

A Critical Guide to Tolstoy's *On Life*
Interpretive Essays

edited by Inessa Medzhibovskaya

General Editor
Michael A. Denner

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**A Critical Guide to Tolstoy's *On Life*.
Interpretive Essays/Inessa Medzhibovskaya, Editor**

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(Notes)

- 1 In his entry on Tolstoy for the Macmillan *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, for example, Eugene Kamenka wrote that "Tolstoy . . . had no genuine conception of a philosophical problem or of a technical philosophical argument" (Kamenka, 147).
- 2 Although many commentators have characterized Tolstoy's mature world view as "pantheism," Richard Gustafson argues persuasively that it is more appropriately called "panentheism," since Tolstoy held that God is not only immanent in the world but also transcendent to it (but *not* as a creator). See Gustafson, 100–02.
- 3 Dostoevsky, 242–44.
- 4 Ironically, such an integration is not unknown in subsequent Russian philosophy. The twentieth-century panpsychist Nikolai Lossky (1870–1965), inspired by Leibniz's monadology, developed an elaborate metaphysical system that gives freedom of choice and the capacity to sin to every entity in the world, right down to subatomic particles, which he regards as proto-persons. In this respect, Tolstoy, lacking a metaphysics as rich as Lossky's, left his theodicy in *On Life* incomplete.

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Tolstoy Sees Foolishness, and Writes: From *On Life* to *Fruits of Enlightenment*, and Back Again

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Was it better or worse for him there, where he woke up after this real death? Was he disappointed, or did he find there exactly what he had expected? We will all soon find out.

— Leo Tolstoy, "Master and Man"¹

Everyone who has an opinion on the matter knows that Tolstoy thought that spiritualism was ridiculous. Whenever spiritualism appears in his novels — in *Anna Karenina* and *Resurrection* — Tolstoy resolutely derides it, but derides it with a purpose: only suggestible and somewhat gullible characters (with the possible exception of Vronsky) are interested in séances, and they often base disastrous decisions on what mediums convey to them as messages from the other world.² There would be, it seems, nothing more to say on the matter. Except that Tolstoy apparently needed to make this point about spiritualism over and over again. Why, if spiritualism was so foolish, did he repeatedly return to the topic? When we take Tolstoy's attention to spiritualism seriously — not necessarily spiritualism itself, but the writer's focus on it — it provides some missing connections between his art, his philosophy, and his religious conceptions.

Tolstoy had been aware of spiritualism from his voluminous reading — and even participated in some séances — from the very dawn of the European movement, even before it arrived in Russia, and he

formed his dismissive attitude early. So one is surprised to learn that Tolstoy went to another séance in Moscow around 1886, and that the experience was so unsettling (or frustrating, or amusing?) for him that he immediately sketched a play on the subject. Almost contemporaneous with *The Kreutzer Sonata*, this sketch grew into one of his major literary products of the 1880s, entitled *The Fruits of Enlightenment*, a work that has been mostly overlooked as a source for the cultural context of Russian Spiritualism. The play is superficially a satire on the nobility, but the most prominent plot device animating this story of good-hearted peasants justly outwitting their silly betters is a faked spiritualist séance. I propose to take this comedy about a relatively marginal issue in Russian culture (spiritualism) and demonstrate its embedding in a unified vision of science, philosophy, and religion.

I situate *Fruits of Enlightenment* not among Tolstoy's dramatic works, or even among his fictional creations, but instead put this manifestly frivolous work in the context of *On Life* (*О Жизни*), Tolstoy's most highbrow and thorough philosophical writing. This is not a fanciful linkage. Tolstoy began *Fruits of Enlightenment* at almost exactly the same time as *On Life*, and set the play aside to produce what he later declared one of his two most important works.³ When he finally resumed the dramatic sketch, he altered the play to emphasize satirizing spiritualist *scientists* (as opposed to its earlier emphasis on dilettante noble spiritualists). Ilya Vinitsky has already produced an excellent study of the play's professional hypnotist, Grossmann, in the context of Tolstoy's theory of art, arguing that hypnosis as a model for communication was a central concern for Tolstoy during this period of his life (Vinitsky 2009, 136–155). I shall instead focus on the “professor” in the story, Krugosvetlov. If we examine this figure carefully, especially his one big moment — an extended lecture on spiritualist theory — we find a series of themes that draw directly from Tolstoy's encounters with spiritualists and the ideas expressed in *On Life*, themes that will force us to reconsider the marginality of the spiritualist fad in the major religious thought of the mature writer.

What Is Spiritualism?: The Movement Arrives in Russia, and Stays

As an avid reader of the European press, Tolstoy became familiar with spiritualism in its early days of the 1850s. The movement itself was born in upstate New York in 1848, and spread quickly to Britain and then across the European continent.⁴ We know that he encountered it personally in Paris, attending a séance lead by the outstanding Victorian medium Daniel Dunglas Home (pronounced “Hume”), the only medium from the epoch who was never publicly exposed as a fraud. On 16 March 1867, Tolstoy noted in his diary: “Hume both succeeded and didn't succeed (и сделал и не сделал). I must try it myself” (*PSS* 17:724).⁵ (As far as we are aware, Tolstoy never made good on this promise.) Tolstoy was prescient in selecting Home: not only was he reportedly able to levitate and hold burning coals on his palms with no damage, but he had been the reason why the distinguished British chemist William Crookes, in attempting to debunk Home's miracles, became a committed spiritualist. Home also visited Russia on several occasions and married into a distinguished Russian family. His case alone thus demonstrates some crucial themes for this essay: the transition from Europe to Russia, the link between science and spiritualism, and Tolstoy's deep personal interest in both these issues.

Spiritualism should not be confused with a general interest in spirituality, or as an opposition to “materialism” (whatever that might mean). In this essay, spiritualism (Russian спиритизм, derived from the French *spiritisme*) refers to the practices that took place at séances. These were small gatherings of individuals — usually fewer than ten people — who assembled in a darkened room with a particular individual (the “medium”) who could produce a variety of phenomena: table rappings, levitation of furniture, ringing of bells without human contact, automatic writing, etc. Just how these effects were produced was the source of much contemporary debate: for more mystically inclined spiritualists these were communications from the spirit world; for more scientific ones they were interactions between psychic energy and

matter; and for skeptics they were outright fraud. Anything was possible during the height of Russian spiritualism in the 1870s — except to be without an opinion.

Tolstoy began to engage spiritualism in writing during the 1875–1876 “spiritualist season.” *Anna Karenina*, for example, was serialized in the *Russian Herald* (*Русский Вестник*) alongside many of the articles in that flurry of contestation (and features the medium Jules Landau, a fictionalized Home, whose appearance is well analyzed by Donna Orwin [Orwin 2004, 125]). The controversy of that year was prompted by an April 1875 article in defense of spiritualism, published in the *Messenger of Europe* (*Вестник Европы*), penned by Nikolai Petrovich Vagner. Vagner was an interesting man. A trained entomologist, he has been credited with the discovery of pædogenesis — the parthenogenetic reproduction of insect larvae — and he occupied with distinction the chair of zoology at both Kazan University and, starting in the 1870s, St. Petersburg University. Shortly after moving to the capital, he was drawn, despite much skepticism, to attend a few séances upon the invitation of Aleksandr Butlerov: academician, professor of chemistry at St. Petersburg University, and one of the most distinguished scientists in the Russian Empire. Vagner’s curiosity was piqued, and 1875 he was converted. In addition to his spiritualist activities, he also penned a series of fairy tales (under the pseudonym Kot-Murlyka: (Кот-Мурлыка), “Cat Purr”), some of the finest non-naturalist writing produced in the Empire.⁶ Vagner and Tolstoy knew each other as writers, and he appeared in many of the latter’s letters under the derogatory moniker “Wurst,” i.e. German sausage.

