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ABSTRACT

This article describes the device of enstrangement in relation to L.N. Tolstoy's religious–political ideas. We focus on discussing the connection between enstrangement as a literary device and Tolstoy's use of it to criticize the social and political power structure. Our research shifts the optics from politics to life, to man's spiritual and practical world. We direct our attention not to Tolstoy's most self-evident critiques of the power structure, but to his religious anthropology, which is aimed at returning man to the space of life's primordial meanings, including by use of enstrangement. This article shows how Tolstoy comes to an understanding of the false artificiality, of the illusory nature, of the world of culture and man's cultured "Self" through representation of the cultural environment as symbolic and ideological, automatizing people's lives and manipulating their consciousness. Having lost the living substratum of life in the secular, "cultured" world, Tolstoy finds it in the new Word of God, enstranged from automatization, and in a new practice of living "according to Christ."

KEYWORDS

Tolstoy; Shklovsky; enstrangement; religious anarchism; Christianity

Introduction

Lev N. Tolstoy's political/polemical works and, of course, his religious teachings are important for any discussion of him as a thinker and a person. He was traditionally deemed a nihilist, an anarchist, and an individualist; that trend has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Everyone is familiar with his views as a pacifist, a vegetarian, the

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*The Russian term "*ostranenie*" has been often translated as "defamiliarization," including in some of the English-language sources that the author uses in this text. However, I follow Benjamin Sher's choice of "enstrangement," all the more for its close relationship to *otstranenie*, "estrangement." –Trans.

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founder of Tolstoyan movement, and so forth. Political Tolstoy and Christian Tolstoy are often united under the word “anarchism.” He has been called a utopian socialist (Vladimir Lenin), a nonresistance anarchist (Valentin F. Asmus¹), an anarchist-socialist (Gustav Landauer²), a political anarchist (Donna Tussing Orwin³), and a Christian anarchist (Alexandre Christoyannopoulos⁴). The ideas of Christian anarchism have become very popular in contemporary Tolstoy studies; we find them in works by David Stephens,⁵ Elizabeth Fraser,⁶ Inessa Medzibovskaya,⁷ and others.

It has become quite clear that this diversity of definitions is related to his enormous mental work to “blow up” the diverse strata of life that he critically reconsidered and reevaluated. However, no matter what we call him from whatever political, philosophical, ethical, or even aesthetic point of view, within this diversity lies a solid spiritual foundation from which his “tree of knowledge of good and evil” grows. This is his *Christian doctrine*, the basis for all his other “idea superstructures.” Understanding it is the most complex part of Tolstoy’s position.

Everything, according to Tolstoy, is connected with God through Christian teachings and the divine goal-setting power that acts on us. This axiom underlies all of Tolstoy’s judgments and conclusions. It also refracts in the political dimension of his thought.

Religious ways of viewing “the mirror of Russian revolution” were not especially well suited for the Bolsheviks and subsequent Marxist–Leninist philosophy. They enthusiastically welcomed Tolstoy’s “tearing off of any and all kinds of masks” (Lenin), also noting that he “tears the veil of evangelism from official religions” (Asmus); they viewed his faith, above all, as a “*protest*” against the authorities, that is, as a kind of politics; therefore, Soviet criticism gave his religious discourse a tint of something superficial, something superfluous, since “it is precisely because Tolstoy’s religion is more critique than dogma or mystical disposition that Tolstoy foregrounds in the concept of faith not its religious content itself but faith’s ability to be the force of life,”⁸ that is, to be the energy of protest. Faith and religion, as it turns out, were ultimately absent in this severe limitation of Tolstoy’s religious worldview.

Thus, his political views were transformed into a kind of socialist utopianism: “Tolstoy’s teachings are undoubtedly utopian and, in their content, reactionary in the most precise and deepest sense of the word. But it does not in the least follow that his teachings are not socialist, nor that they lack critical elements capable of providing valuable material for the enlightenment of the advanced classes.”⁹ After Lenin, Lunacharsky, and other revolutionary analysts of Tolstoy’s ideas, Soviet political science simply “had” to read him from this perspective alone.

All the most valuable work on Tolstoy during the early Soviet period was mainly done in literary theory, for example, by the Formalist school, which opposed both Symbolism and Socialist Realism, the two leading art theories

in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Formalist ideas were reflected in interpretations of Tolstoy's teachings by Viktor B. Shklovsky (enstrangement) and Boris M. Eikhenbaum (theory of literary being – literaturnyi byt).

In contemporary philosophy and religious studies, the Formalist device of enstrangement has unexpectedly become one of the most important ways of speaking not so much about Tolstoy's literature as about his political and even religious understandings. Tolstoy's use of enstrangement began to be seen as a powerful tool for social critique of the system (Christoyannopoulos,¹⁰ Liza Knapp,¹¹ Michael A. Denner,¹² Prokudin¹³).

