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Over the Prison Wall

Além do muro da prisão

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Over the Prison Wall

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Abstract: Tolstoy's micro-story "The Lion and the Dog" serves as a profound meditation on language, perception, and the limits of the human perspective. Through a defamiliarizing narrative device, Tolstoy strips away anthropocentric projections, inviting readers to transcend the "prison walls of language" (Nietzsche) that confine our grasp of reality. Engaging with Formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *остранение* (defamiliarization), the piece examines how Tolstoy's unadorned storytelling liberates the reader from the calcified metaphors and preconceptions imposed by everyday discourse. The analysis draws parallels between Tolstoy's artistic aims and Nietzsche's critique of truth as a regressive "cobweb" constructed from metaphors that alienate humans from their primal creative wellsprings. Tolstoy's adoption of an animalian perspective subverts anthropocentrism, undermining the delusion of human exceptionalism and offering a path toward a richer, more nuanced understanding of existence. The piece ultimately positions art, and Tolstoy's oeuvre in particular, as a demythologizing force capable of revitalizing perception and revealing the contingent, constructed nature of the metaphysical boundaries that structure our *Umwelt*.

Resumo: O conto de Tolstói "O leão e o cachorro" funciona como uma meditação profunda sobre a linguagem, a percepção e os limites da perspectiva humana. Por meio de um procedimento narrativo de estranhamento, Tolstói desfaz as projeções antropocêntricas e convida os seus leitores a transcender os "muros da prisão da linguagem" (Nietzsche), que confinam a nossa compreensão da realidade. Utilizando o conceito de *остранение* (estranhamento), do teórico formalista Viktor Chklóvski, o artigo examina como a narrativa sem adornos de Tolstói liberta o leitor das metáforas calcificadas e dos preconceitos impostos pelo discurso cotidiano. A análise traça paralelos entre os objetivos artísticos de Tolstói e a crítica de Nietzsche à verdade como uma "teia de aranha" regressiva construída a partir de metáforas que alienam os seres humanos de suas fontes criativas primordiais. A adoção por Tolstói de um perspectivismo animal subverte o antropocentrismo, minando a ilusão do excepcionalismo humano e oferecendo um caminho para uma compreensão mais rica e matizada da existência. Em última análise, o artigo posiciona a arte, e a obra de Tolstói em particular, como uma força de desmitologização capaz de revitalizar a percepção e revelar a natureza contingente e construída das fronteiras metafísicas que estruturam o nosso meio ambiente (*Umwelt*).

Keywords: Lev Tolstoy; Animalian perspective; Anthropocentrism, Defamiliarization

Palavras-chave: Liév Tolstói; Perspectivismo animal, Antropocentrismo; Estranhamento

*The truth is that being human is being animal. This is a difficult thing
to admit if we are raised on a belief in our distinction.
How to Be Animal (Challenger 6)*

*Tolstoy is truly the canonizer of crisis: the forces of disclosure and
destruction lay hidden in almost every one of his devices.
(Eikhenbaum 130)*

Introduction

In Lev Tolstoy's curious world, we are perhaps most human when we shed the pretenses of humanity, when we are most animal; ironically, we are least human when we seek to be most human, when we self-consciously embrace what Kant called *Menschlichkeit*.¹

Tolstoy's artistic embrace of nonhuman perspectives, exemplified in his micro-story "The Lion and the Dog," aligns with Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of language as a confining structure that shapes our grasp of reality, rather than merely reflecting it. The most Tolstoyan of all artistic techniques is his search for ways to transcend the anthropocentric limitations of language, challenging the human-centric worldview and revealing a richer, more nuanced fabric of existence — what Viktor Shklovsky, the Russian Formalist, describes as *остранение*, defamiliarization. Only then, when we "forget [ourselves] as a subject," can we escape what Nietzsche calls the "prison walls of language" (315), overcoming the drowsy, self-satisfied forgetfulness language imposes upon us.

¹ The concept of *Menschlichkeit*, often translated as "humanity" or "human reason," is central to Kant's ethical imperative: "Act so that you use humanity (*Menschlichkeit*) as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means" (46-47).

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This search for liberation from the confines of human language finds an unlikely setting in Tolstoy's story – the menagerie. Traditionally a place of confinement, the menagerie, within the context of "The Lion and the Dog," emerges as a paradoxical space of freedom, a sanctuary from the linguistic limitations that stifle our connection with the world.

