

# WAR AND PEACE

Life's "Labyrinth of Linkages"

One of the unfortunate byproducts of academic literary criticism over the past three decades is its failure to help readers appreciate the essence of *War and Peace*. The influence of postmodernist thought has led many well-meaning scholars to extract from the greatest novel ever written various ideological constructs about war, politics, and society. Other scholars, in the interest of "specialization," have plucked from Tolstoy's delightfully overflowing garden a single species of growth—a theme, a technique, a motif—and replanted it within their own conceptual frameworks. After reading analyses of Tolstoy's use of repetition, his preference of metonymy to metaphor, or his allusions to Greek philosophy, one scratches one's head, wondering: And where is *War and Peace*?

This "loose baggy monster" of a work, as Henry James famously called it, is a cornucopia of human experience. The novel embodies what Tolstoy called life's "labyrinth of linkages"—the deep interconnectedness of everyone and everything in the universe. As such, it is perhaps the grandest literary celebration ever conceived of "globalization"—not merely the unifying social, economic, and cultural forces that connect us today, but the transposition of these connections to a higher realm of spiritual unity.

Tolstoy worked on *War and Peace* during a creative period marked by great spiritual tranquility. Happily married to Sofya Behrs since 1862, settled comfortably on his family estate at Yasnaya Polyana, and intoxi-

cated by his growing literary reputation, Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace* from 1863 to 1869 “under the best conditions of life.”<sup>1</sup> The writer’s calm inner state is reflected in the novel itself. In contrast to his angst-ridden first novel, *War and Peace* is a majestic meditation on life’s holism. If in *The Cossacks* we hear an intense dialogue between the narrator and his hero, in *War and Peace* the narrator focuses our attention on the inner life of many heroes and on the deep interconnectedness of each individual with the cosmic forces of nature and history.

The result is a unified vision of the world that had not yet materialized in *The Cossacks*. The narrator of *War and Peace*, gazing with Olympian repose on his wondrous creation, is fundamentally different from the more ironic and divided narrator of *The Cossacks*. Despite his authoritarianism, like the God of the Old Testament, he has an almost paternalistic love for the humanity of all of his imperfect creatures.

A grand celebration of all that constitutes reality, whether “good” or “bad,” *War and Peace* moves back and forth between private lives and public spectacles, ballrooms and battles, marriages and massacres. No character is too small and no subject too large for this epic masterpiece. Characters are born, they marry, grow old and die within a fictional world where the clock ticks on with slow, implacable calm. This has led some readers to sense in the novel a spirit of fatalism. But it is also an inspiring vision of the world’s physical plenitude and of the meaningful moral choices it offers. These characters discover that their individual lives are both finite and full of possibility, both solitary and part of a unified tapestry of human history and nature. Only Prince Andrei is unable to reconcile his noble ideals with reality. He is the novel’s one tragic hero.

As characters’ personal destinies become increasingly intertwined with the encroaching forces of war and history, the “peace” and “war” sections of the novel become so intertwined that it appears virtually impossible to disentangle them. Power politics, schemes, and stratagems are as rampant in the Petersburg drawing rooms as on the battlefield, and characters are as apt to achieve spiritual illumination in the throes of war as in the joys of family life. The “peace” of the novel’s title refers not only to peacetime but also to the spiritual tranquility characters seek amidst the confusion of modern life.<sup>2</sup>

If *The Cossacks* focuses on Olenin’s view of life from outside the lost Garden and his desperate efforts to get back into it, then *War and Peace* presents a glimpse of what the Garden might actually look like from within. Unlike the first novel, *War and Peace* does not merely describe characters’ quest for perfection in an imperfect world. Its underlying struc-

ture and vision *model* this coveted destination. The essential truth of life the protagonists seek is already present in the work's epic wholeness, in its portrait of a mythical totality of human existence, in which heaven and earth, ideal and real, coexist in total equilibrium. If this sense of wholeness was, as the critic Georg Lukacs has argued, organic to the ancient worldview, then Tolstoy has come as close as possible to resurrecting it in an alienated, modern age.<sup>3</sup>

## THE ART OF WAR AND PEACE IN AN IDEOLOGICAL ERA

*War and Peace* meditates on the majestic order of the universe as a kind of artistic compensation for an era that was anything but orderly and harmonious. The growing ideological divisiveness and social dislocations feared by the author of *The Cossacks* had in fact materialized. Alexander II put the Great Reforms, which democratized the society, into effect in the 1860s. The greatest of those reforms, The Emancipation of the Serfs, was enacted in 1861. To the ongoing debates about social reform were now added discussions about Russian national identity, Russian history, and historiography in general. Fierce journalistic and scholarly controversy continued to sharpen the rift between the old guard and the radical revolutionaries. Divisions also widened between the Slavophiles, who argued that Russia's destiny lay in a return to its unique national traditions, and the Westernizers, who believed that Russia's development ought to follow European models of political governance and social reform.

The opinionated author of *War and Peace* was not above the ideological fray. A proud landed aristocrat, Tolstoy was deeply concerned about the personal loss of prestige and social chaos portended by the Great Reforms. Furthermore, as a soldier during the Crimean War, and author of the patriotic *Sevastopol Tales*, which immortalized the heroism of Russian soldiers during that war, Tolstoy resented the liberal argument that Russia's "humiliating" defeat in the Crimea proved the necessity of sweeping reform.<sup>4</sup>

But art and ideology are not, finally, interchangeable. *War and Peace* assimilates Tolstoy's personal beliefs—many of them conflicting—into an artistic and philosophical whole that transcends whatever polemical intentions the author may have initially had for the work. Kathryn Feuer makes a similar point in her important *Tolstoy and the Genesis of War and Peace*. She describes the strong social and political overtones of

Tolstoy's earliest work on *War and Peace*, a period defined by the author's "rejection of the Spirit of 1856," the time of reform-minded enthusiasm. Feuer then traces the slow and tortuous process by which *War and Peace* grew from a sociopolitical novel with overt ideological intentions into a masterpiece, in which the demands of artistic truth, which at first serve the author's ideological agenda, ultimately supersede it.<sup>5</sup>

