OF EARTH AND SKY:
LEV TOLSTOY AS POET AND PROPHET

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ABSTRACT

In this study I consider Lev Tolstoy’s life and thought by reference to their national and historical context. My purposes here, of course, have to do with understanding that context as well as with understanding Tolstoy. In Chapter II, I consider and try to evoke the nineteenth-century Russian landscape to which Tolstoy was born. Also in Chapter II, I introduce, for comparative purposes, a figure from a generation of Russians later than Tolstoy’s, a man very different from Tolstoy who nonetheless admired him greatly. I am referring to the man who became known as Lenin. I extend and expand the Tolstoy/Lenin comparison in Chapters III and IV, with an eye to what it might tell us about a number of things Tolstoyan. These include the fictive, historic, and theoretical subject matter of War and Peace, the interplay and differences between Western Europe and Russia before, during, and after the Napoleonic Wars, and the question of what Tolstoy’s take on those wars might tell us about Bolshevism. Throughout this study I speak of a thematic interplay between the finite and the infinite which I discern in Tolstoy’s work. In Chapter V I consider,
by way of a brief overview of his literary career, how Tolstoy might have embodied that interplay in his own person.
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Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy has had an English-speaking audience for over a century. Anglophonic Tolstoy criticism has existed for almost as long. Anglophonic audiences, and no small body of scholarship, have also emerged in connection with Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Gogol, and Turgenev. Some part of the interest these authors have held for English-speaking readers, as for Westerners generally, may lie in the fact that members of a culture not our own have taken a narrative form from the West and arguably given it back to us improved. Some of us in the English-speaking world with an interest in literary scholarship have come, or returned, to the great Russian novelists by way of Mikhail Bakhtin. It is fitting that the thinker of dialogism has catalyzed such a returning, for there lives, I hope and believe, a dialogue of cultures in our appreciation of these men’s work.
In the lifetime of Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, serfdom was eliminated in Russia (1861), Tsar Alexander II, who had decreed the emancipation, was assassinated (1881), and a group of radicals made an attempt (1887) on Alexander III. The conspirators included yet another Alexander, one Alexander Ilyich Ulyanov. He refused to ask for clemency and was hanged. In 1905 there was a failed revolution. Twelve years later, and seven years after Tolstoy’s death, Tsarism and feudalism were gone from Russia, and the brother of A.I. Ulyanov was at its helm.

The Hungarian Marxist-Leninist critic Georg Lukacs has named Tolstoy as “the poet of the peasant revolt that lasted from 1861 to 1905” (Studies in European Realism, 145). But it seems that he was not altogether a conscious poet: Tolstoy, Lukacs tells us,

had of course no conception of the true nature of the Russian revolution. But being a writer of genius, he faithfully recorded certain essential traits of reality and thus, without his knowledge, and contrary to his conscious
intentions, he became the poetic mirror of certain aspects of the revolutionary development in Russia. The boldness and sweep of Tolstoy’s realism rests on the fact that it is carried by a movement of world-wide significance, a movement revolutionary in its basic social tendency. (SIER 137)

Tolstoy was, no doubt, a product, a mirror, and a voice of a specific time and place, that is, Russia—mainly rural Russia—as it was in its proto-revolutionary nineteenth century. As a novelist he was an artist of the specific, an artist of the detail proper to the time and place of its imagined setting and to no other. As such he was a realist, as per Lukacs. The narrator of War and Peace, while he speaks of questions that he thinks no man, including himself, can answer, does not especially see himself—despite Lukacs—as conceptually lacking in his understanding of Russian politics or anything else. Without necessarily denying Lukacs’s idea that Tolstoy gave voice to currents in Russia in ways he did not consciously intend, I should like to consider a motif in Tolstoy’s work of which Lukacs does not speak, and which may help to explain why the politics in his work are of a different order from that of such thinkers as, say, Chernyshevsky or Plekhanov. I speak of a certain rhythm of the small and the immense.

In Tolstoy’s later years, during which political radicals such as Plekhanov and the young Lenin were active, he too wrote of political—as well as spiritual—matters. But in his thinking in those years, one does not take on the landlords; one seeks redemption. It was then that he repudiated the great and monumental works for which he was and is best known. It is rather flabbergasting that the author of War and Peace and Anna Karenina would repudiate them. There would seem to be a
rupture here. It is a rupture, but I think there is also a continuity, and this is part of what I would like to explore. Tolstoy’s later spiritual concerns led him to his doctrine of non-resistance to evil, which by itself puts him a long way from the Russian left of his time. In Tolstoy’s repudiation of his best-known novels, and his corresponding shift from the realm of War and Peace and Anna Karenina to that of the Confession, in which he declares that “the huge masses of people acknowledge meaning through an irrational knowledge, and this irrational knowledge is faith…” (57), there is a shift from earthly ambition to spiritual humility, which shift is a nuance of the rhythm of the mundane and the cosmic I discern throughout his work. One way or another, in Tolstoy’s work, the mundane and the cosmic contain each other. For the Tolstoy of War and Peace as for the Tolstoy of the Confession, one finds access to the infinite by humbling oneself. The shift from ambition to humility in the distance from War and Peace to the Confession is also, of course, a shift from one form of ambition to another. Tolstoy being Tolstoy, he did not humble himself to the point of becoming a hermit contemplative; instead he founded, or tried to found, a new version of Christianity.

The change that took place in Tolstoy on the way from War and Peace to the Confession is a nuance, as I will seek to show, of a thematic rhythm that also resides within the earlier work. It is by reference to this manifold rhythm that we shall try to understand some part of Tolstoy’s work and thought. Our study of the small and the immense will seek its rhythm in his work throughout his career, early, middle, and late, and within his individual works, with special attention to War and Peace. The
thought of that rhythm will be with us always; its influence will be obvious in some places and subtle, perhaps even subliminal, in others.

To find our way to that rhythm, and perhaps to some apprehension of its significance in Tolstoy’s imaginative work, let us imagine an exquisite winter day: Snow is everywhere, on the ground and on the trees, there is not much wind, the air is bracing but not really too cold. The sun is bright in a nearly cloudless sky. A couple of borzoi pups are yipping around. The ponds are frozen, but you can tell it is not altogether safe to be out on the ice; there are a few spots where you can see that the ice is thin. But there are young people out there, braving the risk, calling out to each other in Russian as they glide by. There is a snowball fight going on on the far side of the bigger pond. You can hear a joyous combativeness in the fighters’ shouts and laughter. The snowball fighters are pointedly ignored by the skaters, who may have among them someone very like a young Natasha Rostova, fourteen or fifteen, just a little unsteady on her feet but utterly radiant. Among the skaters, or perhaps among the snowball fighters, one could imagine finding young Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy. Or—who knows?—perhaps young Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov.

A snowball has hit its mark, and that mark has lost his balance trying to dodge it. He lets out a shout as he falls: “The devil take you!” He lies sprawled on the ground near the ice. His cry is sharp but not really angry. Young Natasha looks over, smiling, and skates over to her female cousin near the edge of the pond. They exchange a few words in low voices and laugh.

Despite the shouted invocation from our unsteady friend, this is not a place where devils seem to lurk.
If the young Tolstoy could have been there, the scene might have later ended up in one of his books. He would perhaps explain, after telling of Natasha’s smile, that her obvious amusement at the silly lads on the far side of the pond has a certain emotional context: most of the snowball fighters, as she knows, imagine they are in love with her. She has felt the same about one or two of them. The reason they are not on the ice, trying to impress her with their ease on skates, is that it seems a better strategy to pretend to ignore her. Each one has arrived at this conclusion on his own. To the one who falls, it had also occurred that it would be best not to risk a fall on the ice that she would see. He falls anyway, trying to dodge that white missile, but he is surprised to find that he is not all that embarrassed. Something in the glimpse of clear sky he catches as he falls tells him it’s no big deal.

