e.g., please stop requiring my child to attend school, give me some timbers to prop up my rotting hut for one more winter, and find my useless widower son another wife to work to death) offer no more promise of solving the real problems than do the landowner’s futile acts of ad hoc charity (secretly passing a few coins to an abused old woman, donating a bit of grain to those on the brink of starvation). Here we find ourselves trapped along with landowner and peasants in a world where an understanding of causality, when causality can be established at all, offers no way out.

The structure of “A Landowner’s Morning,” such as it is, reflects a similar sense of confinement and pointless repetition. As I noted above, the story’s title signals to us that it will be organized not around plot but instead around a simple unit of time. Tolstoy takes a similar tack in other early works: “A History of Yesterday” [“История вчерашнего дня,” 1851], *Childhood*, “Sevastopol in December” [“Севастополь в декабре месяце,” 1855]. All these texts, by taking as their organizational principle a temporal unit, “[challenge] conventional views of what constitutes an event worth narrating,” exploring “the significance of everyday events that usually escape attention.”²⁸ But in “A Landowner’s Morning” the almost ostentatiously arbitrary nature of such a structure

serves another purpose as well: the morning-like-any-other evokes the strong possibility of repetition without resolution. The story's spatial semiotics reinforce this impression as Nekhludov makes a circuit of his village (a circuit he makes every Sunday morning, we are told), tracing a path from his house to the various peasants' huts and back again. Though Nekhludov refers to notes he has jotted down to remind himself which households he must visit, his movements strike us as quite desultory, less a trajectory than a rambling circular tour that might well be repeated on any other Sunday. What was supposed to have been a life built on teleology—"to do good and to love the good"—seems to have devolved into the landowner's own version of a *cercle vicieux*.

This does not bode well for Tolstoy's protagonist, because Nekhludov, I would argue, is trying above all to figure out *how to be a landowner*. It is as if he has just finished reading Gogol's *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* and has made the ill-advised decision to take its exhortations to heart—which was precisely what Tolstoy's own brother Dmitry did in his youth: he tried (with predictably bad results) to apply the precepts laid out in Gogol's 1847 how-to handbook for serf owners, a tract so reactionary that it bordered on the delusional.²⁹ By declaring literacy among peasants to be useless, for example, and urging masters to explain to serfs that it is simply the masters' duty to compel serfs to labor ("because it has been commanded by God that man must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow"³⁰), Gogol had managed to infuriate people on virtually every point of the political spectrum; in fact, *Selected Passages* was bizarre enough to cause a considerable scandal.

"A Landowner's Morning" certainly does not endorse Gogol's reactionary politics; rather, it undermines them. But what Tolstoy's text shares with Gogol's is a certain uncomfortable assumption that informs both—a sense that the relationship between a landowner and his peasants is probably not going to be "natural" at all, no matter how much one might wish it to be. In *Selected Passages* Gogol's response to this unnaturalness is a strenuous and truly fantastic denial of modernity itself—and especially modernity's complex social arrangements, hybrid class categories, and mobility—in favor of a patriarchal wonderland characterized by unchanging and unmediated social relations. (For example Gogol rejects both law and money, two prime examples of the lamentably artificial structures that interpose themselves between people in modern times.) The avowed aim of *Selected Passages* is "the destruction of complex and worldly

relations such as the present ones" and a return to "simple custom" and the "simple, uncomplicated social mainsprings" of antiquity.³¹

In a chapter called "The Russian Landowner" (the section of *Selected Passages* that provoked the most ire in contemporary readers), Gogol imagines an estate-world embodying his ideals of permanence and stasis, a world where (as he says elsewhere) "everything can be returned to its place."³² But in order to "return everything to its place," one must first know where these places are and what they are called. Thus the opening sentence of this chapter assumes that the first challenge facing the landowner [ПОМЕЩИК] who has recently arrived at his estate is in effect to believe himself to be something called a ПОМЕЩИК: "The most important thing is that you have arrived in the countryside and that you set yourself to being a ПОМЕЩИК."³³ With this goal in mind, Gogol instructs the landowner to make absolutely sure that everyone has his categories straight: "Gather the peasants together and explain to them *what you are and what they are*," he writes, and while you are at it, be sure to teach the village priest, too, "what a landowner is [and] what a peasant is."³⁴

Tolstoy shares Gogol's preference for traditional, clear, *unadulterated* categories, a preference that goes along with a strong distaste for social hybridity and mixing. Nekhliudov shares this taste as well: he frowns in displeasure, for example, when he notices what he takes to be modernity's incursions, such as a flashy framed portrait of a general or a young wife's peasant bling (beads and a spangled head covering), into his serfs' lives.³⁵ Peasants are supposed to *stay peasants* (in fact, staying the same is a large part of what defines them, in Tolstoy's and Nekhliudov's view), which means that there is nothing less appropriate to the timeless essence of peasant-ness than following "fashions" of any sort.³⁶ Indeed, Tolstoy's various paeans to traditional class hierarchy (most notably in *Childhood* and *War and Peace* [Война и мир, 1869]) seem to be motivated as much by revulsion at the adulterated nature of modern social categories as they are by simple nostalgia for the past. Even in the post-emancipation world of *Anna Karenina* [Анна Каренина, 1877], when Levin expresses disgust at the smarmy upstart-merchant type who capitalizes on Stepan Oblonsky's aristocratic profligacy by paying bottom dollar for Oblonsky's forest, it is above all the social *indeterminateness* of this buyer-person (what exactly is he?) that repulses Levin.

In *Anna Karenina* Levin's self-consciously noble identity recalls that of the author himself. Viktor Shklovsky notes the assiduous and rather anxious

attention paid to “genuine” nobility and genealogical distinction in Tolstoy’s family of origin. (Shklovsky’s descriptions of the writer’s early years—and the stately, archaic, deeply patriarchal sensibility that shaped his upbringing—are among the most evocative passages in his biography.)³⁷ Levin echoes this noble self-consciousness in his proud retort to the accusation that he is a “reactionary”: “I’ve never really thought about who I am. *I am Konstantin Levin, that’s all.*”³⁸ In Gogol’s terms, Levin is saying *I am what a landlord is.*³⁹ In other words, Levin naturalizes his class position, presenting it as an immutable fact that he does not even have to think about (not true, of course—Levin thinks about his class position all the time). For Tolstoy, it seems, peasants are fine, noblemen are fine, even priests are fine, but mixtures are not so fine. And mixtures are the stuff that modernity is made of.

