

TOLSTOY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF AESTHETIC FEELING

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF ART

Once upon a time, a scholar, ascetic and religious man named Abu Hamid Ibn Muhammad Ibn Muhammad al-Tusi al-Shafi'i al-Ghazali (Al-Ghazali, 1058-1111) wrote a work called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. A clever philosopher, Abu Al-Walid Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198), responded to this by writing *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*. In *What is Art?*, Tolstoy refers to the importance of art in order to ridicule it.¹ He notes the attention paid to art, music, theatre, film, and books in the press. He notes the investment of governments in the support of museums, theatres and the like. He notes the time spent by artists and performers in learning their craft. He presents the most sardonic description of an opera rehearsal you will ever read. He describes the effort and money poured into art as "stupefying", "repulsive", "a gigantic absurdity", and "utterly incomprehensible".² How can art be so important that a peasant should have to sell his only cow to pay the taxes that maintain the artist-producer in grand luxury? How could art be so important that labourers are conscripted into dangerous occupations just to realise the grandiose productions of an aesthete. These are rhetorical questions for Tolstoy. They are what move him to seek a definition of art that *could* justify the effort and expenditure. A contemporary philosopher would phrase Tolstoy's concern as, "*What would it take to make Art so vitally important?*"

I'd like to turn this question around in the way Averroes turned Al-Ghazali around. We should attend to the *importance of the importance*. Of course our circumstances are somewhat different to those of Tolstoy's Russia: the peasant doesn't have to sell his cow to pay the art-tax. Governments don't throw their money away on art, but save it for more necessary things like weapons and war. Artists (most of them) aren't maintained in luxury by poor plumbers and electricians. But if you poke around there is still something stupefying about the impor-

tance of art. In dark corners of the city, under rocks and behind the filing cabinets, you will find artists who are willing to make the most incredible sacrifices. Some local musicians, clearly more talented and creative than the latest pop idols, played their last gig before an audience of five in a dingy concrete pub several floors up in a North Sydney office building. A prop-man for a city theatre company, a real creative genius who can make or fix anything, has just spent two weeks making a machine that fires two tennis balls simultaneously in opposite directions. A writer of astonishing ingenuity could be found, until recently, sitting in a little boat-turned-desk in a makeshift office in an old brick warehouse, answering the phone for a catering company that, for legal reasons, didn't want to speak to anybody. These people, and many more like them give their lives to art, not caring about remuneration. It seems utterly incomprehensible. Yet in every land, in every age, under all conditions, such people give their lives to art, without even worrying whether what they do is useful, or beneficial or improving. I think, then, that the phenomenon of artistic production requires us to recognise *that* art is important. The question is not, "what would it take to make art *become* so important" but rather, "what is there, in the phenomenon of artistic production, that reveals its *actual* importance to us?"

In this paper I want to consider Tolstoy's view about the importance of aesthetic feeling, but I think it is useful right from the start to see how the way he puts the question about art directs the answer he gives. By asking what it would take to make art vitally important, Tolstoy is practically forced into tying art to universal brotherhood, altruistic sacrifice, and Christianity. If Tolstoy had sought instead what there already is about art that makes it vital, he still could have written as he did about beauty and feeling (criticising beauty as a criterion for art and praising the communication of feeling), without such religious overtones. I think Tolstoy's discussions of beauty and feeling still have relevance for us, though his discussion of the religious dimension of art does not. I think Tolstoy was right that *one* of the important things about art (though surely not the only important thing about it) is the way it is concerned with feeling. On that point he still has a lot to teach us, though his observations need clarification. That is what I shall try to do in this essay.