Lion and the Dog

"Generations of Russian readers" know Leo Tolstoy's very short story, "The Lion and the Dog," from the author's Second Russian Book for Reading. The story is so short, in fact, that we can reproduce it here:

The Lion and the Dog (A true story)

Wild animals were on display in London where admission was paid in money or in dogs and cats that would be fed to the wild animals.

A human (Одному человеку) wanted to see the beasts, so he snatched up a dog off the street and brought it to where the beasts were kept (зверинец). They let him in, and the dog was taken and thrown into the lion's cage to be eaten.

The little dog tucked its tail between its legs and huddled in the corner of the cage. The lion walked up to it and sniffed it.

The little dog lay on its back, raised its paws, and started to wag its tail.

The lion touched it with its paw and turned the dog over.

The little dog leapt up and stood before the lion on its hind legs.

The lion looked at the little dog, turned its head from side to side, and did not touch it.

When the keeper threw the lion some meat, the lion tore off a piece and left it for the dog.

In the evening, when the lion lay down to sleep, the dog lay next to him and placed its head on the lion's paw.

From that day on, the dog lived in the same cage with the lion. The lion did not touch the dog; it ate food, slept alongside it, and sometimes played with it.

One day a nobleman came to the menagerie and recognized his dog. He said that the dog was his and asked the keeper to give it back to him.

The keeper wanted to give it back, but as soon as they called the dog to take it from the cage, the lion raised its hackles and growled.

Thus the lion and the dog lived a whole year in the same cage. In a year the dog grew sick and died. The lion stopped eating, but would sniff and lick the dog, and touch it with its paw.

When it understood that the dog had died, it suddenly jumped up, raised its hackles, began to whip its flanks with its tail, flung itself against the wall of the cage, and began to gnaw at the bars and floor.

The whole day he thrashed about and dashed around the cage and roared. Then he lay near the dead dog and grew silent. The keeper wanted to remove the dead dog, but the lion would not let anyone near it.

The keeper thought that the lion would forget its grief if it were given another dog, and he let a live dog into the cage; but the lion instantly tore it to pieces. Then he folded the dead dog in his paws and lay that way five days. On the sixth day the lion died.²

Tolstoy's text is a translation and adaptation of a well-known and popular 18th-century story, included in a compilation attributed to Laurent-Pierre Béranger and found in Tolstoy's personal library. It's unclear whether the story is "true," or the collections merely assert its truth, but Tolstoy in any case uses the subtitle *быль*, "true story." The previous and subsequent stories in Tolstoy's collection are subtitled *басня*, fable.

"Is Language the Full and Adequate Expression of All Realities?"

The original story, with variants in Europe and Russia that date at least to the 17th century, were used to illustrate, inter alia, the importance of civil obedience, the deontologic compassion of monarchs, the primacy of animal instinct, the bond of friendship, and leonine zoology. In Béranger's version, "Le Lion et L'épagneul" (the version that Tolstoy likely based his upon), is collected under the chapter "La Morale en Action" between the texts "La dette de l'humanité" and "Trait de générosité."³

Whatever the lesson these fables sought to impart, the earlier variants involve attributing human characteristics, emotions, and behaviors to animals. Like Aesopian fables, this practice arguably allows for a deeper emotional connection and engagement with the narrative, making abstract or complex moral lessons more accessible. (Béranger's edition, for instance, is entitled *La morale en exemples*.)

Like other stories in *Second Russian Book for Reading*, and unlike a typical Aesopian fable, "The Lion and the Dog" is notably absent any psychology, judgment, or human projection; it extravagantly eschews all the cultural, scientific, and pedagogical functions of previous versions. Note, for instance, the lion "turns

² TOLSTOY (PSS) 21:165-166. I've amended the English translation provided by David Houston, in: Karpov, Alexander. "Lions and dogs: Apropos of a Tolstoy story." *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, vol. 24, 2012, pp. 74-82.

³ The source of "The Lion and the Dog" was titled "Le lion et l'épagneul" It can be found in a French compilation of children's reading, *La morale en action, ou Choix de faits mémorables et d'anecdotes instructives*, found in the Yasnaya Polyana library holdings. Edited by L. P. Béranger (1749–1822) and E. Guibaud (1711–1794), this collection was first published in 1783. See Karpov for more information.

its head from side to side" (it doesn't wag, shake its head no); the story doesn't explain why the lion doesn't eat the dog; or that the zoo keeper doesn't give the dog back to its nobleman-owner; or even that the lion initially (presumably) thinks the dead dog is sleeping, and only subsequently "figures out" that the dog had died. We might never fully grasp how or why in the story, but we witness it nonetheless.

