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## Unpalatable Pleasures: Tolstoy, Food, and Sex

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# UNPALATABLE PLEASURES: TOLSTOY, FOOD, AND SEX

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Everyone requires a strict diet. There needs to be a book about food.  
L.N. Tolstoy

At times it seems to me as if the Russian is a sort of lost soul. You want to do everything and yet you can do nothing. You keep thinking that you will start a new life as of tomorrow, that you will start a new diet as of tomorrow, but nothing of the sort happens: by the evening of that very same day, you have gorged yourself so much that you can only blink your eyes and you cannot even move your tongue.  
N.V. Gogol

When the topic of food and eating in Russian literature is mentioned, one is likely to think almost instantly of Nikolai Gogol, that robust prose writer whose culinary, gastronomic and alimentary obsessions--in his verbal art as well as his own personal life--often reached truly gargantuan proportions.<sup>1</sup> The fond references to food and drink that one frequently finds in Gogol's prose fiction are commonly explained in psychoanalytic terms as the manifestation of the attempt by this sexually repressed author to hasten a "retreat from love": his orally fixated characters are said to compensate for their paralyzing fear of sex through their great love of eating.<sup>2</sup> Another nineteenth-century Russian writer whose fictional works are fairly replete with memorable food imagery and eating metaphors is Lev Tolstoy. Indeed, the episode where Levin and Oblonskii go to a Moscow restaurant to share a meal in Part I of *Anna Karenina* has become one of the most celebrated, and most closely scrutinized, scenes of dining in all of world literature.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Gogol's characters, however, the people who inhabit Tolstoy's fictional universe generally do not regress from genital to oral modes of libidinal satisfaction. Their creator instead allows gastronomic appetite to accompany--and in some cases even to trigger--carnal desire within them. Whereas in Gogol's world one must choose either food or sex, in Tolstoy's one can enjoy them both. In his works, eating serves not as a substitute for sexual gratification, but instead as its complement: eating and fornicating constitute two

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<sup>1</sup>The two standard studies of Gogol's use of food in his fiction are those by Obolensky and Kolb-Seletski. For testimony to Gogol's obsession with food in his own personal life, see the comments by his contemporaries reported in Veresaev (114, 171, 185-86, 215, 217-18, 228, 235, 239, 245). Karlinsky points out that "both Pushkin and Chekhov could write of food with enthusiasm, but it is impossible to imagine either of them giving a cooking demonstration" (206-7), which is exactly what Gogol did for the benefit of some of his Russian friends directly upon his return from Italy, where he first discovered the joys of pasta.

<sup>2</sup>For psychoanalytic studies of Gogol and his fiction, see Karlinsky, McLean, and Rancour-Laferrriere.

<sup>3</sup>Wolfe, for instance, includes this scene (196-204) in her book, a collection that she describes as "The Pleasure of Reading about Wonderful Food in Scenes from Great Literature." For critical analyses of this scene of dining, see also Goscilo, Gutkin, LeBlanc, Pearson, and Schmidt.

of the main human activities through which people seek to satisfy their carnal desire for sensual pleasures.

As we know from his works of fiction and non-fiction alike, Tolstoy's attitude toward sensual pleasure was deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, he himself seems to have possessed acute sensual sensibilities and strong physical appetites for the pleasures of the flesh as well as of the palate. His early diaries, for instance, are filled with entries where he admonishes himself for failing to curb his sensuality, usually when he visits prostitutes, gypsies or serf girls at night and when he overindulges his weakness for rich foods.<sup>4</sup> In his literary works, meanwhile, this strong craving for life's physical pleasures manifests itself in his portrayal of characters who enjoy intensely felt bodily sensations. "His earlier novels and stories," G.W. Spence observes in a study of Tolstoy's asceticism, "often express a very vivid awareness of the beauty and richness of sensuous, physical life" (20). Indeed, Dmitry Merezhkovsky recognized in this Russian writer's works such an intuitive awareness of--and appreciation for--the instinctive, animal life of human beings that he called Tolstoy a "seer of the flesh," in contradistinction to his most famous contemporary and polar opposite, Dostoevsky, whom Merezhkovsky regarded as a visionary of the spirit.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Thomas Mann writes that Tolstoy's life, like that of the pagan Goethe, recalls the myth of the giant Antæus, "who was unconquerable because fresh strength streamed into him whenever he touched his mother earth" (106). Admiring what he calls Tolstoy's "animalism, his unheard-of interest in the life of the body, his genius for bringing home to us man's physical being," Mann contends that the Russian novelist displays in his art "a sensuousness more powerful, more immediately fresh in its appeal," than does the great German humanist himself (108).<sup>6</sup> Finally, John Bayley asserts that in the early part of Tolstoy's career his works emit a pagan feeling of optimism about the world, or what the critic labels as *самодовольность*: that is, a *joie de vivre* that reflects an innate sense of satisfaction with self, life, and nature (50).

After his midlife spiritual crisis, however, Tolstoy came to condemn categorically those pleasures of the flesh that he had once celebrated so memorably in his fiction and he began to advocate instead a rigorous asceticism. During this post-conversion period, Tolstoy's dualistic conception of human beings, as creatures who are tragically torn

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<sup>4</sup>"Ate too much at dinner (gluttony)," Tolstoy reproaches himself, for example, in a diary entry for 8 March 1851. "Ate too many sweets" (*PSS*, XLVI, 48). All quotes from Tolstoy's novels, stories, diaries, essays and letters come from the ninety-volume jubilee edition of his complete works. These references are listed parenthetically in the text by volume (Roman numerals) and page (Arabic numerals).

<sup>5</sup>Davie maintains that Merezhkovsky's "brilliantly perceptive but one-sided view of Tolstoy is distorted by his determination to make Tolstoy and Dostoevsky antithetical" (7).

<sup>6</sup>In light of the many unflattering things that he had to say about Goethe during his lifetime, Tolstoy himself probably would have resented Mann's analogy. "I don't like Goethe at all. I don't like his self-assured paganism," Tolstoy writes, for instance, in a letter in August 1891 (*PSS*, LXVI, 34). Later, in his diary for 1906, Tolstoy writes, "I am reading Goethe and can see all the pernicious influence of this insignificant, bourgeois-egotistical gifted man on the generation I encountered" (*PSS*, LV, 248). With respect to Goethe's most famous work, Tolstoy once referred to *Faust* as "that trashiest piece of trash" (*PSS*, LXIII, 38).

between body and soul, between the lure of carnal desire and the promptings of spiritual aspirations, becomes more explicit and prominent in his writings. The author of *The Kreutzer Sonata* would go so far as to condemn sexual intercourse altogether, advocating instead total celibacy, even for married couples. This tension between the animal nature and the spiritual nature of human beings, most critics would agree, is present in Tolstoy's works long before his conversion to a radical brand of Christianity in the 1880s. "Among the philosophical questions that tormented Lev Tolstoy throughout his life," Irina Gutkin asserts, "the dichotomy between flesh and spirit in human nature probably ranks second only to the meaning of death" (84). Richard Gustafson, meanwhile, maintains that, as moral and spiritual types, Tolstoy's fictional characters polarize around two extremes: they are either men of the flesh or men of the spirit. "The man of the flesh lives for himself, his own purposes, pleasure, or profit," Gustafson writes. "Often he is represented in pursuit of sex or food" (207). Fleshly characters such as Stiva Oblonskii, he explains, "define themselves by their bod[ies], their animal urges" (207). What predominates in Tolstoy's post-conversion period is the strict moral imperative that his fictional characters are now made to heed with respect to the body: they are required to subdue the desires of the flesh, to subordinate their physical urges to their spiritual aspirations, and to transcend their animal natures in order to allow the divine element that lies buried deep within them to emerge. In his later works of fiction as well as in his moralistic essays, it becomes especially clear that Tolstoy now condemns sexual passion as an inherently demeaning, degrading, and destructive instinct within human beings, as an animal urge that only impedes us in our quest for moral and spiritual self-perfection.

What I mainly intend to explore in this essay is how Tolstoy's evolving attitude toward human sexuality is mirrored in many respects by his treatment of gastronomic indulgence. As the carnal pleasures of the flesh come increasingly to be seen as sinful temptations that lure people away from the straight and narrow path of moral righteousness, Tolstoy tends more and more to regard the gastronomic pleasures of the table with a feeling of revulsion and disgust--as bodily pleasures that can no longer be considered morally and spiritually "palatable." What causes gastronomic pleasure to become so distasteful for Tolstoy is the belief that eating can lead directly to the arousal of sexual desire. If in his early works Tolstoy tends to depict food and sex in a parallel relationship, as analogous sensual pleasures that usually accompany and complement each other, then in his later writings the author often depicts this relationship as a causal one, whereby eating actually induces sexual activity. In Jakobsonian terms, we could say that Tolstoy's treatment of food moves from the pole of similarity to the pole of contiguity, from metaphor to metonym. As Tolstoy's disenchantment with sexual love (as a coarse and brutish passion) grew more acute and as his commitment to a strict asceticism intensified, his attitude toward food consumption and eating patterns likewise became less moderate. His later advocacy of such radical ideals as celibacy, chastity, and conjugal continence in sexual matters is thus mirrored by his support of extreme dietary measures as well--such as vegetarianism, abstinence, and fasting. Like William Alcott, Sylvester Graham, and a number of other religious reformers in nineteenth-century America, Tolstoy seems to have succumbed to the temptation of believing that eating practices could provide

a ready solution to the complex problems posed by the issue of our spiritual well-being and moral health: that diet, in other words, could shape morality.<sup>7</sup>

#### ANIMAL APPETITES: SENSUAL PLEASURES OF THE NATURAL MAN

For those who subscribe to the notion that Tolstoy, at least in his earlier works, was a hedonist who understood life primarily as a "born pagan" and "seer of the flesh," Daddy Eroshka in *The Cossaks* would no doubt qualify as the archetypal Tolstoyan character. Endowed with a robust constitution, earthly nature and animal vitality, this elderly Cossack appears to epitomize freedom from any moral laws--Christian or otherwise--that might threaten to restrict, constrain or condemn the gratification of sensual desire. In psychoanalytic terms, Daddy Eroshka could be said to embody the *id*, for he lives mainly according to the ethos that Freud identified as the "pleasure principle": that is, his primitive instincts seek everywhere the immediate satisfaction of an unrestrained animal desire for pleasure and happiness. In accord with Eroshka's hedonistic philosophy, nature ought to serve as the sole moral standard in life: since our animal appetite for food and sex is quite natural, it is therefore right and good that we satisfy that sensual hunger. "God has made everything for the joy of man. There is no sin in any of it," he tries to explain to a sceptical Olenin. "Just look at any animal.... It eats whatever God gives it!" (PSS VI,56). Under Eroshka's permissive ethic, the moral correctness of appeasing our animal appetites extends, naturally enough, from the gastronomical to the sexual realm. "A sin? Where's the sin? A sin to look at a pretty girl? A sin to make merry with her? Or a sin to love her?" he asks rhetorically. "No, my dear fellow, it's not a sin, it's salvation! God made you, and God make the girl too. He made it all, old chap; so it is no sin to look at a pretty girl. That's what she was made for: to be loved and to give joy" (PSS VI, 47).

