The symbolist period (roughly 1880–1910) in Russian criticism and literature is characterized by extreme variation in opinions of Tolstoy. He was adored by some and condemned by others. For some reason, perhaps because no one ever seriously questioned his accomplishments as an artist, his art was not studied too closely by the Russian symbolists. Although the symbolists produced many outstanding artists, writers, and poets who were also fine critics and scholars, they did not produce many serious studies of Tolstoy. Apart from Merezhkovsky's massive study and, to some extent, Andrei Bely's interesting pamphlet, which will be discussed below, the symbolists simply voiced general approval of Tolstoy as a great Russian sage. They wrote short articles on occasions such as his eightieth anniversary and his death, as did Valerii Briusov, or they painted metaphoric tributes like the poet Alexander Blok's comparison of Tolstoy to a sun shining over Russia. His descriptions were often said to be either worthy of a painter's efforts or reminiscent of a particular painter. When a description or visual image was considered too detailed, comparison was made to the Dutch school of painting, because, like the Dutch artists, Tolstoy left nothing for the imagination of the reader to fill in. In fact, some of the judgments were excessively favorable, at least as the merits of the works have been sifted by time. It is noteworthy that the symbolists, unlike almost everyone else on the scene, resisted the temptation to divide...
Tolstoy into two parts, one the great artist and the other a poor thinker, which was a popular pastime among civic critics. To the symbolists, the connection between Tolstoy's intuitive artistic and rational intellectual dispositions was real and could not be severed to any meaningful purpose. According to the symbolists, it was the thinker who was largely responsible for the artist, and vice versa. By and large, however, the symbolists estimated the value of Tolstoy, his work, and his personality with methods that left something to be desired and, by today's standards, can hardly be considered accurate or scientific.

The controversial symbolist critic Volynsky (pseudonym of A. L. Flekser [1863–1926]) wrote a highly impressionistic review of Tolstoy's work. He evidently shared Merezhkovsky's opinion that the circumstances of fin-de-siècle Russia were comparable to those of the Italian Renaissance, insofar as they were in both instances the result of change from a tribal to a civilized society and a homogeneous culture. He visualized the modern period in Russia as a time of drastic changes that stimulated vigorous intellectual activity, which would subside when the transition was complete. The Renaissance, beginning with the invention of the printing press, had been such a period in Western Europe; it transformed a slowly developing manuscript culture to a rapidly changing scientific culture. A parallel change had occurred in antiquity, when an oral culture became a literate one in Greece, accompanied by an unprecedented flowering of the arts and intellectual achievement. In Russia both these changes were essentially taking place at once, spelling some dangers for the stability of the national soul. In the course of less than two centuries Russia developed not only from an oral to a literate culture but also to a modern, homogeneous scientific culture. Naturally, the tensions involved in such a process were extraordinary, and, Flekser found, they were reflected in the works of outstanding writers such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. But Flekser, although aware of the extraordinary qualities of the intellectual climate in Russia at the time, interpreted them metaphysically, rather than psychologically; he surveyed the time as a period of inexplicable interference by destiny, and Tolstoy as its tool: a focusing device at the crossroads of history, a device in which the phenomenal material and the noumenal ideal substance of reality were being fused into new, meaningful, and profoundly mysterious forces that would continue to shape the destiny of man.
Andrei Bely (pseudonym of Boris Bugaev [1880–1934]) adopted a comparable romantic attitude. He wrote a short article\(^4\) that he then expanded into a pamphlet on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as the bearers of ill tidings about the approaching end of an era.\(^5\) Like many critics of this unusually subjective period, he was airing his own opinions as much as writing a critique. Primarily, though, Bely was interested in the creative process as such. He interpreted great talent as a cosmic phenomenon, an extraordinary event in the life of a nation and a tragic one in the life of the individual, a fatal process of which both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were the victims. Bely claimed that a genius could be compared to a person hit by lightning, except that his destruction proceeded slowly. A burst of inhuman creative energy passed through him, first running wild (Sturm und Drang), then settling into a flow, finally evaporating as it lost its creative impetus; the poet was maimed in the process. Gogol, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, Bely suggested, had each been impaired: a madman, an eccentric saint, an epileptic. Being a genius entailed alienation from mankind, for as a poet rose higher it became more difficult for him to communicate his thoughts and fewer people were able to understand him. The populace could see only the external trappings: a maimed, exhausted body and mind. Bely saw creativity as an initially chaotic process that moved in the direction of order and harmony. In this ordering process he held that the poet himself was fully responsible. Thus Bely advocated the Apollonian over the Dionysian principle. Tolstoy he found superior to Dostoevsky; he compared Tolstoy's calm, accomplished images and art to Dostoevsky's imageless art and his predilection for "playing furiously with cacophonies of sound and meaning," which resulted in a tumultuous construction with riotous ugliness (bezobrazie). He suspected the latter of being, at least occasionally, wanton and deliberate. Bely, who was scandalized by Dostoevsky's short story about death, "Bobok," interpreted it as a sign of permanent damage to Dostoevsky's character, inflicted by his own genius. By contrast, he called Tolstoy the most outstanding literary phenomenon of the nineteenth century and endorsed his Shakespearean accomplishments and his "efforts to transfix death" with perfection of image and form. Bely's study was, then, more of a general investigation of the creative phenomenon as such. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were only specific examples of its various manifestations. His pamphlet was not a proper study of the works of
either writer, but his method was typical of symbolist critics of Tolstoy, who preferred to synthesize various subjects and thus produce sweeping and largely unsubstantiated opinions. This method left their criticism deficient in specific arguments.

The poet, scholar, and critic of considerable renown Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949) also attempted a symbolist interpretation of Tolstoy’s art. He saw Tolstoy’s writings as filled with symbolic expressions of a tragic view of life. To Ivanov Tolstoy was a kind of latter-day Socrates, a man with a powerful sense of morality who made his art subservient to his philosophy. This philosophy was extremely difficult to express, and as an artist, Ivanov said, Tolstoy moved gradually to free himself from the shackles of form, a process that took shape as a progressive simplification of language. Ivanov saw in this a parallel to the freeing of the personality from the laws of material reality—necessity and determinism. Ivanov, then, interpreted Tolstoy’s development as an artist as a gradual ascent toward a higher reality of spirit, a reality where one could be completely free from all rational limitations such as language and form.

