

Notes

NOTES ON WAR AND PEACE

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1. Tolstoy's Biologism

By the end of the First Epilogue Pierre Bezukhov is happily married to Natasha Rostova and they have four children. As a guide to life he has adopted the philosophy of Platon Karataev. Yet he feels that he must take part in the meetings of a secret society in Petersburg that will eventually lead to the Decembrist uprising. Natasha asks Pierre whether Karataev would have approved of their married life. Yes, says Pierre, he would have approved of their family life but not of Pierre's involvement in a secret political society. It is odd that neither Pierre nor Natasha is at all disturbed by the thought that Karataev would have disapproved of Pierre's political activity. Of course Pierre knows, as Tolstoy does, that only unconscious activity bears fruit--yet "at that moment it seemed to him that he was chosen to give a new direction to the whole of Russian society and to the whole world."¹ In other words, become a Napoleon. This contradiction between Karataev's philosophy and Pierre's action is, according to Bocharov, Tolstoy's "ironic commentary" on what life is like.² I think a good deal more could be said about it.

Let us consider a similar case--Prince Andrei Bolkonsky after the battle of Austerlitz. Disillusioned in military "glory," driven by guilt over his behavior to his late wife, he decides to retire from the world and concentrate on managing his estate at Bogucharovo and bringing up his son. He turns out to be a very efficient and progressive manager, doing far more for his peasants than the idealist Pierre. Yet Pierre, on visiting his friend, notices with surprise that Prince Andrei's eyes are dull and listless, as if he is bored with his limited role as a father and estate manager. These activities do not fully engage all that is in him. It takes only a few encouraging words from Pierre (in the raft scene) and the voice of Natasha at Otradnoe to make him decide that he must plunge again into the big world where he can affect others. He decides to work with Speransky on the army code.

¹Tolstoy, War and Peace, trans. Ann Dunnigan (New York: New American Library, 1968), p. 1409.

²S. Bocharov, Roman L. Tolstogo "Voina i mir" (Moscow: Khud. lit., 1987), pp. 149-54.

Prince Andrei needs to break out of the confining world of his estate and Pierre Bezukhov needs to found a secret political society in violation of Karataev's precepts. The cause in each case is biological, springing from some deep inner need to move beyond the domestic sphere into a larger activity that would affect the world. Precisely because it is biological in origin Pierre is not disturbed in the least by the contradiction between his beliefs and his actions. Just as Natasha's biological role is to be a housewife and mother, so a man's role is to go beyond the home and seek to affect the world. This is what Pierre realizes. Tolstoy does not say that Prince Andrei's activity with Speransky or with the Russian army is necessarily useful, or that Pierre's political activity will change the world. Tolstoy is concerned above all with the biological need for such activity.

In the closing pages of the novel we find that the children of the major characters have such names as Andryusha (Andrei), Natasha, Petya, and Nicholas. Does this not suggest that their future lives will repeat in important ways the lives of their parents? The closing lines of the novel are not given to a major character but to 15-year old Nicholas Bolkonsky, the son of Prince Andrei. Although he has been adopted by Princess Marya and Nikolai Rostov, the boy holds the military life in contempt (and Nikolai Rostov as well). His two heroes are Pierre ("he wanted to be learned, wise and kind like Pierre") and Prince Andrei, the father whom he had never seen but whom Pierre and Natasha had told him about. Nicholas dreams of glory, fired up by his reading of Plutarch: "Everyone shall know of me, and they shall all love and admire me." The very same vow is expressed by his father before the battle of Austerlitz. And in the concluding lines of the novel he invokes both his "fathers": "But Uncle Pierre! Oh, what a wonderful man! And my father? Oh, Father, Father! Yes, I will do something that even he would be satisfied with..." (Tolstoy is reported to have said that Nicholas would become a Decembrist.³)

These concluding lines suggest two points.

First, Nicholas Bolkonsky's prayer at the end echoes the biological movement that we have traced in both his fathers: the deeply felt need to make use of all one's energies and talents even if that means breaking out of the private sphere into the larger one where one can influence the world.