Enstrangement

The literary device of “enstrangement” (*ostranenie*) was introduced in the famous “manifesto of Russian Formalism,”¹⁴ Shklovsky's work “Art as Device” (1916–1917).¹⁵

The term “enstrangement” can be interpreted as “something strange,” “alienation,” “estrangement.”¹⁶ Discussing this device, Shklovsky illustrated its essence using mainly examples from Tolstoy's texts. This led to a belief that Tolstoy was virtually the main creator of this device, but this is certainly not the case, as we read in Shklovsky himself,¹⁷ or, for example, in the article by Carlo Ginzburg.¹⁸

There are two types of enstrangement: enstrangement of *words* and enstrangement of *things*. Tolstoy uses both, from Shklovsky's point of view, to affect readers with his own experiences and ideas. He uses this special device to force readers to look at the familiar as if for the first time, to perceive what is understandable as strange and incomprehensible. Tolstoy deprives the reader/hero from automatized recognition of external reality and its constituent elements; he destroys the habit of “looking but not seeing,” of perceiving the living world as self-evident, as something given. To put it more simply: The enstranged gaze uses a nonstandard lens for gazing intently at the outside world. The task of literature, per Shklovsky, is not to reflect or symbolize/enculturate life, but to engage in the processes of individual creativity, in its broadest sense as form-creation. The thing described is not as important as the form in which it is presented to us. Shklovsky dreamed of using form to return man to the “substance of existence” (*veshchestvo sushchestvovaniia*) (to use Andrei Platonov's expression), to banish the automatization of perception where “things are either given as a single trait, for example, as a number, or executed as if by formula without even appearing in consciousness.”¹⁹ The Formalist scholar called our habits of perception and the laws of prosaic speech “automatism.” He cites a typical example from Tolstoy's *Diary*, in which the latter noticed that the automatically (unconsciously) lived life “eats up” not only words, things, and events, but also the “life-world” of people as a whole.

In his analysis of text, Shklovsky does not separate art and reality by some impenetrable wall. On the contrary, his method of enstrangement forces the reader to abandon the ideology of contemplation, realism, or mimesis, as the tasks of art, but to see life in a unique way, as an estranged, extraliterary reality, through genuine art. This, he proposes, will be the viewpoint suggested by Tolstoy's work. *The text forces us to see reality in a new way, but it does not show/reflect reality as tracing paper does.* "Shklovsky—at least in this 1917 article—offers a model in which the best art is fundamentally engaged with, affected by, and influential upon practical life, *byt*."²⁰

As Denner notes, Shklovsky was writing his manifesto while under the influence of Tolstoy's treatise *What Is Art?* (1897–1898),²¹ namely, its discourse on art's role and significance for life. It clearly reflects two trends in early twentieth-century debates: art as an autonomous area of aesthetic consciousness with the primacy of pleasure and beauty, and art as ethics, as a snapshot of the religious worldview of the people "among whom it arose."²² The scholar called Tolstoy "an epidemiologist of art" and drew attention to the fact that the writer's arguments work once he begins to back his theoretical propositions with empirical examples. Denner takes this even further and shows how the "master of the realist novel" (Tolstoy) was seized by avant-gardism, to which Denner reduces the Tolstoyan search for a "naïve form" of art for the people, the simple life.

But was that really the case?

In his treatise *What Is Art?* Tolstoy provided a clear differentiation between two types of art/culture: elite/noble and popular/peasant. If we accept Shklovsky's idea that enstrangement in Tolstoy means a *different* vision of the world, as if seeing it for the first time through the eyes of a "child, savage, or peasant," we notice that this is more Shklovsky's logic than Tolstoy's. Tolstoy's demand for a *new gaze does not apply* to children, savages, or peasants; on the contrary, he speaks of automatization of life in relation to *himself* and the people of his *own* elite circles. That is, he proposes we adopt the perspective of popular culture, their direct gaze at the world, and move away from aristocratic habits and stereotypes. It is not the people who are estranged from culture but the aristocrats, and from the people and from real life, as well.

The device of enstrangement leads Tolstoy to choose the lens of "popular worldview," "popular gaze," the eyes of a simple man that lack the deceitful optics of an aestheticized (synonymous with cultured) understanding of life. This lens should be used on the "eye of high society," the world of the most elite circle of intellectuals. This is primarily about literature. Only through this kind of "naïve" view of life are the heroes of Tolstoy's work, regardless of their social status, able to distance themselves spiritually from the system and its false and deceitful rules, symbols, and signs and thus, relatively speaking, to defeat the lie within themselves. The textbook example is "social ties": Platon Karataev—Pierre Bezukhov (*War and Peace*).

According to Carlo Ginzburg, enstrangement allows someone, via skillful deconstruction of the world of culture, to arrive at the root causes of what is hidden behind culture's "screens," to arrive at the origins of culture. He gives the example of the "psychotechnics of the Stoics" in their search for the root cause of the creation of delicious food. *Imagination* conceals the "consumption of corpses" of animals and fish behind the guise of an exquisite dish; the intellect demands that we distance ourselves from the aesthetic (as a synonym for pleasure) form of eating, if it conceals another basis, the world of things as they are "in reality." If we use his analogy with the teachings of Marcus Aurelius, then his Stoic call to "wipe out representation," to return to the principle, is not only not native, but it suggests a supreme means of reflection: the *imagination* freed from stereotypes of knowledge and automatic perception of it. This example demonstrates not a detachment from culture but its decay, not a return to the thing but a search for the sources of its mortification.

Of course, this is not the view of a native peasant who would never perceive eating an animal as eating a "corpse" (even excluding the vegetarian world of the East). The natural world is a familiar world given for survival, and this pragmatic function is what makes it valuable to the peasant. To stop eating the meat of animals or fish, one must stop being a peasant/hunter and become a monk, a Buddhist, an ascetic. In Russia, only a man of aristocratic culture and transformed consciousness could allow himself this kind of enstrangement, not a naïve commoner. Vegetarianism is not naïveté but a challenge of perception of the world (at least for Russian culture). It is religiously or aesthetically motivated; one must be a confirmed opponent of killing and eating living beings, not a child or peasant, much less a "Voltairean savage." Cultural clichés can only be destroyed from within an aristocratic culture, not a peasant (read: naïve) one, a culture that relies on "finished products" rather than on gathering and processing them. In this act, there is no "Formalist"-type enstrangement.

