

Rousseau and Tolstoy: Childhood and Confession

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It was shortly after Rousseau's death in 1778 that news of his *Confessions* first reached Russia. According to the eminent Soviet scholar Jurij Lotman,¹ the work was first mentioned in print in connection with a translation into Russian of a pamphlet by le Begue du Presle concerning Rousseau's last days and the circumstances of his death. The pamphlet included the first translation of the preface to *Les Confessions*, and in 1797 an incomplete translation of the whole work appeared. The subsequent impact of Rousseau's *Confessions* on Russian literature has never been adequately examined. This particular gap in scholarship is, of course, part of the larger problem of how critics have handled Rousseau's work in general in its relation to Russian literature. On the one hand, Western critics seem prone to exaggerate Rousseau's influence on Russian literature. Milan Markovitch's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et Tolstoj* (published in 1928), one of the very few book-length works devoted to the subject, is sketchy in its analysis and tends to ignore or to minimize important differences in the work of the two writers. On the other hand, Soviet critics have tended to downplay Rousseau's artistic contributions to Russian literature, whether from a mistaken identification of literary influence with second-rate literary imitation, of artistic borrowing with artistic inferiority, or from a nationalistic interest in the independence of all things Russian from the influence of all things Western. I.V. Cuprina, for example, concludes that despite important resemblances between Tolstoy's trilogy, *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth* (1852-56), and the works of Rousseau and several other Western writers, Tolstoy's novel is in the end the "outcome" of a purely Russian tradition.²

On the contrary, it can well be argued that Tolstoy's work is obviously imbued with an intimate knowledge of Rousseau's autobiography, that it concentrates on many of the issues which most fascinated Rousseau, and that it makes use of many of his literary techniques. At the same time, however, it should likewise be clear that the influence was not a simple one and that even in his early work Tolstoy was already revising, reinterpreting and at times even rejecting several of Rousseau's ideas. Perhaps a comparison of *Les Confessions* with *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth* can serve as a

paradigm of Rousseau's influence on Russian literature, for the impact of the former work upon the latter is both powerful and complicated. In any case, the comparison should certainly call into question the accuracy of much Western and Soviet scholarship concerning Rousseau.

It is worth noting from the outset that Tolstoy himself endorsed the argument that Rousseau had deeply influenced his worldview and literary techniques. Towards the end of his life, in 1901, Tolstoy is reported to have remarked in a conversation with the French professor Boyer:

People have been unjust to Rousseau, the greatness of his thought was not recognized, and he was calumniated. I have read the whole of Rousseau, all the twenty volumes, including the dictionary of music. I admired him with more than enthusiasm, I worshipped him. At fifteen I wore on my neck, instead of the usual cross, a medallion with his portrait. With some of his pages I am so familiar that I feel as if I had written them myself.³

In 1905 Tolstoy joined the "Jean-Jacques Rousseau Society" in Geneva with "the greatest pleasure," and he wrote to the Society's founders that "Rousseau and the Gospels have been the two great and beneficial influences on my life."⁴ During the same period Tolstoy presented his biographer, Paul Birukoff, with a list of the works which, as Tolstoy recollected, had most influenced his youth, that is, the period between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one. The four most highly-rated books on the list are the *New Testament*, *David Copperfield*, and two works by Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Les Confessions*.⁵

It was in the fall of 1851, about two years after the period which Tolstoy calls his youth, that he began work on his semi-autobiographical trilogy. The work's first and finest section, *Childhood*, was published without the author's name in the September 6, 1852 edition of the journal *Sovremennik* and enjoyed an immediate public success. In several respects the work is obviously related to Rousseau's *Confessions* and handles many of the issues with which Rousseau is preoccupied. These include, for example, the interest in the formative process of childhood, the habit of self-analysis, the high moral evaluation of sincerity and spontaneity, the contrast between the innocent natural man and artificial and corrupting society, the examination of the irrational and contradictory elements of the normal human mind, the attention to fantasy and imagination, the exploration of the limits of and interactions between verbal and gestic language, and so on. Nevertheless, although the issues of

paramount importance to both writers are in many respects similar, many of Tolstoy's ideas differ in important ways from those of Rousseau.

