

The Whole World of Tolstoy

“Tolstoy—he’s a whole world...”

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A Type of Isaiah: The Reception of Tolstoy in *Fin-de-siècle* Brazil

At the end of the nineteenth century, as a great wave of works by Russian writers swept the world, Tolstoy held a distinctive place: His was the only fame that was not to be posthumous. When, between 1883 and 1886, countless critiques and translations of Russian authors flooded the French market, Tolstoy had not even turned 60. He would continue his craft for another two-and-a-half decades.

French critics were important mediators in this international process of literary diffusion, particularly the French viscount Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé who wrote the 1886 essay “The Russian Novel.” If the French influence was valid in general, it was especially so for Latin America and Brazil, which were decidedly Francophile throughout the nineteenth century and until the 1920s.

While international critics viewed the Russian novelists as great esthetic and cultural innovators, intellectuals on the periphery of the worldwide literary system, such as the Brazilians, saw the Russian works as examples of literary emancipation. Throughout the nineteenth century, Brazilian thinkers had experienced grave doubts about the existence of a truly national art. (The debates were in many ways similar to those in Russia in the same era.) The mass arrival of Russians on the international scene stimulated those on the literary periphery, representing the successful formation of a relevant literature from a place previously considered “without literature.”

As numerous scholars have already examined Tolstoy’s crisis in the 1870s and

1880s, this essay will not undertake a detailed analysis. Briefly, however, from the viewpoint of critical reception, his role as a polemicist and indoctrinator has been considered at least as important as that of his role as a fiction writer. The novelist was read in parallel to the thinker, with often the latter being primary. Thus, the books by Tolstoy advertised in a Rio de Janeiro newspaper by French publisher Lombaerts in 1886 were *all* of doctrine (*Que Faire* among others). José Carlos Júnior, an essayist then writing in the northern, interior state of Ceará (considered one of the most provincial parts of Brazil), noted that “*philosophers* such as Tolstoy resort to the novel or devote a great part of their wakefulness to it.” This thought was echoed by important critic José Veríssimo, who wrote about Tolstoy at the start of the twentieth century:

The reader knows that this aristocratic and illustrious name is that of one of the great writers of our time. And not just a great writer for the power of invention, the abundance of imagination, the force of thought, the excellence of style, and the originality of concept, but also, *which is more worthy, a great spirit and a great heart.* (219; Italics mine)

On the eve of Tolstoy’s death at Astapovo station, a journalist at the *Diário Popular* summarized well the high regard in which Tolstoy was held:

Tolstoy is indisputably Russia’s greatest novelist and possibly the most notable of the current era. And, without doubt, the most original thinker. The mixture of pessimism, anarchy, and mysticism that cha-

racterizes him, together with an admirable talent for writing and an incredible depth of psychological observation, has made him the most surprising figure and, in turn, the most congenial of the literary and philosophical world. (Casabona)

Tolstoy was widely covered by the Brazilian media, with Brazilian magazines displaying him in a multitude of illustrations, photographs, sketches, and caricatures—generally of French origin. Maxims and examples of Tolstoy's wisdom filled the illustrated periodicals, side by side with coverage of Voltaire, Pascal, and Cicero. *The Kreutzer Sonata* gained a Brazilian translation by important publisher Garnier in 1895. (The existence of a translation into Portuguese indicates the prestige of Tolstoy, since the majority of foreign books were read directly in their French versions.) This novel, as well as *Resurrection* and the study *What Is Art?* sparked intense debate in the press and literary periodicals. In general, these works received more comment in this *fin-de-siècle* period than *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina*.