It is easy to find confirmation of this in Tolstoy: "Seeing the aim and purpose of art in the pleasure we receive from it is like attributing, as people at the lowest level of moral development (savages, for example) do, the aim and purpose of food to the pleasure received from consuming it."²³ Here he calls representatives of his own class who have made pleasure the basis of life "savages." Those who extract their bread by the sweat of their own brows better understand its immediate purpose.

Tolstoy emphasizes the functional use of the natural world for a working man who eats meat to regain his strength, distinguishing him from the aristocratic "savage" who seeks ways to dispose of satiety in pleasure via the sight and smell of food, the sophisticated complexities of cuisine, and so forth. Perhaps this is the person who should be sobered by

the sight of a living creature being killed to gratify his physiological “aesthetic” needs for beauty and delight in delicacies. (It is terrifying to imagine what Tolstoy would say about our own era, which operates entirely on an aesthetics of consumption of this kind of corpse-demonstrations and corpse-eating.)

Endlessly repeating Shklovsky’s provocation that Tolstoy “looked at human conventions and institutions through the eyes of a horse or child, as strange, bizarre phenomena freed from the meanings habitually invested in them,”²⁴ we forget that enstrangement is an artistic device characteristic of almost any writer, and it fulfills strictly artistic tasks.

However, the device of enstrangement was developed not only in the field of literature but also in politics. Today’s politicization of enstrangement demands even more reservations when applying it to Tolstoy’s ideas. Many researchers have identified the device of enstrangement in many of his most important religious and polemical works: *Confession* (1879–1882), *What I Believe* (1884), “Christianity and Patriotism” (1893), “Patriotism and Government” (1900), “The Kingdom of God Is Within You” (1893), *The Four Gospels Harmonized and Translated* (1880), and so forth. The use of enstrangement of the Sunday mass in his novel *Resurrection* (1889–1899) has become almost a textbook example. Of course, almost all these works are aimed at critiquing religion and power, describing the absurdity of violence in the system, and forcing us to gaze intently at a world where the value meanings of religion, science, and culture have been erased, but is this really a demonstration of enstrangement in Tolstoy, that is, as a means of social critique?²⁵

While examining in detail the manifestation of enstrangement as a device for exposing the political system, A. Christoyannopoulos, leading contemporary researcher of Tolstoy’s Christian anarchism, shows that “defamiliarization [enstrangement] is a potent tool in disrupting the narratives of the violent political status quo, a technique therefore worth analyzing and deploying in denouncing violence and oppression.”²⁶ He very aptly called Tolstoy’s thinking “defamiliarizing violence.” In his article the scholar identified four reasons why Tolstoy’s enstrangement is “potentially subversive.” He sees elements of Christian anarchism in enstrangement, showing that Tolstoy uses empathy and irony to estrange man’s rational consciousness from his routine consciousness, society from the idea of bureaucratic hierarchy:

What makes Tolstoyan defamiliarization potentially subversive? In what manner does defamiliarization affect those exposed to it such that they might reconsider their assumptions? My heuristic suggestion is that defamiliarization is effective due to at least four reasons: It disrupts routine thinking and briefly opens a moment for reflection; it helps establish some implicit agreement on what is being observed through the complicit bond that underlies the sharing

of humour, irony or ridicule; it relativizes constructed hierarchies and strips them of their self-importance; and it generates empathy by gazing at the familiar through the eyes of someone else.²⁷

Indeed, in many of his works, the way Tolstoy describes the *inertia* of life or man's *hypnotism* by the system (for example, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* or *What I Believe*) sounds similar to Shklovsky's idea of automated or de-automated perception of reality. Automatization-inertia becomes a universal principle of the unconscious: man's unconscious acceptance of the rhetoric of the state, faith, cultural phenomena, pedagogy, science, and life itself. This leads to blind admiration of the Leviathan, which the majority of people also perceive automatically as a self-significant and unconditional value of universal existence. Here Tolstoy stumbled onto one of the features of twentieth-century, mass-society man who lives *automatically and inertially*, in essence unconsciously, accepting the external (state) as the bulwark of his own individual life. Having bound all strata of society by thoughtless obedience to law, state bureaucratism leads to an irresponsible, orderly execution of those laws even if they are criminal and immoral from a universal human perspective. Automatization operates from within a system that cannot de-automatize itself, cannot unmask itself. On the contrary, the church, art, and science will do everything they can to serve the "work of the mechanism" as best as possible, "veiling" anything related to human life and its true meaning. The issue here is not just the deceptive essence of institutions, but also the fact that this manner of bureaucracy has been historically entrenched as the fatalism of some impersonal and inevitable will.

That is, Tolstoy showed that it is not only man who is inert, but also the bureaucratic system that is automatized and mechanical. Even as early as *War and Peace*, the writer was drawing attention to the fact that even the most organized mind seemed powerless before the system:

One thought was in Pierre's head the entire time. It was the thought of who, who had ultimately sentenced him to death? It was not the people in the commission who interrogated him . . . It was not Davout, who looked on him so humanely . . . Who had ultimately executed, killed, took away his, Pierre's, life with all his memories, aspirations, hopes, and thoughts? Who did this? And Pierre felt that it was *no one*. It was a system, a set of circumstances. Some sort of system was killing him, Pierre, taking his life, everything, destroying him (*italics mine*).²⁸

Tolstoy seems to recognize something objectively higher, a law, a system, a will, before which any particular mind and individual will is powerless, be it Napoleon, Alexander I, or Pierre Bezukhov. By and large, to estrange oneself from it does not mean to expose it, to describe all the horrors of

power, but to distance oneself from it, to retreat into one's *inner* life. At the same time, this is no synonym for extreme subjectivism, the atomic life of a "man in a shell" (that is, a return to automatization). Tolstoy was constantly seeking out forms of consciousness of life in which each man critically "reveals the work of his own conscience," distinguishing himself from the state, society, family, his external and internal self, and so forth. Only an individual man is able to distance himself and refuse to participate in the evil deeds of the state, thereby "peacefully destroying it" within himself and, as a long-term evolutionary consequence, outside himself as well (the utopian dream of the withering-away of the state). However, he can only do this by going outside of his inner world: to other people, connections, and associations.