While Feuer describes the transition from ideology to art, Boris Eikhenbaum argues in *Tolstoi in the Sixties* for a fundamentally opposite trajectory. He points out that what began as a family chronicle eventually was transformed into a historical epic. This is exemplified by Tolstoy's progressive inclusion of historico-philosophical essays, which Eikhenbaum likens to the authorial digressions in a Homeric epic. Furthermore, these essays prove to Eikhenbaum that Tolstoy's writing was becoming more rather than less polemical, as the author became increasingly engrossed in the controversies of the late 1860s. Still, as this astute critic argues, it is nearly impossible to fit Tolstoy neatly into any of the warring ideological camps of the 1860s, because the author's "archaistic" thought patterns combine so many conflicting traditional and progressive tendencies.

Taking Eikhenbaum's insights a step further, I propose that *War and Peace* unites the intellectual oppositions of the 1860s within an artistic world that transcends ideology altogether. Against the backdrop of the author's luxuriant, expansive canvas, questions about whether Tolstoy was a conservative or a liberal, a Slavophile or a Westernizer, become moot. Just as the vast Russian countryside in *War and Peace* engulfs the invading French army, so Tolstoy's massive literary landscape assimilates a web of conflicting ideas and influences into a synthetic creation whose deepest artistic sympathies are panhuman and pantheistic.<sup>6</sup>

There is no denying that Tolstoy's social conservatism seeps into *War and Peace* in his idealized depiction of the harmonious landlord-peasant relationship; he seems to suggest that such feudal relations are part of a timeless historical pattern that existed long before discussion of reform.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the obvious ideological underpinnings of the novel's rather poetic presentation of peasant-aristocrat relations, this vision of social harmony serves a non-ideological purpose, as well. It is integral to the work's overall sense of timeless historical cycles and the interconnect-edness of man, nature, and history within a "great chain of being."<sup>8</sup>

Through his depiction of class harmony, Tolstoy creates for the divided Russian society of the 1860s a vision of a mythical, harmonious past, in which Russians are un-self-consciously secure in their collective national identity and spiritually united in their response to an invading army. In

the novel Russia ends Napoleon's worldwide anarchy, and thus unleashes the forces that would lead to her own Decembrist Revolution of 1825.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Russia becomes a vital link in the vast chain of historical evolution, in which timeless patterns of revolution and retreat, social chaos and order, eternally recur.

To take another example of how the novel assimilates authorial ideology into an artistic whole, consider the novel's portrait of Mikhail Speransky, the influential government reformer under Alexander I, who, when Prince Andrei idolizes him in Volume Two, Part Three, is at the height of his career. While many historians in Tolstoy's time and after admired Speransky's accomplishments as an administrator, Tolstoy ridicules him in the novel, looking down on him as titled gentlemen often looked down on priests' sons who became opportunistic government bureaucrats. What's more, with his grating, high-pitched laugh and lowbrow narrow-mindedness, Tolstoy's Speransky has the qualities that Tolstoy disliked in many of the radical reformers of his own day: he is abrasive, contemptuous of others, and deaf to the larger historical and natural forces that move life forward. But even if the ideologue in Tolstoy has Speransky play the role of polemical whipping boy for his pro-aristocratic, antireformist stance, the artist in Tolstoy perceives Speransky from a much wider vantage point. Speransky is, in fact, *essential* to the larger life processes and trajectory of the novel as a whole.

When Prince Andrei becomes bitterly disenchanted with him, this is but a variation on the recurrent theme of ideal creation and disillusionment that is experienced by all of the novel's main characters. Prince Andrei's disenchantment with Speransky is the final blow to his grandiose delusions about human power. Having discovered earlier, on the battlefield of Austerlitz, that his idol Napoleon is but a buzzing fly in the fabric of history, Prince Andrei learns through his encounter with Speransky that social reformers are equally ineffectual—and irrelevant. Psychologically freed, at least for the moment, Prince Andrei can now open himself to new possibilities for achieving personal happiness and meaning. For one of the few times in the novel, he listens to the wisdom of his emotions and heeds the call of his love for the young and vibrant Natasha Rostova.

Yet this emotional flowering is temporary. Prince Andrei's capacity to live in concert with the forces of life and his own emotional needs is limited. Tragically unable to free himself from the shackles of duty and rationality, he postpones his happiness by giving in to his father's demands that the wedding to Natasha be postponed for a year. It is significant that, when he returns to Moscow nearly a year later, at the end of Volume Two,

Part Five, and learns of Natasha's infidelity during his absence, Prince Andrei's first words are a defense of his former idol, Speransky, "the news of whose sudden exile and alleged treason had just reached Moscow" (530; II, 5, 21).<sup>10</sup> He deals with his bitterness towards Natasha—and presumably towards himself—by attempting to resurrect an idol long dead to him, and now to Russia as well. Thus, Speransky's rise and fall from power roughly parallel Prince Andrei's own emotional trajectory in the novel. Despite Tolstoy's ideological opposition to Speransky's politics and personality, the artist in him sees Speransky as a necessary part of that timeless ebb and flow of life processes, which, in the context of the novel, is the highest, most enduring truth.