The well-known poet and critic Mikhail Kuzmin (1875–1936) interpreted the formal simplicity of Tolstoy’s last works, which were published posthumously, as austerity. He was irritated by Tolstoy’s apparent efforts to bring religion into his art, a project Kuzmin found distasteful. He interpreted it as an old man’s stubborn desire to have his last word. Evidently Kuzmin did not want Tolstoy to act as a sage and beam his message through his works. He found Tolstoy’s posthumously published novelette “Hajji-Murad,” an otherwise accomplished work of art, adversely affected by an unwarranted, and therefore artistically improper, prologos(vitae)-type introduction. The message of that introduction was that Hajji Murad was a natural man, a near-animal who, though maimed, continued to cling to life tenaciously in the face of hopeless odds and was therefore similar to a roadside bush of burdock that, though repeatedly run over by passing traffic, continued to cling to life. Kuzmin found this message irritatingly ambiguous. He condemned Tolstoy’s attempts to tell his readers what to think. Didacticism, he felt, had its place, but should be limited to other forms of expression. He praised in this sense Bely’s pamphlet on Tolstoy. The critic S. Adrianov concurred. He also saw “Hajji-Murad” as a condensed version of War and Peace, a work with a
strong didactic intent, and Tolstoy's last major effort to preach through literature: his last attempt to restate the message he tried to convey all his life but could never completely express. Adrianov could not say, however, what that message was. And so the efforts to unravel Tolstoy's elusive message continued. The impressionist critic Iulii Aikhenval'd (1872–1928) speculated that the reason that Tolstoy's last works, published posthumously, made such a dead impression was that Tolstoy had been trying to abandon his marvelously vital art in favor of divination (veshchie vydumki), yet he could not forget how to write artistic works. As an artist he was cursed with total recall. His last works made the impression of a somewhat dead landscape because his spirit was already elsewhere. Aikhenval'd found Tolstoy's last works to be highly prophetic, filled with an inhuman knowledge of things to come, things that transcended human understanding. In an impressionistically pedestrian critique, A. Gruzinsky maintained that Tolstoy did not himself believe his contention that his incomparable artistic images were inferior to his lifeless message. Gruzinsky ventured a guess that Tolstoy's marvelously transparent images would continue to live long after his opaque message was forgotten. As a rule, then, symbolists and impressionists presented subjective impressions, which they had arrived at inductively by an untraceable method. This resulted in sometimes apparently unwarranted conclusions, drawn in the name of the inspiration, intuition, and artistic sensitivity the critic claimed. They deemed such assertions justified, however. The symbolists presumed that since knowledge of reality, especially its meaningful aspects, was impossible, poetic truth—revelations and symbolic approximations—were the best one could hope for. It was up to the reader to make the effort to understand what the critic was writing about. These assumptions make their critiques of Tolstoy and his work less valuable today.

MEREZHKOVSKY

A noteworthy, though faulty, study of Tolstoy as a man and artist was published at the turn of the century by the celebrated dean of the Russian decadents (the elder generation of the Russian symbolists), Dmitry Sergeevich Merezhkovsky (1866–1941). In three volumes he compared and contrasted Dostoevsky and Tolstoy as men, artists, and religious thinkers (prophets). His study was apparently designed primarily to promote symbolism as a new reli-
The study, which is considerably slanted in favor of Dostoevsky, was apparently intended to balance appreciation for the two writers in a public who preferred Tolstoy. As criticism of Tolstoy's work, several chapters in the second part of the first volume of the book are especially remarkable. They are devoted to a survey of the formal devices used by Tolstoy. Merezhkovsky's findings in this area have impressed students and critics of Tolstoy. His book was reprinted several times and translated into many languages.

Merezhkovsky was interested in overcoming a resistance to symbolism in the critical establishment. He also sought to enhance and redefine his own role as a critic. He demanded and achieved equal status with the authors whose work he judged, claiming that the creative laws governing critic and writer were the same. Like many symbolists, he was unconcerned with the relative truth of empirical reality; he wanted to probe a reality deeper than that accessible to the senses, one that could be perceived only intuitively. He viewed literature as a tool, an aid to intuition, akin to an "extrasensory crutch." He believed that literature supplied the symbols that bridged the gap between ordinary and extraordinary, sensory and extrasensory (intuitive) experience, and so assisted mankind in its gradual ascent toward higher consciousness. His study of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy was an elaborate demonstration of the operation of this principle and its use by the two writers in their works.

According to Merezhkovsky, both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, whom he imagined to form a kind of syzygy—a synergic team within the collective Russian tribal soul (Dostoevsky as the spiritus and Tolstoy the anima)—had made substantial contributions in this area, each according to his own peculiar talent. Whereas Dostoevsky explored the upper reaches of the psyche, the areas of the mind, Tolstoy had opened the area of psychophysics to consciousness. Until he came along, no other writer had singled out this area of experience for detailed conscious exploration:

Tolstoy's fame is based on the fact that he was the first to depict—and with what intrepid sincerity!—this vast new, as yet almost unexplored, inexhaustible area toward which our growing self-consciousness is headed, the area of increasing psychophysical sensitivity; and in this sense he can be said to have given us a new body, something like a new vessel for new wine.
Tolstoy is supreme in depicting this neither physical nor spiritual but psychophysical region—the natural side of man, that side of flesh which is turned toward the spirit, and the side of mind that is turned toward the flesh—that mysterious area in man where the struggle between Beast and God in him takes place. . . .

Never and nowhere before has this "natural man" appeared so starkly and devastatingly genuine as in the works of Tolstoy: in this respect he has neither rivals nor equals in world literature, not even in any other branch of art in the entire world. [7:166–67]

Tolstoy's descriptions of psychophysical states were so acute that the effect on the reader continued after he had finished reading:

Putting aside all that is generalized, standard, literary, conventional, artificial, Tolstoy explores in each of the sensations he examines only what is most specific, individual, particular to it, and constitutes its keenest edge; he then whets and sharpens it, hypersensitizes it to morbid acuity, so that the feeling pierces, penetrates like a needle, and we shall never again be able to free ourselves of it: the peculiarities of his manner of experiencing a sensation become forever ours, from then on we feel as he does, not only while we read his works but afterwards, when we return to real life. One may say that the capacity for experiencing sensation of people who have read Tolstoy's works changes, becomes somewhat different from what it was before they read his works. [7:161]

Merezhkovsky, who claimed that significant tensions in the national psyche were being reflected in the works of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and now the symbolists, pleaded for recognition of substantial similarities between Tolstoy's and the symbolists' style. Tolstoy's narrative too consisted of a web of organically interwoven patterns of correspondences and cross-references, held together by contiguity and reinforced by repetition. The result was an astonishingly concrete, tangible impression. Like some kind of god, Tolstoy created his characters in the flesh:

All these scattered, single features complete and tally with one another, as in beautiful statues the shape of one limb always matches the character of others as, for example [Anna Karenina's] tapering fingers and finely chiseled neck that looks as if it were made of old ivory, the irrepressible sparkle in [her] eyes, her precipitous grace of movement and unruly curls that are forever defying control—all these meticulously drawn individual features are so harmonized that they naturally and spontaneously blend in the reader's imagination into a single, living, unique, separate, individual, unforgettable whole so that when we finish the book we feel as though we had actually seen Anna Karenina with our own eyes, and would recognize her at once should we meet her in person.
This gift of insight into the body, which he alone possesses to such an extent and which could be called a clairvoyance of the flesh, at times, though admittedly relatively seldom, leads Tolstoy into excess. [7:155]

Merezhkovsky, who preferred an element of vagueness in literature, complained that Tolstoy created a narrative of too high a definition. Compared to Pushkin, who encouraged readers to become involved in the story and contribute their own thoughts, Tolstoy anticipated all the required imaginative effort, stifled curiosity, and risked boredom. The reader was made to see the whole picture. He was overwhelmed with a barrage of concrete detail. The onslaught continued with a rapid fire of repetitions, until the reader was subdued into an attitude of submissive detachment and intellectual passivity (7:152). Tolstoy's language, Merezhkovsky said, was unembellished and avoided drawing attention to itself. Tolstoy used words only for their meaning. He never used poetic devices such as melody and rhythm, and he used elaborate figurative speech rarely (7:162). Ordinarily Tolstoy used simple, commonplace words and expressions that evoked clear, concrete images, such as readily identifiable features and bodily characteristics. He used epithets sparingly and only for a special effect: "His language, usually simple and measured, does not suffer from an excess of epithet. He uses them lavishly only when special features of a given sensation need to be described: 'suddenly he felt a (1) familiar, (2) old, (3) dumb, (4) nagging pain, (5) stubborn, (6) quiet, (7) serious.' Seven adjectives to one noun, and yet there is no overloading, not one of them is superfluous, this is how keenly interested we are in Ivan Ilych's pain to the smallest detail" (7:162). Artistic control was exercised by repeating patterns of similarities and differences. Thematic similarity between passages was suggested by similarities of style. Key words were repeated in unrelated contexts to tie together apparently remote circumstances, or to establish a connection between characters that were far removed in normal life but underwent similar psychophysical experiences. An example was the eerie feeling of anticipatory fear and excitement (conveyed with the key words strashno ["gruesome"] and veselo ["exciting, merry"] that seized animals and people alike in the face of physical passion. Their appearance and sensations were described in like terms:
When Vronsky first sees Anna he is struck by the quality of “race,” of “blood” in her appearance. Frou-Frou also had in the highest degree this quality that made one forget all defects: this quality was “blood,” “breed,” i.e., an aristocratic quality of the body. They both, the horse and the woman, have the same definitive character, a bodily presence in which strength and tenderness, refinement and energy are combined. Anna has a small hand “with tapering fingers,” a hand that looks “strong” and “tender.” The leg bones of Frou-Frou “below the knee seemed no thicker than a finger but were unusually wide if looked at sideways.” “Her muscles, bulging underneath a taut, mobile skin, smooth as satin and covered with a net of blood vessels, seemed hard as a rock. . . . Her whole bearing, and especially of her head, conveyed a definitive, energetic, and yet tender impression.” They both have the same precipitous lightness and sureness, an almost winged quality of movement and at the same time a much too passionate, suspenseful and defiant, stormy, orgiastic abundance of vital energy. The lean head of Frou-Frou has slightly protruding sparkling, merry eyes (Anna too has “sparkling and merry” eyes) and widens at the mouth into flaring nostrils with “a thin membrane between them that seems filled with blood.” Like Anna, she understands her master “without a word being spoken.” . . . [We are told how] “she took a deep breath . . . nimbly changing her feet” (Anna, too, has a “nimble gait”). . . . The words “chiseled,” “thin,” “strong” are used in the same sense in describing the appearance of both Anna and Frou-Frou. [7:196-97]

Merezhkovsky was the first to draw attention to this remarkable similarity in the descriptions of Anna Karenina and the horse Frou-Frou. He claimed that Tolstoy was at his best in depicting the physical frame of animal and man. The external bodily feature became a window for seeing inside a character. The method was spectacularly successful as a method of building characters, whom Tolstoy literally sculpted verbally. Merezhkovsky differentiated between two methods of characterization in Tolstoy’s works. By one method he developed a salient feature so as to reveal the inner character. By the other he built the character by adding feature on feature until a complex, multifaceted personality emerged (7:153). Repetition was essential to both methods. In the first, synecdochic method, one or more select features were singled out and repeated, until whenever the character was mentioned, one recalled the feature and the inner identity it signified. Merezhkovsky cited outstanding examples of this technique in War and Peace, such as the upper lip of Lise, the petite wife of Prince Andrei: “Thanks to these reiterations and repetitions of one and the same bodily characteris-
tic first in the living, then in the dead, then again on the face of her statue and, finally, in the face of her son, the 'short upper lip' of the little princess is etched permanently on our memory, remains imbedded in it with ineffaceable clarity, so that we cannot even remember the little princess without also recalling the image of her slightly raised upper lip with just a shade of dark fluff on it” (7:146). Merezhkovsky cited other examples: the heavy gait and softly radiant eyes of Prince Andrei’s sister, Mary, who blushed in patches; the thinness and fragility of Vereshchagin, the innocent victim of mob violence; and a number of others. In each instance, the inner being was revealed, sometimes in a flash, through an external, apparently trivial but actually profoundly typical bodily feature. The feature symbolized the character, and literally acquired a new dimension through repetition. Merezhkovsky explained the effectiveness of the method by stating that Tolstoy noticed what others had overlooked, and the common trait became uncomon. Merezhkovsky pointed out, however, that these intrinsically potent features could be unduly enhanced if they were mentioned too often. By repetition the trait would take on an independent existence, detach itself from the concrete character, and live its own life somewhat in the manner of Gogol:

Speransky has these “pudgy white hands,” in the description of which Tolstoy plainly somewhat abuses his favorite device of repetition and emphasis. . . . It would seem that the feature has been mentioned enough: no matter how absentminded the reader, he will never again forget that Speransky has white, pudgy hands. But the artist is not satisfied: a few more scenes and, with dogged persistence, the same detail crops up again . . . . Eventually, this white hand begins to haunt one like an apparition: as though it had detached itself from the rest of the body—just like the short upper lip of the little princess—and acts on its own, lives its own, separate, strange, almost supernatural life as if it were a fantastic creature like Gogol’s “Nose.” [7:152]

Such odd side effects demonstrated that the success of repetition required careful judgment in its application, and showed that Tolstoy’s judgment was not always reliable in this respect.

