

Lev Tolstoy and the Freedom to Choose One's Own Path

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It is difficult to be sat on all day, every day, by some other creature, without forming an opinion about them. On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to sit all day every day, on top of another creature and not have the slightest thought about them whatsoever.

-- Douglas Adams, *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (1988)

Committed to the idea that the lives of humans and animals are inextricably linked, Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828–1910) promoted—through literature, essays, and letters—the animal world as another venue in which to practice concern and kindness, consequently leading to more peaceful, consonant human relations. The focal point of Tolstoy's philosophy of human-animal relations, however, is susceptible to distortion or misinterpretation. On the one hand, some scholars minimize or dismiss as extremist Tolstoy's renunciation of hunting, his vegetarian lifestyle, and his rejection of animal subjects for medical or scientific purposes. On the other, some vegetarians and animal rights scholars focus exclusively on the author's later stance on antiviolence as concrete evidence of Tolstoy's progressive outlook toward non-human animals. While Tolstoy voiced more modern concepts of animal rights and welfare than his contemporaries typically espoused, an argument preferencing any single component of Tolstoy's philosophy misrepresents its inherent complexity. Although Tolstoy employs the animal theme as a literary device to reflect the external devaluation of humans, he also denounces human domination over living animals (in reducing them to “pets” or “beasts of burden”) as well as human abuse and destruction of living animals (through hunting or the slaughterhouse). These beliefs resonate with his larger social concerns, such as his opposition to serfdom, the role of women in society, the devolution of sexual mores, and the destruction of rural life through modernization. At the core of *all* of these issues lies his intrinsic concern: the impact of socio-historical factors on the morality, autonomy, and valuation of the individual being. Numerous scholars have studied the themes of individuation and ethics in his works, and many have written on his vegetarian and pacifist principles. But none has devoted sufficient attention to Tolstoy's articulation of these concerns together in relation to the animal realm.

Tolstoy's eschewal of meat, alcohol, tobacco, and sexual relations is reflected in his biography and discussed in his later philosophical writings. In his afterword to *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), Tolstoy encourages people to oppose debauchery and baseness by living a “natural life,” requiring a vegetarian lifestyle. A year later, he explicates these beliefs further in “The First Step” (1891), an introduction to a vegetarian cookbook. His adoption of an ascetic lifestyle does not represent a particular “conversion” experience, though, because his earlier writings espouse these same values and principles. Thus, his philosophy of human-animal relations develops from intrinsic connections between his personal beliefs and his literary creations, which feature non-human animals, located repeatedly alongside a series of objectified and subordinated “others,” devoid of or stripped of place and people to call one's own, and

frequently the power to execute decisions governing the self. In *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877), Tolstoy creates a metaphorical link between animals and estranged or subjugated characters, particularly women. In “Kholstomer”¹ (1885), similar themes of suppression and ostracization come literally from the horse’s mouth, as Tolstoy shifts into a convincing, albeit moralizing, animal narration. Foregrounding the animal realm throughout his *oeuvre*,² Tolstoy underscores a recurring theme of social justice and admiration for individuals—literary or otherwise—who nourish an indomitable will against the crushing pressure of dehumanizing socio-historical forces, and who refrain from allowing governing circumstances to vanquish their individual psyche or moral judgment.

CHRISTIANITY, MORALITY, AND BEEFSTEAKS

In the 1880s, Tolstoy became a vegetarian and renounced hunting because it reflected an “evil pastime ‘in which our killing habit and, consequently, our meat-eating habit merge together’” (LeBlanc 84). Tolstoy’s status within Russia and his international fame dynamically advanced the vegetarian cause, but he did not found the movement in Russia.³ Moreover, his vegetarianism relates to general Orthodox principles and to folk and sectarian beliefs. The Orthodox Church designated the flesh of several animals (beaver, squirrel, and horse, among others) as unfit for human consumption. As late as the seventeenth century, animals that were strangled and not bled (geese, ducks, grouse, and hares) were considered improper comestibles for Orthodox Christians (Smith 13). The greater dietary influence of the Orthodox Church required Russian believers to fast nearly two hundred days annually. During fasts, believers could not consume meat or dairy products such as milk, cheese, and eggs (Toomre 13). Additionally, many sectarians expanded the interpretation of Christian conduct to renounce all meat-eating (along with alcohol and tobacco use, profanity, and sexual activity) (Engelstein 14).

In “The First Step” (1891), Tolstoy likewise aligns the consumption of meat with moral vices, and warns of the “excitation of the passions caused by such food” (123). In this preface to a new Russian translation of *The Ethics of Diet: A Catena of Authorities Deprecatory of the Practice of Flesh-Eating* (1883) by British vegetarian Howard Williams, Tolstoy contends that self-control provides liberation from fundamental lusts such as gluttony, idleness, and sexual love; and he maintains that the *first* effort must include fasting, if one hopes to conquer the latter two desires (“First” 113). But his warnings do not concern bodily defilement alone. Tolstoy maintains that the use of animal flesh is “simply immoral, as it involves the performance of an act which is contrary to moral feeling—killing” (123).⁴ He relates an encounter with a clergyman who, in criticizing religious asceticism, boasted of a Christianity not “of fasting and privations, but of beefsteaks” (117). He then provides a grisly account of a visit to a slaughter-house; and he censures the hypocrisy of those who eat meat yet claim to oppose suffering.

