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## The greatest of all novels

by Gary Saul Morson

*On Tolstoy's masterpiece.*

Just 150 years ago, in 1869, Tolstoy published the final installment of *War and Peace*, often regarded as the greatest of all novels. In his time, Tolstoy was known as a *nyetovshchik*—someone who says *nyet*, or no, to all prevailing opinion—and *War and Peace* discredits the prevailing views of the radical intelligentsia, then just beginning to dominate Russian thought. The intelligentsia's way of thinking is still very much with us and so Tolstoy's critique is, if anything, even more pertinent today.

"If we concede that human life can be governed by reason, then the possibility of life is destroyed," the book's epilogue instructs. Even more than their Western European counterparts, Russians were obsessed with establishing a hard social science, as certain as physics. Any Western theory that promised such certainty found enthusiastic Russian supporters. In England, utilitarianism supported moderate liberalism, but by the 1860s Russians took it as proof of revolutionary socialism. The French positivist Auguste Comte, who coined the term "sociology," originally planned to call his new discipline "social physics." His Russian followers presumed that this "physics" already existed. Of course, Marxism—or "scientific socialism"—would eventually triumph over its rivals.

For Tolstoy, such aspirations were sheer nonsense. All purported social sciences held that, as with Newtonian astronomy, the complexity of observed phenomena was explicable by a few simple laws. But with society and individual psyches, Tolstoy insisted, the very opposite is the case: "the deeper we delve in search of these [fundamental] causes," Tolstoy observes, "the more of them we find." Things do not simplify, they ramify. Whatever regularities there may be are overwhelmed by sheer contingencies. Sometimes events happen just "for some reason," a favorite phrase of Tolstoy's indicating that no theory could ever predict them. And as contemporary chaos theory has rediscovered, sometimes apparently insignificant chance events can have concatenating effects and so make an enormous difference.

As the novel begins, its main hero, Prince Andrei, believes in a science of warfare, which German generals and theoreticians claim to have elaborated. Tolstoy allows this purported social science to

stand for all others, existing or to come. At the council of war before the Battle of Austerlitz (1805), the Russians and their Austrian allies plan their campaign according to their supposed science and are certain that “every contingency has been foreseen.” They suffer a disastrous defeat.

This defeat does not in the least shake the generals’ confidence in their “science,” much as the failure of Marx’s predictions never dissuaded Marxists and the many failures of contemporary economists’ predictions have never made them less confident of their “science.” Tolstoy loves to show how many ways there are to ignore inconvenient facts. Some of the generals (and some economists) adjust their theories so that they fit what they had failed to foresee, as if the test of a theory were not the ability to predict but to retrodict the known past. Even astrologers can do that. Tolstoy refers to this way of thinking as “the fallacy of retrospection.”

The German generals typically choose another common approach to disconfirming evidence by claiming that defeat, far from invalidating their science, offers yet another confirmation of it. General Pfühl attributes every loss to the failure to carry out his orders to the letter, and since such precision is never possible in battle, he can always argue that, just as he predicted, “‘the whole affair would go to the devil.’ . . . He positively rejoiced in failure, for failures resulting from deviations in practice from the theory only proved to him the accuracy of his theory.” As we would say today, his “science” is “nonfalsifiable.”

By contrast, Prince Andrei, a person of absolute intellectual integrity, does learn from disconfirmation. When he enters the army, he attributes Napoleon’s success to two factors—his mastery of military science and his great physical courage under fire. Justly confident of his own courage and intellect, Andrei dreams of becoming the Napoleon who conquers Napoleon. Austerlitz teaches him that, whatever accounts for Napoleon’s success, it is not some purported military science. He concludes from his own experience “that in war the most deeply considered plans (as he had seen at Austerlitz) mean nothing, and that everything depends on the way unexpected movements of the enemy, which cannot possibly be foreseen, are met.”

When the French invade Russia in 1812, Andrei finds himself at another Council of War where generals again try to apply their science. He concludes, “there was not and could not be a science of war. . . . What science can there be in a matter which, as in every practical matter, nothing can be determined and everything depends on innumerable conditions, the significance of which becomes manifest at a particular moment, and no one can tell when that moment will come?”

“As in every practical matter”: the same argument applies to any conceivable social science. “Innumerable chances”: theorists overlook whatever their model does not envision. In referring to “a particular moment,” Andrei recognizes a key difference between thinking in terms of laws and in terms of contingencies. To the extent that deterministic laws reign, every moment is the automatic derivative of earlier moments. When one calculates the orbit of Mars, there is no suspense. But in a world of contingency, *presentness* makes a difference. “What are we facing tomorrow?” Andrei asks his friend Pierre before the battle of Borodino. “A hundred million chances which will be decided on the instant by whether we run or they run, whether this man or

that man is killed.” No one can foresee whom a particular bullet will kill, and yet how soldiers react to such contingencies makes all the difference.

