A Paradox in Tolstoi’s What Is Art?

René Wellek reminds the reader of an important truism about Tolstoi’s What Is Art? “One must recognize that What Is Art? is not merely an outburst of the old man after his conversion but grows out of the totality of his life and art: it is a logical consequence of his constant, basic preoccupations.”1 Much of what Tolstoi says in What Is Art? is already present in précis form in his journal Iasnaja Poljana in the early sixties, and some of his convictions about art are expressed in a small scene in his first published artistic work, Childhood. I am thinking of the poem that Nikolai writes for his grandmother’s name-day. This modest effort takes him first to imitation of the feelings and forms of others and then to a lie: in order to get the concluding couplet to rime, he must say falsely that he loves his grandmother as much as he does his mother. Art for Tolstoi already manipulates feelings and concern for form leads one to the distortion of reality.

Tolstoi was always ambivalent about art, at times engrossed in it and at times disgusted with it. His diaries and letters are filled with statements about its triviality and uselessness and he turned frequently from it with feigned or real relief to practical matters. Art was never his whole life and the scathing satire in What Is Art? of the power of art to turn its practitioners into one-sided freaks was a deeply felt and personal concern. In 1896 about the time that he was bringing What Is Art? to completion, he told Goldenweizer, in a tone more measured and temperate than that of What Is Art? the following: “However great a gift for music you may have, and however much time and power you may spent on it, do remember that, above all, the most important of all is to be a man. It is always necessary to remember that art is not everything.”2 It was not everything but it was much in his life. He spoke of its use and function often and not always in the bludgeoning and outrageous manner of What Is Art? Although he spoke contemptuously about critics in What Is Art?, he spoke—and almost about the same time—to Goldenweizer about good and bad critics and the need for good critics: “Just as it is difficult to be a really good critic, so it is easy for the most stupid and limited man to become a critic, and as good critics are needed so bad critics are merely harmful.”3 He

3. Ibid., p. 77.
spoke slightly about “form” in What Is Art? and elsewhere, and yet I know of no more refined analysis of formal properties than his statement—in remarks about Anna Karenina—about how thoughts exist in formal contexts: “In everything, in almost everything that I have written I was guided by the need to express the net of relations between thoughts, but every thought, once it is taken out of the context in which we find it, loses its artistic sense and power.” This statement could serve as a definition of contemporary contextualism. One need not go outside of What Is Art? itself for refined and sensitive opinion about art. The following comment about unity in a work of art, occasioned by a discussion of Wagner’s work, rivals Aristotle in its respect for wholeness. “In a true work of art—poem, drama, picture, song, or symphony—it is impossible to extract one line, one scene, one figure or one bar from its place and put it in another, without infringing the significance of the whole work....”

The rhetoric of What Is Art? can easily camouflage that Tolstoi is saying very important things, that the views expressed there summarize to a large extent what he has been saying all of his life, and that these views deserve a serious hearing. What Is Art? is sometimes represented as the demented ravings of an old man; and though it is easy to document such a view, it is also a grievous distortion. Tolstoi is whimsical, provocative, unfair, outrageous, and misleading, but always for a purpose; he knows what he is doing and does it deliberately. An analysis of the rhetorical technique awaits doing, and it is not my purpose here. My purpose is to remind myself and the reader that the consistent line of attitudes from Childhood to What Is Art? takes much away from the view that Tolstoi’s position in What Is Art? is a late aberration. The fact, too, that many of Tolstoi’s views, even the most extreme, were expressed by his predecessors signals to us that the convictions and attitudes of What Is Art? have not only a biographical but also a cultural consistency.

Tolstoi was not the first to say in the Russian critical tradition that the pouring out of national resources for museums, theatres, and art exhibitions was morally disgraceful in a nation suffering from need and hunger. Pisarev had said the same thing many times before him, and in a manner as provocative and intemperate. Tolstoi was not, also, the first to denigrate the value of contemporary art after the Western model. Chernyshevskii looked on art as a plaything and diversion elevated by class interest to significance. Tolstoi’s argument against the aesthetics of “beauty” is prefigured in Chernyshevskii’s argument against a priori and idealistic concepts of art. There is a socializing

---