Enstrangement from the Self

In his *Confession*, Tolstoy made *himself* an almost typical example of the possible reincarnation of a man who has overcome his animal Self on the way to his spiritual or all-human Self. Here, for the first time, he made a public demonstration of his way of *enstranging* from his sociopolitical Self as an active member of society, as an officer, a writer, and a family man, and to himself as a "simpleton," a religious person with "the people's type of worldview" who heard the voice of God in himself and believed in His Word directly, literally taking in the meaning of what was said by Him. "Christ doesn't require suffering for the mere sake of suffering, and He only expresses clearly and defiantly what He means. He says, 'Don't resist evil' . . . what had seemed contradictory now became consistent and what I had deemed superfluous became indispensable."²⁹ It was not the process of inventing circumstances that made Tolstoy simultaneously apolitical, religious, and anarchic, but the result of his spiritual enstrangement from those circumstances, that is, a new vision of life and art. "His experience suggested to him that a meaningful, free life was possible only outside politics, and this became his lifetime opinion."³⁰

The process was one of self-exposure. Tolstoy realized that the only person who could achieve this goal is the one most honest with himself and most sincere before the world. In Tolstoy, the device of enstrangement merges with a confessional form of writing, with a sincerity of expression of feelings and thoughts that would not allow his mind and his heart to speak falsely in the face of obvious contradiction: between what he saw and what he felt and understood (or did not understand) in the events around him . . . Confession is an enstrangement from one's external (animal) self that is living in accordance with generally accepted law. It helped Tolstoy to hear another voice within himself, a spiritual man who represents the true "Self" and who is inside each of us.

Like Socrates, he bares himself to the world, unafraid to open his soul indiscriminately to everyone, asking naïvely about the meaning of life, about God, about living in imitation of Christ, urging everyone to listen to the voice of the living God within themselves. (Just as Socrates called for listening to the inner voice of your *δαίμονιον*.)

Tolstoy showed that the world of aristocratic culture included entire segregated zones of “indecent mental behavior” among generally accepted and respectable conversations about nothing. He began to destroy them, first of all within himself, squeezing the writer, the landowner, the family man, the *comme-il-faut*, and finally the traditional (that is, formal) Christian out of himself drop by drop. Along the way he estranged from himself his own “drops of honey,” all his former life, peering into it with the uncomprehending gaze of a wanderer who has found himself at a crossroads,³¹ who has lost direction, but who has already broken with his former life and embarked on the true path that leads to God, his only and eternal support.

This device is thus fully consistent with Tolstoy’s main task, man’s spiritual rebirth, which many have understood as a vulgar appeal to the simple life. The ability to transfer the register of interests from *himself* (his egoistic and animal Self) and his aristocratic culture as the best (in fact, a screen for maintaining one’s animal Self) to *another* via an attempt to see the world through the eyes of *another*, be it a horse, a peasant, a child, a tree, and so forth, is the first step on the path toward extending beyond the Self into another dimension of shared life. However, escaping the automatization of one’s cultural unconscious life, which is filled with self-love, requires *reflection and emotional empathy*, that is, an even more powerful basis for discovering the other in oneself. For Tolstoy, this universal Other was his religious faith and the practice of living according to Christ.

Enstrangement is thus closely tied to his religious doctrine. For example, Medzibovskaya examines the *dialectics of nonviolence and destruction* reflected in the religious understanding of “forceful nonresistance of evil.” She studies the “creative psychology (and dialectics) of Tolstoy’s articulation of the inevitability of nonviolence and the genres, forms, devices, and imagistic repertoire with which this articulation is achieved.”³² Medzibovskaya calls his position a kind of “political theology” whose essence lies in the ethical confidence in good’s obligatory victory over evil. Analyzing Tolstoy’s article “Carthago delenda est,” the scholar clearly shows that this “destruction” does not involve any violent action (in terms of physical or political activity). She also examines the peaceful destruction of the “inert consciousness of the masses” as a method of enstrangement identified by Shklovsky in a rarely cited passage: “Tolstoy is not only a great creator, but also a great destroyer of the old structures in which he eliminates the tired preconsciousness that is ready to accept truisms at face value.”³³ That is, he expands his critique into the political plane of revelations.

That estrangement operates as a powerful trigger for exposing the system's rottenness does seem to be the case. However, despite the persuasiveness and attractiveness of the use of estrangement as a device of socio-political and religious critique, its theoretical-disruptive meaning is more evident in art than in polemics. In his political treatises, this is perhaps only a side effect of Tolstoy's attempt to address the more important task at hand. Tolstoy has no need to estrange himself from reality in his articles, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Reality was already de-automatized in the perception of nearly all thinking people, and his critique was open and transparent. There is no need to dig deeply, when the titles of his appeals alone suffice: "Come to Your Senses!" (1904), "I Cannot Be Silent" (1908), "For God or Mammon?" (1896), "Why Do People Stupefy Themselves?" (1891), "Thou Shalt Not Kill" (1907), "It Is Time to Understand" (1909), and so forth.