### THE OBJECTIVE MIRROR AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE LENS: ARTISTIC "REALITY" IN *WAR AND PEACE*

To speak of the holism of *War and Peace* is not to imply that the work contains, literally, a comprehensive picture of reality. No work of art could possibly achieve this, even one as vast as *War and Peace*. In a response to criticism leveled against him in 1869, the author admitted that there was much he intentionally left out of his depiction of the era: "the horrors of serfdom, the immuring of wives, the flogging of grown-up sons . . . and so on."<sup>11</sup> John Bayley makes a telling point when he writes that "Tolstoy only created a world that seems to embrace all of reality by sealing off things that worried and disturbed him."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Tolstoy's factual omissions stem from his desire to focus on the mythical social harmony of an earlier age, and to distill from that era the universal norms, rather than the extreme limits, of human behavior:

If we have come to believe in the perversity and coarse violence of that period, that is only because the traditions, memoirs, stories, and novels that have been handed to us record for the most part exceptional cases of violence and brutality. To suppose that the predominant characteristic of that period was turbulence is as unjust as it would be for a man seeing nothing but the tops of trees beyond a hill, to conclude that there was nothing to be found in that locality but trees.<sup>13</sup>

Tolstoy himself repeatedly rejected the notion of the novel as an objective reflection of reality. Art's purpose, he insisted, is not to transfer histori-

cal experience exactly (an impossibility in his view) but to transmute it to the literary canvas, which contains its own internal set of laws and relationships. In response to readers who criticized him for having Napoleon speak both French and Russian, Tolstoy compared himself to the painter who is blamed for putting a black spot on his subject's face to create the impression of a shadow: "I would only ask those to whom it seems absurd that Napoleon should speak now Russian and now French, to realize that this seems so to them only because they, like the man looking at the portrait, notice a black spot under the nose instead of observing the face with its lights and shades."<sup>14</sup>

Tolstoy's defense of his artistic choices goes beyond questions of ideology or literary technique. It touches on his central ideas about the unique capacities and aims of art. As this quotation makes clear, what concerns the author above all is a distinction between artistic reality and empirical reality, between an artistic representation of the world and that world as it is seen by the naked eye, or experienced by the senses with empirical objectivity. This distinction, which appears obvious from our post-Formalist standpoint, was not widely accepted in the anti-aesthetic, materialist, and utilitarian intellectual climate of the 1860s in Russia.

To appreciate this, we need only consider Nikolai Dobroliubov's influential article "What is Oblomovitis?" published in 1860, about Ivan Goncharov's novel *Oblomov*, or the essay "Bazarov," about Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, published in 1862 by the radical social critic Dmitry Pisarev.<sup>15</sup> These critics blithely ignore the line between art and life and treat the novels as if they were objective mirrors of reality, thus turning them into sociological documents. Rather than discuss the emotional complexity of the works and the deep ambivalence of both authors towards their heroes, Dobroliubov and Pisarev treat each fictional hero as if he were an actual living being, and they diagnose contemporary social ills based on this "empirical" literary evidence. In other words, these critics treat art in precisely the way that Tolstoy said that art should not be approached: as an exact mirror of objective reality. For Tolstoy, art is not a mirror but a transformative lens. It distills from the objective facts of nature and society a higher poetic truth.

Tolstoy develops these ideas further in a notebook entry from April 1870, about a year after the completion of *War and Peace*. The author describes why he believes art is superior to "historical science" for understanding historical truth:

The first condition of history, like that of every art, must be lucidity,

simplicity, and affirmativeness, not conjecture. But then *history-art* does not have the constraint and the unachievable goal of *history-science*. *History-art*, like every art, aims not for breadth but for depth, and its subject-matter can be the description of the life of all of Europe and the description of one month in the life of a 16th century peasant.<sup>16</sup>

Tolstoy considers “history-art” a superior form of knowledge because it peers into the inner reality and penetrates the deeper significance of historical facts, whereas “history-science” contents itself with an enumeration of the facts themselves. The limitation of “history-science” is that it focuses on the external reality of a historical era, and that it fails to incorporate into its narrative the innumerable forces—many of them metaphysical—that play a crucial role in the movement of history. To capture historical truth “[a] knowledge of *all* the details of life is necessary. Art—the gift of artistry—is necessary.”<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the artist must capture the totality of the universe, the overarching order that encompasses all the details, not an enumeration of each and every detail. In a notebook entry written a month earlier, in March 1870, Tolstoy further explains why he believes that art, not science or rational thought, is uniquely capable of illuminating the “essence” of life:

The work of thought leads to the vanity of thought. It is not necessary to return to thought. There is another tool: art. Thought requires figures, lines, symmetry, movement in space and time and thereby destroys itself. . . . What do chemistry, physics, astronomy, and especially the most fashionable zoology do? They bring everything under their requirements of symmetry and continuity (the circle), and arrive at a thought, but the essence of the object [of study] remains. . . . Only art knows the conditions neither of time, nor space, nor movement. Only art, always inimical to symmetry and the circle, gives the essence.<sup>18</sup>

Conspicuously absent from Tolstoy’s reflections on the superiority of art to scientific thought is any reference to the human subject, to the artist himself, who creates the work. In speaking about art as though it existed outside of the participation of and manipulation by human beings, Tolstoy reveals the depth of his desire to believe in a pure, unconstructed truth of life. And yet, the writer was equally aware of how necessary, and even empowering, humanly imposed structures can be. Indeed, it is precisely

through the author's brilliant manipulation of artistic *form* that *War and Peace* captures life's plenitude and holism.

Tolstoy understood that the capacity of art to reflect life's deepest truths depends not only on poetic inspiration and metaphysical insight but also on a finely honed artistic craft, a subject that preoccupied him throughout his life. One of his most illuminating ruminations is found in an unlikely place, his essay "Why Do Men Stupefy Themselves?" published in 1890 as a preface to a book, *Drunkenness*, about the Temperance Movement in Russia.<sup>19</sup> One of the essay's well-known passages about the use of details in art harkens back to Tolstoy's earlier reflections, in his 1870 notebook entries, on art's unique capacity to reveal life's "essence." Here the writer provides a tantalizing clue about how exactly art does that:

[The painter] Bryullov one day corrected a pupil's study. The pupil, having glanced at the altered drawing, exclaimed: "Why, you only touched it a tiny bit, but it is quite another thing." Bryullov replied: "Art begins where the tiny bit begins."