Second, the glory that Nicholas Bolkonsky seeks is not the military glory that earlier Tolstoyan heroes had sought: Nikolai Rostov, Prince Andrei, and Petya Rostov. In these characters Tolstoy showed how youthful idealism (biology!) expressed itself on the battlefield, with disappointing and sometimes fatal results. It often seemed like nothing more than an exciting "ego-trip." But with two such fathers as Pierre and Prince Andrei, Nicholas will--such is the prayer-

³E. E. Zaidenshnur, "Voyna i mir" L. N. Tolstogo (Moscow: Kniga, 1966), p. 150.

-express his idealism on a higher level.

2. Determinism and Freedom

The Second Epilogue is mostly a long restatement of Tolstoy's theory of history, but tacked on at the end is a short discourse on necessity (determinism) and freedom. Although this discourse is just as unorthodox and irritating as Tolstoy's theory of history few scholars think it is worth serious discussion. Gustafson dismisses it as vague because Tolstoy had not yet developed his doctrine of God. (After Gustafson develops the full doctrine of God the reader remains no less perplexed by Tolstoy's view of freedom and determinism.⁴) Morson devotes less than a page to it, finding it "totally irrelevant to human life and the practice of historiography."⁵ Isaiah Berlin finds the conflict between freedom and determinism a terrible dilemma that Tolstoy never finally resolved.⁶

If Tolstoy's theory of freedom and determinism is vague and just an "empty truth" (Morson), why would Tolstoy choose to end his great novel on a vague and empty note?

There is nothing vague or tentative about the way he expresses himself. From the standpoint of reason, says Tolstoy, man is completely determined (the law of necessity). Yet if he were to admit this as true, man would not be able to live for a single moment. Fortunately, he is ignorant of all the innumerable factors that determine each action of his, and what he does not know he assumes to be an area in which free will can operate. This area of freedom is, of course, illusory--based only on ignorance of the truth--but if man believes he is free, he feels that he is alive. From the standpoint of reason, says Tolstoy, free will "is only a momentary, indefinable sensation of life." Tolstoy gives us a series of equations: free will = consciousness = life = God.⁷ These terms may express an illusion, but that illusion is the basis of

⁴Richard F. Gustafson, Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 224.

The full "doctrine of God" that Tolstoy eventually developed did recognize the reality of freedom in a limited sense: man was free to choose to follow God, but he remained unfree in all other matters. Since most decisions are not of a spiritual nature, the area of illusory freedom remained almost as large as it was in War and Peace. For the full "doctrine of God," see Gustafson, p. 445.

⁵Gary Saul Morson, Hidden in Plain View (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 92.

⁶Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," in Russian Thinkers (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 43-45.

⁷I have combined and equated terms used in the second Epilogue with those in Pierre Bezukhov's dream of the vibrating liquid globe in which God at the center is equated with Life. See p. 1272.

morality and culture as well as of life.

I think we would all agree that each of our actions is the result of a combination of factors involving freedom and necessity. But Tolstoy drives on to a wild and reckless extremism in his logic. The closing lines of the Second Epilogue, that is, the closing lines of the whole novel, thunder at the reader: "It is...necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist and to recognize a dependence [on the laws of nature--nr] of which we are not conscious." End of novel. Observe that Tolstoy does not qualify this statement by such a phrase as "from the standpoint of reason..." His command is absolute. Even though he has told us that "a man without freedom is conceivable only as a man bereft of life," yet he recommends this heroic insanity (resulting in death) to living in a human world of necessary illusions.

Scholars agree that Tolstoy is definitely on the side of freedom rather than determinism--but they ignore the last lines of the novel, and this is troublesome.

Why did Tolstoy insist on the primacy of determinism? Several reasons could be suggested. First, his concern with biology, the tremendous force of life in him, his close feeling for the rhythms of the earth. Second, in connection with his theory of history, any recognition of the complexity of human motives would make leaders more humble and attentive in trying to predict or change the course of events. Finally, there is a tantalizing and obscure passage near the end of the Second Epilogue that may be worth our notice. The discoveries of Copernicus and Newton were used by Voltaire and other foes of religion, says Tolstoy, but religion survived their attacks. He goes on:

In exactly the same way now it seems that we have only to admit the law of necessity to destroy the concept of the soul, of good and evil, and all the institutions of church and state that have been erected on these conceptions.