Tolstoy's estrangement is important not only in order to expose the total lie of state institutions and the unnaturalness of operatic art or church ideology. Equally important is the revelatory effect of Tolstoy's artistic *vision of the world*, which Shklovsky emphasizes when analyzing *how* the writer looks at things.

The logic of the author's vision works thus. Growing up as a "symbolic animal," mastering culture, science, religion, and life itself, then becoming a creative genius of the literary world, Tolstoy *gradually* comes to understand their false artificiality, their illusory nature, due to the illusory nature of the cultural environment itself, both the symbolic and ideological environment, which cleverly operate with words, images, and ideas. Shklovsky correctly notes that traditional art deals with a finished "product," while new art (Formalists) is more interested in the process of creating and producing it. Both are important for Tolstoy, but in the first stage, he was actually more focused on the "product" much more than the "meaning of its production." This is where his *Confession* begins:

The theory adopted by these people, my fellow writers, was that life proceeds according to a general development and that we, the thinkers, play the primary role in that development; moreover, we, the artists and the poets, have the greatest influence on the thinkers. Our mission is to educate people. In order to avoid the obvious question—"What do I know and what can I teach?"—the theory explained that it is not necessary to know anything and that the artist and the poet teach unconsciously.³⁴

It is excessive faith in the semiotic world of culture rather than the world of "things" and the world of labor, an orientation toward "recognizing" and "speaking" rather than "doing," "seeing," and "listening," that eventually becomes the cause of his metanoia, leading to his destructive critique of culture, literature, and art.

This was no anarchism. “I am ranked among the anarchists, though I am not an anarchist, but a Christian. My anarchism is only the application of Christianity to human relations. Same with anti-militarism, communism, vegetarianism.”³⁵ Christianity became the main basis for “extending beyond himself” into the world; through this, Tolstoy received a new, “enstranged” vision of the world. The whole feature of his critique is that he looked through the eyes of a primitive Christian marveling at the lies of pseudo-Christian culture as he exposed the cultured simulations of faith, art, and life. His naïve surprise is also the source of his destructive power. Christianity is not merely words or metaphors to him. Christianity is the “substance of life,” reality itself, represented in labor, consciousness, moral communication with others, and love for God. It is Christ himself and his doctrine of love and nonresistance to evil.

Meanwhile, as a writer, Tolstoy had no other tool but his words to approach the essence of things. He understood perfectly well that in order to be heard, the text must acquire a new form; he could achieve clarity of “content” of events only by relying on the adequacy of a form that would also entail “infection” by text. In this sense, it is not only the artistic text but also any polemical, folkloric, religious, or philosophical-analytical texts that move the reader from “the emotion of form” (L. Vygotsky) to a profound grip or an ethics of content. The main thing on this path is to create a form that will destroy the falsity of “elite culture’s” aesthetic language of pleasures. True art is different:

All human life is filled with all kinds of works of art, from lullabies, jokes, impersonations, home decorations, clothes and utensils to church services and solemn processions. All these are activities of art. What we call art in the narrow sense of the word is not all human activity that conveys feelings but only those that, for some reason, we single out from all this activity and to which we attach special importance.³⁶

Tolstoy attached this kind of special importance to those forms and types of art that flowed from the Russian people’s life and religious consciousness. He began writing fairy tales, parables, stories in the folk style, and so forth. Nor was this avant-gardism.

The text exists due to the cohesion of form, word, and meaning of life; it becomes a powerful detonator for peaceful “destruction” (above all, in the mind of the reader) of the system of generally accepted norms and formalized rules of meaningless life. Art does this by “infecting” readers with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that the artist experiences:

In everything, in nearly everything that I have written, I was guided by the need to collect thoughts that are linked together in order to express myself, but each thought expressed separately in words loses its meaning; it becomes terribly diminished when taken out of the linkage in which it is

found. The linkage itself is not created by thought (I think) but by something else, and there is no way to express the basis of this linkage directly in words; but it is possible only indirectly, in words describing images, actions, positions.³⁷

We should stipulate that only a genius like Tolstoy or a true believer can infect others with the virus of love, goodness, and justice. In the mouth of a bigot or a mediocrity, the same words can only elicit alienation and nihilism.

Art leads to truth, understood either as a thing in its original essence or as the meaning of some event that eludes an outside (non-artistic) vision of the world. This is where estrangement becomes the most effective method of penetrating into the essence of things in search of the meaning of life. It is not worried about “everyday life’s” multiplicity of isolated meanings; it destroys the very concept of multiplicity in relation to the semantics of the word “meaning.” Meaning is singular: It is the first and the last, *the meaning of life for man and humanity*.

“Estranging ourselves from estrangement”

Let us return to the examples Shklovsky gives in *Art as Device* of Tolstoy’s estrangement in order to see what makes them unique. “In each example, some accepted social practice or institution—corporal punishment, private property, opera—is seen through the corrective lens of art. It is shown de-constructed, in its elemental form by art; and perception is given the task of reassembling those parts into a truer, more elemental and unspoiled vision of the thing.”³⁸

The first example is “estrangement of the concept of flogging”; the second, the horse Kholstomer’s view of the world of private property; the third, military battles, salons, and opera in *War in Peace*; the fourth, the city and the court in *Resurrection*, and so forth.

It is striking that the “unspoiled vision of the thing” through estrangement does not coincide with Tolstoy’s mission as a social critic of the system. Shklovky’s interpretation of the flogging (*porka*) example is, oddly enough, far from the critique of the horrors of the police system that modern scholars find in it. Shklovsky looks at the flogging from the position of estrangement, as an observation of fragments of a phenomenon (flogging procedures), ironically replacing one type of flogging with another in the description of the act. This achieves the effect of ironically exposing flogging as an anti-human event without critiquing the political system that uses it as a punishment. Children too are flogged, but this does not mean that criticism of this fact entails abandoning childbearing or the institution of the family.

