

TOLSTOY – CONTRA SEMIOSIS

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"One is tempted to write outside any form whatsoever . . . simply to talk out, pour out, the best you can, all that you feel very strongly."

L. Tolstoy

One theme which permeates Tolstoy's entire oeuvre is that of a young man from the gentry striving desperately to get out of his own milieu. His environment seems to him highly artificial and empty. All it demands from a young man is that he must be "comme il faut." This magic phrase opens to him all the doors: to aristocratic salons, a convenient marriage, and a career. But Tolstoy's protagonist is highly dissatisfied with such a situation. He feels its false, parasitic character, and he seeks another environment: the *natural* one (*Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth*, the Caucasian cycle, *The Cossacks*). Another variation of the same theme is that a young man, not even clearly aware of his dissatisfaction or desires, is confronted suddenly and by chance with a new environment which strikes him with its simplicity ("Lucerne," *The Snowstorm*, *War and Peace*). Thus Tolstoy ever creates situations in which the two cultural codes, the artificial and the natural one, are mutually opposed. How does he oppose these two codes? The artificial one contains a set of rules to be learned (e.g., to be "comme il faut" means to know the rules of salon behavior). The world so constructed is heavily mediated, so that the thick veil of signs totally obscures and even eliminates the cognition of truth. What are the true feelings of Pierre or even Andrej when they declare their love strictly according to the code for marriage proposals? No one, not even the protagonists themselves, recognizes the real, natural impulses and intentions behind the set of signs prepared, elaborated and learned for such an occasion.

But what is the *natural*, according to Tolstoy? It is the non-mediated, intuitive cognition and behavior, the capacity that every person – unspoiled by rule and learning – is endowed with from birth. Or, to use the terms of a contemporary semiotician, it is a special way of learning comparable to learning one's native language: a process based not on rules, but on memory, in which one remembers a number of "texts" in their numerous usages.¹

¹ Ju. Lotman, "Problema 'obučenija kul'ture' kak ee tipologičeskaja xarakteristika," in *Sēmeiōtikē* 5 (Tartu, 1971).

Evidently it is with such an idea in mind that Tolstoy lets Natasha perform folk dances "naturally"; it is clear that she has not learned them, but just knows them, in spite of her Western education. When confronted with the world of the natural, however, Tolstoy's learned hero is often in trouble because he has to deal with a code of behavior that he does not know ("Lucerne," *The Cossacks*).

Tolstoy, in his attempt to delimit the artificial and the natural, the mediated and the intuitive codes of communication, faced the same difficulties that have beset all philosophers who asked the fundamental questions about the role of semiosis in our acquisition of knowledge. Two basic issues have been raised: (1) Is all our knowledge mediated by signs, or is there any immediately perceivable cognition? Or, to put it specifically as the philosophers of antiquity did: does *cognitio rei* precede *cognitio verbi*? (2) What is the relation between the sign and the thing, does the thing match the sign? Since antiquity these questions have been asked by philosophers such as Locke, Lambert, Humboldt, Husserl, and also by anthropologists, linguists, semioticians, and psychologists like Whorf, Sapir, Benveniste, Jakobson, Piaget.² Various answers have been given to these questions, only to confirm the fact that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to define the extent of semiotic mediation. One thing seems to be clear: there is no developed culture without strongly developed semiosis. Tolstoy's attacks against highly developed culture can be viewed as a protest against overextended semiosis.

As Tolstoy scholars have noticed, the writer's attention frequently focused on the sign as such in various systems of communication which are the target of his satire and mockery. As early as the 1920's, young members of the Russian Formalist school, working on prose, showed that "ostranenie" – the device of "making-strange" – was the most important method of representation in Tolstoy's writings.³ "Ostranenie" was defined as the gap between the origin of a device and its actual function.⁴ Such a collision can be shown best when a hero looks at some happening and misinterprets it because he does not understand it. For instance, when Pierre looks at the battlefield of Borodino and takes the smoke and cannon explosions for a sequence of strange sounds followed by beautiful clouds, he is the instrument of the above-mentioned device. Similarly, Natasha interprets the conductor at the

² Cf. R. Jakobson, *Coup d'oeil sur le développement de la sémiotique* (Bloomington: Indiana University Publications, 1975). I am also indebted to Professor Elmar Holenstein from whose lecture at Harvard University in the Fall 1978 I greatly profited.