A case in point is the extent to which each writer portrays a representative man, a typical member of the human race, or a particular, unique and individual soul. Tolstoy's interest in the general laws of human nature and development and his consequent attention to the typical and representative aspects of his characters are well known. A substantial part of the trilogy is composed of material which was not drawn from Tolstoy's own particular past and household, and in the process of revising the story Tolstoy sought to eliminate even further what one critic calls "the singular and merely local."⁶ Similarly, Boris Eixenbaum points out that the idea for the work came to Tolstoy "not from a desire to portray the psychological development of a specific personality with its typically individual peculiarities, but from a need to 'generalize', to formulate an abstract program."⁷ Repeatedly, the narrator of the trilogy links the experience and behavior of the characters to those of humankind in general: to note just a few examples from *Youth*, Volodya fell prey to a "general human weakness," Nikolenka "in this respect acted like millions of people," and later "replied as one always does in such cases."⁸

Cuprina opposes this interest of Tolstoy in the representative and the generally human to what she sees as the very different goals of Rousseau: Rousseau, she says, is writing only about himself, and is, moreover, bent above all in showing how unique and extraordinary are his character and experience. In short, "the goal of describing a typical man in typical circumstances is completely lacking in *Les Confessions*."⁹ If we set aside the negative moral and aesthetic judgment implicit in this remark — the depiction of the "typical man," etc. being essential in the Soviet literary canon — it is undeniable that Cuprina is largely correct: the dominant and certainly the most famous tendency of Rousseau's work does seem to be the impulse to demonstrate that "au moins je suis autre." Nevertheless, Cuprina unnecessarily downplays the book's counter-current, Rousseau's appeal to "l'innombrable foule de mes semblables," and his conscious decision to provide "une pièce de comparaison pour l'étude du coeur humain."¹⁰ Cuprina thus misses entirely the work's slippery and self-justifying logic: when Rousseau claims he is completely unlike others, he manages thereby to become superior to them or at least impervious to their moral claims; and when he argues that he is just like others, he challenges them to declare that they are any better than he is.

Clearly, then, the contrast between the two works is not as simple as it may at first appear, for whereas the writers seem at first

glance to present radically opposed perspectives on their characters, the one as particular and unique, the other as representative and typical, the depiction of Rousseau's "unique" self does include a strain of the universalizing tendency characteristic of Tolstoy.

Closely related to these problems is the question of literary genre. While Rousseau is writing autobiography ("cet homme, ce sera moi"¹¹), Tolstoy insists on calling his work a novel and one which does not simply reflect his own past. In an angry letter to Nekrasov, the editor of *Sovremennik*, Tolstoy objected to the title under which *Childhood* was published, saying, "The title 'A History of My Childhood' contradicts the idea of the work. What does anyone care about the history of *my* childhood?"¹²

The issue here is thus not only the contrast between the unique and the generalized character, but also the contrast between the autobiographical and the fictional modes of literature. Rousseau's choice of the more "singular" and the more explicitly autobiographical character and Tolstoy's choice of the more "universal" and more fictional character relate in turn to the larger question of their respective attitudes to the proper depth, purpose and audience of one's personal confession of faults or sins. Not surprisingly, the comparison between the points of view of the two writers on this subject must again be made with full acknowledgment of the internal complexities of each man's ideas.

Rousseau is renowned, of course, for his intention to tell the whole truth about himself, to surpass even Montaigne in the analysis of his heart and in the complete and candid display of everything he finds therein. The truth of the human soul is unitary, says Rousseau; "si je tais quelque chose, on ne me connaîtra sur rien, tant tout se tient."¹³ His primary enterprise, as he tells it, is to depict "un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature," and since "nul ne peut écrire la vie d'un homme que lui-même,"¹⁴ he chooses himself as the object of study. Still, from the beginning a second, less objective and probably more powerful motivation animates his work: the urge to defend and to justify himself, the hope that at last he will be rendered "justice." This second impulse obviously circumscribes the first.

Rousseau was certainly aware of at least some of the difficulties involved in a truthful and concrete presentation of oneself. One of his remarks in the unpublished Neuchâtel Preface to the *Confessions* is almost startling in its sophistication. In writing about his life, says Rousseau, a man "la deguise; sous le nom de sa vie, il fait son apologie; il se montre comme il veut être vu, mais point du tout comme il est."¹⁵ Still, the comment turns out to be directed not at Rousseau at all, but at his predecessors, and Rousseau thereupon asserts his own ability to transcend such insinceri-

ties. Just a page or two later, however, the Preface itself provides a clue as to the particular way in which Rousseau will tell us less than the whole truth in his *Confessions*. The test of his absolute sincerity, says Rousseau, is the fact that he will admit the commission of actions "noires ou basses," declaring, "l'on peut être assuré que celui qui ose avouer de telles actions avouera tout. Voilà la dure mais sure preuve de ma sincérité."¹⁶ Rousseau seems to overlook the fact that this is only half a confession, and that to be complete it would also have to include some acknowledgment of moral responsibility for those actions. This is precisely the step which throughout his autobiography Rousseau is unwilling to take, so much so that from the work's first pages his urge to self-justification is hopelessly muddled with his urge to tell the whole truth. For example, in his remarkable fantasy of appearing book-in-hand before God, "le souverain juge," at the Last Judgment, Rousseau concludes that the *Confessions* will demonstrate at once both his absolute sincerity and his absolute innocence. Indeed, the former somehow guarantees the latter. Obviously, from the very beginning, the book is as much a weapon as it is an instrument of self-discovery, two functions which at bottom are fundamentally incompatible.