It is not difficult to understand the strong attraction that such a "wild beast" (PSS VI, 46) of a man, with his natural self-absorption and inherent lack of self-consciousness, poses to the more "civilized" and libidinally repressed Olenin, the young Russian officer who has fled Moscow social life in his search for a more authentic way of life in the exotic Caucasus. Indeed, Olenin clearly envies the ability of rugged Cossacks such as Daddy Eroshka and Lukashka to act freely and instinctually like feral animals, rather than cautiously and cerebrally like domesticated human beings. In the moment of epiphany that he experiences while sitting in the stag's lair, Olenin strips away the layers of his oppressive social identity and actually visualizes himself as just such a wild animal, a totally instinctual creature, rather than as the reflective and self-conscious human being that he has learned to become as a product of civilization:

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<sup>7</sup>For historical studies that examine the development of the health reform movement in nineteenth-century America (and Sylvester Graham's ideological system in particular), see Nissenbaum and Whorton. Deutsch, meanwhile, discusses the food fadism of these health reformers rather more irreverently and unsympathetically in his popular book.

And it became clear to him that he was not a Russian nobleman, a member of Moscow society, the friend and relation of so-and-so and so-and-so, but just such a mosquito, or pheasant, or deer, as those that were now living all around him. "Just as they, just as Daddy Eroshka, I shall live awhile and die..." (PSS VI, 77).

After toying for a while with the idea of finding happiness in a Christian spirit of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation, Olenin later returns to the *carpe diem* "recipe" for happiness that Daddy Eroshka swears by, and the hero resolves to follow suit by living like a simple Cossack in harmony with nature.

In living close to nature, of course, free-spirited Cossacks such as Daddy Eroshka and Lukashka not only hunt and kill, they also liberally indulge their basic animal appetites for both food and sex. "The people live as nature lives," Olenin tries to explain to one of his Moscow acquaintances, "they die, are born, copulate, and more are born--they fight, eat and drink, rejoice and again die, without any restrictions but those that nature imposes on sun and grass, on animal and tree. They have no other laws" (PSS VI, 102). Olenin himself, of course, has already experienced a moral freedom of sorts in Moscow, where, we are told, "neither physical nor moral fetters of any kind existed for him: he could do as he liked, lacking nothing and bound by nothing...he yielded to all his impulses only in so far as they did not restrict his freedom" (PSS VI, 8). Indeed, Olenin's self-indulgent, immoral lifestyle in Moscow, Gustafson points out, "is captured in the image of his farewell party, the late hours, the abundance of food and drink, the idleness, and the endless conversations about life" (55). Even the fun-loving Lukashka is puzzled as to why Olenin, a wealthy Russian aristocrat, would ever want to leave a materialistic playground such as Moscow for the Caucasus. "And why on earth did you want to come here?" he asks Olenin. "In your place I would do nothing but make merry!" (PSS VI, 85). Like both Daddy Eroshka and Lukashka, therefore, Olenin already is a man of the flesh; unlike his hedonistic Cossack acquaintances, however, this educated Russian visitor is restrained by a self-consciousness, intellect, and conscience that prevent him from behaving in the same free, instinctual manner as do these primitive natural men.

Much of the narrative in the second half of *The Cossacks* concerns itself with describing the holiday festivities that take place in this Cossack village in conjunction with the summer solstice and later with the grape harvest. These are both festive times during the seasonal calendar, periods of carnival when, as Bakhtin has noted (122-3), all the hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions that mark the established order of everyday life within official culture are temporarily suspended. The conscience-stricken Olenin, however, finds it difficult to allow himself to share in the carnival spirit of moral license and libidinal release that reigns in the Cossack village, where few (if any) restrictions are placed upon pursuing the gratification of sensual appetite. Instead, it is his fellow Russian officer Beletskii, a fun-loving type with loose morals, who seems to adapt quite easily to this permissive atmosphere. Indeed, when Olenin balks at the invitation to attend a party at Ustenka's, Beletskii chides him for his puritanical churlishness. "Charming women such as one sees nowhere else, and to live like a monk!" Beletskii exclaims. "What an idea! Why spoil your life and not make use of what is at hand?" (PSS VI, 94). The "monkish" Olenin occupies himself each day with solitary hunting

expeditions that serve largely to mortify his flesh and distract him from his sexual attraction to Mar'ianka: we are told that he returns home "tired and hungry" from them, "with his bag of food and cigarettes untouched" (*PSS VI*, 88). Meanwhile, the fun-loving "Grandad," as Beletskii is fondly nicknamed by the Cossack girls, participates very actively in the local party scene, which is characterized by both gastronomic indulgence (the "refreshments" of spicebread and sweets) and sexual license (the "merrymaking" with the girls). Indeed, an organic connection between food and sex is firmly established in this section of the text, where male characters such as Beletskii and Lukashka seek to "buy" sexual favors by providing tasty comestibles for the young maidens in the village. Out of the two Russian guests, therefore, it is the negative character Beletskii who eagerly follows Daddy Eroshka's injunction to "make merry," which this amoral libertine does by indulging his animal appetite for both sweet confections and young Cossack girls. Restrained by his keen moral sensibilities, meanwhile, the hero Olenin can only ask himself, "What demon has brought me to this disgusting banquet?" (*PSS VI*, 98).

Despite the apparent celebration of animal vitality and natural appetite that we observe in the portrayal of Daddy Eroshka in *The Cossacks*, the author's own attitude toward sexual and gastronomic indulgence during this period of his life more closely approximates that of the highly autobiographical Olenin. Like his fictional alter ego, Tolstoy seems to have possessed a healthy fear of his own powerful libidinal urges even during his younger years. It should not surprise us, therefore, to find that the artistic representation of Daddy Eroshka is pervaded by the same ambivalence toward physical pleasure and man's animal nature that characterized the author's own attitude. Although Olenin may mythologize, exoticize and romanticize this merry man of the flesh, readers of *The Cossacks* are nonetheless shown that in reality Daddy Eroshka is little more than, in Gustafson's words, "a liar and drunkard whose life is based on economic self-interest and personal pleasure" (56).<sup>8</sup> Despite his protagonist's fascination with the primitive vitality of Daddy Eroshka, Tolstoy makes it clear that there are some serious moral flaws in this ancient warrior, a rather lewd old man who has now been reduced to reminiscing nostalgically about his earlier sexual and military exploits and who behaves in a rather opportunistic fashion toward his wealthy young Russian friend. "The closer we look," John Hagan writes, "the more clearly we recognize that Eroška is a very ambiguous figure, indeed--a bundle of contradictions, who epitomizes the incongruous fusion of Christian and Heathen in the Cossack character in general, and whom Tolstoy views with as much irony as admiration" (36). This incongruous fusion of pagan and Christian sensibilities, of course, applies equally well to the author's own spiritual personality: the deep contradictions that we find in the author's portrayal of Daddy Eroshka, as was

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<sup>8</sup>In her study of the Cossack hero in Russian literature, Kornblatt agrees that the drunken and nostalgic Daddy Eroshka emerges as "a highly contradictory character, a former hero now mocked by the younger Cossacks" (94). Appropriately enough, Kornblatt entitles the chapter of her book that deals with *The Cossacks* "The Ambivalent Tolstoi."

suggested earlier, seem to mirror Tolstoy's own troubling ambivalence about the flesh and the spirit in human nature.<sup>9</sup>

### MONOGAMY: TAMING SEXUAL APPETITE THROUGH MARRIAGE

During his life-long search for moral self-perfection, Tolstoy came increasingly to believe that our natural appetites for food and sex must be held firmly in check if our spiritual natures can ever hope to transcend our mere animal personalities. The first step on the path to the morally good life, therefore, is to learn moderation, restraint and self-control in matters concerning the flesh and our physical appetites.<sup>10</sup> This, of course, is precisely the moral lesson that the ebullient young Natasha Rostova is forced to learn in *War and Peace*. Like Daddy Eroshka, the sprightly Natasha is often mentioned as one of those Tolstoyan fictional characters who convey vividly the author's pagan celebration of life and nature. Nicknamed the "Cossack" on account of her wild, free, and primitive behavior, Natasha enlivens and rejuvenates nearly everyone who comes in contact with her--especially male characters such as Andrei Bolkonskii and Pierre Bezukhov--with her abundant vitality, and infectious *жизнерадостность* that manifests itself to some extent in this adolescent girl's emerging sexuality. Indeed, she seems to personify the life force of Nature itself. Perhaps no single episode in *War and Peace* better illustrates this joyful spontaneity and acute responsiveness on Natasha's part to the instinctual, intuitive side of life than the scene in Book 7 when she extemporaneously performs a native folk song and lively dance *à la russe* at Uncle's home following the wolf hunt. The spirit of earthly sensual pleasure that pervades this scene, as well as Book 7 as a whole, is rendered in large part through the joyful celebration of culinary delight and gastronomic abundance that we find at Uncle's home. Witness in this regard the following description of the sumptuous home-style feast prepared by Anisia Fyodorovna, Uncle's domestic partner and cook:

On the tray was some herb vodka, various kinds of liqueurs, mushrooms, rye cakes made out of buttermilk, honeycombs, still mead and sparkling mead, apples, raw and roasted nuts, and nut-and-honey sweets. Afterwards Anisia Fyodorovna brought a freshly roasted chicken, ham, and preserves made with honey or with sugar. All of this was the result of Anisia Fyodorovna's housekeeping; gathered and prepared by her. All of this had the smell and aroma of Anisia Fyodorovna herself; all of it gave off a savory succulence, cleanliness, whiteness, and a pleasant smile. (*PSS X*, 263).

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<sup>9</sup>Hagan explains the author's ambivalence in the following way: "Tolstoy feels the pull of an ethic of love and self-sacrifice as fully as he feels the pull of an amoral freedom from such an ethic; he is Puritan and Primitivist at one and the same time, for he cannot decide whether God resides 'in' Nature and is obeyed by living according to natural impulse, or whether God is 'outside' Nature and is obeyed by resisting natural impulse. This is the crux of the whole matter, and the main point about *The Cossacks* is that it expresses this dilemma without ever resolving it" (44).

<sup>10</sup>In a letter dated 28 December 1851, for example, Tolstoy writes, "Nothing to excess. That's a principle that I'd be very glad to follow in all things" (*PSS LIX*, 138).



"Natasha had a bite of everything," the narrator reports, "and it seemed to her that she had never seen or eaten such buttermilk cakes, such aromatic jam, such honey-and-nut sweets, or such a chicken anywhere" (*PSS X*, 263). In this passage Tolstoy joyfully extols, in epic fashion, the munificence of the rich natural bounty with which earthly life is blessed.

