

an interview with

# Tatyana

# Tolstaya

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like yesterday's dishes.

*Border/Lines collective member Ioan Davies interviewed Tatyana Tolstaya at the PEN congress in Toronto in October 1989. The great-grandneice of the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, Tolstaya, a short-story writer, has had privileged access to the West throughout most of her life (at the time of the interview she was a writer in residence at the University of Texas). Border/ Lines is publishing the interview because Tolstaya articulates a particular point of view from the aristocratic intelligentsia which has to be set in context with the recent transformations in the Soviet Union. The collection of short stories On the Golden Porch was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1989, and created great confusion among western feminists. See the special issue on Soviet women of Canadian Woman Studies, vol. 10, no. 4, 1989, for versions of this confusion.*

**Border/Lines** Give me a sense of what you write.

**Tatyana Tolstaya** Well, I write all kinds of things, but the real things that interest me are people from the psychological point of view, as human beings. I'm not interested much in the social life of people, though everything one describes becomes social. I'm not interested in social problems as such. I believe in eternal problems. So from my point of view there is no history. There are all sorts of events but there is no progress in history as many people believe. A man is a man whether he lives in ancient Rome, in the middle ages or in the present. It is the same human being, with everything that describes him as a human being. With his fears, expectations, illusions, disillusionments, beliefs, disbeliefs, the desire to be religious, the desire to be nonreligious. To believe in God or to be afraid of God. To hate God and to challenge God. To love, not to love. To want to be loved. That's what I'm interested in and of course as I want my characters to develop and to be active, so I have to place them in the surroundings and the scenery I know. And this is the scenery of our everyday life in the Soviet Union.

As it is a strange life it can be defined in many ways. A sad life. A horrible life, a fearful life. Yet to survive in that crazy life you have to develop a certain sense of humour which allows you to survive. Those who have no sense of humour are in a desperate way. Very soon they perish as human beings. They become half animal. So a sense of humour is a very good thing. It just keeps you on the surface and there's a lot of possibility of making fun of what is going on. Just to show the absurdity of everyday life, of all the social arrangements and how it affects you and how ridiculous you are yourself because you are just a human being thinking that you are potentially a God – that is, just a weak person who depends on everything and everyone. So that's what I'm interested in. Often I write about old people because they still have the same expectations as the young person has, while there is nothing for them in the future. So somehow their expectations turn back and they become, as it were, the wrong memories. Illusions about their past. They try to make their past more interesting because otherwise there is nothing behind and nothing in front of them. It is this impossible situation that I'm interested in.

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Can you say how you compare yourself with, or do you even think of yourself in relation to other women writers in Russia?

I don't believe in any women's literature. I think there are just writers. Good writers, bad writers. If they happen to be women, O.K. If they are men, O.K. I don't see any difficulty in it. We are just human beings who write.

I mean, do you think that in that way the whole emphasis here in Canada, Britain, and the United States on feminist writing is an indulgence of the West?

I think that's one of the stereotypes. Usually, westerners think of the East in terms of stereotypes because the East is opposite to them. They are different. But this is the western stereotype, the feminist stereotype. You know what the feminists invented: they invented the idea of phallocracy – that the world is bad because it is ruled by men. That is completely ridiculous because, for example, England is ruled by a woman. The United States are ruled by a man. But if you compare them this way there is much more in common between America and the Soviet Union than there are differences. Both are ruled by men. It is not the question of men having power. Just the question of some more deep differences – economic, social, ideological, political, historical, religious and so on. If you just divide humanity in two pieces, men and women, you will not understand the differences and the complexities of the world. It is a primitivization of everything, of all our consciousness and, somehow, of what we all want to be. Some of them – I speak only of the extreme feminists of a certain kind which irritate me infinitely – want to develop a sort of neutral person. Both men and women in the same person that would be simply neutral. Everything would be the same with this person. So who will it be? A worker? I don't understand. I like the differences, and I like the differences not only between men and women, but just differences in everything. I think that the more differences you have the more interesting is life. I like racial differences and sometimes I even feel it's a pity that there are only three main races, black, white and yellow. I would like people to be green with spots of violet, or I don't know what. To have the diversity of flowers. If we had only the rose we would just hate it. Simply a flower.