Brazilian anarchist groups were particularly attentive to Tolstoy's ideas, which were debated extensively and in detail in anarchist and socialist publications. Influential critic Nestor Vítor studied Tolstoy based on the ideas of European social critic Max Nordau. Tolstoy also received considerable attention from Brazil's psychiatric-medical community, mainly for his consideration of the theories of Italian criminologists Cesare Lombroso and Enrico Ferri, who were greatly respected in Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Academia Brasileira de Letras ("Brazilian Academy of Literature"), created in 1897, also paid homage to Tolstoy from the outset and elected him a correspondent member of the institution in its October 25, 1898, meeting. Like Reclus and Spencer, Tolstoy was one of the few members chosen unanimously with eleven votes. Even Ibsen had one vote against him.¹

Writer and engineer André Rebouças, defender of the abolition of Brazilian slavery, gave the reading of Tolstoy an important place in his diary, written in exile in Africa after the establishment of the Brazilian Republic. The Russian writer appears in his diary as a spiritual model, a sort of ethical paradigm combining the possibility of personal regeneration with a social mission. In 1892 Rebouças writes, "I continue educating my heart by reading Tolstoy and the blessed Homer." On another date Rebouças notes, "I shall sow the doctrine of Jesus and Tolstoy; of Work and Humility; of Sacrifice and Self-denial." And in June of the same year: "For the rest, a truly Tolstoyan life; doing all my housework and saving to the limits of the possible."

In the same era, intellectual Valdemiro Cavalcanti, a member of the serio-comical group A Padaria Espiritual ("The Spiritual Bakery"), received guests for literary debates and discussion sessions on the Brazilian reality at his home, known to the group as Villa Tolstói (Carteira—Waldemiro Cavalcanti). Brazilian periodicals also occasionally reproduced interviews with Tolstoy, including one from 1897, supposedly by a "Brazilian journalist"; the interview includes mention of certain messianic groups in northeastern Brazil that, according to the interviewee, retained similarities with Russian sects (Carvalho). (The interview is probably a fraud. However, in its "invention" lies significant potential for research into popular perceptions of Tolstoy.)

Just as Tolstoy's life was followed with great interest, so too was his death. Newspapers around the world dedicated much space to the departure and death of the illustrious writer. Between November 15 and 22, 1910, the main Brazilian newspapers, reproducing information from international news agencies, were already documenting each step of his disappearance and dramatic "flight." When the news of his death arrived, the newspaper *O País* printed an illustration of Jesus Christ, solemn and regretful, standing beside Tolstoy's tomb. This is but one of the many Brazilian

contributions to the extensive Tolstoyan iconography, especially bountiful on the occasion of his death. All major newspapers documented the ultimate pilgrimage of the count through Russia, an act that must have caused profound impressions among his admirers, as it was ultimately to be the decisive encounter of the prophetic figure of Tolstoy with the death that had so obsessed him. Biographical notes and articles exuded consternation. One of these, in the *Jornal do Comércio*, filled almost one-and-a-half pages, an exceptional coverage considering the layouts of newspapers at the start of the twentieth century.

The subject would have likely continued to receive considerable coverage had it not been for the uprising of the Brazilian navy at the port of Rio de Janeiro on November 23, which would absorb media attention. The front-page photographs of the bombing victims were a stark contrast to the praise of the Tolstoyan doctrine of nonviolence expressed on the eve of that day.

However, various criticisms of Tolstoy had also arisen to match the scale of the positive commentaries. In this sense as well, the Brazilian trends followed the international standard. For example, in 1895, Viveiros de Castro suggested that the central ideas in *The Kreutzer Sonata* were a “mere repetition of Schopenhauer” (151-52). Intellectuals who opposed anarchic movements saw Tolstoy as a diffuser of dangerous ideas. Further, the religious basis of Tolstoyan thinking created incompatibilities with the socialist and anarchic movements. One review, translated from a French newspaper for the Brazilian newspaper *Aurora*, observed that the count

is not a modern revolutionary; he is a religious reformer of absolute and implacable judgments. He is the heir of those obscure sectarians who, in the times of most vivid faith and most vivid suffering, would turn up at some crossroads and evoke a Christ of social justice to the troubled multitudes. (Catonné)

The Nietzschean-anarchist writer Elísio de Carvalho likewise noted Tolstoy’s significant but pernicious influence:

The Christian spirit, reinvigorated by the propaganda of the oracle of Yasnaia Poliana, falsified the idea of anarchy, obliterated the moral sentiments and destroyed the rebellious instinct, awakening in the human being instincts of servility and submission that seemed dormant in the masses.