Likewise, seeing private property through the eyes of a horse cannot be called a device of socioeconomic critique. Of course we notice that the horse “says” things like *property, I, mine, and farm*, but *it* does not “think”

in economic categories: It does not expose them. The horse lives inside words that economists treat as external concepts and abstractions of the system, but for the horse they are just a form of existence without any understanding of what that form is and why it is good or bad. Kholstomer's lack of understanding is not a demand for justice (which would be absurd), but the horse secretly demonstrates to us a penetration into the "unspoiled vision of the thing" associated with its activity, its products, interpersonal relations, and the value of the very existence of the horse, that is, everything that has long been erased by verbal layering of words, symbols, and concepts. The horse is wordless by nature, so it returns us directly to the original world of things, or, as Shklovsky wrote, to the "original meaning" of natural life. The horse is looking for sympathy, not ways of fighting for freedom. Using Husserl's language, we can call this demonstration of a phenomenon that has ceased to be a sign. As Victoria Faibyshenko has so accurately noted,

The destruction of the act of signification leads us, however, not to pure appearance, not to the abstract intensity of the spot, as in Shklovsky, but unexpectedly to meaning. The phenomenon as the fulfillment of meaning is made available only through the collapse of meaning, through the collapse of the "picture of the world." Precisely because we begin to contemplate it artistically as a painting, we see not the disintegration of the intentional form, not frightening or repulsive materiality (like Natasha Rostova in the opera); we see what Mamardashvili called "the lower structures of consciousness"—the spontaneity of meaning formation, which has not yet been consolidated in a thing—it is the way consciousness meets its own participation, avoiding it.³⁹

Religion occupies a special place among Shklovsky's examples:

This method of seeing things *taken out of their context* led to the fact that, in his late works analyzing dogmas and rituals, Tolstoy also applied the device of enstrangement to describing them, substituting their everyday meanings for the customary words of religious use; what resulted was something strange, monstrous, sincerely taken as blasphemy by many, causing serious pain to many. But it was all the same device by which Tolstoy perceived and recounted his surroundings. Tolstoyan perception shook Tolstoy's own faith by reaching things he long wanted to avoid (*italics mine*).⁴⁰

What does it mean *to take things out of context*, and can we call examples like "enstrangement from the opera" and "from the act of Communion in the Church" as examples of the *same order* for demonstrating the device of enstrangement? If so, and if the mechanism by which the enstranged consciousness works is the same for description of any segment of culture, as Shklovsky insists, then we can surmise that Tolstoy's use of it had nothing to do with exposing the system, art, or ecclesiastical faith. *Estranging ourselves from enstrangement*, we will show that he used the device with the opposite

goal in mind: to see “social, religious, and cultural things” in a way that lies outside the standard field of “critical thinking,” revolutionary critique, and religious sectarianism. Literature had quite enough of this even without Tolstoy. He “brought” his way of seeing things out “from under critique” on the part of culture and civilization and into the space of what he considered the only true world of Christlike life, where the thing acquires its original and true meaning.

The system cannot be fought in its own language: This is the unspoken pathos I see in Tolstoy’s exposure of power, culture, and official religion. This is exactly what Tolstoy denounced in *Confession* in relation to the circle of writers or churchmen and what made him estrange himself from social politics and revolutionism later in life.

For Shklovsky, art is where “the return of the feeling of the life . . . of a thing” manifests itself, namely, in the making of it. Tolstoy, however, was seeking salvation not in it but, perhaps, through it, in living a life based not on the estranged word but on the practice of Christ’s deeds. His model was the working world of laborers in whose lives he sought a well of sincerity and spiritual salvation for man.

Tolstoy practically exposed the religious cult of the state and its laws as eternal and unchanging. As has already been noted, he considered the most important thing man’s “Self-consciousness,” the core of the primordial moral foundation within each of us that makes us party to ourselves, each other, and God. That is how the language of philosophical anthropology would put it.

Speaking the language of life, Tolstoy asserted the right to see human life not as an aesthetic or sociopolitical activity but as man’s autonomous life with God and in God. “Christ says to me: ‘Live for your happiness and for that of that others, but do not believe in the snares—temptations (σκάνδαλος)—that attract you by semblance of happiness, while they, in reality, deprive you of it and entice you into evil. Do not deprive yourself of the happiness given to you.’”⁴¹

In his work, Tolstoy tried to put a complex process into practice: while relying on words, to overcome their cultured (symbolic) meaning through a direct “vision” of the thing they designate (to separate sign and significance, the making and the made); while relying on culture, to overcome its “decorum and screens” in order to return things to their original primordial meaning.

Tolstoy perceived a culture in which meaning had lost its original connection with the sign as hostile, even deceitful, for living man. The world of evil and lies is built from the language of words and symbols. It is words and their rationalization, their all-understanding logic, that replaces people with thoughts, feelings, and actions, displacing labor, the life and death of millions of “mute and naïve” people feeding the select handful of

priests of culture, to the periphery of meaning. Language, logic, upbringing, education, faith, and traditions: These are all the world of habituated life, an automatic mode of perception characteristic of people of his elite circle. The more developed a person is, the more cultured he is, the more he can be described in the language of signs and symbols, which makes him all the more powerless before the fatal order of a life not created by him.