But here one should note that Tolstoy, unlike Gogol, does not seem to have convinced himself that the past was perfect, or even that it was all that great. Even Levin, who is not a serf owner but merely a landlord, “[cannot] help noticing” that his whole life is based on “an unpleasant relation to [his] laborers”!⁴⁰ Thus while Gogol’s moralism, apophatic leanings, and nostalgia for the organic society of an imaginary lost era are all discernible in Tolstoy’s work and thought, in the end what distinguishes Tolstoy’s politics from his predecessor’s is a strong empiricist impulse. As we see in “A Landowner’s Morning,” Tolstoy tests his own ideas against reality—a verification process that held no interest at all for Gogol. So even though “A Landowner’s Morning” is informed by an interest in rigid social classifications that recalls Gogol’s in *Selected Passages*, Tolstoy’s empiricism requires him to pursue this interest in a considerably more nuanced way.

With the title of “A Landowner’s Morning,” Tolstoy immediately directs our attention not to an individual or an event but to a class label, and the narrative’s first word is “prince”: “Prince Nekhliudov was nineteen years old when he left his third year of study at the university and arrived at his village to pass the summer vacation there by himself.”⁴¹ But the categories that Gogol wants to see as self-evident and immutable—“what a landowner is and what a peasant is”—are the categories that Tolstoy interrogates. He does this by first having his protagonist embrace these categories wholeheartedly and then laying out the consequences of this decision. Nekhliudov seeks to found his life on the belief that “master” is indeed *what he is*, and he wants the peasants to see what they are

as well, or what they should be. As he patiently explains to the hopeless reprobate Iukhvanka, "If you want to be a good peasant, then change your life," because a "good peasant" will not lie, beat his elderly mother, drink, or steal timber.⁴²

In "A Landowner's Morning" we continually encounter the key words that designate characters' places in the social order, the words that Gogol presents as perfectly (almost magically) sufficient to the task of organizing how people should live. But in Tolstoy's text we read these terms so many times that the repetition begins to have a vaguely estranging effect that causes us to wonder what they might really mean. "Помещик" ("landowner," derived from the word for an estate originally given to a member of the nobility by the tsar), "барин" ("master," related to "бояр" ["boyar"], a word used in pre-Petrine times to designate noblemen), "крестьянин" ("peasant," related to the word for Christian), and "мужик" (also "peasant," from the word for man)—all appear over and over. More often than not the narrator refers to Nekhliudov simply as "the young помещик"; when the peasants address him they generally call him "барин" ("master"), unless they are using a folksy term like "батюшка" or "отец" (both "father") or a more formal one like "кормилец" ("benefactor") or "ваше сиятельство" ("your excellency"). "Барин" suggests the physical presence of an individual ("here comes the master"), and is spoken from a peasant's point of view; it also calls up the opposition between master and peasant and thus a very specific power relation. "Помещик" instead calls to mind the estate owner's relationship to his land and thus perhaps to the state; it can imply not only an opposition to "peasant" but also to "merchant" or "city-dwelling courtier." The term "господа" ("lords") occurs once in the story, spoken by Nekhliudov's old nurse when she urges him to stop spoiling the peasants by going too easy on them: "Is that how lords are supposed to act?" she asks.⁴³ Interestingly, the word designating legal membership in the nobility—"дворянин," related to the word for court—never occurs at all, which perhaps tells us something about the way Tolstoy would have preferred to define nobility: that is, not primarily as a relationship to state power, but as a relationship among people. Censorship did not permit the use of the words "раб" or "рабство" ("slave," "slavery") in printed references to serfdom, but Tolstoy used both in his diaries.

When the peasants call Nekhliudov "батюшка" and "отец," they are invoking a whole set of patriarchal social arrangements (one might in theory

call them “agreements”) that the peasants will of course try to use to their own advantage. Thus the moment when one impoverished serf, begging not to be required to move to a new house, utters the emotionally-charged words “бабушка ваше сиятельство!”—roughly, “Papa your Excellency!”—is the moment when his wife chooses to throw herself at the master’s feet, a dramatic display of abjection that succeeds in getting the couple what they want (“Benefactor!” the wife cries, “you are our father, you are our mother!”⁴⁴).

In fact, the peasants seem to be able to make more effective use of the vocabulary available to them than their master does, despite Nekhliudov’s hope that by looking into Iukhvanka’s face and speaking the right words, he will “touch the peasant and by persuasion bring him back to the true path”⁴⁵—as though the right words were all the situation required. Behind Nekhliudov’s repeated attempts at heart-to-heart talks with peasants we hear Gogol’s recurring advice to landlords and officials: “All your dealings should be personal.”⁴⁶ (“Personal” here translates Gogol’s “лично” and “самолично,” implying face-to-face, unmediated interaction.)⁴⁷ Nekhliudov thinks that by personally issuing a correctly-worded remonstrance, he is being what a master is, and for him, this is what counts. When the peasants fail to be “touched” by his speeches, when they remain vacant-eyed and evasive, Nekhliudov castigates himself for having chosen the wrong words: “It seemed to him that everything he said was not what should be said”; “he felt he was not saying what he ought to be saying.”⁴⁸ Here once again we recall Gogol’s admonitions, particularly the memorably weird parts of *Selected Passages* that attempt to explain precisely what sorts of vocabulary a landowner must adopt in speaking to peasants: “Keep in reserve a supply of synonyms for ‘brave fellow’ and . . . ‘mollycoddle,’” Gogol advises; “dig up still more similar words” and try always to use only “powerful words.”⁴⁹

In the end, Nekhliudov’s failed attempts to communicate personally [самолично] as Landlord to Peasant suggest that these labels alone will not allow him to understand and address the phenomena he encounters in his circuit of the village—sights that are sometimes so unfathomably alien that Nekhliudov cannot even bring himself to remember, from one visit to the next, how his peasants actually live:

Nekhliudov had long known, not by hearsay or by believing what others said but by his own direct experience, that his peasants lived in a state of extreme wretchedness; but this whole reality was so incompatible with his upbringing,

his manner of thinking and his way of life that he kept involuntarily forgetting the truth, and every time he was reminded of it as he was now, in a vivid and palpable way, his heart became unbearably heavy and sad.⁵⁰

The extreme poverty and disorder of the peasants' environment strike the landowner as incomprehensible, and the long passages devoted to describing their conditions seem intended to represent not only the physical facts that Nekhludov confronts, but also his difficulty in absorbing this information.