The observable reality of this scene—the day, the snowball fight, the skaters—all of this might have been recounted by any articulate person who was there and paying attention. A memoirist, or a writer of occasional pieces for a newspaper, might have told this tale. When we get inside the minds of the skaters and the fighters, we move a step away from straight reportage and toward specifically fictional narrative. With the fallen youth’s epiphany we come a little closer to a specifically Tolstoyan narrative. There are moments in Tolstoy’s fiction—Georg Lukacs has spoken of Andrei Bolkonsky’s lying wounded at Austerlitz; I would add Pierre Bezukhov’s accession to a long-sought tranquillity when he is a prisoner of the French—of peace from an unplanned, unforeseen surrender to what is (Theory of the Novel 149, War and Peace 244, 895).
In the first case, there is a perspectival shift from the mundane to the cosmic. Bolkonsky is watching a couple of soldiers having an absurd battle over a mop, while others are fighting over a cannon, when he is hit. When he has fallen, the physical deranging of his body and point of view bring on an intuition of the metaphysical, or a new comprehension of the physical as unbounded and unbounding, which may amount to the same thing:

“How quiet, peaceful, and solemn; not at all as I ran,” thought Prince Andrei… “how differently do those clouds glide across that lofty infinite sky! How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes! All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing, but that. But even if it does not exist, there is nothing but quiet and peace. Thank God!...” (W&P 244)

In the second case, there is again a perspectival shift. Pierre Bezukhov’s confinement in a small place is the occasion for his accession to a larger vision of things. His accession is catalyzed not by a look at the sky but by his acquaintance with a very down-to-earth man. He is Platon Karataev, a peasant soldier among the men with whom Pierre is incarcerated during the French occupation of Moscow. Twenty-eight in all, Pierre, Platon and the others are kept in a shed for four weeks. Platon is a kind and friendly man with a practical and instinctive wisdom to which he seems, as a Russian peasant, to have been born. Pierre always remembers him as “the personification of everything Russian, kindly, and round (859).” For Tolstoy’s narrator, Platon’s [e]very word and action…was the manifestation of an activity unknown to
him, which was his life. But his life, as he regarded it, had no meaning as a separate thing. It had meaning only as part of a whole of which he was always conscious. (861)

The roundness Pierre sees in Platon, the quality in him of one who personifies Russia—there is a completeness to it, a quality of that which contains all, is all. It is, I would suggest, something like what Andrei Bolkonsky sees in the sky over Austerlitz. After four weeks as a prisoner, Pierre has found a tranquillity he had sought…in philanthropy, in Freemasonry, in the dissipations of town life, in wine, in heroic feats of self-sacrifice, and in romantic love for Natasha; he had sought it by reasoning—and all these quests and experiments had failed him. And now without thinking about it …had found that peace and inner harmony only through the horror of death, through privation, and through what he recognized in Karataev. (895)

Early in Pierre’s time as a prisoner, the first night after he meets Platon, he lies awake for a long while to the sound of Platon’s snoring. He is attuned to that rhythm when he feels that “the world that had been shattered was once more stirring in his soul with a new beauty and on new and unshakable foundations (859).” In that sound, in that rhythm, there lives an oscillation between the small and the immense. Here is a man—he is not all of Russia, he is just a sleeping, snoring peasant conscript. And here also is a catalyst for the rebirth of a world.
CHAPTER III
THE FIGHTER AND THE SKATER

A rhythm of the small and the immense, the sleeping man and the awakening world—this is also a rhythm of doubt and certainty; it is the fighter’s chagrin as he falls and his intuition, as he sees the sky from the icy ground, that he is part of something whose immensity obviates that chagrin. I would suggest that in trying to comprehend both the small and the immense, and comprehend their relations, Tolstoy was impelled to be both poet and sage, novelist and tract writer, world-famous author and humble spiritual teacher. If we were to continue to think on these lines, we might be tempted to suppose that, at the pond, young Tolstoy was a skater one day and a fighter the next. But it may be more to our purposes to decide one way or the other. If so, one’s first thought might place young Tolstoy among the skaters and young Ulyanov among the fighters. After all, Tolstoy would become a pacifist, and Ulyanov, as Lenin, would lead an armed revolution that triggered a civil war and ushered in an extremely violent epoch, spanning several decades, in Russia. But I would suggest that the future revolutionary was on the ice. He did not employ
violence for its own sake, at least not before 1917. He sought mastery in whatever he attempted, and did not much care about embarrassing himself—the thought would not occur to him. As one who has tried the arts of both skating and throwing balls accurately, and mastered neither, I am going on the premise that skating is a subtler skill. As such it would have appealed to him more, and he was a skater in his youth. Supposing for a moment that young Vladimir Ilyich were interested in Natasha, he, even if uniquely among her admirers there that day, would have been on the ice, damn the risk. Self-doubt, and aversion to risk, were not prominent in his nature.

Young Lev Nikolaevich could have been among the skaters—one thinks of Constantine Levin’s rendezvous on the ice with Kitty Shcherbatsky—but I would place him among the snowball fighters. If he were the one who fell, this could be a seed of Andrei Bolkonsky’s sky-gazing epiphany at Austerlitz. But more to my purposes here—if the snowball fighters stayed off the ice out of self doubt, it is of interest that Tolstoy placed self-doubting and self-questioning heroes at the centers of many books. I speak of such characters as Nikolai Irtenev (Childhood, Boyhood and Youth), Dmitri Olenin (The Cossacks), Pierre Bezukhov, Constantine Levin, and Prince Dmitri Nekhlyudov (Resurrection). Tolstoy himself, as I have mentioned, came to doubt the value of what most readers would take for his greatest achievements.

Tolstoy’s doubt, like the rest of his consciousness, had more sources, influences, and constituent parts than we can know. It is, however, fair to say that his consciousness and his doubt had their beginnings in a landscape something like the one in which we have imagined our young friends. He grew up on Yasnaya Polyana,
the Tolstoy family estate, a hundred and thirty miles south of Moscow. In such a
place there is a spaciousness and a leisureliness. Our fallen fighter, whether he is
Tolstoy or not, is visited by a sense of the infinite when he falls. He might have an
impulse to try to convey it, but in the moment of that impulse, there also comes a
sense of human foolishness, not just in connection with his and the other lads’ efforts
to impress Natasha, but also in his very presuming to try to convey all of what he is
feeling and thinking about the humanly mundane and the unbounded on the estate, in
Russia, in the world. The fighters and the skaters are adolescents, that is, people with
a sense of the large but of limited articulation. One’s understanding may be limited
as compared to the landscape, but one tries. There is space, and there is time.

The rhythm of Tolstoy’s doubt and his certainty are those of a Russian doubt
and a Russian certainty, born of a Russian landscape; nevertheless I should like to
conduct some part of our consideration of them by way of a look at Western doubt,
Western certainty. Tolstoy was not unacquainted with Western thought, and insofar
as this Russian thinker is uniquely Russian, we may learn something of his thought
by means of comparison with that to which it is foreign. Our comparison will
necessarily take us into a brief look at the two cultures’ respective histories.

To the degree that Tolstoy, Lenin, or any other Russian is influenced by post-
Enlightenment Western thought, he is influenced by a way of thinking to which
radical doubt is of the essence. One of the wellsprings of Western thought, before
and after the Enlightenment, is Plato. The philosophical hero of most of the
Dialogues, Socrates, has an approach to knowledge based on doubt. His doubt,
which is also a certainty, has to do with his interlocutors’ assumptions. His position
is that they do not know what they think they know. His approach is to show them
that this is so by questioning their assumptions and guiding the ensuing conversation
to a place where it is clear that the assumptions are groundless. Plato has been a
major influence on West European thought as long as there has been such a thing,
and something akin to Socratic doubt came to the fore during the Enlightenment. For
both rationalists and empiricists, in a culture just coming out of centuries of
dogmatic faith, credible knowledge claims could arise only from that of which one
could be certain. For the rationalists, the sources of that certainty were mental—they
would have to do with reason and irrefutable logic. For the empiricists, certainty
would have experiential sources—certain knowledge could only come from sensory
experience and the sensorially verifiable.

