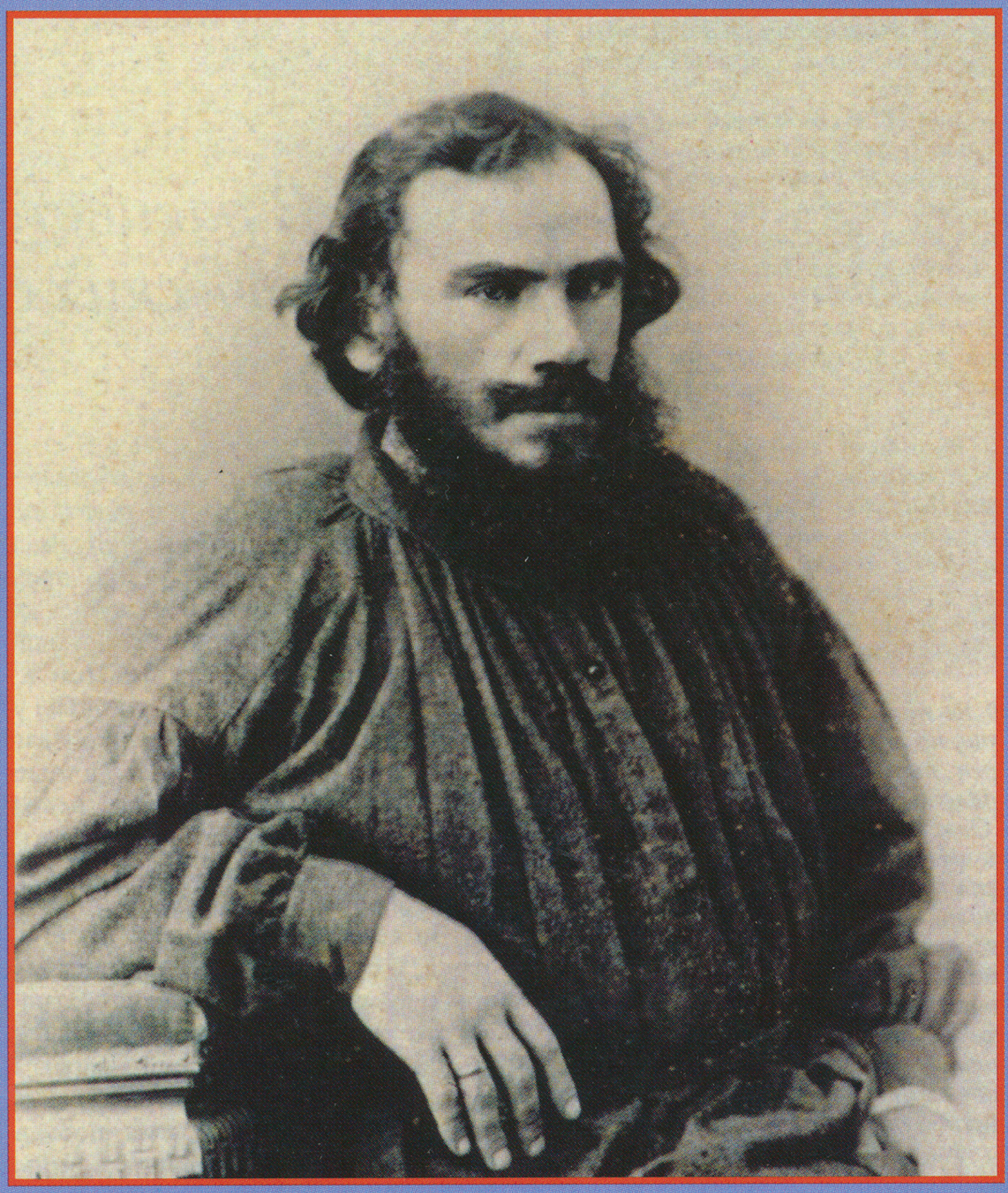
TOLSTOY

AS TEACHER



LEO TOLSTOY'S
WRITINGS ON EDUCATION

EDITED BY BOB BLAISDELL

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Tolstoj as Teacher

INTRODUCTION

Bob Blaisdell

Dit is het inleidend hoofdstuk uit het boek *Tolstoy as Teacher,* geredigeerd door Bob Blaisdell en in 2000 uitgegeven door het *Teachers & Writers Collaborative* te New York.
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Introduction

by Bob Blaisdell

> *Every artistic word, whether it belongs to Goethe or to Fedka, differs from the inartistic in that it evokes an endless mass of thoughts, images, and explanations.*
> —Leo Tolstoy, in "Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us, or Are We to Learn from the Peasant Children?"

IN 1859, the thirty-one-year-old Count Leo Tolstoy—already a famous author, a veteran of two army campaigns, a university dropout, a gambler, the father of a boy by a married peasant woman—opened a free, noncompulsory school in one of the buildings on his estate. Written over the doors of his school at Yasnaya Polyana were the words "Come and Go Freely." The disciplines ranged from literature to music to biology, with the students' interests directing the daily course of study. By the time Tolstoy began work on his magazine, *Yasnaya Polyana*, in 1861—which he published to inform and attract other educators—he had formulated his own dynamic, clearly drawn ideas, rejecting as twaddle or harmful most of the pedagogies he had read about or observed:

> The best teacher is the one who can instantly recognize what is bothering a particular student. This ability in turn gives the teacher a knowledge of the greatest possible number of methods; the ability to invent new methods; and above all—rather than the blind adherence to one method—the conviction that all methods are one-sided, that the best possible method is the one that answers best all the possible difficulties incurred by the student. This is not a method, but an art and talent.[1]

Tolstoy saw teaching as an "art," and like any of the arts, it only works when it works. He knew from experience that what was successful in the classroom one day did not necessarily succeed the next. To Tolstoy, theories weren't to be bowed to. Pedagogical theory was something for teachers to use or not use; it was simply one of many resources available.