Merezhkovsky further explained that such repeated features could fail to achieve their intended effect. Some features required additional persuasive development and failed without it. For example, the pudginess of the hands of people in power was used by Tolstoy to suggest the corruption of their owner. Kutuzov’s obesity was another of these bodily features that Tolstoy used to
suggest much more than just a physical characteristic. The same point could be made about the mysterious roundness of Platon Karataev, a truly sweeping and vague abstraction (7:149–50). The mysterious qualities of this trait were evident in the reference to the mandala of God in the dream of overweight Pierre, a floating sphere he thought was a symbol of life and matter. The abstract nature of the image allowed for little referential, but ample connotative, potential. It generated an endless flow of speculative imagery of puzzling ambiguity and vexing ambivalence. Its meaning, which probably included the meaning of the name Tolstoy (fat man), was never explained. In Karataev it carried a suggestion of self-satisfied acquiescence in spiritual perfection. In Napoleon, however, plumpness of body suggested, on the contrary, smugness and grossness of spirit. Many other characters, good and bad, were affected by roundness in a vaguely disturbing, mysterious fashion. Anna Karenina, whose erect posture was said to be an index of a passionate animal nature, had rounded arms and a pleasing fullness of body, combined with delicately rounded small hands and tapered fingers. Roundness underscored her blood ties to her promiscuous brother Stiva, who was pleasantly rotund, but had a light gait and animal vigor. But other, less specific similarities failed to produce sufficiently clear referential connotations. According to Merezhkovsky, the reason for the failure of some of these features was that the physical was too removed from the metaphysical world. The connection had to be established with either intellectual (logical) or psychic (mythological) aids. The failure demonstrated that weak or sketchy similarity, even if reinforced through repetition, was not enough to bring together thoroughly unrelated phenomena. Repetition could rediffuse associative thought patterns and encourage speculations about the supernatural where anything was possible. Tolstoyan metaphysics was generally characterized by such referential weakness. This weakness was at the heart of the failure of Tolstoy’s technique in all areas except psychophysics. Only there the technique of instant identification worked well because he could draw on the storehouse of concrete, familiar concepts, memories of instantly identifiable emotional experiences and sensory impressions that were all related to the body and shared by everyone, regardless of background or education.

Merezhkovsky outlined the wider implications of the window technique, still confining them within the area of psychophysics. Somehow the flat hair on the head of Ivan Ilych, pasted to his skull,
suggested rigor mortis and the terminal nature of his disease ("The Death of Ivan Ilych"). On the other hand, Anna Karenina’s unruly little curls revealed health and an abundance of life and animal energy. Tolstoy was particularly successful in depicting the language of gesture, which in his handling became a plastic symbol of complex emotion. Claiming that gesture was by its very nature several times as expressive as words, Merezhkovsky cited a number of examples from Tolstoy’s works that described particularly expressive gestures: the “screaming” silence of the branch pushed by the falling tree in the conclusion of Tolstoy’s early short story “Three Deaths”; the recalcitrant scream of the anonymous little child in Childhood who had come to see the dead mistress and became conscious of death for the first time; the look of submission to fate in the face of the captured mature wolf (War and Peace); the image of the dead merchant Brekhunov ("Master and Man"), as he was lifted off Nikita, his carcass frozen stiff in spread-eagle position, dramatizing the animal nature of his mortal remains. Some gestures or their equivalents suggested considerable complexity in preceding, accompanying, or subsequent experiences. Kutuzov’s long-healed wound (War and Peace) answered Prince Andrei’s silent question and complex scruples and Kutuzov’s moral right to send others into mortal combat. Expressive also was the manner in which the surgeon held his bloodied cigar after hours of surgery on the wounded in battle (7:158). Another example was Natasha’s reluctantly returning, then suddenly flashing, smile, which symbolized for Pierre the return of happiness at long last. More ambivalent, but still effective, Merezhkovsky found, were gestures involving simple moral decisions, such as, for example, the embarrassed smiles on the faces of participants in the sinister ritualized project to trick Pierre into proposing to Hélène (War and Peace). Because of greater affinity between people on the psychophysical than on the intellectual level, everyone knew what the smiles were all about, whereas at least Pierre was at sea about the meaning and purpose of the accompanying disjointed and banal formal conversation. As always with Tolstoy, his characters’ speech was less meaningful than their gestures (7:195).

Merezhkovsky offered an ingenious analysis of what he termed Tolstoy’s magical powers of illusion—his ability to elicit powerful emotions with unusual combinations of words. Tolstoy would inject these word combinations into the midground, as it were, between
the reader's memory and senses—his imagination—arouse it, and so induce simultaneous resonance in both those adjacent areas, thus triggering an emotion:

When we learn that Ivan Ilych cried out three days in pain "Ooo! Oooooo! Oo!" because having started to scream "I don't want toooo!" he never stopped and just continued to scream, it is easy for us not only to imagine but actually to feel in our bones this dreadful transition from human speech to a senseless animal howl. We know it not only consciously, through thought and imagination, but actually, through instinctive recall of previous bodily experience, which translates itself into an actual bodily sensation . . . [just as ] a silent string begins to vibrate in response to a ringing one. The animal soul of the reader, his motoric sensory apparatus, becomes stimulated by his own body that winces, shrinks involuntarily, like an animal, in imitation of the body of the described character. The reader thus is some sense "enters" the body of the character, becomes, as it were, "trans-substantiated." [7:158]

