

A SELECTIVE DEFENCE OF TOLSTOY'S *WHAT IS ART?*

Todd R. Long—University of Swansea

For many years, Tolstoy's *What is Art?* has been dismissed by some as the fanatical diatribe of a man obsessed with morality, and demonized by others for castigating as "bad art" many of their most cherished works. Though Tolstoy deserves some of this criticism (for he is sometimes inconsistent in the application of his theory), contemporary commentators continue to take for granted certain criticisms about Tolstoy's theory of art, even though he can be defended against many of the often-repeated negative conclusions they take his theory to imply.¹ In this paper I want to defend Tolstoy against three specific claims made by Robert Wilkinson in his essay "Art, Emotion and Expression": (1) Artists must have lived the emotions their works convey, (2) moral content guarantees aesthetic success, and (3) the art object itself is not valuable. Because Tolstoy is sometimes inconsistent in applying his own theory, whichever conclusions one draws from *What is Art?* will depend on what one takes Tolstoy to hold as fundamentally important in his theory. I hope to show that a proper reading of Tolstoy renders his theory much more cogent than Wilkinson seems to think it does.

Artists must have lived the emotions their works convey

Wilkinson lists what he takes to be Tolstoy's three necessary conditions for an object to be counted as a work of art, one of which he puts this way: "its maker has him/herself lived through the feelings thus aroused."² Elsewhere Wilkinson says that, for Tolstoy, "in any art worthy of the name, the artist must have lived through the feelings she or he wishes to express. . . ."³ On what he takes to follow from Tolstoy's theory, Wilkinson rules out an artist's imagined experiences as being proper sources of content for artworks, for he says that, *contra* Tolstoy, there is no "simple correlation between what has been lived through and what is artistically convincing: many writers report, for instance, that

¹ Colin Lyas (1997:59-66) is one notable exception to the critics who continue to assume that Tolstoy's theory of art implies the positions against which I defend him in this paper.

² Wilkinson (1992:186).

³ Wilkinson (1992:186).

characters they have created seem to take a direction of their own, and undergo experiences the artist can only imagine, but are none the less convincing as a result."⁴

It seems that Wilkinson has not read carefully Tolstoy's passage about the boy who infects his listeners with the fear he experienced when encountering a wolf:

Even if the boy had not seen a wolf, but had often been afraid of seeing one; and, wishing to call up in others the feeling he experienced, *invented* the encounter with the wolf, telling it in such a way that through his narrative he called up in his listeners the same feeling he experienced in imagining the wolf - this, too, is art. In just the same way, it is art if a man, having experienced in reality *or in imagination* the horror of suffering or the delight of pleasure, expresses these feelings on canvas or in marble in such a way that others are infected by them. And in just the same way, it will be art if a man has experienced *or imagined* the feelings of merriment, joy, sadness, despair, cheerfulness, dejection, and the transitions between these feelings, and expresses them in sounds so that listeners are infected by them and experience them in the same way as he experienced them.⁵ (my emphasis)

It does not take a careful reading of this passage to realize that Tolstoy allows for writers to include imagined experiences in their work. It seems very clear to me that what Tolstoy is emphasizing in this passage is not the artist's lived experience in a narrow sense, comprising only the artist's active engagement in the world; rather, Tolstoy is emphasizing that, whichever experiences an artist has had, lived through or imagined, what is important in creating art is to be able to infect others with those same feelings.

Moral content guarantees aesthetic success

Wilkinson holds that Tolstoy's subordination of aesthetics to morality leads to the undesirable consequence that

the subject matter of a work of art largely or wholly determines its aesthetic merit or demerit. That is, for anyone holding the Tolstoyan premise, it follows that the presence of whatever subject-matter is ideologically approved of guarantees success in a work of art, and its absence or contradiction guarantees indifference or failure.⁶

Before considering whether or not Tolstoy is open to this charge, I want to point out the careless reasoning in Wilkinson's argument. The penultimate premise in his argument is this: *The subject matter of a work of art largely or wholly determines its aesthetic merit or demerit.*

⁴ Wilkinson (1992:186).

⁵ Tolstoy (1995:39).

⁶ Wilkinson (1992:184).