Adherents of science and modern materialism, seen by Brazilian intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century as advanced instruments of understanding and world change, were losing patience with Tolstoy’s attacks on scientific knowledge. The very idea that Tolstoy was qualified to teach (or indoctrinate) the masses was itself subject to the most virulent criticisms, as in this commentary from the magazine *Ateneida* in 1903:

A Russian, count by profession and of literary passion, wrote novels in a fanatical tranquility in his properties in Yasnaia Poliana. The individual was discovered. And to impress, the philosophical beauty of his books was noted. The count, amazed, turned himself philosopher. The Slav stated the most foolish banalities of vulgarly dissident christianisms. But all recognized—or so they said—his famous genius. And they spread through the whole world the philosophical glory of the old novelist, completely ignorant of philosophy and of science, profane. (Encolpo)

Critics and reviewers exhaustively explored the contradictions between Tolstoy’s doctrine and life. The following is one commentary among many, published on the eve of Tolstoy’s death, and particularly aggressive:

He spent almost all his existence dreaming of a world of good, attacking religions for, at the end of such a glorious journey, come to denounce mystical tendencies in his own

acts and writings. [...] Moreover, a little more than a year ago, the excommunicate of Russian Orthodoxy did not consent to the publication of his *Resurrection*, and old novel; he wanted to radically rework it. This in March of last year. Since then his studies have been directed to another order of work, the “mysticism of the octogenerian” had taken him over. He even wrote a gospel—this when he told all he wanted to isolate himself from the world. But what was his detachment from earthly things? The infirmity of age, which does not spare the brain, which weakens things of the spirit. [...] Well, we need to detach ourselves from the fetishism we all have for this great Russian; his detachment could either be through a great sanctity of the soul, or it could come from a soul tired of happiness, of enjoyment, for whom money no longer has attraction—it would be useless to him now.² (“O grande russo”)

Nevertheless, no aspect of his doctrine or his personal life caused as much uproar as the theses developed in his essay about esthetics. Tasso Fragoso, one of the founders of the Academia Brasileira de Letras, analyzed the theses of *What Is Art?* and came to the curious conclusion that the doctrines of Auguste Comte, who enjoyed great popularity in Brazil, were superior to those of Tolstoy. *What Is Art?* also generated angry responses. According to critic Agripino Grieco, Tolstoy was behaving with the “fury of an esthetical terrorist” (98). Poet Alphonsus de Guimaraens resented Tolstoy’s “barbaric critique of Shakespeare and Dante, whose sacred images, in the rage of a true iconoclast, he tried to raze to the ground” (416). Essayist Silvio Romero followed a similar tack: “The example of the portentous Tolstoy, who wrote a whole book (*What is Art?*) in which he advances, let it be said in passing, great absurdities regarding Shakespeare and Wagner” (368). Finally, critic Péricles Moraes compared Tolstoy to “a vandal on a Roman

plain, a naïve barbarian sacking a sumptuous palace and scorning its spoils” (163).

These examples are only indications of the presence of Tolstoy in *fin-de-siècle* Brazil, in which he was considered one of the most, or maybe the most, well known public figures in the world. The critical reception of Tolstoy in Brazil was not unlike his reception in other nations, primarily because his reception in Brazil—and Brazil’s first contact with Russian literature in general—occurred essentially through the intermediary of French culture. However, the details of Tolstoy’s reception were distinctly Brazilian. Unease with the presence of cultural intermediation was combined with Brazilian intellectuals’ desire to get closer to Tolstoy and the Russian writers, seen as producers of the best examples of a new, virginal literature. The argument was sometimes more, sometimes less, explicit: If the Russians can do it, so can we.

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This text also appears in the upcoming proceedings of the 2007 International Conference on Tolstoy, held in August at Yasnaya Polyana, Russia.

Notes

1. I could not confirm by examining Tolstoy’s diaries and correspondences whether the count was informed that he was the newest member of the celebrated institution. In 1898 Tolstoy was receiving notes and letters from all over the world and honorary membership in various associations and organizations.
2. This kind of appraisal would be repeated in subsequent texts, confirming that *The Kreutzer Sonata* played a fundamental role in the reception of Tolstoy in Brazil. For instance:

He preached carnal abstinence between couples, this when he was already old and the father of twelve children. (Grieco 97)

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