Vagner was soon joined publicly by Butlerov. The latter’s scientific prominence and reputation for probity served to bolster the intellectual respectability of spiritualism after he entered the journalistic fray later in 1875. His support, and Vagner’s, prompted their university colleague Dmitrii I. Mendeleev (most famous today for his 1869 formulation of the periodic system of chemical elements) to empanel a commission to ostensibly “investigate,” but actually debunk, the claims of scientific spiritualists. These disputes were highly public in the 1870s, and Tolstoy, for one, took note of them.

Medium and Man: Tolstoy among the Spiritualists (and the Scientists)

When Tolstoy bothered to address spiritualism directly, Nikolai Strakhov (1828–1896) was usually involved. Trained in the natural sciences, Strakhov worked as a journalist and collaborator with Fedor Dostoevsky’s journal *Time* (*Время*) (although he later slandered the novelist after his death) and eventually as a general conservative intellectual gadfly. From the 1870s on, he became close to Tolstoy, corresponding on a variety of topics and making frequent trips to Yasnaya Polyana. Despite the fact that he regretted Strakhov’s unwillingness to devote himself to a religious life, Tolstoy clearly respected the latter’s views on many topics, especially scientific ones.⁷ In order to approach Tolstoy’s understanding of spiritualism, therefore, we must begin with science; in particular, it is important to underscore that Tolstoy’s hostility to spiritualism was not a manifestation of some “anti-scientific” attitude on his part. For Tolstoy was, properly speaking, not opposed to science at all.

This does not mean science was unproblematic. Although, like most members of the Russian intelligentsia of mid-century, he read widely in popular journals in both Russian and other languages about the tremendous developments in various fields — he was particularly taken with the work of Michael Faraday and James Joule — he remained suspicious of research in cell theory and microbiology, and (along with Strakhov) nurtured an abiding hostility to atomism.⁸ Tolstoy’s interest in science apparently stemmed from his general obsession with forms of method, definition, and (crucial for us) epistemology. While working on his important essay “What Is Art?,” for example, Tolstoy wrote to Strakhov on 6 February 1891 demanding a definition of science:

It’s too long to write about, but I’d like to talk to you about it: in fact I’d like answers to these questions: (1) Does science, whose distinguishing feature is the strict verification of its propositions — criticism — apply this criticism to those propositions on the basis of which certain knowledge and information

is separated off from the whole infinite quantity of knowledge transmitted by people from generation to generation? (2) Can those features which constitute the special nature of scientific knowledge according to existing definition, be applied to knowledge of any kind — the most worthless and even harmful? (3) Is the distinguishing property of science the special nature of its content, not its form? (4) If there is any knowledge which is separated off by its content from all other knowledge as being especially important and meriting the special respect which is characteristically ascribed to science, is true art also distinguished by this same content from art which is not true? (reproduced in Tolstoy 1978, II:476)

It is clear from this statement (and there are others) that labeling Tolstoy “hostile” to science is an oversimplification. To some extent, this characterization has its roots in the common belief that science and religion are inexorably opposed, and since it goes without saying that Tolstoy was “religious,” he must have been anti-scientific. This caricatures both the nuanced relationship of science and religion found in the history of science and Tolstoy’s religious belief. One would be on far stronger grounds to view the writer as fascinated by the scientific project (as he understood it), and concerned to demarcate the proper domain for this powerful form of intellectual inquiry.

Precisely Tolstoy’s worry over the proper domain of science — and the tendency of his contemporaries to ascribe to science too much *moral* power and too broad a social significance — accounts for his several reservations about the scientific endeavor, of which I will briefly mention three that exhibit characteristic features.⁹

First, Tolstoy repeatedly condemned contemporary medicine, particularly when physicians endorsed sexual activity as necessary for health (notably in *The Kreutzer Sonata*). He claimed that patients tended to deify doctors and outsource moral decision-making to them.¹⁰ Second, and related, were Tolstoy’s criticisms of Dmitrii I. Mendeleev’s vision

of transforming Russia into an industrial capitalist state, powered by a massive expansion of the Russian population. Based as it was on the birth of many more children — and thus a great deal more sex — Tolstoy declared the chemist’s views “[h]orribly absurd” (*PSS* 55:237) in a diary entry of 24 August 1906, while reading Mendeleev’s popular economic tract *To a Knowledge of Russia* (*К Познанию России*), a view he reiterated in letters and comments that summer while he was immersed in the book.¹¹

The third prominent case was Tolstoy’s famously negative view of Darwinism. Darwin’s theories were widely available in Russia almost as soon as they were published, and the intelligentsia had access to both the scientific works and their popularizations. *The Origin of Species* was translated into Russian in 1864 by S. Rachinsky, with a second edition in 1865; noted physiologist I. M. Sechenov translated *The Descent of Man* in 1871, the same year as the English edition, with a second edition in 1874; *Variation of Animals and Plants*, *The Expression of the Emotions*, and *The Voyage of the Beagle* all appeared in the 1870s; and between 1907 and 1909 botanist K. A. Timiriazev (“Darwin’s Russian Bulldog”) oversaw an edition of eight volumes of Darwiniana in Russian. Criticism of Darwin’s views from Russian naturalists stemmed mostly, as Daniel Todes has shown, from their belief that the Englishman had overemphasized Malthusian overpopulation and competition to the extent of ignoring cooperative trends in evolution.¹² Most of the reactions from members of the intelligentsia, however, were broadly in favor of the general tenor of Darwin’s vision of nature.

The exceptions were conservatives, especially Nikolai Strakhov and Nikolai Danilevskii, who attacked the theory for being corrosive of morals. Tolstoy reacted similarly, although not as vehemently. At staggered points in the 1870s, especially in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy lashed out at Social Darwinist views that interpreted society as exhibiting the survival of the fittest, but he soon ceased to write on the matter. Unlike many other writers with strong views on evolution, he let Charles Darwin’s death in 1882 pass without public comment, and he only became re-energized on the matter in 1885, when Strakhov began to polemicize on behalf of Danilevskii’s massive posthumous volume *Darwinism*,

and drew his famous friend into the fray. Tolstoy began to write more openly and frequently about the threat Darwinism posed to a religious life, but even here, as Hugh McLean has noted, Tolstoy's views shared the two central characteristics of his other wary views of modern science and medicine: Darwin's was a theory of the past, and thus had no bearing on what we must do *now*; and society as a whole misunderstood this and ascribed moral weight to these views, which distracted them from proper living. After about 1890 Tolstoy's views had solidified on this issue and he remained staunchly critical of Social Darwinism, without any nuance to differentiate the naturalist and sociological interpretations.¹³