Now one of the options available to us here is that the subject matter of a work of art *largely* determines its aesthetic merit or demerit. But for the subject matter *largely* to determine an artwork's aesthetic merit or demerit requires at least one other feature, beside the subject matter, entering in to take up the space that "largely" does not completely fill. Thus, according to Wilkinson's own premise, it is possible that an approved of subject matter does not guarantee an artwork's success on the ground that another feature, or features, is lacking in its role for determining whether or not an object is successful as a work of art.

Beyond this formal complaint, I want to argue that, for Tolstoy, infectiousness, not subject matter, is the crucial factor in determining the aesthetic success of an artwork. In chapter 15 of *What is Art?* Tolstoy says, "One indisputable sign that distinguishes true art from counterfeit is the infectiousness of art."⁷ This infectiousness involves an artist's conveying feelings to an audience. Furthermore, an artwork is more or less infectious depending upon three conditions: its particularity, clarity, and the artist's sincerity, all of which have to do with the way in which a feeling is conveyed. Tolstoy goes so far as to say, "the degree of infectiousness is also the only measure of artistic worth".⁸ He feels so strongly about this that no fewer than four times in three pages does he expressly state that these three conditions of infectiousness, which alone determine an artwork's aesthetic merit, have nothing at all to do with subject matter:

The presence in differing degrees of the three conditions - particularity, clarity and sincerity - determines the worth of the object of art, *regardless of its content*. . . .⁹ (my emphasis)

These are the three conditions the presence of which distinguishes art from artistic counterfeits, and at the same time determines the worth of any work of art *regardless of its content*. . . .¹⁰ (my emphasis)

The stronger the infection, the better the art is *as art, regardless of its content* - that is, independently of the worth of the feelings [the artist] conveys. . . .¹¹ (my emphasis)

Thus art is distinguished from non-art, and the worth of art as art is determined, *regardless of its content*, that is, independently of whether it conveys good or bad feelings.¹² (my emphasis)

Tolstoy does not mention this principle in isolation, for he has already appealed to it in chapter 12 where he says, "If the work is good *as art*,

⁷ Tolstoy (1995:120).

⁸ Tolstoy (1995:121).

⁹ Tolstoy (1995:123).

¹⁰ Tolstoy (1995:122).

¹¹ Tolstoy (1995:121).

¹² Tolstoy (1995:123).

then the feeling expressed by the artist is conveyed to others, *regardless of whether the work is moral or immoral.*"¹³ (my emphasis). Thus, Tolstoy thinks that the aesthetic success of a work of art is due to its infectiousness, not to its subject matter. I conclude that Wilkinson is wrong to claim that, on Tolstoy's theory, the subject matter of a work of art determines its aesthetic merit as art.

Wilkinson makes a related claim, which he bases on Tolstoy's view that art should be good in its content, that whether or not a subject "is treated in an artistically satisfying way is irrelevant, for example, it is unimportant whether the characters are credible, or the style pleasing to read and so on. These features, which are aesthetic virtues, are on this view of no account in determining the value of the work of art as a work of art."¹⁴ If, as Tolstoy has repeated numerous times, the infectiousness of a work of art, not its subject matter, determines its aesthetic worth, then Wilkinson is also wrong to charge Tolstoy with downplaying absolutely the aesthetic merits of an artwork. For Tolstoy, the infectiousness of a work of art is brought about by means of the artist's artistic talent to convey feelings. In fact, it is only by means of the artist's artistic talent that these feelings are conveyed. For Tolstoy, art conveys our feelings to one another just as language conveys our thoughts to one another. We must keep in mind that Tolstoy's inventory of what can count as a work of art is much larger than the traditional categories: Tolstoy wants to include such items as simple stories, lullabies, and church services as potential works of art. Any human activity in which someone conveys feelings by means of external signs can count as art.¹⁵

But regardless of which items can count as art under Tolstoy's theory, Wilkinson has taken Tolstoy to have subsumed aesthetic virtues under moral ones in such a way that a work's moral qualities (which deal with subject matter) determine its *aesthetic merit*. Wilkinson has missed Tolstoy's dualism here, for Tolstoy distinguishes between an artwork's aesthetic merits and its moral merits. T.J. Diffey points out that Tolstoy agrees with the proponents of "art for art's sake" that to judge an artwork, *as art*, is not to consider its moral content. Diffey says, "In *What is Art?* . . . artistic merit is held to consist solely in infectiousness or expressiveness, and not in the moral character of the content of the work."¹⁶ Furthermore, says Diffey, "Tolstoy's argument in *What is Art?* implies that we can ask two logically distinct questions of any work of art: is it good as art and is its content morally good."¹⁷

Now if Wilkinson is so obviously wrong on this issue, then how is it that he came to make the strong accusation that, for Tolstoy, it is

¹³ Tolstoy (1995:94).

