
Reflections on the House at Iasnaia Poliana*

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Every artist balances the life he lives with the texts he creates, and finds a place where they “collide” with each other. For readers, Tolstoy’s estate exists, first and foremost, by virtue of his literary works. But not entirely. A large part of the writer’s personal history is connected with the house at Iasnaia Poliana. It is unknown why the personality of a writer becomes associated with “one-and-a-half rooms” (Brodsky), with a writer’s desk (Kafka), and, as it happens, with household memories for Tolstoy. It is only clear that no two dwellings are identical in the same way no two texts are alike.

The Iasnaia Poliana estate, built by the grandfather and later enlarged by the grandson, constitutes an extraordinarily informative aggregate of signs made up of various items that were “somehow learnt by heart” (Goethe). The interior of the house is a concentration of the family’s memories and is particularly interesting from a semiotic point of view. The grandfather and the grandson lived in their own “time capsules,” checking their sense of time against the English Norton clocks with which guests of the museum today compare the hands of their own watches. The relevance of the estate is maintained, in part, through this connection with time, and it is here that the source of its continued fascination for visitors is to be found. In addition to being a reflection of the writer during his lifetime, Iasnaia Poliana is an expression of the happiness of life, a carrier of everyday domestic expediency, and an “echo” of the opinions of its master, of his likes and dislikes.

No other life can be called a journey to such an extent as the life of Tolstoy. In the rooms of the Iasnaia Poliana estate artefacts evoking the memory of the great man abound: photographs of both the young soldier and the peace-loving old man, a cabinet of hunting rifles belonging to a vegetarian, and the portraits of a horde of children whose sire was to renounce physical passion. All of this constitutes a moving testimony to the life of a man who strived for simplicity and was continually censured by the society into which he was born. His final escape, resembling, as it did, King Lear in the company of his beloved daughter, represented a search for a new life at the age of eighty-two, a final journey that ended at a country railway station.

In this curious reference to Tolstoy’s estate it seems Peter Ustinov has not pointed to the most glaring contradictions present in the collision of family affairs and the act of writing, of life and text. The same hand that wrote *War and Peace* also stitched boots, making for an interesting “supplementary volume” to Tolstoy’s remarkable epic. And here in the drawers of every possible kind of cabinet and desk writing implements lie side by side with tools required for physical labour. The estate has retained a large number of personal belongings including a slightly worn pair of shoes, permanently altered by their owner’s gait, and a once stylish yellow waist coat revealing the age of its wearer. All these items recreate the physical appearance of the writer and resurrect the outlines of his life. In all these things there is something unmistakably and heart-rendingly Tolstoyan.

This “S-E-N-S-I-B-L-E minded man” (V. Rozanov) was frugal not only in his use of words but also with regards to the interior of his estate that he “composed” over the course of almost fifty years. Tolstoy depicted the workings of reason and intellect and could hardly be called “the poet and artist of times past.” In the house, there are no antique rugs or tapestries, no fragile china, and, mercifully, no grand bourgeois monstrosities à la Biedermeier. There is nothing that reveals a sense of self-satisfied complacency; here one encounters no fear of emptiness. Everything is simple, comfortable, and functional. The entire mood of the estate is underpinned by the whiteness of the

rooms that suggests the leaves of writing paper that were Tolstoy's constant companions.

In *War and Peace* Tolstoy conveyed the greatest mistrust toward possessions in general (but not towards the familial "aroma" of domestic memories) by means of indifferent epithets. The interiors of the novel, which display traces of the real Iasnaia Poliana, exhibit the same predominance of substance over style that is encountered on the estate. Tolstoy did not like objects without associations, without the smell of memories. The simplicity of the estate's interior deepened in meaning on account of the semantic subtext of the objects with which it was furnished. An insignificant piece of furniture, modestly built, acquired in Tolstoy's eyes a particular importance and aplomb because of its past history. Each piece of furniture was a reminder of someone dear to him—a favourite "aunty," his father or grandfather.

Tolstoy was neither a follower of trends nor a collector of stylish objects. He did not even have Nikolai Rostov's "hunter's" collection of Turkish pipes, let alone such *recherché* items as classical busts of Goethe or the writing implements of historical personages like those belonging to Victor Hugo. Tolstoy had other priorities and they lay primarily with his family towards whom he felt deep feelings of devotion.