At every dwelling he must first pass through the yard, from which he looks at the hut from outside:

Churis's house consisted of a half-rotten log square, musty at the corners and bent over to one side, so sunken into the ground that right over the dung heap could be seen one red-framed window with a broken shutter and another, smaller window stuffed up with flax. . . . [The hut and lean-tos] had at one time been covered with one thatch roof, but now the black rotting straw hung only over the eaves so that overhead in some places the framework and rafters were visible.⁵¹

The passage continues in the same manner for nearly a page: the trees are broken and their leaves scanty, remnants of a post and wheel are lying about, tools have been tossed onto a pile of blackened manure, and a cart without wheels stands next to "a confused pile of empty useless beehives."⁵² And after he enters the dwelling, things only get worse:

Nekhludov walked into the hut. The uneven, stained walls of the kitchen corner were hung with all kinds of rags and clothes, and the icon corner was literally covered with reddish cockroaches swarming over the images and the benches. In the middle of this black, stinking, fifteen-foot hut there was a big crack in the ceiling, and even though there were two supports propping it up, the ceiling was so bent that it threatened to cave in at any moment.⁵³

Similar scenes recur at other houses:

Davydka's hut stood crooked and alone at the edge of the village. Around it was no yard, no hut, no barn, just a few dirty stalls . . . There was no living creature near the hut except for a pig, which lay in the mud by the threshold and squealed.⁵⁴

In the passage describing this structure's interior, it seems as though virtually every noun is preceded by an adjective indicating some variant of "broken."

Chickens are flying about inside; there is no furniture, not even beds; so complete is the impression of “desolation and disorder” that Nekhliudov finds it “hard to believe that this place is inhabited” at all.⁵⁵

But it seems that Nekhliudov’s idea of what constitutes an inhabited place—a home—does not coincide with the peasants’ idea of such a place, a fact made clear to Nekhliudov, if only briefly and temporarily, in a moment of painful revelation. Having just offered the destitute Churis the chance to leave his disintegrating house and move into a brand new one—brick, solid, and warm—Nekhliudov is preparing to bask in the well-deserved gratitude he thinks is about to come his way. Instead, Churis and his wife offer frantic objections to the suggestion their landlord deems so reasonable and generous: “But what kind of a life would we have there? . . . it’s an uninhabited place . . . barren! . . . it’s a new place, an unknown place.”⁵⁶ By contrast, they insist, their current home—with its rotting roof, desolate yard, and tumbledown shacks—is “a cheery place, a familiar place”; for Churis, the hut signifies “all our peasant surroundings” [“все наше заведение мужицкое”], the place where his forefathers lived and died.⁵⁷ Only at this moment (and only, it seems, briefly) “did the young landowner understand *what all this meant* to Churis and his wife—the collapsing hut, the broken well with the dirty puddle, the rotting stables and barns, the cracked willows that could be seen through the crooked windows.”⁵⁸

In passages like this one, the story directs our attention as much to the landowner’s futile attempts at understanding the peasants’ relationship to their environment as it does to the environment itself. Even when Nekhliudov finds himself at the home of a prosperous peasant family (the last stop on his tour), his appreciation of the orderly household—thriving apiaries, abundant live-stock, strapping women—does not translate into an understanding of the people themselves. Nekhliudov is entirely unsuccessful in his attempt to convince the family patriarch, Dutlov, to invest in farmland with him, once again for reasons that the landowner finds mystifying. The old man simply answers Nekhliudov’s questions with more questions, refusing to divulge any information and pursuing an agenda of his own that remains opaque to the master.⁵⁹ While Dutlov professes to have no money and claims not even to count his beehives (“as many as God has given! One must not count them, the bees do not like it”⁶⁰), his only request to the master is that his sons be permitted to pay their rent in kind rather than in labor hours, so that they can work as

teamers and thus make money—clearly the old peasant has analyzed the economics of his situation, whether or not the bees approve.⁶¹ Throughout most of the conversation with his master, Dutlov occupies himself with his bees (which do not sting him but do sting Nekhliudov), and when the landowner offers apiary advice gleaned from a nineteenth-century version of *Country Living* magazine (*Maison Rustique* [*The Rustic House*], a decidedly amusing title in the context of a crumbling Russian village), the old man replies, “Well, yes, батюшка . . . they may write things like that in books, but maybe they write them out of malice,” because really, “who can teach the bees where to build their combs?”⁶²

Dutlov is skillful when it comes to deflecting Nekhliudov's questions, but the master has as much right to enter this old man's house as he does to enter the home of any serf. Surveillance is a fact of peasant life (“I've come to take a look at your household,” Nekhliudov says to Churis⁶³); peasant space cannot protect itself against such intrusions.⁶⁴ Peasant culture, however, evolved mechanisms for doing just that, and Nekhliudov's constant frustration attests to the effectiveness of his serfs' evasions. In fact, Nekhliudov's greatest complaint about his serfs would seem to be their incomprehensibility, since that is what thwarts his plans: “What am I to do with [Iukhvanka]? I can't see him in this situation, but how can I get him out of it? He's wrecking all my best plans.”⁶⁵ What appears to bother Nekhliudov most about this incorrigible peasant is that his behavior is *inexplicably* bad; thus the young landowner asks his steward over and over: but *why* is this man so intractable? What has made him this way?⁶⁶ In this passage as in others, “A Landowner's Morning” evokes not so much the peasant's labor—all the hard physical work that sustains the master's way of life, work that is never once represented in the story—but rather the master's labor, the thankless work of trying to make sense of senseless people. Only in Nekhliudov's recurring but inchoate feelings of “embarrassment,” “shame,” and “conscience” does Tolstoy hint at the underlying problem, which is both moral and structural: people who own other people and thus the fruits of other people's labor are not well positioned to take an honest account of either their own lives or others' motives.⁶⁷