In the time of Descartes (1596-1650) and Locke (1632-1704), a culture to
which dogmatic faith had been central for a thousand years or so came, in its early
maturity, to value doubt. A number of philosophers who still held religious beliefs,
including Descartes, were impelled to construct elaborate proofs of the existence of
God, which would once have been a given. In that culture to which radical doubt
became central in its early maturity, that culture which produced the Enlightenment
and was transformed by it, there lives, also, a will to the infinite. This has been so
before, during and after the Enlightenment. In the architecture of the Gothic
cathedrals there is an upward urge, a reach for the heavens. There is a will to
dominion over the whole planet in the Colombian project of gobbling up lands and
nations for Western states and Western corporations. The first men to walk on a
celestial body beyond our planet were Westerners, sent there by a Western power that became a Western power because of the aforementioned Colombian project.

In Western Europe, radical doubt coincided with, and helped facilitate, world-historic political and economic changes. If certain men’s reason—a species of reason to which doubt is of its essence—tells them that kings have no absolute right to their power, and this coincides with the ascendancy of an economic class to which the monarchy is a hindrance, revolutions may follow. This is not to imply a simple causality. The words of thinkers such as Newton, Descartes, Locke, Smith, Voltaire, Hume, Berkeley and Kant did not somehow cause the revolutions that took place in Europe and America between the 1640s and the 1790s. Nor would I suggest that the time of the shift of economic primacy from agrarian interests to manufacturing, and that of the migration of political primacy from monarchs to Parliaments and elected prime ministers, “caused” the thinkers I’ve mentioned as its mouthpieces. They were products of their times, and they were producers also; their works contributed to the character of their times.

When Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment ideas reached Russia, something, or some things, might have been lost in translation. The Bolsheviks possessed a certainty that had some of its intellectual roots in Enlightenment-era doubt. But that certainty, and that doubt, may have been something like hothouse flowers. Like the Enlightenment thinkers, the Marxists wanted to bring light to a land in darkness. The Bolsheviks were certain of their mission to sweep away the backwardness of the Russian past and the Russian countryside, as they led the proletariat in its historic task of taking center stage and moving history in a
progressive direction. But, of course, that mission did not go well. Some of its manifestations—setting up industrial state socialism, collectivizing agriculture—resembled not merely hothouse flowers but something more like poisonous weeds. On a fundamental, instinctual level, Russia might not have been altogether fertile soil for the doubting spirit, and indeed the whole *weltanschauung*, of the Enlightenment.

As I speak of “Russia” here, I am including under that heading the minds of such quasi-Westernized Russians as Lenin and Tolstoy. Lenin’s “doubt,” like that of the other Bolsheviks, was a certainty. Tolstoy speaks of youthful religious doubts in his *Confession* (13), and in later life he broke with the Orthodox Church, but throughout his work one finds some species of Christian belief.

If we suspect that Russia in Tolstoy’s time was not the most fertile soil for Enlightenment ideas, in this connection it may be useful to consider some part of the difference between the two cultures’ religious and political histories.

Christianity was born and took root in the lands around the Mediterranean. Constantine I adopted Christianity in the early Fourth Century and made it legal throughout the Roman Empire, via the Edict of Milan, in 313. Christianity was strong, if not prevalent, in Western Europe from late antiquity and into the time of Europe’s beginnings as a culture distinct from the Graeco-Roman and ancient Middle Eastern cultures it drew upon and succeeded. By contrast, Christianity did not have a significant presence in Russia until near the beginning of the second millennium C.E. It was around 988, with the baptism of the Kievan prince Vladimir, that the Kievan Russian state officially accepted Christianity. Moreover, Russian Christianity was and is an Eastern Christianity. As the historian Nicholas
Riasanovsky has pointed out, it comes not from Rome but from Byzantium, and Russia’s never having been Catholic “contributed in a major way to the relative isolation of Russia from the rest of Europe and its Latin civilization” (*A History of Russia*, 36).

If Christianity came to its prevalence in Russia about seven centuries after it did so in Western Europe, then in Tolstoy’s time, Russian Christianity was, in historical terms, relatively young. A rough chronological analogy might put nineteenth-century Russian Christianity about where European Christianity was in the twelfth century C. E. This is not to assume or imply that Russia, with its Russian Christianity, was some sort of Europe-come-lately. Each major culture, the West European and Russian included, develops in its own uniqueness. But I would suggest that a culture that has found its core beliefs more recently than another is likely to be less disposed towards radical doubt, or at least has a different relation to doubt, than does the other. As Leon Trotsky has pointed out (*The Russian Revolution* 6), Russia never had a Reformation. That is, he continues, “some sort of modernized form of Christianity adapted to the demands of a bourgeois society.” In Trotsky’s usage, a “bourgeois society” would be an urban culture with a strong, or at least up-and-coming, capitalist class. In the century when Trotsky, and our skater, and our snowball fighter, were all born, Russia’s people were still predominantly rural, and its economy was still mainly agrarian. As Riasanovsky has also pointed out, the period of Mongol domination kept Russia isolated from Europe, and by some historians’ reckoning retarded its development by one hundred-fifty to two hundred years (*HOR* 73). As Riasanovsky relates, the Mongols controlled Russia from 1240
until their defeat at Kulikovo in 1380. The last remnants of Mongol power were not thrown off until 1480, when Ivan III repudiated the khan (HOR 71).

About four hundred years after Ivan III repudiated a ruler from the Far East, a Russian novelist took a literary form from the West to places where no Westerner, or anyone else, had thought to take it. The novel as we know it—that form whose rise is associated with Defoe, Fielding and Richardson—is related, as Ian Watt has noted, to British empiricism and to notions of individual liberty that were at large in England during and after the Glorious Revolution of 1689 (The Rise of the Novel, Chapters I and III). Truth, if not God, was to be found in the observable details. The early British novelists’ work coincided with the notion that scientists might learn nature’s secrets by observing it and experimenting with its materials, rather than consulting the works of, say, Aristotle or Ptolemy. And storytellers would build their tales out of copious amounts of sensory detail, with free and idiosyncratic individuals rather than allegorical or mythic figures at the centers of those tales. Tolstoy, like novelists from places such as England and France, built his tales from observable detail and the behavior of idiosyncratic protagonists. But he had some things to say that he could not say in this way. His sense of history, and of the inadequacy of existing historiography, seems to have impelled him to write an historical novel that was and is unlike any other. The whole of what he has to say cannot be conveyed by an accretion of detail, and he has a certain skepticism, as we shall discuss in a moment, about individual volition.

In Tolstoy’s largest work, along with an expansive and nuanced sense of space and time, there is an audacity of form. War and Peace is an unusual book
inasmuch as it is a work of fiction incorporating lengthy historico-theoretical essays; moreover, the voice of those essays is not that of a narrative persona but belong directly to the author.

As Isaiah Berlin has noted (The Hedgehog and the Fox, 6-9), critics as far back as Flaubert and Turgenev, who read War and Peace as it was first appearing (Norton W&P 1115), have argued that Tolstoy’s historical digressions are tedious and unnecessary. Turgenev speaks of “sham and charlatanery” (ibid), and the critic Dimitry Akhsharumov declared in 1868 that “it is fortunate for us that the author is a better artist than thinker” (qtd. in H&F, 8). As Berlin relates, critics such as Emile Melchior de Vogue (France, C19), Dmitry Merezhkovsky (Russia, C19-20), Stefan Zweig (Austria, C20), Percy Lubbock (England, C20), and the early Tolstoy biographer Pavel Biryukov (Russia, C19) have been similarly dismissive. But the responses of these reader/critics do not add up to a consensus. Boris Eikhenbaum compares the essays favorably to the digressions of Homer and argues that they turn what might have been a conventional novel into an epic. He seems to identify that turning with an imparting of history into a book whose greatness depends on it:

An examination of the novel from this stylistic point of view convinces us that philosophical, historical digressions were introduced by Tolstoy really as elements of genre, as a sign of the epic, analogous to the digressions of the Iliad. A novel written on a rather scanty basis of historical material, filled with family episodes lacking any relation to history and the era of 1812, becomes, thanks to these digressions, a quasi-historical, even altogether historical work, not simply a novel such as those of Zotov
Berlin himself illustrates the congruence of Tolstoy’s fiction and his historical thought by way of a number of instances from the fiction. As he relates, what Tolstoy has set out to refute is the notion “that individuals can, by the use of their own resources, understand and control the course of events” (*H&F* 20). One finds this in the essays; it is implicit in the idea expressed there, which we will discuss further, that historic causation is too large and various a matter to be understood by beings limited by their existence in a specific time and place. Berlin arrives at the line I have just quoted by way of relating that in the fictive body of *War and Peace* neither Prince Bagration, a real-life officer at Austerlitz and hero to Tolstoy’s young Nikolai Rostov, nor Mikhail Speransky, a real-life advisor to Alexander I and—fictitiously—one-time mentor to Andrei Bolkonsky, nor Alexander himself, nor—most important—Napoleon himself, has much of a clue about the events they are caught up in, much less any real influence over their course. James Wood has recently declared that the essays belong in the book, pointing out some parallels between Tolstoy’s history and his fiction. As Wood tells it, Tolstoy’s peace involves two families, the Rostovs and the Bolkonskys, and one figure, Pierre Bezukhov, who is not from either family but is involved with both. Pierre, a central character, is a friend to Andrei Bolkonsky and eventually marries Natasha Rostova. Tolstoy’s war also involves, per Wood, two “families” and an outsider who is involved with both and involves them with each other: the families are France and Russia; the outsider is Bonaparte. Wood also points out that “[t]he
aggression of the narrative descriptions of Napoleon gains power from the aggression of the historical essays, in which Tolstoy recurringly argues against the cult of the ‘great man’” (“Movable Types: How War and Peace Works,” The New Yorker, 26 November 2007, 3-4).

Tolstoy’s early readers, even some of the more astute ones, might have wondered what the essays were doing in a work of fiction. War and Peace has since become an older book and a classic, meaning that scholars have had some time to look it over and the inclination to do so with a measure of attention. As we have seen, some have found a higher-order congruence in its seemingly incongruent elements. I should like to weigh in here, for I think our understanding of that higher congruence is enriched by reference to the rhythm of the small and the infinite of which I have spoken. I would argue, and of course I would not be the first, that Tolstoy’s fiction and his historical theorizing in War and Peace, like Tolstoy’s war and Tolstoy’s peace, are of a piece. They are so, at least, in connection with the episode we were considering a while ago (7 above). The juxtaposition of the chaos of battle and the peace of the infinite sky in Andrei’s consciousness is a spatial, synchronous manifestation of what is alive in the essays as a temporal, diachronous—in truth, pan-chronous—principle. Historic causation, like the sky, is in the realm of the infinite, or of that which might as well be infinite from a human point of view because it is too large for us to grasp. Tolstoy tells us that in the course of writing War and Peace he “arrived at the evident fact that the causes of historical events when they take place cannot be grasped by our intelligence” (Some Words About War and Peace, Norton W&P, 1094). In 1812, Napoleon’s temporary alliance with
Alexander I of Russia fell through, he made his final invasion of Russia, and suffered his final expulsion from Russia after taking and then losing Moscow. As Tolstoy relates, historians and others have weighed in on the causes of the events of that year. Some speak of Napoleon’s will and Alexander’s resoluteness. Others speak of French aggressiveness and Russian patriotism. Still others speak of a French democratic mission. Tolstoy summarily dismisses the idea that the causes lay in one or two men’s wills; this is as absurd as to say that the last blow of the spade by the last laborer employed in leveling a hill leveled the hill all by itself. “Why,” he continues, “did millions of people begin to kill one another?....Endless conjectures can be made, and are made, of the causes of this senseless event, but the immense number of these explanations, and their concurrence in one purpose, only proves that the causes were innumerable and that not one of them deserves to be called the cause.” Causality, for Tolstoy, is virtually infinite in its manifold character and also in its nature as a thing of humanly-incomprehensible temporal regression. For Tolstoy “there is and can be no beginning to any event, for one event always flows uninterruptedly from another” (W&P 732).

Tolstoy is merciless toward those who cannot grasp the infinite complexity he sees in historic causation. Gary Saul Morson has spoken of him as a satirist, indeed declaring that War and Peace “satirizes all historical writing, and all novels” (Hidden in Plain View, 83). I am inclined to agree, especially in reference to historical writing, but I am concerned that Tolstoy’s skills as a satirist have, despite Morson’s efforts, gone underappreciated. With this in mind, I will quote a passage from the second epilogue. Berlin reproduces it in its entirety; I have resisted the
temptation to follow suit but it does bear quoting at some length. This, for Tolstoy, is what nineteenth-century historiography has to say about the Napoleonic Wars:

At the end of the eighteenth century there were a couple of dozen men in Paris who began to talk about all men being free and equal. This caused people all over France to begin to slash at and drown one another. They killed the king and many other people. At that time in France there was a man of genius—Napoleon. He conquered everybody everywhere—that is, he killed many people because he was a great genius. And for some reason he went to kill Africans, and killed them so well...that when he returned to France he ordered everybody to obey him, and they all obeyed him....Napoleon led six hundred thousand men into Russia and captured Moscow, then he suddenly ran away from Moscow, and the Emperor Alexander...united Europe to arm against the disturber of its peace. All Napoleon’s allies suddenly became his enemies and their forces advanced against the fresh forces he raised. The allies defeated Napoleon....the skillful statesmen and diplomatists (especially Talleyrand, who managed to sit down in a particular chair before anyone else and thereby extended the frontiers of France) talked in Vienna and by those conversations made the nations happy or unhappy. Suddenly the diplomatists and monarchs nearly quarreled...but just then Napoleon arrived in France with a battalion, and the French, who had been hating him, immediately all submitted to him. But the Allied monarchs...defeated the genius Napoleon and, suddenly recognizing him as a brigand, sent him to the island of St. Helena. And the exile, separated
from the beloved France so dear to his heart, died a lingering death on 
that rock and bequeathed his great deeds to posterity.

(1044-5. Ellipses are mine.)

After laying things out for us in this way, Tolstoy tells us that he is not being ironic.

If the novelist and the historical thinker in Tolstoy add up to something like 
an epic poet, as per Eikhenbaum, there may be something like a poet’s sense of 
wonder in both the storyteller and the essayist. After the passage above, Tolstoy goes 
on to describe power, which is the power of causation, as an indefinable mystery 
(1050-56). If I may indulge in some speculation for a moment, I would suggest that 
Tolstoy’s sense of historical causality has within it a sense of wonder, something 
akin to Andrei Bolkonsky’s perception of the sky over Austerlitz. As with the 
infinite, one cannot altogether comprehend history but one can feel and intuit its 
immensity, indeed its grandeur. This, I would suggest, is at least one of the reasons 
he devotes the space to historical causality that he does and is the source of his satire 
above. The usual explanations are so far from the truth he perceives that he does not 
have to exaggerate to make them laughable.

That truth is not abstract or uninformed. Tolstoy speaks of having amassed 
an entire library of historical material during his work on War and Peace and that the 
words and deeds of historical figures who appear in it are all authentic. His 
interpretation, not his facts, so he tells us, is different from those of the historians 
(Some Words About War and Peace, Norton W&P, 1094).
Let us consider, once more, the fighter and the skater. Tolstoy, who was born in 1828, and Lenin, who was born in 1870, could not, of course, really have been together in the same place during a coterminous adolescence. But both were products of the Russian nineteenth century. Like a substantial estate with some large ponds, suitable for skating and for pursuing one’s intentions toward a girl like Natasha, Russia was a place to give one a sense of the immense, and perhaps also to foster immense ambition, literary or political. Out on the pond, as we have imagined it, there are some thin spots on the ice. The skaters stay away from them. There are no mishaps worse than that which befalls our unsteady snowball fighter. But in the decades following Tolstoy’s death in 1910, millions of his countrymen did, so to say, fall through the ice, never to come up alive. The young fellow we have imagined as a confident skater had much to do with this. I have said that self-doubt was not prominent in his nature; later we shall consider his relation to doubt in comparison with Tolstoy’s.
CHAPTER IV
TOLSTOY, LENIN, AND BONAPARTE’S REVENGE

If Russia never had a Reformation, another way to say this is that it did not have an analogous period of coming out of a thousand years of faith from which it had grown weary. Capitalism and modern technics were arriving in Russia in the nineteenth century but they were not home-grown. Since Russia did not have to give birth to them on its own, their development there did not have quite the same need for individualist thinking, religious and secular, as did the urbanizing culture of early modern Europe, with its doubt-fueled science and philosophy and its eventual focus on ever-more efficient means of manufacture and machine technics.