Instead of a conclusion

The topic Shklovsky raises goes beyond the current one. The paradox is that culture gives us the status of Homo Sapiens, but the more civilized we become, the greater the danger of losing that sapience on the path to global progress and becoming a “cog” (*shtiftik*) in the system. The issue is not just proverbial “over-education,” which does little to teach the mind. The task is to find, while developing within an external environment of total words, numbers, signs, techniques, and devices, a way of returning to our original self, to the one who possesses the original mind, body, and emotions, to the one God sent into the world for some task known only to Him. “It seems to me that enstrangement is an effective means of countering the risk we all face: the risk of taking reality (including ourselves) for granted, for something self-evident.”⁴²

For Tolstoy, the problem of cultural critique is not only that it distorts or perverts the true meaning of life, as captured in the working life of millions of people. It distorts reality itself, “which lies outside the limits of language”⁴³ yet is described only through it. Language from the “house of being” became being itself, not allowing others to think about being in different ways. In his sense of the injustice of culture, Tolstoy came very close to Marx’s doctrine of alienation.⁴⁴ While Marx understands the essence of alienation as the actual separation of the producer from the products of his labor, Tolstoy understands that alienation lies at the heart of the mechanisms of the entire culture, when its fruits are inaccessible to those without whom it could not have come about at all.

He therefore understood his task as “undermining” the foundation that gave rise to this cultural alienation by carrying out the act of desemiologization within life itself. At issue here is not the search for a better language, political order, or economic system to aid in overcoming this alienation and to inoculate the world with a “virus of justice.” Tolstoy had highly negative view of any political construct of power, be it democracy, authoritarianism, or tyranny. Many of Tolstoy’s contemporaries saw his teachings only as “crude communism” with its primitivism and Rousseauist rejection of culture. The view of Tolstoy as

an anarchist operates within this politicized framework. “But I am not an anarchist, I am a Christian.” The distance between these two words is enormous.

The fact is, Tolstoy dreamed of man’s return to the natural state of life, to the original meaning of the word “*thing*” (*veshch*) as that which results from labor, a product of activity. “We are talking precisely about the ‘thing’ as a product of human activity, as a ‘product’ in contrast to the more general meaning of the word, ‘any object of the material world,’ which, for example, Kant means when speaking of ‘things in themselves.’”⁴⁵ Marx would call this the objective appropriation of the world. The child first takes possession of the world’s things “actively-practically” and only later symbolically/culturally.

One important means of differentiation was the separation of words and deeds that we call living life. Tolstoy’s heroes the most like himself are of very few words; they are generally people from the world of labor, from peasant culture. In *The Power of Darkness*, the peasant Akim often repeats one meaningless phrase, “*tayo-tayo*,” which apparently does not even require decoding (it reminds us of a famous phrase of Tolstoy’s favorite contemporary, the peasant Vasilii Siutaev: “Everything’s within you and everything’s present”). Platon Karataev, of course, possessed this kind of unique, estranged language:

Platon could not remember what he said a minute ago, just as he could not find a words to express his favorite song to Pierre. It went like ‘my darling, my birch, I feel heartsick’ but the words did not make any sense. He did not understand and could not understand the meaning of words taken separately from speech. His every word and action was manifestation of an activity unknown to him, which was his life. But his life, as he himself saw it, had no meaning as a separate life. It made sense only as part of the whole that he constantly felt. His words and actions poured out of him as evenly, necessarily, and immediately as a fragrance flows from a flower. He could not understand either the significance or the meaning of an action or word taken individually.⁴⁶

To eliminate automatism in life, we must stop taking life as a given and understand it as something given from above, from the One who brought us into this life. In Kantian terms, we could say that every call to enstrangement in Tolstoy means a shift in coordinates from phenomenal reality to a transcendental one associated with living according to Christ’s commandments. For this change to take place, we need an “explosion of the semiotic window” (Yuri Lotman). The “religious enstrangement” of Tolstoy and the Tolstoyans from the world of words, symbols, ideological lies, church, culture, and the state was just such an explosion. Politicians, philosophers, and revolutionaries who think in words saw this merely as a call for destruction and anarchism.

But that is another story.

Notes

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2. G. Landauer, *Der werdende Mensch. Aufsätze zur Literatur* (Leipzig: Weimar, 1980), p. 99.
3. D.T. Orwin, "Introduction: Tolstoy as Artist and Public Figure," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, ed. D.T. Orwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 49–76, 51.
4. A. Christoyannopoulos, *Tolstoy's Political Thought: Christian Anarcho-Pacifist Iconoclasm Then and Now* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).
5. D. Stephens, "The Non-Violent Anarchism of Leo Tolstoy," in *Government Is Violence: Essays on Anarchism and Pacifism*, ed. D. Stephens (London: Pheonix, 1990), pp. 7–19.
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8. V.F. Asmus, "Religiozno-filosofskie traktaty L.N. Tolstogo," in L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochineni v 90-t* (Moscow; Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1928–1958), vol. 23, p. ix.
9. V.I. Lenin, "Tolstoi i ego epokha," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 55-ti t.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi literatury, 1967–1975), vol. 17, p. 32.
10. A. Christoyannopoulos, "The Subversive Potential of Leo Tolstoy's 'Defamiliarization': A Case Study in Drawing on the Imagination to Denounce Violence," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 2019, vol. 22, no. 5, pp. 562–580.
11. L. Knapp, "The Development of Style and Theme in Tolstoy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, ed. D.T. Orwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.161–175.
12. M.A. Denner, "Dusting Off the Couch (and Discovering the Tolstoy Connection in Shklovsky's 'Art as Device')," *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal*, 2008, no. 52(3), pp. 370–388.
13. B.A. Prokudin, "Tolstoi: printsip 'ostraneniia' v politike," *Tsennosti i smysli*, 2013, no. 1, pp. 139–146.
14. V. Erlich, "Russian Formalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 34, No 4, pp. 627–638; M.A. Denner, "Dusting Off the Couch (and Discovering the Tolstoy Connection in Shklovsky's 'Art as Device')," *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal*, 2008, no. 52(3), pp. 370–388; O. Khanzen-Leve, *Russkii formalizm. Metodologicheskaiia rekonstruktsiia razvitiia na osnove printsipa ostraneniia* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 2001); Ya. Levchenko, *Drugaiia nauka v poiskakh biografii* (Moscow: HSE, 2012).
15. First published in the *Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo iazyka*, vol. 2 (Petrograd, 1917), pp. 3–14. The text was originally called a "manifesto of the Formalist method" by B.M. Eikhenbaum in his article "Teoriia 'formal'nogo metoda'" (1925).
16. "The words 'estrangement' and 'enstrangement': both spellings are logical." V. B. Shklovsky, *Ozherel'ia zabluzhdeniia* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1981), p. 25.