The author, however, also feels compelled to show readers or *War and Peace* what Ruth Benson refers to as the "dark side" of Natasha's sexual energy: that is, the potentially destructive element implicit in her pagan enjoyment of elemental life (55). Soon after the scene at Uncle's in Book 7, therefore, we are made to witness in Book 8 how Natasha's unrestrained passion for life and its sensual pleasures can become truly demonic: this still fairly naive and innocent Moscow girl falls prey to the hypnotic, bewitching, and intoxicating spell of the Kuragins' sexual mystique at the opera and suffers a debilitating fall from moral grace. Natasha eventually learns to "tame" her sexual passion and finds spiritual redemption not only through the traditional religious regimen of abstinence, prayer, and penance that she observes after her "fall," but also through her subsequent marriage to Pierre Bezukhov, a conjugal union that succeeds in diminishing the heroine's bewitching charms--and harnessing her sexual energy--through the discipline she acquires in fulfilling daily routines in her new roles as a wife and mother. By the time they come to the Epilogue, with its nearly suffocating atmosphere of dirty diapers, noisy children, and prosaic domesticity, many readers feel that the author of *War and Peace* has suddenly brought forth a Natasha who is entirely new and different. "Confronted with the two Natashas," Benson writes, "Tolstoy mutes the wild sensual Natasha, takes away the primitive power which she displayed in her dance at Uncle's and transforms this 'heavenly creature' into the model mother and wife of the Epilogue" (65). Tolstoy, in effect, "de-eroticizes" Natasha by glorifying her newly acquired identity as wife and mother. In a manner not terribly unlike the way Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, would later describe the civilizing processes of sublimation and repression, Tolstoy shows us how the institution of marriage can be made to fulfill an important regulative function within society with respect to the libidinal urges of human beings. Natasha's marriage to Pierre, as Benson puts it, "exemplifies Tolstoy's attempt to cope with the destructive force of sexuality by controlling and legitimizing it within the framework of marriage" (x).<sup>11</sup> In *War and Peace*, maternity and sexuality are thus kept at a safe, comfortable distance from one another, "neatly compartmentalized," in Evan's words (12), in order to preserve and protect the existing social order, an order that finds its microcosmic mirror image in the family unit.

The regulative function that marriage is designed to fulfill within society, that of effectively neutralizing the largely destructive tendencies of the sensual appetites for pleasure within human beings, finds its gastronomical parallel in Tolstoy's highly functional attitude toward food and eating. One must eat in moderation, according to Tolstoy, since an unrestrained appetite leads to gluttony or overeating, which only leaves

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<sup>11</sup>"Central to Tolstoy's notion of the family is that it disciplines, justifies, and redeems sexual relations," Benson writes elsewhere in her book. "More than that, it places sex in a natural, biological order which can minimize its erotic and maximize its functional essence" (91).

one with a feeling of physical and spiritual dissatisfaction. To make explicit this connection between the need to restrain appetites both sexual and gastronomical, Tolstoy in the Epilogue to *War and Peace* resorts to an alimentary analogy that draws a direct parallel between the purpose of marriage (family) and the purpose of a meal (nourishment). "If the purpose of a meal is nourishment of the body," the narrator observes,

then the person who eats two meals at once perhaps gets greater enjoyment, but he will not attain his purpose, since his stomach will not digest both meals. If the purpose of a marriage is the family, then the person who wishes to have many wives and husbands may perhaps obtain much pleasure, but in no case will he have a family. If the purpose of food is nourishment and the purpose of marriage is the family, then the whole question resolves itself into not eating more than one can digest and not having more wives or husbands than are needed for the family--that is, one wife or one husband. (*PSS XII*, 268)

It is perhaps worth noting in this regard that Pierre's first wife, the sexually promiscuous and decidedly immoderate Hélène Kuragina, suffers a painful death after contracting an illness that arose, in the narrator's words, "from an inconvenience resulting from marrying two husbands at the same time" (*PSS XII*, 4). The monogamous Natasha, on the other hand, learns to adopt an ethos of moderation, restraint and self-control that enables her not merely to restrict her sexual appetite by limiting it to just one "meal" (i.e. her husband). It also allows her to channel her dangerous libidinal energies safely into the domestic routines that are maintained by a busy wife and mother. Tolstoy's so-called "therapeutic" view of marriage thus saves his heroine from sensual excess by teaching her moral, emotional and even visceral discipline.

#### AN ETHOS OF MODERATION, RESTRAINT AND SELF-CONTROL

Tolstoy's advocacy of an ethos of moderation, restraint and self-control in matters of sexual and gastronomic appetite--as well as his faith in the institution of marriage and the family as an effective social harness upon human sexual desire--reaches its apex during the period of the writing of *Anna Karenina*, the work which in many ways marks a watershed both in Tolstoy's personal life and in his artistic career. "In the context of Tolstoy's own development," Irene Pearson asserts, "*Anna Karenina* represents a transitional stage between his joy in expressing intensely-felt physical sensations and his urge to asceticism and social reform" (10). In Tolstoy's famous novel of adultery, the largely autobiographical Konstantin Levin embodies the author's functional approach to the problem of the strong gastronomic and sexual temptation generated by tasty foods and enticing women. The most memorable instance in *Anna Karenina* where this ethos of moderation, restraint and self-control collides against an indulgent philosophy of epicureanism and hedonism occurs, of course, in the well-known restaurant scene depicted in Part 1 of the novel, when Levin goes to dine with his future brother-in-law, Stiva

Oblonskii.<sup>12</sup> From the moment he enters the Moscow restaurant, Levin is immediately made ill at ease by the decadent features of the establishment, by those same elements of urban aristocratic luxury that seem to make his future brother-in-law, by contrast, so radiant with delight: namely, the Tartar waiters in their swallow-tail coats, the vodka and hors d'oeuvres at the buffet, the painted Frenchwoman sitting at the counter. "Levin did not take any vodka," we are told, "simply because that Frenchwoman--all made up, as it seemed to him, of false hair, *poudre de riz*, and *vinaigre de toilette*--was offensive to him. He hastily moved away from her as from some dirty place" (*PSS XVIII*, 37). Whereas Stiva feels right at home in this culinary pleasure palace, Levin loses his appetite almost immediately upon entering the restaurant and is made very uncomfortable by the vulgar surroundings, which he seems to fear will profane the sacred image of Kitty that he carries around with him in his heart.

During this scene of dining Tolstoy conflates the gastronomic and sexual discourses that will be at work throughout his entire novel, exploiting culinary motifs here as an effective way to convey the contrasting attitudes toward sexuality of these two long-time but antipodal friends. The foods that they enjoy eating become emblematic not only of their opposing personalities, life values, and moral natures, but also of their diametrically opposed views on sexuality. Stiva Oblonskii, the hedonistic "man of the flesh" whose eyes actually become moist and glisten with delight as he dines, is in ecstasy as he swallows quivering oysters from his silver fork and sips chablis from his wide-lipped champagne glass. Konstantin Levin, on the other hand, the simple and sober "man of the spirit," can find little pleasure in such exotic culinary fare. On the contrary, he expresses a feeling of disappointment that there is no buckwheat porridge or cabbage soup at this restaurant (*PSS XVIII*, 38). "Levin ate some oysters, though he would have preferred bread and cheese," the narrator observes, succinctly encapsulating for us the simple gastronomic dialectic at work here, that, as Lynn Visson has argued, partakes in a wider rivalry within nineteenth-century Russian literature between Russian peasant or "Slavophile" cooking, on the one hand, which features simple and earthy native food items, and elegant Gallic fare, on the other, which the Europeanized gentry imported into Russia from the West. For the Slavophile Tolstoy, of course, Levin's simple peasant diet of cabbage soup and porridge (щи да каша) is immensely preferable in moral terms to Oblonskii's aristocratic culinary indulgence in oysters and champagne, which represent a decadent Western concern with material values.<sup>13</sup>

The contrast in the gastronomical appetites of these two diners in *Anna Karenina*

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<sup>12</sup>The following discussion about the restaurant scene with Levin and Oblonskii repeats some of the arguments that I made in my earlier article on *Anna Karenina*, "Levin visits Anna."

<sup>13</sup>Later, in Part III of the novel, Tolstoy shows us the moral antipodes in the countryside to this urban scene of decadent gastronomic indulgence at the Moscow restaurant. First of all, there is the scene where Levin shares a simple meal of bread and water with an old peasant during a break from the mowing on his estate, a scene in which, as Goscilo correctly notes (485), food symbolizes a sense of "true communion" between the hero and some simple rural laborers engaged in a common activity (*PSS XVIII*, 268-9). Secondly, there is the scene where Levin receives a pleasant impression of spiritual well-being while he watches a peasant family dine together modestly on щи and каша (*PSS XVIII*, 344).

extends well beyond this Westernizer/Slavophile dialectic, however, to encompass their greatly differing perspectives upon the broader semiotic significance of the very act of eating. As Helena Goscilo observes, Levin and Stiva define for us here the "culinary moral spectrum" that assumes increasing importance in Tolstoy's life and works (482). For the primitive and rustic Levin, eating is a basic biological act, necessary for the purposes of nutrition by sustaining one's life, strength and health; for the urbane and sophisticated Oblonskii, on the other hand, eating constitutes, in his words, "one of life's pleasures" (*PSS XVIII*, 38).<sup>14</sup>

Semiotically considered, Levin, with his rustic *appétit naturel*, eats to live, whereas Oblonskii, with his urbane *appétit de luxe*, lives to eat: Stiva, in other words, must artificially stimulate his appetite and create a false hunger in order to generate ever new pleasure out of eating.<sup>15</sup> "It seems strange to me that while we country people try to get over our meals as quickly as we can, so as to be able to get on with our work, here you and I try to make our meal last as long as possible, and therefore we eat oysters," Levin observes at one point. "Well, of course," Oblonskii replies. "That is, after all, the aim of civilization: to get enjoyment out of everything." "Well, if that is its aim," Levin fires back, "I'd rather be a savage." "You are a savage as it is. All you Levins are savages," Stiva exclaims (*PSS XVIII*, 40). As Irene Pearson observes, "the simple way of life in the Russian countryside," where people take a practical, functional, utilitarian approach to food, is made to contrast in this scene with what she calls "the French-style civilization of the city," where the aim is instead to derive as much pleasure and satisfaction as possible from the act of eating (11).<sup>16</sup> In addition to the geographical contrast between city and country, Oblonskii's and Levin's differing perspectives on food and eating thus reveal to us a whole series of binary oppositions with broader sociological, psychological and moral categories: e.g. enjoyment versus nourishment, luxury versus necessity, the "ego" versus the "id," the pleasure principle versus the reality principle, urban

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<sup>14</sup>If we were to borrow the terms suggested by Barthes (8), we could say that eating for Levin operates within the "realm of necessity" (*l'ordre de besoin*), where food indicates deprivation, while for Oblonskii it operates within the "realm of desire" (*l'ordre de désir*), where food indicates indulgence.

<sup>15</sup>"Socrates points out that eating is a pleasure because it takes away the pain of hunger," Pearson writes. "But as soon as one is satisfied, the pleasure disappears along with the pain. A false hunger, a type of greed, must be stimulated in order to re-create the possibility of feeling more pleasure. The same is true of sexual pleasure, Tolstoy seems to imply" (13). Tolstoy, in fact, states this belief quite explicitly in a letter of 27-30 October 1895, when he writes, "if life's happiness lies in the satisfaction of one's lusts, then as they are satisfied, one's pleasure decreases and decreases, and one must constantly arouse newer and stronger lusts in order to obtain the same pleasure" (*PSS LXVIII*, 240).

