

**Panel “Challenging Tolstoy”
“Swiss Footsteps: Rousseau, Tolstoy, Nijinsky.”**

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Towards the end of his life, the Swiss-born French writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau took a series of walks around Paris and then wrote about them. His last autobiographical work *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1778) is structured around these walks, as indicated by the chapter headings Walk #1 to (the unfinished) Walk #10. *Reveries* is indeed partly about his walks, but mostly Rousseau uses the structure of his work to relate his rambling thoughts on education, nature and civilization; his feelings of guilt and paranoia; memories of his past; and his belief in the interconnection of thinking with walking. These are all themes he had addressed in his earlier work *Confessions*, which is widely considered the first major secular autobiography.

In 1857, the 28-year-old Russian writer Leo Tolstoy set out from Paris to go hiking around Switzerland, partly in homage to his literary idol, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Tolstoy wrote about his walks in very brief entries in his diary. One diary entry dated June 25/July 7 from Lucerne ends with a series of self-reflective questions, including “What am I?” This question became the title of Tolstoy’s later autobiographical essay, from which he drew to write an account of his religious conversion and life in faith. This work became known as *Confession (Исповедь)* when it was first published in Geneva in 1884.

In 1918, the internationally famous dancer Vaslav Nijinsky moved to Saint Moritz, Switzerland, partly because his wife wanted to separate him from his Tolstoyan friends (whom he had met while on tour in the USA). In the beginning of January, 1919, when he was 29 years old and right before he was diagnosed with schizophrenia, Nijinsky began writing in a school exercise notebook. Nijinsky’s work *Feeling (Чувство)*; in English it has been translated as *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*) is permeated with Tolstoyan concerns such as vegetarianism, pacifism, and chastity; and like Rousseau’s *Reveries*, it is structured, albeit less obviously, around a series of walks the writer takes.

This paper situates Nijinsky’s work in the tradition of confessional writing (attending to the question of authenticity and the mind-body problem) and then focuses on how Nijinsky responds to and, perhaps unconsciously, challenges Tolstoy’s authority. Through accounts of his walks around Saint Moritz, Nijinsky re-enacts and performs the “old Eastern tale” that begins Tolstoy’s

Confession. By shifting the emphasis from *what he is* to *what he is becoming*, Nijinsky rewrites allegory as lived experience.