³ Cf. V. Šklovskij, *Materjal i stil' v romane L'va Tolstogo "Vojna i mir"* (Moskva, 1928).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

opera as someone merely "waving a stick" aimlessly or senselessly. To put it in semiotic terms, "ostranenie" implies a mutation of the *signatum* in a given sign. The perceptions of the two protagonists exemplify exactly this kind of mutation. There are numerous examples illustrating this operation. What is its thrust? Evidently, the writer's dissatisfaction with the nature of certain signs, his disapproval of the wrong relation between *signans* and *signatum*, and his tendency to change this relation into a proper one. In both cases, the signs involved in the process of "ostranenie" were indexes, and in both instances the observer changed them into icons. The smoke deciphered by Pierre as a cloud is a pure icon. In Natasha's interpretation of conducting as waving a stick, the sign has an iconic character as well: it is a gesture "resembling itself," or directed toward itself without any further purpose or function. Let us examine other instances of "ostranenie." Andrej at Borodino sees the cannonball near his feet. Intellectually he knows that it means "death", but sensually he perceives only a round, smoking ball, and his alerted mind vacillates between this innocent image and frightening idea. Still more complex is another of Pierre's experiences at Borodino. An officer, a very active young man, has just been killed. But the position of his body does not indicate death: it is sitting in an upright position. Having discovered that the sitting man is a corpse, Pierre still cannot perceive death in such a form. In this case, the *expected* index did not occur, but was replaced by another index.

With all the examples presented, it becomes clear that Tolstoy destroys indexes and tends to substitute icons. This tendency seems to be in agreement with his striving for natural communication. An icon is a sign based on similarity, and its properties may be immediately recognized, while an index is built on contiguity, and, therefore, its recognition demands some learned knowledge. It is also important to notice that all instances of "ostranenie" involve a "natural" person decoding the signs (Natasha, Pierre), or call for some rudimentary experience of life in the situation presented (Andrej).

All the examples analyzed so far pertain to perception or cognition, and all the signs in question are *visual* ones. It is now appropriate to examine those scenes from *War and Peace* in which language communication is presented. The initial scene in Anna Pavlovna Scherer's salon provides the most palpable example of the type of semiosis which is repulsive to Tolstoy. The first two persons who appear in the initial act of conversation are the hostess — a lady-in-waiting and protégée of the Empress-Mother — and her guest, an equally shrewd courtier, Prince Vasilij Kuragin. Several times Tolstoy refers to them as "actors" and describes their *emploi* as well as their way of acting. The *emploi* of Anna Pavlovna is "to be an enthusiast." Since it

becomes her "social status," she does it "even if she does not feel like doing it."⁵ After her fiery speech on the present political situation she "suddenly stopped with a smile mocking her own enthusiasm."⁶ Thus the *emploi* is immediately exposed as hypocrisy when the actor is shown with his mask taken off. Prince Vasilij's posturing is revealed in the same way. Four times in succession his words are shown to have a double and false meaning which he "does not even try to conceal."⁷ Similarly, Anna Pavlovna's letter of invitation, in spite of its "personal" and "intimate" style, was written "to everyone in the same way," and its message — "de passer la soirée chez une pauvre malade"⁸ — did not correspond to the real intention of the invitation. The same holds for the relation between the real and the pretended reason for each guest's coming. Every step of the entire discourse from a simple utterance to a dialogue, to a situation is presented as a *signans* with a double *signatum*. Upon the fixed, the traditionally learned contiguity of words (or ways of behaving) and their meaning is superimposed a new contiguity. But the traditional one does not disappear; it coexists with the added one, thanks to the author's constant intervention. Actually, the entire situation is not so much described or presented as it is commented upon with reference to the way in which the users handle signs. In other words, the author's attention is focused not so much on *what* is said or done, but on *how* it is said or done. While dealing with visual signs, Tolstoy tended to destroy indexes and to replace them by more natural icons. In the present case he is against symbols because they are or can be polysemantic. This property is used to create hypocritical relations between people and thus to destroy the human community and ultimately the individual as well.

