

The Analogy Between Food And Art: Tolstoy and Eaton

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In her discussion of consequential theories of aesthetic value, Marcia Eaton presents Tolstoy's food analogy to explain "a confusion he thought accounted for the prevalence of counterfeit art and a misunderstanding about what constitutes real value."¹ In the end, Eaton concludes that "the analogy is not very helpful." I find her argument wanting, and this has prompted me to reexamine the Count's analogical argument. Below I shall review and analyze his argument, look at Eaton's analysis and criticism, and suggest (with her assistance) an alternative interpretation which centers around her definition of "art."

Tolstoy starts out with a generalization against inherent theories of aesthetic values which Monroe Beardsley² and Professor Eaton (129,143) wish to defend – "If we say that the aim of *any* activity is merely our pleasure and define it solely by that pleasure, our definition will evidently be a false one."³ If this is true of any human activity, surely it is true of art and food, so one commonality is established for the analogy, at least in Tolstoy's mind. He tells us what an adequate definition must consist of: "In order to define any human activity, it is necessary to understand its sense and importance; and in order to do this it is primarily necessary to examine that activity in itself, in its dependence on its causes and in connexion with its effects, and not merely in relation to the pleasure we can get from it" (116). Tolstoy sets up the first half of the analogical argument this way:

But this [defining an activity by our pleasure in it] is precisely what has occurred in the efforts to define art. Now if we consider the food question it will not occur to any one to affirm that the importance of food consists in the pleasure we receive when eating it. Everybody understands that the satisfaction of our taste cannot serve as a basis for our definition of the merits of food, and that we have therefore no right to presuppose that dinners with cayenne pepper, Limburg cheese, alcohol, and so on, to which we are accustomed and which please us [he is speaking of the Russian

diet here!], form the very best human food. (116; clauses in braces are added)

Tolstoy at this juncture makes the inferential move from the food question to art: "In the same way beauty, or that which pleases us, can in no sense serve as a basis for the definition of art; nor can a series of objects which afford us pleasure serve as the model of what art should be" (116-117). There is no connection made among objects which would give the series definitive power by pleasure – it is a reflection upon *us* rather than the objects. The central portion of his extended argument is given in the following passage:

Just as people who conceive the aim and purpose of food to be pleasure cannot recognize the real meaning of eating, so people who consider the aim of art to be pleasure cannot realize its true meaning and purpose, because they attribute to an activity the meaning of which lies in its connexion with other phenomena of life, the false and exceptional aim of pleasure. People come to understand that the meaning of eating lies in the nourishment of the body, only when they cease to consider that the object of that activity is pleasure. And it is the same 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, that is to say, pleasure . . . And since discussions as to why one man likes pears and another prefers meat do not help towards finding a definition of what is essential in nourishment, so the solution of questions of taste in art (to which the discussions on art involuntarily come) not only does not help to make clear in what this particular human activity which we call art really consists, but renders such elucidation quite impossible until we rid ourselves of a conception which justifies every kind of art at the cost of confusing the whole matter. (117-118)

Now let us put Tolstoy's argument from analogy into standard form. The model (or one version of it)⁴ is:

X and Y are alike. [An assumed premise which leads to the others.]

Things of type X have the properties of p, q, r, etc., and z.

Things of type Y have the properties of p, q, r, etc.

Things of type Y also have property z.

Instantiated, the argument of Tolstoy looks like this:

Food and art are alike. Food has the properties of not being solely pleasure, pleasing C the best, and nourishment. Art has the properties of not being solely pleasure, *pleasing (enjoyable) the best (true art)*. Art also has real value like nourishment (an internal, defining component) of the soul, which Tolstoy later calls "spiritual food" (250): the communication of sincere feeling.

Eaton comments on the conclusion when she remarks: "Art, like food, is *really important*, and it could not be, Tolstoy reflected, if all it did were to give us pleasure. Its real value must lie in the contribution it makes to a healthy individual and a healthy society" (130; her emphasis). After a promising account of Tolstoy's analogical argument, she ends with this brief criticism:

Tolstoy failed to realize – or to admit – that even people who are forced to eat only nutritious food usually prefer something "tasty," at least occasionally. What is true of food may well be true of art. Thus the analogy is not very helpful. (130).