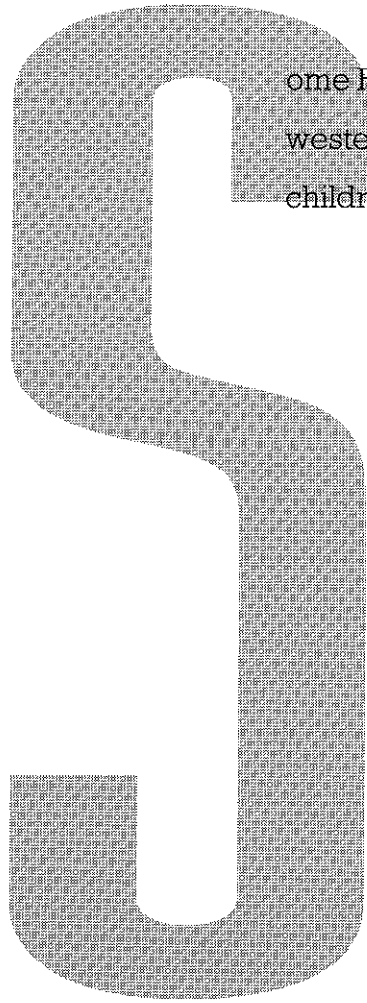
O.K. You've touched on something which I think is really quite important. In terms of everyday life in the Soviet Union, one of the ideas that comes over through the media and people who travel in USSR is that everyday culture is really very Victorian. People dress in 19th-century clothing and they have their hair braided and so on. What we're talking of is a world in a time warp and the whole idea of perestroika and glasnost has an impossible task because here are people who are actually used to a sense of security, whereas mod-

ernism is something which is terrible and frightening. What has actually happened in the Soviet Union is that it is expected suddenly to drop out of the Victorian age.

It's not exactly like that. I think that our society has different spots and different groups of people and places who live in different ages. Some live in the stone age. To reach the Victorian age is as difficult as, for example, the wildest parts of India to reach the level of the civilization which exists in Japan. It's impossible. Now the Victorian age is perhaps our future. Some people live in the stone age. Some live in the middle ages. Not the western middle ages but the Russian middle ages. Some live a half-wild life. They have no morals at all. They've never heard of basic morals, not to kill, not to steal, not to offend: all these things. Some people are very sophisticated in the most western way and you will find no differences in dealing with them. The only thing is that they do not have the technical devices to which westerners are used. In some sense some people are much more advanced than westerners and that even helps some Russians to develop a particular attitude towards west-

erners as though they were dealing with children, children with expensive toys such as computers. They are children who do not know life. They don't understand. They have never been in such complete conflicting psychological situations as Russians have always experienced. So you have everything. But in our country people live in different periods, in different times; deep past, past, present, future and, maybe even distant future. So our society is really very pluralistic. This is very difficult to discuss. You can take one group of people in one place and speak about them. Then you can speak about the others. Maybe that's why one of the great Russian poets of the nineteenth century gave us an idea that has always been very popular: you cannot understand Russia, you can only believe in it. We cannot understand it. We cannot explain it to ourselves! Only to those who are outside, which we do weakly.

That of course raises another question. I think it was the Russians who coined the term "intelligentsia." The importance of the knowledgeable sector of society. What kind of influence do you think it has? What is it?



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Well the idea of intelligentsia also developed and changed during the years because when the term was coined last century it meant only educated people with a developed consciousness. The majority of the population was undeveloped and had no consciousness at all. Self consciousness just didn't exist. They were believed to have had a state of collective consciousness against a purely individual one. Later it changed because it started meaning cultured people, and sometimes educated people. But during these 70 years, and especially during the Stalinist era, the intelligentsia or the cultured educated people were destroyed. Destroyed as a whole class. So what it is now we just don't know. We don't understand how the intelligentsia might still exist. There are educated people who have the formal education but they don't have the teachers of the old intelligentsia and there are those who are as cultured as it is possible. But intelligentsia? There's a great difference. Intellectuals are those who deal with some intellectual activity. Intelligentsia are people with a sophisticated soul so to speak. That's the Russian difference: those people who feel responsibility for the others, themselves or society, for the environment, the life, for the future and so on.

Are you saying those people virtually disappeared over the years?

Well they were killed. They were killed by the hundreds and thousands and millions, but something remained always. The root remained.

I'd like to know. What do you think remained?

What remained? It's all so very complex. For me intelligentsia was the flower of the nation. The only group who could lead the country somewhere and not let it become just a crowd of crazy people, not knowing where to go and what to do.