¹⁴ Wilkinson (1992:184).

¹⁵ See Tolstoy (1995:39-41).

¹⁶ Diffey (1985:60).

¹⁷ Diffey (1985:60).

irrelevant whether an artwork is aesthetically satisfying? Wilkinson does not give his reasons in his essay, but perhaps we can understand how someone might come to think that Tolstoy implies such a position. In chapter 16, Tolstoy begins to explain his view that art, to be *morally good*, must meet one of two requirements: either it must unite people in “feelings that come from the consciousness of sonship to God and the brotherhood of men”¹⁸, or in universal, simple everyday feelings. Tolstoy says, “Only these two kinds of feelings constitute in our time the subject matter of art *that is good in content*”¹⁹ (my emphasis). Tolstoy goes on to criticise harshly many accepted works of art as not meeting either of these criteria. These he labels “bad art”. But what is crucially important to keep in mind is that Tolstoy’s labelling them as “bad art” is *not* an aesthetic judgement, but rather it is a *moral* one.

However, Tolstoy does not clearly maintain this distinction from chapter 16 onward. Though he never expressly denies the distinction between good and bad aesthetic qualities, on the one hand, and good and bad moral qualities, on the other, he does seem to conflate the two types of qualities when he names examples of “bad art” in chapter 16. Here he denounces Beethoven, Schumann, Wagner, Dante, Shakespeare, and others as having created immoral art (that is, art that conveys feelings exclusive to the idle rich, that promotes patriotic or churchly feelings or perverse, sensual feelings). The problem is that Tolstoy uses qualities he has heretofore treated as producing “counterfeit art” to show that these so-called artists have created “bad art”. For instance, he criticises many accepted composers for having created “artificial and exceptionally complex music”.²⁰ And in his discussion of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, though he does list reasons that properly fit under his theory for what counts as “bad art”, he also has this to say: “...I cannot even imagine a crowd of normal people who could understand anything in this long, intricate and artificial work but short fragments drowning in a sea of the incomprehensible. And therefore, I must conclude, whether I will or no, that this work belongs to bad art.”²¹ But in chapter 11 he lists works that are complex and incomprehensible as falling under the concept of diversion, which falls under the category of *counterfeit art*.

Herein is one of Tolstoy’s fundamental problems, and it might help us to see how it is that many commentators on Tolstoy have charged him with no real concern for an artwork’s aesthetic qualities. In his examples, Tolstoy does not consistently apply his distinction between “counterfeit art” and “bad art”, but the distinction is necessary if he is to maintain his clear emphasis upon the distinction between an artwork’s aesthetic and moral virtues. And it is clear that he *wants* to maintain this distinction,

¹⁸ Tolstoy (1995:130).

¹⁹ Tolstoy (1995:130).

²⁰ Tolstoy (1995:136).

²¹ Tolstoy (1995:137).

for just after his evaluation of Beethoven's *Ninth*, Tolstoy summarizes his position about how works are to be evaluated:

Whatever the object that passes for a work of art, and however it is praised by people, in order to find out its worth it is necessary to apply to it the question of whether the object belongs to genuine art or to the artistic counterfeits. Having recognized a given object, based on the token of infectiousness for at least a small circle of people, as belonging to the realm of art, it is necessary, based on the general token of accessibility, to decide the next question: does the work belong to bad, exclusive art, opposed to the religious consciousness of our time, or to Christian art which unites people?²²

Tolstoy then argues that society should encourage only those works belonging both to the category of "genuine art" and to the category of "Christian art", but again, this is a moral injunction. I think the moral fervour that informs so much of Tolstoy's writing has led him into inconsistency in this area, but I see no reason to think that his inconsistencies should alter our view of his fundamental emphasis upon the worth of the aesthetic qualities of an artwork in producing infectiousness. A passage from chapter 12 should be enough to refute Wilkinson's claim:

A musical performance is art and can infect only when the sound is neither higher nor lower than it ought to be - that is, the infinitely small centre of the required note must be played - and it must have exactly the necessary duration, and the intensity of the sound must be neither stronger nor weaker than is necessary. The least deviation in the pitch of the sound one way or the other, the least lengthening or shortening of the duration, and the least strengthening or weakening of the sound as compared with what is required, destroys the perfection of the performance, and consequently the infectiousness of the work. . . . It is the same in all the arts: a little bit lighter, a little bit darker, a little bit higher, lower, to the right, to the left - in painting; a little bit weaker or stronger in intonation, a little bit too early or too late - in dramatic art; in poetry - a little bit too much said, or not said, or exaggerated, and there is no infection. Infection is achieved only when and in so far as the artist finds those infinitely small moments of which the work of art is composed.²³

The art object itself is not valuable

Wilkinson claims that according to Tolstoy's theory, the art object itself is worthless - all that is important is the transmitting of feelings. Wilkinson says

²² Tolstoy (1995:138).

²³ Tolstoy (1995:99).

The goal of art is to convey feeling type *X*, and if two art objects, *A* and *B* both do this equally well, then it will be a matter of indifference which I encounter or, indeed, if one of them is lost. But this is at variance with the way in which works of art are thought of. They are usually regarded as being in an important way individual or unique. . . and the loss of any is the loss of something irreplaceable. What is crucial is the way in which each work is expressive: if this were not so, they would be substitutable the one for the other without loss, but they are not. To give one example: there are a number of pieces of music dating from roughly the turn of the century which are "farewells to life", for example the Ninth Symphony of Bruckner or the Tenth of Mahler. If Tolstoy is right, it is unimportant if one of these works is lost, but to say this is to see at once that it is false. The reason for the falsehood lies in the fact that in each case the poignancy is embodied in a unique fashion, and the uniqueness is constituted by the special combination of aesthetic properties employed in each case. Any theory of aesthetic expression must acknowledge that the vehicle of expression - the particular work of art itself - makes an ineliminable contribution to the expression.²⁴

Either Wilkinson has not read carefully chapters 9-12 of *What is Art?*, or he has misinterpreted certain features of Tolstoy's theory, for I can show that Tolstoy can plead "not guilty" successfully to every one of these charges. Wilkinson's claim here depends upon the assumption that, for Tolstoy, the particular form or expression of an artwork is irrelevant--all that is relevant is the conveying of a certain type of feeling.²⁵ I want to argue that (1) Tolstoy's conception of infectiousness involves the conveying of a particular feeling in such a way that the feeling conveyed cannot be divorced from the form the artwork takes, and (2) the feeling expressed in any particular work of art could not be expressed in any other work.

Tolstoy says that the most important of the conditions promoting infectiousness, namely sincerity, "will force the artist to find a clear expression of the feeling he wishes to convey".²⁶ Tolstoy is emphatic that the feelings conveyed in art are both new and particular: "The

²⁴ Wilkinson (1992) 185.

²⁵ I suspect that part of the problem with Wilkinson's analysis is a misunderstanding of the nature of the feelings that Tolstoy says are conveyed by art. It is clear from the above quote that Wilkinson thinks Tolstoy's conception of the feelings conveyed by art involve feeling *types*. But Tolstoy emphasises the *particularity* of the feelings expressed by art. T.J. Diffey (1985:28-29) sheds some light on this matter with regard to type-token distinctions in art. See also Colin Lyas, who says, "Two works can "convey the same thing" in the sense of the same general sort of thing, love of money, say, while not conveying the same thing in the sense of a particular form that love of money can take. Why should we saddle Tolstoy with the former and implausible view?" (1997:63-64).