Far more important to the owner of Iasnaia Poliana was the art of organizing the space around him and the continuous shifting of the environment in his place of residence. He repeatedly moved the location and altered the arrangement of his study, making it into a wanderer through the everyday chaos of life. Different rooms, the "vaulted" one, the one "for guests," and the one with the "Italian window," all served as studies at various times. Through all this, the bedroom, by contrast, remained undisturbed, not once changing its function.

Everything on the estate was extremely functional. And everything, beginning with the fountain pen used for "catching" ideas during the night at the moment of their conception, to the special stand used for writing them down placed at the head of the bed, to the moveable arm-chairs with their own desks used for composing letters,

and ending with the now-famous Tolstoyan shirt, was connected with the main occupation of Iasnaia Poliana's proprietor, the task of writing. Writing united the mind, hand, pen, and paper in mysterious ways and it involved a large collection of complementary items: the "Remington" typewriter, the mimeograph, and the offices that housed a virtual brigade of secretaries. The leaves of writing paper, pens, letter openers, and blotters found throughout the house in addition to his father's writing desk of Persian walnut, his daughters' little stools, the piles of manuscripts, and the absence of any unused space on scrap paper, all testified to the extent to which the other activities of the house were subordinated to writing.

In 1855, at age 27, Tolstoy sold the thirty-two-room main house at Iasnaia Poliana to pay gambling debts, and its new owner dismantled it and moved it to a neighbouring estate. When Tolstoy married, he settled his new wife in the remaining right wing of the original mansion. It had five upper rooms: his own bedroom (a corner room like his mother's), the nursery, the bedroom occupied by his beloved guardian, "Aunty" T. Ergol'skaia, the dining room with the large window, and the drawing room with its balcony where coffee was drunk. The low "vaulted room" down below served variously as nursery, dining room and study. There was insufficient space for a separate study in this wing of the old house. Every room was swallowed up by members of the household that Tolstoy, "singer" of family happiness, celebrated. Aleksandrine Tolstaia, a close friend and relative who served as lady-in-waiting at the Imperial Court in Petersburg, recalled that the house itself was "disorderly and not very comfortable" but it duly compensated for this on account of its "lively layout" throughout which "sweet, pleasant people noted for their straightforwardness and lack of affectation could be found in every corner." During the early years the space used for writing was minimal and was restricted to the point where Tolstoy only half-jokingly could be referred to as a "literary man incognito." At this point in time writing had not become "fatal" and did not entail unpleasantness

for his family. It had yet to steal him away from them. Over the years the vocation of writer was to corrode Tolstoy's family life, leaving behind a complex of guilt and blame, a sense of an "unfathomable tragedy," and stern accusations of the immorality of that to which in the early days he had given himself utterly.

Early on, within the wing, still without additions, family life reigned supreme. Writing requires quiet and solitude more than it does family commotion, however. Tolstoy's masterpieces were the labours of a solitary man possessed by an extreme sense of individualism that enabled him to be alone with eternity, where his wife and children could only play the role of outside guests. A correlation between family and the musings of the solitary writer was nonetheless established in Tolstoy's life. At certain moments his wife and children completely engrossed the writer, altering both his thoughts and demeanor, and forcing him to consider the mundane and insignificant. His home was a blend of work and family. Like two corners in a room full of people, there was one place for "serious conversations" and another for youthful merriment. Here we see a combining of the two realities of family comfort and ascetic literary solitude; each operated along parallel lines and evoked associations in the other while simultaneously intersecting and growing apart.

Over the years Tolstoy was forced to enlarge the wing of the house he and his family occupied, eventually tripling the number of its rooms. Perhaps the only way to overcome the stultifying life spent on a country estate with its snowstorms, endless forests, and long nights was with concealed pathos: "If I cease to exist, then the whole world will perish." Tolstoy possessed immense creativity and everything around him—his wife, children, house, and clothes—acquired a writerly tinge. Sof'ia Andreevna became the "wife of a writer," his son, Lev L'vovich, the author of Chopin's Preludes, and even his shirt became "Tolstovka," a model of prosaic attire.