Now, I do not think Tolstoy would have distinguished the two – tasty from nutritious. Obviously food can (can probably should) be both, and the food of the peasant or lower class was usually both nutritious *and* tasty. We shouldn't think of hospital food when we are considering the nutritional value of food at this point. (But imagine Santa Fean New Mexican food, like Josie's or Maria's.)

There are numerous descriptions of peasant food in Tolstoy's major fiction, and one episode that comes to mind is from *Anna Karenina* where Levin had been out mowing with the peasants and they had taken a break.

The peasants got ready for dinner. Some washed, the young lads bathed in the stream, others made a place comfortable for a rest, untied their sacks of bread, and uncovered the pitchers of kvass. [for an explanation of this beverage, see footnote.] The old man crumbled up some bread in a cup, stirred it with the handle of a spoon, poured water on it from his whetstone-case, broke up some more bread, and . . . seasoned it with salt . . . "Come, master, taste my sop," said he, kneeling down before the cup. The sop was so good that Levin gave up the idea of going home for dinner.³

By this quote I do not mean to imply that we are to identify Tolstoy with his character Levin. What I do suggest by this kind of passage (of which this is only one example) is that Tolstoy did entertain the nutritious and the pleasurable (or tasty) with respect to food. It is just that the former is the aim or purpose and the latter is its main effect (and hence we should not lose sight of it, the pleasurable). So Eaton's claim about people preferring tasty to nutritious is unfounded because both attributions can be (and should be) made to food; hence, her conclusion does not follow or is at least poorly supported. Tolstoy was aware of these issues in regard to food and his fiction testify to this circumstance. But this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The most telling description of food that is both nutritious and pleasurable comes from Aylmer Maude's paraphrase of Tolstoy's thought in his essay "Tolstoy's View of Art" (1990) where the Count predicts: "The good art of the future should be superior to

our present art in clearness, *beauty*, simplicity, and compression, for one penalty of forgetting the primary aim of art is that we greatly lose that which is *a natural accompaniment of art – the pleasure given by beauty*. We are like men who, living to eat, eventually lose even *the natural pleasure food affords to those who eat to live*.⁶ Such a remark clearly casts doubt on Eaton's first premise. Tolstoy's objection to pleasure is as to the aim or object of an activity – whether food or art – and not with pleasure *per se*.

It is with the other half of the distinction in the analogy that I have questions – the nourishment part. Does peasant food have real or nutritional value? The Russian diet seems to be wanting in this regard; after all, how nutritious is the old man's sop which Levin found so good that he gave up the idea of going home for dinner? What was Levin's dinner menu? In a passage (I, 177-178) where dinner is served to a guest at Levin's country estate the preliminary course consisted of bread-and-butter, salt goose and salted mushrooms, and herb-brandy. The nettle soup was next, followed by chicken in white sauce and white Crimean wine. Elsewhere (I, 189) fried eggs are mentioned for supper served with herb-brandy. One may have doubts about the old man's sop, but "sops" were really "soups" when it came to the cuisine of the people:

In the old (pre-revolutionary) days, the peasant returning from a long day of labor in the fields joined his family around a crude wooden table in a tiny – sometimes a one – room – wooden cottage. Their repast, illuminated by weak oil lamps or flickering candles, consisted of a single nourishing course. It was simple and cheap, but hearty and flavorful. The head of the house cut the loaf of sour, dark Russian bread (the most important food staple) into thick slabs and a steaming bowl of *borshch* (beet soup) or *shchi* (cabbage soup) or *ukha* (fish soup) was passed around. When the soup was thin, as it often was, plates heaped high with the coarse cooked grain call *kasha* helped fill the diners' stomachs. The food was lightened – and the spirits of the family lifted – by glass after glass of *kvas(s)*.⁷