THE CRITICISM OF BEAUTY

Let us take up first the criticisms that Tolstoy has of the theory that art is for the production of beauty. It appears to Tolstoy that in the two thousand years between Plato and himself, little progress has been made

in the theory of art. He considers the many attempts to define art in terms of beauty. The problem lies in saying what beauty is. One can try to locate beauty in objective properties of art products: in symmetry, in order, in proportion, in "the harmony of the parts"—all the things that Plato considered under the heading of "the appropriate". Tolstoy has the same difficulty that Plato had, however. Either the appropriate can't be specified in a way that enables it to serve as a useful criterion, or else it cuts too deeply into the canon, excising as "non-art" products that we think are as central as can be.

What are we left with? Just two alternatives: to make beauty into an objective universal by referring it to a transcendental realm, or to allow that beauty is a subjective concept and identify it with whatever is aesthetically pleasing (by "aesthetically pleasing" I mean that which pleases just in terms of its aesthetic properties—the colour, or the sound, or the movement, etc.). Tolstoy rejects the view that beauty is whatever pleases on the same grounds that Plato rejected it, namely that pleasure merely *results* from the experience of beauty, it is not the cause of a thing's being beautiful. But he goes further than Plato does by criticising the view that beauty is transcendental. To define beauty as "a manifestation of the absolutely perfect" is "a fantastic definition, founded on nothing," he says.³ Tolstoy's criticism at least shows that without a clear and substantial definition of beauty, there is no sense in saying that beauty is the aim of art.

It is important to consider this criticism, because it establishes a condition that Tolstoy's definition of art must satisfy. If the aim of art is the *communication of feeling*, as Tolstoy maintains, then it should be possible to provide a clear and substantial definition of feeling. That task, however, must face an in-principle objection, and the qualifications needed to get around it threaten to undermine Tolstoy's entire argument. I do not think the objection is decisive, but the response to it shows that there is more similarity than Tolstoy would like to admit between the definition of art in terms of beauty and the definition of art in terms of feeling. But let us look first at what Tolstoy has to say.

THE THEORY OF FEELING

How are we to define art if not in terms of beauty? Tolstoy reviews a number of definitions current in the last century and rejects them. Each of those definitions has proponents among philosophers today, but it is Tolstoy's own definition that is most interesting. According to him, art is the production of a community of feeling. It requires that a feeling or set of feelings be objectified by the producer and through this objec-

tification be addressed to others generally. For example, on this view, when a musician composes a "lament" (taking "lament" as the name of a musical trope), she transforms her own actual pain into a unique product that is capable, upon hearing, of affecting others with the same pain.

Let's consider the elements of this view. First, there is the idea that art is a form of *communication*. I wonder just how essential this is. It means that there can be no such thing as "private art" or a "private artist". But imagine now someone I shall call, "the internal poet", who really composes verses, but considers them so intensely personal that she is unable to communicate them. She never writes them down or speaks them aloud. Yet she claims to be a poet, and participates in all the poetry festivals. She stands before the audience, closes her eyes, and *doesn't* speak, she merely recites the poems to herself. Now I'm not asking whether she or her silence count as art, but whether her poems do. By Tolstoy's definition they do not. From here, consider a poet who actually puts pen to paper, but always burns his poems; one who speaks them aloud, even shouts them out in desolate places, but never, ever within earshot of a human being. Do we have art yet? Suppose the communication takes place, but by an accident, as it were, against the producer's intentions. Bernini is said to have sculpted "Costanza" only for himself; let us say, then, that we have her against his wishes. Does that mean that what has been described as the greatest sculpture since Michelangelo's "David" is not art? What if the artist intends to communicate but fails? Suppose that Shelley had a manuscript on him when he went to the bottom of the sea. Was there a work of art there? Or only potential art? These questions I think, are hard to decide.