Another instance in which ambiguity in language generates unfortunate results appears in the scene of the card game between Doloxov and Nikolaj Rostov, who loses his entire fortune. Doloxov is in love with Sonja while she is in love with Nikolaj. She has just refused a marriage proposal by Doloxov and he is trying to convey to Rostov his willingness to forgive the card debt in exchange for Sonja. The communication between the two goes through the whole system of hints dropped by Doloxov.

"Gentlemen," said he, having kept the bank for some time, "Please put the money on the cards because I can get confused in counting." One of

⁵ L. Tolstoy, *Sobranie sočinenij v dvenadcati tomach* (Moskva: Goslitizdat, 1958), vol. 4, p. 9. All translations are mine.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

the gamblers said he hoped one could believe Doloxov. "One can, but I am afraid I can get confused," answered Doloxov.⁹

The answer is ambiguous: "confused" as to what? Does it concern counting or honesty? And what should one "believe" under the circumstances? The same ambiguity can be noticed when Doloxov encourages Rostov to continue the game: "Don't worry, we will settle our accounts" (*my s toboj sočtemsja*). "Settling accounts" refers to both money and the competition for Sonja's love. Examples of this sort of ambiguity can be multiplied. There is one other matter that deserves special attention in the card game scene. The situation between the two rivals is a realization of the proverb "Lucky in cards -- unlucky in love." Doloxov, who quotes the proverb to Rostov, is trying by his actions to reverse its meaning; by so doing he violates that which is fixed and renders it ambiguous. The result is failure and unhappiness for both players. To conclude: whenever ambiguity in language occurs in Tolstoy's works, it leads to bad results. For Tolstoy, desirable communication occurs when the sign matches exactly the "thing," or, ideally, when signs are altogether absent. The most open declaration of this point of view can be found in a story which took Tolstoy almost all his creative life to write: "Xolstomer" (1856-1885). In it, animals are shown to be better than people, mainly because the "activities of people . . . are governed by words, while ours [horses'] are governed by deeds." "People are governed in life not by deeds, but by words. They like not so much the possibility of doing or not doing something as the possibility of saying various words agreed upon about various subjects,"¹⁰ says the horse-protagonist of the story.

The arbitrariness of the verbal sign and the possibility of its abuse as a result of its arbitrariness disturb Tolstoy even more because he as a writer was doomed to verbal expression. He, therefore, tried such forms of representation within the realm of the verbal universe which would most exactly reveal the "naked fact." To show things with as little description as possible became the main point in the argument between him and Turgenev about the artistic method. "Description is not sufficient," or "it is virtually impossible to describe a person," says Tolstoy in his *Diary of Youth*.¹¹ How does he find the verbal technique of "presenting" instead of describing? *War and Peace* provides various examples of it on different levels of its structure. On the

⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 58 nn.

¹⁰ L. Tolstoy, *Sobranie sočinenij v dvadcati tomax* (Moskva, 1964), vol. 12, pp. 25-26.

¹¹ Cf. B. Ėjxenbaum, *Molodoj Tolstoj* (Peterburg-Berlin, 1922).

level of composition it is a *montage*; in fact it was the first great historical novel-*montage*. It incorporates real documents almost *in extenso* and original correspondence, e.g., the exchange between Alexander I and Napoleon. The French dialogues, translated by the author himself in the footnotes, also serve as components of the *montage*. They represent "real reality" shown in its immediacy rather than information about it conveyed by the narration. Boris Uspenskij correctly contends that the phonetic rendering of Denisov's defective pronunciation of *r* in the first version of the novel serves the same purpose.¹²

