

Two Hedgehogs: Art and Argument in *War and Peace*

By Andrew D. Kaufman © 2008

Isaiah Berlin argues in his classic 1951 essay, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, that Tolstoy the artist celebrates the diversity of life in *War and Peace*, while Tolstoy the thinker strives for a unifying philosophical vision. “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing,” Berlin cites the Greek poet Archilocus at the outset of his essay. He explains:

[T]here exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to...a single, universal organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance – and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory,...related by no moral or aesthetic principle.

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

competition of the hedgehogs, I propose that the artist wins, because his vision of life is the fuller and ultimately more humane of the two.

In 1876 Tolstoy wrote to his close personal friend, philosopher, and literary critic Nikolai Strakhov: “For art criticism we need people who would show the senselessness of looking for separate ideas in a work of art and who would continually guide the reader in that endless labyrinth of linkages that makes up the stuff of art, and bring him to the laws that serve as the basis for those linkages.” Even in a career as varied as Tolstoy’s, these words are perhaps the best single expression of the writer’s lifelong artistic and philosophical credo. Tolstoy had a fundamental belief in the wholeness of the universe and in art’s unique capacity to capture that wholeness. In our post-modernist climate, these beliefs will strike many as both naïve and passé.

Even in Tolstoy’s time the position was unique. The second half of the nineteenth century in Russia was dominated by the materialist world view of the radical intelligentsia, who raised rational thought to the level of religion, privileged the empirically verifiable over the spiritual, and approached literature in precisely the way Tolstoy opposed. Not only did the leading radical literary critics of the day tend to reduce works of literature (Tolstoy’s included) to statements of ideology, but they also mocked Tolstoy’s belief in transcendent truths. In a notebook entry written in March 1870, Tolstoy explains why he believes that art, not science or rational thought, is uniquely capable of illuminating the “essence” of life:

The work of thought leads to the vanity of thought. It is not necessary to return to thought. There is another tool: art. Thought requires lines, symmetry, movement

in space and time and thereby destroys itself....What does chemistry, physics, astronomy, and especially the most fashionable zoology do? They bring everything under their requirements of symmetry, continuity—the circle, and arrive at a thought, but the essence of the object [of study] remains....Only art knows neither the conditions of time, nor space, nor movement. Only art, always inimical to symmetry and the circle, gives the essence.

Few works in Tolstoy's oeuvre more fully and beautifully express the writer's belief in a unified essence of life and in art's capacity to illuminate that essence than *War and Peace*. A grand celebration of all that constitutes reality, whether "good" or "bad," *War and Peace* moves back and forth between private lives and public spectacles, ballrooms and battles, marriages and massacres. No character is too small and no subject too large for this epic masterpiece. Characters are born, they marry, grow old and die within a fictional world where the clock ticks on with slow, implacable calm. This has led some readers to sense in the novel a spirit of fatalism. But it is also an inspiring vision of the world's physical plenitude and of the meaningful moral choices it offers. Almost all of the main protagonists find happiness in a balanced, mature view of the world as a place where joy and tragedy, moral choice and providential design, are present in equal measure. These characters discover that their individual lives are both finite and full of possibility, both solitary and part of a unified tapestry of human history and nature. Only Prince Andrei is unable to reconcile his noble ideals with reality. He is the novel's one tragic hero.

As characters' personal destinies become increasingly intertwined with the encroaching forces of war and history, the "peace" and "war" sections of the novel become so interconnected that it appears virtually impossible to disentangle them. Power politics, schemes and stratagems are as present in the Petersburg drawing rooms as on the battlefield, and characters are as apt to achieve spiritual illumination in the throes of war as in the joys of family life. The "peace" of the novel's title refers not only to peacetime but also to the spiritual tranquility characters seek amidst the confusion of modern life. *War and Peace* does not merely describe various characters' quest for perfection in an imperfect world. Its underlying structure and vision *model* this coveted destination. The essential truth of life sought by characters is already present in the work's epic wholeness, in its portrait of a mythical totality of human existence, in which heaven and earth, ideal and real, co-exist in total equilibrium. If this sense of wholeness was, as the critic Georg Lukacs has argued, organic to the ancient world view, then Tolstoy has come as close as possible to resurrecting it in an alienated, modern age.

War and Peace meditates on the majestic order of the universe as an artistic compensation for an era that was anything but orderly and harmonious. In 1861 Alexander II put into effect the Great Reforms, which democratized Russian society and led to social dislocations and growing ideological divisiveness. To the ongoing debates about social reform were now added discussions about Russian national identity, Russian history and historiography. Fierce journalistic and scholarly controversy continued to sharpen the rift between the old guard and the radical intelligentsia. Divisions also widened between the Slavophiles, who argued that Russia's destiny lay in a return to its

unique national traditions, and the Westernizers, who believed that Russia's development ought to follow European models of political governance and social reform.