The novel’s wisest general, Commander-in-Chief Kutuzov, understands this fact about battle, and about life, from the start. At the council of war before Austerlitz, Kutuzov dozes off. At last he cuts the meeting short: “ ‘Gentlemen, the disposition for tomorrow—or rather for today, for it is past midnight—cannot be altered now. And before a battle, there is nothing more important . . . ’ —he paused—‘than a good night’s sleep.’ ” If the world of human beings were amenable to science, then planning would be most important. But in a world governed by contingency, where immediate reactions to unexpected events matter most, one above all needs *alertness*.

If so, then the people who make the most difference are not the generals but the line officers who can detect contingencies as they occur. Nikolai Rostov, an ordinary young man, finds himself at the top of a hill that the French are climbing, and as he looks down he feels “instinctively” that the French have momentarily arranged themselves so that “if his hussars were to charge the French dragoons now, the latter would not be able to withstand them, but that it would have to be done at once, instantly, or it would be too late.” Just as he does when hunting, he acts without reflecting and seizes the instant. This is one of those unforeseeable “particular moments” when alertness makes all the difference.

**T**olstoy had an amazing capacity to understand “particular moments” in all their unrepeatable complexity. Where theorists, and even other great novelists, saw a smooth curve, he detected the infinitesimal deviations from it. This ability explains his unsurpassed realism in describing the human mind. Isaac Babel expressed what so many have felt when he remarked that if nature could write directly, without a human intermediary, it would write like Tolstoy; in a similar spirit, Matthew Arnold declared that “we are not to take Anna Karenina as a work of art; we are to take it as a piece of life.” Tolstoy himself stressed his ability to see the infinitesimally small movements of consciousness that others overlooked.

In one essay, he retold a story about the Russian painter Bryullov, who corrected a student’s sketch. “Why you only touched it a tiny bit,” the student exclaimed, “but it is a completely different thing.” Bryullov replied, “Art begins where that ‘tiny bit’ begins.” Tolstoy elaborates:

That saying is strikingly true not only of art but of all life. One may say that true life begins where the tiny bit begins—where what seem 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.

Tolstoy’s amazing talent to see complexity and irregularities overlooked by others not only explains his astonishing realism but also serves as a counterargument to all the “simplifiers.” Readers of Russian literature appreciate its psychological depth, but they are usually unaware that for Tolstoy, as for Dostoevsky and Chekhov, psychology served as an ideological weapon against prevailing ideology. Let me mention a few remarkable instances of how Tolstoy shows that our

minds are much more complex than we imagine.

Early in the book, the cunning hypocrite Prince Vasily, hovering near the deathbed of Pierre's father, maneuvers to cheat Pierre out of his inheritance. When the old man dies, Prince Vasily unexpectedly acts out of character. " 'Ah my friend,' he murmured, taking Pierre by the elbow, and there was a weakness and sincerity in his voice that Pierre had never heard before. 'How greatly we sin, how we deceive—and for what? I am nearing sixty, my friend—I too—it all ends in death, all . . .' And he wept." Another writer might make this moment a turning point in Vasily's life, or at least allow it to reveal qualities that we will see again, but nothing of the sort happens in *War and Peace*. So far as we know, Prince Vasily is never sincere again. Tolstoy knows that people are never entirely consistent, that character includes acting out of character; and he demonstrates an uncanny sense of when and how someone might do so.

Vasily maneuvers Pierre into marrying his daughter Helen, who is as corrupt as her father. Pierre suspects her of infidelity, perhaps with his old friend Dolokhov. At a banquet, Dolokhov teases Pierre with intimations he knows his wife rather too well. When Dolokhov grabs a program a waiter has handed Pierre, the latter loses his temper and challenges Dolokhov to a duel. It is at this point that he becomes convinced of his wife's guilt "and is severed from her forever." Pierre will doubtless remember, and careless readers do not notice, that he does not challenge Dolokhov because he is convinced Dolokhov is having an affair with his wife. On the contrary, Pierre becomes convinced Dolokhov is having an affair with his wife because he has challenged him. Since that is absurd, memory reverses causality to substitute a more comprehensible story. In this way, people are taken in by the mental equivalent of an optical illusion. No one but Tolstoy would notice this fact about the mind.

When Prince Andrei's wife is dying in labor, he waits in the next room listening to her pitiful, animal screams. He feels unendurable guilt as she suffers. At last he hears the shriek of an infant, and his first thought is "why have they taken a baby in there?" He is so focused on his wife's suffering that he forgets—only for a split second, of course—why she is suffering. He will never remember this absurd first reaction, immediately corrected; once again, only Tolstoy would notice it. He shows us how our minds work even though memory omits what makes no sense.

