
This is a relatively short book. The text is 157 pages, followed by an appendix of Russian quotations (41 pages), notes (20 pages), and index (7 pages). Yet it is rich in content, taking on some of the most important and challenging problems Tolstoy faced as a writer and thinker. Irina Paperno, professor at the University of California, Berkeley, is an accomplished scholar of Russian literature and intellectual history. This is her fourth book. It is a study of the lifelong development of Tolstoy’s conception of the self, of his understanding of the possibilities and methods of the self’s narrative representation, and of his own efforts at narrating the self. Since his conception of the self evolved in tandem with his religious ideas, the book also analyzes Tolstoy’s religious conversion and faith, his philosophical views, and, more generally, his search for the meaning of life. Tolstoy came to believe that the true self (the soul) transcended time, language, and narrative representation, that it was infinite, and that its ultimate fulfillment consisted in its merging with the divine and in its dissolution as an individual self. In death he hoped to realize what Paperno calls “the truth of selfless being” (p. 5). To trace this complex intellectual and spiritual evolution, she draws on the full range of Tolstoy’s nonfiction writings from the 1850s until his death in 1910: diaries, letters, reminiscences, autobiographical and confessional statements, essays, and religious tracts. In addition, her book is informed by vast reading in other sources, primary and secondary.

Tolstoy’s first efforts to answer the question, “Who, what am I?” can be found in his early diaries, from 1847 to 1858. In the first chapter of her book, Paperno shows that the diaries and related personal writings (such as “A History of Yesterday,” from 1851) were already, in part, experiments in exploring problems of self, time, memory, and narrative. But in this period, she notes, his practices of introspection and self-examination were more oriented to the moral purpose of self-improvement than to theoretical speculation about the nature of the self. His response to “What am I?” (which he asked in 1854) was this-worldly, biographical, and moral- psychological rather than explicitly theological.

Twenty years later that began to change as Tolstoy turned to religion. An important stage in his conversion was his correspondence with the literary critic and philosophical writer Nikolai Strakhov. Paperno devotes her second chapter to this philosophical dialogue on faith, conducted between 1875 and 1879. Tolstoy now realized that “What am I?” is a question about the nature of man in relation to God. For him it encapsulated Kant’s famous three questions (with which Strakhov opened their correspondence): What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope for? Reason alone could not answer such questions. Tolstoy searched for the faith that could, knowing that words (the instrument of reason) would not be able to express it, at least not fully. He found that faith is “what people live by” (as he put it in the title of an 1881 fable). Thus he came to the conclusion that to profess one’s faith one had to tell one’s life. Such a project was fraught from the beginning, since how can one tell except with words? But Tolstoy was a writer and had to persevere. If Paperno is right (as surely she is) that he posited faith as “something that was derived from lived experience as well as something that propelled one’s life forward” (p. 59), then the challenge facing him as a writer was to recreate that lived experience and so convey the faith that issued from and sustained it.

In his Confession (which initially bore the title, What Am I?) Tolstoy presents the process (life) by which he himself came to faith. In her third chapter Paperno situates this text within the “conversion
narrative” tradition of Christian culture. That tradition begins with Augustine’s Confessions and was secularized with Rousseau’s Confessions. In one of her most interesting and significant arguments, Paperno suggests that Tolstoy returns to the Augustinian roots of the tradition and to the “theological mode of self-exploration” (p. 99); he “resacralizes” the self and radically departs from modern autobiography. She observes that in both Augustine and Tolstoy, the post-conversion self moves toward its own dissolution. It transcends space, time, and narrative. In its quest for unity with the divine, it transcends even itself as a self (which implies finitude). Tolstoy defined it as: “A part of the infinite” (p. 69). Paperno points to another parallel between Augustine and Tolstoy: Following their confessions, both wrote works expounding what they took to be the essential truths of Christianity. “For both authors,” she writes, “confessions were followed by ‘professions’” (p. 77). What Tolstoy professed most of all was the Christian “law of love,” understood both in the ethical sense of love of one’s neighbor and in the metaphysical sense of “cosmic love” or dissolution of the self in infinite divine spirit.

It is clear that the overall conception of this book is inspired by Augustine’s distinction (to which Paperno refers, of course) between the questions “Who am I?” (about the biographical self) and “What am I?” (about human nature and its theological implications). Narrative works for the first question (about the finite, phenomenal self) but not for the second (about the soul). After his religious conversion, Tolstoy was mainly interested in the fate of his soul—which, of course, is beyond temporal, narrative representation. Thus his continued efforts to produce an autobiography (“My Life,” 1878) or memoir (“Reminiscences,” 1902–6) were doomed to failure, as Paperno shows in the fourth chapter of her book. He faced similar inevitable difficulties when he resumed his diary in 1884 (treated in the sixth and final chapter). Tolstoy believed that dreams offered a way to overcome the limits of linear narrative and that they were a portal into the world beyond time and representation. All his life he recorded and interpreted his dreams. Paperno follows this interest throughout the book.

A paradoxical and perhaps tragic aspect of Tolstoy’s struggle with the self is that he was self-centered (or more precisely soul-centered). He did not recognize the other. (In her fifth chapter Paperno presents this as a difference with Hegel’s famous master-and-slave dialectic, but I am not persuaded that Hegel was a particularly important frame of reference for him in this connection.) The relationship that mattered to Tolstoy was between himself and God, not that between himself and others. As he devalued his own self (as merely phenomenal), he devalued others as well, together with the rest of earthly reality. “The older he got,” Paperno writes in words that could conclude her fine study, “the more he longed to stop being not only a writer but also an individual, to shed his self and his body so that he could be one with God” (p. 78).

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