Like Voltaire in his time, the unsolicited champions of the law of necessity today use that law as a weapon against religion, though the law of necessity in history, like the law of Copernicus in astronomy, far from destroying, rather strengthens the foundation on which the institutions of church and state are founded.⁸

I do not see how determinism (the law of necessity) strengthens the foundations of church and state and the concept of the soul. It is a

⁸War and Peace, pp. 1453-54.

paradoxical statement that urgently needs elucidation. Perhaps it may explain why Tolstoy insists so strongly on the primacy of determinism.

Another problem is why Tolstoy debunks free will as a necessary illusion. If free will is to be renounced, why does he bother to write his huge novel War and Peace, which celebrates the force of life in all its manifestations, even going into details about the frisky "bandy-legged, lavender-gray dog" of Karataev? "The aim of an artist," writes Tolstoy, "is not to resolve a question irrefutably but to compel one to love life in all its manifestations, and these are inexhaustible."⁹

To make one love life is to make one love an illusion. That, says Tolstoy, is the function of the artist!

It is curious that even while debunking free will in the Second Epilogue Tolstoy--who is not a visionary--asks us to accept a miracle. If we think we are free, says Tolstoy, we become alive. But just how does this transformation come about physically, biologically? It is a mysterious leap from believing in free will to becoming alive. Tolstoy never explains how abstract thought is transformed into a living being. Of course that is how God created the world: "In the beginning was the Word..." And the Creation followed. We usually think the process works in the reverse way: to be alive means to be endowed with free will. Tolstoy asks us to accept a miracle--to be like God.

3. The Death of Prince Andrei

It is a famous scene. Prince Andrei's regiment is being held in reserve during the Battle of Borodino. It has been under heavy artillery fire for eight hours and the men are being decimated. Prince Andrei walks up and down, encouraging his men and waiting for orders to get into action. A shell lands two paces from him.

"Lie down! shouted the adjutant, throwing himself to the ground.

Prince Andrei hesitated. The smoking shell, which had fallen near a clump of wormwood on the border of the plowed field and the meadow, spun like a top between him and the prostrate adjutant.

"Can this be death?" thought Prince Andrei, looking with unwonted yearning at the grass, the wormwood, and then at the wisp of smoke curling up from the rotating black ball. "I can't die, I don't want to die. I love life--love this grass, this earth, this air..."

Even while he was thinking these

⁹From an unsent letter quoted in Ernest J. Simmons, Leo Tolstoy (Boston: Little, Brown, 1946), p. 276.

thoughts, he remembered that people were looking at him.

"It's shameful, sir!" he said to the adjutant. "What kind of--"

He did not finish. There was the sound of an explosion, like the splintering of a window frame being ripped out, and at the same moment, a suffocating smell of powder, and Prince Andrei was hurled to one side, and flinging up his arm fell face downward.

Several officers ran up to him. Blood poured from the right side of his abdomen, making a great stain on the grass.¹⁰

One feels like raising a question here. Surely Prince Andrei did not need the shouted warning of his adjutant to know that he must lie down at once when a shell was about to burst close to him. Yet Prince Andrei decided not to lie down, seemingly mesmerized by the thought "Can this be death?" It was as if he was inviting death...

Let us go back to the last conversation between Prince Andrei and Pierre on the eve of the battle of Borodino. Prince Andrei, "in the cold, white daylight of his clear perception of death," had reviewed beforehand the false images he had lived by--false because they had proved disillusioning: Glory, the love of Natasha, the commonweal, the fatherland. And now he clearly saw the horror of war and the utter depravity of the military class that made war possible.