Another example of this sort of verbal legerdemain was the detailed dissection of the distraught reveries of Ivan Ilych on his deathbed. The stark contrast between the idyllic nature of his distant childhood memories and the grim present startled the reader into recalling similar, if unrelated, experiences of his own and triggered an imaginary sensation—jangled his nerves into feeling empathetic pain (7:163). The vividness or magic, the startling quality of the experience, depended on an element of strong surprise achieved by the juxtaposition of disparate ingredients. Adding a new twist, an unusual ingredient, combining familiar but dissimilar and unrelated experiences, Tolstoy startled the reader and threw his responses into confusion as to whether he was having actual or imaginary experiences. The mild sense of confusion produced a sensation of magic if the experience was colorful and vivid enough. A weak example of such a charming, magical experience within War and Peace itself was the kiss between Sonia and Nikolai Rostov, which they remembered for the rest of their lives because of an unexpected and therefore exciting ingredient that was added to their kiss—the smell of burnt cork from her painted mustache. So, obviously, Tolstoy was manipulating his characters as he was his readers. The trick was to achieve the correct proportion between dull known and exciting unknown ingredients, balancing the impression between recognition and surprise, yet avoiding too much surprise that would interfere with recognition and cause too much confusion.
Merezhkovsky maintained that a modicum of trickery was clearly involved in the very successful manipulation of sensations with which Tolstoy could not have any firsthand acquaintance. Such experiences were made to look indubitably genuine because of a deliberately high proportion of thoroughly familiar, commonplace detail. For example, Tolstoy skillfully reconstructed the vain, feverish sensations of a sixteen-year-old (Natasha Rostov) going to her first ball (in War and Peace), and the tinge of imaginary pain in the breasts of an exhausted mother (Dolly) as she thought of another pregnancy (in Anna Karenina). There seemed to be no limit to Tolstoy’s ingenuity in this respect. He even put routine human thoughts and feelings into the heads of intelligent animals. For example, he described the joy of Levin’s dog Laska which, on seeing her master, became dampened by the uncomfortable feeling of looking into his “always strange” human eyes; and the vexation of a female charger, ready to gallop away and chafing at the bit, when, startled by a sudden command into increased consciousness, she is thrown into confusion by the unfamiliar problem of needing to reach a now conscious decision of which of her four legs to put forward first. All such incidents greatly contributed to the vividness and verisimilitude of the narrative. The strange element rode in on the commonplace. Success depended on the twist being startling enough, strong enough, to revitalize a commonplace experience without offending against credibility.

Yet the same method, Merezhkovsky found, could prove inadequate in conveying more individualized experience, although it continued to be dramatically effective. He imputed such failure to a lack of readily identifiable referents. Such was the case whenever Tolstoy tied together real and imaginary detail, whenever he tried to merge dreams and reality or place identical experiences in an environment of mixed real and fantastic nature such as daydreams, incidences of unusually high parallelism, or incredibly frequent coincidences. The effort was sometimes quite successful (12:232). At other times, Merezhkovsky pointed out, this dramatically effective technique failed. In any case, passages constructed along such lines invariably acquired a fantastic coloring, sometimes without increasing the plausibility of the fantastic element itself. Attempts to do so by adding more and more repetitive realistic detail only made the experience surrealistic, i.e., more concrete, without making it any more natural. They simply added a theatrical touch, as in
the series of incidents that culminated in Anna's destruction (12:232–35). An impressive array of coincidences in *Anna Karenina*, Merezhkovsky said, did not increase the realism of her experience, even though it was described with realistic detail, persistently repeated. Repetition merely added plasticity to a fantastically combined image of flesh, blood, fire, iron, and loud noise, presided over by an ugly chthonic deity who presumably symbolized the "iron laws of necessity" to which human beings were subject (12:236–37). Merezhkovsky found the image contrived but admitted that it effectively dramatized Tolstoy's idea. Still, persistent recurrence of the same image in other works by Tolstoy, from the earliest to the latest, suggested that he was having difficulties in evolving credible imagery to express unusual circumstances—his peculiar views about stock situations of a metaphysical nature. Elsewhere he apparently tried to express them with stylistic means:

When the dying Ivan Ilych "is being stuffed into a black, narrow bag," at first he is unable to get right into it. But then, "suddenly some force shoved him in the chest and side, making it still harder to breathe, and he fell through the hole and there at the end of the hole he saw a light..." In exactly the same way Anna, when she wanted "to rise up, back away from the carriage wheels," was suddenly "seized by an implacable something that shoved her in the head and grabbed her by the back." "God, forgive me all," says Anna. "Forgo" instead of "forgive" says Ivan Ilych. "Let me go past your judgment!" prays also Dmitry Karamazov: "Without judgment," past judgment, past the iron law of vengeance and repayment. When Anna "fell through the hole," when the candle "went out" forever, then maybe for her too, just as it did for Ivan Ilych, "there, at the end of the hole, was light"—and it was no longer dim candlelight but a new, nondeclining, unblinking light. Maybe for her too, "instead of death there was light." Maybe she also said to herself "Where is it? What death? There was no fear because there was no death." [12:237]

God be merciful, "forgive, help me!" prays Levin, too, before Kitty goes into labor. [12:242]

Merezhkovsky granted that perhaps there were reasons for some of the verbal development that transcended his understanding, since Dostoevsky too used similar words, but he judged the overall attempt as unsuccessful. Repetition implied at least a partial failure to achieve the desired effect. Moreover, the effectiveness of Tolstoy's narrative fell off dramatically as soon as he left the familiar grounds of psychophysical experience. Outside of
psychophysics, little could be understood of the author's references or message. Eventually the reader was stranded in contemplation of the lone, godlike figure of the author looming up behind an increasingly abstract, sterile background of unfamiliar empty rhetoric and awkward narrative.

In a significant part of his argument with Tolstoy, Merezhkovsky attempted to show that Tolstoy's fault lay in ignoring familiar literary and cultural conventions. His indignation with Tolstoy's renunciation of them was rooted in the symbolist view of literature as an extrasensory crutch, a form of walking stick one needed to understand unusual experiences that did not originate in either the author's or the reader's personal experience but came from within—tribal memories, archaic visions, and other experiences of an intuitive type, especially those of a frightening, chaotic kind. The symbolists were of the opinion that mankind, in the course of its gradual ascent toward higher, more differentiated consciousness (which was a necessary historic development), underwent arcane experiences for which there was no explanation and which therefore could not be accommodated by individual man in his personal consciousness unless and until he could identify them with something familiar. He needed a label, a characterization that would steer and integrate these puzzling experiences into his own consciousness. Folklore and literature supplied ample characterizations of this type in the form of conventional symbols and myths. This idea, later elaborated by the Swiss psychologist Carl G. Jung, appears related to Plato's concept of life as a never-ending process of retracing eternal ideas (Jungian archetypes). The human individual could participate to the extent of undergoing recurrent variants of experience until its meaning cleared in his mind, giving it a new dimension—wisdom. However, the symbolists conceived of an ingenious shortcut upon this somewhat laborious and occasionally dangerous direct process of acquiring unusual perspicacity. They had a system that allowed them to forgo direct experience and the dangers of actual confrontation with reality by undertaking theoretical labors in writing. Their solution probably rests on the age-old magic belief that ideas are the equivalents of things, a notion that in modern times identifies actuality with theory, reality with fiction, a thing with its name, so that if one can name a thing, one knows it and controls it. The symbolists, in any case, tried to implement their theory by weaving complex and recurrent patterns of words
with references on all four levels of language—sound, meaning, morphology, and syntax—in hopes of hitting upon a magic formula in which a sudden burst of productive thought associations would reveal some new aspect of the enigma of man. In this way they hoped to increase their wisdom and control over reality with relative ease. One of their schemes was to belabor old symbols in new combinations, trying to revitalize the denotative potential that had been sapped by overuse. In a word, they hoped to produce new formulations that would illumine for them the chaos of un-lived by imagined experience—possibilities that they felt existed in the realm of art. Exploring the function of writing itself, rather than message, characterization, or plot, thus became the symbolist writer’s purpose. He relied on the creative inspiration of the unconscious and the existence of a hidden intellectual code that controlled language formation. Merezhkovsky insisted that every writer should engage in this magical process. He claimed that those who, like Tolstoy, scorned it were thereby reduced to mediocrity, insofar as they could handle only the concrete, everyday, phenomenological aspects of life. Attempts by such writers to enter the higher reaches of noumenal experience were doomed to failure if they did not have at their fingertips recognizable symbols of such experience, as supplied by folklore, myth, and other forms of literary convention.