The nobleman's blindness ensures that peasants will remain an enigma, a problem demanding study—hence the peasant *question*. The years when Tolstoy was working on “A Landowner's Morning” coincided with Russian

literature's most influential intervention in the debates over serfdom, Turgenev's *Notes of a Hunter*. In 1847 Turgenev began to publish his stories (or notes—"записки," as he called them) in the journal *The Contemporary* [*Современник*] before bringing them together in one volume in 1852. Tolstoy was, of course, well aware of Turgenev's work (in fact he was intimidated by it to some degree), and certainly no reader who came across Tolstoy's story would have failed to think of Turgenev.⁶⁸

Yet the differences between *Notes of a Hunter* and "A Landowner's Morning" are more illuminating than the parallels. For one thing, Tolstoy is not concerned to let us know exactly where the action of "A Landowner's Morning" takes place. Toward the story's conclusion Dutlov's sons (seeking permission to work as teamers) refer briefly to Odessa and Romen, thus suggesting a location in or near Ukraine, but this lone geographic fact is of little import and in the end the village is not situated on the map, or even named. "A Landowner's Morning" entirely lacks the striking geographic specificity of Turgenev's stories, the first of which (in the 1852 volume) opens with the following sentence: "Whoever has happened to travel from Bolkhov County into the Zhizdra region will no doubt have been struck by the sharp differences between the nature of the people in the Orel province and those in Kaluga." After comparing "the Orel peasant" and "the Kaluga peasant," Turgenev opts for an even greater degree of specificity: "An Orel village (I am talking about the eastern part of the Orel province) is usually situated among ploughed fields and close to a ravine . . . A Kaluga village, on the other hand, will be surrounded for the most part by woodland. . . ."⁶⁹ The insistent attention to subtle distinctions (e.g., reminding us that we are dealing not with *western* Orel but with *eastern* Orel) signals Turgenev's ethnographic approach, an approach that assumes that close study of a certain well-defined milieu will yield the insights one seeks.

But neither Tolstoy nor Turgenev spends much time describing what a typical peasant actually does—that is, the repetitive and often crushing physical labor of working the land. In "A Landowner's Morning" we never witness this work being performed; instead, we see it as traces left on peasants' bodies. Lukhvanka's mother, for instance, represents "the last limit of old age and ruin that is possible in a living person": bony frame, drooping head, hands deformed by heavy toil, and a face bearing "the most monstrous marks of wretchedness and old age."⁷⁰ Davydka's mother, too, "had long ceased to be a woman and was

only a laborer"; for now, she says, she is strong enough to bear up under this burden, but she tells Nekhliudov, "My daughter-in-law died from work, and I will too." When Nekhliudov expresses shock at this statement—the woman's matter-of-fact acknowledgement that peasant labor can be *lethal*—she explains that her son's young wife died under the horrible strain [на́тыга] of constant work combined with hunger and grief over the loss of a newborn child whom she could not feed.⁷¹

Labor that marks the body in this way does not, it seems, lend itself to artistic representation. If there are virtually no well-known nineteenth-century Russian novels that are primarily about peasant life, this is largely because the kind of work peasants most often do—hour upon hour of backbreaking, monotonous tasks performed alongside others who are engaged in the same work—is not well suited to a narrative form that evolved to represent an individual's progress in life and the compromise this individual must reach with society in order to *develop*.⁷² Peasants are rarely the heroes of novels because personal development is not thought to be the peasant's concern, and because the conditions of peasant life are not ideal for generating the more or less teleological narrative that novels generally require.

This fact is implicitly acknowledged in the *form* of Tolstoy's and Turgenev's texts: neither attempts to tell the story of one peasant's life in a long narrative (instead they write sketches about various peasants); both are told from the point of view of the landowner, whose attempts at understanding constitute much of what the sketches are about (especially in Tolstoy); and perhaps most important, both are structured around the master's mobility and the serfs' immobility. The master comes and goes as he wishes, while the serfs generally stay put—the reflection, of course, of a particular power relation. The landowner makes rounds, moving through a landscape (Turgenev) or a village (Tolstoy), and in both cases taking advantage of his right to cross lines that would constitute impassable boundaries to peasants, but that are not boundaries at all to him. Thus the peasant comes to be seen as the product of a "milieu" in a way that the landowner is not, and the landowner comes to serve as a traveling lens rather than a character who interests us in his own right.

While Tolstoy's peasants are presented to us as entirely immobile—we see them at home in their huts, sometimes even in their beds—Turgenev

manages to depict peasants who enjoy (or endure) some degree of mobility. In order to do so, he must focus on exceptional peasants, those whose circumstances permit (or require) them to do something other than work eighteen hours a day in a field alongside others who do the same. In *Notes of a Hunter* we sometimes read about serfs who are foresters and huntsmen, who have fallen through cracks in the system and are wandering about the countryside, who live by gathering herbs in the woods, and who are young enough to be sent to spend summer nights outdoors guarding livestock in the meadows. In other words, despite Turgenev's ethnographic impulse, his focus is not on agricultural labor—which is to say, it is not on the circumstances under which the great majority of peasants actually made their living.

Tolstoy's focus is on more typical peasants, those who stay in one place in order to work fields owned by the master—and yet, quite strikingly, “A Landowner's Morning” concludes with a lyrical fantasy of peasant mobility and freedom. After his frustrating morning in the village Nekhliudov returns to the manor house, where Tolstoy surrounds him with accoutrements signaling the landowner's vast distance from his serfs (not only luxurious furniture and a piano but papers, accounts, books, and *Maison Rustique*). Fearing that he is “wasting the best years of [his] life” and feeling himself to be anything but free, Nekhliudov gives himself over to a vision of Dutlov's vigorous teenage son Ilyusha driving a fast *troika* along a highway.⁷³ Picturing Ilyusha's evident joy in his own movement, Nekhliudov imagines the young peasant arriving at a crowded inn, crossing himself, eating with his companions, saying his prayers, and lying down to sleep under the sky.⁷⁴ And at this point in the narrative, Nekhliudov seems to enter into Ilyusha's mind:

And in his dream he sees Kiev with its saints and its crowds of pilgrims, Romen with its merchants and goods, he sees Odessa [Odessa] and the distant dark blue sea with white sails, and Tsargrad [Constantinople] with its golden houses and white-breasted, black-browed Turkish girls, and he is flying there, rising on some kind of invisible wings. He flies freely and easily, further and further, seeing below him the golden cities glowing brightly and the dark blue skies with stars and the dark blue seas with white sails—and it feels sweet and joyful to him to fly further and further . . . “Wonderful!” whispered Nekhliudov to himself, and the thought came to him, “Why am I not Ilyusha?”⁷⁵

These are the last words of "A Landowner's Morning": the nobleman who feels trapped by the nature of his relations with the peasants projects onto them a freedom that they have never in fact enjoyed.⁷⁶

By contrast, our last glimpse of actual peasants (in the penultimate chapter, a few pages before the Ilyusha fantasy) shows Nekhliudov approaching the manor house and confronting the ragged petitioners—in varying states of drunkenness, ill-health, grief, and rage—whose quarrels he must adjudicate and whose problems he must untangle.⁷⁷ No wonder he would prefer to be Ilyusha. And here, in this contrast, we see one key way in which "A Landowner's Morning" points unmistakably toward ideas that would shape Tolstoy's entire life and work. In Richard Gustafson's words: "Count Leo Tolstoy was fated by his noble origins to a life separated from the vast majority of the people, the peasants, among whom he lived. Despite his sense of mission to the world, there was no way he could participate in the life of the very people, who, he saw, made his or any life possible. Every effort he made—teaching their children, joining in their work, dressing like them, writing for them—turned out to be but a symbolic gesture void of effective content."⁷⁸

"A Landowner's Morning" can avoid issuing explicit commentary on the most horrific injustices of serfdom because Nekhliudov is a good master who is trying to do the right thing. These injustices—not only the economic exploitation built into the system but also the abuses that inevitably attend this basic one, such as forced marriages, starvation, beatings, the buying and selling of human beings, and other violence—form a large part of what occupies Turgenev in *Notes of a Hunter*. Tolstoy more or less ignores these social facts, as Hruska points out: "While Tolstoy sometimes complained in his diary about the 'impossibility of a correct life' under serfdom . . . his complaints tend to be abstract, with considerably less concern for the brutality inherent to serfdom than was shown by, for example, Turgenev or Dostoevsky."⁷⁹

In fact, recent criticism has come quite close to describing at least one other Tolstoy text as a defense of serfdom: in *Childhood* Georgii Lesskis sees Tolstoy's tendency "calmly to accept the idea of serfdom as a reality, and not to consider the position of house-serfs and peasants to be unfair."⁸⁰ Lesskis argues that contemporary readers would have recognized the life of the saintly old serf nanny Natalya Savishna in *Childhood* to be a rewriting of a famous story in *Notes of a Hunter*, "Ermolai and the Miller's Wife" ["Ермолай и мельничиха"].

In Turgenev's sketch, a young woman's life is ruined by her owner's interference in her love for another serf; in *Childhood*, the same plot becomes a vaguely amusing episode in Natalya Savishna's past, a long-ago event, briefly and blithely narrated, that caused her to surrender her right to marry—and to surrender, in effect, her very subjectivity—in favor of service to the master's family.⁸¹ In Tolstoy's comic rewriting of Turgenev's peasant tragedy, Natalya Savishna is perfectly content with her fate—a re-construing of Turgenev's story that is particularly disturbing to anyone who has ever read the odious pro-slavery novels written in response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in mid-nineteenth-century America, novels in which happy slaves (especially "mammies" like Natalya Savishna, women whose lives are devoted to raising their masters' offspring) confirm for us how very pleased they are with their place in the social order.

But "A Landowner's Morning" allows for no such whitewashing, not even the most subtle or implicit. Even if the story is less concerned with indicting serfdom as an institution than it is with exploring the futility of good intentions, the text's very structure works to debunk any argument Nekhliudov might marshal to justify the existing social arrangements. The story insists so strongly on the ways in which the landowner's social position *blinds* him that nothing he might say or think in defense of this position could ever be convincing (and since the entire narrative is told from Nekhliudov's point of view, no position other than his is available to us). The constant emphasis on Nekhliudov's incomprehension and his inability to offer meaningful help to the peasants combines with the text's plotlessness and its unspecified setting to create a sense of bewilderment, isolation, and pointless repetition, a movement that feels anti-teleological and even entropic.

Childhood, too, is loosely structured around an arbitrary and potentially repeatable unit of time and a series of *tableau*-like scenes that do not serve to move the narrative forward, but instead describe phenomena that are supposed to be recurring or vaguely typical.⁸² But the effect here is entirely different than it is in "A Landowner's Morning." As I noted above, in *Childhood* the explicit focus on family life aims at making this life meaningful by naturalizing it (by suggesting that things cannot be any way but the way that they always already are), and it does so in large part by situating the clan in a kind of time that emphasizes what is iterative, cyclical, and (thus) "natural"—the temporality of

idyll and of the family novel. Idyllic time is anti-teleological, but it is not at all entropic. Although it moves in circles/cycles and is cut off from larger temporal systems where linear “progress” is happening, this does not mean that the idyll represents its world as pointless; rather, it predictably creates and recreates its own predictable (but genuine) meaning through closed cycles of repetition.⁸³

The generic underpinnings of *Childhood*—its roots in idyll—help make it possible for Tolstoy to imply an intimate connection between serfdom and family, and thus to construe serfdom as a relationship of love. And an idyll-inflected text is likely to work to encompass in its view of “family” everyone who is in the home—including those like Natalya Savishna, whose individual interests are effectively denied by being subsumed under the interests of a putatively organic unity. This tendency is reinforced by a narrative point of view that acknowledges virtually no separation, for example, between the child nobleman and his serf nanny, as when Nikolenka says: “For as long as I remember myself, I remember Natal’ia Savishna” (words that recall Bakhtin’s remarks on how idyll “renders less distinct all the temporal boundaries between individual lives”).⁸⁴ *Childhood*’s implicit argument is that it might well be worth it for the Natalya Savishnas of the world to be forced to sacrifice themselves for the common good, which in the end turns out to be their own good as well: this really is a text about the loveable side of slavery.