That saying is strikingly true not only of art but of all of life. One may say that true life begins where the tiny bit begins—where what seems to us minute and infinitely small alterations take place. True life is not lived where great external changes take place—where people move about, clash, fight, and slay one another—it is lived only where these tiny, tiny, infinitesimally small changes occur.<sup>20</sup>

This passage reveals as much about Tolstoy's artistic technique as it does about Bryullov's: the attention to detail that allowed him to capture the subtle movement of human consciousness and the moment-to-moment flow of everyday reality. "True life" is lived in those "minute" and "almost imperceptible" moments when the mind is moving forward ever so slightly, making those successive tiny decisions that lead to major consequences. It is in that "almost imperceptible" space that the future drug or alcohol addict is born, according to Tolstoy. By giving in to a seemingly insignificant impulse to indulge, the future addict thus initiates a process that ramifies well beyond the initial, isolated act of smoking or drinking.

It is also in that "almost imperceptible" space that the holism of Tolstoy's artistic vision in *War and Peace* is born. Focusing on minute processes, he illuminates a vast web of associations. His poetics of the "tiny bit" permits him to go not only into the "breadth" but also into the "depth" of his subject. Yet not just any detail will do. In a little-known article, "How Count Tolstoy Writes," published in Boston in 1899 by

Charles Johnston (an Irish journalist and writer who knew him personally), Tolstoy explains what constitutes the necessary detail:

“You should not neglect the slightest detail in art: because sometimes some half-torn button may light up a whole side of the character of a given person; and that button must be faithfully represented. But all efforts, including the half-torn-off button, must be directed exclusively to the inner reality, and must by no means draw away attention from what is of first importance to details and secondary facts. One of our contemporary novelists, in describing the history of Joseph and his wife, would certainly not miss the chance to exhibit his knowledge of life, and would write: ‘Come to me!’ murmured she, in a languishing voice, stretching out her arm, soft with aromatic unguents, on which shone a bracelet decorated, and so on, and so on, and these details not only would not light up the heart of the matter more clearly, but would certainly obscure it.”<sup>21</sup>

Let us observe how the Russian master, in contrast to those “contemporary novelists,” uses details to “light up” “the inner reality” of the moment in *War and Peace*. Here is Prince Andrei discovering that his wife, Lise, has died during childbirth:

He went into his wife’s room. She lay dead in the same position in which he had seen her five minutes before, and, despite her still eyes and pale cheeks, there was the same expression on that lovely, timid, childish face, with its lip covered with fine black hair.

“I loved you all and did nothing bad to anybody, and what have you done to me? Ah, what have you done to me?” said her lovely, pitiful dead face. In the corner, something small and red snorted and squealed in Marya Bogdanova’s white, trembling hands. (327–28; II, 1, 9)

The details Tolstoy selects cause us to experience along with Prince Andrei the shock of discovery that the face he (and we) had seen only moments before is now dead. Prince Andrei’s shock has a moral dimension as well; projecting onto his wife’s dead face his own sense of guilt toward her, he perceives in it words of rebuke. By attributing them to the “lovely, timid, childish face,” only after we hear them, the narrator creates for us a momentary sense that Lise is actually speaking. Thus, as we read the text, we experience Andrei’s inner reality, as he realizes that Lise is dead and is overcome by the sense that he is somehow responsible.



**Figure 1** L. N. Tolstoy in the study at his Yasnaya Polyana home, November 3, 1909. Photograph by his wife, S. A. Tolstaya. Tolstoy liked the portrait: "The portrait is wonderful, because it was not posed. The hands are wonderful, the expression is natural." Published in *Tolstoy v zhizni* (Tula, 1988), vol. 1, p. 145. Courtesy of L. N. Tolstoy State Museum, Moscow.

Wherein lies true, objective experience, and what is subjective perception? We are momentarily unsure. We know and feel what Prince Andrei knows and feels, but also more than he does. It is unclear whether he sees what is happening in the corner of the room, but we certainly do. The final details describing the birth of his son reinforce for us the sense of life's ultimate continuity and integrity. The scene's overall pathos, then, is one of tragedy combined with tenderness and optimism. We begin to understand

Lise's death both from Prince Andrei's limited perspective and also from the narrator's wide-seeing, life-affirming vantage point. The scene highlights the objective truth about life and death, while simultaneously evoking the fluid subjectivity of the individual who confronts that truth with a sense of confusion and vulnerability.

In this dual perspective lies the scene's "inner reality," made palpable to us not through abstract emotionalism or realistic embellishment but by means of concrete details that reveal both the surface of things and their hidden truths. The details in this passage thus "*light up the heart of the matter more clearly*" (italics added), by illuminating one of the cornerstones of the novel's overarching design: its sense of the world as a place defined by the immutable, ongoing cycles of life and death, and as a place in which human joy and tragedy are forever present in equal measure.

## WAR AND PEACE IN THE EYES OF TOLSTOY'S CONTEMPORARIES

Despite Tolstoy's repeated emphasis on the holism of art and his lifelong search for a technique that would capture it, *War and Peace* seemed to its contemporary readers anything but whole. Far from discovering that "essence" Tolstoy described in his notebooks, or uncovering the novel's "labyrinth of linkages," contemporary critics repeatedly referred to the work's strangeness, incomprehensibility, and lack of a guiding principle.