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

But art and ideology are not, finally, interchangeable. *War and Peace* assimilates Tolstoy's personal beliefs—many of them conflicting—into an artistic and philosophical whole that transcends whatever polemical intentions the author may have initially had for the work. In fact, the novel unites the intellectual oppositions of the 1860's into an artistic world that transcends ideology altogether. Against the backdrop of the author's luxuriant, expansive canvas, questions about whether Tolstoy was a conservative or a liberal, a Slavophile or a Westernizer, become moot. Just as the vast Russian countryside in *War and Peace* engulfs the invading French army, so Tolstoy's massive literary landscape assimilates a web of conflicting ideas and influences into a synthetic creation whose deepest artistic sympathies are pan-human and pantheistic.

True, Tolstoy's social conservatism seeps into the narrative of *War and Peace* in its idealized depiction of the harmonious landlord-peasant relationship, as if to suggest that such feudal relations are part of a timeless historical pattern that existed long before discussion of reform. Despite the obvious ideological underpinnings of this rather poetic presentation of peasant-aristocrat relations, such a vision of social harmony serves a non-

ideological purpose, as well. It is integral to the work's overall sense of timeless historical cycles and the interconnectedness of man, nature, and history within a "great chain of being." Through his depiction of class harmony Tolstoy creates for the divided Russian society of the 1860's a vision of a mythical, harmonious past, in which Russians are unselfconsciously secure in their collective national identity and spiritually united in their response to an invading army. As a result, Russia ends Napoleon's worldwide anarchy, and thus unleashes the forces that would lead to her own Decembrist Revolution of 1825. In this way, Russia becomes a vital link in the vast chain of historical evolution, in which timeless patterns of revolution and retreat, social chaos and order, eternally recur.

To take another example of how the novel assimilates authorial ideology into an artistic whole, consider the novel's portrait of Mikhail Speransky, the self-important government reformer under Alexander I, who, when Prince Andrei idolizes him in Volume Two, Part Three, is at the height of his career. With his grating, high-pitched laugh and lowbrow narrow-mindedness, Speransky has the qualities that Tolstoy disliked in many of the radical reformers of his own day: he is abrasive, contemptuous of others, and deaf to the larger historical and natural forces that move life forward. But even if the ideologue in Tolstoy has Speransky play the role of polemical whipping boy for the author's anti-reformist stance, the artist in Tolstoy perceives Speransky from a much wider vantage point.

Speransky is, in fact, *essential* to the larger life processes and trajectory of the novel as a whole. When Prince Andrei becomes bitterly disenchanted with him, this is but a variation on the recurrent theme of ideal creation and disillusionment that is

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

Yet his emotional flowering is temporary. Tragically unable to free himself from the shackles of duty and rationality, he destroys his happiness by giving in to his father's demands that the wedding to Natasha be postponed for a year. When he returns to Moscow nearly a year later, at the end of Volume Two, Part Five, and learns of Natasha's infidelity during his absence, Prince Andrei's first words are a defense of his former idol, Speransky, "the news of whose sudden exile and alleged treachery had just reached Moscow." Andrei deals with his bitterness towards Natasha—and presumably towards himself, who unfairly and unwisely asked her to wait for him—by attempting to resurrect an idol long dead to him, and now to Russia, as well. Thus, Speransky's rise and fall from power roughly parallel Prince Andrei's own emotional trajectory in the novel. Despite Tolstoy's ideological opposition to Speransky's politics and personality, the artist in him sees Speransky as a necessary part of that timeless ebb and flow of life processes, which, in the context of the novel, is the highest, most enduring truth.

It is impossible to extract any single moral or message or intellectual truth from such an overarching vision of the world. The meaning of the novel is not contained in any

character, motif, or theme, in special moments or privileged scenes. It can be felt, rather, in the artistic fabric of the entire text, heard in that mysterious authorial voice that reveals the world to us in all of its complex specificity with utter verisimilitude, while at the same time illuminating life's poetic grandeur. And yet, as readers of the novel have discovered, to their delight or dismay, one of its most original features is the existence of a second authorial voice—polemical, rational, severe—that regularly punctuates the text, rudely puncturing that shimmering narrative fabric.

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

For many contemporary readers the digressions were only one of many examples of the work's structural confusion and indeterminacy. The lack of a focused storyline, the absence of clear heroes, and its sheer length were other striking features. Henry James famously called the novel a "splendid accident" and a "loose baggy monster." In his article about *War and Peace*, published in 1870, Strakhov pinpointed the problem of these essays: while their ideas are excellent, he wrote, they detract from the work's

overall philosophical spirit. The essays reduce the celebration of life's fullness, evoked in the artistic portions, to a one-sided system of ratiocination, which dissects rather than integrates, and thus gives an "incomplete" picture of life.