Tolstoy's approach to confession is likewise complex, though for different reasons. Interestingly enough, although Tolstoy deeply admired Rousseau's honesty, he applied Rousseau's goal of complete sincerity about himself only to his most private writing, his diaries, in which the only observing eyes would be those of himself, his wife, his daughter, and God. It is true, of course, that the confessional impulse runs throughout Tolstoy's public work, but his understanding of personal confession seems to be in at least two respects quite different from that of Rousseau. First, because his impulse to confession does not seem to have been animated by or mingled with the urge to justify himself to others, to be vindicated by others, Tolstoy required only a very small audience for his confessions; in fact, he found the public announcement of sins to be both personally and socially dangerous. Secondly, because his impulse to confession was not accompanied by an interest in justifying himself to himself, Tolstoy was willing, even eager, to accept full, perhaps even excessive, moral responsibility for his failures.

Both these points require further discussion. Concerning the importance of full but private confession, Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth* examines in part the alternative position, the drive to confess publicly, handling it now with a touch of amused and sympathetic irony, now with a more serious and more overtly critical perspective. The difficulty of confessing simply and innocently, without an overlay of vanity and of pleasure in one's humility or sincerity, is described with great psychological finesse in the long

episode of *Youth* concerning Nikolenka's two confessions to the priest and his decision to confide in the baffled cab-driver. It is clear from the incident that open confession can lapse rapidly into boasting, for, as the narrator comments, "I blush now at the recollection." If the confession of fine feelings can interfere with or even replace their realization into action (says Tolstoy, "noble words seldom go with noble deeds"), or are so readily tinged with and corrupted by vanity, the open confession of one's secret villainies can be even more absurd and harmful. Nikolai and Dmitri, who vow eternal candor to one another, are in the end "carried away by frankness," so that their confessions "dry up" their affection for one another and become weapons with which they are able needlessly to hurt one another.¹⁷

Just as confession is treated within the book as a venture to be conducted with caution and circumspection, the book itself as a whole does not constitute a direct and complete confession of Tolstoy's own childhood. The work is in fact only semi-autobiographical. Certainly, it is psychologically "true," examining with care a young boy's interior life, and, particularly in the last two sections, absorbing elements of Tolstoy's own diaries and personal recollections; but, as we have seen, the trilogy tends rather to be concerned with and to illuminate general human experience rather than to reveal the particular psyche and events of Tolstoy's own past.

As for the second respect in which the approaches of Rousseau and Tolstoy differ regarding the confession of sins, the degree to which each accepts moral responsibility for them, Tolstoy vividly describes in a chapter of *Boyhood* Nikolenko's conviction that everyone, from his grandmother on down to his coachman, hates him and enjoys his sufferings, and his conclusion that he must actually be an orphan:

. . . [T]his preposterous thought not only afforded me a certain sad consolation, but even seemed quite plausible. It was comforting to think that I was unhappy not because I was guilty, but because I was fated to be so from the day of my birth.¹⁸

This comical and touching refusal of moral responsibility echoes the logic of Rousseau's remark that "[j]'affectais de me reprocher ce que j'avais fait, pour excuser ce que j'allais faire. En aggravant les torts du passé, j'en regardais l'avenir comme une suite nécessaire."¹⁹ What is important for my purposes in this statement is not Rousseau's ironical admonition against exaggerating his faults, but rather the fact that he seems to be as aware as Tolstoy of the

specious logic to which a person may resort in order to place the blame for his actions on anyone but himself. Nevertheless, it is just such logic which Rousseau employs throughout *Les Confessions*, from the initial scene of his triumph at the Last Judgment to his explanation for the theft of the ribbon and for his abandonment of his children.

