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## From the History of Tolstoy Criticism

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### *Fedor Sologub's "The One Path of Lev Tolstoy"*

Introduction, translation, and annotation by

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#### Introduction

Fedor Sologub (Teternikov; 1863-1927) was one of the first of the Russian Symbolists to write about Lev Tolstoy and his significance for their artistic movement. He published the article "Die Welt Leo Tolstoi's" [*sic*] in 1898, meaning that it predates Dmitrii Merezhkovsky's well-known volumes (*Л. Толстой и Достоевский* [1901] and *Религия Л. Толстого и Достоевского* [1902]).<sup>1</sup> It first appeared in German because Sologub wrote it at the request of Alex Brauner, an editor of the Vienna newspaper *Die Zeit*, who was a friend of Sologub and a supporter of the Symbolist movement.<sup>2</sup> He published the Russian version, "Единый путь Льва Толстого," immediately after Tolstoy's death in 1910, just as representatives of every school of thought in Russia were writing about the great author and his importance for Russian culture.<sup>3</sup> He did introduce changes to the second version (mostly by adding language found widely throughout his post-1905 works), but its basic ideas remain unaltered.<sup>4</sup> The present translation is of the 1910 Russian version.

In "The One Path of Lev Tolstoy" Sologub depicts Tolstoy as an audacious thinker who dared to doubt all that others take for granted. According to Sologub he exposed the lies of reason [разум] and science, and refused to believe all human dogmas. Tolstoy replaced them with the artist's direct perception; Sologub, one of Russia's best-known solipsistic writers, argues that Tolstoy accepted

only that which he himself experienced, and in fact wrote only about himself and these experiences. Through the sheer force of his artistic will and skill Tolstoy, like a god, was able to create worlds that are seemingly realistic down to the last detail, but there is one essential difference between his world and ours: in his artistic world all veils are lifted and Truth is thereby revealed.

The basic Truth of Tolstoy's world is that there is no individual, separate existence [отдельное бытие] and that the human "I" is a lie, delusion, and phantom [ложь, обман, призрак]. Humans live their life with the delusion that we have our own individualities and can control our own destinies, when in fact all beings are part of one universal world organism and share one universal soul, which flows from one source. Of special importance to Sologub is the word "one" [единый], which is in the title and repeats throughout the article. The Russian единый has several possible connotations, of which Sologub makes full use in his description of Tolstoy. At its centre lies the number one [один], but this same root is also found in the words "unity" [единение], "to unite, unify" [объединить], and "only" [единственный].<sup>5</sup> The cornerstone of Sologub's worldview was the concept of the One Will, which he names "The One Will" [Единая воля] and "The One Countenance" [Единый лик].<sup>6</sup> Sologub felt that the One Will, the force that was present in and controlled everything, was similar to a puppeteer, whose human puppets existed unaware that

they were controlled by a higher force. In "The Theatre of One Will" (1908), considered by most scholars to be Sologub's most comprehensive statement of his worldview, Sologub declares that the purpose of Symbolist theatre is to reveal the One Will to the masses; this knowledge would help bring about the unity the Symbolists desired.

Boris Sorokin argues that Symbolist writings on Tolstoy inevitably reveal more about the particular author than about Tolstoy; while Sorokin does not discuss Sologub's article, it without question fits this pattern.<sup>7</sup> Sologub felt that Tolstoy's work is forceful and lifelike at least partially because, in his view, Tolstoy and he were espousing very similar ideas. In Sologub's reading, Tolstoy becomes another prophet of the One Will and a precursor of the Symbolist movement, especially as Sologub understood it.