Strakhov's ideas guided Tolstoy as he himself grappled with this issue of the difference between an artistic representation of the world and rational argumentation throughout the late 1860's and 1870's. In fact, even as he worked on the novel in the 1860's, the author vacillated about using the polemical digressions. He had serious reservations about whether these digressions should remain at all. Eventually, he came to believe that art, with its ability to speak in images, can reveal things that rational thought cannot, and decided to remove the theoretical essays from the main section and place them in a separate appendix, called "Articles about the Campaign of 1812," in the 1873 edition of *War and Peace*.

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

The artistic narrator does not argue rationally for or against abstract intellectual positions. In and of themselves, ideas are sterile and irrelevant to his conception of the world. What counts are the infinitely complex natural and historical processes, in which rational ideas play, at best, a trifling role. The artistic narrator is concerned above all with the human capacity to live successfully within these organic processes—a capacity that depends not on ideas, but on the person behind the ideas, on the person's emotional, intuitive responsiveness to the world. We see this in Tolstoy's treatment of Speransky, whose shortcoming is not only his faulty conclusions but his faulty approach to living. As Prince Andrei discovers, Speransky's ideas can have no bearing on his or anybody else's happiness, and his clever words, which "lacked just that something which is the salt of mirth," embody the ultimate sterility of the man himself. By contrast, Pierre, whose ideas are frequently confused or half-baked amalgams of other peoples' thought, leaves a lasting effect on other people through the warmth of his personality and the sincere quality of his words. "Your friend's a fine fellow, I've come to love him!" Old Prince Bolkonsky says to his son, Andrei, after Pierre's departure. "He fires me up. Another man talks cleverly, and you don't want to listen to him, but he talks nonsense, yet he fires me up, old as I am."

While the narrator's irony can be harsh indeed in the artistic sections, as we see in the Speransky passages, it stops short of outright contempt and is always counterbalanced by a paternal, godlike benevolence. In contrast, the narrator of the theoretical essays openly scoffs at the narrow-mindedness of the historians and philosophers he discredits. The artistic narrator bestows a full-blooded, complex humanity on even the most reprehensible of characters. What reader is not gripped by sudden compassion for the

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

In the theoretical essays, we, the readers, are passive recipients of the world. In the artistic portions of the novel, however, we are invited to be active participants in, indeed, co-creators of, the universe alongside the narrator. Carried along by the overwhelming lifelikeness of the narrator’s invented world, we achieve the sort of clear, comprehensive vision of the universe that Prince Andrei, Nikolai, and Pierre, Napoleon, Speransky, and the military strategists, covet but cannot attain. We fully empathize with the characters’ struggles and vicariously participate in them, while calmly recognizing, along with the narrator, the concealed patterns and unifying truths hidden from the characters’ gaze. This awareness only intensifies our empathy for the characters, widening our understanding of each character’s individual experience and, by extension, our own.

“Can it be they’re running to me? Can it be?” Nikolai Rostov thinks as he lies wounded on the battlefield at Schoengraben. “And why? To kill me? *Me*, whom everybody loves so?” The brilliance of the narrative perspective resides in the narrator’s ability to embrace both the deep poignancy of the moment and also the comic naivete of

Nikolai's thought. The gung-ho young hussar knows that he is at war, and yet in his heart-of-hearts he cannot conceive of anybody trying to hurt him, the beloved son and brother and "young master." We both feel *with* Nikolai and shake our heads at his childish amazement. The narrator thus invites us to remain fully human, empathizing with Nikolai's suffering as he experiences it, and at the same time providing us with his wise, godlike view of things. The narrator's omniscient perspective is benevolent and responsive to multiple emotional levels in a way that the more severe voice of the polemical narrator, constrained by the limits of the genre in which he is writing, cannot be.

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

When in the Second Part of the Epilogue, the narrator presents his calculus of history thesis—that historians must stop trying to seek causes and discover instead the laws that unite the "unknown infinitely small elements" of the universe—he is merely

offering an analytical clarification of the truths the novel's artistic canvas has created for us from the beginning: that every human being, individual moment, or decision is both irreducibly distinct and also an integral part of an inexhaustible, unified tapestry of human experience. The narrator's calculus thesis is at best a gloss on the multi-layered experience of life already realized in the "labyrinth of linkages" contained in the artistic sections of the work. The theorist writes *about* unity, he writes *about* the need to integrate. But the artist unites, he integrates. He gives us a glimpse of that "essence," which Tolstoy described in his 1870 notebook as the fundamental aim of artistic expression.

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