"How God can look down and hear them! cried Prince Andrei in a shrill piercing voice. "Ah, my friend, life has become a burden for me of late. I see that I have begun to understand too much. It does not do for a man to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil....Ah, well, it's not for long!" he added.¹¹

From these passages it seems clear that Andrei willed his own death. That is why he chose not to fall to the ground when the shell

¹⁰War and Peace, pp. 973-74.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 925-26, 933. It may be objected that Prince Andrei plainly says in this same passage that "I can't die, I don't want to die, I love life--love this grass, this earth, this air..." And "he remembered that people were looking at him." Tolstoy explains this contradiction in the last lines of this scene, where Prince Andrei thinks: "Why was I so reluctant to relinquish life? There was something about this life that I did not and do not now understand." (p. 975) He wishes to live in order to test out one other value--divine love--which is just beginning to affect him as he lies dying and his ego begins to dissolve.

was about to explode.

In an earlier version Andrei was to have died at Austerlitz, but Tolstoy decided to postpone his death.¹² Prince Andrei lived for a month after his fatal wound at Borodino. Tolstoy not only wanted to explore the state of mind of a dying man but to bring out the nature of Prince Andrei's conversion to Christianity. Only when dying, when his ego was dissolving, could Prince Andrei forgive Natasha and Anatol. But his forgiveness and love were then no longer for a particular Natasha and Anatol: "To love everything and everybody and always to sacrifice oneself for love meant not to love anyone, not to live this earthly life."¹³ The reader might conclude from this that Tolstoy did not believe a truly Christian love possible until the barrier of personality, of ego, was dissolved. Yet we should note that Prince Andrei's dying is inclosed between two scenes involving Pierre Bezukhov in captivity. During the month that Prince Andrei lay dying, Pierre had been moving toward Karataev and Karataev's philosophy. Prince Andrei's discovery of divine love was the same as Pierre's earthly love for mankind. Tolstoy's favorite method of eliciting meaning from Juxtapositions works very effectively here. Just as Prince Andrei's ego dissolves as he moves toward death, Pierre's ego dissolves as he moves toward a new life. He refuses to give his name to the French; he calls the child he has saved from the flames of Moscow his daughter; and in clothing and spirit he becomes one with the narod in the shed. It was probably because Tolstoy wanted to point up the contrast between Prince Andrei and Pierre--between Christianity as divine love and as earthly love--that Prince Andrei's life was extended by a month.

4. Pierre Bezukhov as a Non-Western Hero

Pierre has been severely criticized for his flabby will. "He decides to have no will of his own," says Gustafson. "Pierre fails to be responsible to himself."¹⁴ And Wasiulek finds that Pierre "is the supremely manipulable person, and Anna Mikhaylovna is the supremely manipulating person."¹⁵ "In a parody of the standard adventure novels," says Morson,

Pierre endures a series of suspenseful incidents, each of which is marked by the hero's failure to make a decision in the nick of time....There is never a moment when he is actually taking responsibility.

¹²Zaidenshnur, p. 158.

¹³War and Peace, p. 1173.

¹⁴Gustafson, pp. 342-43.

¹⁵Edward Wasiulek, Tolstoy's Major Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 86.

The inability to face the decisiveness of each moment and to live each present moment actively and responsibly dooms Pierre in the Tolstoyan world he inhabits....Pierre unwittingly puts himself into the hands of that master strategist, Anna Mikhailovna."¹⁶

From the censure of these commentators one might suppose that it would have been better if Pierre had a firm will like Prince Andrei (and Pierre admires Prince Andrei's will). Yet it is Prince Andrei who is doomed and dies while Pierre emerges as the triumphant hero of the novel, bearing away its great heroine Natasha. Is it possible that Pierre's triumph is in some essential way related to his lack of will?

Let us examine the first bit of evidence cited by these critics--that Pierre puts himself into the hands of that supreme manipulator, Anna Mikhailovna. First of all, Pierre took to heart Marya Dmitrievna's scolding for his playing a practical joke (the policeman and bear incident) while his father lay dying. Pierre had the good sense to realize that "on this night, to avoid losing his head and doing something stupid, he must not act according to his own ideas, but must surrender himself entirely to the will of those who were guiding him."¹⁷ Knowing his weakness, he made a constructive decision in this instance. Secondly, he instinctively chose the right person as his guide--he could, for example, have chosen Prince Vasily Kuragin! In choosing to let himself be manipulated by Anna Mikhailovna, Pierre demonstrated self-knowledge (and humility at that self-knowledge) and an openness to experience--the very factors which enabled him to mature and triumph at the end.