### Notes

1. Merezhkovsky's work was first serialized in the journal *Мир искусства* (1900, #1-4, 7-12; 1901, #4-12; 1902, #2).
2. "Die Welt Leo Tolstoi's," *Die Zeit* (Vienna) 206 (September 10, 1898): 167-68.
3. "Единый путь Льва Толстого," *Собрание сочинений* 10 (St. Petersburg): 189-202. For examples of the wide range of responses to Tolstoy's death see the December 1910 and January 1911 issues of *Русская мысль*.
4. For a discussion of the two versions of the article and their echoes of Sologub's other theoretical works, as well as of Sologub's subsequent dramatization of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (written in 1912), see my forthcoming article "Fedor Sologub's Symbolist Recreation of Lev Tolstoi" (*American Contributions to the XIII International Congress of Slavists* [Columbus: Slavica, 2003]).
5. The number one has another important meaning in Sologub's portrayal of Tolstoy; while many critics saw more than one Tolstoy (pre-conversion vs. post-conversion; great artist but poor thinker), Sologub clearly feels that there is only one consistent Tolstoy.
6. Sologub's most detailed development of these ideas can be found in the articles "Театр одной воли" (*Театр: Книга о новом театре* [St. Petersburg, 1908]) and "Искусство наших дней" (*Русская мысль* 12 [December 1915]: 35-62).
7. Sorokin, *Tolstoy in Prerevolutionary Russian Culture* (Columbus, OH: 1979): 211-12. This sentiment is echoed by Tim Langen in his introduction to Andrei Bely's "Leo Tolstoy and Culture" in *Tolstoy Studies Journal* 13 (2001): 79.

## Fedor Sologub's "The One Path of Lev Tolstoy"

To enjoy a long life, world fame, and personal happiness, as well as the uplifting comforts of art and daring thought, is a happy and rare fate. Now that his mortal remains have returned to the earth and the sufferings of this great man's ailing flesh have gone away, there has arisen forever the image of a blessed and happy person, who with rare wholeness embodied the premonition of universal religion that has begun to take hold among the nations, the pre-consciousness of the universal all-human soul.

None of the great poets evoked as strong a feeling of one life as Lev Tolstoy. This is due not only to the fact that he had great command over the art of literary expression; obviously, external skill, no matter how great, is not sufficient to create such a wonderful impression of vitality and truth. A certain living persuasiveness (which Lev Tolstoy had) is required; a strength that made his works not a likeness or repetition of our world, but the creation of a real, living world in the image and likeness of its creator. This living persuasiveness is so great that its obvious contradictions do not diminish it at all, just as the contradictions that we observe in the external world do not diminish our sense of reality.

The person who looks at things from one point of view is always right and true to himself: there are no contradictions when you can look at only

one side of each object. But Lev Tolstoy did not observe from one place; he looked at the world as if from the very depths and placed us in the very centres of the action, so that we do not see his characters from the side, but look at the world with their eyes and react to external stimuli with their feelings. It always seems, when reading this wonderful writer, that he embodies the very truth of the world and its life.

It is remarkable that his world is not the same world that we know. At first Lev Tolstoy's skill screens from us the inexact correspondence of his world with ours. But if we look deeper we see that we have fallen under his spell. Just like the system of our famous geometrist Lobachevsky<sup>1</sup> (a system that is itself internally consistent, but in well-known ways does not correspond to our familiar Euclidian idea of space), Lev Tolstoy's world is another world, another planet concomitant with earth and almost repeating its life. Tolstoy's is a restless and living world, alive through and through, closely linked to the sources of life and to the truth of life. Life and death, truth and falsehood are the day and night of this world.

How was this world created?

In it there is nothing from the realm of pure fantasy. All its elements come from our earthly world. When you read Lev Tolstoy it constantly seems that he saw or lived through all of this, saw it just once, but internalized it forever. Therefore his every word exudes the strength and freshness of direct perception, as if he never is speaking about others but always only about himself.

"One must experience life once," he says, "in all of its artless beauty" (*The Cossacks*). And he experienced it once, he went through the entire range of feelings that are accessible to the human soul, and he began to question that which people find unquestionable, even though it cannot be proven, the very truth of this life and these feelings.

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<sup>1</sup>Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky (1792-1856), Russian geometrist who published the first system of non-Euclidian geometry. Most of his contemporaries dismissed his ideas and only after his death was he accorded his proper place as a revolutionary thinker.