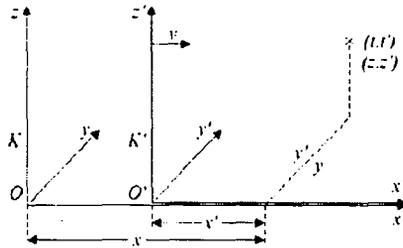
Notice, however, that Tolstoy's condition of communication is actually much stronger. Art involves communication to a group of indefinite largeness. Personal or one-to-one communication is not art. As an example of what the implications of this are, consider the following tale, which I call "the perpetuited correspondence":

Long ago, in the 15th century there lived in Holland a tulip named Pieter Cos who was very fond of a certain rose, Esperaza Blanca, that grew in a bright valley of the Sierra Morena, in Spain. Mijneer Tulip wrote many beautiful love-poems to Señorita Rose, and she wrote back, in even more florid language, of her love for him. Many years later the letters were collected by a group of Pais-Bas nasturtia who thought them not only highly poetic but also florosophical. The letters were passed on from one perennial to another until finally they came into the hands of a Monsieur Fleur-de-Lys, who published them, with the explicit consent and tacit approval of the French Republic, under the title: *Florilegium: Les écrites des amours botaniques*. Paris: éditions des belles lettres, 1765.

On Tolstoy's view, when the letters were private communications and only intended so, the poetry they contained was not art. Did they become art when they were discovered and appreciated by the nasturtia? Or only when they became published and promulgated? And if the last, is it Monsieur Fleur-de-Lys who is the artist, since he is the communicator (just like an artist presenting a "found object")? The condition of public communication is more difficult to accept than the mere communication condition. It points out a problem with Tolstoy's definition. He is more concerned with *who* art is for than he is with *what* art is for. To him, art must be for the sake of communicating feelings to "mankind", rather than just for the sake of expressing feelings. I wonder, however, if this doesn't come into tension with his view, which we will consider later, that an artist must be sincere. It's not that I think there is a contradiction, but rather that we often think sincerity is most clearly expressed when a person does whatever she does *regardless* of its impression on others. A clear sign of sincerity would lie in the artist's *not* caring whether the production was communicated to others or not. Yet an artist could care a lot about *expressing* feeling, with expressing it well and clearly, if only for himself. Even the internal poet could, in this way, work creatively and artistically with words. On this view her sonnets would be art. But the correspondence of Señor Tulip and Mrs. Rose might not be: if the aim was just to communicate feeling, and not specifically to express it, the letters would be just love-letters, and not yet art. And perhaps that's how it should be.

Let us make an adjustment to Tolstoy's definition of art, then. Let's say that it is not the communication of feeling that is necessary, but the expression of feeling. This is a good start, but the definition needs to be further clarified. We need to look more closely at the relation between art and feeling. I'd like to begin with a distinction Tolstoy makes between (and now I'll replace the word 'communication' with 'expression') the expression of thought and the expression of feeling. I suppose he means by the expression of thought just passing along information, and with that everything that has to do with science. The expression of feeling is then left to art. In ordinary speech, of course, this is an impossible distinction to maintain. Almost everything we say communicates feeling as well as information. And even scientific writing has its own spare, elegant, aesthetic. But we can surely distinguish the *emphasis* and *aim* of expression: if what is emphasised is feeling, or if the aim of expression is primarily to evoke a feeling, then to that extent we have met a condition of art, even if the vehicle of expression is

exactly the same as might be used to convey information. There is a difference between the presentation of this diagram:



on a chalkboard in a physics classroom (where it produces little if any emotional reaction) and the presentation of the same diagram on a giant artscreen at a rave (where it provokes a wildly enthusiastic response). It is clear that the difference has something to do with the expression of information in the first context and the expression of feeling in the second.