Strakhov brought Tolstoy into the Darwinism fight, and he also inducted him into his campaign against séances and mediums, especially when endorsed by natural scientists like Butlerov and Vagner, which he objected to largely as a transgression against correct metaphysical reasoning. Strakhov dashed off a series of critical pieces attacking the metaphysics of mediumism in late 1876, after the bulk of the fury surrounding the Mendeleev commission had already subsided.¹⁴ He had earlier sounded out Tolstoy's views on the matter, and the latter responded on 1–2 January 1876 with a long and surprising letter that reflected substantial preoccupation with both the epistemological and social issues posed by spiritualism:

Second, I was struck by new proofs of our intellectual commonality. You write about spiritualism, I had almost written about it. My article is entirely ready. The article in the *Russian Herald* worried me terribly. Three things struck me. 1) That the muzhiks see devils incessantly, and no one considers this to be a phenomenon which deserves attention, that these are facts; but Butler and Wurst [Butlerov and Vagner – MG] see them, and I should believe them — these are facts. I would like to show that the case of the muzhiks' devils is just as authentic as theirs, but that Butler and Wurst don't deserve our trust, having become stupid by sitting over

microscopes and retorts, but instead the fresh muzhik, who knows a great deal less (in your terms, his analysis is less developed), yet has the foundations of all knowledge — faith, a religious worldview (synthesis, if you like) that is without comparison more correct than Wurst's. (*PSS* 62:235–36)

Frustratingly for the historian, Tolstoy never drafted his “entirely ready” article. However, among his papers and scribbles, one finds related notes from October 1875 written in reaction to a pro-spiritualist piece. The thoughts here echo the above letter to Strakhov, and demonstrate how tightly Tolstoy wove the shenanigans at séances with his emerging philosophical worries that would blossom in his 1879 *Confession*:

Observation, experiment, facts, inductive method. —

Inductive, deductive — these are only words relating to the essence of thinking. This difference and opposition makes sense only relating to the essence of thought. I.e., I can prove or express something inductively or deductively, but the thought occurs to me, it appears neither inductively nor deductively. And therefore it is impossible to produce a thought inductively. In order to make experiments, it is necessary to already have a *goal* for the experiments, in order to see facts, one must see what they prove. Phenomena such as mediumism only prove the poverty of thought of the people who affirm the med[iums]. The goal in mind during the experiments of mediumism is a thought. And this thought is superstition — i.e., the absence of a rational worldview. (*PSS* 17:724)

That is where Tolstoy left his views on spiritualism during the great year of public debate over Spiritualism — as private notes soon dismissed, peripheral to his line of thought.

What Does Man Laugh By?: *Fruits of Enlightenment*

And then, for no discernible reason, Tolstoy's interest in the topic reawakened in the mid-1880s. Tolstoy's friend N. V. Davydov, having arrived in Moscow from Tula while the Tolstoy family was visiting the metropole, heard from an acquaintance that N. A. L'vov, a respected nobleman and an avid amateur spiritualist, would be having a séance in a few days. Knowing that Tolstoy "wanted to participate at some point in such a séance, in order to convince himself with his own eyes in the imaginability of everything that happened there," Davydov arranged for both of them to attend L'vov's séance (*TVS*, II: 205). We have no idea why Tolstoy evinced such an interest, but we do know his mind was just about made up. He told Davydov, as the latter recalled, "that he was surprised that people could believe in the reality of spiritualist phenomena; after all it is just the same, he said, as believing that if I strike my walking stick milk will flow from it, which has never happened and never will." (*TVS*, II: 205). Present at the event were Tolstoy, Davydov, L'vov, the medium (a man named Mamchich), P. F. Samarin, and K. Iu. Milioti. The séance was unsuccessful: everyone sat around a circular table in a dark room; there were knocks on the table and phosphorescent glows; Samarin brushed against a hand in the darkness; and then the medium came to. Afterwards, L'vov displayed some spiritualist photographs, and everyone retired. The next day, Davydov noted, Tolstoy "affirmed to me his opinion that in spiritualism everything is either self-deception, in which both the medium and the participants in the séance are complicit, or simply a deception created by professionals" (*TVS*, II:205). We do not know precisely when this happened, but the *terminus ante quem* is 1887, since L'vov died that year.

This single event was the trigger for Tolstoy's only creative work which devoted substantial attention to spiritualism, his comedy *The Fruits of Enlightenment*, which George Steiner delightfully dubbed "Tolstoy's *Meistersinger*, his one major excursion into gaiety" (Steiner, 129). It is obvious that the original sketch of the play (*PSS* 27:433–435) was directly inspired by the séance, since the names of the characters remain those of the original participants, especially L'vov and Samarin. (These are changed to Zvezdintsev and Sakhatov in the final

version of the play.) The original sketch had the role of a "professor" — although none was present at the L'vov séance — and he was originally dubbed "Kutler," patently a *portmanteau* of Butlerov and Vagner. Kutler would eventually become Krugosvetlov, and his role was expanded when Tolstoy extensively revised the play in 1889. Although the play was drawn from real life, Tolstoy continued to develop the characters as he tinkered, transmuting them into literary creations that transform the play into more than merely a *roman à clef*.¹⁵

The timing of the first sketch of *Fruits of Enlightenment* places it immediately after the completion of *The Power of Darkness* (November 1886), but Tolstoy made little progress, achieving only a skeleton of acts one and two. The idea for the play was soon consigned to a drawer — displaced by the composition of *On Life* — and was only revived in 1889 due to a Jane Austenesque desire on the part of the young folks at Yasnaya Polyana to put on a play. The story comes to us from the reminiscences of A. M. Novikov, who was visiting Yasnaya Polyana in late 1889 and over a meal had a conversation with Tolstoy's daughter Maria, and the two came to the idea of staging a play. She turned to Novikov and said: "Haven't you read papa's play?" He assumed she meant *The Power of Darkness*, but she insisted upon "another one. I saw it among his papers" (*TVS* II:448). He asked her to obtain a copy, and this operation took a few days. The draft, which he recalled being titled "The Thread Has Snapped" (Ниточка оборвалась), was only a pale shadow of what would eventually be *Fruits of Enlightenment*.

Novikov immediately noticed the satire of the local nobility within it, however, and they decided to put on the play and apportioned the roles. Tolstoy at first objected that this kind of theater was an idle amusement of the rich — a somewhat strange criticism from the author of the farce — but he eventually acquiesced, even attending rehearsals and working seriously on corrections and revisions. Novikov and Maria summoned friends from Moscow, Tula, and Chern' to take part, and the production was staged on 30 December 1889. Tolstoy seemed to enjoy the whole process immensely, in particular V. M. Lopatin's portrayal of the third peasant.¹⁶

That is the standard account. Tolstoy did not actually abandon the

play from 1886 to late 1889, only revived by the antics of the young adults. He had returned to the play after completing *On Life*, and he spent much of the spring of 1889 expanding the sketches until it reached the stage of the draft Mariia Lvovna Tolstaya filched from his writing desk, publishing it in 1891. The final revisions, after the success of the amateur theatricals, left Tolstoy uncomfortable, as one can see from a letter to his chief disciple V. G. Chertkov, dated 15 January 1890:

Recently the comedy which was performed at home has so taken hold of me that I've been working on it continually over 10 days, improving it and embellishing it from an artistic point of view. The result is still a very insignificant and feeble work, but the thing is that it made me see what a soul-degrading occupation art is. A man may die at any time, and all of a sudden he jots down anxiously a phrase which is appropriate to a particular person and is funny; and he's glad to have found it. Generally speaking I felt ashamed, but I think I've finished now. (Tolstoy 1978, II:451)

Partly at issue here was Tolstoy's ambivalent attitude toward the theater, as George Steiner has analyzed well (Steiner, 116–117). But more relevant for us is Tolstoy's attention to the morally problematic nature of *comedy*, especially when writing parts suited to particular individuals. This applies directly to the character of Krugosvetlov.