Of course Pierre should not have let himself be manipulated into a marriage with Hélène Kuragina. He was motivated not only by lust, and guilt over lust, but by the expectations of society. Pierre's phrasing is quite revealing: "Now I know that not for her alone, not for me alone, but for everyone it must inevitably come about. They all expect it...I cannot, cannot disappoint them."¹⁸ This openness to the pressure of society is bad in this case, but it prefigures in a minor way his decision to kill Napoleon for the sake of the narod. Pierre's self-knowledge makes him decide to join the Freemasons; he is attracted by their emphasis on brotherhood (again society!) and self-perfection. He is not manipulated into joining the Freemasons but joins out of an inner need to control himself and do good for others. And indeed, thanks to his involvement with the Freemasons, he is able to summon up the strength to repulse Prince Vasily, much to the latter's surprise, when Pierre is urged to live again with Hélène.

¹⁶Morson, pp. 233, 235.

¹⁷War and Peace, p. 114.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 263.

Pierre's lack of willpower serves him in good stead when he decides that he must kill Napoleon. He wakes up too late, gets involved with Ramballe, saves a child from the flames, defends the Armenian woman--all of which distract him from the job of killing Napoleon. At the same time, lacking a strong ego, he can more easily merge with the narod, so that he identifies the child he has saved from the flames as his daughter. After the shock of the execution of "incendiaries," he loses what ego he has and can then be ready to merge with Karataev. Prince Andrei, of course, would never have been able to meet Karataev or be influenced by him. (Recall how obsessed Prince Andrei is with the need of tracking down and killing Anatol, all for the sake of family honor, while he is callously indifferent to Natasha's suffering.)

Prince Andrei's strong ego is related to his pride in his ancestry, his roots in the landed gentry, the clarity and firmness of his father's eighteenth-century background. Pierre, on the other hand, is illegitimate, has no parents to bring him up, no tradition to fall back on, and therefore he must rely, for better or worse, on his instincts. Since he lacks both a firm moral center and willpower, he becomes all the more dependent on what experience can teach him. This would explain why he is so much more flexible and open to experience than Prince Andrei. I suspect that these are the characteristics Zaidenshnur has in mind when he says that Pierre expresses Tolstoy's deeply felt ideas and is "the character closest to Tolstoy in the novel."¹⁹

I would like to press this notion a bit further. Tolstoy maintained that War and Peace was not a novel (in the Western sense); if Pierre Bezukhov is one of the central characters in War and Peace he is not a Western-type hero either. He belongs to a Russian literary tradition (as yet unexplored) that includes Oblomov, Prince Myshkin and, to some extent, Bazarov. If there is a quintessentially Russian novel it is Oblomov, whose center is a character who cannot get out of bed, the "Plato of Oblomovka" whose destiny is to "demonstrate the ideally peaceful side of human existence."²⁰ Just as Prince Andrei and Stolz stress western will and ego, so Pierre and Oblomov represent characters who live by the heart and the intuition--and who therefore exert a profound influence on a society where their presence is much needed. Prince Myshkin, of course, is unthinkable as a western-type character; people are drawn to him by what he is, rather than by what he tries to achieve (Don Quixote is an activist).

It may seem strange to include Bazarov in this tradition. He is a self-confessed nihilist, an activist, rough, extreme, and even inhuman (to his parents, for example, whom he hasn't seen for three

¹⁹Zaidenshnur, p. 327.