Plato suggests (*Symposium* 211-212) that the aim of art is to produce, in the presence of beauty, something real and true. But this example of Tolstoy's distinction between information and emotion shows that there must be something more (or different) to art than that. As a diagram of a Lorentz transformation, the graph expresses something true; but it becomes art when we see it as expressing something more (or different), and it is clear that whatever else it expresses has to do with feeling. At the same time it's not easy to say in what way feeling is involved. I can try to show this by considering three examples of artistic production, the whole point of which concerns not expressing feelings. The first comes from a short romantic comedy which I call, *The Dialogue of Yawn and Information*. This is not a dialogue whose aim is to express no feeling, but one in which the characters are prohibited from expressing feelings. In *The Dialogue of Yawn and Information*, Tatsache and Ennui meet in the world's crappiest internet chat room, a place called *i-Chat*. The interface in *i-Chat* provides you with the ability to type only the 26 letters of the English alphabet, all lower case. There are no colours. No special fonts. No italics, boldface, etc. No punctuation to make sideways faces with. No "emoticons". There are, moreover, very strict rules, the violation of which will get you instantly and permanently kicked out. For example, you may only communicate using simple declarative sentences, without any evaluative vocabulary; and you are not allowed to say anything about how you feel. Here is a portion of the dialogue:

T: the cat is on the mat

E: two plus two is four

T: salt is sodium chloride

E: the stickleback is a species of fish

T: the order of elements in any set is determined by a principle external to that set

E: in singapore they usually eat with a fork and a spoon

Consider for a moment whether this scene can be art. I think it can. Do the characters express feeling? Not in any usual way. The scene expresses a *quality*, namely *what it's like* not to be able to express feeling. Is that a feeling? Not exactly. So just what does the scene express besides information? It seems to express something non-cognitive *about* feeling, a *meta-feeling* if you will.

Consider a second example. Actors sometimes train using what is known as a "naive mask", a mask with relatively few and ambiguous expressive features. Let's conceive of a play whose aim is to express neither information nor feeling. In this play, called "15", the curtain rises on two actors, in white body suits and naive mask. They stand before the audience for five or six minutes. They don't move. They don't say anything. They breath in an even and almost imperceptible way. Then the curtain falls. Is it art? Again, I want to say it is. Does it express feeling? Not in any usual way. But it expresses *something* different from information. What is it? It seems to be a *mood* or an *emotion*, and that is not exactly the same thing as a feeling.

Finally consider some relatively recent paintings, like *Black Square* by Kasimir Malevich, or *Out of Step with the World* by Tom Sachs. These paintings belong to a style called "suprematism" which is *not intended* to be expressionless. Their expression is supposed to be profound and in general superior to the expression of mundane feelings. But even if they express some deep truth, it can hardly be said that they express mere information. So what sort of thing do they express? Here it seems as though the paintings express an entire orientation to the world, and that is not the same as a meta-feeling or a mood.

This last example helps to make a point about the difficulty of saying what art expresses that is non-informational. It is like trying to express the eidetic in a discursive way. It can't actually be done. Tolstoy's word "feeling" is just as good a word as any for it. But now it appears that the term "feeling", understood as the non-informational, non-discursive, qualitative, emotive or orientational element of artistic expression, is just as mysterious as the term "beauty" was. It's hard to avoid the circular definition: art is expression that is artistic. This is what I referred

to earlier as an in-principle objection: we cannot state informatively what is non-informational in artistic expression. Thus Tolstoy cannot provide a clear and substantive definition of feeling (just as Plato could not provide a clear and substantive definition of beauty).

Let's not give up on feeling just yet, however. Tolstoy himself recognises that his basic definition of art is extremely broad. So he strengthens it with criteria for the manner and achievement of expression which determine the quality of an artistic production. He thinks that to be good art, a production must be "infectious" (the more infectious it is, the better the art), and he argues that what makes a production infectious includes three factors:

- (1) the individuality of the feeling
- (2) the clearness of the expression, and
- (3) the sincerity of the artist

These criteria, too, are open to objections. In particular, the criterion of sincerity seems to add nothing to the theory of artistic expression. Nevertheless, I think the first two criteria are helpful at indicating when feeling of the relevant sort is actually expressed, as well as what the expression of such feeling accomplishes. They also help explain the enduring popularity and admiration that attends some artistic productions. Let's consider the criteria a little more carefully, then.