Despite my emphasis on him, the professor was certainly not the main character. *The Fruits of Enlightenment* was essentially a classic farce, in which a smart peasant girl (Tania), manages to win her somewhat hapless lover (the kitchen boy Semyon), and persuade her noble master, Leonid Fedorovich Zvezdintsev, to sell land to Semyon's village family at reasonable rates. The rub is how Tania pulls this off. Zvezdintsev was an avid Spiritualist, and Tania rigs a séance by persuading him that Semyon, while napping, has mediumistic powers, and then "materializing" the deed of sale during the séance. There are other plot lines as well — the arrogant valet Grigorii who continually paws at Tania; the

obsessive crusade of the lady of the house against germs and microbes, especially when spread by peasants (a thinly veiled and ruthless portrait of Tolstoy's wife); and so on — but none of these rise to the dominance, either structurally or thematically, of the staged séance.

Aside from Tania — and even she is a bit of a schemer — no one comes off well: the nobility are ninnyes, the servants are feckless, and the peasants are shallow. Tolstoy himself later almost recanted both the content of the play and the practice of playwriting:

In *Fruits of Enlightenment* I was, as the author, on the side of the peasants, but on stage suddenly they appeared to be the same kind of swindlers and cheats, like Grossmann, and conscious cheats at that. I can't reproach the actors for this — they performed well.... I understood from this that it is one thing to write, another to put on a play; there is a big difference between text and performance. (qtd. in Опульская, 259; ellipses added)

But perhaps no one is so irredeemably comic, so worthy of relentless mockery as the "Professor," Aleksei Vladimirovich Krugosvetlov, described in the dramatis personae as: "Scientist, 50 years of age, with calm, pleasantly self-assured manners and a sort of slow, singing speech. Speaks guardedly. He relates meekly and disdainfully to those who do not agree with him. Smokes a great deal. A thin, mobile person" (*PSS* 27:95). He is the figure that concentrates our attention on spiritualism itself with his smug all-knowing air in the midst of rank fraud.

Krugosvetlov is a pure "type": the scientist who has converted to a whole-hearted — but still scientific — belief in mediumistic phenomena, alongside such well-known British luminaries as William Crookes and Alfred Russel Wallace, both of whom were cited in the draft (*PSS* 27:112). Their Russian counterparts, Butlerov and Vagner, were not explicitly invoked, but the allusion was overt, even if Krugosvetlov was no longer named "Kutler." There are a few characteristics of this type which stood out to contemporaries, and which Tolstoy deftly satirized: an enthusiasm for explaining everything through the transfor-

mations of energy (*PSS* 27:185); the denial of spiritualist phenomena as “supernatural,” but rather framing them as natural laws not yet fully understood (*PSS* 27:191–192); and the refusal to accept evidence of fraud by mediums, even when publicly confronted with the deception (*PSS* 27:246–247). (In the first draft of the play, after Semyon’s fraud is exposed, the professor still wants to take the young man to Petersburg for further study [*PSS* 27:434].) Instead of providing many snippets of Krugosvetlov’s mode of reasoning, I will instead reproduce Krugosvetlov’s extremely long disquisition on the science behind spiritualism, which Tolstoy had expanded substantially for the final version of the play. The speech is not quite a monologue, as it is interrupted by giggles from the peanut gallery of flirting teenagers in the séance room, and by requests from the host to cut it short — all highly comic interventions designed to deflate any residual respect for the professor — but Krugosvetlov soldiers on:

Gentlemen! The phenomenon which we study appears ordinary on the one hand, like nothing new, and on the other hand like something which is beyond the order of natural conditions. Neither the one nor the other is correct. This phenomenon is not new, but as old as the world, and is not supernatural, but is entirely subject to the same eternal laws to which everything existing is subject. This phenomenon is often described as communion with the spiritual world. This description is inexact. In this description the spiritual world is placed in opposition to the material world, but this is not correct: there is no such opposition. Both worlds are so tightly intercalated, that there is no possibility of setting a demarcation line which separates one world from the other. We say: matter is composed of molecules... [interruption] Molecules from atoms, but atoms, not having extension, are in essence nothing other than points of attachment of force. That is, strictly speaking, not force but energy — the same

energy which is just as uniform and indestructible as matter. But since matter is one, but its forms are diverse, just the same with energy. Until recently we knew only four forms of energy which can transform into each other: dynamic, thermal, electrical, and chemical. But four forms of energy are far from exhausting all the variety of its appearances. The forms of energy’s appearance are multiple, and one of these new, little-known forms of energy is being studied by us. I am speaking of the energy of mediumism. [interruption] Mediumistic energy has been known to humanity from long ago: foresight, precognition, clairvoyance, and many others — all this is nothing more than a manifestation of mediumistic energy. The phenomena produced by it have been known for a long time. But the energy itself was not recognized as such until very recently, until one had recognized that medium, the vibrations of which produce mediumistic energy. And just as the phenomenon of light was unexplained until the existence of an imponderable substance, the ether, was recognized, just so mediumistic phenomena appeared mysterious until one recognizes the truth, now indubitable, that in the interstices of the ether particles there is another imponderable substance, still finer than the ether, which is not subject to the law of three dimensions... [interruption] And just as mathematical calculations confirmed incontrovertibly the existence of the imponderable ether that produces the phenomena of light and electricity, just so the brilliant array of most accurate experiments by Hermann Schmidt and Joseph Schmatzofen without doubt confirms the existence of that substance, which fills the universe and can be called the spiritual ether. [interruption] And thus, an array of strictly scientific experiments and researches, which I have the honor of informing you about, have clarified for us the laws of

mediumistic phenomena. These experiments have clarified for us that the submersion of some persons in the hypnotic state, which differs from ordinary sleep only in that with the submersion in this sleep physiological activity not only doesn't decline, but always intensifies, as we just saw — it turns out, that the submersion in this state of whichever subject invariably entails certain perturbations in the spiritual ether, perturbations completely similar to those which are produced by the submersion of a solid body in a liquid. These perturbations are what we call mediumistic phenomena... [interruption]. (*PSS* 27:209–211; ellipses in the original)

Much revealing material lies buried here amid the obfuscation. Of course, there are echoes of some of the classic spiritualist tropes (transformations of energy, etc.). In a formal sense, the speech becomes increasingly abstract the more he is interrupted, exemplifying the detachment of Krugosvetlov from his immediate surroundings. But, most obviously, the entire passage is nothing more than a circular definition of “mediumistic phenomena.” One analysis of Tolstoy's theater interprets this speech as an Aesopian critique of the dogmas of the established church, and there is merit to that argument.¹⁷ My point, however, concerns not so much the content as why Tolstoy bothered to include such an extended speech in the play in the first place. It was not present, even as a placeholder, in the early drafts from 1886 or in such an extended form until the final version. The answer stems, I argue, from what intervened between the L'vov séance and the Yasnaya Polyana production: the writing of *On Life*.