Tolstoy's touch could be felt in everything, from the lay-out of the estate and the functionality of the rooms, down to their psychological comfort that required attention to the smallest detail, such

as the precise arrangement on the writer's desk of the small bronze dogs and the tortoise-shell bell. Tolstoy's influence over his domestic environment was enhanced by such unsubstantial elements as the warmth of the Russian stove, the smell of savory dishes, the sounds of music coming from the piano, and the striking of the grandfather clock.

It was as if he journeyed about his own house. Tolstoy's house is distinct from Tolstoy the man in the same way a map of the Earth is distinct from the Earth itself. Nevertheless, his place of residence undoubtedly expands the horizons of our ideas about the great man. It is a mirror that reflects Tolstoy's family life and, like the literature he produced, is a singular effort of love. The presence of light was important for both his daily life and his artistic endeavours. Tolstoy was a "man of the sun" who busied himself with writing exclusively during the morning hours when the "critic" was stern, but the sun gentle and optimistic. Tolstoy took great pleasure in the sunrise and it was for this reason each of his studies was found without fail in the section of the estate facing east. Led by the promptings of his muse, Tolstoy literally "journeyed" throughout the house in search of the sun. His enthusiasm for literary work was directly related to the strength of the sun's rays.

The decor of the house at Iasnaia Poliana suggested simple human happiness, but with the passing of years an accretion of objects in the house made it stifling. Gradually it filled up with hunting equipment, tennis racquets, trophies, portraits of family members, and children's toys. Its vistas no longer pleased the proprietor who, apart from the hours in his study, spent little time indoors. After the estate was enlarged and its symmetry destroyed, Tolstoy acquired a study for himself that served as "a selfish asylum for the wailing of his personality."

The interior at Iasnaia Poliana was unique for the absence of icons (if you exclude Sof'ia Andreevna's rooms and the small icon hung unnoticeably in the hall). Instead, a reproduction of Raphael's "Sistine Madonna" was prominently displayed in a place normally reserved for icons.

This painting became both a personal symbol and a redemptive deity for the writer. During the long years between 1862 and 1885 a reproduction of it hung in the bedroom, protecting his love from the trials and tribulations of day-to-day existence. The symbol of the Madonna turned out to be rich with meaning for the writer, but, at the same time, it was also extremely personal. For Tolstoy the wonder of this image lay in its representation of motherhood. He had seen the original in 1857 in Dresden and was at once “deeply touched” by it. A short while later a reproduction of this precious image was given to him by his “priceless Sasha” [Alexandrine Tolstaia], who reminded him of a “ray of light” breaking out from under the dark clouds of life. For Tolstoy, Alexandrine, never married and somewhat older than him, was herself “the best of women” in comparison to whom all others came only “up to her knees” and before whom he mentally donned a “moral tuxedo” and “white gloves.” “Your Madonna hangs here and gladdens us” he informed her, his “universal wife,” during a shared moment of intimate reflection.

Tolstoy’s reverential attitude toward his prematurely deceased mother is well known. Forced to pass through life without recourse to maternal affection, Tolstoy experienced nostalgia for this loss and dreamed of a new happiness to be provided by his future wife whose qualities would

recall in some way those of his mother. The Madonna filled the gap created by the absence of a maternal image and, as a result, a bond was established between Tolstoy and the painting. Family happiness at Iasnaia Poliana developed under the watchful eye of the Sistine Madonna hanging from a piece of cloth in the bedroom. It remained there for more than fifteen years, a witness to both the births and the upbringing of the children. This “Madonna” guarded their domestic happiness and helped Tolstoy maintain a balance between the study and the nursery.

Later the “singer of family happiness” incarnated himself as an advocate for abstinence from sexual relations and, as a result, disavowed his previously cherished ideal of the family. Now it was the writer, more than the husband, who was in need of this idealized image. In keeping with this change, he moved the “Madonna” from the bedroom to the study. A fundamental change in semantics had taken place. At some point in time the image of the Madonna-mother had been elevated and transformed into another symbol—a Muse.

*Translated by Paul Haddock, abridged by Donna Orwin