- (1) *The individuality of the feeling.* Tolstoy has exactness of expression in mind here. Every feeling, whether it is described in a general or specific way, is individual. If I feel depressed, it's my depression, nobody else's that I feel. But, being depressed, I probably won't take the trouble to express it in a very exact way. I'll probably just sigh and hang my head. Yet if someone were to put it in words like this:

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear
(Coleridge, from *Dejection: An Ode*)

he would start to reveal its individuality, and turn feeling into art. With care and ingenuity, practically any feeling can be expressed very exactly by words. Individual feelings can be expressed very exactly in painting and other art forms. On Tolstoy's view, if you looked at two paintings and said of the first one "it makes me feel anxious", but of the second one, "it makes me feel that instability of expectation you get when your when your lover is returning

from a six-week absence, your balance is unsteady, your pulse is uneven, your mouth dry, and your stomach becomes an ocean of evaporation" then the second painting is better art. But it is not the description that shows the second is the better work; it is the feeling that is expressed by the work which shows it to be better. We must resist the temptation of subduing all art forms to the medium of description. Yet without the description, we will have problems identifying a very exact feeling, and problems knowing whether others who are profoundly affected by a work experience the same feeling. In practice, then, this first criterion leads to an emphasis on complexity and refinement in art, that is, to physical manifestations of exactness.

- (2) *The clarity of the expression.* Clarity may seem at first just like individuality, but it is not so much about the preciseness or refinement of expression as it is about the effectiveness of communicating it. Even a general, inexact feeling, such as determination, might be communicated effectively by a simple cartoon drawing. Of Tolstoy's three criteria, this one is probably most closely related to infectiousness. There is great pleasure when a feeling is clearly communicated and widely shared. On this view the more widely shared the feeling is, the better. Dick Bruna's *Miffy* gives us a good example of clear expression that is nevertheless simple and general; not refined art.

The criterion of clarity can be seen as the complement to the criterion of individuality. It will be genuinely difficult to produce a work that expresses highly individual feelings which are at the same time widely shared and easily received. Such a work, however, will show why art is actually important.

- (3) *The sincerity of the artist.* It's important to note that Tolstoy thinks of sincerity as a criterion related to the infectiousness of art. For him it turns out to be the most crucial of all three criteria. For him it comprises and sums up all the rest. Tolstoy believes that if only an artist is sincere (he doesn't say anything about talented or diligent!) then she will express her feelings exactly and clearly. This is an overstatement. Indeed, one of the reasons sincerity has come to be a special expectation of artists is just because the feelings expressed in contemporary art tend to be so vague (that is, the first two criteria are not met). Nowadays when we believe that an artist is sincere, then even if her work does not express

feelings that are refined or clear, we may find ourselves admiring and praising it. In fact, in some cases it may be *only* sincerity that we can praise. Thus, insincerity has become the great sin of contemporary art. Mass production and commercialisation instantly reduce our estimation of art that we can't feel. Artists are roundly criticised for commercialising self-promotion. But sincerity itself is not bound to the expression of feelings, and it is hard to see it as having the importance to art of the other criteria. Would the painting of the Sistine Chapel be any less a work of art if it turned out that Michelangelo was an atheist? Sincerity is a general moral criterion that does not belong to thinking merely about the quality of art. We should expect everyone to be sincere, whether they are artists or not.

So, of the three criteria that Tolstoy considers, only the first two are really applicable to the question what makes *art* important, but together they provide a powerful argument for the importance of aesthetic feeling. They show that even though we cannot provide a rigorous definition of aesthetic feeling (or turn feeling into cognitive content), we can appreciate, through art, feeling that is at once highly individual *and* highly general, and we can determine the conditions for the manner and achievement of such feelings. It would be interesting to see if one could provide similar criteria for the manner and achievement of beauty.

NOTES

- 1 Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (1896) translated by Aylmer Maude (New York: MacMillan, 1960).
- 2 Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, Chapter I.
- 3 Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, Chapter IV.