How Much Science Does a Man Need?: *On Life*

On Life comprises perhaps the most complete statement of Tolstoy's epistemological and metaphysical views outside an explicitly religious frame, and it was composed at a crucial moment in his intellectual development — right after the break from Orthodoxy, and before his

more explicit political radicalization. Tolstoy himself considered the work to be seminal, and yet aside from several incisive Russian reviews of the French translation of the text, it was soon broadly ignored.¹⁸ For example, in 1890 it was considered completely responsible, in a survey article on contemporary trends in Russian philosophy, to declare that “[n]either Count Tolstoi nor his followers have any interest whatever in philosophy; they are even indifferent to ethics as a science” (Mokievsky, 159). Even a cursory acquaintance with this text would disabuse anyone of such a gross oversimplification.

On Life represents a further stage in Tolstoy's decades of wrangling with problems of epistemology (evident in his philosophical fragments of 1847), the privileged role of nature in the formation of the self, and especially a confrontation with the pessimistic depiction of the will in the thought of Arthur Schopenhauer.¹⁹ The central argument of the text, echoed in a comment buried in Appendix III, is that “Man always knows through reason, and not through faith. One might dissimulate, maintaining that he knows through faith and not through reason; but as soon as a person knows two faiths and sees people who profess a different faith than his own, then he is confronted with the inevitable necessity to decide the issue with reason” (*PSS* 26:439). For our purposes, it suffices to follow two of the main strands of argumentation: the rejection of the primary claimant to the power of reason in contemporary society — that is, science; and the application of the process of reason to resolve certain questions about the nature of suffering, theodicy, and the soul.

First, to science. Tolstoy maintained that the problem with science, at least at the epistemological level, was not its insistent commitment to rationalism (that was Dostoevsky's position), but rather its application of that rationalism to inappropriate problems. He had already articulated this view explicitly in an unpublished draft entitled “A Conversation on Science,” drafted in 1875–1876, not coincidentally during the spiritualism controversies:

Earlier science did not distance itself from the philosophical questions connected with it; now History says directly that questions of the purpose of humanity,

of the laws of its development are outside of science. Physiology says that it knows the path of activity of nerves, but questions about the freedom or lack thereof of a person are beyond its domain. Jurisprudence says that it knows the history of the emergence of these or those ordinances, but that the question of to which degree these ordinances answer to our idea of justice are beyond its domain, etc. Even worse, medicine says: your illness is outside of science. So what the devil do I care for your sciences? I'm better off playing chess. (*PSS* 17:141)²⁰

Notice here that Tolstoy was most vexed with the historical and social sciences, well within the purview of *наука*, the Russian term that mirrors the German *Wissenschaft*. Distinctive about *On Life* was his extension of the analysis to the physical sciences through scientists' rampant abuse of reductionist reasoning.

The crux here, related to his critique of Darwinism, was the application of scientific theories to humans. Science proved unable to address the complexity posed by humanity:

[E]xamining man as a subject of observation we see, scientists say, that he eats this way, grows, reproduces, ages and dies, like all other animals.... For this we will examine the life of animals and plants in general. Examining these animals and plants, we see that in these still simpler laws of matter appear in common with both.... We see that what happens in the plant and the animal happens exactly the same way in man, they say, and thus we conclude that everything that happens in man is explained to us from what happens in the simplest dead matter visible to us.... The conception that in man there is something that we don't see either in plants, or in animals, or in dead matter, and that this something is the only subject of knowledge,

without which all other forms are useless, doesn't trouble them. (*PSS* 26:350–351; ellipses added)

The tendency of contemporary scientists to search for uniformity in laws and regularity of phenomena — not unrelated to Krugosvetlov's mode of reasoning — meant they defined “science” in such a way as to exclude all the phenomena that not only made humanity unique, but were in fact the only questions worth posing. This inverted the proper order of philosophical reasoning, according to Tolstoy: “It is not the case that what we call science determines life, but our conception of life determines that which we should recognize as science. And thus, in order that science should be science, one must first of all resolve the question of what is and isn't science, and for this one must clarify the concept of life” (*PSS* 26:321).

This immediately raises the issue of which kind of knowledge — one may call it *наука* (science) if one likes — would be appropriate for the correct concept of life. Tolstoy spends most of *On Life* outlining an understanding of life consistent with his religious views (the divinity in all humanity and the obligation to build the Kingdom of God on Earth) and his political views (non-resistance to violence). The interconnection of these views is very intricate, and I will leave it to the other essays in this volume to do full justice to it. One point of relevance to my argument bears stressing, however: Tolstoy's explicit articulation of what happens after death. The answer? As far as we know, nothing — to the person who died. There is no evidence of any personal life after death. One of the crucial messages of *On Life* is that this fact is not a cause for fear:

I will die. What's frightening in that? After all, how many various transitions have taken place and will take place in my bodily existence, and I do not fear them? Why should I fear this transition which has not yet happened and in which not only is there nothing repellent to my reason and experience, but which is so understandable, familiar, and natural for me, that in the continuation of my life I constantly made and

make judgments in which death, both of animals and of people, is taken by me as a necessary and often pleasant condition of my life. What's frightening about it? (PSS 26:398–399)

After death, individuals *do* in fact live on, but only in the memories of those who knew and loved them. The body is recycled by nature, and the “soul,” still loved, moves beyond it. The critique here is not necessarily ontological (there is no afterlife), but is certainly epistemological (we have no knowledge of such an afterlife, and thus should not base our actions upon such expectations).²¹ Fear of death is irrational; instead of focusing on a potentially non-existent afterlife, one should concentrate one's attentions on the present and living a life of love. The implication of this view for my argument should be clear: there is no evidence of a personal afterlife, one accessible to sense perception — Christian or spiritualist — and attempts to ponder it or (worse) communicate with it only distract from living in the here and now, building the Kingdom of God.

On Life thus embodies a critique of science that exactly mirrors the persona of Krugosvetlov — is, in fact, the philosophical justification of the creative satire present in *Fruits of Enlightenment* — but also importantly links a false understanding of reason within science to a pervasive fear of death. And this fear of death was precisely what made the spiritualists not just comic, but revelatory of a deep problem with the contemporary intelligentsia. One can see this connection in a shorter early draft of Krugosvetlov's monologue, where Tolstoy articulated the spiritualist credo thus: “The phenomenon is a communion with the invisible world. In this communion, whatever its form, there are two, always at least 2 factors. In the given case they are in general two: the human world, ours, corporeal, and the invisible, spiritual world” (PSS 27:466). The problematic move of splitting the world into present and absent halves is one of the central arguments of *On Life*. *Fruits of Enlightenment* was, from its earliest drafts on, an increasingly stylized expansion of his critique of science and its metaphysics, one refracted through actual representatives of the kind of scientist (and science) he rejected.