The author of an unsigned review of the first parts of *War and Peace*, published in 1866 in *Book Herald* (*Knizhnyi Vestnik*), remarks that Tolstoy's novel "seems strange and indeterminate. Evidently the author himself does not know what he is writing."<sup>22</sup> In 1867 the critic and minor novelist N. D. Akhsharumov echoes this point by emphasizing the generic indeterminacy of the work: "We cannot place this work categorically in any of the usual literary genres."<sup>23</sup> In his 1868 review of the work, P. V. Annenkov writes: "The big wheel of the novel in our opinion can only be the plot and the central idea of the work which is inextricably connected with it. The plot is nowhere to be seen, not even in the scenes of political and social life, however remarkable they might be."<sup>24</sup> The author of an unsigned review in *Affair* (*Delo*) writes that "the pictures and characters are not united by any controlling idea or anything which would give an inner life or logic to the events: everything is mixed up into a general mass where one can see neither the reasons for nor the consequences of the events or the appearance of heroes or facts."<sup>25</sup>

For some of Tolstoy's contemporary critics, the size and formlessness of the work were a reflection of Tolstoy's own unformed, prodigious personality. In a letter to I. P. Borisov, for instance, Ivan Turgenev remarks that "Tolstoy is a real giant among the rest of our literary fraternity—and he produces on me the impression of an elephant at the zoo: clumsy, even preposterous, but enormous—and how intelligent!"<sup>26</sup> A reviewer for the *Westminster Review* in England speaks of the novel as "this prodigal outpouring of a careless genius."<sup>27</sup> And the American writer and critic Henry James famously called the novel "a splendid accident."<sup>28</sup>

There was one glaring exception to this general trend in the contemporary reception of *War and Peace*. Not surprisingly, it came from the critic and philosopher Nikolai Strakhov, who wrote three articles about the novel, published in 1866, 1869, and 1870. These articles not only established Strakhov's reputation as an important literary critic but also were responsible for sparking Tolstoy's interest in the critic, and initiating their lifelong friendship.<sup>29</sup> In their time Strakhov's articles were the most unequivocally admiring responses to the novel, counterbalancing the generally hostile reaction to it in the influential radical press.

To this day Strakhov's readings remain among the most sensitive—and underappreciated—attempts to grasp the novel's mysterious holism. By discussing the novel's artistic and philosophical vision, Strakhov became one of the first critics to appreciate that "labyrinth of linkages" that Tolstoy would later define as "the essence of art." He was also among the first to touch on an aspect of Tolstoy's art that has thrilled readers for generations: the "realism" feels so true to life, and yet at the same time captures the extraordinariness of everyday reality. The critic asserts that, while no "abstract paraphrase" will do justice to *War and Peace*, the novel *does* do justice to the complexity of life: "A complete picture of human life. A complete picture of Russia of those days. A complete picture of the things in which men set their happiness and greatness, their sorrow and their shame. That is what *War and Peace* is."<sup>30</sup>

If Strakhov, like other contemporary critics, found the novel incomprehensible, it was not because it lacked a guiding principle, but rather because of its artistic richness and philosophical profundity, which, he felt, were beyond the reach of the ordinary, rational intellect: "Count L. N. Tolstoy is a poet in the old and best sense of the word. He carries within him the deepest questions of which man is capable. He sees things clearly and opens up to us the most sacred secrets of life and death."<sup>31</sup> In a not so subtle swipe at the radical intelligentsia, who mocked the novel's refined "elegance" and its "philosophy of stagnation,"<sup>32</sup> Strakhov asks: "How

do you want people to understand him, people for whom such questions completely fail to exist, and who are so obtuse or, if you wish, so intelligent that they don't find any secrets either within themselves or around them?"<sup>33</sup>

To appreciate the uniqueness in its time of Strakhov's approach to *War and Peace*, we may compare it to another important contemporary article, "Staroe Barstvo" ("The Old Gentry"), published in 1868, by Dmitry Pisarev, mentioned earlier. As was characteristic of the radical intelligentsia, Pisarev used Tolstoy's novel as a springboard for his discussion about the "pathology of Russian society" of the era of Alexander I and, by extension, of the current era as well.<sup>34</sup> In *War and Peace*, Pisarev argues, Tolstoy "poses and decides the question about what happens to human minds and characters in those conditions which create the possibility for people to get by without knowledge, without energy, and without labor."<sup>35</sup>

Pisarev is referring here, of course, to the gentry, one of the radical intelligentsia's favorite targets. Pisarev censures two characters in the novel, Boris Drubetskoi and Nikolai Rostov, but he sees Boris as the lesser of the two evils. Despite his aristocratic pretensions, he is a practical-minded careerist who possesses skills that could potentially make him a productive member of society. Nikolai, on the other hand, is a self-indulgent and weak-willed child of privilege. Boris "seeks solid and tangible benefits" for himself, whereas "Rostov wants more than anything, and come what may, bustle, glamour, strong sensations, effective scenes and bright pictures."<sup>36</sup>

The reason Boris "is more intelligent and has a deeper character than Rostov" is that he is grounded in empirical reality. He has "a far greater capacity to observe attentively and to make sensible generalizations about surrounding phenomena,"<sup>37</sup> by which Pisarev means specifically material facts. "With the proper development of his talents Boris would make a good investigator while Rostov with the same proper development of his would make in all probability an exceptional artist, poet, musician, or painter."<sup>38</sup> Without denigrating the value of art as a professional pursuit (Pisarev is himself a literary critic, after all), he makes it clear that a rational, scientific approach to the world is preferable. Still, Nikolai might at least leverage his penchant for "bustle" and "glamour" into a socially useful artistic career, in which he can share his "strong sensations" and interest in "effective scenes and bright pictures" with the rest of society.

Despite his deep-seated distrust of art created by an idle aristocrat of Tolstoy's ilk, Pisarev does not deny that *War and Peace* is an important work of art. On the contrary, he argues that "precisely because the author

spent much time, labor, and love . . . that truth, throbbing with the life of the facts themselves, that truth, bursting forth apart from the personal sympathies and convictions of the story-teller, is especially valuable for its irresistible persuasiveness."<sup>39</sup> Tolstoy, it seems, is just the kind of socially useful artist Pisarev hopes Nikolai might one day become. His authorial eye becomes a photographic lens, accurately, if accidentally, reflecting the objective reality that gave rise to it. *War and Peace* is, in spite of itself, a valuable sociological document,<sup>40</sup> because it reveals the concrete, empirical reality of the world that produced it. While uninterested in Tolstoy's creative imagination, his personal attitudes, and subjective perception of objective reality, Pisarev seems to believe that an artist of Tolstoy's caliber must *necessarily* record reality with total accuracy.