<sup>16</sup>Brown observes that Balzac is another author who makes a clear distinction in his novels between city appetites and country appetites, contrasting the elegant cuisine and fashionable dining rooms of Parisian *bons vivants* with the modest fare served by provincial misers (30). In the "Glossary of Metafictional Terms" appended to his book, Brown defines "Food-work metonym" as "the peasant ethic whereby the purpose of food is to supply energy for work. Food is a means, not an end in itself: eating to live, not living to eat" (202).

sophistication versus rural simplicity, the gentry class versus the peasant class, hunger versus appetite.<sup>17</sup>

When the meal has ended and the table conversation switches over to the subject of women we see that Tolstoy continues to use the gastronomic analogy as a way to reify the contrast between Stiva's hedonism and Levin's puritanism. Establishing a setting similar in most respects to Plato's *Symposium*, where, as Gutkin notes, both physical and intellectual pleasures can be enjoyed through the twin activities of dining and discourse (86), Tolstoy's two male characters proceed to engage in a dialogue about carnal versus spiritual love. As we might well expect, each of these men brings to the issue of sexual love the same semiotic code that he abides by with respect to the act of eating: for Levin, the sex drive is a dangerous, if necessary, instinctual urge that must be restrained by channeling it within the institution of marriage and the framework of the family; for Oblonskii, sex, like food, constitutes one of life's delicious pleasures and is thus to be enjoyed for its own sake. For the stoical and spartan Levin, sex is merely a means to an end; while for the hedonistic and epicurean Oblonskii, sex is an end in and of itself.<sup>18</sup> Why a married man would commit adultery is just as incomprehensible to the puritanical Levin as why one would ever go to a baker's shop and steal a roll after having eaten one's fill at a restaurant. "But why not steal a roll (калач)?" the philandering Stiva muses. "After all, a roll sometimes smells so good that one can't resist it!" (*PSS XVIII*, 44-45).<sup>19</sup> Gluttonous overeating and adulterous extramarital sex are thus linked together here as pleasurable sensual activities that for Oblonskii, as a representative member of the rich and idle aristocracy in Moscow, seem to complement and accompany each other.

The lines of verse from Heinrich Heine that Stiva proceeds to quote during this dining scene underscore for us the semiotic field within which Tolstoy's treatment of sensual pleasure is to be understood throughout the rest of the novel: "It is heavenly when I have mastered my earthly desires; but when I have not succeeded, I have also had right good pleasure!" (*PSS XVIII*, 45). If the line about mastering earthly desires characterizes Levin's position, then the line about the joy of failing to restrain such desire captures Oblonskii's attitude. As we see repeatedly throughout the novel, Stiva is hardly even trying to master his "earthly desires" (be they gastronomical or sexual in nature); he is seeking only to enjoy "right good pleasure" wherever and whenever he can. For Levin, on the other hand, libidinal restraint does not seem to pose much of a problem, since he eats for nourishment rather than for pleasure. Like the tamed and domesticated Natasha

<sup>17</sup>In her study A.N. Engelgardt's *Letters From the Country, 1872-1887*, Frierson explores a number of these same binary oppositions that were utilized by the Russian Populist writer (and contemporary of Tolstoy) in his publicistic writings.

<sup>18</sup>Goscilo makes this classical Greek distinction between Levin, who is associated with Plato and the Stoics, and Oblonskii, who is associated with Epicurus and the Hedonists (486).

<sup>19</sup>Arguing that Stiva "epitomizes the pursuit of one alternative that Tolstoy did not allow himself in his own life" (56), Armstrong claims that the author himself actually longed for stolen "rolls" like Oblonskii, but he simply refused to admit it (58-9). In her psychoanalytic reading of *Anna Karenina*, Armstrong thus sees both Levin and Oblonskii as products of the author's self-projection. Tolstoy, she asserts, "allows Stiva, his supposed opposite, to satisfy vicariously all these banned appetites" (65-6).

in the Epilogue to *War and Peace*, Levin understands the necessity of harnessing his sexual instincts and he has thus adopted a functional attitude not only toward food but also toward sex, a sensual activity that for him can only be legitimized and justified through the institution of marriage. This is reflected in his comment to Oblonskii that he feels a physical revulsion for "fallen women," sexual creatures whom he considers to be moral abominations (*PSS XVIII*, 45). Indeed, Levin's aversion for erotic women--who are epitomized by the obscenely painted Frenchwoman with her curls--is largely what accounts for his being so "ill at ease and uncomfortable in this restaurant with its private rooms where men took women to dine" (*PSS XVIII*, 39). He realizes full well, of course, that these private rooms facilitate not only elegant dining, but also romantic trysts.<sup>20</sup>

#### EARTHLY DESIRES: SINS OF THE FLESH AND THE PALATE

Throughout *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy continues to identify the satisfaction of gastronomic and sexual desire with a sinful animal appetite for pleasure. The quintessential "man of the flesh" in Tolstoy's famous novel of adultery (if not in his entire literary oeuvre) is, of course, the tragic heroine's philandering brother. As a fun-loving character whose behavior is governed almost entirely by the pleasure principle, Stiva Oblonskii throughout the novel is shown freely indulging his hearty appetite for both food and women. We learn, for instance, that his "married bachelor" regularly conducts amorous liaisons with young actresses, and we witness how he flirts shamelessly with loose women such as Betsy Tverskaia and the painted hostess at the restaurant. In the gastronomic realm, meanwhile, Oblonskii is shown to derive great pleasure from hosting an elegant dinner party at his Moscow home in Part IV and he clearly enjoys consuming a sumptuous repast not only at the posh restaurant in Part I but also at Levin's country home when he goes hunting with him in Part II. The hedonistic Stiva, in short, personifies a lifestyle that Levin roundly condemns for its sinful праздность: that is, he epitomizes all the idleness, luxury, and self-indulgence of urbane aristocratic life in Russia. When Stiva suddenly shows up at Levin's rural estate in Part 6, accompanied by his younger pleasure-seeking partner in sensuality, the amiable *bon vivant* Vasia Veslovsky, the reader observes once again how in Tolstoy's novel the pleasures of the flesh are invariably made both similar to and contiguous with the pleasures of the palate. Food is here linked closely with sex during the hunting trip, when we learn not only that Stiva and Veslovsky spent the first night of the expedition making love to some of the local peasant

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<sup>20</sup>Kiltz has written an entire book about the erotic dining that transpired in such private dining rooms (*chambres séparées*). Indeed, a typical pattern that emerges from the nineteenth-century European novel involves a group of men going to a restaurant or a club to dine and drink, and then, in an intoxicated mood of post-prandial lethargy, either retiring to private rooms or setting off for a brothel where they pair off with the prostitutes working there. "Nineteenth-century French novelists in particular," writes Brown, "fully exploited the relationships between food and fornication in their depictions of tête-à-tête meals, and, in the novel as in contemporary society, the co-occurrence of the culinary and the sexual acts was made explicit in public dining houses where the *cabinet particulier* was designed specifically for amorous diners" (14).

girls, but also that chubby little Vasia has managed to consume by himself all of the provisions that Kitty had prepared as meals for the trio of hungry sportsmen.

The romantic, adulterous relationship between Anna and Vronskii is likewise associated with gastronomic images of food and drink, but invariably, as Pearson notes, "in a negative or tainted sense" (12). Like Oblonskii, neither the tragic heroine nor her lover ever really attempts to master their earthly desires. Vronskii, for example, who travels in a fast aristocratic crowd made up of people who "abandon themselves unblushingly to all their passions" (*PSS XVIII*, 121), is consistently portrayed as a healthy, virile and carnivorous beast. Witness in this regard, as Goscilo rightly notes (488-9), the repeated references to his strong white teeth and his fondness for beefsteak. Much like Sappho Shtolz's young admirer Vaska, who has been nourished on "underdone beef (говядина), truffles, and Burgundy" and who seems to possess a "superabundance of health" (*PSS XVIII*, 315), Vronskii is presented as a fine physical specimen. And in much the same manner that the concupiscent Vaska is ready to "eat" the enticing Sappho (*PSS XVIII*, 315), Vronskii's animal passion drives him ultimately to devour the beautiful Anna. At one point, when he is forced to spend a week serving as the official escort for a foreign prince who is visiting the capital, Vronskii even experiences an epiphany of sorts and comes to recognize his own bestial nature. Due to gymnastics and rigorous exercise, the Prince, who epitomizes animal vitality and appetite, is able to maintain a healthy appearance in spite of the sensual excess he indulges in when amusing himself sexually and gastronomically. In search of a "taste" of distinctively Russian sensual amusements, the Prince is escorted on a round of native popular entertainments: while in St. Petersburg, he experiences, among other things, horse racing, bear hunting, troika riding, crockery smashing, gypsy girls, pancakes, and champagne. Vronskii, however, soon finds this escort duty both wearisome and aggravating. "The chief reason why the Prince's presence especially oppressed Vronskii," the narrator explains, "was that he could not help but see himself reflected in the Prince, and what he saw in that mirror was not flattering to his vanity. The Prince was a very stupid, very self-assured, very healthy and very clean man--and nothing more" (*PSS XVIII*, 374). To Vronskii's mind, however, the Prince is not even a human being; instead he is merely a "stupid hunk of meat" (говядина) (*PSS XVIII*, 374). "Can I really be like that myself?" muses a perplexed Vronskii, who is not normally given to reflection of this kind. He later describes the Prince to Anna as "a finely-bred animal like those that get first-place prizes at cattle shows," the sort of creature who despises "everything except animal pleasures" (*PSS XVIII*, 378). To this unflattering characterization, a pregnant, jealous, and thus unsympathetic Anna responds sarcastically, "But don't all of you love those animal pleasures?" (*PSS XVIII*, 378).<sup>21</sup>

Anna, the St. Petersburg adulteress who relinquishes her domestic identity as wife and mother by abandoning her husband and young son to pursue her sexual passion for Vronskii (thus reversing the pattern of development followed by Natasha Rostova),

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<sup>21</sup>When Vronskii in Part 5 is desperately searching for some pastime to occupy him while he is staying with Anna in Italy, Tolstoy compares him to "a hungry animal," one who "seizes every object it meets, in hopes of finding food in it" (*XIX*, 32).

likewise is closely identified throughout the novel with food imagery that serves mainly to reinforce her negative image as a fleshly creature. In Anna's case, however, it is the language of gastronomy that is frequently invoked when she wishes to express her spiritual state of her emotional needs. "I unhappy?" she says to her lover soon after they consummate their love affair. "I am like a hungry person to whom food has been given. He may be cold, his clothes may be ragged, and he may be ashamed, but he is not unhappy" (*PSS XVIII*, 201). By equating her sexual appetite with such a basic human need as physical hunger, Anna seeks through this metaphor to justify the necessity, and hence the morality, of indulging her sexual passion. "I am alive and I am not to blame that God made me so that I need to love and live," she says later in another transparent attempt to rationalize her sin of adultery. "I cannot repent of breathing, of loving" (*PSS XVIII*, 308-9). As the story progresses, however, and the heroine's moral, emotional and psychological deterioration becomes ever more painfully evident to the reader, we see that Anna's sexual desire is actually more an "appetite" that she has chosen to indulge than a basic, essential "hunger" that she has no choice but to appease.<sup>22</sup> In sexual matters, therefore, Anna seems to possess an *appétit de luxe* (like Stiva's), although she strives to convince herself that her erotic desire is actually an *appétit naturel* (like Levin's).