Scholars observed that *showing* rather than describing was Tolstoy's method in *The Cossacks*.¹³ Olenin, the protagonist, traveling for the first time in his life in the Caucasus, sees the famous mountains. Instead of expressing his enchantment with the landscape's beauty with the usual verbal ardor, he simply signals the *presence* of the mountains each time he casts an eye on the new environment. The elliptic phrase "And the mountains . . ." (*A gory . . .*) is repeated a number of times and serves as a signal or "gesture" which points at, rather than describes, the object in question. Tolstoy used the same method in *War and Peace*, once in the scene on the Ens bridge¹⁴ and once when presenting the city of Moscow being abandoned by its inhabitants. In the first instance he "points" at groups of soldiers passing by, emphasizing their number and their homogenous character by repeating the phrase: "and this one also passed by" (*I ètot proxodil*). The artistic goal in the second case is similar to the first. Tolstoy indicates the large quantity of carts leaving Moscow by simply repeating the word "carts" (*arby*), which alone, among a variety of other objects, catch the attention of the observer.

How can this kind of representation be characterized within Tolstoy's semiotic system? What does the repetition of an object stand for in terms of non-verbal representation? The system of signs includes on particular type of signification: "*ostension*." Bertrand Russell, in his analysis of the use of language, isolates a special definition of an object that he calls "ostensive definition." According to Russell, it is "any process by which a person is taught to understand a word otherwise than by the use of other words."¹⁵

¹² B. Uspenskij, "Struktura xudožestvennogo teksta i tekstologija," in: *Poëtika i stilistika ruskoj literatury. Pamjati V. V. Vinogradova* (Leningrad, 1971).

¹³ Ejsenbaum, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Tolstoj, *Sobranie sočinenij v dvenadcati tomach, op. cit.*, vol. 4, pp. 178-179.

¹⁵ B. Russell, *Human Knowledge, its Scope and Limits* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), p. 63.

One example of ostension is given as pointing at the object and simultaneously uttering the word signifying this object. Another example of semiosis by ostension is given by the Czech semiotician Ivo Osolsobě: a display of ready-made objects in a shop window stands for the verbal advertisement of the same objects.¹⁶ In Tolstoy's case the fact of a mere repetition of the word in question stands for a gesture pointing at the object. In *The Cossacks*, especially, the reiterated word is given an even stronger gestural function because it is preceded by the particle "a." In a purely verbal context this particle functions as a reminder; translated into a system of gesture, it acquires a deictic role.

A similar consideration underlies Tolstoy's representation of time. In *War and Peace*, as in Homer's epos,¹⁷ time goes forward only. There are no flashbacks or simultaneity, no "in the meantime" sequences. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy makes the nature of language — its linearity — coincide with our perception of time as an ontological continuum. Time so represented is thus another instance of a "naked fact," of non-mediated reality, while all the devices which serve to break, or "deform," the temporal sequence appear as means of mediation.

The last example of an attempt to avoid or reduce the system of mediation is Levin's well-known eloquent declaration of love. Not only does he — Tolstoy's *alter ego* — reject the obvious formulas used on such occasions, but he rejects words altogether. He uses instead only their shortest signals: the initial letters. Although the message so represented is long and rather complicated, his beloved reconstructs it exactly. This precision would have been impossible, had it not been for her intuitive knowledge of the message. In this case, as in the example of Natasha's folk dancing, intuitive knowledge works "miracles."

Tolstoy's art makes clear his idiosyncrasies and preferences. His hostile attitude towards poetry as an "artificial" type of speech is due to the fact that poetic language is a highly semioticized, ambiguous metalanguage. By the same token, his attraction to or rejection of individual works of art or authors can also be elucidated. While esteeming highly Chekhov's short story "The Darling" (*Dušečka*), he criticized his plays as well as those by Shakespeare. Finally, Tolstoy's last iconoclastic act, his total rejection of art, becomes fully understandable. He tried to represent without the means of representation, to

¹⁶ I. Osolsobě, "OstENZE jako mezní případ lidského sledování a její význam pro umění," *Estetika* 1 (Praha: Academia, 1967).

¹⁷ F. F. Zelinskij, "Zakon xronologičeskoj nesovmestnosti i kompozicija Ilijady," *Xaristeria, Sbornik statej po filologii i lingvistike v čest' F. E. Korša* (Moskva, 1896).

deal with language by avoiding language or reducing its scope. This contradiction in terms became an obsession. The only solution was to cross it all out, to escape from it, just as he escaped from Jasnaja Poljana.

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