Such a description is frequently found with literary variation in Tolstoy's fiction. In a Moscow restaurant (the *England*), Tolstoy (I, 41-44) describes the dinner options: turbot, a fish snack, vodka (an aperitif), fresh oysters (Flensburg, not Ostend, although the latter were preferable), cabbage soup, porridge *a la Russe*, white bread, clear soup with vegetables, roast beef with capons, white seal, stewed fruitage (for dessert), Parmesan cheese, and to drink with a the meal, the wines were Champagne, Nuits, and Chablis. The soup and the porridge appealed most to Levin (since they are food of the people). In the course of the dinner Stepan Arkadyevich remarks the aim of culture is to make everything a source of enjoyment, and Levin responds, "Well, if that's its aim, I'd rather be a savage"

(I, 44). Levin was horrified at the meal's cost – over 26 roubles (I, 51). “Levin belonged to the second class” (I, 59) of Russian high society. An example of the sort of thing which Tolstoy despised in the Czars' dietary habits is contained in the following episode:

“They (the Schutzburges) asked my husband and myself to dinner, and I was told that the sauce at that dinner cost a thousand roubles,” Princess Miaghkaia said, speaking loudly, conscious that all were listening; “and very nasty sauce it was – some green mess. We had to ask them, and I made a sause for eighty-five kopecks, and everyone was very much pleased with it. I can't afford thousand-rouble sauces.” (I, 150)

Her sentiment was exactly Levin's and indeed the Count's, too.

Eaton's premise in her criticism is curious for another reason because Tolstoy's instances of peasant art are usually those of people who are enjoying themselves. He writes of the singing of a “choir” (really just an informal group) of peasant women who sang with “a definite feeling of joy, cheerfulness, and energy, was expressed, that without noticing how it infected me” (221). This incident found its way into *Anna* where he narrates: “The women, all singing, began to come close to Levin, and he felt as though a storm were swooping down upon him with a thunder of merriment ... and the whole meadow and distant fields all seemed to be shaking and singing to the measures of this wild merry song, with its shouts and whistles and clapping. Levin felt envious of this health and mirthfulness; he longed to take part in the expression of this joy of life” (I, 302). So, of course, Tolstoy realized and admitted true art – real or genuine art – could be pleasurable – just like food could be; consequently, contrary to Eaton, the analogy, I think, is very helpful and moreover appropriate.

One of the reasons why is that the nutrition/pleasure confusion in food is seen in art with the confusion of real value and instrumental value (i.e., pleasure). “The art of commoners communicates sincere feeling, according to Tolstoy,” Eaton reasons, “and hence has genuine value” (130), much like a “hungry animal eagerly clutches every object it can get, hoping to find nourishment in it” (*Anna*, II, 33) and not seeking pleasure in it, although pleasure may accompany it, it is not to be confused with its real value (see note 6). One of the marks of a good analogy is that the Xs and Ys have essential or characteristically shared attributes or features; the food analogy does possess these. And we expect something like this of someone of the literary stature of Tolstoy who has such masterful, fictional skills and imagination. Writers like Tolstoy are masters of metaphor, description, and analogy, and their works of fiction are exquisite blends of these linguistic elements.

To drive this point home, we can use food as a test case for Eaton's definition of "art":

X is a work of art if and only if X is an artifact and X is discussed in such a way that information concerning its history of production brings the audience to attend to intrinsic properties considered worthy of attention in aesthetic traditions (history, criticism, theory).⁸

For X within the domain of food, I shall talk about bread, A Daily Loaf, *pain ordinaire* Careme. Here is what Bernard Clayton has to say about Careme (1784-1833) and his bread:

The great eighteenth-century French cook and founder of *la grande cuisine*, Antonin Careme, wrote of grand dishes for princes and kings, yet he created an ordinary loaf of bread that has been passed down from one generation of bakers to the next for more than 175 years. Careme, who has been called the cook of kings and the king of cooks, wrote: "Cooks who travel with their gastronomically minded masters can, from now on, by following this method, procure fresh bread each day." This excellent bread is made with hard wheat bread flour to give the dough the ability to withstand the expansion it undergoes when it rises more than three times its original volume. Baking at high heat provides the oven-spring that makes possible the formation of a large cellular structure, the distinguishing characteristic of *pain ordinaire*.⁹

First of all, our *pain ordinaire* is an artifact – something created from a recipe by a baker (a skilled craftsman) – much like a particular musical performance by musicians following a score. The particular loaf will vary with weather conditions, room conditions, who is making it, and so on, much like the musical performance will vary by who is playing it, where, when, and so on. But the essential defining characteristics of the loaf do not vary, so it is identifiable as *pain ordinaire*: Identity and repeatability are necessary conditions for something to be considered one of the languages of art (see Eaton, *BIA*, ch.4).