The Death of Aleksandr Butlerov: Tolstoy's Spiritualist Interlocutors

Despite his personal experiences with spiritualism — or perhaps because of them — Tolstoy was not very deeply informed about it. It is clear that during 1875 and 1876 he followed the articles on mediumistic phenomena published in the thick journals (it would have been hard to avoid those), but his library at Yasnaya Polyana contained nothing by Aleksandr Aksakov, Nikolai Vagner, Aleksandr Butlerov, or other major spiritualist writers.²² The only important discussion of spiritualism he seemed to have read was *On Eternal Truths* (*О Вечных Истинах*), by Nikolai Strakhov, a book that includes a summary of the latter's hostile views on spiritualism. We know that he read this book carefully, and that he read it in February 1887 — that is, while composing *On Life*.²³

While Tolstoy was thus exposed to spiritualism — attending séances, reading books — he also made it clear in a letter to Strakhov, probably from December 1885, commenting on Strakhov's most recent newspaper polemic against Butlerov (who died the following year), that he could not be bothered to care about spiritualism, and that Strakhov was approaching the issue the wrong way.²⁴ In this same letter, Tolstoy immediately transitioned into a mode of philosophical analysis that is strikingly reminiscent of *On Life*, implying that this would be the correct way (PSS 63:312–314). At each point we look, then, it seems that Tolstoy found spiritualism at an exact juncture with his philosophical system.

I emphasize that spiritualism is relevant in understanding Tolstoy's thought because he thought it was *unimportant*. Its marginality to his main line of thinking, his perception of it as a silly fad, is precisely why we can detect in his works the manifold interconnections between his philosophy, his religion, and his prose — akin to the technique of detecting art forgeries by looking at an earlobe, or the paw of a dog, rather than the supposedly distinctive eyes or the hands of the master being imitated.²⁵ But this marginality did not prevent those for whom spiritualism was central, such as Nikolai Vagner, from forcing Tolstoy to articulate some of the commitments explored above.

Their correspondence on *Fruits of Enlightenment* consists of three letters, and it is worth reproducing the first by Vagner and then Tolstoy's response *in toto* here. Vagner initiated the exchange with a letter to the Sage of Yasnaya Polyana on 22 March 1890:

Deeply Esteemed Lev Nikolaevich!

Yesterday I was at a meeting of the "Russian Literary Soc." and heard your comedy "*The Fruits of Enlightenment*." I went to hear this new work of yours, which was mentioned in "*New Time*." — I thought that much was misstated in this notice. — I said to myself: "It cannot be that a writer of such greatness, such enormous talent, Mr. Tolstoy wrote a libel (пасквиль) on professors, on scientists!["]

To my great regret, it's true! It was painful and hard to hear that you with your usual artistic mastery razzed me and my friend, A. M. Butlerov.

Several times during the reading I asked myself: is it perhaps hard for me because this mockery offends me personally or my dear departed friend? And I answered completely objectively: no!... It is hard for me because they are razzing the truth.

Never until this moment since I have been a member of the Literary Soc. had a session been so well attended as yesterday. All the opponents of spiritualism came in order to hear your razzing of them. And all came to the conclusion that your razzing is just as talented as your writing of serious works.

"Don't kick a prostrate man," say our people, on whose behalf you, entirely justly, advocate so fiercely. Spiritualism is a prostrate truth, forgotten and "disgraced by the enemy" (*Свет* 1877).

You found it necessary to add to all these insults also your own personal stamp. You achieved your goal. If someone from the Soc. remained halfway in contemplation, then he is now converted to your side — because there is nothing stronger than mockery. To the word of the Journal jokers and the Literary gaffers you have added your talented honest word.

You attack doctors with complete justification — you are completely right to accuse us scientists — in our egotistical and too-specialized strivings. But this is not your thought [alone]. Much earlier than you I said this in print. Here are my words: "It is necessary that scientists come down from the scientific heights and glance at the place which calls to them with one great principle, one great word, which vivifies and unifies everything. This great powerful word: humanity!"

In the name of this great word, I worked and work seriously in this area, about which you know nothing and which you, nevertheless, razz!

You preach not to resist evil with evil, and you yourself do evil. In our contemporary society laughter, and above all evil mockery, is the most powerful evil. Yesterday during the reading of your libel, I several times had to encounter and bear the double-meaning and mocking glances of my fellow members of the Literary Society. We spiritualists do not pay, cannot pay, evil for evil and can only from our whole souls wish you more talent and more strength for your works for the good of your land and your people.²⁶

Tolstoy's response, a mixture of contrition and counter-accusation, followed on 25 March 1890:

Dear and truly respected Nikolai Petrovich*,

Your letter aroused the very feelings which you probably wanted to arouse by it — feelings of regret, remorse almost, and grief that I caused distress, although unwittingly, to a man I love and respect, and above all love and gratitude to you for your loving attitude towards a man who has caused you pain. Please forgive me first of all and then hear me out. By way of justification I would say the following: (1) that this comedy had been written by me a long time ago in rough and discarded; it saw the light of day unexpectedly; my daughters asked me if they could perform it, I began to revise it without thinking it would get any further than our house and in the end it was widely circulated. This is a feeble justification, but still it is one: if I had really thought of it for publication, it's very possible I wouldn't have published it as it is. (2) I never thought of you or Butlerov when I was writing the comedy.²⁷ All that I knew of Butlerov inspired my respect, and I've already told you of the feelings I have for you. The professor is a personification of a constantly encountered and comic contradiction: the profession of strict scientific methods and of the most fantastic formulations and assertions. (3) — And most important — is my loathing, which increases with the years and which I don't disavow, for all superstitions, among which I reckon spiritualism. The more I look at people's lives the more convinced I am that the main obstacle to getting things done, or rather a delaying factor, is the various superstitions which have grown on to the true teaching from different sides, and are preventing it from getting through to people's souls. Superstitions are the spoonful of tar which ruins the barrel of honey, and it's impossible not to hate them or at least not to make fun of them. I recently visited the Optina Monastery and saw people there burning with true love for God and mankind, and at the

same time considering it necessary to stand for several hours a day in church, take communion, and give and receive blessings, thereby paralysing the active power of life in themselves. I can't help hating these superstitions. I see how for some people these superstitions substitute the form for the essence, for others are an instrument of disunity, and for others again a means of repelling them from the true teaching. It's the same with any superstition, with any spoonful of tar. And the reason is that truth is common to all, universal, the property of all mankind, while superstitions are egotistical. Superstitions are particular forms, agreeable and convenient for particular people in particular situations. As soon as a man is in a different situation, other people's superstitions repel him and his superstitions repel them. Such in my opinion are the superstitions of all churches and such too are those of spiritualism. It seems to me that people who are followers of a particular kind of private teaching ought to learn to separate the truth common to all from what they alone, these particular people, consider to be the truth. If that were so, if they didn't consider that communion, or the origin of the holy spirit, or the existence of spirits were just as indisputable truths as the law of humility, unselfishness, or the purity of love, if they were to dissolve their spoonful of tar in a special vessel without infecting the whole barrel, it would be possible not to hate these private teachings. Then it would be possible to agree over those enormous areas which are common to all people, and not to touch on those areas which are distorted in such varied and fanciful ways in so many different creeds. I thought this particularly keenly when I read or heard about your work, deeply sympathetic to me, in the name of the principle of humanity which you mention in your letter. I constantly experience these

feelings when I receive, as I have done recently, from America, a great many spiritualist publications and journals, many of which, for example *World's Advance Thought*, are filled with the highest Christian spirit.