Europe in its time of doubt produced figures—one thinks of Mary Shelley, Lord Byron, and Goethe—who tell tales expressing a self doubt in a culture becoming accustomed to questioning received truth. Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, Byron’s Manfred, and Goethe’s Faust are faces of a reflexive injunction: in them, a culture to which doubt is essential commands itself to doubt, or question, itself. Europe, like Russia, was a land in which large impulses were afoot. There lives in
Frankenstein, Manfred, and Faust a sense that European culture, in its quest for ever-
greater knowledge and power, is trying to go to places where men should not go.
Frankenstein’s project partakes of a scientific hubris. His creation of life in the
laboratory—a scientist presuming to do God’s work—destroys him. Manfred’s is a
metaphysical hubris. He invokes the spirits of nature and they fashion a curse upon
him out of the materials of his own soul (Manfred I.i.1. 153). What Manfred has not
understood is that the power to invoke is not the power to command. His story is
eerily prescient. The theme of the industrial age, which began in the century during
which Lenin and Tolstoy were born and Manfred appeared, is the use of machines to
harness such natural forces as electricity, heat, and atomic energy to multiply human
or animal muscular effort a thousand fold, a million fold. Our “mastery” over nature
may yet destroy us, and the fact that we can harness nature’s powers without really
being able to control or foresee the results of that harnessing put us in a position
analogous to Manfred’s. Faust’s hubris is spiritual and the meaning of his story is
perhaps the essential one: when one’s thirst for knowledge knows no limits, one
courts damnation.

A consideration of the lives and works of Lenin and Tolstoy imparts a sense
that Russia, unlike Europe, is a land in which a will to the infinite does not bring
with it an intuition that one is bargaining one’s soul.

The snowball fighter and the skater were both, in their very different ways,
more intimate with certainty than with doubt. As Georg Lukacs has related, Maxim
Gorky speaks in his memoirs of a conversation with Lenin, quoting him as follows:

25
“What a colossus, eh? What a gigantic figure! Ah, there’s an artist for you, my boy! … And do you know what is even more amazing? It’s his peasant voice, his peasant way of thinking! A very peasant in the flesh! Until this nobleman came along, there was no real peasant in our literature”….Then he looked at me with his little Asiatic slant-eye, and asked: “Who in Europe could be put in the same class with him? No one!” ¹

(Studies in European Realism, 127. Ellipses in original.)

If there is an extraordinary certainty in both Lenin and Tolstoy, I would suggest that Lenin’s rhetorical conflation of the noble and the peasant in Tolstoy is not unrelated to that certainty. Russia was an agrarian country. The thought comes that, at least in Tolstoy’s time, a large part of Russia’s spirit lay with its character as such; it knew well enough how to be one. Lenin was himself both a hereditary nobleman and a revolutionary Marxist; in his version of Marxism the Russian nobility had to go. As a Marxist, he was a thinker whose ideology insisted on the irreconcilability of the land-owning nobility and the peasantry. And here he is, despite that irreconcilability, praising the landowner Tolstoy as a nobleman who is really a peasant. The noble and the peasant, howsoever their respective economic interests might conflict, are people of the Russian land, a place, perhaps unlike Moscow and St. Petersburg, of certainty.

In some of Tolstoy’s earthier characters such as the peasant soldier Platon Karataev and the well-off peasant whom Constantine Levin visits (Anna Karenina 323-5), there is a certainty; there may be spiritual humility but there is not much self-

¹ Maybe, maybe not. Two tellers of the Faust myth—Goethe and Thomas Mann—come to mind as peers, if not classmates, to Tolstoy.
doubt. Karataev and the rich peasant are foils to the self-doubting heroes Pierre
Bezukhov and Levin, respectively. Tolstoy himself—our fallen fighter who sees
infinity in his glimpse of the Russian sky—is like a synthesis of his self-doubting
heroes and some of the instinctually wise, sturdy characters they encounter. His
confidence as an author, his certainty, is as large and as present as that sky precisely
because of his synthesis of doubt and wise instinct. This is, perhaps, the larger
meaning of Lenin’s conflation of the nobleman and the peasant in his thoughts on
Tolstoy: He is the artist he is because he contains both Bezukhov and Karataev,
Levin and the rich peasant.

We will recall that, despite a shouted invocation of the devil, the pond where
we have left our young friends—we could call it Natasha’s Russia, or the peace of
War and Peace—is not a place where devils seem to lurk. Danger, however, can lurk
unsuspected. It is difficult to imagine young Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili at the
pond. It is on or near the Moscow/St. Petersburg axis, a good thousand miles north of
the young man’s seminary school in Tbilisi. The milieu is fairly prosperous. Both the
landscape and the milieu are a long way from the world of a Georgian village thug.
But suppose, just for a moment, that he is there; perhaps the seminary school has
some sort of exchange program. He looks, and feels, woefully out of place. He
sneers cynically at the whole scene. He tries to catch Natasha’s eye with a mocking
smile when the young man falls, and she instinctively recoils. His smile and his
whole bearing strike her as unseemly and threatening. The look of fear on her face is
not what he had wanted to see. But after a moment he starts to feel pleased with it.
He has thought of making some stone-cored snowballs and joining the fighters, but he has a bad arm. He has thought of trying to trick the skaters onto the thin ice in order to enjoy the likely results. But how? Such pleasures can wait. The fear is the thing. There is time.

In Tolstoy’s rhythm of the small and the immense, which is also the rhythm of doubt and certainty, one can discern something that now looks like Russia warning itself about Lenin and his successors—including, of course, the fellow with the bad arm. To put it another way: a century after Tolstoy’s death, and half a century after Stalin’s, the thought comes to a reader of War and Peace that Lenin and his followers look like the ghosts of Bonaparte.

In order to speak of this, we must speak of the difference between how Tolstoy created fiction and how he thought of history. To be precise, there is a difference here between two kinds of mastery, one attainable and one unattainable. The difference has to do with what can be done, and what cannot be done, with detail. We have spoken of Russian certainty, and of Tolstoy’s certainty. What is this Russian thinker certain of? He has, of course, an authorial certainty: he is confident of his own ability to build works immense in their scope and intelligence by means of attention to small detail. He is also certain that there are laws of history, but that— I shall paraphrase—you would have to be God to make an empirical science of history. Historians should make the effort to discover those laws:

To study the laws of history we must completely change the subject of our observation, must leave aside kings, ministers, and generals, and study the common, infinatesimally small elements by which the masses are moved. No
one can say in how far it is possible for man to advance in this way toward an understanding of the laws of history; but it is evident that only along that path does the possibility of discovering the laws of history lie, and that as yet not a millionth part as much mental effort has been applied in this direction by historians as has been devoted to describing the actions of various kings, commanders, and ministers and propounding the historians’ own reflections concerning these actions.  

(W&P 733)

We should make the effort, but, for Tolstoy, our understanding is necessarily limited because we are finite beings, creatures of a specific time and place, while causation is unlimited in its multiplicity and also temporally. The trouble with some existing historiography, for Tolstoy, is that it ignores continuity. To place a line I have quoted partially (20 above) in context, the method is “to take an arbitrarily selected series of continuous events and examine it apart from others, though there is and can be no beginning to any event, for one event always flows uninterruptedly from another” (W&P 732). Real understanding, and also real power, have to do with one’s relation to time, and men are not the sort of beings who transcend time’s limits:

Only the expression of the will of the Deity, not dependent on time, can relate to a whole series of events occurring over a period of years or centuries, and only the Deity, independent of everything, can by His sole will determine the direction of humanity’s movement; but man acts in time and himself takes part in what occurs.  

(W&P 1057)

As we have discussed, Tolstoy’s incorporation of historico-theoretical essays in War and Peace marks it as an unusual novel. The fictive story Tolstoy tells could
perhaps have been told without the essays. But, it is not coincidental that he embeds those essays in a book that tells of the Napoleonic Wars in Russia. In the passages I have quoted on the last couple of pages, Tolstoy is addressing himself to historiography. But with Tolstoy’s thoughts on history in mind, we might shift our focus from historiography to Napoleon himself, and, since we are temporally privileged to do so as Tolstoy was not, to Lenin and his successors.