It is no wonder, then, that Nikolai Rostov so incensed Pisarev. One of the novel's expansive personalities, Nikolai—with his impulsiveness, sense of life's poetry, and deep patriotism, often expressed with childlike abandon—offends Pisarev's sober faith in the supreme importance of objective reality. Any individual who strives—through reverie, art, or any other means—to overcome or otherwise transform that reality is, for Pisarev, delusional and a drag on social progress. Objective reality exists outside of our subjective consciousness; it is something “you can't conceal in a bag.”<sup>41</sup>

Strakhov's article about *War and Peace* shares two assumptions with Pisarev's article: that the novel presents an indisputable truth about the world, and that its capacity to do so lies in the author's great artistry. But here is where the similarity ends. For Pisarev, the author is a passive vehicle through which objective reality is filtered. Strakhov, however, focuses on the productive act, not just the final result, of the author's engagement with his world. For Strakhov the human subject—and this includes both the author and his characters—do not merely exist in the world. They do not merely see or fail to see external reality for what it is. They participate in the world and proactively engage in it, seeking its hidden meanings, searching out its deeper truths. According to Strakhov, Tolstoy does not merely present life's phenomena; he penetrates them, transforming them artistically and illuminating their inner essence.

“There is realism and then there is realism [*Realizm realizmu rozni*],” Strakhov writes. “Art essentially can never reject the ideal and always strives for it; and the more clearly and vividly one senses that striving in the creation of realism, the loftier that realism is, the nearer it is to being truly artistic.”<sup>42</sup> Herein lies the difference, according to Strakhov, between Tolstoy's realism and that of his less gifted contemporaries who

turn their souls into a simple photographic instrument and photograph with it whatever pictures happen to arise. Our literature produces many such pictures: but then simple-minded readers, imagining that before them appear genuine artists, will be not a little surprised upon seeing that absolutely nothing comes of these writers. The matter, however, is understandable; these writers were faithful to reality not because it was brightly illuminated by their ideal, but because they themselves did not see further than that which they depicted. They stood on the same level as the reality that they described.<sup>43</sup>

Although Strakhov does not name the specific practitioners of what he calls “photographic realism,” we may assume that he is referring to those prose writers who became popular in Russia in the 1860s for their stark, journalistic reportage of the various social ills.<sup>44</sup> Strakhov had a strong distaste for their radical political positions. Interestingly, though, his critique of “photographic realism” focuses not on its misguided ideology but on its creative and philosophical shallowness.

What Strakhov disliked most about the politics of the radicals of his generation—their valuing the material over the spiritual; their mechanistic and atomistic sense of life; their inability to recognize an ideal of transcendent beauty in the world—is precisely what he disliked in the art of the “photographic realists,” as well. Like their counterparts in the political sphere, these realist writers see only empirical facts, never the unifying truths and higher spiritual beauty contained within those facts.

Tolstoy, on the other hand, is able to rise above this “photographic” realism and to “penetrate that poetry which is hidden in reality.”<sup>45</sup> Tolstoy’s realism is infused with the ideal: “A realistic depiction of the human soul was essential [to Tolstoy] in order that a genuine realization of the ideal, however weak, might appear before us all the more powerfully and all the more truthfully.”<sup>46</sup> The novel celebrates the “genuine inner beauty, genuine human dignity” of the individual, not by means of abstract generalization or by romantic distortion, but by capturing “each feature, each trace of genuine inner beauty, of genuine human dignity” of the individual, struggling nobly against the implacable forces of history.<sup>47</sup> “The broader subject of the author,” Strakhov writes, “is, simply, *man*.”<sup>48</sup>

Tolstoy’s art does not pit the “wonderful life” against “ordinary everyday reality.”<sup>49</sup> Far from a vision of Utopia, Tolstoy’s ideal, for Strakhov, exists “in the pure light of day”<sup>50</sup>: right here, right now, within this imperfect world and its flawed, striving inhabitants. He “tries to find and define with complete precision, in what way and in what degree man’s striving for

the ideal is realized in actual life.”<sup>51</sup> The author’s ideal emerges, not only in heightened moments or striking scenes; it pervades the artistic fabric of the entire text, in that mysterious authorial voice that reveals the imperfect world to us with utter verisimilitude, while at the same time illuminating life’s poetic grandeur. And yet, as readers of the novel have discovered, to their delight or dismay, one of its most original features is the existence of a second authorial voice—polemical, rational, severe—that regularly punctuates the text, rudely puncturing that shimmering narrative fabric.

## TWO HEDGEHOGS: ART AND ARGUMENT IN *WAR AND PEACE*

This second voice confronts us with a fundamental problem: how are we to make sense of the openly polemical historical-philosophical treatises—those cantankerous, rigidly rational intrusions into an otherwise expansive vision of life? These essays, scattered among the artistic portions of the novel, and increasing in length and number towards the end, are of two types: abstract philosophical treatises and specific polemical attacks: against Napoleon, who believes that he shapes events; at historians who accept the great-man theory of historical evolution; and at all manner of strategists, military and otherwise, who believe that rational planning affects the outcome of events. If there is a consistent thesis in these essays, it is that great men are history’s slaves and that free will is an illusion, albeit a necessary one to help us get through life.

For many contemporary readers the digressions were only one of many examples of the work’s structural confusion and indeterminacy. In his article about *War and Peace*, published in 1870, Strakhov pinpointed the problem of these essays: while their ideas are excellent, he wrote, they detract from the work’s overall philosophical spirit. The essays reduce the celebration of life’s fullness, evoked in the artistic portions, to a one-sided system of ratiocination, which dissects rather than integrates, and thus gives an “incomplete” picture of life:

[The] formulas about knowledge are in and of themselves cold, passionless, indifferent; they capture neither beauty, nor goodness, nor truth, that is to say, that which is higher than all else on earth, in which consists the most essential interest of our life. . . . For science the world becomes a dead, one-sided play of reasons and consequences; but for a living person the world has beauty, life, it constitutes an object of

despair or delight, blessing or repulsion. . . . The mind finds nothing in the world besides some sort of endless and senseless mechanism; but the heart shows us another meaning, which at bottom is singularly important.