Is there any connection with the ones that remain and, say, Gorbachev and the new sense of glasnost?

The ideas always existed even though they were hidden. Of course these ideas affected Gorbachev because he is oriented toward the intelligentsia. That is clear, and even if he is pretending, still he is pretending this way and not another way. He doesn't say that the dictatorship

of creativity. There is constant competition between these two realms, but ultimately the poet or the painter wins. He is predestined to be the winner.

In the long run.

In the long run. The poet is the victor. Sometimes it was just an ideal but it was soothing for those who suffered from oppression. Not from the Czar (you never met the Czar) but from your neighbour who thinks that he is better than you. From the policeman. From the little man with a little power.

Somehow the hope existed that in the long run the poet might be the victor, but the Russian poets and all the others perished, one by one, some earlier, some later, some just became crazy and died, others were killed. It lasted for two centuries so of course it couldn't be but noticed. And long ago people of the word, of letters, started pointing each other to the fact of what was going on. "The poets are killed one by one. If we have a poet he is killed." And so there was an awe towards this sort of thing and it was clear that some sort of competition was going on. The government was always

They somehow stay silent like the souls you know who are now dead. Ancestors watching us. So people who want really to create something and not to please the authorities, not to gain money, are constantly aware of the great ones. It's a sort of pagan religion.

Do they have any contemporary writers outside Russia that are taken seriously – say from England, the States, France or Germany?

Yes. Of course they do and several different generations had different models. For example, in the sixties the most popular writer in Russia was Hemingway. He affected our writing a lot. In some ways he improved peoples' writing but in another he spoiled it. While the strongest survived, he taught how to write sparingly. That was a good lesson. But he also taught how to pretend to say something without saying anything seriously. But it was a very good experience. He was one who really affected people.

He was so popular that in every house you could see his photograph on the wall. Unbelievable. Who else? Faulkner was very important and people became hysterical over him. I wonder if they understood what he wrote because he wrote for people of another culture. People extract some other message from Faulkner. Not the one he meant. But still it is something. I think that's the way it always is in writing a book.

Salinger was considered to be more Russian than American, somehow. He's closer to the Russian sense of detachment from politics.

What about central European writers like Kafka?

Kafka was extremely important. There was a generation of Kafka readers. Funny, when I was young I used to look at the young boys and girls, sophisticated boys and girls of 17, who said they read nothing but Kafka.

I'm interested about the Central Europeans because in a way one would have expected Central European stuff to become available.

No. no. no.

It's not being translated now?

They are translated.

Nobody picks it up?

Usually people are interested in something exotic from somewhere else that binds us to the others. Latin American writing is popular because I think it deals with the same problems as we do. They have the same problems – like tyranny. Marquez with his fantastic realism is very

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of the proletariat is what we need. No.

That's interesting because in a way we in the West who read Russian literature see everything from black Pushkin to imprisoned Dostoevsky and Jewish and exiled Mandelstam as a continuous tradition of survival. I think it is a very important tradition. And in fact this conference in a way is founded on that premise. Russia is the classic example of what happened to writers. Do you think there's any way in which that tradition is now fed back as a result of perestroika and glasnost into the curriculum and the newspapers? To what extent are people now rethinking their imprisoned writers? To what extent are they rethinking the culture as a whole?

To the extreme extent.

How?

Starting with Pushkin, or even earlier, but Pushkin was the one who just shaped this concept, that there is in existence two different governments. The government of the earth – either the Czar or the politburo – and the moral authority of the invisible government that nurtures souls. That is art, literature, poetry and all sorts

of these things. Competition from the margins. So now the story of life and death, the meaning of the activity of different writers and poets is what is told and retold and repeated even if you just cannot listen to it any more. People just write about these horrible stories of one's life and how it all happened. So practically all the writers I know already received their reward after their death. Everyone is aware of how they lived and how they died and of what happened.

And how do you think in the Soviet Union today the writer who inherits this incredible legacy sees himself as carrying on the task?

It's an interesting question because we had a poet – David Samolev is his name – who once wrote a little poem, beautifully written. The idea of it was that the great ones have passed away. There are no great ones. So there's a great silence now and in this great silence there is an ill feeling, that, like children now that the adult has gone away, we can do anything we want and no one will watch us. Everything is permitted and so the horrible time starts. Because when everything is permitted you can imagine what the people who have just waited for this moment will allow. So there is a great sorrow.

close to what Russian life is. A truly fantastic reality. There are of course many other writers. Some of them affected our culture. They became ours. Mark Twain is a sort of Russian writer because everyone knows him. Just everyone. O'Henry is a sort of Russian writer but he didn't affect the literature, in the literal way. But Hemingway, Kafka and Faulkner did affect.