A mercilessly truthful man, he avidly started to search for truth, systematically testing his soul. He created a world that is completely true and simple, without haloes, without sacred objects, without beauty, without any sort of grandeur, without great people, without great deeds, even without great suffering, without any of the temptations by which people have been seduced. In this debunked and un-extraordinary world the great truth, the unquestionable justification of life, is found not through a great exertion of the intellect, but by direct feeling. Life is known not with reason, as people of science have tried to know it, but it can be known only through life itself, and this cognition is more reliable, because reason, itself a part of life, cannot encompass it.

In the light of pure reason, life is senseless and impossible, and that is how it appears in the works of Lev Tolstoy to a superficial reader ruled by reason. In life people do what they do not want to do and what they should not do; they seduce themselves with words, they strive either for the unattainable or the insignificant, and in this senseless striving they clash with one another, they hate, despise, insult, exact revenge, kill and perish, and there is no truth in their lives, and their very life is a lie and illusion. If it seems that there is something lofty and sacred in this life, then it too is a delusion: every noble impulse leads to something base, every clean thing is a veil covering something foul, and all beautiful feelings, strictly analyzed, are placed into the ranks of despised desires and urges.

Even human individuality itself, the distinct and constant nature of our "I," under merciless analysis disintegrates into a deceptive phantom, into an unstable illusion hovering above the changing form of dead substance. All forms of pride and heroism become ridiculous, because they all contradict the unquestionably illusory nature of our existence. To love yourself is to love a phantom. To love another—by choice or by attraction—to love your own children or your own countrymen, is also illusory and senseless and cruel, just as it is senseless and cruel not to give food to someone else's child in order to keep it for your own.

The poet [i.e., Tolstoy] mercilessly pulls off the final veils, and with scornful pity he says: here is what you have bowed down to before. We are all

bewitched by the old incantations of our ancestors; we believe in words, symbols, emblems, and all of this is a lie; there are beautiful words, but they do not have worthy equivalents in our world. There is no heavenly fire, and Prometheus performed no great feat—life is entirely carnal, earthly, and coarse. People eat and drink, work and play, become wealthy and lose their fortunes, bear children and die—and everything they do, in all of its merit and all of its pettiness, all of it, is a lie and delusion. The entire diversity of life, bursting with energy, arose as if for the sole purpose of perishing.

The poet, who contained in himself all earthly feelings in all their gradations, did not allow any one of them power over him and did not give in to the attraction of any of them. Therefore he seems to be the most impassive and impartial of all artists. He depicted people without anger and without malice, often with pity, always somewhat scornfully. No one was protected from him by a seductive word or deed; everyone stood before him as at a final judgment, having revealed their innermost intentions. A truly terrible light, like x-rays, was cast on every person, but this was not the sunlight by which Shakespeare, for example, saw people.

The irreconcilable contradictions of life are concealed by nothing. And why conceal them? If life is senseless and impossible, then death will come and resolve all the impossibilities. Death is terrible, but sometimes it is better not to live, and it is a blessing to die, to become free and free others (*The Death of Ivan Il'ich*).

But death is truly terrible, and no matter how deserted the heavens are, no matter how chained to the earth and to the dust of the ground<sup>2</sup> our life is, we only live once, and the great mysteries of existence remain just as fateful and persistent, and just as unsolved. We need to solve them, but how?

"If we assume," says Lev Tolstoy, "that human life can be controlled by reason, then the

possibility of life will be destroyed" (*War and Peace*).

In another place (*Confession*) he says, "One may live only as long as one is drunk with life, but as soon as one sobers up, it is impossible not to see that all of this is a delusion."

Reason is correct, but lifeless: it does not know life; it knows only life's outlines. Where there is only reason, despair rules. If life is senseless, then all of reason's attempts to intervene in life's organization are insignificant. Reason can indicate only one meaning of life—personal happiness—and that is unattainable. One needs to search for the solutions to the essential questions not using reason, and Lev Tolstoy did not use reason in his search for them.

Tolstoy portrays life as senseless and insignificant, but how does he inject into it that attractive harmony? Not with reason; Lev Tolstoy did not rely on reason as Ibsen did; but reading him we believe that he "knew," that he was a wise and "seeing" person, that in this confusion of events he saw a certain organizing principle.