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* I would like to thank my friend Ross Robins for introducing me, many years ago, to Tolstoy's articles on education.—*Editor*

At the same time there were rules of thumb he and his teachers observed. The chaos and clamor of everyday classroom activity was not to be squashed by teacherly authority; the "chaos" was natural, even necessary, and Tolstoy discovered that the children themselves justly regulated its duration and limits.[2]

The Yasnaya Polyana school was a paradise for Tolstoy.[3] In early August 1861, he wrote to a friend, Countess Alexandrine Andreevna Tolstaya, that he had "a charming and poetic occupation which I can't tear myself away from, and that's the school":

> When I break away from my office . . . I go to the school; but as it's undergoing alterations the classes are held alongside, in the garden under the apple trees, and it's so overgrown that you can only get there by stooping down. The teacher sits there with the schoolchildren all round him, nibbling blades of grass and making the lime and maple leaves crackle. The teacher teaches according to my advice, but even so, not too well, and the children feel it. They are fonder of me. And we begin to chat for three or four hours, and nobody is bored. It's impossible to describe these children—they have to be seen. I've never seen the like among children of our own dear class. Just imagine that in two years, in the complete absence of discipline, not a single boy or girl has been punished.[4] There's never any laziness, coarseness, stupid jokes, or unseemly language. The schoolhouse is now almost completed. The school occupies three large rooms: one pink, and two blue. One room, moreover, is a museum. On the shelves round the wall, stones, butterflies, skeletons, grasses, flowers, physics instruments, etc., are laid out. On Sundays the museum is open to everyone, and a German from Jena [a teacher named Keller] (who's turned out to be an excellent young fellow) does experiments. Once a week there's a botany class, and we all go off to the woods to look for flowers, grasses and mushrooms. Four singing classes a week, and six of drawing (the German again), and it's all going very well. . . . Excluding myself there are three teachers in all. . . . The classes are supposed to be from 8 to 12 and from 3 to 6, but they always go on till 2 o'clock because it's impossible to get the children to leave the school—they ask for more. In the evening it often happens that more than half of them stay and spend the night in the garden, in a hut. At lunch and supper and after supper we—the teachers—confer together. On Saturdays we read our notes to each other and prepare for the following week.[5]

Two of Tolstoy's *Yasnaya Polyana* essays in particular—"Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us, or Are We to Learn from the Peasant Children?" and "The School at Yasnaya Polyana"—are more exciting and important than Tolstoy's theories about teaching, for a simple reason: they give accounts of his interactions with the peasant boys and

girls ("more important," because these two articles show more about successful teaching than even any of Tolstoy's brilliant formulations can). When Tolstoy was with his students, his eyes were wide open; he was amazed and appreciative, and the sparkling conversations and classroom scenes he describes reveal a joy found nowhere else in his life or work. Some narrative passages are as beautiful and evocative as his fiction:

> Fedka kept looking up at me from his notebook, and smiled, winked, and repeated, "Write, write, or I'll give it to you!" He was evidently quite amused to see a grown-up write a theme.
>
> Having finished his own composition worse and faster than usual, Fedka climbed on the back of my chair and began to read over my shoulder. I could not go on; others came up to us, and I read them what I had written.
>
> They did not like it, and nobody praised it. I felt ashamed, and to soothe my literary ambitions I began to tell them of my plan for what was to follow. The further I got in the story, the more enthusiastic I became; I corrected myself, and they kept helping me out. One student said that the old man should turn out to be a magician; another remarked: "No, that won't do, he should just be a soldier.... The best thing would be if he steals from him.... No, that wouldn't go with the proverb," and so on.
>
> All were exceedingly interested. It was obviously a new and exciting sensation for the students to be present at the process of creation, and to take part in it. The decisions they made were for the most part all the same, and were true to the plot as well as in the details and characterizations. Almost all of them took part in the composing process, but from the start Semka and Fedka especially distinguished themselves: Semka, by his perceptive, artistic descriptions, and Fedka, by the acuity of his poetic gifts, and especially by the glow and rapidity of his imagination.[6]

When *Yasnaya Polyana* first appeared, its articles were overlooked and ignored by almost everyone in Russia but the tsarist secret police. The Minister of the Interior, however, was onto Tolstoy when hardly anyone else had raised an eyebrow:

> The careful reading of the educational review *Yasnaya Polyana*, edited by Count Tolstoy, leads to the conclusion that this review, in preaching new methods of tuition and principles of popular schools, frequently spreads ideas which, besides being incorrect, are injurious in their teaching. Without entering into a full examination of the doctrines of the review, and without pointing out any particular articles or expressions—which, however, could be easily done—I consider it necessary to draw the attention of your Excellency to the general tendency and spirit of the review, which very often attacks the fundamental rules of religion and morality. The continuation of the review in the same spirit must, in my opinion, be considered more dangerous as its

> editor is a man of remarkable and one may say even a fascinating talent, who cannot be suspected to be a criminal or an unprincipled man. The evil lies in the sophistry and eccentricity of his convictions which, being expounded with extraordinary eloquence, may carry away inexperienced teachers in this direction, and thus give a wrong turn to popular education. I have the honor to inform you of this hoping you may consider it useful to draw the special attention of the censor to this publication.[7]

All nineteenth-century Russian writers were at the mercy of government censors. (For instance, in January 1862, the first issue of *Yasnaya Polyana* had to await "release" by the censor.) The Minister of the Interior had little to fear, though, because Tolstoy's influence on educational practice through *Yasnaya Polyana* was limited and local enough. Later in life, of course, Tolstoy could offer his opinions and pronouncements on (among other topics) religion and civil disobedience to a worldwide and receptive audience even when the censors blocked publication in Russia.

Although Tolstoy was very fond of titles in question form—"What Then Must We Do?"; "What Is Art?"; "How Much Land Does a Man Need?"—the answers to these questions were never in doubt. He answers the question "Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us, or Are We to Learn from the Peasant Children?" with a resounding "We have to learn from them!"

> It's impossible and absurd to teach and educate a child for the simple reason that the child stands closer than I do—and than any grown-up does—to that ideal of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness to which I, in my pride, wish to raise him. The consciousness of this ideal lies more powerfully in him than in me. All he needs of me is the necessary material to fulfill himself, harmoniously and multifariously. The moment I gave Fedka complete freedom and stopped teaching him, he wrote a poetic work, one that is unique in Russian literature. And thus it is my conviction that we cannot teach children in general, and peasant children in particular, to write and to compose—particularly artistic works. All that we need teach them is how to set about writing.[8]

No commentator in Tolstoy's time—or our own—has admitted the full truth of this assertion about children's writing, but we hope this anthology will show it is true and that Tolstoy's writings on education were also "a poetic work, one that is unique in Russian [or any] literature." He reminds us to recognize and value our students' artistry, an artistry he feels we have lost and should strive to rediscover.

While Tolstoy's opinions in the pedagogical essays are compelling and persuasive, their greatest value is, just as he suggests, in their descriptiveness. "In presenting a description of the Yasnaya Polyana school," he writes, "I do not mean to offer a model of what's needed and what is good for a school, but simply to furnish a true description of the school. I assume that such descriptions have their use."[9] These are not the descriptions of a theorist or of a naive observer; they are the masterful narratives of an extraordinary teacher and an unsurpassed novelist. The critic John Bayley has pointed out Tolstoy's ability to make completely remote or peculiar settings seem universal and familiar.[10] The peasant school was located on Tolstoy's country estate from 1859 to 1862, 130 miles southwest of Moscow, yet through Tolstoy's descriptions I feel almost more familiar with the daily life of his catch-as-catch-can school than I do with the schools in which I was taught and have taught.