Bonaparte was a bastard child of the French eighteenth century. The century of his birth was the century of Denis Diderot and his fellow Encyclopedists, Voltaire, Rousseau, and the French Revolution. It was the “Age of Reason,” and it seemed to many thinkers that reason, and things associated with it, were inherently emancipatory, progressive, and just. The Encyclopedists sought to create a compendium of human knowledge, or knowledge of the human, by way of which interested readers could know what was known of the human. Knowledge of the known would be conducive to human progress. Voltaire declared that “It is obvious to the whole world that a service is better than an injury, that gentleness is preferable to anger. It only remains, therefore, to use our reason to discern the shades of goodness and badness” (quoted by John Ralston Saul in Voltaire’s Bastards, 31). As Saul has pointed out (VB 31), it was a mistake to think that reason was necessarily intimate with morality and fairness. But European thinkers, or at least French thinkers, assumed so in Voltaire’s time, and by 1789, reason seemed not to favor the ancien regime. Nor did it seem to favor the absolutism that propped up the nobility and the clergy along with the monarchy itself.
The one major French Enlightenment thinker and Encyclopedist who was still alive in 1789, the Marquis de Condorcet, welcomed the Revolution, took part in it, and died in prison upon being arrested by the Montagnard authorities. The Revolution ate its young because reason and progress, unbeknownst to thinkers such as Voltaire and Condorcet, were not and are not freestanding entities. They are not of the same precise order as mathematics, contra the mathematician/humanist philosopher Condorcet. Reason and progress have no existence independent of the humans who seek to practise them or put them into play in the world. Those humans were, and are, a varied, fractious, and not disinterested lot. Robespierre’s reason and progress were not the same as Condorcet’s.

Nor was Napoleon’s. If the excesses of the French Revolution left any doubt that reason and progress can be invoked in the service of mass slaughter, surely the life and works of Bonaparte put it to rest. In the nearly two-century distance from Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* (1637) to the Napoleonic Wars, one could, at the risk of oversimplification, chart a certain ideological trajectory in French intellectual and political life: By means of doubt one may arrive at certainty, there is nothing in the human realm that humans cannot or should not know, reason tells us that liberty, equality and fraternity must replace the divine right of kings, and all of this has to do with human progress. And since the French are the ones to have realized and embodied all of this, France should have an empire. Napoleon was the face of this last notion, and it was a face both ugly and prefigurative.

The playing-out of these ideas, the history of their interaction with the political and discursive universes they encountered, did not, of course, confine itself
to France. It spread, and its spreading brings up, or illuminates, questions of benefit. As John Ralston Saul has pointed out,

The real message [Bonaparte] took from the Revolution was the necessity for rational administration…Bonaparte understood that the power given by efficient methods and rational arguments was far more absolute than anything the kings had known. (VB 69) What the avatars of the “Age of Reason” did not understand, and what the small Corsican demonstrated to the hundredth power, is that you can infuse a whole continent or two with your version of reason, and the centrality of a perennial question—cui bono—is not diminished one bit. For Diderot or Voltaire, mankind is the beneficiary of reason and enquiry. Mankind, however, would appear not to be a single body with a single interest. One could read the works of Karl Marx, with his insistence on the centrality of class struggle to human affairs, as the most cogent nineteenth-century European response to the eighteenth-century assumption that it is. And one could read the works of Tolstoy as the most cogent nineteenth-century Russian response to the same assumption. It is a very different kind of response. As a Christian he believed that the reconciliation of God and man might hold the key to reconciliation of man and man. He neither advocates class struggle nor assigns it an important role in human progress. But he was as far, or farther, from the Encyclopedists as Marx was. His Napoleon is a small man involved, without much understanding or even much volition, in some large events. This degenerated son of the French Enlightenment may see himself as a user and agent of reason, but he has nothing to do with enlightened reason or progress. Nor with liberty, equality, and fraternity.
Tolstoy’s Napoleon Bonaparte, like the historical one, uses rational military means for insane ends: his self-creation as some sort of hero by way of the slaughter of several million people. His insignificance is obvious to Andrei Bolkonsky, whose sense of the infinite had been awakened by his view of the sky when we saw him last (7). His sense of the finite—or his sense of the infinitely limited—is awakened by what he sees next. Napoleon, despite his having invaded Russia, had actually been a hero of his. But when the wounded Andrei sees him up close, it is something like a consciousness the size of Russia taking a look at Corsica, which is about a two-thousandth part of Russia’s size. Andrei is unimpressed, or he is only impressed by how unimpressive Napoleon is. A wounded bear might glance at a passing mouse; he would not believe it if you told him it was the rodent that laid him low. As Andrei lies wounded, Napoleon and some of his officers come upon him, taking him for one of the slain:

“That’s a fine death!” said Napoleon as he gazed at Bolkonski.

Prince Andrew understood that this was said of him and that it was Napoleon who said it. He heard the speaker addressed as Sire. But he heard the words as he might have heard the buzzing of a fly….He knew it was Napoleon—his hero—but at that moment Napoleon seemed to him such a small, insignificant creature compared with what was passing now between himself and that lofty infinite sky with the clouds flying over it. At that moment it meant nothing to him who might be standing over him, or what was said of him; he was only glad that people were standing near him and only wished that they would help him and bring him back to life, which
seemed to him so beautiful now that he had today learned to understand it so
differently. (254)

Andrei is unimpressed by Napoleon; Napoleon is not unimpressed by Andrei.

Napoleon thought Andrei embodied a fine death. When Andrei makes a slight move
and groans, Napoleon has him taken care of along with the other wounded Russian
prisoners. Tolstoy repeats the comparison of Napoleon’s insignificance and the
infinite sky several times; it becomes something almost like a musical motif as we
inhabit the wounded Andrei’s thoughts:

So insignificant…seemed to him all the interests that engrossed Napoleon, so
mean did his hero himself with his paltry vanity and joy in victory appear,
compared to the lofty, equitable, and kindly sky….Visions of his father, wife,
sister, and future son, and the tenderness he had felt the night before the
battle, the figure of the insignificant little Napoleon, and above all this the
lofty sky, formed the chief subjects of his delirious fancies.

The quiet home life and peaceful happiness of Bald Hills presented
itself to him. He was already enjoying that happiness when that little
Napoleon had suddenly appeared with his unsympathizing look of short-
sighted delight at the misery of others, and doubts and torments had
followed, and only the heavens promised peace. (254-5)

That promised peace, and all else that is associated with the heavens, do not look
simple or comprehensible to Andrei. In this he feels himself at some distance from
his highly religious sister, Princess Mary, who had given him a gold icon pendant
that he still has with him:
“How happy and calm I should be [Andrei thinks] if I could now say: ‘Lord, have mercy on me!’…But to whom should I say that? Either to a Power indefinable, incomprehensible, which I not only cannot address but which I cannot even express in words—the Great All or Nothing—or to that God who has been sewn into this amulet by Mary! There is nothing certain, nothing at all except the unimportance of everything I understand, and the greatness of something incomprehensible but all-important.”

(255)

The incident with Napoleon is a fictional counterpart to Tolstoy’s historical ideas as expressed in the essays. Napoleon’s insignificance stands as an implicit rebuke to historians who say that “so-and-so [small] gave an order and such-and-such [large] events resulted.”

The Napoleonic Wars in Russia were part of an ongoing encounter between Russia and the West that includes Tolstoy’s war, Tolstoy’s peace, and much else besides, including Dostoevsky, Bolshevism, and the Cold War. Some part of the encounter is a battle over the Russian soul, or over its definition, or over whose prerogative it is to do the defining.