A solution to the senselessness and futility of life can be reached only through life's relationship to the infinite. Only when placed in relationship to the infinite does life become noble. This noble appearance is not present in finite life itself: it, like the kingdom of God, "has suffered violence," to use the term from the Gospels.<sup>3</sup> One needs to make

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<sup>3</sup>By using the verb *нудится* Sologub likely is referring to Matthew 11:12, which in Church Slavonic reads "От дней же Иоанна Крестителя доселе царствие небесное нудится, и нуждницы восхищают е." The Russian Synodal Bible translates this phrase as "От дней же Иоанна Крестителя донныне Царство Небесное силою берется, и употребляющие усилие восхищают его." In the New Revised Standard Version this passage reads "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force." According to commentary, the verb "нудится" in this specific context has the meaning of "is obtained only with great labour, only with great strength does one enter it" (into the Kingdom of Heaven) ("трудами получается, силою

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<sup>2</sup>Sologub's use of the word *прах* here is a likely reference to Genesis 2:7: "И создал Господь Бог человека из праха земного." In the New Revised Standard Version this passage reads, "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground."

a certain effort of live feeling in order to know it. Thus, the most natural of the people portrayed by Lev Tolstoy is Platon Karataev (his most inspired creation), who, listening to stories, asked questions directed toward clarifying the nobility of life.

The justification of life is found only in relationship to the infinite, where life "according to God's will" is the greatest good. "It is not the awareness of life that is an illusion, but everything spatial and temporal is illusory" (*On Life*). A separate, individual life is an illusion and a lie. Everything individual seemed illusory to Lev Tolstoy. In his portrayal any individuality fractured into series of petty moods and sensations, and there is nothing constant like the people of bronze or marble sculpted by the artists of the past.

Lev Tolstoy's ability to create vivid images that are like the vitality and strength of nature itself comes entirely from his negation of separate human existence. In fact, what does exist for a person portrayed by Lev Tolstoy? There exist objects—fields, trees, stones—all the impressions coming from them, all the traces of these impressions in our memory, thoughts that develop almost mechanically, and moods that develop equally mechanically; all of these unquestionable and clear things. Beyond that which is unquestionable and alive, there arise long and tenacious, but hazy, rows of delusional dreams and contemptible attempts in this quickly-flowing alternation of phenomena to affirm the existence of the person's separate identity. The closer man comes to the sources of true existence, the purer and simpler he is, and the more unsuccessful and false these attempts are.

Every person in Lev Tolstoy's works is as if a centre of world life, a part of the world organism, one of those focal points where life concentrates the fragmented rays of its universal consciousness in order to know itself. It only seems to each of them that they have their own will; the will, however, is

only one, universal, which moves and directs everything. It only seems to each of them that they possess their own separate life (and therefore it is frightening to die), when in fact there is but one life, united in everything, and "there is no death" (*On Life*).

The preaching of equality and brotherhood is perhaps nowhere as convincing as in the works of Lev Tolstoy, because he continuously, with all of his characters, shows that people are truly equal in the most important sense, in their tragic aspect; he shows that they are all equally insignificant, and that the best of them are those who know their own and man's common insignificance. All people live *one* life and have *one* soul. This one life of the one soul—this life which is fragmented into diverse reflections but which is always one—always occupied Lev Tolstoy. Lev Tolstoy loved this life, which is united in everything; he loved it with all of the strength of his powerful being; he loved it the way others love a woman, or wine, or fame, or power, or aspirations. This is why his works strike us with such force of life. Then after life, he fell in love with everything that lives, first of all man, then animals (*Kholstomer*), and plants (*Three Deaths*).

People in his world are like springs, flowing with various force but all from the same soil. In them the force of life either runs wild, or flows peacefully, or dries up. This force of life is practically the only thing that distinguishes his main characters from one another according to the depth and strength of the springs gushing within each of them.