* * * *

Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy was born on September 9, 1828, at Yasnaya Polyana ("Clear Glade"), the family estate. Tolstoy and his three older brothers and younger sister were orphans from the time Leo was eight. His mother died before he turned two. (It is touching to note, in the education articles, his belief that the most important education any child receives is at his mother's knee.)

His first tutor, Karl Ivanovich Rössel, the Russian-born German on whom the tutor Karl Ivanovich in Tolstoy's fictional *Childhood* is based, was a good, simple man, responsive and kind to the children, although somewhat limited, Tolstoy's guardians thought, by his ignorance. From him Tolstoy learned reading, writing, mathematics, and German. When Prosper Saint-Thomas, a Frenchman, replaced Rössel when Tolstoy was eight, the boy began his lifelong battle with educational authority. Saint-Thomas had rules; he knew what had to be taught and what had to be learned. He was confident, disciplined, and demanding; the relationship he established with his charges required that they be obedient, that they answer what he wanted them to answer, and that they think about what he wanted them to think about. He expected them to bow to his authority as if he were a priest and they initiates in the faith of education. Tolstoy felt Saint-Thomas was fairly typical of boys' teachers in aristocratic Russian families of the time.

Tolstoy did not attend a conventional school until he was sixteen, but by then—with the help of several specialized tutors—he had become fluent in a handful of languages (German, French, and English, as well as Russian), and also well-versed in Arabic, Tartar, and Turkish. (His aunts and other relatives, meanwhile, "educated" him in the manners and attitudes that encouraged the moral laxity and class divisions that he later came to mock and reject.)

Tolstoy's years at Kazan University (1844–1847), where he first studied Oriental languages and then law, left him with a lifelong disdain for higher education. This was the only formal education he ever had, and to Tolstoy, "formal" almost always meant something to fight against:

> I was little interested in the lectures of our teachers in Kazan. To begin with, for about a year I studied Oriental languages, but made very little progress. I plunged eagerly into everything, I read a countless number of books but always in one or another particular direction. When I became interested in some problem, I did not swerve away from it to the left or to the right, and tried to read everything that could shed a light on this one problem. It was like that with me in Kazan too. There were two reasons for my leaving the university: one was that my brother had completed his studies and was going away, and the other, strange as it may sound, was my work on [Catherine the Great's] *Instructions* and [Montesquieu's] *Esprit des lois* (I have a copy now), which opened up for me a new field of independent mental endeavor, whereas the university with its demands, far from helping me in it, hindered me.[11]

As Tolstoy's wife noted years later, "He was a poor student and always had difficulty in learning what others said he must. Whatever he learned in life he learned of his own accord, and did it spontaneously, quickly, with intense application."[12] (For instance, at the age of forty-three Tolstoy taught himself Greek, which, besides giving him a new appreciation of Homer, enabled him to teach Greek to his older sons and to translate, "correct," and revise a version of the gospels. He also taught himself Hebrew, and then, as an old man, Danish (in a matter of weeks). This is not to mention how he apprenticed himself to skilled workers to learn to farm, to repair wagon wheels, and to make shoes and clothes.)

When Tolstoy was nineteen, he and his brothers decided it was time to divide their family inheritance. As was customary in the Russian aristocracy, the youngest son, Leo, received the family estate. Atypically, the brothers portioned out an equal share to their sister.

At age twenty-one, Tolstoy passed two examinations in Criminal Law at St. Petersburg University (he bragged that he had spent only a week studying for them). Before completing the next two examinations that would have given him a degree, he moved home to reform his estate in the interests, he hoped, of the serfs. With his servant Foka, he opened a school for peasant children, a short-lived endeavor that Tolstoy never wrote about and hardly mentioned again, except to say that it was an illegal operation, as all self-governed schools in Russia were. (Even so, to start a school for serf children was not an unusual undertaking for estate owners.) In retrospect, this first effort at educational and social reform seems largely a whim.

In 1851 he followed his brother Nikolai to the Caucasus, where Nikolai was serving as an officer. The Cossacks (Russian peasants who had long lived in this mountain region where they could avoid serfdom) and the native Tartars immediately caught Tolstoy's imagination and later bore fruit in his fiction. While serving as a volunteer in the army, Tolstoy wrote the novel titled *Childhood*. He gambled and lost money, eventually squandering the family house and portions of the Yasnaya Polyana land. He drank too much and chased women. He saw and participated in battles as a noncommissioned officer. *Childhood*, its sequels, and *The Sevastopol Sketches* (descriptive accounts of the battles in the Crimea between Russia and England in 1854–55) led to his being hailed as a new voice in Russian literature. He retired from the army in 1856.

Tolstoy then became disillusioned with the rewards of his aristocratic, artistic circle, and longed for a new, fulfilling purpose. Before that purpose came to him, he fled Yasnaya Polyana and broke off a marriage engagement with a neighboring landowner's daughter. His "grand tour" of Western Europe in 1857 was spent visiting sites and museums. In Paris he became acquainted with Ivan Turgenev, with whom he began a long-lived but difficult friendship. While in Europe, Tolstoy noted in his journal that he wanted to return to project that would become a consuming passion: a school for peasant children. The twentieth-century critic Viktor Shklovsky suggests, however, that Tolstoy's ideas for the Yasnaya Polyana school were inspired by what he had seen among the Cossacks:

> Tolstoy thought that the Cossack community could serve as a model for the whole of Russia—peasantry without the nobility. That is how he felt when he was finishing *The Cossacks*, and when he taught at the Yasnaya Polyana school. [The Yasnaya Polyana school was like] Cossack schools, so to speak, a devel-

> opment of Cossack ideas in pedagogy. [Cossack schools'] purpose was to discover and rear gifted children; there was no definite program and pupils were free to come and go as they liked. The gang of children without superiors was the realization of Tolstoy's dream about "Cossackdom."[13]

Tolstoy's second effort as an educator, the Yasnaya Polyana school of 1859–62, was as vast, involving, and important an undertaking to him as the writing of his later novels *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, or *Resurrection*. Fellow authors (including Turgenev) saw Tolstoy's expedition into pedagogy as a diversion from his true calling; his daughter and biographer Alexandra wrote, "He threw his whole being into his schoolwork; thoughts of living in the village, of marrying a village girl passed through his mind. He was so absorbed in his surroundings that all other classes of society vanished, as it were, from his life. . . ."[14] In a letter of 1861 Tolstoy wrote to a friend: "What has this school done for me since I opened it? It has been my whole life, it has been my monastery, my church into which I escaped, finding refuge from all the anxieties, doubts, and temptations of life."[15]

Nearly fifty years after the Yasnaya Polyana school closed, Vassily Morozov (Fedka) recalled its first days:

> In three months' time we were deep in our studies. By that time we could read with facility and the number of scholars had grown from twenty-two to seventy.
>
> All seventy of us would swoop down on Tolstoy, one with a question, another with a lesson book to show.
>
> "Lev Nikolaevich, is this right?"
>
> He would look at the book.
>
> "Yes, it's right, only you've left something out here. Otherwise it's fine. Don't hurry so."
>
> "What about mine—how do I write?" and another copy-book would be thrust under his nose, and then another, until the whole group was clamoring for his attention.
>
> He would examine the books seriously and say a few kind words of approval sprinkled with remarks like:
>
> "You'll have to rewrite that. You've left out too much."[16]

In the beginning Tolstoy and an Orthodox priest, who taught theology, were able to manage the teaching load. Within the next three years, in his capacity as a government arbiter Tolstoy hired about a dozen more teachers for the Yasnaya Polyana school and other schools he set up nearby. Most of the young teachers were former university students who

had been expelled for political agitation. He liked to point out that these would-be revolutionaries, on encountering the needs and interests of the children, immediately gave up "their Herzen"[17] and learned to teach Bible stories.

Petr Morozov, one of those teachers, published some reminiscences. He remarked that on first entering the school, "What struck me was the inconceivable din the children were making."[18] He grew used to this occasional "din." Morozov remembered: "We would work all day. . . . Some would leave, others would come, and so it went on from early morning until late in the evening."[19] Even with the rigors of the work and simple living conditions, said Morozov, "The school did not weary me, thanks to the lack of official discipline." Tolstoy had ideas about how to let teachers be most effective, and these included allowing them to teach as they had been most effectively taught, even if those methods ran counter to Tolstoy's own.

Fedka remembered one of their ventures into writing:

> We happened to be reading a certain book along with Lev Nikolaevich, I cannot remember the title of the book, but it was very good. Pausing at the full stops I would often put this question to Lev Nikolaevich: "But, Lev Nikolaevich, can you make things up like that yourself?" "I don't know." After reading the book, Lev Nikolaevich said to us, to the whole class: "If you like we'll write something ourselves, we'll invent it."[20]

One such "invention" is the story by "Fedka" and "Semka" based on Snegirev's proverb, "He Feeds with the Spoon, then Pokes the Eye with the Handle" (which you can find in this volume).

In 1860, the fatal illness of Tolstoy's brother Nikolai in France pulled Tolstoy away from his school. This was the last time Tolstoy went abroad, and he used the trip to pursue his abiding interest: he examined the educational methods in the most famous school systems in Europe. Tolstoy hated the thought that there might be better ways to educate students than the ones he himself was discovering, by trial and error, at his school.

In Germany he met Berthold Auerbach, the educator and novelist whose fictional *A New Life* Tolstoy greatly admired: "It was owing to [*A New Life*] that I started a school for my peasants and became interested in popular education."[21] Auerbach said: "You yourself are the best teacher. With the help of the children you create your own method and all will go well. Any abstract method is an absurdity. The best that a teacher can do in a school will depend on him personally, on his own capacities."[22] How-

ever, most of what Tolstoy saw in the schools of Germany, France, and England left him disappointed. "Modern" progressive systems such as those of Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), the German inventor and popularizer of kindergarten, and Jean Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), the Swiss educator, had become dogmatic, trusting more in the method than in the dynamics of the classroom or the individuality of the students. There was also the old-fashioned approach of intimidation, punishment, and rote-learning. Even the better schools assumed the right to compel the minds and spirits of the students.

In Marseilles, Tolstoy had a revelation:

> The very boy who told me that Henry IV had been killed by Julius Caesar knew very well the history of the *Three Musketeers* and of *Monte Cristo*. I found twenty-eight illustrated editions of these in Marseilles, costing from five to ten centimes. To a population of 250,000 they sell 30,000 of them—consequently, if we suppose that ten people read or listen to one copy, we find that everyone knows their history. In addition there are the museum, the public libraries, the theaters. Then there are the cafés—two large *cafés chantants*, where each may enter for fifty centimes' worth of food or drink, and where there are daily as many as 25,000 people—and this is not counting the smaller cafés, which hold as many more—in each of these cafés they produce little comedies and skits, and recite verses. Taking the lowest calculation, we get one-fifth of the population—one-fifth who get their daily oral instruction just as the Greeks and Romans were instructed in their amphitheaters.
>
> Whether this education is good or bad is another matter; but here it is, this unconscious education that is so much more powerful than the one by compulsion. Here is the unconscious school that has undermined the compulsory school and has made the latter's substance dwindle down to almost nothing. The only thing left is a despotic form, one almost without content. I say "almost without content" because I exclude the mere mechanical ability of putting letters together and writing down words—the only knowledge that can be taken away after five or six years' study. Here it must be remarked that even the mere mechanical art of reading and writing is frequently acquired outside of school in a much shorter period, and that frequently the students do not take this ability with them when they leave the school—or it is lost, finding no application in life. Where school attendance is made compulsory by law, there is no need to teach a second generation to read, write, and figure, because the parents, we should think, would be able to do that at home, and the children would learn much more easily that way than in school.
>
> What I saw in Marseilles takes place in all the other countries: everywhere the greater part of one's education is acquired not at school but in life. Where life is instructive—in London, Paris, and generally in all large cities—

> the masses are educated; where life is not instructive, in the country, the people are uneducated, in spite of the fact that the schools are the same in both. The knowledge acquired in the country is lost. The direction and spirit of the popular education, both in the cities and in the villages, is absolutely independent from, and generally contrary to, the spirit that it is intended to instill in the schools. Education goes on quite independently of the schools.[23]

Tolstoy's observations about culture made him modest about his own educational project. He was revolutionary but deliberately nondogmatic. He did not attack the popular cultural education of the day (later, for instance, he raised his own children on the novels of Alexandre Dumas, Charles Dickens, and Jules Verne, and in the 1880s moved his family to Moscow for a period of years for his children's schooling), but instead bowed to it and supplemented it with complementary material. At the same time, he eagerly offered children as much education as they desired. Tolstoy firmly believed that teachers should choose subjects that aligned with their own interests and enthusiasms: "If you wish to educate the student by science, love your science and know it, and the students will love both you and the science, and you will educate them; but if you yourself do not love it, the science will have no educational influence, no matter how much you may compel them to learn it."[24]

Tolstoy saw the use of force as causing the most harm in education:

> How is this? The need of education lies in every man; the people love and seek education, as they love and seek the air for breathing; the government and society burn with the desire to educate the masses, and yet, notwithstanding all the force of cunning and the persistence of governments and societies, the masses constantly manifest their dissatisfaction with the education which is offered to them, and step by step submit only to force.[25]

After Tolstoy returned from Europe in April 1861, he applied for governmental permission to publish an educational magazine. Originally to be titled *The Country Schoolmaster*, it became known as *Yasnaya Polyana*. He secured subscriptions, less than 400, and budgeted 3,000 rubles for its production (which because of gambling debts he could hardly afford).