Despite Tolstoy’s passionate arguments in “The First Step,” many scholars minimize the connection between his vegetarianism and his compassion for the animal world. According to Darra Goldstein, ethical considerations did not initially motivate Tolstoy’s meat avoidance: “Tolstoy struggled against carnal and gustatory temptation alike, the renunciation of meat and sex being equally important for attaining moral purity” (103). Daniel Rancour-Laferrier and Ronald D. LeBlanc maintain that Tolstoy’s vegetarianism related primarily to issues of moral and physical discipline. LeBlanc notes:

Present day historians of the vegetarian movement in Russia tend to ignore the close association between abstinence from meat and abstinence from sex posited by Tolstoy. Instead they emphasize the progressive, humanitarian aspects of Tolstoy's vegetarianism: how his refusal to eat meat stems from his ethical refusal to commit violence upon any of God's living creatures (95)

He further argues that humanitarian claims sever Tolstoy's vegetarianism "from two of its most defining philosophical bases: abstinence theory and Christian physiology" (97).

If one examines the fundamental reasoning behind Tolstoy's abstinence argument, however, the core principle deals with the domination and destruction of others. In his "Afterword to *The Kreutzer Sonata*" (1889), Tolstoy discusses the trend toward using prostitution to derive supposed health benefits from sexual relations when marriage may not be possible. He argues that institutionalized prostitution requires an entire class of women "to perish bodily and spiritually for the satisfaction of the passing demands of men" ("Afterword" 111). In clarifying his point, he further underscores the link between human and animal victims:

And what I wanted to say here was that [debauchery] is bad because it cannot be that it is necessary for the sake of the health of some people to destroy the body and soul of other people, in the same way that it cannot be necessary for the sake of the health of some people to drink the blood of others. (95)

Based on other essays from this same period, his reference to "drink[ing] the blood of others" logically extends to the act of killing animals, draining blood, and partaking of meat. Here and elsewhere Tolstoy includes animals among those downtrodden, dominated beings whose own needs and protection are discounted for the "benefits" of those in control. Thus mindful of the subjugated Other, Tolstoy realizes he must "turn his back completely on the system of values accepted by the comfortable elite to which he belonged" (Walicki 326). Only in this way can a person freely live an ethical and humane existence: by disavowing *society's* system of values—including the devaluation of non-human animals. These ultimate realizations and convictions at which Tolstoy arrived provides a valuable framework for recontextualizing earlier literary works, in that the animal realm aided his efforts to discern what it means to be human and humane, and to live by deed rather than words.

War and Peace

External Devaluation and Intrinsic Valuation: The Case of the Rostov's "Kitten"

In *War and Peace* (*Voyna i mir* 1869), the animal world serves as an extension of what Ginzburg calls Tolstoy's "analytical, *explanatory* psychologism." That is, a character is enriched by adding *personality*—"a dynamic, multidimensional system in which derived features emerged in complex fashion from initial social, biological, and psychological premises" (221–22). In this process, Tolstoy often associates a particular character with an animal, as in the case of Sonya, a poor relation living in Count Ilya Rostov's household. Superficially addressed in Tolstoy

studies,⁵ Sonya belongs to those characters whose lives—most often for reasons beyond their control—are governed for them, yet whose limited choices reflect moral strength and psychological independence. Tolstoy describes Sonya’s behavior and standing in terms of a housecat, thereby emphasizing her orphaned status and role of subservience. Her introduction in the novel concurrently highlights her feline attributes and her independence of spirit:

The smooth grace of her movements, the soft elasticity of her small limbs and a certain wary artfulness in her manner suggested a beautiful, half-grown kitten which promises to develop into a lovely cat. ... in spite of herself her eyes under their long thick lashes watched her cousin [Nikolay] ... with such passionate girlish adoration that her smile could not for a single instant deceive anyone, and it was plain to see that the kitten had only crouched down the more energetically to spring up and play with her cousin the moment they ... could escape from the drawing room.

The little kitten, feasting her eyes on [Nikolay], seemed ready at a moment’s notice to start her gambolling and display her kittenish nature. (*War and Peace* 45–46)

These passages provide a description in miniature of Sonya’s role: her grace and elasticity develop into charitable kindness and pliability of will, and she forgoes her desires to accommodate others’ wishes. A penniless orphan, Sonya is an unsuitable match for Nikolay Rostov, despite their mutual affection. Yet her love cannot be vanquished. The “kitten” remains at arm’s length, “feasting her eyes” on her beloved, and perpetually waiting for that which cannot occur. In the epilogue, after Nikolay has married Princess Maria Bolkonskaya, Sonya lives with the couple (a common arrangement for single females at the time). Maria admits feeling resentment toward Sonya, but her sister-in-law Natasha responds, “Sometimes I am sorry for her and sometimes I think that she doesn’t feel it as you or I would” (*W&P* 1363).