This is my confession to you: please forgive me once again if in making it I have expressed myself too harshly anywhere. I will say, as children say: forgive me, it will be the first and last time; the last time because having once spoken my mind, I shall never speak to you about spiritualism again, and if you don't deprive me of friendship and communication with you, I shall only communicate with you about those areas where there is agreement between us. It seems to me that this is possible, and I hope that the circumstance which was the cause of this correspondence will not be the instrument of disunity, but on the contrary of rapprochement between us.

Yours truly and affectionately,

L. Tolstoy

* Forgive me if I have got your patronymic wrong. I could have found it out in town, but there is nowhere to do so in the country. (Tolstoy 1978, II:455–456; see the original in *PSS* 65:58–60)

Vagner, not taking Tolstoy's hint to drop the matter, responded with a final letter on 10 April 1890, which repeated many of the claims from the former, but at substantially greater length. After an extended opening in which he compared spiritualists to early Christians suffering for their beliefs, he turned back to the question of *Fruits of Enlightenment*, "which I consider (forgive my candor) an effort unworthy of a writer with such a broad, powerful talent, as yours is." He continued: "After all, we spiritualists have fewer enemies abroad than we have in Russia — and these enemies with full joy will now laugh and point

their fingers at us. *Das ist Herr Seelig Prof Butlerow, und dass [sic] ist wanneritizig prof. Wagner!* Isn't this an evil thing that you have done?" Superstition does not enter the picture: "Your interpretation is contrary to the nature of the human soul which wants and thirsts for eternal life, eternal striving to the good and light."²⁸ And that, precisely, was what Vagner did not understand: the striving for eternal life was the very problem that Tolstoy was trying to eradicate. And it is for that reason that spiritualism was more important to him than he ever let on.

He did not respond to this second letter. According to the reminiscences of P. G. Ganzen, Tolstoy recalled this particular exchange with a certain amount of humor: "The beginning of the letter was good, friendly, but then the professor suddenly began to turn bitter and reproached me because I, a person that he so loves and esteems, allowed himself to so cruelly mock his dearest beliefs." Tolstoy in this recounting was more honest about the motivation for writing the comedy: it was not simply because his daughter wanted to perform something, but "because I thought it was necessary. I could perhaps have answered him and explained that this was only a misunderstanding from his side, but the tone of his letter was so irritating that I could not expect any positive result from my letter and thus I didn't answer him" (*TVS*, I:462–63). And thus the exchange ended, and mostly for the best. As Tolstoy wrote to V. G. Chertkov on 1 July 1890, after the dust had settled: "I'm very glad about Vagner — chiefly that he is not angry, but is good towards me" (*PSS* 87:32). All's well that ends well.

But nothing really ends for either the spiritualist or the Tolstoyan: for the former, the soul lives on (and maintains sporadic contact, under very specific and controlled conditions, with this world); and for the latter, it is love that persists. Beyond this merely formal parallel, there were clearly deeper connections between the modern spiritualists and Tolstoy's mature religious and philosophical thought — deny them though Tolstoy might. His irritation with mediumism burned for a long time, although admittedly on a very low flame. The question remains, however, as to why he was so bothered by it. It is difficult to formulate a concrete answer to this question without delving further into psychobiography than either evidence or inclination permits, but

some tentative interpretations present themselves. Perhaps he disliked spiritualism because it proposed a voice beyond the grave, which, as Gary Saul Morson has suggested, was seen by Tolstoy (as in his drafted suicide note) to be a particularly powerful form of discourse — and thus he resented it (Morson, 27).²⁹ Or maybe the source was less aesthetic. Ilya Vinitsky suggests that “Tolstoy hated Modern Spiritualism because for him it represented a poor caricature (or a profanation) of his own deeply held beliefs” (Vinitsky 2009, 141). This seems closer to the mark, but a reading of *On Life* excludes this interpretation. If Tolstoy’s philosophical (and religious) *oeuvre* leaves the reader with any single thought, it is that we are utterly ignorant of the afterlife, and thus can rationally expect no reward beyond what we do here and now.

The fact that only our present actions have any spiritual relevance for Tolstoy, that they are our only way of realizing the Kingdom of God, is not to be understood as resignedly settling for the present. For Tolstoy, the notion is much richer than quietism. These very actions in the present, these demonstrations of love, are precisely how the “soul” of the departed lives on with us. These actions are importantly not ritualized, not invested in a clerical-lay distinction, but are everyday acts of goodness. Spiritualism is thus entirely wrong-headed, and doubly so: first, it assumes the existence of a personal afterlife in order to explain the phenomena observed in séances, which perpetuates a paralyzing fear of death; and it does so through extensive rituals (darkened rooms, elaborate protocols) and specially designated intermediaries (mediums). No, spiritualism cannot be understood as a caricature of Tolstoyan principles.

But Tolstoy most definitely understood it as a caricature — not of his own views, but of every other established religion that preached the afterlife and mystical communion with the Godhead. Whereas in *Anna Karenina* or *Resurrection* spiritualism was a diagnostic probe used to expose the dim-wittedness and venality of the shallow St. Petersburg nobility, after *On Life* Tolstoy’s references to spiritualism (with the partial exception of *Resurrection*) stake out deeper claims for the source of its wrongness. In “Religion and Morality,” for example, an essay dated 28 October 1893 — and thus after both *On Life* and

Fruits of Enlightenment — Tolstoy dismissed spiritualism in passing in the following terms: “Modern spiritualism, which has as its foundation the preservation of individuality and its goodness, also flows from this attitude to the world. All pagan cults — divination, the idolization of those who enjoy themselves as men, or interceding saints, all sacrifices and prayers about the giving of earthly goods and the deliverance from evil — flow from this attitude to life” (*PSS* 39:9). Or, more explicitly and concretely, one finds in his diary entry of 29 December 1897:

The spiritualists say that after death the soul of people lives on and communicates with them. Soloviev, the father, said truly, I remember that this is the Church dogma of saints, of their intercession and of prayers to them. Evgenii Ivanovich also said truly that as the Pashkov Sect is a taking out of the dogma of the Redemption alone and the adaptation of everything to it, so spiritualism is the taking out of the dogma of saints, and the adaptation of everything to it. (Tolstoy 1993, 188)

This, then, might be our answer as to why Tolstoy could not leave the séances alone: spiritualism was, to his mind, manifestly *silly*, and yet it served as a boiled-down, simplified outline of precisely what was wrong with mainstream Christianity: the clergy, the dogma, the rituals. These were things that distracted people from the true message of Christ. And that was no laughing matter.