Tolstoy anticipated that his magazine would ruffle feathers. In the introduction to the first issue, he wrote:

> Entering on a new work, I am under some fear, both for myself and for those thoughts which have been for years developing in me, and which I regard as true. I am certain beforehand that many of these thoughts will turn out to be mistaken. However carefully I have endeavored to study the subject, and

> have involuntarily looked upon it from one side, I hope that my thoughts will call forth the expression of a contrary opinion. I shall be glad to afford room for all opinions in my magazine. Of one thing only am I afraid—that these opinions may be expressed with acridity, and that the discussion of a subject so dear and important to all as that of national education may degenerate into sarcasms, personalities, and journalistic polemics; and I will not say that sarcasms and personalities could not affect me, or that I hope to be above them. On the contrary, I confess that I fear as much for myself as for the cause itself; I fear being carried away by personal polemics instead of quietly and persistently working at my subject.
>
> I therefore beg all future opponents of my views to express their thoughts so that I may explain myself, and substantiate my statements in those cases in which our disagreement is caused by our not understanding one another, and might agree with my opponents when the error of my view is proved.[26]

Tolstoy's view, his theory—or "anti-theory," as Reginald D. Archambault would have it[27]—was based not on idealistic notions but on what happens in the classroom and how things work and evolve. Tolstoy, better than most teachers, understood what worked and why; this was partly because he was even more critical of himself than he was of other educators. He was able to take into account and to dramatize many dynamics of the classroom better than anyone before or since; he saw situations not through pedagogical goggles but with his own two eyes. His theories, then, have a substantiality often missing in pedagogy. The one factor he failed to account for in his anti-theoretical theories of teaching was his own unique personality and charisma.

When Tolstoy the teacher is discussed by critics or biographers, he is sometimes caricatured as being a romantic protégé of his idol, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose pedagogical writings contain much that is beautiful to imagine but even more that is just plain silly.[28] In any case, Rousseau's recommended practices are not based on observed experiences, as Tolstoy's rigorously are.

Try as Tolstoy might to find a unifying pedagogical idea that others could follow, the best he could do in this line was to attack and ridicule compulsion and recommend a few teaching methods and tactics. Since he believed teaching was an "art and talent"—though the highest praise he gave himself was that he had "a certain pedagogical tact"—could these writings become the basis of a Tolstoyan pedagogy? No, because

according to Tolstoy himself, art—and therefore the art of teaching—can't be taught:

> The feeling of infection by the art of music, which seems so simple and so easily obtained, is a thing we receive only when the performer finds those infinitely minute degrees which are necessary to perfection in music. It is the same in all arts: a wee bit lighter, a wee bit darker, a wee bit higher, lower, to the right or the left—in painting; a wee bit weaker or stronger in intonation, a wee bit sooner or later—in dramatic art; a wee bit omitted, overemphasized, or exaggerated—in poetry, and there is no contagion. Infection is only obtained when an artist finds those infinitely minute degrees of which a work of art consists, and only to the extent to which he finds them. And it is quite impossible to teach people by external means to find these minute degrees: they can only be found when a man yields to his feeling. No instruction can make a dancer catch just the time of the music, or a singer or a fiddler take exactly the infinitely minute center of his note, or a sketcher draw of all possible lines the only right one, or a poet find the only right arrangement of the only suitable words. All that is found only by feeling. And therefore schools may teach what is necessary in order to produce something resembling art, but not art itself.
>
> The teaching of the schools stops where the wee bit begins—consequently where art begins.[29]

Tolstoy's school was like all "experimental" schools that have cultivated "student-directed" programs, and yet there is no evidence that Tolstoy's writings on education have influenced or inspired any school but the dozen or so he set up in the Tula district while he held the position of public arbiter in 1861–62. The leading Russian thinker on education in Tolstoy's time was Konstantin Ushinsky, a school inspector and author of very popular elementary school texts. Ushinsky worked within the government, while Tolstoy—though happy to set up governmentally *funded* schools—whenever possible tried to shake off any official influence in the classroom. Even so, Ushinsky and Tolstoy shared some beliefs, including the fundamental one of goodwill toward the peasants.

In the twentieth century, John Dewey, though an admirer of Tolstoy and sympathetic to his ideas, did not concern himself as Tolstoy did with individual students or individual schoolrooms.[30] On the other hand, the most important wisdom Tolstoy gained from teaching—his belief and delight in students' writing—has been shared by individual teachers everywhere.[31]

Tolstoy expected to challenge and influence his contemporaries' attitudes about education, but instead—when they bothered to respond—they dismissed the ideas and opinions of *Yasnaya Polyana* as unimportant or impractical. In 1874, Tolstoy, recalling his disappointment over *Yasnaya Polyana* not having been taken seriously, wrote:

> The question of what [the criteria were] as to what to teach and how to teach received an even greater meaning for me; only by solving it could I be convinced that what I taught was neither injurious nor useless. This question both then and now has appeared to me as a cornerstone of the whole pedagogy, and to the solution of this question I devoted the publication of the pedagogical periodical *Yasnaya Polyana*. In several articles (I do not renounce anything I then said) I tried to put the question in all its significance and to solve it as much as I could. At that time I found no sympathy in all the pedagogical literature, not even any contradiction, but the most complete indifference to the question which I put. There were some attacks on certain details and trifles, but the question itself evidently did not interest anyone. I was young then, and that indifference grieved me. I did not understand that with my question, "How do you know what to teach and how to teach?" I was like a man who, let us say, in a gathering of Turkish pashas discussing the question in what manner they may collect the greatest revenue from the people, should propose to them the following: "Gentlemen, in order to know how much revenue to collect from each, we must first analyze the question on what your right to exact that revenue is based." Obviously all the pashas would continue their discussion of the measures of extortion, and would reply only with silence to his irrelevant question.[32]

"[*Yasnaya Polyana*] has become a bibliographical rarity," wrote Pavel Biryukov in 1905. "True, Tolstoy's own principal articles have been included in the fourth volume of the full edition of his works, but, besides those articles, there appeared in the magazine many different short notices, descriptions and reports of great interest for teachers in a theoretical as well as in a practical sense." That is, "each number contained one or two theoretical articles, then reports of the progress of the school under the management of Tolstoy, bibliography, description of school libraries, accounts of donations, and a supplement in the shape of a book for reading. The motto of the magazine was the saying: *Glaubst zu schieben und wirst geschoben*, that is to say, 'You mean to push, but in reality it is you who are pushed.'"[33]