"The key to understanding Anna," Gary Saul Morson boldly maintains, "is that she is Stiva's sister, Anna Oblonskaya" (7). This Oblonskian family resemblance, this commonality of shared sensual traits, becomes especially prominent in Part 7, when Anna takes her final carriage ride through Moscow prior to her suicide. During that ride, Anna confesses that, while she may not know any longer who she is, she does, as the French say, know her "appetites." She proceeds to generalize about the nature of human desire, using a gastronomic metaphor for her sexual lust that sounds quite Oblonskian:

"Those boys want some of that dirty ice cream; they know that for a certainty," she thought, as she saw two boys stopping at an ice cream vendor, who lifted down a tub of from his head and wiped his perspiring face with the end of the cloth. "We all want something sweet, something tasty; if we can get no bonbons, then dirty ice cream! And Kitty is just the same; if not Vronskii, then Levin." (*PSS XIX*, 340)

Like Stiva's *kalach*, Anna's ice cream and bonbons are here shown to represent much more than merely some sweet and tasty comestibles; these gastronomic objects of desire also serve as metaphors for the voracious sexual appetite of a now jaded libertine. Moreover, Anna realizes that she has herself become that dirty ice cream: she openly expresses here the fear that, as an object of carnal desire, she no longer has "the right flavor" for her lover (*PSS XIX*, 343). Like her pleasure-seeking brother, therefore, Anna comes increasingly to identify human desire with basic animal lust, with a purely physical appetite for food and sex. As Pearson correctly notes, Anna by the end comes to view life in Darwinian terms as "a battle between individuals for the satisfaction of their appetites"

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<sup>22</sup>For a useful distinction between "hunger" (essentially a bodily drive) and "appetite" (a state of mind), see Cappon (21).



(14).<sup>23</sup> Not unlike Vronskii, Anna has reduced all of human existence essentially to the satisfaction of one's animal urges; as a result, living has become a meaningless activity from which she can no longer derive any pleasure. As she herself succinctly puts it (significantly enough, in English), "the zest is gone" (*PSS XIX*, 343).<sup>24</sup>

Tolstoy's condemnation of the sinful pleasures of the flesh and the palate in *Anna Karenina* culminates with the discussion Levin has in Part 8 with the peasant Fedor, who distinguishes between those people who live selflessly for the betterment of their "soul" (душа) and those who instead live selfishly for the benefit of their "stomach" (брюхо). At first sight, one would think that the cast of characters in Tolstoy's novel helps to support this distinction, since there seems to be such a clear dichotomy between selfish egoists (such as Anna, Vronskii, Oblonskii, and Veslovskii) who freely indulge their sensual appetite for physical pleasures, and more moral and spiritual creatures (such as Levin, Kitty, Dolly, and Varenka) who live largely to satisfy the needs and desires of others rather than their own. The novel's parallel plot lines--one focused on Anna, the other on Levin--likewise seem to support this polarity: whereas the female heroine, a "man of the flesh" who lives largely for the benefit of her own stomach, ultimately perishes due to despair, the male hero, a "man of the spirit" who lives mainly for the benefit of his soul, seems ultimately to find spiritual peace. One difficulty with this polarized scheme, however, is that it overlooks the fact that the author's masterful artistic portrayal of Anna has the effect of mitigating much of our moral condemnation of her sinful behavior. "We are so moved by compassion for her suffering," Edward Wasiolek observes about Tolstoy's heroine, "that we tend to overlook the fund of sheer nastiness in her by the end of the novel" (130). Not all readers, perhaps, are as willing as Wasiolek to overlook Anna's serious failings, but most of them do seem to believe that Tolstoy did not wish for his graceful, charming, and passionate heroine to be categorically condemned.<sup>25</sup>

Another difficulty with this overly neat opposition between sensual and moral characters in *Anna Karenina* is that Levin is not without some problems of his own by novel's end. In Part 8, for instance, he is contemplating suicide and experiencing marital difficulties of his own with Kitty. Worse yet, the narrative events that are depicted in Part 7, when Levin and Kitty move to Moscow for her confinement, show us that the hero's ethos of moderation, restraint, and self-control in matters involving sensual pleasure is severely tested--if not in fact defeated--by the same infectious spirit of aristocratic праздность that Stiva and Veslovsky had brought with them from the city to the country when they invaded Levin's rural estate in Part VI. As I have argued elsewhere, Levin's activities in Moscow during this section of the novel closely resemble--rather than sharply

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<sup>23</sup>"Towards the end," Pearson writes, "Anna thinks more and more on the level of 'dog-eat-dog,' or to use Tolstoy's own reference to Katavasov's scientific research, on the level of 'the cuttlefish's eating habits'" (14).

<sup>24</sup>In my earlier article on *Anna Karenina*, I noted the deeper culinary significance of Anna's statement. "Although 'zest' carries the usual meanings of 'gusto' and 'relish,'" I pointed out, "the word originally denoted the peel of citrus fruit such as lemons and oranges, which was used as flavoring" (10).

<sup>25</sup>Even such a staunch opponent of the pro-Anna camp as Morson openly admits that he belongs to the "minority camp" when he holds that the book condemns Tolstoy's heroine (8).

contrast with--the immoral behavior of Stiva Oblonskii: for example, Levin pays a number of meaningless social calls, attends the theater, and even dines at the English Club--that notorious "temple of idleness" (зрам праздности) (*PSS XIX*, 268)--in the company of such merry sybarites as Oblonskii, Vronskii, and Iashvin. "If the scene of dining at the Hotel *Angliia* depicted in Part I had served to illustrate Levin's moral puritanism, displaying for us his staunch opposition to gastronomic pleasure and sexual indulgence," I pointed out in an earlier article,

then the scene of dining at the *Angliiskii klub* depicted in Part VII reveals how Levin's characteristic sense of restraint in libidinal matters has now given way to a desire to indulge in a variety of sensual pleasures.... Thus we see our hero eating and drinking, seemingly without restraint, while his wife, nine months pregnant, lies home in bed. Caught up in the holiday atmosphere reigning at the club, Levin now partakes quite willingly and enthusiastically in those leisure activities that--either explicitly or implicitly--he had condemned so categorically in Part I: namely, eating, drinking, gambling, and socializing. (6-7)<sup>26</sup>

This evening of sensual indulgence reaches its climax when Levin decides to cancel his plans to attend a meeting of the Agricultural Society with Sviazhskii and opts instead to go with Oblonskii to visit his sister Anna. As critics such as Grossman, Mandelker, and myself have already noted, Levin's visit to the home of this "fallen woman," who succeeds in seducing the hero with her beauty, grace, and charm, bears some uncanny resemblances with a trip to a brothel. Those affinities are certainly not lost upon Levin's pregnant and jealous wife, who upbraids her husband soundly upon his return home late that evening. "You have fallen in love with that horrid woman!" Kitty screams at Levin. "She has bewitched you! I saw it in your eyes. Yes, yes! What can come of this? You were at the club drinking and drinking, and gambling, and then you went...to whom?" (*PSS XIX*, 281). Infected by the spirit of *праздность* that permeates aristocratic life in the capital, the puritanical Levin seems this evening to have been transformed suddenly into an Oblonskian playboy and hedonistic "man of the flesh."

#### RADICAL MEASURES FOR SWEET PLEASURES: SEXUAL ABSTINENCE

Most readers of *Anna Karenina* are perhaps inclined to dismiss Levin's sensually indulgent behavior in Part VII of the novel as nothing more than a temporary aberration due to the "intoxicated" consciousness that he experiences while staying in Moscow.<sup>27</sup> After all, once he leaves that "immoral Babylon" and returns to his estate in the Russian

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<sup>26</sup>I have argued that "the scene at the English Club shows Levin being essentially seduced by the charms of aristocratic life in Moscow. The 'noble savage' from the Russian countryside to whom we were first introduced in Part I, the rustic who once prided himself in his simple peasant ways, appears to have been effectively 'civilized' in Part VII as he comes to realize his inherent kinship with his gentry brethren in the city" (7).

<sup>27</sup>Gustafson discusses at some length this notion of "intoxicated consciousness" (338-402).

countryside in Part VIII, Levin does regain his moral composure. Upon completing *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy, on the other hand, did not regain his. As he reveals in his *Confession*, the author had now become thoroughly disenchanted with his conventional mode of life. Sounding more like Anna than Levin, Tolstoy's narrator in *Confession* claims that once his eyes had at last been opened to all the evil in life and to the meaninglessness of human existence, he could no longer deceive himself: in the face of inevitable death, all of life's charms are revealed as merely a cruel and stupid hoax perpetrated upon man. To illustrate his point, the narrator recounts an ancient Eastern fable whose central metaphor is a gastronomic one. Surprised by a wild beast that threatens to kill him, a traveler seeks refuge in a dried-up well, at the bottom of which he sees a dragon with gaping jaws anxiously waiting to devour him. The man grabs hold of a wild bush growing in the cracks of the well and he clings desperately to its branch, even as he sees that two mice (one white, the other black) are gnawing away at it. "Soon the branch will give way and break off, and he will fall into the jaws of the dragon," the narrator explains. "The traveler sees this and knows that he will surely die. But while he is still hanging there, he looks around and sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the bush, and he stretches out his tongue and licks them" (*PSS XXIII*, 14). For Tolstoy, this gastronomic image--of a man licking tasty drops of honey as he awaits certain death--captures perfectly our basic existential predicament as human beings:

Thus I cling to the branch of life, knowing that inevitably the dragon of death is waiting, ready to tear me to pieces; and I cannot understand why this torment has befallen me. I try to suck the honey that once consoled me, but the honey no longer brings me joy. Day and night the black mouse and the white mouse gnaw at the branch to which I cling. I clearly see the dragon, and the honey has lost all its sweetness for me. I see only one thing--the inescapable dragon and the mice--and I cannot avert my eyes from them. This is no fable, this is the naked truth, irrefutable and understood by everyone. (*PSS XXIII*, 14)

Just like his tragic heroine, who finds at the end of *Anna Karenina* that she has lost her appetite for living ("the zest is gone"), Tolstoy now finds that the two drops of honey that he had formerly considered so delicious and tasty in his own life--his love for his family and for his writing--have lost all their flavor for him: the sweetness is gone.