²⁰Ivan Goncharov, Oblomov, trans. Ann Dunnigan (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 537.

years and visits for only three days). But why is he so demoralized by rejection by Mme. Odintseva? Why does he return to his parents after the rejection? The cause of his death is ambiguous but when he is dying he says strange things; his last words to Mme. Odintseva are suffused with the "romanticism" that he has fought throughout the novel. He tells her: "Be kind to Mother. You couldn't find people like them in your great world if you searched for them with a lantern in broad daylight."²¹ How can we explain this adoration of his parents, whom he had treated so casually up to now? It becomes evident that at heart he is at one with his sweet and gentle parents Vassily and Arina, whose prototypes are Gogol's old-world landowners. Bazarov's fierce, crude behavior, his trampling upon lawns and people's sensibilities, his rigid utilitarianism, are a self-imposed discipline designed to shape and temper him--like Chernyshevsky's Rakhmetev--into the steely leader of the revolutionaries of the future. Rejected by a woman, he reflects in his dying words his inheritance from his old-world parents. It is this tension between his nature and his rigid views and practices--a tension which he tries to conceal from himself and others--that makes him so appealing a character. Note, by the way, that the novel ends with Bazarov's parents tending the grave where he lies buried. This offers Turgenev the occasion for closing the novel with a declaration about nature: nature "speaks of eternal reconciliation and eternal life."²² The principle governing nature is not extremism but reconciliation. Vassily and Arina move in rhythm with nature. Bazarov in the end turns out to move in that same rhythm too.

Given this Russian tradition of the goodness that lies in being rather than achieving, it is inevitable that the ego-centered Prince Andrei must die and the weak-willed, good natured Pierre will survive and triumph.

5. Hélène Kuragina

It has been said that War and Peace contains over 500 characters, all of them carefully individualized. Tolstoy seems to know each one intimately. He even shows us life from the point of view of a dog. Karataev's frisky, well-fed dog follows after Pierre in the retreating column of French soldiers: "All around lay the flesh of different animals--from men to horses--in various stages of decomposition."²³ That is a dog's point of view!

The only character who does not enjoy Tolstoy's sympathy is

²¹Ivan Turgenev, Fathers and Sons, trans. Barbara Makanowitzky (New York: Bantam Books, 1959), p. 197.

²²"Old World Landowners" is one of Gogol's best stories, as good as "The Overcoat" in my opinion, but it did not have the literary influence of "The Overcoat." It should be required reading in a course in Russian Civilization.

²³War and Peace, p. 1267.

The only character who does not enjoy Tolstoy's sympathy is Hélène Kuragina.

In all the earlier versions as well as in the final version she is depicted only from the outside, as a sexual being, so that the reader feels no sympathy for her. Even her rascally father, Prince Vasily, gets more sympathy from Tolstoy, especially when someone's death reminds Prince Vasily of what awaits him. Hélène, however, is shown no mercy--she remains throughout the novel a symbol of pure evil.

A Soviet scholar claimed that Tolstoy did not empathise with her because she was meant to embody nothing but sensuality. Since it was only her body that drew Pierre to her, there was no need of making a deeper study of her.²⁴

While this sounds plausible, one may also wonder to what extent Tolstoy's fear of his own strong sexuality played a role here. Hélène is dangerous--she is promiscuous, even incestuous (with Anatol). She rejects the thought of having a child by Pierre and, in fact, dies while attempting to have an abortion. This is in opposition to Tolstoy's strong belief in the sanctity of marriage. Poor Hélène!

I confess that I happen to be fascinated by her, especially by her conversion to Catholicism and what that meant to her:

The state of dovelike purity in which she found herself (she wore only white dresses trimmed with white ribbons during this period) gave her pleasure...²⁵

In this state of dovelike purity she has a conversation with her confessor, a sleek, well-fed abbé who sits close to her, gazing at her with placid admiration: "Hélène," says Tolstoy, "was wearing a white dress, transparent over the shoulders and bosom."²⁶

Now that is something to think about. Hélène's "dovelike purity" is symbolized by a white dress, which is appropriate--but the dress is transparent! What a combination! Dostoevsky himself could never have thought up anything as marvelously, as beautifully depraved as this.

²⁴Zaidenshnur, p. 277

²⁵War and Peace, p. 1002.

²⁶Ibid. To make the picture complete, Tolstoy added the following sentence: "Ellen smiled uneasily as she gazed at his curly hair and plump, smooth-shaven, dusky cheeks, expecting the conversation to take a new turn at any moment."