Those in positions of superiority frequently assume that “lesser” beings are less sensitive or perceptive, and therefore suffer less. But despite Sonya’s circumstances, Tolstoy does not present her as a victim, as John Bayley stresses (116). (In fact, Bayley notes that Sonya’s role is based on Tolstoy’s own Aunt Tatiana, whom he esteemed highly.) Sonya makes certain key decisions about her fate within the margin of her ability to do so. She refuses a socially advantageous marriage proposal from Dolokhov, and she releases Nikolay from his childhood promise by telling him: “I love you as a brother, and I shall always love you, and that’s all I want” (*W&P* 389). Her strength and courage render Sonya as one of Tolstoy’s “‘best’ women”—those who are “bodiless, deprived of all passions save those directed toward family, chastity, or the Christian ideals of self-effacement and asceticism” (Benson 11). Indeed, her position renders her irreproachable vis-à-vis Tolstoy’s later judgments in the “*Kreutzer Sonata*” afterword:

Carnal love and marriage are forms of service to oneself, and that is why in every case these are a hindrance to the service of God and to people; this is why, from the Christian point of view, carnal love and marriage are a degradation and a sin. (“Afterword” 117)

Never fully considered an equal by those around her, Sonya occupies a lower/dependent position within the Rostov family. Yet whatever her own desires may have been, her position as a pet (a housecat⁶) “exempts” her from marriage and accompanying sexual expectations. Thus, her animal status at the beginning of the novel paradoxically results in a higher moral (independent) status, freed from “animal” desires of the flesh and the “degradation” of marriage.

Hunting and the Price of “Peace” and “Harmony

Linked to the topic of dependence–independence is the theme of belonging, a life-long and largely unfulfilled need on the part of Tolstoy. The author develops this topic in particular through the motif of the hunt, in which he juxtaposes the harmony of belonging with dissonant loneliness. He also depicts the simultaneous connection and separation of human and animal in detailing the brutality of the hunt; namely, his description illuminates the paradox of the hunter’s heightened participation in nature at the instant of killing. But instead of extolling some universal, idealized image of nature in this moment, Tolstoy stresses the cruelty of the hunting act by unexpectedly entering the targeted animal’s mind, thereby individualizing the victim of violence.

The narrator lightly mocks young Nikolay Rostov, who fervently asks God to send the wolf toward him: “He prayed with that sense of passionate anxiety with which men pray at moments of great excitement arising from trivial causes” (*W&P* 588). When the wolf crosses Nikolay’s path, Tolstoy deliberately shifts the narrative perspective:

Suddenly the wolf’s whole appearance changed: she shuddered, seeing what she had probably never seen before—human eyes fixed on her, and turning her head a little towards Rostov, she paused, in doubt whether to go back or forward. “Oh, no matter—forward ...” the wolf seemed to say to herself, and she continued on, not looking round, with a quiet, long, easy yet resolute lope. (589)

With this brief paragraph, Tolstoy forces the reader to acknowledge the *individuality* of the animal. She is not “a” wolf, but a *specific* female wolf with a past (no experience with humans) and a consciousness (absence of fear). Consequently, he intensifies the violence of the animal’s capture and renders Nikolay’s cruel rapture more reprehensible:

That instant when Nikolai saw the wolf struggling in the gully with the dogs, saw the wolf’s grey coat under them, her outstretched hind leg, her panting, terrified head with ears laid back (Karay was pinning her by the throat), was the happiest moment of his life. (591)

Richard F. Gustafson suggests that the hunt here “imitates the action and embodies the meaning of [the novel]” (42). While he and other scholars rightly underscore the significance of this sequence, their explications remain incomplete due to the exclusive focus on *human* perspectives. Acknowledging the individuality of the wolf and the barbarity of her fate further expands the implications of the hunt for the entire text. Cycles of aspiration, disappointment,

achievement, and accord always exact a great price; and for each victor, a victim will suffer in agonizing defeat. Thus, when Gustafson concludes that the hunt “moves toward the paradigmatic restoration of that peace which is the harmony of all together and at one” (43), he ignores the sacrifice made by the animal (like the sacrifice made by myriad dehumanized soldiers in the war sequences) in order to achieve that “peace” and “harmony.”

Anna Karenina

Instinct and Understanding: Lessons from a Canine

In bestowing consciousness upon non-human characters, Tolstoy contributes to the developing portrayal of animal perception in literary history. *Anna Karenina* (1877) provides a more extended demonstration of this animal narration. In the hunting episode with Konstantin Levin and his dog, Laska, Tolstoy highlights the hunter’s reliance on his dog’s keen sense of smell. But in describing the scene from the dog’s perspective, he also demonstrates Laska’s ability to rationalize. José Ortega y Gasset suggests that the domesticated animal, such as the dog, represents an “*intermediate reality between the pure animal and man,*” in that human training partly subsumes natural instincts, thereby partially de-animalizing and humanizing the animal. Accordingly, domesticated animals possess “*something like reason*” (92).⁷ This combination of instinct and rudimentary reason renders Laska superior to Levin in what Ortega y Gasset describes as the *venatic act*. Here, one sees the folly of human efforts to override instinctual canine superiority. The second time Levin misdirects his companion, she knows she will lose the scent:

Well, if that’s what he wants I’ll do it, but I no longer accept any responsibility for it now, she thought She was no longer on the scent, but simply used her eyes and ears *without understanding anything* (AK 635; italics mine).

Laska obeys the master’s commands, but sets aside her instinct and her key to understanding, thereby replaying an earlier scenario in which Levin experienced a similar disconnect between instinct and reason.