Any English writers?

No. Joyce has only recently been translated, and people have only just heard of him. So he lost a century, almost a century. He will not affect anymore. He lost the ability to affect.

One of the people who was in a sense resurrected here in the 1970s and who I think has become a very powerful influence on people's thinking, not just about Russia but about more general issues of writing in its relation to society, is Mikhail Bakhtin. Is there any continued influence in Russia?

Yes. Yes, but he is regarded as sort of a classic of this approach.

He is one of the old dead?

Yes. Maybe the last one in a way. He was a great one, and he had a different approach which is rather rare in our country because usually our writers are illiterate from the point of view of literary criticism. That's because it was all forbidden. We did have a very good formal school in the early 20s. But they were all dispersed and died. They emigrated or they were shut up during all these years. In many respects Russians were very quick to pick up the ideas that were just appearing in the late teens and early twenties: such as new painting, new thinking, new philosophy. But immediately it was cut. Today there is no critical theory in Russia.

So do you think that one of the ongoing problems is how to pick it up again. I mean, from where do you start?

Yes, how to pick up the things that already are of no use! You know the West has lived it through and had its passions about it. So now we pick up the ideas that are already dead. Its the same as to be in love with a woman whose portrait you see and now you find out well, O.K.,

best. The West has a lot of difficulties and vices and so on but it has the tendency to improve. At least life can become more comfortable for most of the people. The Swedish way. No wars. Three hundred years without wars and a very high standard of living.

If you live without war, if you just work and work to develop, then you have money enough to feed even the most hungry. Of course there will be social differences. There are social differences in paradise. You know some simple angels just deal with people and the angels of high rank deal with God. There is justice everywhere. So it is all obvious to me. The others just want to have a totalitarian government and still think that it will work. They want the Cambodian way. They want, perhaps, the Vietnamese way or the Chinese way, but you see what's going on. People are poor and they suffer and they run away. No one runs away from their own difference.

Let me just ask you one last question and then I think we've probably done as much as we can. This is the first time that PEN has had Russian representation. And that by itself must have involved a whole series of debates within the Writers' Union. I just wonder whether writers want to belong to the official union or whether a lot of writers say who cares? Does it matter? Do people actually feel it's important to belong to the Writers' Union?

Yes, and not because the membership at the Writers' Union brings privileges. Real privileges go only to the authorities of the Writers' Union. Simple members receive only slight privileges. The majority of normal writers, simple members and non-members, believe that it would be better for the Writers' Union not to exist at all. They would like to see it dissolved and then themselves organize in associations and clubs. They want to receive more equality because each one thinks that the rules of the game amount to simple injustice. The secretaries of the Writers' Union are the worst writers and they get the best privileges. The whole situation with the Writers' Union is very complicated. Those who are already in don't want to get out. They lose even the few privileges they have. It would be better, somehow, to work together to destroy the Writers' Union. But there are different ways of destroying. Some people tried to create a second writers' union. It didn't work. Some tried to create different associations but that doesn't give you any power at all. So the PEN organization may become a core of a body that would replace the Writers' Union in the most creative way. At best it would be one such organization. ♦

There's a great silence now and in this great silence there is an ill feeling that, like children now that the adult has gone away, we can do anything we want and no one will watch us.

she exists but now she is 90. So what's the use of falling in love with her? I wrote a story with this very plot. About a man of 40 who is in love with the voice of a singer who lived in the twenties. He is in love. He doesn't want anything because she is the best and he shuts his door and listens to her voice. Listens and listens and he imagines and it is just a sweet dream of his. Perhaps he would meet her. But he understands that she doesn't exist any more. And then suddenly he finds out that she does exist. He doesn't know whether to go and see her or not because she must be old. But he goes and he is extremely disappointed because she's an old, rough woman who lost everything 50 years ago. Just a ruin of a person in every sense. That's what is going on here in every respect. We pick up the ideas and they are already cold like yesterday's dishes. As for new ideas, you know it's difficult to pick up new ideas without living through the old ones. So, just imagine, that's what is going on in our country.

We don't know how to live. We don't know what to do. One thing is obvious. There are people for whom, as with me, it's obvious that the western way is the