Tolstoy devoted himself to the school for three years. Then, in the spring of 1862, exhausted by his work at the school and as public arbiter, he left to recover on a vacation on the Russian steppes. While he was

gone, Tsarist secret police raided and searched his estate, hoping to turn up evidence of revolutionary activity by Tolstoy or his teachers. In an angry letter to Alexandrine Tolstaya, his friend, he explained:

> They write to me from Yasnaya that on July 6 three troikas full of police drove up, ordered no one, including Auntie no doubt, to leave the premises, and began to ransack the place. What they were searching for we still do not know. One of your friends, a filthy colonel [Alexandrine Tolstaya was a member of the court, and so is being scolded for her association with the government], read through all my letters and journals, which I had intended before my death to turn over to the friend who would be closest to me at the time; he read two sets of correspondence which I would have given anything in the world to keep secret—and then he drove off after asserting that he had found nothing of a *suspicious* character. It was my good fortune and also that of my friend that I was not there—I should have killed him. How lovely! How endearing! This is how the government wins friends for itself. If you recall what my political interests are you know that I have always been, and especially since I have been wrapped up in my school, completely indifferent to the government, and even more indifferent to the present-day liberals whom I despise with all my heart. Now I can no longer say this of myself. I am full of anger, revulsion, almost hatred for that sweet government which undertakes a police search of my home for lithographic and typographic presses for printing proclamations by Herzen, whom I scorn, and which bore me so I have not even the patience to read them through. . . . And suddenly I and my student teachers are subjected to a police search! . . .[34]

Nothing was found, but when Tolstoy got word of the raid he was outraged and protested to the Tsar. Though the episode grieved him, Tolstoy never cited it as a cause for the school's demise. It was his unquenchable passion for literature and his desire for marriage and family that led him to give up teaching in the fall of 1862. The student Vassily Morozov remarked:

> That year our school did not reopen, something in our attitude to it had disintegrated and grown confused. The field work had come to an end, the fields were cleared and the school could have begun, but it was as if a sort of silent strike had been declared; instead of the former seventy pupils only fifteen turned up. Practically nobody came from the distant villages and nearby districts. Many of our Yasnaya Polyana children held off because of their parents. . . . Lev Nikolaevich was annoyed and regretted this, saying they shouldn't have given up, they should have gone on studying, but Lev Nikolaevich too seemed to have something else in mind.[35]

After his marriage in September of 1862 to Sonya Behrs, the daughter of one of the royal physicians, Morozov continues, "Lev Nikolaevich rarely visited us, and the school began to flag."[36]

Although scholars such as Shklovsky have argued that Sonya was jealous of his involvement in the school, Tolstoy himself never hinted that she had spoiled or deterred his experiment in educating the peasants. What nagged at him was his impulse, his compulsion, to write. All his life he would periodically renounce the value of his own writing, but he always returned to it. His new great project at this time was researching background for a novel about "the Decembrists" of 1825.[37] Tolstoy's writing and research on the Decembrists led him further into the past, to Napoleon's campaign of 1812 and the response of Russia's military and of her people—and thus, the great project of *War and Peace*.

After Tolstoy completed *War and Peace* in 1869, he returned to a challenge he himself had set forth in *Yasnaya Polyana*: "To print good books for the masses! How simple and easy it looks, just like all great ideas. There is just one difficulty: there are no good books for the people, not only in our country, but even not in Europe. In order to print such books they must be written first, but not one of the benefactors will think of undertaking this task."[38] So Tolstoy became the "benefactor" who undertook this task. His *ABC Book* and the four levels of *Readers* (graded primers) that followed were his primary literary work between *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, and in them he distilled, revised, and adapted world literature for the purpose of teaching and promoting reading. Simultaneously, he took up the question of his own children's education. By 1869, he and Sonya had four children (they eventually had thirteen, the last of whom was born when Tolstoy was sixty).

Both detractors and devotees of Tolstoy cannot help but notice that Tolstoy did not always follow his stated beliefs. Tolstoy's own children received a far more conventional and orderly education than the peasant children had. (In spite of his hard-earned views on education, he felt he should defer to his wife's wishes about their children's upbringing.) Tutors did the bulk of the teaching, with Tolstoy and Sonya also taking teaching duties (Tolstoy's primary topic was mathematics). His oldest children listened to and helped him correct the stories he wrote for his *ABC Book* and *Readers*, and themselves served as teachers in a new, short-lived school he set up for peasant children in 1872. Tolstoy did not publish work on this

new school, though his daughter Tatyana described the daily routine in her memoirs:

> Having completed the *Readers* and the *ABC*, Papa decided he really ought to try them out for himself, so he resumed teaching the peasant children.
>
> Seryozha and I could already read and write quite passably. Ilya, then about six, could only just read and was very bad at writing; nevertheless he announced that he was going to teach the youngest class. Papa agreed, and the lessons began.
>
> They lasted for slightly over two hours every day, beginning after our dinner, which was served between five and six, and continuing till it was time for us to go to bed. Papa took the boys' class in his study. The girls were Mama's responsibility, and she taught them in another room. We three children taught the absolute beginners their alphabet. Our classroom was the hall, and fat Ilya, a big pointer clutched in one hand, would try to teach the alphabet to rows of stolid little children much the same size as himself. . . .[39]

This teaching project did not involve Tolstoy's full attention or energy. "When summer came," continues Tatyana Tolstaya, "the school was closed, and the next year it didn't reopen."[40]

Soon after, in 1874, he was named to the county council and served on the Education Committee. At something of a standstill with the early writing of *Anna Karenina*, he relished his new role as a school inspector. He wrote to a friend: "I have now jumped out of abstract pedagogy into the practical on one side and the abstract on the other—the work of the schools in our district. And I straightway began to love these thousands of children with whom I'm concerned, as I did fourteen years ago."[41] After much lobbying of the government he got the go-ahead in 1876 to open a teachers college, a "university in bast shoes,"[42] in which he would train young, bright peasants to teach other peasants. He had to give up this treasured plan when there were too few applicants to continue, and he never again deeply involved himself in public education.[43]

One of the themes of the second half of *Anna Karenina* is the spiritual crisis of the Tolstoy-like Konstantin Levin. Even before the completion of the novel in 1877, Tolstoy found himself in despair over the meaning of life; he was on the verge of suicide. This crisis was resolved by a deep and idiosyncratic acceptance of Christianity (so idiosyncratic that the Orthodox Church eventually excommunicated him for heresy). Afterward, Tolstoy saw and judged the world in a new way, and his artistic output, though impressive for almost anyone else, dropped off.