Pain ordinaire, our X, is also discussed by Bernard Clayton, and many others,¹⁰ in such a way that information (the type of flour used, the dough's expansion, the baking, and so on) concerning its history of production (Careme's life and times, his method and writings) brings the audience (that numbers into the thousands of cooking fanatics) to attend to intrinsic properties (the bread's shape, color, weight, smell, taste, and "large cellular structure") considered worthy of attention in aesthetic traditions (history, criticism, theory). For this last condition – the aesthetic – we have been witnessing the revising of views about what constitutes the canon of art in addition to technological changes in

cooking which bring us to attend to qualities that are finally being recognized as worthy of serious aesthetic attention(see Eaton, 95). (Think of all the refined cookbooks, choice magazines, gourmet cooking shows on TV, and fine restaurants that pay attention to these details.) The way food is made, presented, and appreciated can elevate it to an art form. Indeed, in some cases it is or has been a work of art.¹¹ My test case can be further augmented, but I think my claim has been established.

So if food satisfies Eaton's definition of "art" (and I have shown that in the above paragraph), then food has the essential properties (necessary and sufficient conditions) to be regarded as art – whether from the standpoint of identity (Eaton or my interpretation of Eaton) or analogy (Tolstoy). In fact, given some of the activities Tolstoy includes as genuine art (triumphal marches, utensils, jest, dress, the ornamentation of houses), he probably would be amicable to the inclusion of food on its list. Cooking and eating could be ways of communicating sincere feelings towards one another (as *gestures* perhaps) in a family or a group, e.g., our (American) Thanksgiving dinner which is as much celebration of certain traditional values as it is a meal. Symbolism is present here.

Towards the end, Eaton argues for a position which is remarkably close to Tolstoy's: "If by 'inherent' one means 'separable from all other areas of our experience', then aesthetic value is consequential. If 'consequential' means 'independent of the pleasure or displeasure the object itself gives us', then aesthetic value must be inherent. Both factors, I think, are part of aesthetic experiences" (145). Given what I have presented above. Tolstoy would probably agree. He could have well made the following statement by Professor Eaton: "The consequences of engaging in aesthetic activity are often as important as the inherent pleasure obtained from them" (144). She combines these two theories in much the same way she combines the moral and the aesthetic – something Tolstoy would have certainly approved of.

The analogy, as I have claimed above, is a good one, but that does not mean that it is not without faults. As the passages from *Anna* indicate, Tolstoy romanticizes the peasants and their food through the eyes of Levin. This is clearly a shortcoming, but by itself this criticism is not devastating. Tolstoy sees a connection between peasant cuisine and the cuisine of the upper classes. Elite cuisine becomes corrupted and loses sight of its purpose when it no longer has peasant (or regional) cuisine as its base. Expert or erudite cuisine (of the upper classes for Tolstoy), as Jean-Francois Ravel describes it,¹² as "*bad international cuisine that transports the picturesqueness of a regional dish (i.e., peasant or popular cuisine) without transposing its principles*, because they have not been understood. When such comprehension exists, on the other hand, real (or

good) Grand Cuisine can sometimes give the diversity of local registers an interpretation that is at once faithful and new" (247; his emphases, bracketed phrases added). He adds that "a chef who loses all contact with popular cuisine rarely succeeds in putting something really exquisite together.

Furthermore, it is a striking fact that truly great erudite cuisine has arisen principally in places where a tasty and varied traditional cuisine already existed, serving it as a sort of basis" (149). Tolstoy anticipates the dialectical relationship between these two cuisines in his discussions of food. Consequently Tolstoy looking back to pleasant food or cuisine as the paradigm of what it should be is not without foundation in the food literature, e.g., Revel's account.