And so, the primary meaning of *War and Peace* is not to be found in the philosophical formulas of Count L. N. Tolstoy, but in the chronicle itself, where the life of history is illustrated with such amazing fullness, where there are so many profound discoveries for our heart.<sup>52</sup>

Strakhov's ideas guided Tolstoy as he himself grappled with this issue of the difference between an artistic representation of the world and rational argumentation, throughout the late 1860s and 1870s.<sup>53</sup> In fact, even as he worked on the novel in the 1860s, the author vacillated, entertaining serious reservations about whether the polemical digressions should remain at all. Eventually, he came to believe that art, with its ability to speak in images, can reveal things that rational thought cannot, and decided to remove the essays from the main section and place them in a separate appendix, called "Articles about the Campaign of 1812," in the 1873 edition of *War and Peace*. Under the wrong-headed assumption that Tolstoy considered the original version of the novel definitive, future editors adopted the practice of reinstating the essays in the main body of the text.<sup>54</sup>

If we examine what, specifically, is problematic about the essays in the context of the novel as a whole, and why Tolstoy had ongoing reservations about them, we uncover the essence of his narrative art. The author of the theoretical essays destroys his intellectual competition by mounting a point-by-point assault against the "false" theories of historical evolution and then carefully leading the reader through his own "correct" reasoning processes. The voice is that of a severe and humorless social critic, an intellectual crank, whose spirit reminds one more of the later author of "What Is Art?" and the moralistic fiction than the broad-minded, life-affirming narrator of *War and Peace*. These captious authorial musings reinstate, in fact, the very intellectual divisiveness of the era (the 1860s) that the artistic narrator seeks to transcend.

The artistic narrator does not argue rationally for or against abstract intellectual positions. In and of themselves, ideas are sterile and irrelevant to his conception of the world. What counts are the infinitely complex natural and historical processes, in which rational ideas play, at best, a trifling role. The artistic narrator is concerned above all with the human capacity to live successfully within these organic processes—a capacity

that depends not on ideas, but on the person behind the ideas, on the person's emotional, intuitive responsiveness to the world.

We see this in Tolstoy's treatment of Speransky, whose shortcoming is not only his faulty conclusions but his faulty approach to living. As Prince Andrei discovers, Speransky's ideas can have no bearing on his or anybody else's happiness, and his clever words, which lacked that "something which constitutes the salt of merriment" (465; II, 3, 18) embody the ultimate sterility of the man himself. By contrast, Pierre, whose ideas are frequently confused or half-baked amalgams of other peoples' thought, leaves a lasting effect on other people through the warmth of his personality and the sincere quality of his words. "[Y]our friend's a fine fellow, I've come to love him!" Old Prince Bolkonsky says to his son, Andrei, after Pierre's departure. "He fires me up. Another man talks cleverly, and you don't want to listen to him, but he talks nonsense, yet he fires me up, old as I am" (394; II, 2, 14).

While the narrator's irony can be harsh indeed in the artistic sections, as we see in the Speransky passages, it stops short of outright contempt and is always counterbalanced by a paternal, godlike benevolence. In contrast, the narrator of the theoretical essays openly scoffs at the narrow-mindedness of the historians and philosophers he discredits. The artistic narrator bestows a full-blooded, complex humanity on even the most reprehensible of characters.

What reader is not gripped by sudden compassion for the cruel, maleficent Dolokhov, when Nikolai Rostov unexpectedly discovers that "Dolokhov, this rowdy duelist, lived in Moscow with his old mother and hunchbacked sister, and was a most affectionate son and brother"? (317; II, 1, 5). The narrator of the theoretical treatises cannot surprise us with such a revelation, because his perspective is defined and circumscribed by the nature of the genre in which he is writing: a mixture of philosophical disquisition, historiography, and polemical journalism. His purpose is to conquer his audience with the power of rational, linear argument, not to invite us to share emotionally in the fate of his characters and in the complexities of their lived experience.

In the theoretical essays, we, the readers, are passive recipients of the world. In the artistic portions of the novel, however, we are invited to be active participants in, indeed co-creators of, the universe alongside the narrator. Carried along by the overwhelming lifelikeness of the narrator's invented world, we achieve the sort of clear, comprehensive vision of the universe that Prince Andrei, Nikolai, and Pierre, Napoleon, Speransky, and the military strategists covet but cannot attain. We fully empathize

with the characters' struggles and vicariously participate in them while calmly recognizing, along with the narrator, the concealed patterns and unifying truths hidden from the characters' gaze. This awareness only intensifies our empathy for the characters, widening our understanding of their individual experiences and, by extension, our own.

"Can it be they're running to me? Can it be?" Nikolai Rostov thinks while standing in an open battlefield after having fallen from his horse and sprained his arm during battle. "And why? To kill me? *Me*, whom everybody loves so?" (189; I, 2, 19). The brilliance of the narrative perspective resides in the narrator's ability to embrace both the poignancy of the moment and also the comic naïveté of Nikolai's thought. The gung-ho young hussar knows that he is at war, and "though a moment before he had been galloping only in order to meet these Frenchmen and cut them to pieces," now in his heart of hearts he cannot conceive of anybody trying to hurt him, the beloved son and brother and "young master"! Beyond this, Tolstoy is gently mocking the self-dramatization and obviously unheroic conduct of this youthful warrior, who "seized his pistol and, instead of firing it, threw it at the Frenchman, and ran for the bushes as fast as he could" (189; I, 2, 19).

We both feel *with* Nikolai and shake our heads at his childish amazement and jejune behavior. The narrator's omniscient perspective is benevolent and responsive to multiple emotional levels in a way that the more severe voice of the polemical narrator, constrained by the limits of the genre in which he is writing, cannot be.