Since I first read *War and Peace*, I have been struck by one passage that, in terms of the overall plot, could have been omitted, but which perfectly displays Tolstoy's gifts. Home from the army, Nikolai Rostov joins his family in a wolf hunt. As he lies in wait, hoping the wolf will come his way, he prays "with that passionate compunction with which men pray in moments of intense emotion arising from trivial causes. . . . 'I know it is a sin to ask this,' he addresses God, but "make the wolf come my way and let Karai [Rostov's dog] get his teeth in his throat and finish him off.' " And the wolf does come. " 'No, it can't be!' thought Rostov, taking a deep breath as a man does at the fulfillment of something long hoped for. The greatest happiness had come to him—and so simply, unheralded by pomp and fanfare."

Who but Tolstoy would recognize the distinct psychology of intense emotion from trivial causes, or observe how people take a deep breath when something long hoped for is accomplished? Contrary to the way we usually think and novelists usually write, great happiness does not occur at the sort of moment we might expect: say, a wedding, the birth of a child, or honor over an achievement. It does not occur as the climax of a well-constructed story. It is completely unexpected and unheralded.

Stories, no less than theories, falsify reality by making things fit too well. Rostov himself has learned this lesson after trying to narrate how he was wounded. He finds that despite all his efforts to “relate everything exactly as it happened,” he keeps following familiar narrative forms untrue to real experience. “Imperceptibly, unconsciously, and inevitably, he slipped into falsehood. . . . To tell the truth is very difficult.” Tolstoy shows us why it is so difficult and teaches us to look for what we would otherwise miss, the ungainly roughness of things.

As the dogs close in on the wolf, Rostov is so focused that he “did not hear his own cry nor did he realize that he was galloping; he saw neither the dogs nor the ground over which he rode. He saw only the wolf.” Tolstoy describes a moment of utter absorption that allows no mental room for observing what one’s body, as if acting on its own, is doing. The wolf briefly eludes capture, then makes a false step that allows Karai to reach him. Then there occurs a sentence which, I think, only Tolstoy could have written: “That instant when Nikolai saw the wolf struggling in the gully with the dogs, saw her gray coat and outstretched hind leg under them, her head with ears laid back in terror and gasping (Karai had her by the throat) was the happiest moment of his life.” We marvel, and yet we somehow feel that Tolstoy is right: it is just such a moment that would be one’s happiest. It is also clear that Rostov himself will never remember this moment, because part of what makes it so happy is that he is totally absorbed with no mental energy left for evaluating, or even noticing it. And what this means is that, more likely than not, none of us will ever know when we were happiest. The simplifiers claim to know; Tolstoy tells us what we cannot know.

As Tolstoy’s wisdom seems almost too great to be confined in a novel, Prince Andrei appears to be out of place in this genre. Rather, he seems like a refugee from an epic poem, as if Achilles were transported into *Pride and Prejudice*. Aspiring to superhuman heroism, Andrei finds himself forced to live in conventional society, which he disdains. As the novel begins, he tells Pierre that he is going off to war “because this life I’m leading is . . . not to my taste.” He seeks something transcendentally meaningful, something he calls “glory.” The night before Austerlitz, at which he expects to die, he again thinks that all that matters to him is

glory . . . I cannot be blamed for wanting that, for wanting nothing but that. . . . And dear and precious as many people are to me—father, sister, wife . . . I would sacrifice them all, dreadful and unnatural as it may seem, for a moment of glory . . . for the love of men I do not know and shall never know . . . I value only this mysterious power and glory that is hovering over me in the mist.

The irony is that, more than anything else, it is the mist that ensures Napoleon’s victory.

Andrei watches for his moment of epic glory and at last seizes the opportunity to turn a group of fleeing soldiers around by taking hold of a standard and running forward. The soldiers do indeed follow him, but he is wounded and falls. Lying on his back, he literally, as well as figuratively, changes his point of view. Opening his eyes he sees not chaotic running and fighting, but the “immeasurably lofty heavens,” in the sight of which all Andrei has been striving for seems insignificant. “How is it I did not see this before? . . . Yes, all is vanity, all is delusion except those infinite heavens. There is nothing but that. And even that does not exist. . . . thank God.”

As the novel progresses, Andrei continues to learn what does not matter. The compass of his disdain expands, step by disillusioned step, until, on his deathbed, it contains all earthly life. Andrei’s long dying has rightly been considered the greatest death in world literature, especially when he achieves truths inaccessible to the living and, at last, when he can no longer speak at all. One critic asked: How does Count Tolstoy know what a man would think in his last instants? It is not as if he had himself died and then returned to describe it! And yet Tolstoy convinces us that the experience would be just like that.