Over the last thirty years of his life his greatest endeavor in educating the people had nothing to do with schools. In 1884, Tolstoy, Pavel Biryukov, and Vladimir Chertkov, who would become his longtime associate and secretary, took over a St. Petersburg publishing house, christened it The Intermediary (*Posrednik*), and began printing and distributing millions of copies of inexpensive booklets of classic and contemporary moral literature, including many stories by Tolstoy himself. This nonprofit venture was wonderfully successful, as had been his *ABC Book* and graded *Readers*. But as *Yasnaya Polyana* had done, The Intermediary occasionally ran afoul of government censors. The publishers' implied criticisms of the government eventually resulted in the deportation of Biryukov.

Tolstoy's religious writings, his essays on social and moral issues, and his efforts to solve social problems occupied him much of the rest of his life. He became an advocate for the Dukhobors and Molokans, two persecuted religious groups whose emigration he helped fund. During a terrible drought and famine in western Russia during the early 1890s, he raised money and set up soup kitchens with his friends and children. Too famous for the government to silence, Tolstoy publicly challenged capital punishment and conscription, and he ceaselessly promoted tolerance, peace, and civil disobedience to a larger and larger international audience. He also fought continually with his wife and sons over property and his sons' excesses. (In many ways, his sons' lives mirrored his own vice-ridden youth.)

Meanwhile, Tolstoy also wrote the novel *Resurrection* (1898) and several famous novellas, including *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886), *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), and *Master and Man* (1895). Great as they are, these works are often relentlessly didactic and, compared to his earlier fiction, reductive. It was his social and religious consciousness and activism—and copyright disputes between his wife and Chertkov—that made it harder for Tolstoy to justify to himself his works of the imagination. One of the results of his internal conflicts about writing more fiction, however, was the sometimes wonderful, occasionally delightful, often narrow-minded *What Is Art?* (1898), in which Tolstoy rigorously (and perversely) excludes from the realms of art the classical music he continued to love and the great literature he still guiltily composed (most notably the sensational *Hadji Murad*, an admiring, exciting, fictional portrait of a real-life Tartar warrior). Tolstoy also momentarily reflects on his

teaching experiences at the Yasnaya Polyana school in *What Is Art?*, but he is much less generous about art in this work than he was in the education articles, where he clearly outlined or even discovered some of the artistic aspirations for his own novels and stories.

As for the fates of the Yasnaya Polyana students, Fedka's life in particular was not a happy or lucky one. After the dissolution of the school, he and Ignat Makarov (that is, Semka) worked as hands on Tolstoy's farm, but were fired when they lied about having allowed some horses to get loose. Fedka and Semka then worked as carriage drivers in Tula, but Fedka failed to keep this job and was down and out for some time. As a middle-aged family man, he renewed his friendship with Tolstoy and, with the famous author's help, even published a new story. When Thomas Edison sent Tolstoy a phonograph, Tolstoy recorded his own and Fedka's voice.

In 1889, meanwhile, Ignat Makarov (Semka) returned to Yasnaya Polyana as a discharged soldier, and Tolstoy, after chatting with his former pupil, put him in charge of his estate at Samara. In 1910, the year of Tolstoy's death, Prokofy Vlasov, another former student, was arrested by one of the guards Sonya Tolstoy had hired to patrol the grounds. The impoverished Vlasov had chopped down a tree, he said, to prop up the side of his shack. (Tolstoy released Vlasov and asked Sonya to fire the guard, but she refused.)

When Tolstoy died his body was returned to the site of the imaginary buried "green stick"—upon which, his brother Nikolai as a child had said, was written the secret of mankind's happiness. At the site was one of Tolstoy's first students, Taraska Fokanov. Fokanov helped dig the grave and thereafter tended it.

* * * *

There have been three major translations into English of Tolstoy's "Collected Works." All three date from around the turn of the twentieth century. The only one that does not bypass most of the articles on education is the twenty-four volume 1904 edition (*The Complete Works of Count Tolstoy*) by Leo Wiener, a Harvard professor of Slavic Languages. Wiener has been the only translator to tackle the fine "On Popular Education" of 1874, and the only one who attempted to find an audience for Tolstoy's pedagogical ideas. (He compiled a long section of "Notes on

Education and Instruction" from Tolstoy's diaries and letters.) Wiener also translated many of the children's stories from the *Readers*.

Nathan Haskell Dole's 1898 edition of *The Complete Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi* contains "The School at Yasnaya Polyana," "Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us . . .?," and many of the stories from the *Readers*, in a volume entitled *The Long Exile and Other Stories*. Aylmer Maude, who lauds the education articles in his good, comprehensive biography, translated only a measly eight-page excerpt from "The School at Yasnaya Polyana" in the twenty-one-volume *Centenary Edition* (1928–1937). In 1982 Alan Pinch translated five articles, reminiscences by a student and a teacher, and two student stories, in *Tolstoy on Education*.

For this volume, Christopher Edgar has translated two of Tolstoy's *Yasnaya Polyana* articles: the vital and relevant "Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us, or Are We to Learn from the Peasant Children?" and the comprehensive "The School at Yasnaya Polyana." In addition, we include a new translation of lengthy excerpts from the remaining *Yasnaya Polyana* articles—"On Popular Education," "On Methods of Teaching the Rudiments," "A Project of a General Plan for the Establishment of Popular Schools," "Education and Culture," and "Progress and the Definition of Education"—as well as passages from the article of 1874 titled "On Public Education" and Goldenweiser's *Talks with Tolstoy*. We have also included two stories by Tolstoy's students, "They Feed with the Spoon, Then Poke the Eye with the Handle" and "The Life of a Soldier's Wife."

There are numerous and excellent modern translations of Tolstoy's more famous works, as well as biographies and studies. Please see the annotated bibliography on p. 237.

Notes

1. Leo Tolstoy, in "On Methods of Teaching the Rudiments." See p. 186 of the current volume. For the entire article, see *Tolstoy on Education* translated by Leo Wiener (University of Chicago Press, 1967).

2. "We think that the disorder is growing greater and greater and that it has no limits—it seems we have no other means of stopping it except the use of force—whereas we only need to wait a little, and the disorder (or animation) calms down naturally, by itself, growing into an order much better and more solid than what we might have come up with." Leo Tolstoy in "The School at Yasnaya Polyana." See p. 81 of the current volume.

3. I have chosen to ignore Tolstoy's later repudiation of his teaching efforts as expressed in *A Confession* (1882): "It amuses me now when I remember how I shuffled in trying to satisfy my desire to teach, while in the depth of my soul I knew very well that I could not teach anything needful for I did not know what was needful." In *The Portable Tolstoy* (Penguin, 1978), p. 675. Much later, in 1904, Tolstoy remembered the Yasnaya Polyana school years as "the brightest period of my life." See Ernest Simmons, *Leo Tolstoy* (Vintage Books, 1960), Volume I , p. 237.