A man with a larger will to domination than Tolstoy’s might have a somewhat different feeling for history and historical causality. If one has a sense—perhaps similar to Tolstoy’s—of the immensity and complexity of the forces at work in historic events, but nevertheless believes, unlike Tolstoy, that they are comprehensible to a superior human intelligence, it is a small step to the thought that
they are not only comprehensible but malleable to one’s will. We have seen that
Lenin admired Tolstoy; the size of his political ambition may bear comparison to that
of Tolstoy’s literary ambition. Some part of the difference between Lenin as a
political man and Tolstoy as a literary man may lie precisely in Lenin’s assumption
that, as large and unruly a beast as history is, one can still hitch a ride on it and affect
its course. In this, any resemblance Lenin bears to Tolstoy leaves off; it is here that
his resemblance to Bonaparte begins.

It is fitting that the older, long-bearded Tolstoy looked something like an Old
Testament prophet, for his largest work is eerily prophetic. In the years 1789-1812 a
revolution born, in part, of both emancipatory ideas and the insurgent impulses of
France’s urban poor overthrew the monarchy, did away with feudalism, sent a
number of its own makers to the guillotine, and gave rise to circumstances under
which a small Corsican could exercise his large ambitions. Napoleon, a non-
Frenchman from a place on the periphery of France’s influence, sought to extend that
influence eastward, getting as far as Moscow before his retreat. Lev Tolstoy was
born sixteen years after that retreat, and during the eighteen-sixties he wrote *War
and Peace*, which now looks like a mirror that reflects across time as well as space.
It tells, of course, of the history I have briefly related. Starting a few years after its
author’s death, a Russian revolution born of both emancipatory ideas and the
insurgent impulses of Russia’s urban working class overthrew Tsarism and
feudalism, sent millions of people, including most of its own leaders, to early deaths,
and gave rise to circumstances under which a small Georgian could exercise his large
ambitions. Stalin, a non-Russian from a place on the periphery of Russia’s influence, sought to extend that influence westward after World War II and got as far as Berlin.

If Napoleon was a bastard son of the French eighteenth century, Lenin and certainly Stalin were bastard sons of the following century in Europe, or to be precise, bastard sons, with the emphasis on the “bastard,” of nineteenth-century European revolutionism. Stalin bears roughly the same relation to Marx that Bonaparte bears to Rousseau or Voltaire. I would suggest that Stalinism is Bonapartist insofar as two differences are similar to each other. The first difference would be that between, on the one hand, liberty, equality and fraternity, along with whatever actual embodiment they found in the early days of the Revolution, and on the other, Napoleon’s murderous adventures in Russia and elsewhere. The second difference would be that between, on the one hand, workers’ control and ownership of the means of production and thence real political power, as theorized by Marx and at least partly embodied in the Paris Commune, and on the other, Stalin’s bestowal of the blessings of state “socialism” on Eastern Europe.

In all of this there is the same interplay between small, if sometimes intelligent, men and large ambition, large events, which we find in Tolstoy’s war. Through Andrei Bolkonsky’s ears we can hear the words of Tolstoy’s Napoleon. But Stalin was Napoleon’s echo. It is a measure of Tolstoy’s genius that he was able, without even intending it, to sound a future warning about certain men—who were not yet born during the warning’s composition—with Napoleonic ambition.
Tolstoy’s Napoleon Bonaparte is a small man involved in some large events. Those events form the matter of Tolstoy’s war if not his peace. If Tolstoy’s most monumental work has to do with the collision of east and west that was Russia’s encounter with Napoleon’s armies, and the Faust myth embodies something central to the European world-feeling, consider it: A Faustian bargain involves drawing upon forces larger than oneself, which one may not be able to control, and the bargain puts oneself or at least one’s better nature at the risk of destruction. Those forces might not be literally devilish; they might appear under such names as manifest destiny, Geist, or atomic fission. Napoleon, like Victor Frankenstein, Manfred, and Faust, sought command over large phenomena which ultimately he could not control. Does this make him a Faustian figure? The question suggests itself. What Napoleon’s armies wrought in Europe, Africa and Russia could be called diabolical. War and Peace, like Faust and the Faustian stories I have mentioned, is a cautionary tale about the hubris of power. From a post-Stalin point of view, as we have seen, War and Peace looks like a Russian spatio-temporal mirror to what was for Tolstoy some recent European history. But that mirror does not show an exact reflection. Its images are refracted by the culture and intellect of its creator. If you are a westerner, that is, a citizen of the culture whose imagination gave birth to Faust, Napoleon might look Faustian. He certainly might if you are the sort of historian Tolstoy counters and lampoons in the passages I have quoted, who would ascribe the causing of immense phenomena to orders given by one man or a few men. Perhaps Napoleon, even if he did not have a fateful visit from Mephistopheles, drew upon or embodied something like a malign aspect of Hegel’s Geist, or some
daemon of western progress and/or greed; Hegel himself referred to him as a “world-soul” when he saw him at Jena in 1806 (quoted in The Oxford Guide to Philosophy, 966). But Tolstoy, though he was acquainted with the culture that gave birth to the Faust myth, was not one of its citizens. His Napoleon could not make a Faustian bargain or anything like it. If one makes such a bargain, it will bring one low, but in the meanwhile, one’s own—large—volition is a real causative factor in large events. Tolstoy’s Napoleon lives in a different causal universe, one where in large phenomena there lives incomprehensibly large and complex causation.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, I will say here that in smaller phenomena, Tolstoy grants effective agency to individual volition. He can, he tells us, “undoubtedly commit an act or refrain from it if the act relates to me alone. I have undoubtedly by my own will just lifted and lowered my arm. I can at once stop writing. You can at once stop reading” (Some Words About War and Peace, Norton W&P, 1095). But when other people are involved with one’s deeds, and situations are larger and more complex than an individual deciding upon an individual deed, freedom lessens, or causation does not have to do with individual agency:

Testing my freedom I can lift and forcibly lower my hand in the air. I have done so. But near me stands a child and I raise my hand above him and want to lower it with the same force onto the child. I cannot do this….In action I cannot refrain from attacking with my regiment or from running when all around me run—I cannot” (ibid).

Tolstoy’s fictional characters, like many fictional characters, make decisions and carry them out to the degree that they are able. The instances of this are innumerable.
To speak of one or two—the rich peasant whom Levin visits in *Anna Karenina* has made a decent life for himself and his family by way of his own decisions and his own efforts. Levin himself, when he stops in on him, is in the process of finding his way to a decent marriage and a decent life for himself.

Where the scale is world-historical or macrocosmic, things are different. And it is here that Tolstoy’s thought can begin to look a little strange, or more than a little strange, to a Western mind. Perhaps it is because the present author is from an individualist culture that is Faustian, or at least—and this may amount to the same thing—perceives itself as such—but I cannot escape the intuition that both Napoleon and Lenin, as individuals, played a large role in unleashing forces they could not control and affected history in the process. Tolstoy would differ on who or what did the unleashing. To him, that must remain unknowable. Or, for Tolstoy, the ultimate unleasher is the ultimate knower, whose purposes, whose ultimate nature, whose knowing, cannot be known by men. “There is, and can be,” Tolstoy tells us, “no cause of an historical event except the one cause of all causes” (*W&P* 874).
CHAPTER V

TWO BEARS

Tolstoy’s cause of all causes is supposed to have spoken worlds into being, and his speech would transcend any limits related to time and space. Gary Saul Morson has spoken of what he calls absolute language, in connection not with God but with Tolstoy (Hidden in Plain View, 9-36). Absolute language would be language that asserts a truth which it claims is trans-historical. Ideally, its source would have to be a speaker who stands outside of time and history, as with a biblical command (HIPV 14). But what Morson is talking about is Tolstoy’s necessarily-doomed attempts to make such statements himself, doomed because “no man in history can utter a nonhistorical word” (24). For Morson, Tolstoy’s attempts on these lines include statements such as the line from War and Peace I quoted at the end of the last chapter, and the famous opening sentence of Anna Karenina: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” What follows is language of a more contingent nature; Tolstoy tells of the state of things in the Oblonsky household on the third day after Stepan Arkadyich Oblonsky’s affair with
the former French governess has been discovered by his wife. The sequence of
language-types here is more or less typical of Tolstoy’s fiction. If his novels
consisted entirely of historical essays and sentences like the opening one in *Anna
Karenina*, they would not be novels; they would be books of essays and proverbs.
Although Tolstoy’s pronouncements can be striking, the mix generally works. As
Morson puts it, “nondialogic speech [in fiction] could become more effective than it
is in contexts where we do expect it: skillfully used, brief sermons in novels may
command more attention than long sermons in churches” (12). Morson’s analysis is
astute; what he does not address is that Tolstoy’s mixture of nondialogic and dialogic
language is one nuance of a lifelong…dialogue in his work between that which is
spatio-temporally bound and that which, at least in his conception, is not.