The difference in the attitude of Rousseau and Tolstoy to public confession can be no more sharply drawn than in a consideration of a letter which Tolstoy wrote toward the end of his life to Paul Birukoff:

I am afraid that it was in vain that I gave you hopes by my promise to write my *Reminiscences*. I have tried to think about it, and I saw what a dreadful difficulty it is to avoid the Charybdis of self-praise (by keeping silent about what is bad) and the Scylla of cynical frankness about all the abominations of one's life. Were a man to describe all his odiousness, stupidity, viciousness, vile-ness — quite truthfully, even more truthfully than Rousseau — it would be a seductive book or article. People would say: "Here is a man whom many place high, but look what a scoundrel he was; if so, then for us ordinary folk it is all the more admissible."²⁰

We are in this letter far from the attitude of Rousseau, who believed that his confession would ultimately vindicate him and who fervently hoped that no man would thereafter be able to claim, "je fus meilleur que cet homme-là."²¹ Nor does Tolstoy imitate Rousseau's adroit side-stepping of moral accountability, but instead candidly admits his guilt and "odiousness." Perhaps most importantly, however, Tolstoy decides in the end against writing the equivalent of Rousseau's *Confessions* for reasons which structure his much earlier treatment of confession in *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth*, that is, the harm one does oneself by slipping into self-praise, and the harm one does others by fully exposing one's vices. Rousseau's almost complete replacement of the eye of God with the eye of the reader was a substitution with which Tolstoy would have no part.

The stance which Tolstoy took in his early letter to the editor Nekrasov when he was unknown and previously unpublished — his conviction that he had no business directly presenting the public with the details of his childhood — was maintained until his death as a figure of world renown, although he did finally (reluctantly) allow his friend Certkov to supervise the publication of most of his diaries. It is interesting to note that Tolstoy's early

work devoted to a boy's childhood and youth is only in muted and oblique fashion a work of autobiography, and that his late work specifically titled *Confession* (Ispoved'), written at almost exactly the same age in which Rousseau wrote his *Confessions*, while a candid account of his religious falls and crises, has the feel of a generalized human document and lacks the color and vivid personal detail of Rousseau's autobiography or even of his own *Childhood* trilogy. Evidently, neither Tolstoy nor Rousseau ever told the whole truth about himself in public, although this is a fact of which only Tolstoy was aware.

Whether or not the impact of Rousseau on Tolstoy can actually be taken as some kind of paradigm of Rousseau's influence on Russian literature is a moot question, but it is clear both that the French writer did attract and affect Tolstoy profoundly and that, as Pascal is said to have observed, "[L]es mêmes pensées poussent quelquefois tout autrement dans un autre que dans leur auteur."²² Perhaps future studies of Rousseau will fill in the gaps and correct the bias of Western and Soviet scholarship by examining both the complexities of his influence and the shape that influence took in specifically artistic fields.

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NOTES

1. Ju. M. Lotman, "Russo i Russkaja Kul'tura XVIII Veka," in *Epoxa Prosvješćenija* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo 'Nauka', 1967), pp. 218-19.
2. I.V. Čuprina, *Trilogija L. Tolstogo: "Detstvo, Otročestvo i Junost'"* (Saratov: Izdatel'stvo Saratovskogo Universiteta, 1961), p. 148.
3. Leo Tolstoy, *His Life and Work*, compiled by Paul Birukoff, revised by Leo Tolstoy, and translated, Volume I: *Childhood and Early Manhood* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), p. 199.
4. N.N. Gusev, *Tolstoj v Molodosti* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Tolstovskogo Muzeja, 1927), p. 136, as quoted in Čuprina, p. 132. My translation.
5. Birukoff, p. 98.
6. Alexandra and Sverre Lyngstad, Introduction to *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth*, by Leo Tolstoy (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), p. xii.
7. Boris Eixenbaum, *The Young Tolstoi*, trans. and ed. by Gary Kern (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1972), p. 59.
8. Tolstoy, *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth*, pp. 289, 293, 335.
9. Čuprina, p. 140. My translation.
10. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions: Première Partie*, Preface by J.B. Pontalis, Collection Folio (Gallimard, 1959 (text), 1973 (Preface and notes), p. 34, and Rousseau, Neuchâtel Preface, in *Introduction à l'Etude de J.-J. Rousseau*, by Ph. Van Thieghem (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1963), p. 5.
11. Rousseau, *Confessions*, p. 33.
12. Tolstoy, as quoted in Čuprina, p. 140. My translation.
13. Rousseau, Neuchâtel Preface, p. 5.
14. Rousseau, *Confessions*, p. 33; Neuchâtel Preface, pp. 2, 4.
15. Neuchâtel Preface, p. 2.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
17. Tolstoy, *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth*, pp. 212, 258, 336.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
19. Rousseau, *Confessions*, p. 101.
20. Tolstoy, as quoted by Birukoff, p. xiv.
21. Pascal, *De l'esprit géométrique*, II, *De l'art de persuader* IX, 286, quoted by Milan Markovitch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et Tolstoi: Thèse présentée à la faculté des lettres de l'Université de Paris* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1928) p. 4.