Tolstoy's unadorned version is related laconically, simplistically, chronologically, objectively, almost like a medieval annal:

In this year King Edward died and Earl Harold succeeded to the kingdom, and held it 40 weeks and one day; and in this year William came and conquered England. And in this year Christ Church was burnt and a comet appeared on 18 April. (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle A*, 1066).

Like an annal, Tolstoy's text compresses facts and events with minimal narrative embellishment; it invites the reader to view the events as contingent but inevitable, like the grooves on a record – meant for everyone yet no one in particular. Tolstoy's "story" is hardly one, it is exaggeratedly "not art" or "anti-art," which, in Tolstoy's topsy-turvy world, means it is "real" art. In short we are told what happens but not *why*.

A fable becomes a fable by containing a version of the "myth of consent" (Gruen). Humans historically – in Genesis, in Locke's, or Hobbes' political theories – have justified their dominion over animals by assuming that animals understand and agree with human actions and the roles they are given, attributing wisdom and understanding to the animal, what Harriet Ritvo calls the "sagacious animal" (31-38). This anthropomorphic projection allows humans to maintain a narrative of benign supremacy, assuming that animals accept human supremacy as natural or rightful precisely because humans are rational and animals are not, thus alleviating humans feelings of guilt or moral conflict about their dominion.

Typically for Tolstoy, the story "Lion and Dog" additionally relies on an autobiographical element to promote its artistic goals: The play on words between "лев" (lion) and "Лев" (Leo, the first name of Tolstoy; in Russian, the word лев is both the human name and the animal) introduces a self-referential aspect to the narrative, weaving the author's identity into the fabric of the story in a manner that is both literal and symbolic – it's a story by Lev about a lev. A perfectly ordinary way to parse the title would be "Lev (Tolstoy) and the Dog."

This interplay between the lion within the story and Tolstoy as its author serves as a potent reminder of the arbitrary nature of signs and the layers of meaning that can be constructed through linguistic and cultural associations. The lion, a wild and untamed animal, could be seen as a representation of the raw, unmediated forces of nature, while Tolstoy embodies the human animal.

Yet, the story itself blurs these distinctions, presenting a narrative where the human and non-human animals coexist and form meaningful, unexpected relationships. Tolstoy, as the creator of this narrative, emphasizes the role of the author not just as a creator of texts but as a participant in the cultural systems that give those texts significance.

By intentionally abstracting out the fabular elements, by taking a well-known fable and stripping off the “moral” and leaving the bare “true story” (by making a *быль* into *быт*), we (Russian peasant children and college professors) can spy Tolstoy’s artistic technique, what Shklovsky called *остранение*, “making strange” or “distancing.”

“An insect or a bird perceives a completely different world from a human being”

In “Art as Device,” Shklovsky’s brief, foundational text of Formalism, the Formalist critic attempts to overturn the reigning definition of art.⁴ (Viktor Ehrlich, in his seminal book on Russian Formalism, called Shklovsky’s article “the manifesto of Russian Formalism” (76).) Shklovsky begins his manifesto by quoting A. A. Potebnya’s words as generally-representative of all definitions of art: “Art is thinking in images” (7). In this reigning model of art, art’s highest function is to craft signs into evocative tropes that conjure complex, enriching concepts, transcending the mere sum of their constituent elements. Art is therefore not qualitatively different from “everyday discourse” – it’s just “more”: more expressive, more efficient, more ornate, etc.

In any case, all communication, practical or poetic, drives towards ever more efficient comprehension of the external world, what Shklovsky repeatedly calls “the algebraic method.” In and of itself, efficiency is not a negative end; Shklovsky posits that this efficient communication has an inevitable effect on the thing itself, the referent:

With this algebraic method of thinking, we don’t really see things but only recognize them by their primary characteristics. A thing passes by us as though it were packed up [...]. Under the influence of such a way of perceiving, things dry up. At first this affects only the perception of the things, but after a while this perception has an effect on the thing’s making [и на ее делание].

⁴ “Искусство как прием” was first published in ОРОУАЗ’s second, expanded 1917 reprint of the 1916 *Сборник по теории поэтического языка* [Studies in the Theory of Poetic Language]. It was later redacted and altered to serve as the first chapter to *о теории прозы* [On the Theory of Prose], first published in 1919 and reprinted in 1929. The latter edition has become the standard version of “Art as Device.”