We have spoken of that dialogue in several of its permutations throughout
this study; Napoleon versus the infinite sky, false notions of local causality versus
the reality of infinite causality prominent among them. I should like to close with a
brief overview of Tolstoy’s career, in order to see if the work can tell us if, or how,
the man himself embodies or resembles the dialogue of which I speak.

When things at the Oblonsky household have flown apart, we meet the family
a little afterwards, on the third day. The teller of the Oblonskys’ tale, whose narrative
choice that was, was an admirer of a man said to have risen on the third day. Realms
associated with the risen man were of interest to the teller of the Oblonskys’ troubles.
We might consider the relations of those realms and that teller.

In its way, the arc of Tolstoy’s whole career is congruent with his status as
thinker of the unknowable in *War and Peace*. If in that status he served as an
unwitting teller of parallels between the French and the Bolsheviks, in that same status he embodies a certain other parallel. In the Tolstoyan rhythm of the finite and the infinite, the thinker of the unknowable appears to emulate he who—for Christians such as Lev Tolstoy—knows all. If a person whose thinking lives in an oscillation of the mundane and the cosmic is a monotheist, that oscillation might be alive in his own lived self, his subjectivity, as a polarity, or a duality, of man and god.

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy writes a world into being. There is a completeness to that world. The title is telling: There is war here, there is peace here. There is not much more to human life. Like most human lives, and unlike a great number of novels, this book is not tightly plotted. Things happen; people interact in battle, desire, love, indifference and just about every other emotion. One finds here both the contingent and the absolute, and thoughts about what human beings have to do with both. As Morson has pointed out (*HIPV* 147-53), the fictive world of *War and Peace* resembles life in the quantity of dropped threads we find there. As in life, characters show up who seem significant but never reappear. Similarly, as Morson also points out, there are incidents whose consequences, if there are any, we do not hear about. In *War and Peace* there is storytelling and there are essays, as in life there is both action and reflection. This book is varied and very large, like life, like the world.

If in *War and Peace* Tolstoy creates a world, that world has its Edenic aspect, and its Eve. There is a sequence set on and around the Rostov estate involving a wolf hunt and joyous revelry during the evening afterwards (437-55). When the hunt is over, Natasha and her brothers visit the home of a man they call “Uncle,” a leader of
the hunt and a distant Rostov relative. The hospitality Natasha and her brothers find in his smallish wooden house after an exhilarating and active day is perfect. Natasha feels that the abundant, unpretentious Russian food they are served is the best she has ever had. A balalaika appears, then a guitar; the music is exquisite and Natasha moves her body to its rhythm well and in a Russian manner, instinctively, despite her training in French styles of dance. On the way home she confides something to her brother: “I know that I shall never again be as happy and tranquil as I am now” (455). One believes it. And she is right. She is already engaged to Andrei Bolkonsky, but later Anatole Kuragin tempts her and she becomes enamored of him, which aborts her engagement to Andrei. This sends her into a long, wasting sickness—nowadays it would perhaps be called a major depression—that nearly kills her. But only nearly. She recovers in the process of tending to the wounded, dying Andrei, and eventually marries Pierre Bezukhov. If Kuragin plays tempter to this Eve, still their encounter is not her fall; he turns her head but does not succeed in seducing her.

If War and Peace is a creation, or even a Creation, it is not until its author’s next novel that he decrees a fall. In Anna Karenina, we find another Eve, and another tempter. The title character is a St. Petersburg society woman married to a rather dull civil servant, with whom she has a young son. She has an affair with the dashing, shallow young military officer Count Vronsky. Anna’s sin is her doom. The affair gets her out of a marriage that brings her no joy, but it provides her more pleasure than happiness and she eventually loses her lover as well as her son and her position in society. She spends time in Europe with Vronsky, but eventually finds that there is no place for her either in Europe or Russia. She commits suicide by throwing herself
under a train. The epigraph to *Anna Karenina* is a sentence ascribed to the one who stands outside history: Vengeance is mine; I will repay. It was, however, not God but Lev Tolstoy who put those words on the page, and it was he who consigned *Anna Karenina* to her death on the tracks.

If Tolstoy enacted a creation and then a fall in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, it was then left to him to imagine something like the coming of redemption to the human world. It was a long time coming. *Anna Karenina* had been published in 1877; *Resurrection* appeared in 1899. It is a tale of the intermingled lives of one Prince Dmitri Ivanovich Nekhlyudov and Katerina Mikhailovna Maslova, a young woman from a peasant background. When Nekhlyudov is about twenty-two, he seduces the seventeen year old Katerina, or Katusha, when she is working in the home of his aunts and he is staying there briefly. Afterwards he gives her a hundred roubles and goes to join his regiment. She becomes pregnant, loses her job with the aunts and soon ends up working as a prostitute. Ten years later, Nekhlyudov finds himself on a jury in a robbery-and-murder case in which Maslova is a defendant. To the jury it appears that she is innocent, but through a mistake in the wording of the verdict she is sentenced to a term in Siberia at hard labor. This brings on a major change in Nekhlyudov. Formerly he had been something like a latter-day Kuragin or Vronsky, a shallow and self-centered young aristocrat involved with a married woman. He recognizes that it was his seduction of Katusha that set her onto the life she has lived since. She is now, unjustly and to his horror, on the verge of exile, and he devotes himself to making amends. He proposes marriage to her, which she declines. He sets up an appeal in Katusha’s case, which is rejected.
A selflessness has awakened in him which does not only have to do with Katusha; he becomes a kind of informal advocate for the other prisoners with whom she is being held and tries to give his land to the peasants who work it. He travels with Katusha to Siberia, where they receive word that her sentence has been lessened as a result of a petition to the Tsar that Nekhlyudov has submitted. They have got to know each other rather well by this time, but she again rejects his offer of marriage, this time not because she does not love him but because she fears that a marriage to her would not be the best thing for him.

Tolstoy calls this tale *Resurrection*, not because anyone in it literally rises from the dead, and not even, I think, because Nekhlyudov becomes altogether Christ-like. He is still only a man. He is still fallible. But what is at work in this book, and in its hero, and in its author, is a New Testament principle, perhaps the essential one: forgiveness. Nekhlyudov’s experience with prisoners and the penal system leads him to the idea, which is the older Tolstoy’s idea, that humans do not have the right to punish other humans. Those humans who are without that right would now include Russian novelists. Katerina Maslova, unlike Anna Karenina, ends up alive.

Maxim Gorky once wrote that “With God [Tolstoy] has very suspicious relations; they sometimes remind me of the relations of ‘two bears in one den’” (quoted by George Steiner in *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, 265). As George Steiner has related, Tolstoy wrote of an experience he had in 1896 that during it he felt God clearly for the first time; that He existed and that I existed in Him;
that the only thing that existed was I in Him: in Him like a limited thing in an unlimited thing, in Him also like a limited being in which He existed.

(TOD 265)

Tolstoy may well be describing something like what Japanese Buddhists call *kensho*, a passing state in which one feels, more than thinks, one’s non-separateness from all that is. It may even be that, in his creative life with its thematic interplay of the mundane and the cosmic, he was striving, perhaps not altogether consciously, for such a state. But for him it was a passing state, and given the conceptual framework and the language available to him, he still speaks of two, an I and a Him, when he seeks to describe a oneness. His thinking was dualistic to the end; a war between flesh and spirit is alive in something he says about Nekhlyudov around the time he seduces Katusha: three years earlier, “he had regarded his spiritual being as his real self; now his healthy virile animal self was the real I” (*Resurrection*, 74). Tolstoy was not a Buddha; he was a writer who, so to say, played God, but he was about as well qualified to do that as anyone, and it is interesting to know that a writer who spoke of the interplay of the mundane and the cosmic throughout his creative life reached a moment, in his late sixties, when they seemed to appear as one.
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