It is thus easy to see why Merezhkovsky divided Tolstoy’s writings into two kinds, and why he claimed to have discovered two different styles in Tolstoy’s fiction. One was a taut, effective style for describing nature and natural man. Anything pertaining to culture was, on the other hand, weak, diffuse, awkward, and inept. Merezhkovsky insisted that “even on superficial reading of War and Peace and Anna Karenina one is struck by the presence of two styles of writing, two languages, two currents of speech, running together in close proximity but never mixing, like oil and water” (7:179). The clumsiness of Tolstoy’s intellectual style bore witness to his inability to formulate his thoughts without help from the conventional formulas of literary expression or, as Merezhkovsky put it, to gather his wits in areas of scant referential support. The confusion was reflected in the loss of syntactic cohesion and, on occasion, a downright faulty grammar (7:180–81).

Apparently Merezhkovsky’s criticism of Tolstoy’s style was grounded in a desire to promote symbolism. His objections to
Tolstoy’s disrespectful treatment of the noumenal world of metaphysics, as against his admiration for Tolstoy’s skill in handling the phenomenal world of physics and psychophysics, were formal. They reflected his vexation at Tolstoy’s refusal to employ literary formulas that he could, if he wished, alter and twist to his heart’s content, but that, Merezhkovsky thought, were legitimate tools of the literary trade and should be used. Merezhkovsky charged that Tolstoy lacked artistically adequate means to mark out and identify the genuinely magical side of experience, and he thus failed to reveal anything about his own considerable intuitive ability to penetrate this area of reality, withholding the benefits of his genius. When dealing with matters metaphysical, Tolstoy merely increased the quantity of his images (contrast) at the expense of logic (similarity), aiming for startling results, regardless of the quality of the result. Out of a misguided and whimsical desire for boorish originality, Tolstoy did not use the excellent symbolic language of conventions and myths; he thought of such words as artificial. Tolstoy was a savage who never learned to appreciate the beauty of artifice, just as he could never appreciate the boundary between nature and culture, Merezhkovsky claimed (7:177–78).

Ignoring the huge reservoir of symbols available to him in literary convention, Tolstoy operated with crude self-made approximations that could not begin to comprehend the entire range of intellectual experience. Merezhkovsky listed some of the images that he thought Tolstoy used especially often to depict the noumenal side of existence. He found Tolstoy’s favorite image to be the hole. Tolstoy pictured birth and death as experiences of passing in and out of the womb of eternity through a narrow hole, where pain and suffering either ceased or began. He depicted the experience itself as rather rude, painful, and undignified, like being pushed unceremoniously through a long thin dark (black) bag. Sometimes he added candlelight. A character’s resistance to fate and the ordeal was expressed by animal howls, more or less controlled, depending on the temperament and degree of maturity the character had attained. There were silently mature figures, for example, the tree in “Three Deaths,” Karataev and the mature (materoi) wolf in War and Peace, and Anna and Frou-Frou in Anna Karenina; immature whimperers, such as the lady in “Three Deaths,” Lise and Anatole in War and Peace, Levin (at the birth of his son) and his brother Nikolai (Anna Karenina), and Pozdnyshch’s wife (The Kreutzer-
Sonata); and then infantile howlers, such as the little child who saw death for the first time in Childhood, both Kitty and her baby during delivery (Anna Karenina), Ivan Ilych ("The Death of Ivan Ilych"), soldiers, and pigs, lambs, and sundry other animals, big and small, slaughtered in various works of fiction and nonfiction by Tolstoy. Finally, Tolstoy showed a response to death that was a meretricious demand for a "prettified version" to suit the taste of the applicant. It was, essentially, a childish attempt to defeat reality by suggesting an "alternate route to heaven," a trip to Rome (the "celestial city" that for Tolstoy epitomized artifice). This was advanced at the last minute by self-centered, self-enamored women who had been so corrupted by vanity and greed that they also wanted more than one husband. With this favorite method of condemning artifice, Tolstoy depicted the deaths of the lady in "Three Deaths," Hélène Kuragin of War and Peace, Anna Karenina, and Pozdnyshev's wife (The Kreutzer-Sonata).

Merezhkovsky assumed that Tolstoy thought of artifice as a malignant growth on the society of man and a corruption of reality (7:110). Tolstoy, he said, liked to draw sketches of men ruined morally and physically by soft living. Merezhkovsky was irritated that Tolstoy persisted in nudging the reader to notice the decrepit physique of an anonymous colonel on parade, the broad pelvises of service personnel, cab drivers in War and Peace, and Tartar waiters in Anna Karenina. Tolstoy's bias against culture was obvious from his dislike of Saint Petersburg (7:263). Nevertheless, a great writer without culture, Merezhkovsky said, could not be a great man of letters. The absence of culture from his works made his art one-sided, as Turgenev had pointed out. There was no opposition between man and nature in Tolstoy's works. He wanted to deal only with man's elemental nature. He refused, for example, to accommodate the stylistic conventions of the age he depicted. As a result, Merezhkovsky said, repeating Leont'ev's argument (see p. 75 above), War and Peace read like a contemporary novel:

In reading War and Peace it is very difficult to get rid of the hardly surprising yet, come to think of it, rather astonishing impression that the events depicted, despite their familiar historic form, took place only yesterday. All the described characters, despite their sharp, portraitlike quality, are our contemporaries. The reader needs a continuous effort of imagination and memory, especially where the action is transferred from the scene of world affairs into private, family, inner life, not to forget that it occurs between the fifth and
fifteenth year, and not the sixth and seventh decade of the past century, that he, the reader, is separated from these persons and events by a historic abyss of almost a whole century, and what a century!—one that is equal to two to three centuries in less turbulent historical epochs. The air we breathe in War and Peace and Anna Karenina is the same air; the smell of history in both these epics is the same: here as there one finds the same, to us utterly familiar, atmosphere of the second half of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the similarity is not so much in the external shape of events as in their inner shadings of historical "coloring"; ask yourself, is there an significant difference between Austerlitz, Borodino, and the battles in the "Sebastopol stories"? Apart from a few historic names, almost all the details of the first can be so easily transferred to the second, and from these to the first. What is described is not a battle with the peculiarities of a certain historic epoch but a battle in general. Between the Freemasonry of Pierre Bezukhov and the narodnik activities of Levin, between the family life in the house of Rostov and in the house of Shcherbatsky, there is just as little difference in historical coloring as elsewhere. People who were born and raised in the fifties and seventies of the eighteenth century on Derzhavin, Sumarokov, Novikov, Voltaire, Diderot, and Helvetius not only speak our contemporary idiom but think and feel as we, in terms of the newest, latest, most private feelings that seem to have been "born" to us just yesterday and have not yet been fictionalized by anyone—our very own feelings and thoughts. It is almost impossible to imagine Prince Andrei, with his pitilessly sharp, cold, and precise, already overrefined, already quite morbid, so very much our own sensibilities as a contemporary of [N. M. Karamzin's] "Poor Liza." . . . Levin does not have a single religious doubt that might be in any way whatever incomprehensible to Pierre Bezukhov. They are not only spiritual twins but of the same age, historical contemporaries. Their entire external cultural shell, their whole costume and personality in the broadest sense of the word "persona" is that of persons of our own period and times. [7:169–70]

Turgenev was correct, Merezhkovsky found, in saying that there was no historical flavor to War and Peace. Austerlitz and Borodino were shown to have caused barely a ripple on the surface of Russian life and were soon drowned out by the people's daily concerns.

Merezhkovsky then explained the serious nature of the artistic flaws that resulted from Tolstoy's insistence on depicting only the natural side of man. He suggested that Tolstoy perhaps exaggerated the physical character of man because he could not understand the intellectual side of man and did not have the skill to express it. Tolstoy's heroes functioned on lower levels of consciousness; they were passive victims of animal emotions, incap-
ble of a rational approach to life. Many were crude, unthinking animals like Nikolai Rostov. Some of his most successful, accomplished characters were intuitive animals like Natasha Rostov, who "did not deign to be clever," or Daddy Eroshka of *The Cossacks*, Tolstoy's most perfect creation, whose name suggested that he was the living embodiment of the god Eros, thought Merezhkovsky, Eros being the prime mover behind everything psychophysical. Every one of Tolstoy's sturdy characters had a touch of the wild animal in him (7:205).

Merezhkovsky thought that a significant effect of Tolstoy's failure to give characters human individualities was that none of them could really communicate with words (7:195). Merezhkovsky found that they all chatted in the style of the author, but their meaningful communications all came by gesture, mimicry, and inarticulate sound (7:232).

Furthermore, Merezhkovsky contended that anyone who scorned cultural conventions eventually surrendered to an intellectually limited outlook. He explained that, so far as he could see, Tolstoy's brilliant and successful technique of making windows into the souls of his characters did not allow him to peek inside their minds. As a result, they failed to develop a mental profile. Whatever individuality they possessed was merely a deviation from the physical norm for the species, like the horse Frou-Frou, whose measurements were at variance with the requirements for racehorses. Intellectually there was no room for growth in Tolstoy's characters. After a brief and unproductive period of struggle to develop a human personality, their spirit gave up, bowing to their animal nature, the only real nature they ever had. Mind and body were always mismatched in Tolstoy's characters. The subhuman, orgiastic, chthonic world of Tolstoy was symbolized by the collective image of soldiers frolicking in and out of a waterhole while a sickened Prince Andrei looked on (*War and Peace*). In this oppressive atmosphere of unconscious animal carnality, the individual intellect felt lost, was always either sickly or unreal. Merezhkovsky maintained that Tolstoy could only write about the commonplace. He insinuated that

in the works of Tolstoy there are no characters, no personalities, not even protagonists but merely contemplative, passive, suffering people; there are no heroes, only species—victims, who do not struggle or resist but let themselves be carried by the onrushing stream of
elemental animal life. Occasionally someone pops his head up above
the surface to appear as a human face but is almost immediately
swallowed up by the elements, sinking and drowning in them again,
this time forever.

Therefore there is no tragedy. Everywhere isolated tragic nodi are
tied; but, not being resolved in human individuality, they pass once
more into oblivion by joining the impersonal, the material, objective,
unreasoning realm, that which is will-less and nonhuman; there is
also none of that unifying resolution that the ancients called a cata-
trophe. In the ocean of that shoreless epos everything is agitated,
moves like flashes of the rays of sun on the surface of waves, every-
things is born, lives, and dies, and is born again, without end and
without beginning. [7:204]

In his argument Merezhkovsky employed some typical symbolist
images, some of which were warmed-over Gnostic notions, such as
the concept of an absent God (Deus absconditus), and the world as a
cosmic crypt under an oppressive, laden sky:

And as there is no redeeming terror, so there can be no redeeming
laughter. Not once, reading the works of Tolstoy, is one moved not
only to laugh, but even to smile. As though there were a heavy,
cloudless but oppressive, low “brazen” sky above that holds every-
thing down below, so that in the end the heart contracts from misery
and there seems nothing to breathe, there is no air. . . .

Even Turgenev remarked on this sensation of crampedness in the
works of Tolstoy, a kind of lack of outlet into the upper reaches,
freedom, fresh air, spirit, spirituality. He tried to explain this defect
by a lack of “enlightenment.” But would not lack of “consciousness”
be a better word? [7:204–5]

Apparently Tolstoy felt no sense of loss in the transaction; he will-
ingly abandoned the distinction between man and animal and used
the same terminology to describe both. Vronsky impressed one as a
stallion, Frou-Frou as a woman; Anna Karenina and Pozdnychev’s
wife were both described as though they were horses. The same
dour look of silent, eloquent reproach was stamped in the faces of
all newly born, dead, or dying, be they animal or man. In mortal
anguish all reverted to animal sounds. Attempts to rise above the
animal were punished by death: men, robbed of their last dignity,
were reduced to animal poses, like the body of Brekhunov in “Mas-
ter and Man.” Like Circe Tolstoy changed men into swine. The
Homeric laughter of the author accompanied the destruction of
the divine image in man and the annihilation of the human per-
sonality. Tolstoy was a philistine:
On the very summit of his work, one of the greatest edifices ever raised by men, the creator of *War and Peace* erects this cynical banner—"a diaper with a yellow stain"—as the guiding standard of mankind.