Such an argument can only be made (or implied) in a family story—and “A Landowner’s Morning” is not a family story. Nekhliudov is an orphan; his teenage fantasy of domestic and conjugal bliss—a pretty, saintly wife who will devote her entire being to him and to his peasants—is obviously self-serving and unrealistic. Lacking the family context of *Childhood* (or *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina*, for that matter), “A Landowner’s Morning” cannot argue that the bitter sacrifices required of individual peasants are ultimately in the service of some greater good, and it cannot redeem Nekhliudov’s repetitive circuit through the village by implicating it in the natural cycles of idyll. Thus even though writing about a *good* landowner allows Tolstoy to avoid looking at the shocking brutalities on which other critics of serfdom lavished their attention, Tolstoy in no way avoids the most basic fact about the institution: that serfdom is above all a relation of *economic* inequality and injustice. As early reviewers of “A Landowner’s Morning” noted, while Turgenev’s emphasis in *Notes of a Hunter* had been on the serf’s basic (and still contested) humanity, Tolstoy’s

was on the economic arrangements that kept the peasants, as Nekhliudov remarks in naïve amazement, “so poor.”⁸⁵

By choosing to write a story about serfdom that was *not* also a story about family, *not* an idyll in any sense, Tolstoy required himself to explore the considerably less loveable side of this institution, a decision that again attests to the empiricist drive that sets Tolstoy apart from many other ideological writers (including Gogol). This choice also points to what one might call Tolstoy’s submerged Enlightenment sensibility: actually, as I suggested in the introduction to this paper, “A Landowner’s Morning” can be read as a kind of philosophical tale. The paradigm of this genre is often taken to be Voltaire’s *Candide* [1759], a narrative structured around the travels of a naïf whose wanderings allow him to observe and interrogate the social arrangements he encounters in various locales. The protagonist of a philosophical tale starts out with an idea (in the case of *Candide*, the conviction that “all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds”), an idea that “the unfolding of the plot [then] confirms, undermines, or otherwise qualifies . . . by testing it against a series of concrete experiences and observations in the world at large.”⁸⁶

Nekhliudov’s experience in the countryside tests a theory—the theory that a landowner [помещик] can cause his serfs to lead good (virtuous, prosperous) lives in the absence of any fundamental change to the existing social and economic order. The naïve young landowner, convinced that it is his duty to “act upon” his peasants (“this simple, receptive, uncorrupted class of people”), sets out to “save them from poverty,” to “reform their vices, which are the result of ignorance and superstition, to develop their morality, [and] to cause them to love the good.”⁸⁷ As we have seen, Nekhliudov discovers these beliefs to be inadequate when tested against real life in the village. “Have my peasants gotten richer?” he asks himself, “Have they been morally educated and developed? Not in the least.”⁸⁸ Like *Candide*, then, he must reassess.

Voltaire closes his tale with the famous (and famously ambiguous) injunction to “cultivate one’s own garden,” an idea communicated to *Candide* in his exchange with a virtuous and prosperous old farmer: “You must possess an enormous and splendid property,” says *Candide*; but no, the farmer replies, “I have only twenty acres . . . all of which I cultivate myself with the help of my children; and our labor keeps us from three great evils—idleness, vice, and poverty.”⁸⁹ *Candide* ends with the main character’s reiteration of the old farmer’s

cultivate-our-garden maxim, but in “A Landowner’s Morning” such an injunction could not constitute an *ending*, because it is in effect where the protagonist *began*. Nekhliudov set out to cultivate his garden, and the garden turned out to be an estate requiring oppressed laborers to work it. In “A Landowner’s Morning” the closest we come to *Candide*’s vision of a good life—twenty acres cultivated by one modest, hard-working family who profess to avoid all involvement in the larger world—is the family of the old bee-keeping peasant Dutlov. Indeed, Dutlov sounds a lot like Voltaire’s farmer, who insists on his own ignorance of all “public affairs” (“I never listen to the news from Constantinople; I am content with sending the fruits of my garden to be sold there”).⁹⁰ Dutlov says the same: “I’m busy enough feeding my own family.”⁹¹

Dutlov, however, is a serf who can own no land at all. In fact, Tolstoy’s peasant “farmer” refuses to go in with Nekhliudov to buy land (“it’s not for me to buy groves”⁹²), knowing very well that he would run the risk of being cheated by the барин and left without legal recourse.⁹³ This peasant understands that his best option is to cultivate his garden; too bad, then, that the garden is not actually his. In the end, what Tolstoy’s story suggests is that Voltaire’s essentially middle-class model of virtue is unlikely to be available to Russians, whether noblemen or peasants. What, then, is our Everyman Landowner to do? Where is he to go? This, it seems, is the dilemma that leads the protagonist, at the conclusion of “A Landowner’s Morning,” to imagine himself as a truly free version of Dutlov’s son, a young man who simply flies away, soaring first over the highway and then through the sky, his gaze directed not ahead at the intractable problems of the village but down at the golden rooftops and up at the shining stars.

Endnotes

- 1 Tolstoi, *ПСС*, Chertkov edition, 47:4. My attention was drawn to this diary entry by Anne Hruska’s article. Unless otherwise marked, all quotations of Tolstoy are from the Chertkov edition of *Полное собрание сочинений* [*Complete Collected Works*] in 90 volumes, hereafter cited by volume and page number. All translations are mine, but I have also referred to Leo Wiener’s English version of “Утро помещика,” titled “A Morning of A Landed Proprietor.”
- 2 The focus of idyll or pastoral (terms that are often used interchangeably, and are certainly interchangeable for my purposes) is “the peace and

simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting”; more broadly, it can be defined as “any [literary] work that opposes simple to complicated life, to the advantage of the former,” with the simple life being not necessarily that of shepherds, but also, say, that of children or the lower classes (Abrams, 202-3).