Seeing through all human illusions, Andrei learns the novel’s negative truths. On his deathbed, he thinks of Jesus’s words: “The fowls of the air, they sow not, neither do they reap, yet your heavenly father feedeth them,” and to him they signify that “all these feelings that they [the living] set such store by . . . all those ideas that seem so important to us—*do not matter*.” It is left to Pierre to grasp the novel’s positive truths.

**T**ime and again, Pierre oscillates between contradictory philosophies, never stopping in the sensible middle. Either he embraces some utopian system’s absolute truth or he falls into the despair of total relativism in a meaningless universe. These are his “Louis XVI” moments, when he reasons: Louis XVI thought he was right, while those who killed him thought they were right, and those who killed the ones who killed him thought they were right, each from their own equally valid point of view; beyond such delusions of rightness there is no truth and nothing really matters. “It’s all the same,” Pierre repeats to himself.

For a while Freemasonic mysticism, if he can only find the right interpretation of it, promises to answer all questions. Persuaded at last that he has found it, he gives a speech to his Lodge and provokes tumultuous argument. Oddly enough, what most disturbs Pierre is not those who differ but those who agree with him, because each “understood him in his own way, with stipulations and modifications he could not agree to.” Pierre is struck, as Tolstoy was, “by the endless variety of men’s minds, which presents a truth from ever appearing exactly the same to any two persons.” If our views can never exactly coincide, how can a state of utopian agreement ever be possible? There seems to be no escape from mere “point of view.”

Absurdly convinced of Freemasonic numerology, Pierre decides that he is the man destined by History to kill Napoleon and so remains in French-occupied Moscow after other Russians have left. Captured, he is sentenced to death, and, after watching others executed as he waits his turn, is spared at the last moment “for some reason.” As a prisoner with the retreating French army, he

endures endless privations but, at last, achieves Tolstoyan insights. Pierre discovers that meaningfulness is to be found not in abstract philosophy but in daily experience, and that true life is made up not of grand, noticeable, and easily narratable events but of the countless ordinary moments we do not value and usually overlook. Going off to war and saying goodbye to his sister, Andrei misses the extraordinarily beautiful look in her eyes because “he was looking not at her, but over her head, into the darkness of the open door.” Andrei always strives for what is hidden in the distance, but Pierre learns to see the ever-present prosaic world in all its richness.

In everything near and comprehensible, Pierre “had seen only what was limited, petty, commonplace, and meaningless. He had equipped himself with a mental telescope and gazed into the distance” where things seemed great and infinite only because they were not clearly visible. Each philosophical system offered another telescope, and each directed his attention away from what really matters. Enlightened at last, he “learned to see the great, the eternal, the infinite in everything,” and so discards the telescope with which he had “looked over the heads of men and joyfully surveyed the ever-changing, great, unfathomable infinite life around him.”

The variety of men’s minds no longer disturbs him but provokes a “scarcely perceptible smile” at each person’s idiosyncrasy. Pierre recognizes “the impossibility of changing a man’s convictions by words” and so the “legitimate individuality of every man’s views,” which had so disturbed him, “now became the basis for the sympathy he felt for other people and the interest he took in them.”

Pierre senses the meaning of things, though he cannot explain it to others. In the close of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), which was heavily influenced by Tolstoy, the great philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein explains why that sense cannot be communicated:

6.251. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (Is this not why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have been unable to say what constituted that sense?)

6.522. There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*.

It is not some fact about the world that has changed for Pierre, but his sense of the world as a whole. With that new sense, Pierre’s questions are not answered but simply disappear. He has found faith—“not faith in any sort of rule, or words, or ideas” but in a God perpetually present in the very processes of life. The real sense of the Gospel words Andrei cites—“they sow not, neither do they reap”—is that God is to be found not in remote aims but in the immediate present always before one’s eyes. Pierre has learned, “not by words or reasoning, but by direct feeling, what his nurse had told him long ago: that God is here and everywhere.” Like Pierre, Tolstoy cannot answer the questions of life in words, but instead shows us from within the experience of discovering faith.

**R**eading *War and Peace* is an experience unlike that of reading any other book, except, I suppose, *Anna Karenina*. We move from amazement at the smallest movements of consciousness to a grand vision of life in all its endless complexity and variety. Perhaps we become convinced of this vision because we have always tacitly and unconsciously known it. Here is

Tolstoyan wisdom: real insight lies not in some abstract system, which necessarily oversimplifies, but in a faith always within our grasp. The truths we seek are so difficult to discern precisely because they are hidden in plain view.

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