... It is this total disappearance, this swallowing up of all individual human faces in that which is faceless and nonhuman, that is one of the dominant *motifs* of the Tolstoyan creative impulse. [7:192-93]

Perhaps the most significant casualty of this approach, Merezhkovsky said, was Napoleon, who was depicted as a villainous, moronic fool; Tolstoy completely failed to appreciate Napoleon's personality, his sinister grandeur, and saw him only from the philistine vantage point of the shrewd but ignorant orderly Lavrushka (*War and Peace*). The failure could be measured most clearly in matters metaphysical. Tolstoy's own thought was not the flight of a soaring spirit like that of Leonardo da Vinci, whose modern counterpart Merezhkovsky thought Tolstoy to be (with Dostoevsky being Michelangelo's), but a suspension in limbo: a chronic morbid fear of death, void, and darkness, with no signs of life beyond the grave (7:177). Tolstoy's efforts to resurrect himself were like those of the physically rotting dead in N. V. Gogol's gothic novelette "The Terrible Vengeance"—nightmarish attempts to rise above the grave while being much too firmly tied to the ground for any such attempt to succeed. Tolstoy, Merezhkovsky thought, should have burned *Resurrection* as Gogol had burned the *Dead Souls II*.

Merezhkovsky regarded *Anna Karenina* as Tolstoy's greatest and most poetic novel, in which he almost succeeded in rising above the intellectual limitations of his philistine outlook:

*Anna Karenina* as an accomplished artistic whole is the most thoroughly artistic of all of Tostoy's works. In *War and Peace* he, perhaps, set out to accomplish even more but did not succeed. And we have seen that one of the main protagonists there, Napoleon, turned out to be totally unsuccessful as a character. In *Anna Karenina* everything or almost everything was accomplished successfully; here, and only here, did Tolstoy's artistic genius reach its pinnacle, full and complete self-control, the ultimate balance between design and execution. And if he ever was stronger elsewhere, then, certainly, he was never more perfect, neither before, nor afterwards. [12:203]

Merezhkovsky's demonstration of the merits of the book, however, was rather peculiar. He saw it as a study in the dynamics of passion resulting from an excess of psychophysical energy, where false
Christian standards brought about tragic results. For Merezhkovsky conventional Christianity had betrayed man's genuinely dual nature by debasing and denying the sanctity of flesh. He dismissed the ostensible meaning of "Vengeance is mine ..." as superficial, and he saw *Anna Karenina* as an unconscious attempt by Tolstoy's erotic genius to assert that flesh was equally sacrosanct with the spirit. He saw the alchemy of the book as a kind of apocatastasis, a restoration of man's initial state in an eschatological situation. Loving two husbands, one in the flesh, the other in spirit, Anna was moving toward establishing a new identity in a state of "consecrated flesh." For Merezhkovsky this was the essence of Anna's individuation. The initial stages of the process were sound: a liberation through passion, a psychological process of development in which the original propensity to wholeness almost became a reality and a conscious event. But it was thwarted by her false ideas about a Christian transformation. These ideas, Merezhkovsky assumed, were superimposed by Tolstoy, whose Christianity was always inimical to the artistic core of his work and came from the peculiarities of his own personality (7:40–41).

In the rest of Merezhkovsky's book he advanced his own form of religion, with the help of much material from Dostoevsky's works. In this achievement he has remained without imitators. Although he leans on the critical practices of others, as a critic he stands alone even among symbolists. His method was rooted in the assumption that truth as such, as an absolute, was unknowable. He therefore operated with so-called relative truth, which, for him, apparently meant anything that was stated often enough. In the process, however, Merezhkovsky severely strained his own system by demonstrating his conviction that his own opinion, once it was repeated often and persistently enough in a variety of startling contexts, acquired the ring of oracular truth even without foundation in empirically observable fact. His penchant for raising everything he said to a verbal ritual and his reliance on a system of puns and anagrams to enhance his themes further defeated his purpose. His addiction to antithesis and his clearly mechanical attempts to resolve complex and irrational phenomena into simple sets of opposites were so strained and artificial as to border on the grotesque. All too often his neatly constructed, meticulously balanced word and sound patterns revealed an intent to arrange the fabric of the writer's work to accommodate Merezhkovsky's own extremely in-
volved religious and philosophic scheme. He was evidently influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, elements of whose *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) he tried to incorporate into his own argument. The outcome was a series of remarkable distortions that produced a gallery of fanciful caricatures of Tolstoy’s, and sometimes Dostoevsky’s, characters and ideas. In addition, he tried to resuscitate many metaphysical concepts that in the course of the past two and one-half thousand years had become obsolete and meaningless and that he, believing them to have some residual potential meaning, tried to electrify in recurrent patterns and new uses. Consequently, in about half of his writing no one but a classical philologist or a theologian could understand what he was saying. Yet after one clears away the fog, what remains does not have much substance and is not new. Merezhkovsky attempted the Rosicrucian solution: the union of Dionysus and Christ, rose and cross. The attempt leaves one cold. As a religious prophet in his own right, Merezhkovsky emerges as little more than a purveyor of used spiritual goods and spurious concepts: a mystic philosopher in the Nietzschean mold yet without Nietzsche’s genius, full of rhetoric and infected with the germ of racist arrogance that characterized the later phenomenon of German Nazism. Only his formal analysis of Tolstoy’s artistic devices is relatively free from such contamination. That it became obscured by the rest is unfortunate, because parts of the study are valuable. His study anticipates a good deal of the work done by the Russian formalists, as well as work done in the twentieth century on the psychological causes of the creative impulse. It mentions a number of things that have yet to be fully discussed within the realm of literary criticism and belong, at present, within the disciplines of psychology and anthropology. Merezhkovsky’s idea, for example, that the tension between linear logical and circular symbolic thinking provides psychic potential for creativity is well worth further study. He believed that it endowed Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, like the Renaissance man in Europe, with an unusual spirit of enterprise and an enviable enthusiasm that European writers no longer possess. His discussions of this interesting idea, however, are diffuse and generally inadequate.