²⁶ Tolstoy (1995:122).

consequence of true art is the introduction of a new feeling into everyday life”²⁷ Elsewhere he says

The more particular the feeling conveyed, the more strongly does it affect the perceiver. The perceiver experiences the greater pleasure the more particular the state of mind into which he is transferred. . . . If the artist is sincere, then he will express his feeling as he has perceived it. And since each man is unlike all others, this feeling will be particular for all other men. . . .²⁸

Thus, Tolstoy thinks that the particular feeling an artist wishes to convey, since it is the artist's particular feeling, will be expressed in a way that no other artist could express it.²⁹ In chapters 9-12, where Tolstoy discusses the feelings conveyed by art, he says

. . . the only true work of art is one that conveys a new feeling not experienced by people before. As a by-product of thinking is only a product of thinking when it conveys new observations and thoughts, and does not repeat what is already known, in exactly the same way a work of art is only a work of art when it introduces a new feeling (however insignificant) into the general usage of human life.³⁰

Numerous times Tolstoy mentions these new feelings that genuine art conveys.³¹ We will go wrong if we take him to imply that these new feelings are absolutely novel, for he mentions several times that the feelings we have when we attend to genuine art may be, as it were, feelings we have had before but were unable to express.³²

So what is it that is new about the feelings genuine art expresses? What is the nature of this newness? What is new comes through the

²⁷ Tolstoy (1995:150).

²⁸ Tolstoy (1995:121-122).

²⁹ Diffey says that he takes Tolstoy to hold “that this artist expresses feelings which no other artist could have expressed (different artists, different feelings)” (1985:28). In a related vein, David Whewell writes that one of the three conditions required for Tolstoy's idea of infectiousness, namely the individuality or particularity of the feelings conveyed, “makes it improbable that exactly the same effects could be produced in some other way” (1995:431). See also Colin Lyas, who remarks that Tolstoy's explanation of the infection of music (quoted above, p.7) suggests “that for Tolstoy there was nothing to be expressed that could be expressed equally well in another way” (1997:64).

³⁰ Tolstoy (1995:59).

³¹ See Tolstoy (1995: 59, 60, 85, 88, 94-95, 98).

³² For example, Tolstoy says, “Usually, when a person receives a truly artistic impression, it seems to him that he knew it all along, only he was unable to express it” (1995:81). Elsewhere he says, “The chief peculiarity of the feeling is that the perceiver merges with the artist to such a degree that it seems to him that the perceived object has been made, not by someone else, but by himself, and that everything expressed by the object is exactly what he has long been wanting to express” (1995:121).

particular way in which the feeling is expressed. In chapter 11, Tolstoy says, “an artistic impression is an infection, it works only when the author has himself experienced some feeling and *conveys it in his own way*, not when he conveys someone else’s feeling as it was conveyed to him”³³ (my emphasis). He continues this idea in chapter 12: “A young man produces a work of art, *expressing it in his own particular fashion*, as any artist does, the feelings he has experienced”³⁴ (my emphasis). He echoes the idea again where he states the essence of art for the artist: “the manifestation of feeling *in his own peculiar fashion*”³⁵ (my emphasis). What Tolstoy is reacting to in these chapters is what he takes to be the essence of counterfeit art: artists’ imitating, borrowing, and repeating earlier themes, poetic subjects, and the like.³⁶ He suggests that genuine artists express their feelings through art in original ways such that it is possible that perceivers of their art might recognize both completely new expressions of feelings *and* feelings they have felt before.

Before I explain how this works I want to summarize the argument in this section up to this point: For Tolstoy, the essence of art is the conveying of an artist’s feelings through external signs such that something new comes into the world that is communicated to others. This communication involves the concept of infectiousness, which Tolstoy says causes the perceiver of an artwork to merge with the artist in such a way that the perceiver can feel the particular feeling the artist expresses. Feelings must be clearly expressed in order to be infectious. A genuine artist conveys feelings in her own unique way through artistic means.

Commentators on Tolstoy’s theory of art usually get Tolstoy’s theory right up to this point, but they often miss the final part of the argument that ties the entire theory of infectiousness together and shows how it is that Tolstoy thinks that works of art are valuable in themselves. Remember that Tolstoy says that infection “works only when the author has himself experienced some feeling and conveys it in his own way”³⁷. This implies that the new feeling expressed in an artwork is bound up with the way in which the artist’s experienced feeling is conveyed. Tolstoy makes this explicit where he speaks of the “chief property of art - wholeness, organicness, in which *form and content constitute an*

³³ Tolstoy (1995:85).