If we examine how this or that character of Lev Tolstoy produces its charming impression on us, we see that it is not any personality traits, not a special manner of relating to people or things that produces the enchantment, but only the fullness of life, which he portrays with genius, the "potency," which from a seed develops an entire organism. Whenever there is not this fullness of life, whenever people lack that "potency," they become entirely pitiful and powerless, and their actions are not crowned with success.

There is such a pair in the novel *Anna Karenina*: Koznyshev and Varen'ka, wonderful people, who are, according to all around them, created for a shared life. Despite their complete agreement to

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в него входят"). I have chosen to translate the phrase exactly as in the corresponding English passage. See Полный церковно-славянский словарь (Москва: Издательский отдел московского патриарха, 1993), 358.

submit to the unspoken verdict of those around them, because life did not flow in them like a spring, they were never able to say to each other the words that would decide their fate.

Because he loved the one life, Lev Tolstoy portrayed not so much people with their lives and personalities as he showed the one universal life as it is developed in living beings. Each person in his works was created from the sum of a multitude of individual characteristics (a multitude that starts to seem infinitely inexhaustible), and therefore the person portrayed became life-like and unique, unlike anyone else. This is how Lev Tolstoy created limitless and irrational individual characters, as life itself does. All of these individual characters in Lev Tolstoy's works glisten like precious stones, and not one of them is painted only one color. But in his portraits Lev Tolstoy almost never introduced those last, extreme, coarse touches that would turn the portrayed person into a type. This is shown by the fact that the names of his characters have not become popular common nouns; they are too alive, and in them there is not that artificial limitedness that would make them serve as the representatives of an entire range of similar people. In this sense Lev Tolstoy is the complete opposite of Gogol', who portrayed people in the most lifeless way, and for whom almost every character is a type.

Similarly, in the portrayal of feelings Tolstoy was the exact opposite of Pushkin, who knew only clear and definite feelings, each contained in its own sphere. Lev Tolstoy did not know whole people or whole feelings; he broke everything down into the smallest possible elements.

It is interesting to note that of all writers contemporary to him Tolstoy was friends with Fet, the portrayer of the most subtle emotions and one of the forerunners of the modern symbolist trend in Russian literature. In the first place among previous Russian poets Tolstoy placed Tiutchev, who was a deep and inspired contemplator of living nature.

No matter how great the creative force of Lev Tolstoy, this wondrous feeling of life in his works was bought at an expensive price. In order to "infect" (according to Lev Tolstoy's own expression) the reader with this feeling of life, it was not sufficient to observe life and filter the observations

through himself. It was necessary to do more; after completely smashing the combinations and relationships the world is accustomed to, the poet had to rework the observed material inside himself completely, and then from this chaos to create from within himself a new world. This is how the creative method of Lev Tolstoy seems to me. This new world, obviously, does not completely correspond to ours, but it is impossible not to believe his wonderful life, so convincing is this excess of creative force.

Strictly speaking, Lev Tolstoy always portrayed only his "I" in its many-sided bifurcations. He started with a small set of semi-autobiographical stories and constantly expanded his wondrous world.

He knew and acknowledged only that which he directly perceived. There was nothing else for him, as if he did not believe in accumulated knowledge, in culture, in civilization, in science, in traditions, in laws. Medicine for him was charlatanism. Screams caused by pain were feigned. "Our impression upon seeing the suffering of children and animals is more our own suffering, than theirs" (*On Life*). But even in an adult, he relates once, pain caused "a desperate, but feigned scream" (*War and Peace*).

Lev Tolstoy seemingly had no need of the external world; that is why pointing out that the human race would cease did not seem to him to be a valid argument against his preaching of chastity. Future and past generations did not interest him; his historical novel, in essence, is not at all historical. He also did not know a lot about contemporary life: he did not know urban poverty or the life of the urban middle class.

He was as if locked in a kind of circle; but what an enormous circle it was, and what a charming life was created in it!

One needs to experience the completeness of life not through reason, which is powerless in this respect, but only through life itself. The meaning of life lies in its relationship to the infinite. There arises the question of how are we to live, a question that greatly occupied Lev Tolstoy and to which he dedicated many pages of his literary and theoretical works.