Not all critics are willing to grant this extraordinary success to the narrator. In a recent study, Jeff Love argues that "While *War and Peace* strives towards absolute vision, it also certainly fails to achieve such vision, what amounts to a hyperborean view belonging to the gods or God alone. In this very failure is the secret of its remarkable realism, or rather, the illusion of realism which has struck so many readers of the novel."<sup>55</sup> I would argue, on the contrary, that readers are struck by how Tolstoy's realism *does* achieve a comprehensive, transcendent vision while never eschewing the rough edges, the gaps, the imperfect ebb and flow of the ordinary. Finitude may be a condition of the characters, but not of the narrator—and, by extension, of us, the readers. Therein lies the peculiar power of what Boris Eikhenbaum has described as the narrator's "otherworldly voice" (*potustoronniĭ golos*, or, literally: "a voice from the other side"), by which I take him to mean not only a voice that speaks from the perspective of eternity but also one that is forbearing and humane in a way that only God can be.<sup>56</sup>

As distinct from the narrator of the theoretical treatises, the artistic narrator's synoptic vision is never abstractly philosophical. His transforming presence can be felt in the concrete, sensual details of the here-and-now. As Ivan Turgenev said, "Whenever [Tolstoy] touches the ground, he, like Antaeus, regains his powers."<sup>57</sup> And those powers are felt most palpably in the way the narrator illuminates both what is and what lies beyond what is, the extraordinary in the ordinary. One of Nikolai Rostov's most intensely religious experiences in the novel—his desperate prayer to God to send the wolf his way during the hunt—is also one of the novel's most earthbound. A seemingly unremarkable moment, such as Prince Andrei's surveying of the battlefield the night before the Battle of Schöngrabern, grows into a vast chain of metaphysical and artistic ramifications when viewed in the context of his life's—and the novel's—larger trajectory.

The question of the novel's unity has been at the center of the critical debate right up to our own time. One particularly influential twentieth-century critique is Isaiah Berlin's famous essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, first published in 1951. Berlin argues that Tolstoy the artist celebrates the diversity of life in *War and Peace*, while Tolstoy the thinker strives for a unifying philosophical vision. "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing," Berlin cites the Greek poet Archilocus at the outset of his essay. He explains: "[T]here exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to . . . a single, universal organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance—and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, . . . related by no moral or aesthetic principle."<sup>58</sup>

Because Berlin associates Tolstoy's integrative wisdom with the thinker and foxlike skepticism with the artist, he looks for Tolstoy's unified vision in his theories, not his art. Berlin cannot take seriously the possibility that Tolstoy, the artist, also strives for a holistic vision of the world. Is it possible that there are two hedgehogs in *War and Peace*? In fact, there are. Both the artist and the thinker try to articulate a unifying conception of life—the artist through imagery, and the thinker by means of rational polemics. In this competition of the hedgehogs, I propose that the artist wins, because his vision of life is the fuller and ultimately more humane of the two.

Whereas Berlin separates the thinker and the artist, Gary Saul Morson in his *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace"* tries to put these two sides of the writer's personality back together. Morson is astute in many of his observations—particularly in

one of his central conclusions, that Tolstoy cherished ordinary moments in human life. But I believe that he is wrong to link this and other aspects of the novel to a systematic Tolstoyan thesis about the absence of any unifying patterns at all in the world. In doing so, it seems to me, Morson fails to appreciate how the novel transforms a mountain of “ordinary” facts into an extraordinary vision of human life as something inexhaustible and yet organically unified.

Among contemporary scholars, Sergei Bocharov, George Clay, and Jeff Love have offered compelling alternatives to the Berlin–Morson reading of *War and Peace*. Rather than trying to extract from the novel a systematic idea or thesis, these scholars present nuanced, sensitive readings from which they discover unifying patterns in the complex poetics of the work itself. George Clay describes a “phoenix design,” a pattern of literal and symbolic deaths followed by metaphorical resurrections, which recurs throughout the artistic portions of the work.<sup>59</sup> Proceeding from Tolstoy’s injunction to critics not to look for “ideas” in art, Bocharov creatively guides the reader through several compartments in the work’s “labyrinth of linkages.”<sup>60</sup> Love sees the genius of the work stemming from the artist’s struggle to represent the fluidity of experience in the fixed form of language. In Love’s reading, the unresolved tension between infinite desire and finite capacity in Tolstoy’s artistic representation of life is the source of the novel’s singular creativity and philosophical dynamism.<sup>61</sup>

Yet, as we have seen, the artist and the thinker are at odds with one another in the novel, as Berlin first pointed out, and the artistic narrator does succeed in capturing life’s holism in a way that the polemical narrator does not. In my reading of the novel, the author and his characters engage in a continual, simultaneous effort to create order out of chaos, and higher forms of meaning out of the prosaic facts of reality. In the end, the omniscient narrator discovers that order even when the characters cannot see it, and the artist touches the transcendent where the thinker falls short.

When in the second part of the epilogue the narrator presents his calculus of history thesis—that historians must stop trying to seek causes and discover instead the laws that unite the “unknown infinitely small elements” of the universe—he is merely offering an analytical clarification of the truths the novel’s artistic canvas has created for us from the beginning: that every human being, individual moment, or decision is both irreducibly distinct and also an integral part of an inexhaustible, unified tapestry of human experience. The narrator’s calculus thesis is at best a gloss on the multilayered experience of life already realized in the “labyrinth of linkages” contained in the artistic sections of the work. The theorist writes

*about* unity, he writes *about* the need to integrate. But the artist unites, he integrates. He gives us a glimpse of that “essence” which Tolstoy described in his 1870 notebook as the fundamental aim of artistic expression.

We may agree or disagree with the narrator’s theories but never with his created universe. We may choose to accept the terms of that universe, strive to appreciate its mysteries, understand how it came to be and what its constituent elements are. But in that universe there is no “idea” being put forth or thesis being argued, no hidden ideology to be exposed and explicated. There is only that “endless labyrinth of linkages that makes up the stuff of art.”