Just as Levin required Laska to chase after a non-existent snipe, Levin’s fiancée requires him to attend confession, a process meaningless to him because of unresolved theological questions. “I don’t understand anything,” Levin tells the priest, who nonetheless pronounces the absolution. Levin later describes feeling like a dog

being taught to jump through a hoop, and, that once it’s finally realized and accomplished what is being required of it, barks, and wagging its tail, jumps for joy onto the tables and window sills. (472)

Once again, a link between animal and human critically underscores aspects of a human character’s psyche. Like his dog, Levin does as instructed; yet his doubts mark him as an outsider—one who fails to meet others’ expectations. In contrast to the hunting sequence in *War*

and Peace, the alienation experienced by Levin sets the tone for the hunt in *Anna Karenina*. Gustafson notes that the high expectations for a “common fulfilling experience” result instead in rivalry and estrangement; and the “distance separating individuals expands throughout the scene, and in the end the moment of triumph is achieved only in isolation from others” (47–48). But this reading neglects the fact that Levin does not consider the event entirely unsuccessful because he *did* share a “common fulfilling experience”—with his dog.

Mares and Mistresses: the Dangers of Being Possessed

Not unlike Levin, Tolstoy himself endured perpetual conflict between longing for inclusion and self-inflicted, egotistical estrangement:

Although he ... had a special capacity for a penetrating understanding of others, even of animals, Tolstoy the Stranger spent most of his time alone. Furthermore, throughout his life, he not only destroyed the relationships he established, he also self-righteously and even self-pityingly blamed his resultant isolation on others. (Gustafson 15–16)

Tolstoy bequeaths this same tormenting isolation on his heroine Anna Karenina for yielding to self-indulgence in a society where certain expectations must be met and tacit agreements cannot be broken, especially not by women. According to Ruth Crego Benson, Anna’s separation from “her ‘own kind’ [family, society] is perhaps the greatest deprivation Tolstoy can imagine for her.” Benson continues:

One by one, as all other relations are stripped from her, Anna loses her private identity and her individual character. For Tolstoy, the loss of her ‘sociological’ identity amounts to the loss of her personal identity as well. (98)

Despite her independent spirit, Anna experiences a strong need to belong. Instead, she is primarily *possessed*, which ultimately destroys her individual identity. Her status as Karenin’s wife secures her place in society, but the absence of marital affection fetters her passionate nature. As Vronsky’s mistress, she forfeits her societal standing and her maternal role in exchange for Vronsky’s (tenuous) attention. In both scenarios, Anna is a commodity for the men who govern her life. For Karenin, she supplies youth, beauty, and social grace. For Vronsky, she is an exciting and ardent conquest. Tolstoy emphasizes this latter position through the parallels with Vronsky’s horse and the events of the steeplechase.

Of the many critical interpretations of the Frou-Frou/Anna correlation,⁸ only a few scholars have considered the historical context of the horse in literature. David M. Bethea suggests that the equestrian motif in Russian literature has become almost an “Ursymbol,” and identifies Anna as the “embodiment of Russia ... at a crossroads of history” (78). Amy Mandelker, who maintains Vronsky’s guilt in destroying both Anna and Frou-Frou, notes that the “comparison of a woman to a horse and man’s command over woman to his horsemanship is

a commonplace in literature” (155). With regard to Russian literature specifically, Mandelker points out that brutality toward horses

has traditionally been used as a metaphor for the abuse of women, from the exchange of a woman for a horse in Lermontov’s ‘Bela’ [in *Hero of our Time*] to the implicit connection between Raskolnikov’s dream vision of a horse flogged to death and his murder of Lizaveta and the pawnbroker [in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*]. (156)

In Mandelker’s examples, a horse provides either a physical or psychological substitute for a woman. *Anna Karenina* follows the same paradigm.⁹ Anna and horses encompass Vronsky’s two passions—that do not “interfere with each other” (*AK* 184). Both horse and heroine, responding to the excitement and desire of the moment, seal their fates in trying to please the master. In describing the symbolic importance of horses, Sarah Wintle points to the significance that “their use by humans is predicated on close physical contact.” Therefore, “a good rider is at one with his horse Riding well is thus to be in harmony with, and yet controlling and guiding powerful physical energies” (17). Vronsky, in attempting to command the energies of his horse and his lover, is neither in harmony nor in control. Thus, in both the seduction of Anna and the race, he errs grievously. He breaks Frou-Frou’s back, and the beautiful, championship mare must be shot. By “riding” Anna, he unhorses his opponent Karenin, but in so doing, he symbolically breaks Anna’s back, and destroys her as well. And although Vronsky accepts responsibility for his mistakes, he nonetheless continues to lash out brutally at his victims.