³⁴ Tolstoy (1995:95-96).

³⁵ Tolstoy (1995:98).

³⁶ Tolstoy thinks that one of the possible features of “counterfeit art” is “borrowing either whole subjects or only separate features from earlier, well-known poetic works and so reworking them that, with some additions, they represent something new” (1995:84).

³⁷ Tolstoy (1995:85).

inseparable whole expressing the feeling experienced by the artist”³⁸ (my emphasis). Therefore, for Tolstoy, the feelings expressed by art cannot be divorced from the object of art itself. Furthermore, since Tolstoy is adamant that the expression of feeling conveyed through art “introduces a new feeling (however insignificant) into the general usage of human life”,³⁹ it follows that each work of art, since it is the embodiment of a new feeling, is both unique and valuable in itself as art.

Wilkinson has failed to see Tolstoy’s theory of infectiousness in its entirety. He has attacked Tolstoy for having no concern for the way in which an artwork is expressive, for thinking that the poignancy of an artwork is not embodied in a unique way, and for thinking that the aesthetic properties of an artwork do not make a contribution to the expression. But, as I have shown, Tolstoy explicitly argues that a successful work of art involves the unique way in which the work is expressed and that “form and content constitute an inseparable whole expressing the feeling experienced by the artist”.⁴⁰ As for Wilkinson’s example of the two “farewells to life” by Bruckner and Mahler (which he uses to argue that since they express the same type of feeling it is not important, on Tolstoy’s theory, if one of them is lost), Tolstoy might respond that what is important about the two works is not that they express the same type of feeling, but that each artist has expressed his own particular feeling in his own unique way through the medium of music. Thus, each piece is individual and unique, and it presents a new feeling to the world. I conclude that it is false that, for Tolstoy, the individual work of art itself is of negligible value.

Tolstoy’s theory of art is much more complex than many of his critics take it to be. The moral theme running through *What is Art?* from beginning to end seems to have led many commentators to suppose that Tolstoy must hold the aesthetic qualities of artworks to be of little account. But this is untrue, for according to Tolstoy, a work of art must meet the requirements for “genuine art” (which involves aesthetic qualities) before it can even be up for consideration as “good art”.⁴¹ I believe that Tolstoy’s theory of art contains some real difficulties that cannot be overcome without some fairly drastic changes to it.⁴² However, the three claims I have defended Tolstoy against in this paper are representative of the criticisms that continue to be propagated to this day but which disappear under close scrutiny. I think I have shown that Wilkinson is clearly wrong in assuming that Tolstoy’s theory does not allow for acts of imagination and that it implies that an approved of

³⁸ Tolstoy (1995:88).

³⁹ Tolstoy (1995:59).

⁴⁰ Tolstoy (1995:88).

⁴¹ See Tolstoy (1995:138).

⁴² The difficulties I have in mind have mostly to do with Tolstoy’s requirement that works of art be immediately accessible, but this is a subject for another paper.

subject matter guarantees aesthetic success. Furthermore, I think I have shown that, based upon Tolstoy's insistent emphasis upon the conveying of particular, new feelings and his explicit acknowledgement that the form and content of an artwork constitute an organic whole, which together express the feelings of the artist, Wilkinson is wrong to suppose that Tolstoy's theory of art implies the worthlessness of any art object itself.

Works Cited

- Diffey, T.J. (1985) *Tolstoy's "What is Art?"*. London: Croom Helm.
- Lyas, Colin. (1997) *Aesthetics. Fundamentals of Philosophy*. London: UCL Press.
- Tolstoy, Leo. (1995) *What is Art?* (Trans.) Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Penguin.
- David A. Whewell. (1995) "Leo Tolstoy." *A Companion to Aesthetics*. David E. Cooper (Ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wilkinson, Robert. (1992) "Art, Emotion and Expression." *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction*. (Ed.) Oswald Hanfling. Oxford: Blackwell.

Todd R. Long
1311 Jackson Street
Vicksburg, MS 39180
USA

Todd R. Long is a part-time postgraduate student at the University of Wales, Swansea.

Philosophical Writings

THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA
JUL 27 1998

LIBRARIE

No.8 Summer 1998