- 3 Hruska, “Love and Slavery,” 628. Of course, Tolstoy was not alone in representing serfdom as “a patriarchal system that mirrored family structure, with the serf-owner as father and the serfs as dependent children”; in this he was joined by the Slavophiles. However, Tolstoy differed from the Slavophiles “in his willingness to see serfdom as connected to love, rather than as a violation of the bonds between gentry and peasantry” (Hruska, 628, 628n7).
- 4 Bakhtin, “Forms of Time,” 226-29.
- 5 Ibid., 225, 229. Bakhtin also remarks on the important role that children play in these genres (227).
- 6 This is not to say, however, that the idyll can never accommodate social criticism; celebrating the purity and simplicity of the past can imply a strong critique of the present (impure, hierarchical) social order. On this see Empson, as well as Bakhtin, 231.
- 7 Bakhtin, “Forms of Time,” 225.
- 8 Technically, *Childhood* is not narrated from Nikolenka’s point of view, since the narrator speaks as a young adult recalling his past. However, the prevalence of *style indirect libre* leads the reader to experience the text as if it were being recounted from the child’s perspective.
- 9 The philosophical tale issues “a veiled imperative to bring about change in the established sociopolitical system” by revealing a “tension between theory and actuality [that] arouses a feeling that things ought to be other than they are” (Hollier, 468). I am indebted to Ilya Kliger for first suggesting to me the parallel between this genre and “A Landowner’s Morning.”
- 10 Hollier, *A New History*, 488. While Tolstoy’s social criticism (in “A Landowner’s Morning” and elsewhere) cannot be described as positivist, it is certainly analytical and empirical.
- 11 Ibid., 471.
- 12 Tolstoi, *ИИСС*, Chertkov edition, 4:399.

- 13 Eikhenbaum, *Young Tolstoi*, 69. For Eikhenbaum, "A Landowner's Morning" serves as "an étude of sorts for the 'landowner' chapters of Tolstoy's future novels" (71). In fact, Eikhenbaum repeatedly uses the word "embryo" to describe the relationship between Tolstoy's mature works and his earliest writings, including not only stories and fragments of stories but also diary entries, notes, plans for self-improvement, etc. (45, 46, 69). Indeed, one can readily list the ways in which "A Landowner's Morning" forecasts Tolstoy's later techniques and ideas: its refusal of conventional plotting in favor of a structure based only on a unit of time; its rejection of (auto)biography as *form* combined with the inclusion of considerable autobiographical *content*; a protagonist whose goal is to figure out the right way to live; the fraught relationship between landowner and peasant; the use of dreams and near-dream states to explore consciousness; the careful, almost bloodless analysis of how selflessness and selfishness come together in every individual, etc. As such a list suggests, this particular story yields itself easily to what one might describe as the always-already approach ("Look, there he is—it's Tolstoy! He's already *himself*!"). In this paper I try to strike a balance by acknowledging how "A Landowner's Morning" reflects what would later reveal themselves to be enduring Tolstoyan preoccupations, while also focusing on the story's relationship to the particular historical moment that produced it.
- 14 Tolstoi, *ИИСС*, Chertkov edition, 4:398-400. At times here Tolstoy is referring to the "Novel of a Russian Landowner," the unfinished work from which "A Landowner's Morning" was ultimately excerpted and adapted. Tolstoy's relentless insistence on this work's didactic intent might put one off from reading it altogether.
- 15 Orwin, *Cambridge Companion*, 3-7.
- 16 The conference was "The Over-Examined Life: New Perspectives on Tolstoy," Harvard University, Davis Center for Russian Studies, April 19 – 20, 2002.
- 17 Here Tolstoy's use of the word "novel"—*роман*—is deliberate, as well as somewhat eccentric when compared to the typical usage of the period. For Tolstoy at this time, *роман* designated a long work (longer than *повесть*, which meant basically a long story), and specifically one that did *not* have love intrigue as its main plot element (Tolstoi 2007, 3:397).

- 18 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 3:434. For a detailed account of both works' composition and their complicated interrelationship, see the commentary in 4:397-405. After the publication of "A Landowner's Morning," Tolstoy makes only two very brief mentions of *Novel of a Russian Landowner* in his notebooks (4:406).
- 19 Ibid., 4:400.
- 20 Tolstoy used the surname Nekhliudov in other works as well, most notably in the early story *Lucerne* (in which a nobleman called Nekhliudov asks fundamental ethical questions about human unity) and in the late novel *Resurrection* [*Воскресение*, 1899] (in which another Nekhliudov is transformed—eventually—after confronting the devastating consequences of his own mistreatment of a fellow human being). The name also appears in *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Notes of a Billiard Maker*. Hugh McLean has argued that it is "a thinly disguised autobiographical signal . . . a 'softened' variant of нехлюдой, 'not thin,' a synonym of толстый, 'fat,' of which Tolstoy is a variant" (McLean, "Resurrection," 100). While one might counter that a great many of Tolstoy's characters who are *not* named Nekhliudov incorporate aspects of the author's own traits and experiences (and that McLean's etymology feels a bit stretched), it is true that these Nekhliudovs reflect with particular directness one of Tolstoy's most enduring concerns: how to live in a manner that takes full and honest account of one's responsibility to other people.
- 21 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 4:123.
- 22 Ibid., 4:124-5.
- 23 Ibid., 4:149.
- 24 Ibid., 4:403 (*italics mine*).
- 25 Quoted in Eikhenbaum, *Young Tolstoi*, 69.
- 26 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 4:134.
- 27 Ibid., 4:136.
- 28 Knapp, "Development of Style," 162. When Knapp points out that Tolstoy prided himself on demonstrating how such seemingly unimportant events were in fact "more significant, more serious" than "the facts usually printed in newspapers and histories" (Tolstoy's own words, quoted by Knapp, 162), I am struck by the dramatic contrast between Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's views of print culture and the meanings of "news." For Dostoevsky,

who worked much of his life as a professional journalist, newspapers not only provided a crucial source for his art, they also could be taken as a reflection of what was really happening—and thus what was truly important—at a given moment. In other words, Dostoevsky believed in something called “public opinion,” and he believed that this phenomenon could be accurately represented by printed texts. Tolstoy, by contrast, devoted a fair amount of time to debunking such views, as in Book VIII of *Anna Karenina* when Levin argues that the “people’s voice” calling for Russia to go to war against the Turks is in fact *merely* the voice of a few newspapers in the capitals (733). One can only imagine what Dostoevsky would have made of Tolstoy’s remark in a letter to his brother, “There’s nothing I fear more than turning myself into a journalist-scribbler”! (4:400).