This parable about the human condition, however, seems to apply only to the members of the privileged gentry class, and not to the impoverished peasantry, whose lives, according to the narrator, are marked "more by deprivation and suffering than by pleasures" (*PSS XXIII*, 32). The conditions of luxury, idleness and epicurean indulgence under which the "parasites" from the upper class live in Russia, he maintains, make it impossible for them ever to understand the true meaning of life. In order to live according to the ways of God, one must renounce entirely the gentry way of life--as well as the sensual pleasures traditionally associated with it--and adopt instead the more genuine and morally authentic lifestyle of the hard-working peasants, who have never strayed from their religious faith. In keeping with his view of gentry праздность as a pervasive and infectious condition, Tolstoy not only advocates living like a simple peasant. He also comes to recognize that gastronomic appetite and sexual desire are powerful libidinal

drives that cannot be merely restrained, moderated or controlled. The physical pleasures of the flesh and the palate must instead be avoided entirely since they are, by their very nature, so debasing, dangerous, and destructive for any human being who wishes to rise at all above the level of gratifying his basic animal inclinations. Like alcohol, tobacco, and other addictive drugs, food and sex are seen to "stupefy" people, not only because such items stimulate our desire for sensual pleasure, but more importantly because they blur the demands of our moral conscience and thus deaden the spiritual part of our human nature.<sup>28</sup> Levin's ethos of moderation and libidinal restraint with regard to food and sex in *Anna Karenina*, much like his anachronistic defense of the rural gentry, conventional marriage, and traditional religious belief, simply could no longer constitute a viable code of moral behavior for the disillusioned Tolstoy. He now regarded both food and sex as highly addictive sources of pleasure whose despotic power over man's will, and debilitating effect upon his life, called for more radical measures than mere moderation.

Tolstoy's fear and distrust of erotic desire receive their most explicit artistic expression, of course, in the highly controversial *The Kreutzer Sonata*, a work that seems to have grown out of the author's own bitter disillusionment with married life. In his attempt to deromanticize our idealized notions of love, the story's central character, Pozdnyshev, manages to strip love of any emotional or spiritual value it might have, reducing it to mere sexual passion and a brutish animal lust. In addition, he condemns the institution of marriage as a moral fraud perpetrated by the members of his decadent social class: he exposes it as a sham whose main purpose is actually to legitimize man's wanton sexual desires. Wishing to leave no doubt in the reader's mind that the extreme opinions on sexuality, love, and marriage expressed by his deranged protagonist accurately reflect the author's own views, Tolstoy wrote an *Afterword to The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which he asserts that sexual continence, "which constitutes an indispensable condition of human dignity in the unmarried state, is still more essential in the married one" (*PSS* XXVII, 81).<sup>29</sup> For our purposes, what is particularly interesting about the views expressed by Pozdnyshev in *The Kreutzer Sonata* is how excesses of sexual debauchery are linked causally in this text with gastronomic indulgence. "You see, our stimulating superfluity of food, together with complete physical idleness, is nothing but the systematic excitation of lust," Pozdnyshev explains,

The usual food of a young peasant lad is bread, kvas, and onions; he keeps alive and is vigorous and healthy; his task is light agricultural work. When he goes to perform railway work, his rations are buckwheat porridge and a pound of meat a day. But he works off that pound of meat during

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<sup>28</sup>"Don't let us stupefy ourselves, don't let us kill our reason with strong food which is not natural to man, and with stupefying drinks and smoking," Tolstoy writes in a letter of 27-30 October 1895 (*PSS* LXVIII, 244).

<sup>29</sup>Chertkov published an interesting little booklet in England, entitled *On the Relations of the Sexes*, which is a collection of essays, diary entries and letters that contain Tolstoy's various pronouncements on sexual relations. (This includes his *Afterword to The Kreutzer Sonata*, a translation of which appears in this issue of *Tolstoy Studies Journal*.) For a thorough reception study of Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, mainly within the context of the debate over sexual morality that was taking place in contemporary Russia, see Møller.

his sixteen hours wheeling around thirty pound barrow-loads, so it's just enough for him. But we, who consume two pounds of meat every day, and game, and fish, and all sorts of hot foods and drinks--where does all that go? Into excesses of sensuality. And if it goes there and the safety-valve is open, everything turns out all right; but close the safety-valve a bit, as I closed it temporarily, and at once a stimulus arises which, passing through the prism of our artificial life, expresses itself in utter infatuation, sometimes even platonic. (*PSS XXVII*, 23)

When he accounts for the origins of his own infatuation with the woman he would later wed (and subsequently murder), Pozdnyshv asserts that this love was the result, in large part, of "the excess of food I consumed while living an idle life" (*PSS XXVII*, 24). This direct causal connection between gastronomic excess and sexual excitation is reiterated when Pozdnyshv claims that, had he lived in circumstances normal to man, "consuming just enough food to suffice for the work I did," he would not have fallen in love and "none of all this would have happened" (*PSS XXVII*, 24). In a variant version of *The Kreutzer Sonata* that circulated privately in manuscript form, Pozdnyshv states bluntly, "All of our love affairs and marriages are, for the most part, conditioned by the food we eat" (*PSS XXVII*, 303).<sup>30</sup>

#### THE WAY OF NO FLESH: ASCETIC/AESTHETIC VEGETARIANISM

Given Tolstoy's artistic representation of food in some of his later works of fiction as a dangerous stimulant that can excite sexual lust,<sup>31</sup> it should not surprise us terribly to find that among the radical measures the author comes to advocate late in his life (pacifism, celibacy, opposition to hunting, smoking, and violence) he would also include vegetarianism. After all, if the moral and spiritual ideal Tolstoy believed we should all be striving to attain is absolute sexual continence, then it follows that we should avoid eating meat, since fleshly food, he came to believe, arouses in us sexual passion and carnal desire.<sup>32</sup> According to Sergei Tolstoy (145), his father was convinced to become a

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<sup>30</sup>As Nissenbaum points out, Sylvester Graham likewise maintained (albeit for physiological rather than theological reasons) that, with a proper diet, people could subdue their sexual propensity and thus preserve chastity (32). Witness, for example, what Graham writes in his *Lecture to Young Men* about the direct connection between stimulating foods and sexual arousal: "All kinds of stimulating and heating substances; high-seasoned foods; rich dishes; the free use of flesh; and even the excess of aliment; all, more or less-and some to a very great degree, increase the concupiscent excitability and sensibility of the genital organs, and augment their influence on the functions of organic life, and on the intellectual and moral faculties" (18-19).

<sup>31</sup>In "Father Sergius," for instance, the possibility that the hero will succumb to the sexual temptations of the feeble-minded but voluptuous daughter of a local merchant is foreshadowed in the text by mention of how Sergius no longer threatened his health by fasting, but now indulged his appetite for food and drink, "often eating with special pleasure and not, as before, with revulsion and a consciousness of sin" (*PSS XXXI*, 34). In a narrative as well as a physiological sense, therefore, gastronomical appetite seems to trigger sexual appetite in Tolstoy's story.

<sup>32</sup>Tolstoy was not the first person, of course, to link eating meat with sexual arousal. Many of the American health reformers in the nineteenth century likewise preached the sexual dangers of carnivorousness. Nissenbaum notes how Sylvester Graham, for example, argues in the 1830s for a meatless diet largely on

vegetarian by William Frey, a Russian of Estonian extraction who had emigrated to America to set up an agricultural commune, but later returned to Russia and visited Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana during the fall of 1885.<sup>33</sup> Tolstoy's decision to adopt a meatless diet would seem consistent with his moral and humanitarian objections, as an avowed pacifist and opponent of all forms of violence, to the killing of animals for human food; indeed, he had already given up his beloved pastime of hunting just a few years earlier. When Tolstoy in 1891 writes an essay in which he explains his reasons for refusing to eat meat, his motivation for vegetarianism turns out, however, to be as much ascetic as ethical. Eating fleshly foods is wrong, according to Tolstoy, not only because it perpetuates cruelty and brutal violence to animals (which he depicts quite graphically in his essay when he describes his recent visit to a slaughterhouse in Tula). Carnivorism is also to be condemned, he writes, because it "serves only to develop animal feelings, to excite lust, to promote fornication and drunkenness" (*PSS XXIX*, 84). Tolstoy contends that a carnivorous diet stimulates a carnal appetite: eating animal food arouses animal passions. He argues, in fact, that one should abstain from eating not just meat, but any tasty food item from which one might conceivably derive gustatory enjoyment. After all, gastronomic pleasure, in Tolstoy's chain of reasoning, leads directly and ineluctably to sexual pleasure. Accordingly, he inveighs strongly in this essay against the sin of gluttony (overeating) and he encourages his readers to practice abstinence and fasting, rather than mere moderation, in matters of concerning the consumption of food and drink.

Tolstoy's essay on vegetarianism, which is entitled "The First Step" ("Первая ступень"), was originally intended to serve as the preface to a book by Howard Williams, called *The Ethics of Diet: A Catena of Authorities Deprecatory of the Practice of Flesh-Eating* (1883), a copy of which Vladimir Chertkov had recently given to Tolstoy, who called it a "wonderful" and "needed" work (*PSS LXXXVII*, 84) and who arranged to have it translated into Russian.<sup>34</sup> In the opening sections of "The First Step," Tolstoy asserts that it is impossible for one to lead a good and moral life--whether as a Christian or a pagan--unless one begins with abstinence (воздержание) and self-abnegation

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the grounds that meat acted as a sexual stimulant, exciting vile tempers and driving men to sexual excesses (33-36, 119-120). Indeed, the belief among health reformers that "meat excited libido," Whorton writes, "was a truism" (92). In her book about the sexual politics of meat (155-9), Adams examines "Grahamism" (as a dietary method for controlling male sexuality) from a feminist perspective and draws some interesting connections between male power and meat eating. Ethical vegetarianism, according to Adams, represents a feminist way not merely to reject a carnivorous view of the world, but also to rebuke the generally violent and aggressive male discourse that has predominated in our patriarchal culture.

<sup>33</sup>Christian provides a brief description of Tolstoy's acquaintance with Frey (2:401). For an overview of Tolstoy's vegetarianism, and its influence on some of his followers, see Barkas ("Tolstoy and the Doukhobors," 154-165).

<sup>34</sup>This book by Williams, who was a classical scholar and close associate of Henry Salt, contains pro-vegetarian views from over sixty important thinkers throughout history: from Plutarch and Porphyry to Shelley and Schopenhauer. As Ghandi notes in his autobiography, his acquaintance with the views of British vegetarians such as Williams and Salt (especially the latter's *A Plea for Vegetarianism*) convinced him to become an avowed vegetarian (48). In a study of Tolstoy and Ghandi, Green describes the latter's conversion to vegetarianism during this trip to England (54-7).

(самоотречение). The indispensable "first step" up the ladder of virtues, Tolstoy writes, involves the renunciation of our basic physical appetites and our liberation from the animal lusts that plague us. Although the abstract language that Tolstoy employs in the early part of this essay might lead one to think that he is speaking about our sexual appetite and our lust of the pleasures of the flesh, it soon becomes clear that the author has in mind mainly our gastronomical appetite and our lust for the pleasures of the palate. When he finally does specify the three basic "lusts" (позотн) that torment human beings, Tolstoy identifies them as being "gluttony, idleness, and carnal love" (PSS XXIX, 73-4). Not unlike Pozdnyshv in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Tolstoy in his essay on vegetarianism posits a direct causal link between food and sex.