If Anna indeed represents the embodiment of Russia at a crossroads, as Bethea suggests, then Vronsky becomes a dark knight whose forces assemble chaos, suffering, and death—a knight whose actions breach numerous chivalric codes: upholding honor and virtue, defending Christian teachings and morals, and championing the Good. Perhaps his most egregious violation, however, lies in failing to respect and defend one who is weaker. Prior to their sexual relations, Anna’s infatuation with Vronsky leaves her possessed by a “spirit of evil and deceit” (156). Blithely ignoring the consequences of his pursuits (another Tolstoyan theme), Vronsky believes that those around him, human and nonhuman, exist solely for his personal use. Hence, when he and Anna consummate their affair, he appears as a dissolute conqueror, who has achieved the “sole and exclusive desire of [his] life for almost a whole year, taking the place of all previous desires” (156). Scholars often point to the description of Vronsky as a murderer after this first sexual encounter with Anna:

As she looked at him, she felt her own humiliation physically, and could say nothing further. But what he felt was what a murderer must feel looking at the body he has deprived of life. (*AK* 156)

But the oft-neglected conclusion of that same paragraph, provides the key to Vronsky’s real transgression—arrogantly continuing along a disastrous course instead of redressing his crime: “in spite of all the murderer’s horror in the face of the murdered body, that body had to be

cut in pieces and hidden away; the murderer had to *make use of what he had gained* by the murder” (157; italics mine).

After succumbing to Vronsky, Anna tells him: “Everything is finished. [...] I have nothing but you now. Remember that.” (157) But Tolstoy demonstrates that Vronsky cannot benefit from such a murderous “gain.” His conquest becomes “no more than an exhibition, a thrilling contest set in a closed, and ultimately deadly circle with no other goal in sight save an arbitrary finish line” (Bethea 79). Those close to him, who objectify Anna as a means (or hindrance) to an end, become disappointed with Vronsky’s conduct. His mother is displeased that instead of a “brilliant, elegant, worldly” affair, he engages in a “desperate Werther-like passion” (*AK* 184). His brother (who “kept a ballet girl” himself) cares not for the nature of the affair but disapproves that Vronsky’s actions displease Important Personages. No one demonstrates concern for Anna the *individual*, who turns to morphine and opium for relief before finally committing suicide. Like the mare, the mistress is ultimately destroyed by the misuse of those in control. Yet Tolstoy does not sanction his heroine’s actions: although her decision-making ability is compromised by the unethical acts of others, she must accept responsibility for her choices.¹⁰ For the author, this mandate of conscientious choice applies both on a narrow, individual scale and at the larger, societal level.

To Belong to Oneself: the Rights of a Piebald Gelding

Toward the end of *Anna Karenina*, Levin continues to ask: “What am I? Where am I? And what am I here for?” (842). As Levin ponders such existential questions, Tolstoy produces another intentional woman–horse parallel. Levin watches two peasant women working and muses that they will eventually be dead and buried with nothing remaining of them. His thoughts move to a piebald gelding: “a horse breathing heavily, its nostrils distended, and its belly heaving as it trod the slanting wheel round under it. That’ll be buried, too ...” (842). During a visit with fellow author Ivan Turgenev, Tolstoy saw a decrepit gelding in the pasture and speculated on the horse’s thoughts and emotions. A “spellbound” Turgenev remarked, “Listen, Lev Nikolaevich, you must have been a horse once yourself” (Eikhenbaum 101). Undoubtedly, these moments provide the first glimpses of the animal narrator in Tolstoy’s “Kholstomer” (1885). The animal voice and the high moral tone often lead to the dismissal of the novella as a didactic animal fable; but through simulating an animal point of view and drawing on the centuries-old tradition of equine symbolism, Tolstoy expresses his metaphysical concerns in a unique, intensified manner.

Whereas in the 1860s Tolstoy merely tried to render animal consciousness, the story published in 1885 “bears the stamp of [his] spiritual transformation and reflects his new attitude toward material possessions” (Ryan-Hayes 231–32). In discussing the beast-narrator in “Kholstomer,” Karen Ryan-Hayes suggests that non-human characters in satire help to “palliate didacticism,” and that even though “animals, as caricatural extensions of humans, accentuate human weaknesses and vices, it is easier to accept a satirist’s criticism when a fixed distance is established between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (226). In contrast, Mikhail Bakhtin and Pavel Medvedev assert that the device of *ostranenie* (i.e., making something strange, defamiliarization) serves a highly ideological function: “It is not the thing that Tolstoy wants to deautomatize by means of the device, but this moral meaning [that the object screens and automatizes]” (60–61). Indeed, rather than softening the critical tone, the voice of Kholstomer as his own being accentuates

Tolstoy's *weltanschauung*. But the horse does not serve merely as a mouthpiece for a human author; rather, the animal, the conveyor of the message, demands fresh scrutiny as well.

Analyzing the Houyhnhnms of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Wintle explains that "horses, because of their ubiquity and their glamour, were used as symbols and metaphors for the articulation of ideas and feelings about such central human concerns as status and class, sexuality, and the body" (4). "Kholstomer" addresses these issues, but with the twist that the horse-hero is dispossessed of glamour, status, sexuality,¹¹ and even his body.¹² Furthermore, Kholstomer suffers further alienation and prejudice due to his piebald hide and gelding status. This extreme *personalization* of the animal tragedy makes Tolstoy's tale doubly successful as an allegory of human society and a literal injunction to treat non-human species with greater consideration.

