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Master Tolstoy

The Teacher You Dread Having

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Tolstoy nurtured an obsession with teaching. Brimming with humor, this essay paints a picture of an imperfect and sensitive pedagogue.

In the early 20th century, people from all over Russia and even the far-flung corners of the world came to beseech counsel from the renowned Russian novelist. Guru? Life coach? What an astonishing fate indeed for a man well aware he was an example to no one. And yet there was an area in which Tolstoy wished to be a master: school. His days were punctuated by great pedagogical undertakings that served alternately as escapes and laboratories for his work as a writer. This man shot through with contradictions conceived of and experimented with a radically original form of apprenticeship, for better and for worse.