Perhaps I should, in closing, heed the advice of the poet A. R. Ammons: "argument is like dining: mess with a nice dinner long enough, it's garbage."¹³ Maybe I messed too long with the food analogy.¹⁴

Notes and References

1. Marcia Muelder Eaton. *Basic Issues in Aesthetics* (Belmont California : Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988), 130. Hereafter, references or citations will be made by page number within parentheses in the body of the paper; this includes Eaton's *BIA* plus those listed below.
2. Monroe Beardsley. *Aesthetics* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanoivich, 1958), 531.
3. Leo Tolstoy. *What Is Art? And Essays on Art*, translated by Aylmer Maude (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 116; emphasis added.
4. See, for example, Robert D. Boyd. *Critical Reasoning : The Fixation of Belief* (Bessemer, Alabama: Colonial Press, 1992), 124-126.
5. Leo Tolstoy. *Anna Karenina*, translated by Constance Garnett (Two Volumes; Moscow: State Publishing House for Fiction and Poetry, 1933), I, 279. *Kvass* is a beer of slight alcoholic content and mildly acid flavor usually made in the home by the Russian people by pouring warm water over a mixture of rye, barley, and other cereals and allowing it to ferment. See John Ayto, *The Diner's Dictionary : Food and Drink from A to Z* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1993), 186.
6. Aylmer Maude. *Tolstoy on Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), 368-369; emphases added. A later critic, John Bayley in *Tolstoy and the Novel* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966/1988) believes: "Tolstoy's central conviction that bad art is an affair of the will is expressed more powerfully in the narration of *Anna* than in his theoretical statements. Such artistic activity-whether as producer of spectator-means that one's life is not proceeding along natural, simple and inevitable lines. To amuse oneself with art is like amusing oneself with food, or with sex, and making a diversion out of something

that should be an essential' (235). Obviously Bayley is persuaded by the analogy and primarily for the reasons that Maude and I have cited.

7. Helen and George Paspshvily. *Russian Cooking* (Foods of the World series; New York: Time-Life Books, 1969), 65. See ch. III for receipts and cultural details that surround them (65-99).
8. *BIA*, 94, and in Eaton's *Art and Nonart: Reflections on an Orange Crate and a Moose Call* (East Brunswick: Associated University Presses, 1983), 99-122.
9. Bernard Clayton, Jr., *The Complete Book of Breads* (Revised Edition; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 253.
10. See Reay Tannahill, *Food in History* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1973), 333-342; Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat, *A History of Food*, translated from the French by Anthea Bell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 535, 731-734; and almost every cookbook devoted to bread.
11. As Laura Esquivel relates in her novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, translated by Carol and Thomas Christensen (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 230: "Esperanza and Alex spent many afternoons following these recipes to the letter so they could make invitations that were unique, and in that they had succeeded. Each was a work of art. They were the product of crafts that have, unfortunately, gone out of style, like long dresses, love letters, and the waltz." And "On Food and Happiness," Charles Simic recalls, "Like pizza today, it's [burek is] usually good no matter where you get it, but it can also be a work of art." In *Not for Bread Alone: Writers on Food, Wine, and the Art of Eating*, edited by Daniel Halpern (Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1993), 19.
12. Jean-Francois Revel. *Culture and Cuisine* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1982), and excerpts in *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food*, edited by Deane W. Curtin and Lisa M. Heldke (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 145-152 and 244-250, from which my references are taken.
13. A. R. Ammons. *Garbage: A Poem* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993/1994), 68.
14. For more on the food/art question, see Marianne L. Quinet's interesting study, "Food as Art: The Problem of Function," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, XXI #2 (Spring 1981): 159-171; and for philosophical hints, see M.F.K. Fisher, *The Art of Eating* (Vintage Books; New York: Random House, 1976), e.g., 265: "eating meat [when herbal butters are added] becomes not a physical function, like breathing or defecating, but an agreeable and almost [? ! ; what about is an] intellectual satisfaction of the senses" (emphasis added). Quinet quotes this passage in the conclusion of her study; it would make a good beginning for an exploration between food and philosophy.

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