The structure of "Kholstomer" predicts the hero's fate. Through the beginning of the fifth chapter, an omniscient, human narrator describes the persecution—by human and horse—of a broken-down piebald gelding. Over the next five nights/chapters, Scheherazade-style, the horse relates his own story. But throughout the tale of abuse and decline, the horse's moral certitude solidifies, and he develops the conviction that no creature should possess another. Viktor Shklovsky quotes the passage where Kholstomer observes: "I was threefold unhappy: I was piebald; I was a gelding; and men imagined that I did not belong to God and myself, as is the prerogative of every living thing ..." ("Kholstomer" 242). He then connects this fate to Anna Karenina's:

Tolstoy wanted for each individual to be his/her own person.

Anna was not her own.

She was Karenin's.

Then Anna was Vronskii's.

If everything were arranged so that she would be Anna Vronskaia, she would still be surrounded by the same people, who themselves are not their own. (551–52)

The quest to be one's own person must not be confused with egotistic self-centeredness. Rather, escaping the restrictive expectations of others leaves one free to live a selfless, righteous life. For some Tolstoyan heroes (as in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*), this realization arrives as mortal life expires. Similarly, Kholstomer realizes the false nature of humankind as his physical self disintegrates. Like Anna, he struggles to achieve spiritual freedom as his physical and social autonomy are compromised. But unlike Ivan Ilych or Anna, Kholstomer provides a non-human perspective of the materialistic, spiritually infirm human realm. Moreover, Kholstomer remains blameless. His suffering occurs not due to his own choices, but because of his natural appearance. Hence, Ryan-Hayes views Tolstoy's underlying goal as an attack on "racial and social bias" (231).¹³

In 1889, Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* provoked great controversy, as people accused him of advocating a "celibacy so complete that it would, if practiced, result in the extinction of the human race" (Terras 479). Tolstoy later rebuts this opposition in the "Afterword," in which he claims that chastity is "neither rule nor injunction, but an ideal" (115). Tolstoy believes that the desire for both spiritual and physical unions cannot coexist, and to achieve satisfaction in either realm weakens or destroys the other. He concludes that marriage, therefore, may be a "natural

and desirable condition” for mature adults, and abstinence may not be possible, but that the most satisfying relationships will be those in which the spiritual union prevails (“On the Relations” 155). Four years earlier, Tolstoy already explored the spirit versus body dilemma by imposing extreme, “ideal” celibacy on the horse Kholstomer through castration, which operates paradoxically.¹⁴ The initial trauma represents an act of power and abomination that ravages the victim’s sense of self and precludes immortality through progeny; conversely, it frees the sufferer from “animal” desires of the flesh, thereby encouraging more virtuous contemplations.

The topic of castration in the domain of horse breeding allows Tolstoy to extend the metaphor of discrimination and deprivation to extreme injustice. Based on lineage alone, Kholstomer deserves breeding rights because he descends from the exceptional Orlov stud farm and has demonstrated exceptional skill in distance racing. But as a piebald, he fails to meet the second requirement for breeding: suitable appearance. On this point, Tolstoy highlights the difference in prejudices between human and equine society in the narrative. Other horses are *attracted* by Kholstomer’s variegated coat. Breeders’ standards, however, reject his differences; therefore, they forcibly terminate his reproductive power: “On the next day I had ceased forever to whinny; I became what I am now. All the light of my eyes was quenched Suddenly I comprehended it all, comprehended how I was forever sundered from [other horses], every one” (238). Fellow horses react with contemptuous pity, as his altered state reduces him to less than a horse. The terror of emasculation, and by implication, loss of identity, is also a key motif in Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels*:

[Castration] ... is what the master Houyhnhnm finds most horrific and most memorable in Gulliver’s account of the human treatment of horses, and, once he has come to terms with the right kind of species definitions and reversals, this is the final insult he can offer to the Yahoos (Wintle 19)

Tolstoy deliberately uses the horse and the castration motif to argue for the *spiritual* castration of human lust and passion, thereby inverting traditional equine symbolism of the horse/steed as a sexually powerful creature. Instead of the virile, masculine heroes of *War and Peace*, a meditative, celibate male—albeit one of noble ancestry—occupies the foreground. Disdained by horse and human, Kholstomer spends time contemplating the nature of the world, such as the falsity of “maternal and female affection.” But chiefly, he notes the weaknesses of human beings. He discerns in them a “low and animal, a human instinct, which they call the sentiment or right of property,” and he observes that “men struggle in life not to do what they consider good, but to call as many things as possible their own” (“Kholstomer” 241). He concludes that the lives of men are guided by words (specifically: *my, mine, ours*), while the “superior” horse lives a life of deeds. (Kholstomer inadvertently continues to serve through deed even post-mortem, when his corpse feeds a wolf family, and a peasant finds use for his bones.)

The Next Step

Undeniably, part of Tolstoy’s liberation philosophy includes an awareness of the sanctity of *all* life, which echoes Victorian humanitarian attitudes:

The treatment of animals could be seen as an index of the extent to which an individual had managed to control his or her lower urges. If animal suffering was caused by people in need of moral uplift, then to work for the protection of the brute creation was simultaneously to promote the salvation of human souls and the maintenance of social order. (Ritvo 132)

This connection between protecting the animal and promoting human salvation is expressed directly in “Kholstomer” by the animal himself.¹⁵ Tolstoy creates in the novella what Wintle calls (in regard to Swift) a “sense of species kinship” and “moral responsibility” (13). Even if one cannot escape the domination of others, change one’s social status or skin color, or alter one’s destiny, an individual *can* live in such a manner as to guide the inner, spiritual self by ethical choices and behavior. R.F. Christian concludes that Tolstoy tries to show the

small area of individual freedom of choice within the broader framework of necessity and inevitability which encompasses life on earth. Everyone is condemned to death when he is born, but he must act as though he is free, however limited his power really is to guide and control important events involving people other than himself. (287)