Inevitably, the words-that-began-as-metaphors, as verbal images of things, begin to take the place of the thing itself, and our automatized perception “has an effect on the thing's making” (12). What had begun as an efficient communication of knowledge leads to desiccated perception, and this diseased perception eventually corrodes the thing itself, its *делание*. (Right here, readers of Tolstoy's “philosophy” will recognize distinctively Tolstoyan themes.) It's not merely that we have no access to Kant's “thing in itself,” it's that the thing we are perceiving is itself corroded by, “dried up” by, our perception; the essence of the thing gets further and further from us the more we try to rasp it, to observe it. Our words, which began as metaphors for things, end up affecting the thing and preventing our full, uncorrupted perception.

But art has a salvific function, qualitatively different from practical communication:

And in order to return perception to life, to make us feel things, in order to make stone stony, exists that which we call art. The goal of art is to give a perception of things as a vision, and not as recognition. The device of art is the device of “defamiliarizing” (*остранение*) of things. (14)

The “device of art” provides access back to the world of things which our practical communication has obstructed, and for Shklovsky, Tolstoy was art's supreme practitioner:

The way Tolstoy defamiliarizes his material consists of the following: he does not call a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it were perceived for the first time, while an incident is described as though it were happening for the first time. He foregoes the accepted names for the parts of the thing, and replaces them with the names of corresponding parts in other things. (14)

(Given the context, one might usefully translate *остранение* as “distancing, putting away” – practical communication attempts to bring things closer, while art “removes something, puts the thing at a distant” so we can reexamine it. Shklovsky surely meant both “making strange” and “distancing.”)

Shklovsky's model challenges Potebnya's model: In Potebnya's model, poetry is an extremely efficient form of communication allowing a subject to refer to an object, to recognize a thing: A subject identifies an object using language. For Shklovsky, however, communicating *creates* a thing, “makes it.” Practical communication, in its algebrification, first prevents us from perceiving the stonyness of stones. Eventually, it damages the objects it refers to, making stone less stony.

The device of art, its quiddity, is to make stone stony, “to return perception to life” by forgoing “the accepted names” and thus escaping the bonds of language; its supreme practitioner is Lev Tolstoy.

“Constructed from cobwebs...”

That line, “to make stone stony/чтобы делать камень каменным,” is a pretty exact rephrasing of a key passage (311) from Friedrich Nietzsche’s diary entry from the summer of 1873, a passage that became, in a subsequent essay, entitled “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn” (About Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense). Nietzsche initially writes this diary passage in the summer of 1873, at roughly the same time that Tolstoy was working on what would become the *Вторая русская книга для чтения* (*Second Russian Book for Reading*) (PSS 21: 565).⁵

Typical for Nietzsche during this period, the claims are as elusive as they are brilliant. Nietzsche claims in the entry that human intellect serves only one purpose: the preservation of the human belief in its own exceptionalness.

Language, more broadly human communication, serves one purpose in this model, to convince the human speaker and human listener of the representativeness of language itself, that human language offers access to truth. However, humans have forgotten that language is itself nothing but a spider web on water, “a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms.”

Only through the forgetting of that primitive world of metaphors, only through the hardening and rigidification of an original mass of images that flowed out of the primal power of human imagination in a heated fluid, only through the invincible belief that this sun, this window, this table is a truth in itself – in short, only through the forgetfulness of himself as a subject, and indeed as an artistically creative subject, does man live with some peace, security, and consistency: if he could only break out of the prison walls of this belief for a moment, his “self-consciousness” would be over at once. It already takes him an effort to admit that an insect or a bird perceives a completely different world from a human being, and that the question of which of these two world perceptions is more correct is a completely meaningless one [...] (315).

In essence, Nietzsche and Shklovsky invite us to consider language not as a window to an objective external reality but as a complex, dynamic system that frames, organizes, and mediates

⁵ The textology of this book, *The Second Russian Book for Reading*,” is complex and distracting for our present purposes. Suffice to say that it was one of dozens of stories – subsequently one of the most famous, see Karpov – meant for practical exercises and included, often but not always, with Tolstoy’s *Азбука*, his primer for Russian peasants, which he worked on during the 1870s. The textology of the Nietzsche text is likewise complex – it began as a diary entry in 1873, was incorporated into an unpublished essay around 1876, but not actually published until 1896. See Kaufman’s *The Portable Nietzsche* for a discussion of the text. All translations of Nietzsche are my own.

our experiences of the world. Nietzsche calls language an “infinitely complicated conceptual edifice (Begriffsdomes)... on flowing water; constructed from cobwebs” (314). For him, language, and more broadly human thought itself, forms Gefängniswänden, prison walls, that constrains our experience of the world. (The word in German is obviously connected to the word fang, teeth, and much of the diary entry dwells on the spurious (for Nietzsche) distinction we human animals make between us and animals. We have language instead of fangs, and that language ironically becomes fangs that limit us.)