17. V.B. Shklovskii [Shklovsky], *O teorii prozy (1929)* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1982), p. 80.
18. C. Ginzburg, "Ostranenie. Predistoriia odnogo literaturnogo priema," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2006, no. 4 (available at <https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2006/4/ostranenie-predystoriya-odnogo-literaturnogo-priema.html>).
19. V.B. Shklovskii, "Iskusstvo kak priem," in Shklovskii, *O teorii prozy*, p. 12.
20. Denner, "Dusting Off the Couch (and Discovering the Tolstoy Connection in Shklovsky's 'Art as Device')," p. 373.
21. The treatise was first published in the journal *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* in 1897–1898. It was published at the same time in England in a translation by A. Maude as an appendix to the journal *The New Order*.
22. L.N. Tolstoi [Tolstoy], *Chto takoe iskusstvo*, in L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniei v 90-t* (Moscow; Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1928–1958), vol. 30, p. 70.
23. Tolstoi, *Chto takoe iskusstvo*, p. 60.
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27. *Ibid.*, p. 569.
28. L.N. Tolstoi, *Voina i mir*, vol. 4, chap. 10, in L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniei v 90-t*, vol. 12, pp. 38–39.
29. L.N. Tolstoi, *V chem moia vera*, in L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniei v 90-t*, vol. 23, p. 311.
30. Orwin, "Introduction: Tolstoy as Artist and Public Figure," p. 51.
31. R.F. Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger. A Study in Fiction and Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).
32. I. Medzibovskaya, "Three Attempts on Carthage: Tolstoy's Designs of Nonviolent Destruction," in *Tolstoy and Spirituality* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), p. 181.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
34. L.N. Tolstoi, *Ispoved'*, chapter 2, in L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniei v 90-t*, vol. 23, p. 6. (English translation by David Patterson. See L. Tolstoy, *Confession* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), p. 19.)
35. L.N. Tolstoi, *Dnevnik*, August 24, 1906, in L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniei v 90-t*, vol. 55, p. 239.
36. Tolstoy, *Chto takoe iskusstvo*, chapter 5, in L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniei v 90-t*, vol. 30, p. 67.
37. L.N. Tolstoy, letter to N.N. Strakhov, April 23, 1876, in L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniei v 90-t*, vol. 62, p. 269.
38. Denner, "Dusting Off the Couch (and Discovering the Tolstoy Connection in Shklovsky's 'Art as Device')," p. 382.

39. V.Yu. Faibyshenko, “Vstrecha s fenomenom: voploshchenie i razvopoloshchenie,” *Granitsy sub”ektivnosti*, 2013, no. 3(12), p. 37. (English translation by V. Faibyshenko.)
40. Shklovskii, *O teorii prozy* (1929), p. 17.
41. Tolstoi, *V chem moia vera*, chapter 12, in L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90-t*, vol. 23, p. 454. (English translation by Constantine Popoff, chapter 12.—Trans.)
42. Ginzburg, “Ostranenie. Predistoriia odnogo literaturnogo priema.”
43. Yu.M. Lotman, “Kul’tura i vzryv,” in Iu.M. Lotman, *Semiosfera* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPb, 2010), p. 30.
44. When Bertolt Brecht’s works were published in Russian in the 1950s, “*die Verfremdung*” (“distancing,” Brecht’s translation of estrangement into German) was mistakenly translated as “alienation,” which caused confusion with the philosophical term “alienation” (*die Entfremdung*) as used by Marx in early writings. Subsequent translations in the other direction turned out to be just as unsuccessful: “estrangement” (*ostranenie*), “alienation” (*otchuzhdenie*). Additional layers were generated by French poststructuralist theory and practice, primarily the works of J. Derrida, who, based on the experience of Russian Formalism, proposed a French-language analogue of defamiliarization: deconstruction. Deconstructivism, however, warped the understanding of the idea of the “made-ness of things,” where the procedure of interpretation practically destroys the integrity and self-sufficiency of what is comprehended. In estrangement, Should estrangement be enstrangement? on the contrary, this uniqueness and self-sufficiency are not only preserved but also reveal new facets. See *Proektivnyi filosofskii slovar’: Novye terminy i poniatii*, ed. G.L. Tul’chinskii and M.N. Epstein (St. Petersburg: Aleteiia, 2003), p. 285.
45. S. Zenkin, “Veshch’, forma i energiia,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2006, no. 4 (available at https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/novoe_literaturnoe_obozrenie/160_nlo_6_2019/article/21803/#_ftnref1).
46. Tolstoi, *Voina i mir*, vol. 4, chapter. 13, in L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90-t*, vol. 12, pp. 50–51.

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