Tolstoy dogmatically demands this and other actions in addressing the problems he explores in his fiction and non-fiction, leading George Orwell, among others, to question whether Tolstoy’s expectations and the practices of his disciples merely exchange one form of egoism for another. In his essay on Tolstoy and Shakespeare, Orwell includes the former among

people who are convinced of the wickedness both of armies and of police forces, but who are nevertheless much more intolerant and inquisitorial in outlook than the normal person who believes that it is necessary to use violence in certain circumstances. They will not say to somebody else, ‘Do this, that and the other or you will go to prison,’ but they will, if they can, get inside his brain and dictate his thoughts for him in the minutest particulars. (1941)

Perhaps Orwell’s quote sheds light on the tendency to stress certain Tolstoyan beliefs above others. Tolstoy does not so much muse as pontificate. He doesn’t speculate, he sermonizes.¹⁶ Scholars who focus on Tolstoy the Intellectual may deem his animal focus as lacking substance and gravitas, a bias often encountered in academia. Those who champion Tolstoy the Vegetarian and Animal Advocate may be less comfortable with—or in truth may not know of—his pious antipathy toward marriage and sexuality.¹⁷ Feminist readings of Tolstoy highlight his advocacy for women’s education and liberation from domestic slavery, antiquated childbirth practices, and so forth; yet the same author cynically casts woman in the role of sexual temptress who promotes evil sensuality. In actuality, Tolstoy seems to show more understanding and compassion toward non-human animals than toward women.

Although he wears his birthright uncomfortably, Count Tolstoy fails to make a clean break from his aristocratic heritage and liberate himself from a stratified worldview. Furthermore, his Christianity is an egocentric faith that concentrates foremost on an individual's moral core and relationship with God *from which follows* compassion toward others (quite the opposite of Fyodor Dostoevsky's primary emphasis on charity and pity). In the role of exemplar, then, Tolstoy concerns himself with the tutelage and trusteeship of the Other (human and animal), occupying a secondary status to the Self. Some may well question whether such "flaws," which preclude venerating Tolstoy as a total liberationist, geld—like poor Kholstomer—the potency of the author's philosophical positions. A holistic consideration of his life and work, however, allows one to recognize and appreciate the pioneering strengths of his legacy with regard to non-human animals while acknowledging the limitations of his historical time. Nowhere does Tolstoy advocate freeing animals from their cages (nor women from their corsets). His hierarchical Christianity prevents him from placing humans and animals on the same metaphysical plane. Yet his emphasis on making responsible, conscientious choices in consideration of *all* living things surely is an important first step toward a modern view of animal relations, especially in the nineteenth century. Also, his attempts to portray animal consciousness as accurately as possible represent an innovation within Russian literature. These contributions therefore provide a foundation for foregrounding the animal perspective in later works such as Mikhail Bulgakov's Soviet satire, *Heart of a Dog* (1925), and Georgii Vladimov's Gulag novel, *Faithful Ruslan* (1975). These authors engage the animal world partly in an allegorical manner, but like Tolstoy, they also uphold the interconnectedness of all species, the importance of making ethical decisions, and the right of all creatures to experience freedom from cruelty and oppression—to live a life of one's own.

ENDNOTES

¹ Also translated as "Strider," "The Yardstick," and "The Bachelor." A *kholstomer* is a device for measuring cloth (*kholst* = canvas), thus "suggesting the greatest distance from finger to finger of the outstretched arms, and rapidity in accomplishing the motion" ("Kholstomer" 259).

² The works discussed in this essay reflect Tolstoy's use of the animal world in a *significant* and illuminating way, one through which a deeper understanding of a text and/or his philosophy emerges. The mere presence of animals in a work does not necessarily merit discussion. Tolstoy composed more than fifty animal stories and fables as educational materials for his estate serf schools, but these reflect fabular animals in one-dimensional roles. Similarly, certain characters may espouse values congruent with the author's own, such as in *Resurrection* (1899), where Simonson believes in the interconnectedness of life, opposes war and slaughter, refuses to eat meat or wear the skin of animals, and practices celibacy. But the character's views have little bearing on the novel *in toto* nor do they offer greater insights into Tolstoy's philosophy. In fact, scholars point to various historical personages on whom Simonson might be based. For example, Aldanov (1944) suggests that Tolstoy's model was Nikolai Konstantinovich Geins (a.k.a.

“William Frey”), an acquaintance who espoused positivist ideals and helped to establish a Russian (vegetarian) commune near Wichita, Kansas, in the early twentieth century.