- 29 Shklovsky discusses Dmitry’s effort in his biography of Tolstoy (86-97). McLean writes that Dmitry, inspired by *Selected Passages*, “attempted to follow the principles [Gogol] set forth”: “he wanted to do his moral duty to his peasants, sitting in judgment on them and trying to raise their standards of behavior”—but without questioning the institution of serfdom (McLean, *Quest of Tolstoy*, 39). See also Medzhibovskaya, 42.
- 30 Gogol, *Selected Passages*, 138.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 192, 40.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 191.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 137. The Russian is “Главное то, что, ты приехал в деревню и положил себе непременно быть помещиком” (Gogol, *ПСС*, 8:321).
- 34 Gogol, *Selected Passages*, 137, 143 (*italics mine*).
- 35 Tolstoy, *ПСС*, Chertkov edition, 4:140, 139.
- 36 By 1890 the French sociologist Gabriel de Tarde, for example, was already elaborating on the relationship between following fashions and *being modern* (358, 226).
- 37 See, for example, Shklovsky, 65, 87; on Tolstoy’s early childhood generally, see 26-54.
- 38 Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 155 (*italics mine*).
- 39 Levin makes the point more explicitly a little later in the same chapter: “I consider the [real] aristocrats to be myself and people like me: people who can point back in their family history to three or four honorable

generations . . . who never depended on anyone, but who lived as my father and my grandfather did . . . I value what is mine by birth and labor" (*Anna Karenina*, 157). Compare here what Tolstoy wrote of his own father: "He did not serve anywhere in the reign of Nicholas, and all his friends were also as free as himself, they held no offices . . . Father never groveled before anyone" (quoted in Shklovsky, 49).

40 Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 292.

41 Tolstoy, *ИЦС*, Chertkov edition, 4:123.

42 Ibid., 4:144.

43 Ibid., 4:168.

44 Ibid., 4:132.

45 Ibid., 4:144.

46 Gogol, *ИЦС*, 8:358.

47 Zeldin translates this as "Do not be in touch with anyone other than personally" (185). See also his alternate rendering: "All your dealings with the officials will be personal" (185).

48 Tolstoy, *ИЦС*, Chertkov edition, 4:144, 132.

49 Gogol, *Selected Passages*, 141.

50 Tolstoy, *ИЦС*, Chertkov edition, 4:134.

51 Ibid., 4:126.

52 Ibid., 4:126-7.

53 Ibid., 4:129.

54 Ibid., 4:147.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 4:131-2.

57 Ibid., 4:132.

58 Ibid., 4:133 (*italics mine*).

59 Ibid., 4:158-164.

60 Ibid., 4:160.

61 Ibid., 4:161.

62 Ibid., 4:160.

63 Ibid., 4:128.

64 In Foucauldian terms, we might see Nekhliudov as a kind of walking panopticon peering around corners and through windows, keeping the peasants in line—or trying to—by *seeing* them. This reminds us of

what might be described as modernizing rather than archaizing or “organicist” about Tolstoy’s worldview (again, modern as in the Enlightenment sense of what is modern, as we see in the *conte philosophique*): his insistence on clear categories and systematic ways of thinking.

65 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 4:154.

66 Ibid., 4:145-6.

67 Ibid., e.g., 4:128, 133, 137, 138.

68 See Eikhenbaum, 72 as well as 35, 77.

69 Turgenev, *ИСС*, 3:7.

70 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 4:139.

71 Ibid., 4:151.

72 *Anna Karenina*’s famously powerful scene of Levin mowing alongside his peasants represents a touristic kind of labor: a certain meaning accrues to the landlord’s work in this passage precisely because Levin does it once, and by choice. This has little to do with what work represents in a peasant’s life. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, populism did inspire a number of Russian novels about peasants; see, for example, Goriachkina.

73 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 4:166.

74 Ibid., 4:169-70. Medzhibovskaya, whose interest is in Tolstoy’s religious thought, remarks of this passage, “The landowner’s dreaming his peasant’s dreams is a special kind of religious envy indeed” (64). Medzhibovskaya’s view is that Tolstoy has Nekhliudov *recognize* in his peasants “a form of primordial unity”; I would lean more toward the conclusion that Tolstoy has his protagonist *imagine* such a unity.

75 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 4:170-1.

76 Nekhliudov’s fantasy of joyful, bracing motion recalls the famous scene at the end of Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, when a *troika* carries Chichikov and Russia off into an unknown future.

77 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 4:167.

78 Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy*, 16.

79 Hruska, “Love and Slavery,” 627, n3.

80 Quoted in Hruska, “Love and Slavery,” 630, n14.

81 Quoted in Hruska, “Love and Slavery,” 630.

- 82 “*Childhood* is linked together not by a movement of events which form a plot, but by a sequence of diverse scenes . . . which succeed each other in the course of one day—from morning until evening by the hands of the clock” (Eikhenbaum, 56); for more on the structure of *Childhood*, see 48-67.
- 83 The idyll, Bakhtin writes, is set in “a little spatially limited world . . . sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world” (225). At one point near the end of “A Landowner’s Morning,” Tolstoy’s protagonist bitterly regrets having withdrawn from progressive, modern, linear time, the kind of time that is, in Bakhtin’s terms, “linked . . . with the rest of the world”: Nekhliudov recalls that in his student days, “the future looked altogether different! Then the future was full of enjoyment, various activities, and glittering success, undoubtedly leading . . . to the greatest good in the world” (167, emphasis mine). And since Nekhliudov’s renunciation of this kind of “progress time” is not even rewarded with an idyll, the disappointment proves all the more galling.
- 84 Bakhtin, “Forms of Time,” 225.
- 85 For nineteenth- and early twentieth-century responses to “A Landowner’s Morning,” see Tolstoi 2007 3:435-440.
- 86 Hollier, *A New History*, 471.
- 87 Tolstoi, *IICC*, Chertkov edition, 4:165.
- 88 *Ibid.*, 4:166.
- 89 Voltaire, *Candide*, 74. Of course, one should not assume that Candide’s complacent formula represents Voltaire’s own “solution”: it is unlikely that Voltaire himself saw the cultivation of one’s own garden as an adequate response to the myriad sufferings and injustices described in his tale.
- 90 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 91 Tolstoi, *IICC*, Chertkov edition, 4:163.
- 92 *Ibid.*
- 93 *Ibid.*, 4:156.

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