I must live in order to experience life through life; one needs, obviously, to live a complete life (hence his preaching of physical labour), and to trust life and the truth that is enclosed in it, tearing oneself away from the delusional seductions of one's illusory "I" (hence his preaching of non-resistance to evil).

"Everything will be all right," the valet says to Oblonsky in *Anna Karenina* and thus comforts him.

"Everything will work out in the end" is the title of one of the chapters of *Boyhood*.<sup>4</sup>

Trust life and everything will work out. Much in the artificial conditions of our existence prevents the experience of life (hence Tolstoy's hostility toward city life, toward conventional forms of social life; hence his preaching of chastity and abstinence from meat, wine, and smoking). In our daily activities much also prevents the experience of life (hence his preaching of nonaction and his rejection of certain scientific and artistic trends). One may find the best experience of full and real life,<sup>5</sup> according to Lev Tolstoy, among people who live not as much by reason as by spontaneous life that is close to nature, among simple people and working people. Hence his preaching of simplifying oneself.

Lev Tolstoy's "educational" works flowed directly from his understanding of life, the same

understanding that permeates all of his works of fiction and gives them, in combination with his compositional skill of genius, such a deep and significant value. Just as his works of fiction developed continuously and organically, the entire range of his writings constitutes one organic whole.

Lev Tolstoy thought that one needs to learn the meaning of life from simple people. He said "I saw that not only is their life understandable to them, but also death is understandable to them, and in death they do not see anything terrible, revolting, or strange." "If they have that sense which destroys the fear of hardships, suffering, and death, then this is the true meaning of life."

These thoughts are realized most fully by Lev Tolstoy in Platon Karataev (*War and Peace*), Lev Tolstoy's most wonderful creation. Karataev is the "round and eternal personification of the spirit of the simplicity of truth."

"Karataev did not have any attachments, friendships, or love, but he loved and lovingly lived with everything that life brought his way, especially with a person, not with any specific person, but with those people who were before his eyes."

This is the relationship toward people that naturally flows from acknowledging the illusory nature of separate identity.

All people, no matter who they were, were equally dear to Lev Tolstoy. He equated himself with every person. "If Zulus came to roast my children, the one thing I could do is try to convince the Zulus that it is not advantageous or good for them to do this." There is no other choice: either harden my soul and kill the Zulu to save "my" child, or acknowledge the Zulu to be just as much a person as "my" child. People more frequently choose the former, and from there flow patriotism, love for the family, etc.

By limiting their soul and by seducing themselves with the temptation of separate existence, people have created unnecessary divisions and have erected many barriers among themselves. To them their institutions seem holy, and their dogmas inviolable. And Lev Tolstoy was excommunicated from the Church, supposedly because he renounced it.

But there is only one human spirit, which assumes many various guises, and there is one

<sup>4</sup>Sologub here cites the title of Chapter 16 of *Boyhood*, which is "Перемелется, мука будет." This phrase has been translated slightly more literally elsewhere. Volume One of the Illustrated Cabinet Edition (Boston: Dana Estes and Company, 1904) has "After Grinding Comes Flour" and *The Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi: Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929) renders it as "Grind Long Enough and the Meal Will Come" (165).

<sup>5</sup>The Russian phrase is "живая жизнь." The Russian Symbolists frequently juxtaposed the concept of "life" [жизнь] as true existence with the stagnation of "everyday life" [быт]. For more, including an extensive chapter on Sologub, see Stephen C. Hutchings, *Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday* (NY: Cambridge UP, 1997).

general Truth, which is expressed in different ways in the crowded and meager world of human ideas.<sup>6</sup> There is only one universal religion of love, the religion of the one human spirit; toward this unity were directed all of the human efforts of Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, who has now passed away, blessed for all ages and among all nations.

His words may not all have been uttered, and his path not have been traveled to the end, but with all of his words he spoke about one Truth, and he left us a truly great legacy.

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<sup>6</sup>At the end of the article Sologub switches from “правда” to “истина” for “truth.” I have rendered the latter as “Truth.”