(Notes)

- 1 I would like to thank Mikhail Dolbilov, Caryl Emerson, Inessa Medzhibovskaya, Leore Schnairsohn, Ilya Vinitsky, and the participants in the April 2010 Princeton кружок for comments on an earlier draft of this essay. All dates are in the old-style Julian calendar, which lagged twelve days behind the Western European Gregorian calendar in the nineteenth century. Unattributed translations are my own. My translation. See the original in *PSS* 29:46.
- 2 For a presentation of this received view, see Berry, 86–87, and 93.
- 3 Tolstoy considered the other important work to be “What I Believe” (*В чем моя вера*), as documented in *Опульская*, 116.
- 4 The material that follows on the history of spiritualism is drawn from Chap. 4 in Gordin 2004, 84–112, and references therein. On spiritualism in Russia, see also Mannherz, who addresses the hostility of the Orthodox Church to the new movement — an important point I will bypass in this essay — on pages 6 and 17 of her dissertation.
- 5 Tolstoy wrote Home’s name in Latin letters, spelling it according to its pronunciation; the misspelling is thus in the original. On Home, see Home 1863; Home 1878; and Jenkins.
- 6 For more detail on Vagner’s career both in and outside science, see Gordin 2011. For an illuminating analysis of his spiritualism, see Chap. 4 in Vinitsky 2009, 89–106.
- 7 On the relationship between the two men, see Gerstein, 147–148; Medzhibovskaya, 161; and Orwin 2007. Tolstoy’s occasional frustration with Strakhov should not be discounted, however. He once remarked to a friend: “Strakhov is like a piece of wood; you poke and poke with your finger at him, you think there will be something there, but no — your finger passes right through, where there is no texture — there is precisely no center in him, it is all eaten away by science and philosophy” (qtd. in Gerstein, 178).
- 8 See Orwin 1993, 188–189; and Medzhibovskaya, 139. To be fair to Tolstoy, although atomism was rapidly gaining ground among chemists and physicists across the nineteenth century, the theory still met significant opposition in scientific quarters. See Nye and Gordin 2004, 24–25.
- 9 I leave aside here the claim in Edgerton that Tolstoy’s conception of space and time, especially as articulated in *On Life*, anticipated many of the discoveries of twentieth-century physics. This scientization of Tolstoy renders him even more of a prophet, forecasting developments in physics that were undreamt of when the Russian actually wrote. This approach differs from the far more successful attempt to situate Russian writers as reacting directly to their *contemporary* science, as Knapp does for Dostoevsky. See Knapp.
- 10 See Schefski. Tolstoy’s reservations about physicians were doubled for specialists in mental health, but this did not prevent the emergence of a move-

- ment within psychiatry to provide a “Tolstoyan” therapeutic experience. See the excellent analysis in Chap. 3 in Sirotkina, 74–116, who also discusses the many remote diagnoses, such as those by Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau, of Tolstoy as mentally ill. Lombroso revised his opinion after actually meeting the Russian writer (Sirotkina, 79).
- 11 See Булгаков, I(ii):24. See also Tolstoy to Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich, 25 April – 1 May 1902, in Tolstoy 1978, II:616. On Mendeleev’s economic projects, see Chap. 6 in Gordin 2004, 145–174.
 - 12 See Todes and Rogers.
 - 13 For Tolstoy’s views, see the very helpful analysis in McLean. On Danilevskii, see Данилевский; Тимирязев; and Фаминцын. Strakhov’s opposition to Darwin can be seen, for example, in Страхов 1902.
 - 14 See Страхов 1876a; Страхов 1876b; and Страхов 1876c.
 - 15 See *Опульская*, 187; Полякова, 150–151; and Гудзий, 647–669, esp. 656.
 - 16 See A. M. Novikov’s account in *TVS*, I:448–50; P. A. Sergeenko’s version in *TVS*, II:149; and V. M. Lopatin’s blissfully self-satisfied rendition in *TVS*, II:96–100.
 - 17 See Полякова, 179.
 - 18 The reception is well discussed in Scanlan.
 - 19 On the issues of epistemology and nature, see Gustafson, 212 and 221–222. On Schopenhauer, see Orwin 1993, 150; and McLaughlin.
 - 20 For further discussion of this “Conversation,” see Medzhibovskaya, 167–168.
 - 21 Especially in his earlier writings, Tolstoy had relaxed some aspects of his ontological critique, although the epistemological resistance was always present. See the helpful analysis in Vinitsky 2010.
 - 22 However, S. A. Bers noted in her reminiscences of Tolstoy that “[w]hen spiritualism became the fashion, Lev Nikolaevich visited the late professor Butlerov and was struck in astonishment at his belief in spiritualism” (*TVS*, I:187). If such an event ever took place (there is no corroboration), it would have to have been in the mid-1870s. Interestingly, Aleksandr Aksakov, the central figure of Russian spiritualism, wrote a review of *Resurrection*, which cited lengthy extracts from *On Life*, and appended Dostoevsky’s critique of spiritualism. See Аксаков.
 - 23 See Булгаков, I(ii):284.
 - 24 The Countess disagreed. On 21 February 1884, she wrote to Strakhov in delight about his opposition to spiritualism: “I read your article in ‘Novoe vremia’ [New Time] with interest; who are Vagner and Comp[any] to polemicize with you!” (reproduced in Донсков, 171).
 - 25 See Ginzburg.
 - 26 Н. П. Вагнер Л. Н. Толстому, 22 марта 1890, ИРЛИ РАН f. 231, d. 279, ll. 1–3.
 - 27 This is obviously false, since Tolstoy had originally named the character

- of Krugosvetlov "Kutlerov" and then "Kutler," a compromise between Butlerov and Vagner.
- 28 Н. П. Вагнер Л. Н. Толстому, 10 апреля 1890, ИРЛИ РАН f. 231, d. 279, ll. 4-9ob. The German in this letter is almost nonsensical; Vagner might be parodying poor German speech.
- 29 To be very clear, Morson makes absolutely no connection between spiritualist messages and posthumous speech. The connection, however tenuous, is mine.

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Notes on an Impersonal Life

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1.

Tolstoy's essay *On Life* begins with the most basic intuition: that life is contradictory. My life is not your life. And yet, both of us, as living, partake of something called "life" that is greater than my life or your life. Life is, above all, something that is *lived*, and as such, this living of life has the characteristic of something self-apparent and unquestionable about it. As Tolstoy notes early on in his essay, "[t]he word *life* is very short and very clear, and everybody knows what it means" (Tolstoy, 6). And yet, we as human beings also excel at thinking about life, whether it be in the concrete (my life, your life, this life) or in the abstract (the meaning of life, *media vita in morte sumus*, "in the midst of life we are death," and so on). "Life" seems to be split between the concrete instances of the living and a more general, more "philosophical" presupposition concerning something called "Life" that is common to each instance of the living.¹

As conscious, reflective human beings we find ourselves in the predicament of being both inside and outside life, living life in the immersive continuity of its temporal flux and flow, and standing apart from life, studying it as one object among others in a world arrayed before our critical gaze. One might even say that one lives life at the expense of thinking about it. Furthermore, "life" becomes difficult to separate from the concept of "life," for while life pre-exists the concept