"The gluttonous person is not equipped to struggle against laziness, nor will the gluttonous and idle person ever be strong enough to struggle against sexual lust. Therefore, according to all moral teachings, the striving for abstinence commences with the struggle against the lust of gluttony; it commences with fasting" (PSS XXIX, 73-4).

In the same way that the first condition for a good life is abstinence, Tolstoy explains, "the first condition for a life of abstinence is fasting" (PSS XXIX, 74). Just as gluttony is the first sign of a bad life, so is fasting "the essential condition for a good life" (PSS XXIX, 74). What lends particular urgency to this need to fast, according to Tolstoy, is the fact that the main interest of the vast majority of people is to satisfy their craving for food.<sup>35</sup> "From the poorest to the wealthiest levels of society," he writes, "gluttony is, I think, the primary aim, the chief pleasure of our life" (PSS XXIX, 74). Even destitute working-class people, Tolstoy sadly notes, seek to follow the example of the decadent upper classes; they too seek to acquire "the tastiest and sweetest foods, and to eat and drink as much as they can" (PSS XXIX, 74).<sup>36</sup>

The only effective way to curb our sexual appetite, Tolstoy asserts in his *Afterword to The Kreutzer Sonata*, is to eliminate any pleasure one might possibly derive from the act of sexual intercourse. Only in this way can we hope to succeed in our efforts to strive to make ourselves what he calls voluntary "eunuchs" and thus to conquer our carnal

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<sup>35</sup>"The main concern and the main preoccupation of people is not eating--eating doesn't require much effort--but rather overeating. People talk about their interests and exalted aims, women about lofty feelings, and they don't talk about food; but their main activity is directed towards food," Tolstoy writes in his diary on 10 May 1891. "All people eat on the average, I think, three times as much as they need" (PSS LII, 31). Only a year earlier, Tolstoy had expressed the desire to write "a book about GORGING. Belshazzar's feast, bishops, tsars, taverns. Meetings, partings, jubilees. People think they are occupied with various important matters, but they are only occupied with gorging" (PSS LI, 53).

<sup>36</sup>Tolstoy was also distressed by the gluttony he saw in his own children. "They eat to excess and amuse themselves by spending money on the labors of other people for their own pleasure," he wrote to Chertkov in 1885 (PSS LXXXV, 294). "You look for the cause; look for the remedy," he wrote to his wife a few days later. "The children can stop overeating (vegetarianism)" (PSS LXXXIII, 547).

lust.<sup>37</sup> The same anti-hedonistic, anti-epicurean reasoning seems to inform the solution that Tolstoy advances in "The First Step" for curbing our basic animal craving for food: that is, one should strive as much as possible to remove all the pleasure out of eating.<sup>38</sup> As long as a person continues to enjoy the pleasure that eating provides, Tolstoy maintains, there can be no limit to the increase of the desire or appetite for that pleasure. One can keep this gastronomic lust under control only when one does not eat except in obedience to necessity. "The satisfaction of a need has limits," he writes, "but pleasure does not have any limits. For the satisfaction of one's needs, it is necessary and sufficient to eat bread, buckwheat porridge (каша), and rice. While for the augmentation of pleasure, there is no end to the flavorings and seasonings" (*PSS XXIX*, 77). In a lengthy passage that ensues, Tolstoy proceeds to illustrate in elaborate detail how, if we continue to eat tasty and spicy comestibles (rather than these three bland food items), our appetite for gustatory pleasure will never be satisfied but will instead keep growing larger and larger: that is, we will be seduced into piling one more delicious entrée on top of another at a meal.<sup>39</sup> Since eating tasty foods stimulates our desire for additional physical pleasures (both gastronomical and sexual), Tolstoy's solution is thus for us to practice abstinence by striving as much as possible to make "unpalatable" the pleasures of the palate.<sup>40</sup> Our main purpose in eating, after all, is to provide healthy nourishment for the

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<sup>37</sup>In the pamphlet *On the Relations of the Sexes*, Tolstoy makes it clear that the expression "make themselves eunuchs" is to be understood figuratively (as spiritual victory over the flesh) rather than literally (as actual physical mutilation). "I think that self-mutilation is as much a sin as physical union for the sake of pleasure, just as I think that it is equally sinful to overeat or to exhaust oneself by starvation. That food for the body which enables man to serve this fellows is lawful, and that sexual union which continues the race is lawful" (38).

<sup>38</sup>In *Die Pfennig-Sonate* (1890), one of the several parodies of *The Kreutzer Sonata* that arose as part of the counter-literature in the wake of Tolstoy's tale, Sigmar Mehring pokes fun at the connection that Tolstoy makes between sexual and gastronomical abstinence. As Møller summarizes the plot of Mehring's tale, the narrator once again meets Pozdnyshhev on a train and listens to his account of how he killed a second wife. "His account of his second conjugal murder," Møller writes, "is interwoven with a series of nonsensical arguments in favour of total abstinence--from food!" (169). Chekhov, who admitted that Tolstoy's philosophy had informed his own thinking for a number of years, likewise came to see this connection that Tolstoy established between abstinence from sex (chastity) and abstinence from fleshly food (vegetarianism and fasting). In a letter written on 27 March 1894 to A.S. Suvorin, Chekhov explains his growing disenchantment with Tolstoyanism by noting that he saw "more love for mankind in electricity and steam, than in chastity and abstinence from meat" (*PSS XVI*, 133).

<sup>39</sup>The nearly insatiable gastronomical appetite of Nikolai Gogol may well provide a case in point for Tolstoy's argument. In Veresaev's book, one of Gogol's contemporaries (N.F. Zolotarev), commenting on the "extraordinary" appetite of the Russian writer while he lived in Rome, writes the following: "it would happen that we would stop in at some *trattori* to eat dinner, and Gogol would consume an entire meal and the dinner would be over. Then suddenly a new patron would come in and order himself some entrée. Gogol's appetite would suddenly flare up anew and, despite the fact that he had just finished dinner, he would order himself either the same entrée or something different" (215).

<sup>40</sup>"Those things designed to caress the five external senses," Tolstoy observes in his diary in 1901, "are the things that inflame lust" (*PSS LIV*, 86). "The taste of plain food and fruit," he adds, are among those things that "do not arouse lust. It is aroused by...gourmet dishes" (*PSS LIV*, 86).



body, not to derive pleasure, enjoyment or stimulation for our taste buds. Nutrition, rather than gustation, ought to be the primary aim of the activity of eating.<sup>41</sup>

Tolstoy's all-out Victorian attack upon the pleasure principle in connection with both sex (*The Kreutzer Sonata*) and food ("The First Step") enters the realm of aesthetics when, in the essay *What is Art?*, he challenges the notion that "taste" can ever serve as the arbiter of what constitutes good art. Any theory that defines art on the basis of the pleasure derived from an aesthetic object will necessarily be a false one. To substantiate this claim, Tolstoy makes use of the following gastronomic analogy:

If we were to analyze the question of food, it would not occur to anyone to see the importance of food in the pleasure that we receive from eating it. Everyone understands that the satisfaction of our taste can in no way serve as the basis for our determination of the merits of food, and that we therefore have no right to suppose that the dinners with cayenne pepper, limburger cheese, alcohol, etc., to which we are accustomed and which please us, constitute the very best human food.... To see the aim and purpose of art in the pleasure we get from it is like assuming...that the purpose and aim of food consists in the pleasure derived from consuming it. (*PSS XXX*, 60-1)

"People came to understand that the meaning of food resides in the nourishment of the body only when they ceased to consider that the aim of that activity is pleasure," Tolstoy continues. "And the same is true with regard to art. People will come to understand the meaning of art only when they cease to consider that the aim of that activity is beauty, i.e. pleasure" (*PSS XXX*, 61). In art as in life, therefore, one must judge the quality of an object not in terms of the pleasure it may give, but rather of the nutritive purpose--moral or physiological--that it serves. Counterfeit art, like perverted sex and rich foods, succeeds only in "stupefying" people since it debilitates their moral constitution and weakens their spiritual strength.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Tolstoy sounds very much like a "Grahamite" when he expounds his functional approach to eating. Listen, for instance, to what Graham has to say about the dangers of gastronomic pleasure in a lecture that addresses the issue of juvenile masturbation: "But when we make gustatory enjoyment the ulterior and paramount object of eating and drinking, and one of the principal sources of pleasure in life, and, according to the proverb 'Live to eat,' and eat for the sake of sensual indulgence, and make our rational powers the panders of our appetites, we deprave the propensities of instinct, disorder the body, impair the intellectual faculties, darken the moral sense, and blindly pursue a course which inevitably leads to the worst of evils" (31).

<sup>42</sup>In his later years, Tolstoy quite frequently drew analogies between art and food, using gastronomic tropes as a way to describe the processes of intellectual, moral and spiritual ingestion. "We eat sauces, meat, sugar, sweets--we overeat and think nothing of it. It doesn't even occur to us that it's bad," he writes in 1890. "And yet catarrh of the stomach is an epidemic ailment of our way of life. Isn't the same true of sweet aesthetic food--poems, novels, sonatas, operas, romances, paintings, statues? The same catarrh of the brain. The inability to digest or even to take wholesome food, and the result--death" (*PSS LI*, 45). In the second of his "Three Parables" (1895), meanwhile, Tolstoy uses an extended metaphor about adulterated food to convey his point about the counterfeit nature of the art and science that he had been "fed" in his day (*PSS XXXI*, 60-2). Goscilo finds Tolstoy's use of these reductive tropes--through which he compares art to food--both crude and inaccurate. After all, as she reminds us, "our ingestion of food culminates, literally, in excretion" (494).

SPIRITUAL MALNUTRITION:  
FUNCTIONAL EATING, DYSFUNCTIONAL DIETING

In his quest to remove all the pleasure out of the consumption of food, sex and even art, Tolstoy thus maintained a highly "functional," utilitarian attitude in his approach to these three basic elements of human life. In the gastronomic realm, as we have seen, this type of orientation manifested itself in Tolstoy's advocacy of such radical dietary practices as fasting, vegetarianism, and a menu of simple, bland foods. Ironically enough, however, Tolstoy's adherence to a vegetarian diet, which he claimed never consciously to have betrayed and which he alleged never cost him any effort or deprivation,<sup>43</sup> coincided almost exactly with the onset of the chronic digestive problems with his stomach that would plague him throughout the remainder of his life. Although Tolstoy boasted about the inexpensive yet nutritious vegetarian diet that he followed, his wife complained not merely of the burden such a special diet placed upon her as a homemaker (by forcing her to have two menus prepared for every meal instead of just one). She also lamented the fact that this "abominable" and "senseless" diet was having quite a ruinous effect upon her husband's once robust health.<sup>44</sup> In Sophia's opinion, Lev's vegetarian diet did not give him nearly enough nourishment; indeed, she believed that it was directly responsible for his rapidly deteriorating physical condition and his constant bouts with digestive ailments (the doctors diagnosed him as having severe catarrh of the stomach) (1:139). "An old man of sixty-nine," she objected, "really shouldn't eat this sort of food, which just bloats him up and doesn't give him any nourishment at all!" (3:35).<sup>45</sup> According to Tolstoy's utilitarian approach to food, the purpose in eating a rather bland vegetarian diet, of course, was for its nutritional value rather than its pleasing taste. His wife's testimony, however, asserts that, in strictly physiological terms at least, his "functional" diet had proven after all to be quite "dysfunctional."