³ In 1878, a German pamphlet on vegetarianism created burgeoning interest in vegetarianism in Russia. In the early 1890s, more pamphlets and Tolstoy’s “First Step” further reinforced a movement, reported in widespread publications, including Konstantin Nikolayevich’s vegetarian journal *The First Step*, to which Tolstoy contributed. In St. Petersburg and Moscow, advocates began to assemble and vegetarian restaurants opened. (Russian authorities opposed the movement and the term “vegetarian” as radical, resulting in close supervision and interference of organizing bodies.) But by 1895, vegetarians numbered more than ten thousand (including religious sects and Tolstoyans) (“Russian Vegetarian Societies”). The first formal society was the St. Petersburg Vegetarian Society, founded in 1902, which “ushered in an era of intense activity and interest in vegetarianism in Russia” (Goldstein 106). One of the most notable Russian vegetarians, Natalia Borisovna Nordman-Severova, advocated eating hay and grass because “Russia would never again have to suffer from hunger, since hay was not only abundant, but free” (114).

⁴ Tolstoy also rejected killing animals for medical or scientific purposes. When asked for his opinion on vivisection by an American writer, Tolstoy responded: “Dear Sir, What I think about vivisection is that if people admit that they have the right to take or to endanger the life of living beings for the benefit of many, there will be no limit for their cruelty” (80: 24).

⁵ Surprisingly, in *Women in Tolstoy: The Ideal and the Erotic* (1973), Benson omits any discussion of Sonia.

⁶ Tolstoy apparently cared little for cats and preferred other rodent-catchers at his country estate:

Curled, or rather, coiled in the sunny patches in the Tolstoy house, protecting it from pestilential infestations, instead of the expected feline emblems of domesticity, there are now, and were in Tolstoy’s time, snakes: large garter snakes that rub their scales against the ankles of readers in Tolstoy’s library and usurp the warm windowsills and sunny spots usually occupied in country houses by somnolent, contented cats. (Mandelker 1)

⁷ Moreover, Ortega y Gasset points to the ability of dogs to communicate with humans through variations in their barking, and suggests that “through domestication, therefore, the dog has acquired in his bark a quasi-language, and this implies that a quasi-reason has begun to germinate in him” (94).

⁸ In early drafts of the novel, the heroine was named Tatiana, sharing the diminutive form—Tania—with the horse. The final version minimizes such an obvious equivalence, leading scholars to disagree on the significance of any remaining correlation. For a listing of key criticism related to this topic, see Mandelker p. 208, fn. 30.

⁹ Benson observes that in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, the character Poznyshev never refers to his wife by name but describes her as a “fresh, well-fed harness horse, whose bridle has been removed” (120).

¹⁰ On the other hand, Tolstoy does not idealize the institution of marriage. Through the character Dolly (Anna’s sister-in-law), he “exposes the cult of domesticity for what it often becomes in a bad marriage: an oppression of woman and a denial of her selfhood perpetuated by the myth of the glories of maternity and housekeeping” (Mandelker 53).

¹¹ The story’s focus on sexuality/castration aroused critical disapproval; V. Sollogub, for example, encouraged Tolstoy to avoid the word ‘gelding’, a too blatant reference to sexual organs (Eikhenbaum 101–02).

¹² The passage where Gulliver tells his Houyhnhnm master about the treatment of horses in England purportedly represents the first literary life history of a horse, and provides a near synopsis of Tolstoy’s “Kholstomer”:

I owned that the *Houyhnhnms* among us, whom we call *Horses*, were the most generous and comely Animal we had; that they excelled in Strength and Swiftnes; and when they belonged to Persons of Quality, employed in Travelling, Racing, and drawing Chariots, they were treated with much Kindness and Care, till they fell into Diseases, or became foundered in the Feet; but then they were sold, and used to all kind of Drudgery till they died, after which their Skins were stripped and sold for what they were worth, and their Bodies left to be devoured by Dogs and Birds of Prey. (Swift 243)

¹³ This line of inquiry, concerning interrelated forms of oppression, lies beyond the scope of the present essay but undoubtedly deserves further critical attention.

¹⁴ Tolstoy knew about castration not only from rural farm practices but also through acquaintance with the local Skoptsy. Discovered in the late eighteenth century, the Skoptsy (literally, “self-castrators”) sect extended fleshly renunciation to physical dismemberment. They founded their beliefs on Matthew 19:12, where Christ speaks of becoming eunuchs “for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.” Tolstoy’s condemned such practices on religious and psychological grounds.

¹⁵ Accused at times of excessive anthropomorphism, Tolstoy would likely have appreciated the modern development of cognitive ethology, which “explicitly licenses hypotheses about the internal states of animals” (Bekoff 40).

¹⁶ Tolstoy never suggests such tasks will be simple. Just as anguish and estrangement guided Kholstomer toward sagacity, the author himself experienced extreme psychological distress in the course of his philosophical journey. After the success of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy suffered severe depression and contemplated suicide.

¹⁷ Nevertheless, his argument against procreation seems compatible with certain contemporary societal trends:

Getting married cannot promote the service of God, even in the case of marriage for the purpose of continuing the human race. It would be infinitely simpler if these people, rather than getting married to produce children's lives, would support and save those millions of children who are perishing around us from a lack of material (to say nothing of spiritual) sustenance. (Tolstoy "Afterward" 117)

This passage articulates one of the key reasons given by participants and proponents of today's "childfree" movement: that millions of existing children remain in need of services and support. Judging by other writings, Tolstoy would likely agree with other "childfree" incentives as well, such as overpopulation, negative environmental impact, and harmful effects of children born to those lacking maternal/paternal tendencies, among others ("Selfish").

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