What Nietzsche is not saying is that human language is per se wrong, nor is escape from the prison impossible – all one must do is perceive the world from the perspective of an insect or bird. He emphasizes the inherently limited and subjective nature of our world-making – our Umwelt, our unique sensory world, is not necessarily inferior to the Umwelt of other animals. However, we humans tend to assume the superiority of our own perspective, while Nietzsche playfully suggests that mosquitos might be equally convinced of the supremacy of their own world. By recognizing the constructed nature of language and truth, individuals become aware of the power dynamics embedded in linguistic conventions and seek to transcend these boundaries through creative expression. This awareness opens a space for reinterpreting the metaphors and symbols that shape our perception of the world, offering a form of freedom within the constraints of language and enabling a more nuanced and potentially transformative understanding of ourselves and our reality.

“If we could communicate with a midge...”

Arguably the most difficult problem in logic and physics is the “inverse inference”: Determining the causal factors that produce an observed effect. This is the “inverse” of the forward problem – typically, one tries to predict the effect given a model's parameters. “If X, then our model predicts Y.” But the inverse inference turns the telescope around, so to speak, and posits: “If Y, then our model predicts X.”

The classic example of inverse reasoning in logic is “If it is raining, then Sam meets Jack at the movies.” However, the inverse reference is not necessarily true, it is only possibly true: “If it is not raining, Sam will not meet Jack at the movies.” Perhaps Sam loves popcorn and no matter the weather, Sam and Jack will meet at the movies, thus rendering the inverse prediction untrue. In general, compared to the forward problem, inverse inference is an unstable process prone to amplifying noise and errors in observed data.

This difficulty of reliably determining cause from effect is also mirrored in how we understand the world. Our perceptions are heavily influenced by preconceptions, biases, and the language we use. (As Ludwig Wittgenstein famously argued in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the very structure of language shapes how we categorize and interpret the world around us.)

Art for Tolstoy is what Roland Barthes would call a demythologizing force (129): It engages every-day experience and removes the accreted social meanings, and this renovation of perception has an inevitable social result: Art, particular in its device of defamiliarization, particularly in Tolstoy, is the ladder over Nietzsche's prison walls of language.

By adopting an animalian perspective, Tolstoy evades the linguistic traps that generate false expectations and lead to misinterpretations of reality. Our expectation that a lion would devour a dog thrown into its cage illustrates the constraints of our human perspective. Tolstoy, like Nietzsche, seeks to break free from these limitations, offering an alternative viewpoint that reveals the potential for unexpected outcomes and subverts the errors inherent in our typical modes of understanding.

Instead of providing some Aesopian "moral of the story," the narrative invites the reader to inverse the reasoning, to imagine independently a system that would produce this "true story": A poor human animal, wanting a moment to feel superior to brutes (animal animals?), brutishly grabs a stray pup and, to gain entrance to the bestiary, has it thrown into a cage where a wild lion will surely kill and eat it. To save itself, the dog tries out some tricks taught to it by a human ("down," "walk"), but the lion refuses to accept the dog's anthropomorphic submission, and instead of eating the dog, shares its own meal.

The dog and the lion live in unity, "in one cell" (cage, клетка – the Russian word means "biological cell" as well). A rich man (барин) recognizes his former pet, and (reinstantiating the social order outside the menagerie) commands the keeper (хозяин) to fetch the dog. The lion threatens the keeper and, presumably, the lion and pup continue to eat, play, and sleep together. (There's definitely a bit of sexual pairing here – in Russian (but not in French), lion is masculine and doggy is feminine, and there's a latent possibility, given the pronouns, that the animals mated.)

For years, the lion and the dog live in harmony until, one day, the dog no longer plays with the lion. The lion soon understands that the dog has died. The keeper tries to trick the lion with another dog, but the lion is not tricked. The lion lies, embracing the dead dog, for some time, and then dies. Strikingly, the lion's death seems all but inevitable.

More briefly, “the moral of the story” is that our world, the one that contains menageries, domesticated dogs, poor and rich people, and lions in cages, is one we’ve created out of what Nietzsche calls “the constant fluttering of humans around the one flame of vanity” (209).

Inside the menagerie we find peace from the anomie of the human world with its “cobwebs” of communication.

Over the prison walls we find freedom within the confines of the menagerie. The admission price for harmony is one human.

Quite not the usual reading of the story.

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