In light of what we know today about the nutritional benefits of a vegetarian diet (not to mention Tolstoy's longevity), Sophia's concern for her husband's health seems

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<sup>43</sup>In response to a letter from A.D. Zutphen, a Dutch medical student who had read in a newspaper about Tolstoy's frugal meals and wrote to inquire about the writer's diet, Tolstoy wrote, "My diet consists mainly of hot oatmeal porridge, which I eat two times a day with whole wheat bread (graham bread). In addition to this, at dinner I eat cabbage soup or potato soup, buckwheat porridge or a potato, either boiled or fried in sunflower oil or mustard oil, and apple and prune compote. Dinner, which I eat together with my family, can be replaced, as I have tried to do, by simply oatmeal porridge, which serves as my basic diet. My health not only has not suffered; it has in fact improved significantly since I have given up milk, butter, and eggs, as well as sugar, tea and coffee" (*PSS LXVII*, 32).

<sup>44</sup>"Lev Nikolaevich is unwell," Sophia records in her diary for 14 March 1887. "He has bad indigestion and stomach aches, and yet he eats the most senseless diet; first it's rich food, then vegetarian food, then rum and water, and so on" (1:139).

<sup>45</sup>Sophia was even more upset that two of his daughters were likewise experiencing chronic ill health due, she insisted, to the vegetarian diet their father had convinced them to follow. "Yet one more sacrifice to Lev Nikolaevich's principles!" she noted bitterly (3:35). The stormy relationship that developed between Tolstoy and his wife following his conversion is chronicled by Smoluchowski and Feiler.

rather misplaced. Indeed, Lev's vegetarianism was for her mainly paradigmatic of what she considered the many eccentric ideas her husband had begun to preach after his midlife crisis, when he seemed to have abandoned so many of his earlier values, beliefs and practices. His abandonment of a normal diet, therefore, struck her as but another behavioral abnormality that she could only hope would prove short-lived rather than permanent. "I should be happy to see him healthy again--instead of ruining his stomach with all this (in the doctor's words) harmful food," she noted sadly in 1891. "I should be happy to see him an artist again--instead of writing sermons which masquerade as articles. I should be happy to see him affectionate, attentive, and kind again--instead of this crude sensuality, followed by indifference" (2:50). As this diary entry strongly suggests, Sophia considered her husband's advocacy of vegetarianism, much like his sexual ideal of celibacy and his religious ideal of brotherly love, not merely counterproductive; to her mind, it was also patently hypocritical. Indeed, she seemed to derive special pleasure from pointing out those occasions when the "saint" and "prophet" from Yasnaya Polyana failed--with respect to food and sex--to practice what he preached. As far as sex is concerned, Sophia contends in her diary that the physical side of love continued to be very important to her husband, who seems to have remained quite concupiscent even though he had already passed the age of sixty-five and was publicly preaching absolute marital chastity.<sup>46</sup> "If only those who read *The Kreutzer Sonata* with such reverence could catch a glance of the voluptuous life he leads, and realized that it was only this that made him happy and good-natured," she wrote in 1891 following one of her husband's sudden (bulimic?) outbursts of sexual passion, "then they would cast their deity down from the pedestal on which they have placed him!" (2:18). Sophia likewise questioned the authenticity of his Christian love, since it was practiced by a man who seemed to her to have so little compassion for the members of his own family. "Oh, this sham Christianity, founded on hatred for those closest to you" (4:199), she exclaimed angrily amidst all the legal wrangling over her husband's will and the personal quarrels that went on with Chertkov and other of Tolstoy's followers in the period just prior to his death.

This purported sexual and religious hypocrisy on her husband's part, Sophia insisted, was matched by his gastronomic insincerity as well. Although in his publicistic writings he preached moderation in food consumption, abstinence from meat, and simplicity as well as blandness in diet, Tolstoy apparently continued in his private life to succumb to the sinful temptations presented by the pleasures of the table.<sup>47</sup> In her diary, where she in effect chronicles the persistent digestive troubles that Tolstoy experienced during the last part of his life, Sophia repeatedly upbraids her husband for eating enormous

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<sup>46</sup>"I often suffer because his love for me is physical, more than emotional" (2:132), she would write as late as 1897, when Lev Nikolaevich was almost seventy years old.

<sup>47</sup>Sophia seems to have felt that the chances of maintaining gastronomic abstinence were as slim as they were of maintaining sexual celibacy. "Over tea we had a conversation about food, luxury and the vegetarian diet that Lyovochka is always preaching," she notes in 1891. "He said that he had seen a vegetarian diet in some German newspaper which recommended a dinner of bread and almonds. I am quite sure that the man who is preaching that keeps to such a régime in much the same way as Lyovochka practices the chastity he preaches in *The Kreutzer Sonata*" (2:14).

amounts of food--often at the wrong time of day and usually on a weak stomach. "Just before he left, he greedily gulped down some treats we had got for little Andriusha's sixth birthday--some dumplings, grapes, a pear and some chocolates," she writes soon after her husband's recovery from a bout with stomach pain in December 1901. "And now look what happens. The moment he gets a little better he undoes it all with his intemperate appetite and excessive activity" (3:160). On more than one occasion Sophia claimed that she had to take steps to guard against her husband upsetting his stomach through overeating. "Being healthy evidently bores him," she noted sardonically with regard to his immoderate eating habits (2:10). As was true with so many other aspects of his life, Tolstoy's indulgent gastronomic behavior in the privacy of his own home seemed to her to be greatly at variance with the rigid principles of abstinence that he preached in public. Even during the final year of his life, she would lament the glaring discrepancy that she saw between his ethical tenets on the one hand and his actual personal conduct on the other.

How much more spiritually inclined he was a few years ago! How sincerely he aspired to live simply, to sacrifice all luxuries, and to be good, honest, and open; to be sublimely, spiritually inclined! Now he enjoys himself quite openly, loves good food, a good horse, cards, music, chess, cheerful company and having hundreds of photographs taken of himself. (4:177)

Her husband's attempt to improve himself spiritually, through a rigorous brand of Christian asceticism, thus seemed to be undermined by what she considered to be the relatively sybaritic lifestyle that he continued to maintain on his gentry estate. In her opinion, his radical "diet" had turned out to be dysfunctional not only for his physical health, but for his spiritual health as well.<sup>48</sup>

Sophia's perspective on Tolstoy's dietary practices--and, indeed, on his post-conversion Christian beliefs generally--is not without some decided bias, of course. Yet Tolstoy himself confessed to being deeply troubled by the chasm that existed between the luxurious way of life that he and his aristocratic family enjoyed at Yasnaya Polyana and the terrible hunger and deprivation that characterized the situation of the peasants who lived nearby. For Tolstoy, the socio-economic inequity that lay at the base of the entire class structure in Russia gave rise to this sharp contrast between the wealth of the upper classes and the poverty of the lower classes, a contrast that for him repeatedly found expression in gastronomic terms: food came to serve in his writings as one of the chief measures of a life lived rightly or wrongly. The idle, luxurious life of the aristocratic Tolstoy family was thus frequently emblemized by the excessive gorging that went on at their dinner table, where a large number of relatives, friends, and guests would regularly sit down to a veritable orgy of excessive eating and drinking. Alongside all this shameless feasting, meanwhile, there lived hungry, ill-clad servants who were oppressed by the endless toil they were forced to exert daily in their efforts to feed these comfortable social parasites. "I had no dinner," Tolstoy records in his diary in April 1910;

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<sup>48</sup>Those efforts at spiritualization were doomed to be ineffectual, Mann, Merezhkovsky, and Gorky would argue, because they were undertaken by such an unregenerate and earthy pagan as Tolstoy.

I felt a tormenting anguish from the awareness of the vileness of my life among people who are working so that they can just barely save themselves from a cold, hungry death, save themselves and their families. Yesterday there were fifteen people gorging themselves with pancakes, while five or six domestics were running about, barely managing to prepare and then serve the fodder. (PSS LVIII, 37)<sup>49</sup>

As a result of his volunteer work with famine relief, during which time he helped to set up free food kitchens in various parts of the country, Tolstoy was well aware of the terrible hunger that afflicted thousands of poor peasants daily throughout Russia. Despite the charitable relief efforts that he and some other members of his privileged class undertook to help feed these starving people, Tolstoy realized full well that in socio-economic terms, as he put it, "we live by devouring the labors of thousands of people" (PSS LXVIII, 244).<sup>50</sup>

Tolstoy's feeling of shame at the wide disparity between rich and poor in his country was only further exacerbated, therefore, by the knowledge that he himself continued to succumb at times to the gastronomic indulgence that he condemned so roundly in the Russian gentry. Indeed, the shame must have intensified even further in light of Tolstoy's well-publicized views on abstinence, fasting, and diet. "I am sensual and I lead an idle, well-fed life," he reproaches himself in a letter to Chertkov in 1884 (PSS LXXXV, 80). As late as 1908 he would still find himself unable to keep from drinking excessive amounts of coffee: "Always too much--I can't restrain myself" (PSS LVI, 110). In the secret diary that he began to keep in 1908, Tolstoy would even admit that Sophia was right to taunt him about eating asparagus on the sly while preaching culinary simplicity (PSS LVI, 173). In one of the more telling entries in her diary, meanwhile, Sophia expresses the torment she felt while reading drafts of *Resurrection*, and realizing that her husband, already an old man of seventy, could describe with such extraordinary gusto, "like a gastronome savoring some particularly delicious piece of food," the secrets of carnality between the chambermaid and the officer depicted in Tolstoy's final novel (3:81). While food and sex may well have become socially, morally and spiritually "unpalatable" for Tolstoy after his conversion, Sophia's testimony and the Russian author's own writings suggest that these objects of desire had lost few of their sensual charms and little of their physical attraction for the old apostly of Yasnaya Polyana. "All life is a struggle between the flesh and the spirit," Tolstoy had written in 1895, "and gradually the spirit triumphs over the flesh" (PSS LII, 26). Such existential optimism is tempered, however, by the more candid remark he reportedly made to Gorky that "the flesh rages and riots, and the spirit follows it helpless and miserable" (53).

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<sup>49</sup>"It's impossible to eat even porridge or peacefully have a roll with tea," Tolstoy observes in a letter written in May 1886, "when you live with the knowledge that right by you there are people you know--children...who are going to bed without any bread" (PSS LXXXIII, 568).

<sup>50</sup>"I am living abominably," Tolstoy writes in the midst of the famine relief efforts in 1891. "I don't know myself how I got dragged into this abominable affair, this work of feeding the starving, because it isn't for me to feed those by whom I am fed. But I got dragged in, with the result that I now find myself distributing the vomit puked up by the rich" (PSS LXVI, 94).

Although Tolstoy may have sought in his later years to follow a rigid ascetic diet that he hoped would feed his spiritual rather than his animal nature, the Russian author never did lose entirely his physical appetite for food and sex. He never completely ceased to crave those pleasures of the flesh and the palate that gratified his body rather than nourished his soul.

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