4. But as will be noted by his own children, Tolstoy sometimes had a short fuse and could behave with impatience to dimwittedness. Aylmer Maude tells us of an incident that occurred at the school sometime within a year of his glowing letter (in *The Life of Tolstoy* [Oxford, 1929] Volume 1, p. 255.):

> N. V. Uspensky, the writer, narrates that he visited Yasnaya Polyana in 1862, and Tolstoy, having to leave Uspensky alone for a while, asked him to glance at some of the compositions the boys had written in school. Taking up one of these, Uspensky read: "One day Lev Nikolaevich [Tolstoy] called Savoskin up to the blackboard and told him to solve a problem in arithmetic. 'If I give you five rolls and you eat one of them, how many rolls will you have left?' . . . Savoskin could nohow solve this problem, and the Count pulled his hair for it. . . ." When Tolstoy returned Uspensky pointed out to him this essay, and Tolstoy, sighing heavily, crossed his hands before him and merely said: "Life in this world is a hard task."

5. Tolstoy's *Letters*. Volume 1, pp. 149–150.

6. Tolstoy, in "Are the Peasant Children to Write from Us, or Are We to Learn to Write from the Peasant Children?" See pp. 26–27 of the current volume.

7. Pavel Birukoff [Biryukov]. *Leo Tolstoy: His Life and Work* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), pp. 358–359. (Letter of October 3, 1862, from the Minister of the Interior to the Minister of Public Instruction.) Birukoff also provides the follow-up to the Minister of the Interior's letter: "On October 24th of the same year, [the Minister of Instruction] informed the Minister of the Interior that . . . he saw nothing dangerous or contrary to religion in the review *Yasnaya Polyana*. One only came at times across extreme views upon the subject of education, which might very well be criticized in scientific educational reviews, but not forbidden by the censor. 'On the whole,' continued the Minister of Public Instruction, 'I must say that Count Tolstoy's work as an educationist deserves full respect, and the Minister of Public Instruction is bound to help him and give encouragement, even though not sharing all his views, which, after maturer consideration, he will probably give up himself.'" Unfortunately, how true this last prediction was!

8. Tolstoy, in "Are the Peasant Children to Write from Us, or Are We to Learn to Write from the Peasant Children?" See p. 48 of the current volume.

9. In "The School at Yasnaya Polyana." See p. 80 of the current volume.

10. See John Bayley's *Tolstoy and the Novel* (Viking, 1967).

11. Viktor Shklovsky, *Lev Tolstoy* (Progress Publishers, 1978), p. 88.

12. Sonia Tolstaya, in *Reminiscences of Tolstoy by His Contemporaries* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, no date), p. 38.

13. Shklovsky, op cit., p. 137. It should be noted that neither Tolstoy nor any other biographers took up—or shed light upon—Shklovsky's speculation.

14. Alexandra Tolstaya, *Tolstoy: A Life of My Father* (Harper, 1953), p. 138.

15. Ibid.

16. V. S. Morozov, in "Recollections of a Pupil of the Yasnaya Polyana School." See *Reminiscences of Lev Tolstoi by His Contemporaries*, p. 146.

17. A reference to Aleksandr Herzen (1812–70), the revolutionary leader and writer.

18. Alan Pinch, *Tolstoy on Education* (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), p. 185.

19. Ibid., p. 186.

20. Ibid., p. 246.

21. As quoted by Eugene Schuyler in his essay "Count Tolstoy Twenty Years Ago." See Schuyler's *Collected Essays* (Scribner's Sons, 1901), p. 274.

22. Alexandra Tolstaya, op cit., p. 125.

23. Tolstoy, in "On Popular Education." See pp. 178–180 of the current volume, or Wiener's *Tolstoy on Education* for the complete essay. As far as I know, Tolstoy never again expressed belief in the benefits of urban culture.

24. Tolstoy, in "Education and Culture." See Wiener, op cit., p. 149.

25. Tolstoy, in "On Popular Education." See Wiener, op cit., p. 5.

26. Quoted in Birukoff [Biryukov], op cit., pp. 329–330.

27. Reginald D. Archambault, in his Preface to Wiener, *Tolstoy on Education*, p. xv.

28. "In thus relieving children from all obligations, I free them from their greatest source of misery, namely books. Reading is the scourge of childhood, yet it is usually the only occupation that is given. At twelve years of age Emile will hardly know what a book is. But you will say, 'Surely he ought at least to learn to read.' Yes, he shall learn to read when reading will be of any use to him; till then, it only serves to disgust him." Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Emile, Julie, and Other Writings* (Barron's Educational Series, 1964), p. 119.

29. Tolstoy, in *What Is Art?* See Aylmer Maude's *What Is Art? and Essays on Art* (Oxford, 1930), pp. 200–201.

30. I could not find evidence from Dewey's writings that he even knew of Tolstoy's *Yasnaya Polyana* articles. Daniel Murphy's *Tolstoy and Education* (Irish Academic Press, 1992) usefully compares and contrasts Tolstoy's methods and philosophies to Dewey's, Martin Buber's, and the Ukrainian Sukhomklinsky's. See pp. 251–260.

31. Kenneth Koch's *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1970) and *I Never Told Anybody* (New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1997), for instance, vividly illustrate his diverse students' "unexpected" talent for writing.

32. Tolstoy, in "On Popular Education," which appeared in the popular Russian magazine *Notes of the Fatherland* (September, 1874).

33. Birukoff [Biryukov], op cit., p. 330.

34. As quoted in Aleksandra Tolstaya, op cit., pp. 144–145.

35. Pinch, op cit., pp. 217–218.

36. Ibid., p. 218.

37. The Decembrists: the name for those involved in the aborted rebellion of December, 1825. The Decembrists were composed of disaffected, generally politically liberal members of the officer corps and the educated classes.

38. Tolstoy, in "On Methods of Teaching the Rudiments." See Wiener, op cit., p. 33.

39. Tatyana Tolstaya in *Tolstoy Remembered* (McGraw-Hill, 1977), pp. 108–109. See also Ilya Tolstoy's *Tolstoy, My Father* (Cowles Book Company, 1971) and Sergei ("Seryozha") Tolstoy's memoirs in *Reminiscences of Tolstoy by His Contemporaries*.

40. Ibid., p. 111.

41. Simmons, *Leo Tolstoy*, Volume 1, p. 351.

42. Ibid., p. 352. *Bast shoes*: a reference to the crude wooden shoes typically worn by the Russian peasants (the Yasnaya Polyana students in the photo on the next page are wearing them).

43. In the spring of 1860, after his daughters Tanya and Masha set up their own short-lived school for peasant children, Tolstoy helped with the teaching. In 1907, Tolstoy taught the Bible and "moral lessons" to informal classes of a dozen children. See Simmons, *Leo Tolstoy*, Volume 2, pp. 136, 297–299.